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Björkander, Martina

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# Who Got the Rite Wrong? The Mavuno Alternative Christmas Service and Charismatic Ritual

*Martina Björkander*

## 1 Introduction

Today, will be completely different. Very different. Different from every Christmas service you've been to. Today we will be having an alternative Christmas service.

Mavuno Christmas Service Fieldnotes, 22/12/2013

With those words, Pastor Kyama marks the transition from a fairly standard praise and worship session at the beginning of a Christmas service in Mavuno Church, to what will turn out to be a carefully orchestrated musical performance telling the Christmas story to the urban youth of Nairobi. What follows is a piano and voice concert with the pianist Aaron Rimbui and singer Kanjii Mbugua, aided by two male backing vocalists and Pastor Kyama as a sidekick, and joined towards the end by a female vocalist. The stage is carefully decorated for the season, with a grand piano at its centre. The concert is a mix of different styles, ranging from soul and pop to R'n'B and reggae, from power ballads to dance hall music, from Christian contemporary to Christmas carols. Together, the group of performers set out to bring the congregation on "a journey about love" (Mavuno Christmas Service Fieldnotes, 22/12/2013) that tells the Christmas story as one beginning with the love between two young people, Joseph and Mary, and evolves into a story of God's love for humanity. Pastor Kyama says somewhere in the middle of the concert, interpreting the journey to the congregation, "The Christmas story is a story of relationships. It starts with the relationship between a man and his wife. But then it grows. It becomes a story of the relationship between God and man" (Fieldnotes 2013). The music and the performance help to contextualise this story to young people, "making it real" (Fieldnotes 2013) by presenting different music to that normally played in church ('secular' music, for want of a better word) that allows the pastor to speak very openly about (sometimes forbidden) feelings. This is what makes the service 'alternative' and 'different'. At the same time, the service as

a whole follows a structure that is common in charismatic liturgy and can easily be recognised as ‘church’ if looking at the total setup. A negotiation – even subversion – of ritual takes place, with the Mavuno team deliberately challenging the boundaries of what can be accepted as part of a church service, while remaining sufficiently within the rules to be able to come across as fully part of the born-again community.

In Kenya, a large proportion of the population belongs to various forms of pentecostal-charismatic<sup>1</sup> churches or sympathises with a Renewalist type of Christianity of different denominations (World Christian Database 2004).<sup>2</sup> The Pew Forum Research ten-country survey (2006), for instance, indicated that more than half the population subscribed to forms of Christian faith that emphasise the experience of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues or praying for healing. Among Catholics (25% of the total population) about a third were Renewalists, while as many as seven out of ten Protestants (63% of the population) professed a similar faith (Pew Research Center 2006: 83–84). Historically, various revivalist groups have had a large following in Kenya and, due to their visibility and respectability in society, their influence goes far beyond the actual membership. Central in these groups is the notion of being ‘born-again’ – receiving Jesus as personal Saviour and starting to live a new life – thus joining the community of ‘the saved ones’ (*wokovu*). Often this new life is interpreted in spiritual as well as moral terms; the new spiritual status is marked by living in a morally upright manner by, for example, abstaining from alcohol, drugs, and sex outside of marriage (Mugambi 2020; Parsitau 2009). There is a strong sense of fellowship yet also a high level of mobility among the groups and churches in the born-again category; religious belonging in Kenya is fluid, categories overlap, and people often move between groups or actively attend several different groups at the same time (Gez 2018). This is facilitated by the fact that ritual patterns – what Ogbu Kalu refers to as “the charismatic liturgy” (Kalu 2008: 121) – are iterated from group to group, including the

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- 1 Pentecostal-charismatic is used as an umbrella term referring to the tradition or strand of Christianity also known as Pentecostalism. Variations of Pentecostal and Charismatic are capitalised only when referring to specific phenomena/groups but not when used as generic terms. See further discussion in Anderson (2010), Jacobsen (2011), Anderson (2004), Kalu (2008), and Prosén (2021).
  - 2 Although the WCD statistics can be criticised for various reasons, they remain the most reliable available. The category of Christian Renewal/Renewalists includes the subcategories of Pentecostals, Charismatics, and Neocharismatics, and more or less overlaps the four-fold typology of global Pentecostalism, as described by Allan Anderson (2010). Compare statistics presented by Barrett and Johnson (2002).

presence of a central place for prayer, testimonies, and music (Prosén 2016; Kalu 2010; Parsitau 2006; Muindi 2019).

