

# The commercialisation of anointed water in two ministries: An African theological perspective



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The use of water in healing has significance in African religious life. African people believe that water is not an ordinary substance but is medicinal and a life-giving commodity. This article argues that within a Pentecostal church setting, the use of water in healing should be juxtaposed with biblical practices to deal with the challenges of commercialisation of the commodity, its abuses, and other unethical practices. The integration of the African religious life and biblical practices is framed from an African theological perspective. The contribution of this perspective is its potential to address the commercialisation of water in two selected Pentecostal-type ministries. This will be achieved by introducing an African theological perspective and the use of water in African religious life. Similarly, the two selected ministries and their commercialisation of water will be discussed through the use of the case study method. The two selected church ministries are Rivers of Living Water Ministries and Nala Mandate International (NMI). The aim of this article is to demonstrate that an African theological perspective is relevant for addressing issues of the commercialisation of water in the selected ministries. This challenges how scholars approach the use of water in healing. The practice should be acknowledged in African religious life but its commercialisation should be criticised.

**Contribution:** The article contributed to the discourse on the use of water in African religious life and proposed an African theological perspective to address the challenges of the commercialisation of the commodity.

**Keywords:** Pentecostalism; commercialisation; water; Rivers of Living Waters Ministries; Nala Mandate International; African theological perspective.

## Introduction

The use of water in healing has some significance in African religious life. Africans in different contexts believe that water can deal with sicknesses and diseases. This point is further illustrated by Sackey (2006:142) when he said that:

[I]n traditional religious beliefs hydrotherapy that includes drinking and washing with water is a means to expel any contamination that sickness or misfortune is believed to brought to a person. (p. 142)

This means that water is not only used for drinking and bathing for biological benefits but also for spiritual benefit in addressing misfortune and other problems caused by the spirit world. Sackey (2006:142) goes further to say that in most West African societies water is used as an instrument to cast out evil spirits. Some Africans would even approach the sacrament of baptism with the same mentality of dealing with various evil spirits during the baptismal ritual in a church setting (Oosthuizen 1988). Hence, many Africans tend practicing different water rituals and ceremonies in rivers, dams, streams, waterfalls, or even oceans. It is believed that during these rituals and ceremonies, different misfortunes, curses, and spells would be taken or washed away by water. This makes water an important commodity in African religious life.

However, this article argues that in a Pentecostal church setting, the practice of the use of water in healing should be juxtaposed with biblical practices. This is because, in Pentecostalism, the biblical text is considered authoritative and fundamental to the practice of theology (Ellington 1996, Nel 2016, 2018:58). Therefore, the practice of the use of water in healing must be not only taken from an African religious life but also in balance with the biblical practices. This article uses the African theological perspective as a theoretical framework that balances an African religious life and biblical practices. The aim is to demonstrate that this perspective is relevant in addressing the commercialisation of water in the two selected ministries. This shall be achieved by introducing the African theological perspective and the use of water in African religious life. In addition, the

two selected church ministries and their leaders will also be introduced by using the case study method. Some of the data in this article was obtained from social media utterances from leaders of the ministries. The first church ministry is Rivers of Living Water Ministries led by Bishop BS Zondo. The second church ministry is Nala Mandate International (NMI) led by Dr. Plentiologist QH Nala. Then there will be a discussion on the commercialisation of water in these church ministries and suggestions on the way forward. The aim is to demonstrate that African theological perspective is relevant in addressing the challenge of the commercialisation of water.

## Framing an African theological perspective

There is a need to give an overview of African theology in a quest to frame an African theological perspective. However, scholars have admitted in previous studies that there is no single definition of African theology. Nonetheless, we can have a general understanding of what African theology is about by drawing on various definitions. Mbiti (1973:6) after assessing the different views on African theology from the east, west, and the north conclude that 'African theology liaise to particularise its understanding of the faith according to the total situation of our peoples—historical, cultural, contemporary and anticipated or possible future'. This means that African theology is only concerned with the presentation of the gospel to Africans but how such a message is relevant to the African people and their history. Mashau and Frederick (2008:114) add that African theology 'arises out of the identity of African people, draws on African categories of thought, and speaks to the historical situation of African people'. If theology is about God, African theology is concerned with how God identifies with the African people and how He has been in constant communication with them over the years.

