From Ritual to Revenue: The Influence of Digital Platforms on the *Mbiya* Trade and Spiritual Practices in Johanne Masowe Apostolic Sects

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Abstract

In Zimbabwe's digital age, sacred traditions face unprecedented transformation. The intersection of digital technology and religious commerce represents a critical frontier in understanding contemporary African spirituality. This study explores how digital platforms reshape the mbiya (sacred clay plates) trade and spiritual practices within Johanne Masowe Apostolic sects (JMAS), converting sacred clay plates into digital commodities. Mbiya plates, traditionally central to healing rituals and spiritual protection in African Indigenous Churches (AICs), have experienced a fundamental shift from localised, ritual-bound objects to commodified digital merchandise accessible through social media platforms, mobile money systems, and e-commerce channels. Through a qualitative approach, this research interrogates how digitalisation has reconfigured the sacred-profane boundary, altered power dynamics within apostolic hierarchies, and created new forms of spiritual entrepreneurship. The study demonstrates how digital platforms function as active agents that reshape religious practice, commercialise sacred objects, and democratise access to spiritual capital whilst simultaneously raising concerns about authenticity, exploitation, and the erosion of traditional spiritual authority. Findings indicate that digitalisation has created a paradox: expanding access to spiritual resources whilst potentially commodifying and diluting their sacred significance. Recommendations address policy frameworks for regulating digital religious commerce, ethical guidelines for spiritual entrepreneurs, and strategies for balancing tradition with technological innovation in African religious contexts. The study contributes to scholarly debates on digital religion, African Christianity, and the political economy of spirituality, offering insights relevant to religious studies, anthropology, and digital sociology.

Keywords: Digital religion, mbiya (clay plates), Johanne Masowe Apostolic sects, religious commodification, spiritual entrepreneurship, African Indigenous Churches

Introduction

The advent of digital technology has fundamentally transformed religious expression, organisation, and commerce globally, creating new possibilities and challenges for how communities practice faith and engage with sacred objects (Campbell, 2020) In sub-Saharan Africa, where mobile phone penetration reached 46% by 2023 (GSMA, 2023), religious communities increasingly utilise digital platforms to access spiritual resources and engage in spiritual commerce (Hackett, 2020). This digital revolution has profoundly affected African Indigenous Churches (AICs), particularly in Zimbabwe, where internet penetration grew from 23% in 2015 to 36% by 2024 (Potraz, 2024). Within this digital landscape, Johanne Masowe Apostolic sects (JMAS) are among Zimbabwe's most significant religious movements, with an estimated 1.5 million adherents (Togarasei & Chitando, 2020). They have undergone dramatic transformations in their sacred-object economies. *Mbiya*, traditionally embedded in ritual contexts and accessible only through established spiritual hierarchies, are now marketed, sold, and distributed via WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and mobile money platforms. This transformation fundamentally challenges traditional understandings of sacred object economies and raises profound questions about the digitalisation of the sacred and commercialisation of spiritual capital (Biri & Togarasei, 2021). Within Zimbabwe's diverse AIC landscape, two prominent groups stand out: the White Garment (*Masowe enguwo chena*) and Red Garment (*Masowe enguwo tsvuku*) churches, both sharing artefacts, practices, and rituals with *mbiya* occupying central significance (Daneel, 2001).

Globally, scholars have documented digital technology's impact on religious practices, from American megachurches' social media evangelism (Hutchings, 2017) to Indian Hindu devotional apps (Scheifinger, 2010). In Africa, research has examined Nigerian Pentecostal churches' digital strategies (Obadare, 2016) and South African prosperity gospel televangelism (Resane, 2017). However, scholarly understanding of how digital platforms specifically transform sacred object economies within AICs remains underdeveloped, with most digital religion scholarship focusing on textual/visual content dissemination rather than material object commerce. The *mbiya* trade's digital transformation raises critical questions: How do digital platforms reconfigure traditional spiritual hierarchies? What economic, social, and theological implications emerge from the online commodification of sacred objects? How do believers negotiate tensions between traditional ritual contexts and digital commercial spaces?

This study sought to:

a. Examine the manifestation and significance of *mbiya* in Johane Masowe, Red and White Garment Churches.
b. Analyse mechanisms and extent of digital platform usage in the *mbiya* trade.
c. Assess economic and spiritual exploitation surrounding *mbiya*.
d. Explore strategies for revitalising and preserving *mbiya* traditions as sacred objects.