In this community, Mavuno stands out as innovative and experimental, as trying to break free from what is perceived as a Christianity that has become far too distanced from the real life of young people in Nairobi. These days the church is established and respected in the ecclesial body, but in the early years it was seen as something of a rebellious teenager, challenging the status quo not least through the music played. Mavuno began in 2005 when an older church, Nairobi Chapel, a non-denominational, evangelical mega-church, split into five different congregations that relocated to venues around the city. Mavuno established itself in the south-eastern part, along Mombasa Road, and at the time of the Alternative Christmas Service they were holding their services at the Bellevue Drive-in Cinema in an all-weather tarpaulin tent that hosted around two thousand per service. Later the church moved again, this time to its own premises in Athi River. They have also planted several new branches in capital cities around Africa and beyond (for more on the church and its history see Gitau 2018; Mugambi 2020; [mavunochurch.org](http://mavunochurch.org)).

From the outset, the church has focused on reaching out to the young, professional, post-college, English-speaking, upwardly mobile, middle-class adult. They see this demographic as an “unreached people group” (Pastor Kamau 2014) in that its members share a specific culture that is different from other groups in society. Other churches, they say, present the Gospel in ways that are foreign and alienating to this demographic, but young people must be given the chance to hear the Gospel presented in a language (including aesthetic language) that they can understand. In their services, the Mavuno leaders therefore experiment with musical styles, incorporating elements from popular culture and taking pains to create a relaxed and youthful atmosphere. As we will see in this article, they sometimes go much further than other churches are prepared to go in terms of ritual innovation and experimentation in order to negotiate both ritual itself and life beyond the ritual frame.

This article discusses ritual negotiation, innovation, and disruption using the Alternative Christmas service as a case in point. First, I briefly introduce some theoretical perspectives, before taking the reader to the ethnographic scene. Thereafter, the analysis takes place in two steps: the negotiation of ritual itself (how Mavuno uses music to challenge and change charismatic liturgy), and negotiation of life beyond the ritual frame (how Mavuno uses music to create a space for forbidden feelings within the liturgy). The essay ends with a few conclusions and suggestions for further research. The fieldwork material for this article was gathered as part of my PhD research and a full analysis of

the ritual life of Mavuno church – its spirituality, worship, and liturgy – can be found in Björkander (2024).<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Negotiation, Innovation, and Disruption in the Field of Rituals

In one of her articles, Anne-Christine Hornborg describes “ritual invention” as something of “an oxymoron, since ‘ritual’ foremost gives association to traditional practices and not to inventions” (Hornborg 2017: 18). Having said that, she goes on to describe a Mi’kmaq ritual that is clearly an invention (possibly performed for the very first time during her fieldwork), while consisting of elements from earlier rituals that make it come across as ‘traditional’. What makes this new ritual performance work is the creative use of “interrituality” wherein “ritual acts function as scattered quotes, similar as we in texts find quotes or allusions to other texts” (Hornborg 2017: 18); indeed, the new ritual cannot be entirely novel or it risks being perceived as inauthentic or false. “Creativity thus consists of reassembling elements into a new ritual focus or synthesis” (Hornborg 2017: 17).

This tension between seeing ritual as fixed and traditional versus seeing it as innovative and creative is also addressed by other scholars. When Kathryn T. McClymond discusses ritual disruption, for example, she notes that there is a “significant disjuncture” between “how we experience ritual (flexible, adaptive to immediate circumstances, and extremely angst-free) and how we imagine ritual (fixed, rule-bound, and unforgiving)” (2016: 2). To McClymond, it is obvious that rituals do not always go according to plan – indeed, they may “go wrong” in all sorts of ways, intentionally or unintentionally – and that these disruptions are usually “no big deal” since “[r]itual, for the most part, is a remarkably elastic phenomenon” (2016: 2). The exception is when ritual actors act in subversive ways, challenging prescribed or anticipated behaviour by deliberately altering the ritual performance. These altered ritual performances, McClymond states, “draw attention to latent expectations of ritual actors and the ritual itself” as well as to “behind the scenes’ shifts or tensions in social or political systems at the structural level” (2016: 108, 175).