Bediako (1992:3) points out that an African theology that can revive Africa's cultural heritage and religious consciousness will be able to produce the true identity of African Christianity. To achieve this, the Christian gospel should be able to appeal to the African culture and identity (Bediako 1992:4). However, in the contemporary Pentecostal movement, this is not a challenge. In other words, Pentecostal churches in Africa have been able to make the Christian message attractive to the African context. The challenge for many rising Pentecostal-type ministries in South Africa is ensuring that their practices are rooted in true biblical fundamental teachings. This challenge is important considering the commercialisation of water and other abuses in these churches and ministries. In dealing with this challenge, it is important to establish an African theology that will be able to strike a balance between African cultural heritage and biblical practices. Mbiti (1980) in his other article dealt with this aspect by stating that various African theological aspects should be reflected by using the bible as the basis. Mbiti (1991:121) points out that it is on this ground that 'The theology of Christian healing lends itself readily to

scriptural basis'. Therefore, an African theological perspective in this article refers to the juxtaposition of the African religious life and the biblical basis of a theological concept or phenomenon.

## The use of water in African religious life

In Africa, water is not just a figure of speech but is also an important aspect of life. The people who believe in this aspect of water perceive it as something which gives them life (ed. Bujo 2005:127). Costen (2010:119) explains that water among Africans is used for certain rites such as cleansing, purification, death, dying, regeneration, new life, new birth, and recreation. It is for this reason that the African people perceive water as a life-giving commodity. It is also for this reason that Africans have a love for the rain which brings water for their well-being. It is the rain that brings that connection between water and the divine since it is believed that rain comes from God or heaven (Dube 1989)

Moreover, Africans believe that water is medicinal and sometimes perceived as a better medicine compared to others when it comes to the healing and well-being of Africans (Rinne 2001). In religious circles other than water baptism, some people pray while in water or pray closer to the water streams in the belief that they would be more connected to the supernatural as compared to other environments (Gumo et al 2012). Some people go to the extent of collecting water from the streams for prayer purposes to use it when bathing or for other ritual healing. According to Rim-Rukeh, Irerhievwie and Agbozu (2013), some go and bathe in the water in the belief that they will receive healing, purification, new life, and so forth. The other will just use pure water but pray for it in the belief that it can heal or deliver someone from the challenges of life (Kalu 2008). In both events, believers do not just use water but do so as per the instructions of their prophets and most of them would still do it regardless of the risks and danger posed by the waters of the streams (Modiko 2011). Moreover, some African Christians particularly Pentecostals believe that some of the spirits that torment people are found in water, hence they call them 'water spirits' or 'marine spirits' (Rim-Rukeh et al. 2013). Therefore, they see a need to not only embrace water but to also confront spirits that dwell in the water.

Moreover, some African believers use water beyond its natural abilities, they believe that water has supernatural powers particularly if it has passed the hands of the clergy or if its use is instructed by a prophet. Based on these connotations, water is perceived as a source of life and as a substance that can be used sacredly or in the performance of certain rites. The aspect of water as a life-carrying and medicinal causes the demand and the supply of water particularly in African traditional and religious worldviews. However, the demand and supply of water open up to the commercialisation of the substance (Benyah 2020; cf Banda 2020). This happens particularly when the water has been prayed for by a church leader who is perceived to be carrying

high powers. Hence, some Africans believe that once water is anointed it is no longer a chemical substance but carries power for healing and deliverance. To discuss this in detail, there is a need in the next section to introduce the two selected church ministries that practices the use of water for divine purposes.