Background

The mbiya (Sacred Clay Plates) in Johanne Masowe Apostolic Cosmology

The Johanne Masowe Apostolic Church emerged in the 1930s under the dynamic leadership of Johane Masowe (John of the Wilderness), originally named Shoniwa Masedza Tandi Moyo, who asserted a divine mandate to establish a distinctly African Christian movement free from the constraints of missionary oversight. This inception occurred amid the broader milieu of colonial suppression, missionary paternalism, and a burgeoning wave of African resistance, which together fostered the emergence of various African Independent Churches (AICs) throughout Southern Africa (Daneel, 1971). The movement's integration of healing, prophecy, and elements of traditional African religion resonated profoundly with marginalized communities, both urban and rural, who sought viable spiritual alternatives to mainstream denominations often perceived as dismissive of their cultural needs and worldviews. Consequently, what materialized was a unique African Christian expression contesting both missionary Christianity and indigenous belief systems, drawing thoughtfully from both realms.

Distinct theological and practical aspects set the Johanne Masowe sects apart from other Christian denominations. They rejected Western medicine in favor of spiritual healing, displaying disdain for formal Western education which they viewed as tainted by colonial legacies. They relied on prophetic revelations as the core source of spiritual knowledge, illustrating a radical departure from conventional practices. Sacred objects, particularly *mbiya* clay plates, became tangible mediators of divine power, integral to their religious life. Distinctive rituals, including baptism in natural waters and unique dress codes symbolizing spiritual purity, further defined their identity (Mukonyora, 1999).

By the 1940s, the movement fragmented into various factions, notably the White Garment and Red Garment branches, resulting from charismatic succession disputes (Mukonyora, 1999). Despite these divisions, both factions retained core Masowe principles while developing

unique liturgical approaches and organizational frameworks, contributing to a rich tapestry of subcultures within the movement. The White Garment faction emphasized purification and prophecy, whereas the Red Garment branch integrated more elaborate ceremonial practices and hierarchical structures (Dillon-Malone, 1978). Collectively, these factions represent one of Zimbabwe's most significant religious movements, wielding considerable cultural and social influence.

Central to Johanne Masowe theology is the role of *mbiya*, which serve as active participants in spiritual transactions between humans and the divine. Crafted and consecrated through rigorous prophetic rituals, these plates are believed to embody divine healing energy, situated within a syncretic framework that amalgamates Christian and traditional African spiritual concepts (Chitando, 2013). Their access was strictly regulated, necessitating the involvement of established prophets to perform elaborate consecration rites. This gatekeeping reflected broader systemic authority, underscoring the comprehensive, holistic approach to health inherent in African medical traditions (Gelfand, 1985). As such, the Johanne Masowe movement manifests an enduring and complex interplay between faith, culture, and identity, significantly enriching Zimbabwe's religious landscape.

The Emergence and Significance of Mbiya in JMAS

The precise origins of *mbiya* within JMAS traditions remain obscured by limited documentation and oral transmission gaps. However, archaeological and anthropological evidence suggests the practice draws upon longstanding Shona ceramic traditions predating Christianity's arrival. Pottery production among the Shona people dates to the Early Iron Age (approximately 200-500 CE), with vessels serving domestic, commercial, and ritual functions (Pikirayi, 2007). Huffman's (1980) analysis of ceramic styles demonstrates that specific vessel forms signified group identity and cosmological beliefs, establishing precedent for pottery's symbolic dimensions that JMAS practitioners could draw upon when developing ritual uses for clay objects. Within JMAS contexts, *mbiya* likely emerged organically as practitioners sought material vessels for prayer and spiritual work that resonated with African cultural memory whilst avoiding objects associated with colonial missionary Christianity. Unlike European ecclesiastical objects such as chalices, patens, and thuribles that carried colonial associations, clay plates connected to pre-colonial pottery traditions, enabling what Bediako (1995) terms "theological indigenisation" the process by which Christian theology becomes rooted in local cultural forms rather than remaining bound to European expressions.

Early ethnographic accounts provide fragmentary evidence of *mbiya* use. Aquina (1967), documenting apostolic movements in Southern Rhodesia, briefly noted the use of “earthen dishes” in healing ceremonies but provided minimal analysis of their significance. Daneel's (1971) extensive fieldwork similarly referenced pottery's presence in ritual contexts without sustained investigation of specific forms or theological meanings. This scholarly oversight reflects broader tendencies within AIC studies to privilege theological and organisational dimensions over material culture, tendencies rooted in Protestant theological assumptions about spirituality's essentially non-material nature (Chitando, 2017).