A similar perspective is presented by Ute Hüsken and Frank Neubert (2012: 1), who say that while ritual “in common understanding” as well as in “scholarly discourse” has long been seen as “stable in form, meaningless, preconceived, and with the aim of creating harmony and enabling a tradition’s survival,” these assumptions can be “seriously challenged” based on both ritual performances

<sup>3</sup> See also Prosen 2021.

and texts. They add (2012: 1), “Not only are rituals frequently disputed; they also constitute a field in which vital and sometimes even violent negotiations take place. Negotiations – understood here as processes of interaction during which differing positions are debated and/or acted out – are ubiquitous in ritual contexts, either in relation to the ritual itself or in relation to the realm beyond any given ritual performance.” These negotiations are part and parcel of ritual performance, since a ritual that did not address the ambiguities and challenges in life would soon become meaningless and irrelevant to participants. Drawing on the work of Seligman and colleagues, they point out, “Ritual and ritualistic behavior are not so much events as ways of negotiating our very existence in the world; and ritual provides the central space for playing out the constant tension between tradition and creativity” (Hüsken and Neubert 2012: 7, quoting Seligman et al. 2008: 8).

An important aspect of ritual disruption is ritual failure, which can be understood in several ways, either as a more general concept referring to any instance where ritual performance deviates “significantly from its usual appearance” (Schieffelin 2007: 7), or as a more technical term referring to errors either in the “‘process’ (proper performance of ritual) or ‘outcome’ (achieving the ends for which ritual is performed)” (2007: 3) of ritual. The emphasis differs not merely among scholars, but also between contexts and traditions. “This,” Schieffelin says, “evokes questions about the degree to which, for a given tradition, ritual performance is about ‘getting it right’ vs. ‘getting it done’” (2007: 3). As will become clear below, even within a given tradition there is no consensus on this matter; rather, it is an aspect that is part of the negotiation of ritual.

In this article, I discuss a case where ritual performance is creatively and intentionally altered in response to social changes in the lives of young people, thus challenging latent expectations of both ‘church’ and born-again Christians in the Kenyan context in order to expand the affordance of the charismatic liturgy. Hence, the ritual, as well as the world beyond the ritual frame, is negotiated through ritual performance.

### 3 The Alternative Christmas Service

A few minutes past midday on a Sunday morning, three days before Christmas 2013, a thousand people have gathered for worship in Mavuno Church Bellevue.<sup>4</sup> An hour later the hall is packed with another thousand.

<sup>4</sup> The following account is based on ethnographic fieldnotes from a visit to Mavuno 22nd of December 2013. All quotes are from this occasion if not otherwise specified. The observation

They are all well-dressed, with chic outfits, cool hairstyles, elaborate accessories, and an air of confidence to them. This is the 'in' church for young professionals in Nairobi, today is their Christmas Carol Sunday, and no-one misses a chance to dress up for the occasion. Contributing to the festive atmosphere are chains of electric light flowing above the audience towards the stage. The black and grey stage is decorated with a large Christmas tree, white stars, and Christmas presents in beautiful wrappings. In the centre is a black grand piano and gathered around it a few black bar stools. Soon we are going to be taken on a journey of love, but first the service starts as it does on a normal Mavuno Sunday: with praise and worship led by a worship team. A few songs are sung, both in Swahili and English, one by a Kenyan Afropop music group called Gospel Fathers, and one an English hymn from the seventeenth century: 'Fundi wa Mbao' (Gospel Fathers 2013) and 'What child is this?' (Chatterton Dix 1865), respectively. The music is rhythmic and melodic and the sound travels far beyond the hall. People stand as they sing, some sway on the spot, clap along, or raise their hands. At times the worship team instructs them to dance along with their choreography, and most do. The team members are dressed in red, white, black, and green – the colours of Christmas, and also the colours of the Kenyan flag. Their clothes and styles are fashionable and hip, their energy high, and their dance a peculiar mix of references to street dance, hip hop, aerobics, and rural East African choir music. During and between songs the worship leader encourages the congregation to sing along, to worship and exalt Christ as the King of Kings. The whole praise-and-worship section ends in a crescendo of prayer, ovations, and music led by one of the leading pastors of Mavuno, Pastor Kyama.

When the music stops and the worship team leaves the stage, Pastor Kyama casually sits on one of the stools and after some announcements he moves on to describing what today's service will be like. With a smile on his face he says,

Today will be completely different. Very different. Different from every Christmas service you've been to. Today we will be having an alternative Christmas service. Say to your neighbour: "Alternative Christmas service" (*Alternative Christmas service*).

Tell them "It's gonna be different" (*It's gonna be different*). It's not going to be the same (*It's not going to be the same*).

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was part of my PhD field work and I have described the methods and ethical considerations at length in my thesis (Prosen 2021).

Yes, thank you! Today the message is in the songs and the Christmas readings. And in songs that are different from the ones we normally sing here, but nevertheless very related to the Christmas thing.