## The two selected church ministries

### Rivers of Living Water Ministries

According to the church website (2022), Rivers of Living Water Ministries is a church situated in the Vaal triangle in the Evaton, Sebokeng location and Archbishop Bafana Stephen Zondo is the leader and founder of the church (cf Kgatle 2022b). Archbishop Zondo started this church at his four-room house together with his wife and son and three other people but now has more than 30 000 people with many branches and reaches millions of lives internationally through his publicised messages on both mass media and social media. His wife serves as an executive director in the church. Archbishop Zondo has studied his theology at Rhema Bible Training Centre Johannesburg where he obtained a diploma in theology. Archbishop Zondo received other degrees from different non-accredited bible schools such as Christ the Lamb School of Theology up to a Doctorate Degree. On 23 June 2013, Zondo was conferred with Professorship, Doctor of Divinity (DD), and Consecrated to the Holy Office of Archbishop, by The Interdenominational Theological Centre (ITC). It is a tendency of many pastors in South Africa to seek titles and degrees from non-accredited institutions to boast their images. (Rivers of Living Waters Ministries 2022). Archbishop Zondo has recently appeared to the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission) and attended courts of law for a series of accusations, of abusing church members financially, sexually, swindling, murder, and rape to mention the few (De Vries 2020:1). Rivers of Living Waters Ministries is relevant in this article because other than water, they sell other sacred products including church apparel. The church believes in divine healing using products as opposed to classical Pentecostal churches in South Africa. This is happening at the Rivers of Living Waters many adherents are drawn to this church to get this religious item as is advertised on the church website, television shows, and during church intervals.

### Nala Mandate International

According to the church website, the NMI is the church ministry founded by Dr King SoMnala the Plentiologist, Qhoshangokwakhe Hamilton Nala. Nala is also the founder and President and king of Word of Plenty Mandate, Rebirth Family Centre based in the city of Durban KwaZulu Natal, South Africa (NMI 2022). He studied theology and received a diploma in theology from Faith Bible Institute in 1988. In 1989 received an Associate of art degree from the same institution and in 2001 received an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Holy Nation Bible College and 2013 received an honorary Professorship from House of Prayer and

Holiness International Ministries (NMI 2022). Dr. Nala was born into a family of polygamy, and he is a polygamist as well because he is married to two wives. Nala dropped out of school from grade 1 due to his family's financial struggle. Although he loved school, he had no choice he had to stop attending school. Dr. Nala claims that his ministry began when he was 21 years old when God visited him numerous times and occasions and mandated him to begin the apostolic office and reach out to the body of Christ. The ministry of NMI is a life-changing healing campaign. He says his ministry has equipped many pastors, ministers, worshippers, and musicians in the body of Christ (NMI 2022).

Dr. Nala's ministry is relevant for this article and is not much different from the Rivers of Living Waters as they both focus on the same purpose of healing the sick through religious items such as holy water, and oil, and selling various other religious products such as attire and so forth. And Nala is controversial in the same way Zondo is. Dr. Nala found himself being challenged by furious members of Lesbian Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, (LGBTQ+ people) after He claimed that he can cure homosexuals through his faith in water (Iqual 2017:n.p.). The members of LGBTQ+ people protested in front of his church in Durban requesting the church leaders to give them the faith water to check 'if it is working as he claimed' (Iqual 2017:n.p.) This is not the first time that Dr. Nala is attacked by community organisation members for his outrageous claims. In 2013, he claimed that he can cure HIV and AIDS through his holy water. The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) called holy water to go under a microscope to be checked whether the claim that it can heal the incurable disease is valid (eNCA 2013:n.p.) in the next section, the use of water is introduced in the two church ministries the Rivers of Living Waters and NMI in more details.

## The use of water in two selected church ministries

### The use of water in Rivers of Living Waters

Archbishop Zondo's teaching and preaching concerning the use of the holy water is unapologetic because Leka Mofokeng who is an elder in Archbishop Zondo's church said this while in Botswana concerning the effects of using the 'miracle water'. He said that water removes misfortune, opens doors of blessings, wealth, and healing, and gave success to the seemingly despairing multitude (Gaotlhobogwe 2013:n.p.).

Leka Mofokeng in Gaotlhobogwe justified why the Rivers of Living Waters were selling and using the 'anointed water' when he said:

'It is not just water. It is anointed water prayed for by (bishop) himself in a secluded location. You will agree with me that it would be difficult for the bishop to pray for all of these multitudes one by one. Instead, he prays for this water and gives it out, it is not for profit.' (2013:n.p.)

Based on the statement of Mofokeng it is our view that the Rivers of Living Waters Ministries is a business that is

generating revenue by selling water which is manufactured in its factory that purifies water for human consumption in Johannesburg said Mofokeng (Gaotlhobogwe 2013:n.p.). This new method of providing healing through so-called 'anointed water' in our view is not good for the people who are truly desperate for healing and seeking to be blessed by it (anointed water). Rather, they should be seeking true healing from God in Christ free of charge as the scriptures say in Matthew 10:8 that freely you have been given, freely give (Kgatle 2022a).