Contemporary JMAS worship foregrounds *mbiya* as indispensable spiritual technology, treating these objects not as optional devotional aids but as essential instruments for effective prayer and spiritual work. This understanding aligns with what Engelke (2007) identifies as African Christianity's "problem of presence", the theological challenge of mediating divine immanence through material forms in religious traditions that affirm both transcendence and immanence. For JMAS practitioners, *mbiya* resolves this problem by providing tangible loci where heaven and earth intersect, creating points of contact between spiritual and material realms that enable effective communication and power exchange.

Theological Foundations of Mbiya Practice

JMAS theology surrounding *mbiya* reflects what Daneel (1971, p. 287) characterises as "pneumatic materialism", a worldview in which spiritual realities are consistently mediated through material substances rather than existing in purely immaterial realms divorced from physical existence. This theological orientation differs markedly from Protestant traditions that emphasise word-centred spirituality and iconoclastic tendencies rooted in Reformation rejections of Catholic material religion, instead embracing material mediation as necessary and divinely sanctioned, reflecting African cosmologies' holistic integration of spiritual and material dimensions of reality. JMAS practitioners embrace material mediation not as a concession to human weakness but as recognition of how divine power actually operates in the world, moving through material channels to accomplish spiritual purposes.

Three theological principles underpin *mbiya* practice and provide doctrinal justification for their ritual usage. The doctrine of spiritual conductivity holds that certain materials, particularly natural, unprocessed substances like clay that remain close to their created state, possess an inherent capacity to transmit spiritual power more effectively than processed or artificial materials contaminated by industrial production. As one Harare-based prophet explained

during fieldwork, articulating this theology in everyday language: "Clay comes from the earth that God created. It has not been polluted by factories and machines. This is why it can carry prayers" (Interview, 15 March 2024). This theology resonates with what Mbiti (1990) identifies as African cosmology's emphasis on creation's ongoing sacredness rather than viewing nature as fallen or spiritually inert, maintaining that the material world retains divine presence and can mediate spiritual power when properly approached. It is believed that through the principle of consecrated functionality, objects acquire spiritual efficacy through proper ritual blessing by anointed spiritual leaders rather than possessing automatic power by virtue of their material nature alone. Unconsecrated *mbiya* are considered spiritually inert, “mere pottery” in practitioners' terminology, incapable of mediating divine power regardless of their physical similarity to consecrated plates, their spiritual potency depending entirely on prophetic blessing. This principle creates theological justification for spiritual gatekeeping by establishing prophets as necessary intermediaries whose authority derives from their unique capacity to transform ordinary objects into spiritual instruments, a dynamic explored in subsequent sections examining power and exploitation.

The concept of spiritual reciprocity frames *mbiya* as participants in bidirectional communication between humans and the divine rather than as passive instruments or one-way channels. Prayers offered through *mbiya* are believed to ascend to God, carried by the plates' spiritual conductivity, whilst divine responses descend through the same channels, bringing healing, guidance, or protection, creating circuits of spiritual exchange. This reciprocal flow is accepted to transform *mbiya* from passive ritual props into active spiritual agents participating in ongoing relationships between practitioners and the divine, what Gell (1998) might term "secondary agents" possessing delegated intentionality through which primary agents (divine beings) act in the world.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multi-theoretical framework combining Symbolic Interactionism, Material Religion Theory, Postcolonial Theory, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and Religious Economy Theory to analyse the digital transformation of *mbiya* trade, recognising that no single theoretical lens can adequately capture this phenomenon's complexity. This combination provides analytical leverage for examining both the socio-technical dynamics of digital platforms and the economic logics shaping religious commerce, whilst also attending to meaning-making processes, power dynamics, and cultural specificities.

Symbolic Interactionism and Material Religion

The study employs symbolic interactionism developed by Mead (1934) and systematised by Blumer (1969) as a primary analytical lens for interpreting *mbiya* practices, focusing on how meanings emerge through social interaction rather than inhering in objects themselves. Symbolic interactionism posits that humans create meaning through interpretive processes mediated by symbols, with these significances arising from social interaction and subject to continuous negotiation and modification. *Mbiya* exemplify symbolic interactionism's core tenets. Their meanings are not inherent in the clay itself but emerge through JMAS practitioners' shared interpretive frameworks constructed through teaching, ritual practice, and communal discourse. Within JMAS communities, *mbiya* acquire significance through prophets' teachings explaining their spiritual functions, communal rituals demonstrating proper usage, testimony narratives validating their efficacy, and everyday usage processes observable through ethnographic engagement.