Just tell your neighbour: “Different!” (*Different*) Different nice! (*laughter*)

He then welcomes a group of artists on stage for a piano and voice concert. The pianist, Aaron Rimbui, an established Kenyan jazz artist, starts playing. He is joined by singer and music producer Kanjii Mbugua, who was the first worship director at Mavuno and the brains behind their musical turnaround, and two backing vocalists – one of them the current Mavuno worship director, Mike Onen (Gitau 2018: 121–122; Gazemba 2014a; Gazemba 2014b). The first song they play is the soul ballad ‘Fire and Rain’ (Taylor 1970), followed by the Take That classic love song ‘Back for Good’ (Barlow 1995).

*Whatever I said, whatever I did,  
I didn't mean it,  
I just want you back for good  
(Want you back, want you back, want you back for good)*

It is soulful and groovy, well-rehearsed and tight. Many in the audience sing along, knowing the texts by heart. Explaining that they will be taking the audience on a journey of love, which is what Christmas is all about, Kanjii hands over to Pastor Kyama who reads Luke 1:26–27 from the Message translation, emphasising the words ‘Joseph’, ‘Mary’, ‘engaged’, and ‘virgin’. Then Kanjii interrupts him saying:

So, Pastor Kyama, you know, sometimes we really spiritualise this thing (*Kyama fills in jokingly, ‘schpiritualische’ ... ‘schpiritualize’ ...*) spiritualise this thing (*laughter*).

Let me see, how many of us have been in love? Have been in the past, or are in love right now? Look around. And if your neighbour’s hand is not in the air, just look at them *kidogo* [a little] and say like, ‘For real? I mean, how old are you?’ (*laughter*). So, we’ve all been in love. And the Christmas story is a story of love. This afternoon we will look at this story from Joseph’s perspective.

You know, these were real people with real feelings. Joseph was in *love*. [Pretending to be Joseph:] “There’s a fly mama ... her name is Mary ... we’re gonna get married ...” (*laughter*).



So, you know, what I love about music is that sometimes it helps us, you know, it helps us say what sometimes we cannot be able to say. So, in my head, I'm thinking – I'm thinking! – Joseph must have been like

[he breaks into 'Comfort Zone' (Fletcher, Germain, Gordon, 2012) a reggae song sung by artist Busy Signal]:

*Youuuuuu.*  
*No odda one but you.*  
*Baby girl seh it feel so right so good, so good.*  
*Hotthead.*

Some of the audience giggle and shake their heads, looking bewildered. "What kind of a song is this to sing in church?" they seem to think. Kanjii stops in the middle of the song and says:

I told you! It's gonna be different! (*laughter, hand-clapping, wolf-whistles*).  
 I told you! Don't spiritualise this thing! It was love! (*laughs with audience, then continues singing*):

*Mi need you mi say from mi heart*  
*Baby girl mi and you will neva part*  
*Gal mi seh you have mi inna comfort zone*  
*Everytime mi live without fi come back home*  
*Baby a nuh games mi a play*  
*I and I woulda neva eva stray*  
*Girl mi seh you lock mi inna yuh comfort zone*  
*Let mi solid as a rock you know mi tuff like stone*

*I believe that love is a powerful ting*  
*The feeling deep within*  
*And if you believe in love*  
*Free up your mind, let this flow within*

*Cah no odda girl nuh hol'me hol'me hol'me so tight yet baby*  
*None a dem neva please mi so*  
*Treat mi so*  
*Lawd you feel so right*  
*No girl neva squeeze me squeeze me squeeze me so tight yet baby*  
*None a dem neva groove mi so*

*Move mi so*

*Girl you shine so bright* (Fletcher, Germain, Gordon, 2012)

The audience laugh and respond loudly, most seem to be having a good time, although a few stand and leave the hall. Kanjii seems determined to continue singing the songs although they are quite explicit and not part of the normal church repertoire; the backing vocalists are more embarrassed but keep on going. The next song is R'n'B and says, "Tell me it's real! This feeling that we feel ... It's up to me and you, to make this special love last forever more" (Bennett, Heiley, Jo-Jo 1999) and is followed by Kanjii jokingly encouraging people to take the opportunity to propose if their "significant other" is sitting next to them.

And so it goes on, with readings and songs and between speeches that retell the Christmas story from Joseph's perspective. How he was in love with Mary, how he felt strongly about her, looking forward to the marriage, how he reacted to her being pregnant by someone else ("The Holy Spirit? Like, seriously? Was that the best you could come up with?"), his emotional journey through attraction, anger, fear, vengefulness, and sadness. From Joseph's lowest point, the pastor connects to low points in his own life and the life of young people, smoothly shifting to a time of intercession and prayer, accompanied by instrumental music, and inviting God to heal and restore broken hearts. The audience have again turned into a congregation, and the atmosphere is no longer humorous and concert-like, but sincere and prayerful.