### The use of water in Nala Mandate International

The NMI church leader Bishop Nala is using 'faith water' in a quest to heal all various kinds of diseases. In 2013 Nala claimed that he had cured some congregants of HIV and AIDS with faith water that he sells in his ministry (eNCA 2013:n.p.). Dr. King Nala named his ministry after his surname (Nala) meaning plenty or abundance and wealth (NMI 2022). In addition, anointed water in this ministry is used to draw followers so that Nala can maintain his lavish lifestyle and have a large following. Furthermore, the sale of water is done so that the leader will keep his bank's balance overflowing. Hence, he charges a high amount for the faith items of healing. Dr. Nala recently claimed that he can heal and cure homosexuality, by using 'faith water'. By making utterances such as these, he knows that many people will pay a visit to his church and will buy this wonder-working miracle faith water. The use of water is not only for healing but Nala also promises his congregants that by buying similar products, they will move from poverty to a world of plenty (NMI 2022). It is this kind of assertion that promotes the commercialisation of religious products such as faith water. And the congregants fall prey to their leaders because they are unsuspecting of their hidden agendas in the sale of faith water and other products.

### The commercialisation of water in the two selected ministries

The commercialisation of religion or commodification of the gospel happens when there is a deliberate intention of attaching people's faith and belief system to certain products for profit gains in the church (Gitonga 2011; cf Masenya & Masenya 2018). Therefore, churches that practice the commercialisation of religion sell different sacred products in the name of faith or healing and deliverance. Moreover, the prices of these products are exorbitant because the products are believed to be carrying certain supernatural powers for healing and deliverance to take place. Church leaders in some of these ministries know that once they convince their congregants that the water they sell has been prayed for or blessed by the man of God and is having healing effects, they know it will be bought in large quantities because African believers love tangible items (Masenya & Masenya 2018). In addition, their adherents will extend the word to their neighbors and friends, and multitudes of people will visit the prophet's church to buy the sacred products. And thus, this generates a lot of money for them,

while the congregants will remain poor and not healed, and deprived of the blessings promised to them. However, there are some followers of these churches who have claimed to have received healing in similar practices (Wepener & Muller 2013). Nonetheless, the commercialisation of religion abuses the belief of the church members and followers in these churches because a price tag is attached to their faith.

The Rivers of Living Waters Ministries sell different products for the divine healing of the congregants that include water. Kgatle (2019:49) explains that at 'Rivers of Living Waters church led by Bishop Zondo, there is even a factory to sell healing products like water. The commercialisation of water was recorded one time when Zondo visited Botswana in 2013. According to Gaotlhobogwe:

[A]n estimated crowd of 60000 of people queued for the miracle water and miracle oil from popular South African pastor...to make bad luck disappear and unlock doors of blessings, prosperity, and healing was a hit with the seemingly desperate crowd. (2013:n.p.)

However, most of the time the people do not receive any blessing or prosperity. On the contrary, their lives remain the same. Once all the bottles of miracle water are sold out, the 'Bishop', 'Prophet', or 'Man of God' leaves with a bag full of quick cash to enrich themselves. The unsuspecting followers will remain poor and thirsty for more and so-called 'blessed water'. This notion causes believers in these ministries to wait and hopes that one day God will remember and answer their prayers as they continue to buy faith-healing products. While the 'Bishop', 'Prophet', or 'Man of God' is living in a lavish house in affluent suburbs enjoying the hard-earned money from the congregants.

In the NMI, there is a commercial use of water which is normally prayed for by the pastor and is perceived to be carrying certain powers for the healing of various sicknesses. Sebata (2015; cf Ashamu 2020) explains that while medical scientists have struggled for years to find a cure for HIV and AIDS, Bishop HQ Nala of the NMI claimed to have found a remedy for divine healing of HIV and AIDS which places a demand for this water because many people are suffering from the disease. These claims by Nala once angered the government particularly the provincial government of Kwazulu Natal as they feared that patients might end up leaving their anti-retroviral treatment with the hope that the holy water will heal them (Mboti 2015). In response to these claims, the government encouraged the people to still use the anti-retroviral instead of only relying on the holy water supplied by HQ Nala. In an interview with the South African Broadcasting Corporation, SABC News (2013:n.p). HQ Nala explained that the belief that water can heal people depends on the faith of an individual. However, it is not only faith that people need to access the water, they will also need to buy the water. The small bottle of water in the NMI is purchased at a price of R15.00 (Tat-Siong & Fernando 2022). This water is sourced from the water factory but packaged and branded in such a way that attracts the congregants into buying the water. People believe in the water because its brand carries

the image of the church leader, hence people believe that it has supernatural powers to heal sickness and disease.