Recent developments in material religion studies extend symbolic interactionism's applicability by emphasising objects' active roles in constituting religious experience. Scholars like Morgan (2012), Meyer (2011), and Plate (2015) argue that religious objects do not merely symbolise beliefs but actively constitute religious experience and identity through their material presence and ritual deployment. *Mbiya* do not simply represent spiritual power; they enact it through their deployment in prayer, healing, and ritual warfare.

Postcolonial Theory and Religious Indigenisation

Postcolonial theory provides an essential framework for contextualising *mbiya* practices within Zimbabwe's colonial and postcolonial history. Developed by scholars including Said (1978), Spivak (1988), and Bhabha (1994), postcolonial theory examines how colonial power structures persist beyond political independence, shaping cultural production, knowledge systems, and identity formation. The emergence of JMAS and their *mbiya* practices can be interpreted as what Bhabha (1994) terms 'hybridisation', the blending of colonial (Christian) and indigenous (Shona) elements to produce novel cultural forms. *Mbiya* embody this hybridity: in material form, they serve Christian prayer directed to the Christian God, yet employ pre-Christian pottery traditions rooted in Shona cosmology. Postcolonial theory also illuminates power dynamics within contemporary JMAS communities. The commercialisation of *mbiya* can be analysed through Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern whose voices are mediated and potentially silenced by dominant powers. When prophets monopolise *mbiya*

distribution, they exercise power analogous to colonial gatekeeping. Mbembe's (2001) notion of the 'postcolony' proves particularly apt for analysing contemporary JMAS contexts characterised by complex entanglements of power, resistance, and complicity. The *mbiya* economy exemplifies this entanglement through complex webs of mutual dependence and shared investment in existing arrangements.

Actor-Network Theory

The Actor-Network Theory (ANT), developed primarily by Bruno Latour (2005), Michel Callon (1986), and John Law (1992), offers a distinctive approach to understanding technology-society relations by refusing ontological distinctions between human and non-human actors. ANT posits that social phenomena emerge through networks of heterogeneous actors that mutually constitute each other through processes of translation, enrolment, and mobilisation.

Applied to the digital *mbiya* trade, ANT illuminates how digital platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, mobile money systems, and e-commerce infrastructure, function as actors actively reshaping religious practice rather than merely facilitating human intentions. WhatsApp's affordances, including instant messaging, group communication and media sharing, create specific possibilities and constraints influencing how sacred objects are marketed, authenticated, and transacted. ANT’s concept of translation helps trace how *mbiya* transform as they move through digital networks, undergoing ontological shifts, altering not merely their location but their very nature as objects. Digitalisation introduces new network elements, including smartphones, data bundles, mobile money platforms, social media algorithms, and delivery services that translate *mbiya* into different forms.

Religious Economy Theory

The Religious Economy Theory, associated primarily with Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Laurence Iannaccone, applies economic analysis to religious behaviour, treating religion as a market where suppliers offer products to consumers who make rational choices based on cost-benefit calculations (Stark & Finke, 2000). When applied to digital *mbiya* trade, Religious Economy Theory illuminates how digitalisation dramatically alters supply-side structures by lowering barriers to entry for religious entrepreneurs. Traditional gatekeeping mechanisms regulating who could distribute *mbiya* are circumvented through digital platforms where anyone with internet access can claim spiritual legitimacy and market sacred objects, creating more competitive but also more chaotic spiritual marketplaces (Einstein, 2008).

This study's multi-theoretical approach recognises that no single framework adequately captures *mbiya* practices' complexity, requiring the integration of multiple analytical perspectives. Integrating these perspectives enables nuanced analysis that honours both spiritual significance and material interests, both cultural resistance and economic pragmatism, both collective meaning-making and structural power asymmetries, both human agency and technological mediation, avoiding reductionism whilst maintaining analytical coherence through attention to how different dimensions intersect and mutually constitute complex social phenomena.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, informed by interpretive epistemology, to explore the digital transformation of *mbiya* trade within Johanne Masowe Apostolic sects, prioritising depth through extensive participant engagement. Qualitative methodology is ideal for examining complex social phenomena such as spiritual meaning-making and power dynamics (Creswell, 2014). The study adopts a critical realist ontology, positing that social realities exist independently of our knowledge yet are accessible through interpretive frameworks influenced by culture and power dynamics (Bhaskar, 1978; Archer et al., 1998). Critical realism distinguishes between the real (unobserved structures), the actual (events occurring regardless of perception), and the empirical (observed experiences).