Elaborating on John 3:16, Pastor Kyama continues to share the Gospel as a story of love, a story in which God gave His Son to the world to mend broken hearts, because of His great love. His sermon is short but vigorous, and moves over to the next set of songs, songs that are no longer about Joseph's emotions but geared towards helping the congregation deal with their own. One example is a medley that combines reggae with contemporary worship, with the words,

*No weapon formed against me will prosper ...*

*God will do what He said He would do.*

*He will stand by His word* (Hammond, Moore 1996)

*Everything's gonna be all right*

*Everything's gonna be all right* (Ford, Marley 1974)

*I'm not going back, I'm moving ahead. ...*

*All things are made new, surrendered my life to Christ.*

*I'm moving, moving forward* (Houghton, Sanchez 2007)

In typical charismatic manner, Kanjii encourages the congregation to sing along and to believe what they sing: “Believe it! Believe it!” The song becomes both a prayer and a declaration: asking God to help sort out the pain in life, especially love-related pain, and at the same time testifying and declaring that the new life in Christ is indeed a new life, a different kind of life, where a loving God is in control despite life’s circumstances. Seamlessly the songs move over into an ‘altar call’, a time for responding to the message given. People who are not yet “in a relationship with God” are invited to give their life to Christ, to become born-again, while those who are, are urged to “respond with surrender and obedience” and give themselves as “living sacrifices.” After a time of prayer, the service ends with another more light-hearted section consisting of traditional Christmas carols and hymns, this time led by Mwendie Mbugua, Kanjii’s wife, and ending with ‘Angels we have heard on high’ (Chadwick 1862) including the traditional Latin stanza *Gloria in excelsis Deo* (Glory to God in the Highest). Like the shepherds in the fields, the congregation is encouraged to “Let loose” in praise and go out into life rooted in God’s love through Jesus Christ. With a blessing from Ephesians, they are dismissed and leave the church with worship music playing softly in the background.

#### 4 Widening the Frame – Negotiating Charismatic Liturgy through Music

What is going on in this case? How can we theoretically understand what the Mavuno congregation does in its Alternative Christmas service? Thinking of the ritual performance, it seems there are several processes at work here. First, charismatic liturgy itself is negotiated: What can be included and what cannot, as part of a Sunday service? And how can the liturgy be put across as novel, innovative, and relevant to young people and at the same time as fully adequate, acceptable, and satisfactory as a church service? Second, the world beyond the ritual frame is negotiated: What challenges do young urban Kenyans meet in life? And how can they deal with them within a born-again framework? This section discusses negotiations over ritual, while the next examines ways in which the Alternative Christmas service seeks to address real-life issues.

Vibrant worship music is part of the charismatic liturgy all around the world and has become in many ways the hallmark of charismatic Christianity itself. Indeed, it is hard to think of this brand of Christianity without thinking of its music. The central place of music has been noted by many scholars over

the years (Ingalls and Yong 2015; Anderson 2004; Miller and Yamamori 2007; Cartledge 2007; Chitando 2002), among them Paul Alexander, who says that “music is a crucial aspect of Pentecostalism and part of its phenomenal appeal” (2009: 25). Structurally, pentecostal-charismatic church services often start with a block of congregational singing (‘praise and worship’), followed by announcements and other community-related issues, then the sermon, and lastly an invitation to respond to the message (the ‘altar call’). To this structure is added a range of micro-rites, acts, and utterances that can be utilised by the participants according to choice, as well as a range of ritual modes, embodied attitudes that convey the various affective states that are involved in charismatic worship (the ‘flow’). It is the combination of a rather fixed, common structure and flexible, personalised expression that together make charismatic ritual what it is. This ritualised pattern has been described by Daniel Albrecht among others (1999; see also Cartledge 2007; Björkander 2024), and although there are variations, it is comparatively stable and recognisable in pentecostal-charismatic churches around the globe. Hence, when I use the expression ‘charismatic liturgy’ – following Ogbu Kalu (2008: 121) – I refer to a ritualised way of doing things in communal worship, and not a written text or fixed ritual scheme.