The Cultural, Religious, and Linguistic Communities Commission made arguments against the selling of water in churches such as Rivers of Living Water Ministries. The commission chairperson at that time said that pastors must also account for the commercialising of prayer water because if churches are buying water for R4.00 as an example and selling it for R30.00 after praying for it, it means prayer is worth R26.00 (Ntuli 2017). This in a way is the commercialisation of prayer at a profit of more than 300% which brings another argument if churches should continue to be classified as non-profit organisations (NPO) (Ntuli 2017). Or if they should now be classified as private companies and pay taxes like other businesses. Therefore, the argument brought by the CRL commission is not necessarily the selling of water which also happens in other retail outlets, but the exorbitant prices charged for the selling of water after making certain prayers. The latter is the commercialisation of religion because people's belief systems and faith are attached to the selling of certain sacred products such as water.

## African theological perspective and commercialisation of anointed water

As discussed in the theoretical framework section, an African theological perspective is a reflection of the theological matter based on a scriptural basis. In this context, it refers to the scriptural basis for the use of water in healing. While there is a biblical basis for the use of water in healing various sicknesses and diseases, there is no scriptural basis for the sale of water as done by the two church ministries discussed above. On the contrary, when water was used to heal the leprous Naaman, the Prophet Elisha only instructed him to wash in Jordan seven times for his flesh to be restored and for him to be cleansed from leprosy (2 Ki 5:10). There was no demand for payment or for the prophet to come with his water to sell to the sick person. Similarly, different people were healed in the pool of Bethesda in John 5, but there is no reference to them paying for their healing. While the two biblical texts do not refer to drinkable water, there is still no biblical justification for the sale of water since people can bring their water.

Indeed, water is an important chemical substance, but pastors should not take advantage of the substance to make money for themselves and their families. It might be a good practice to allow congregants to come with their water to be prayed for by the pastor instead of attaching a price to it. But this is only possible if pastors such as Zondo and Nala desire to heal people through water without commercialising it. This depends on their original intention and purpose of selling water to their followers. Was it healing or commercialisation? If it was for healing, then there is nothing wrong with it. Besides, there is evidence of the use of different substances in the bible for the healing of the sick such as the healing of

Naaman in 2 Kings 5:10 and the healing of different people in John 5. Therefore, it is not wrong when a pastor is led to use water to pray for someone, but the challenge is when a price is attached to such water.

## Conclusion

The use of water in healing is consistent with the African religious life. Africans in their different contexts use water for different rituals that bring healing from various diseases and challenges such as misfortunes caused by evil spirits in the spirit world. This article studied this phenomenon by applying it to the two selected ministries, the Rivers of Living Waters of Bishop Stephen Zondo and the NMI of Bishop Hamilton Nala. This article argued that the practice of the use of water in healing should be juxtaposed with biblical practices to deal with the challenges of commercialisation. This was done through the use of an African theological perspective which balances an African cultural heritage with the biblical or scriptural basis for a theological phenomenon. Through this approach, it is proposed here that the practice of using water for healing should have a scriptural basis. And while there are Old and New Testaments texts that support the use of water in healing, there is no biblical basis for the sale of water in the church. On the contrary, biblical texts such as Matthew 10:8 encourages prophets such as Bishop Zondo and Bishop Nala to give freely as they have been given freely. This article challenges the way scholars studied the use of water in the past. The article calls for the acknowledgment of the use of water in healing but a critique of its commercialisation through an African theological perspective.

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## Authors' contributions

M.S.K. contributed in the conceptualisation, formal analysis and writing of the article of the two ministries. V.Q. contributed in the conceptualisation, formal analysis and writing of the article of the commercialisation part.

## Ethical considerations

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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