How does Mavuno negotiate the charismatic liturgy during their very special Christmas service? First of all, they frame the event as a church service by following the normal structure: starting with praise and worship, continuing with announcements, a sermon, and an altar call, and combining these basic building blocks with typical verbal and kinetic expressions. Hornborg, building on Catherine Bell, emphasises the importance of framing in order to convey to participants that this is indeed an authentic “ritual event” (2017: 22). The framing also includes a creative use of elements from various Christian sources, such as traditional hymns and carols, put together into a new whole, thus effectively referencing ‘tradition’ through interrituality (Hornborg 2017). At the same time, the Alternative Christmas service is indeed alternative, challenging the way things are normally done and creatively utilising content from non-ecclesial contexts. Elements from youth culture are borrowed and mixed into the new whole: from the way leaders interact with the audience, through the scenography, dance, and clothing styles, to the musical genres chosen. The event becomes an artistic performance as much as a ritual performance. Positively expressed we could say that when the ritual frame is intact, there is more freedom to include content from other sources in creative ways. Negatively, we could say that the frame puts certain limits on creativity and innovation; there is a boundary that must be kept. Hornborg says, quoting

Christoph Wulf, “There is an innovative and ludic character to be found in rituals which open up for ritual creativity in performances.” But the “playful seriousness” must “respect certain boundaries and is thus able to combine duty and willingness, solidarity and individuality, as well as affirmation, idiosyncrasy, and criticism” (Wulf 2008: 406–7, quoted in Hornborg 2017: 23).

By including elements from youth culture, Mavuno challenges the boundaries of charismatic ritual, playing seriously with both content and form. While keeping the charismatic frame, and a fair number of traditional liturgical elements, they still push the limits for what a Christmas service may be, “thereby subverting the ruling norms by articulating and acting out alternative positions” (Hüsken and Neubert 2012: 6). The inclusion of secular music is the primary subversive act in this case. A total of twenty-five different songs were sung in the course of the service, just a few lines of some, others in their entirety. Approximately half of them had Christian lyrics, the rest did not. Compared to a normal service where all songs have Christian lyrics and are sung in order to worship and glorify God, teach Christian doctrine, or mediate people’s prayers, the inclusion of songs with a completely different content was perceived as challenging and disruptive.

Apart from the repeated references to the service being ‘different’ and ‘alternative’ and the verbal appeals to the audience to participate in the songs despite their unusual content – with the pastors knowing that some could have reservations – there were other instances that pointed to the subversive character of the chosen repertoire. Reactions in the room, especially during some of the songs, told me that people found it embarrassing and improper to sing such material in church. When I later searched the internet for the music videos and lyrics to the songs, I understood why. Many of them are quite explicit, especially the videos, and, considering the number of people singing along with the songs, clearly knowing them by heart, it is likely that the videos are familiar to many. The most obvious example would be ‘Comfort Zone’ by Jamaican reggae artist Busy Signal, referred to above. Some of the audience giggled during it, and the backing vocalists seemed a bit embarrassed to be singing it in front of their peers. A few people in the audience demonstratively left the hall during it. I can only guess the reason, but it seems likely that they found it inappropriate or even irreverent as part of a church service.<sup>5</sup> However, the Mavuno team were determined to go on with their altered ritual performance. Parts of the song were sung with particular stress – “I believe

5 Possibly the reputation of the artist behind the song played a role as well, see for example: “Busy Signal Pleads Guilty” 2012.

that love is a powerful thing,” emphasising the core message of the service, and “free up your mind, let this flow within” (Fletcher, Germain, Gordon 2012) – emphasising the importance of keeping an open mind towards the service’s novel approach to Christmas.

Another song that raised some eyebrows and whose performance seemed to balance on the edge of being irreverent was ‘I don’t ever wanna see you again’ by Uncle Sam. Here, they had changed the refrain in the following manner:

*I don't ever want to see you again  
But tell me why did it have to be my best friend (> the Holy Spirit)  
That you were messing around with  
I didn't want to notice it  
I was true to my love for you (Morris 1997)*

Joseph was presented as being angry with Mary about “messing around” with “the Holy Spirit” (Fieldnotes 2013). Most laughed at this pun, but not everybody was happy. Judging from the reactions, it was a bit too much for some. Theoretically, we find here an example of a situation where “the audience members are forced into uncomfortable positions, often bearing witness to a message with which they do not agree” (McClymond 2016: 108). The audience/congregation is a crucial part of the performance and their presence and participation sanctions (at least to some degree) what goes on in the ritual (Hornborg 2017; Hüsken and Neubert 2012). Ritual performance is a powerful way to make a stand and create change, or as Maurice Bloch has said, “You cannot argue with a song” (1974: 55, quoted in Hornborg 2017: 19).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the most efficient protest against the altered performance is to leave the ritual space.

From the reactions of the audience to the chosen songs, as well as some of the comments afterwards, it is clear that what goes on in the Mavuno Christmas service is slightly unnerving to some, and very entertaining to most. There is a lot of humour in how the story is told, and to many such a down-to-earth perspective on the Christmas events seems refreshing. Most seemed to be having a good time, enjoying a chance to ‘be real’ – to talk openly about life beyond church – in church. The next section discusses this in more depth.

6 As a curiosity I note that this quote has been part of almost every conversation I have had with Hornborg as a supervisor; it is clearly one of Anne-Christine’s favourites.

## 5 Creating Space for Forbidden Feelings – Negotiating Life beyond the Ritual Frame

At the time of my field work in Nairobi, Mavuno's teen ministry (Teens Konnect) held a sermon series titled "Blurred lines" that resulted in both publicity and public conflict for the church. The series was advertised with huge posters around the city showing a young couple "in cosy comfort with each other," and addressed "what Mavuno perceived as an escalating crisis of teenage sexuality in Nairobi" (Gitau 2018: 107). Sermon titles chosen from pop culture, including 'Fifty Shades of Grey' and 'Friends with a Monster', hinted at the subject under discussion. The poster made headlines on evening primetime news, with many Christians condemning it and speaking of how low the church had fallen in using such a "pornographic" picture (Gitau 2018: 107). On the other hand, many media personalities and church leaders from the ecclesial community commended Mavuno for reaching out to young people and trying to talk to them about difficult topics, saying that the sermon series "barely scratched the surface of the problem of a tech-savvy society without checks and balances" (Gitau 2018: 107).

The sermon series and the public discussion that followed gave the Mavuno leaders a chance to clarify their position on sexuality and marriage, one affirming the born-again holiness ideals of chastity and monogamy, of abstaining from sex before and outside of marriage, and honouring fidelity within. This was also preached in the teens' service that I attended in March 2014, where the program included the song 'Ring Finger' by Mavuno-affiliated artist Rigga, who also spoke of his own struggle with sexuality, virginity, and purity (Mavuno Teens Konnect, ethnographic fieldnotes, 23/3/2014). Hence, the difference between Mavuno's teachings and those of other Renewalist churches does not lie in the actual viewpoints on moral matters, but rather in Mavuno's way of addressing them. What makes them different is their openness to talking about these issues in church and to confirming that it is a struggle for a young person to manage to adhere to these norms while at the same time living in contemporary society with its rapid, easy access to both dating and pornography.

In the Alternative Christmas service, the focus is not so much on chastity or fidelity (although these themes are present too), but rather on the emotional aspects of being in love and being hurt by love, as well as the connection between human romantic love and God's eternal love. Symbolised by "a real piano" on stage, Mavuno encourages young adults to "be real" (Fieldnotes 2013), to speak honestly about their real-life questions. In an attempt to integrate life outside of church with life inside – ultimately to achieve more integrity in life – secular music is used to make the connection. Church music does

not normally address anger, fear, attraction, lust, or revenge, which is why Mavuno needed a different set of music to be able to speak about these emotional issues. Secular music, framed by a ritual setting and incorporated into a Christian story, provides the leadership with the opportunity to speak to young people about things that relate to their everyday life. Music, Kanjii said, “helps us communicate what we cannot say” (Fieldnotes 2013); it is a language that speaks more directly to the “affective and emotional core of our identity” (Smith 2010: 77) as human beings.

We may compare this with Magnus Echtler’s depiction of a Muslim festival on Zanzibar, where groups of young men and women sing sexually explicit songs to each other as part of a ritual performance.<sup>7</sup> These songs are immensely popular due to their “transgressive quality,” Echtler says, since they “surpassed the strictures of gender relations without negating them, and therefore shocked and delighted Zanzibaris from other parts of the island who visited the festival in growing numbers” (2012: 65, 66). The obscene songs provided participants with an opportunity to speak about otherwise hidden or forbidden topics, and yet do so in the ‘safe’ environment of ritual performance. “Within the ritual frame they were empowered to sing what they could not voice on any other day,” Echtler explains (2012: 66). Speaking openly about the human body, the songs revealed the social norms connected to gender relations in Zanzibari society, thereby negotiating those very norms. “[T]he songs violated the concealed ‘social’ body by revealing the sexuality of the ‘natural’ body. In breaching the cultural norms regarding the representation of the sexual body, the obscene songs voiced what could not be talked about, thereby taking a stand in the ‘body politics’ of gender relations in Zanzibari society” (Echtler 2012: 65).

In a similar manner, the Mavuno Alternative Christmas service violates prevailing social norms within the Kenyan ecclesial body – where certain emotions and topics are consigned to the closet – by revealing the sexuality of the ‘natural’ body. It deliberately surpasses the strictures of born-again life, yet does so within a charismatic liturgical frame, thus empowering participants to voice what they cannot say on another day. That this is indeed an exemption, undertaken in a safe environment and under the surveillance of pastoral leadership, is underlined, for example, when Kanjii at one point tells the audience that pastor so-and-so “has given you permission for today” to sing a particular song (Fieldnotes 2013). The participants should not go home thinking that these songs, and the life-style they describe, are now no longer off-limits

7 The festival has a pre-Islamic background and involves several activities that are not allowed according to Islam, including drinking, which are not allowed in Mavuno either. The Mavuno comparison strictly pertains to the festival’s use of sexually explicit songs as part of a ritual.



for a born-again Christian. The ritual specialists serve a dual function here, both authorising what goes on in the service (the use of secular songs, speaking openly about all kinds of feelings) and yet reminding the audience about the moral obligations involved in living for Christ (chastity, fidelity, monogamy). These obligations are articulated, for example, in the altar call, where people who already belong to Christ are encouraged to respond with surrender and obedience.

Hence, secular music is used in a strategic way to make a stand, not so much on moral issues, as on the ecclesial unwillingness to speak openly about them. Mavuno wants to challenge the view that sees Christians as holy, detached from certain types of feelings, and standing above the emotional struggle of everyday life, and instead point to a God who is loving, forgiving, and able to heal and restore whatever challenges a person has undergone. This way, the Mavuno leadership is able to address difficult topics in a way that is relevant to young people in Nairobi. Life beyond the ritual frame is negotiated and new ways to approach born-again life are delineated, all within a ritual framework. Expressed in technical terms, we could say that the affordance of the Christmas service is widened from 'merely' communicating the Christmas story, to ministering to the emotional needs of young people as well.<sup>8</sup> The possibilities inherent in the ritual are multiplied and expanded. The price Mavuno pays for this widening of possibilities – this Alternative Christmas service – is that some Christians find them irreverent and walk out the door. To these people, some kind of music – and possibly some kinds of feelings – are just not 'right' for the liturgical setting.

## 6 Conclusion

This article has discussed ritual invention, disruption, and negotiation using the Mavuno Alternative Christmas service as a case in point. We have seen how Mavuno deliberately alters the format of a normal Christmas service, creatively incorporating pop music and other references from youth culture to the liturgy, while still upholding the charismatic frame through the use of carols, hymns, and other traditional elements: transgressing the boundaries of

8 The term 'affordance' was coined by psychologist James J. Gibson, (e.g., 2014). It refers to a range of possibilities for interaction between object and subject. In this case, the service is the 'object' interacting with young urban Kenyans, and for which the possible 'usage' is widened due to the inclusion of music that is not normally part of charismatic liturgy. See also discussion in Monique Ingalls (2018: 23).

charismatic liturgy, and yet at the same time acting firmly within its frame. Music is a key factor in this mix. The Gospel is presented in a context-sensitive way via music and yet music also marks the limits of such contextualisation.

Through this altered ritual performance, Mavuno challenges “prescribed or anticipated ritual behaviour” and “draw[s] attention to latent expectations of ritual actors and the ritual itself” (McClymond 2016, 108). The altered performance asks several important questions of the born-again community: What can be expected from a born-again Christian in terms of love-related emotions? Can a Christian be hurt? Bitter? Heart-broken? Sad? Angry? Attracted? In love? And what can be expected from charismatic liturgy? Can a service include secular music? Speak of sex? Joke freely about sensitive issues? Ultimately, what is the purpose of a Christmas service?

From the perspective of the Mavuno leadership, the purpose of the service is clear: to tell the Christmas message in the most appropriate manner to a young, urban Kenyan. To them, it is obvious that all kinds of emotions can be experienced by Christians (as well as by all humans) and that only a church that speaks truthfully and honestly about all aspects of life can reach out in a trustworthy manner with the Gospel. To them, the charismatic liturgy must therefore be agile enough to be able to move beyond its own boundaries in order to reach a higher goal. Including secular music is not a problem as long as it meets this higher ambition. Conversely, unless a Christmas service does communicate the Gospel in a manner that can be understood by the participants, it is mere liturgical grandstanding. Then, the question of the nature of an authentic ritual performance gets a different and deeper interpretation. Which Christmas service is the most authentic? The one with the correct songs and the correct liturgy, or the one with the most efficiently communicated message? Who in effect ‘got the rite wrong’: those who ‘got it right’ or those who ‘got it done’? And so, ritual negotiation and invention continues.

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