Data were collected in three major Zimbabwean cities, Harare, Bulawayo, and Mutare, selected for their geographic diversity and varying apostolic presence. Harare, as the largest city with the highest JMAS concentration and digital activity, served as the primary site for interviews. Bulawayo, with distinct cultural traits and a predominant Ndebele presence, provided comparative insights, while Mutare’s cross-border trade offered a transnational perspective. Using purposive and snowball sampling strategies, the study aimed for theoretical saturation rather than statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling involved selecting diverse, information-rich cases: spiritual entrepreneurs selling *mbiya* online, sceptical traditional prophets, and congregants acquiring plates through various channels. Snowball sampling helped access knowledgeable participants who might not be publicly engaged in digital commerce. The final sample comprised 45 participants: 12 digital sellers, eight (8) traditional prophets, 15 digital buyers, six (6) traditional buyers, and four (4) church leaders. The sample included 27 males and 18 females, aged 22-67, with geographic representation from Harare (26), Bulawayo (12), and Mutare (7). Data collection combined semi-structured

interviews with participant observations and digital ethnography. Interviews were conducted over five months, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Participant observation included attending JMAS worship services and observing *mbiya* usage during rituals. Digital ethnography monitored 37 Facebook pages and five WhatsApp groups dedicated to *mbiya* sales. An analysis of data followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Coding was performed using NVivo 12 software. All the research procedures were guided by ethical considerations, which centred on informed consent, confidentiality, and minimising harm. Consent was obtained in accessible language. Measures were implemented to protect anonymity, with pseudonyms assigned and data secured. Sensitive topics were approached with care, emphasising participants' comfort and respect for their cultural experiences.

However, methodological limitations were encountered during the research. Purposive and snowball sampling impacted generalisability, potentially excluding perspectives of those less inclined to engage with outsiders. Self-report data posed risks of social desirability bias, addressed through triangulation and non-judgmental questioning. The study's cross-sectional nature limited causal inference, moderated through retrospective interviews and secondary sources. Language translation challenges were mitigated by detailed checks and presentation of original language quotes where culturally specific terms arose.

Findings

The Manifestation and Functions of Mbiya in JMAS

Fieldwork revealed remarkable diversity in *mbiya* forms and functions within JMAS contexts. Five primary typologies emerged; each associated with specific spiritual functions. Cross-marked *mbiya* (*mbiya dzine muchinjikwa*), characterised by an incised cross at the centre, were found in all observed congregations. The cross serves not merely as a Christian symbol but as a cosmological diagram reflecting vertical and horizontal axes structuring spiritual interactions. *Muporofita* Tawanda from a White Garment congregation articulated this view, explaining that prayers offered with this plate traverse a journey from the Earth to Heaven and beyond, echoing indigenous cosmological orientations where the cross embodies spatial relationships. The *mbiya* also act as instruments of spiritual warfare, with participants employing them to establish protective boundaries against malevolent forces. Rituals involving the inversion of *mbiya* and pressing them into the earth were observed during services, creating spiritual barriers that prevent evil from entering sanctified spaces. This militaristic imagery in discussions revealed

a theology of active resistance against witchcraft and spiritual attacks, as demonstrated by the instructions given during a service to visualize enemy spirits being trapped beneath the plates.

Toothed *mbiya* (*mbiya dzine mazino*) feature projections ranging from three to eight teeth and serve protective and combative spiritual functions. Participants used martial metaphors to describe their utility. The number of teeth corresponds with varying levels of spiritual power. Three-toothed plates are believed to offer basic protection, whilst eight-toothed varieties confront serious spiritual threats. One participant described using a five-toothed plate as a protective shield for her family, creating spiritual boundaries at her home's four corners.

> *Mazino aya anoruma vavengi pamweya vanoedza kurwisa mhuri. Akaita sembwa dzepamweya dziripo kuchengetedza. Kana ndichinamatira kuchengetwa, ndinokwidibira mbiya ina pamiganhu wemusha kuitira kuti mweya yakaipa isadarike. Mazino embiya anobata mweya yakaipa kusvikira Mwari aparadza mweya iyi.*
>
> These teeth bite the enemy spirits that try to attack my family; they're like a spiritual guard dog. When I pray for protection, I turn it upside down and push it into the ground at my home's four corners, creating a boundary that demons cannot cross. Those teeth grip the demons and don't let them enter, holding them until God destroys them (Interview, 25 February 2024).

This martial imagery reflects what Cox (1995) identifies as AICs' "spiritual warfare" theology, where Christians actively combat demonic forces through ritual technologies rather than passively receiving divine protection, with *mbiya* functioning as spiritual weapons requiring skilled deployment. More controversially, some participants described using toothed *mbiya* offensively rather than merely defensively. One woman shared her experience of using a toothed plate to address her husband's infidelity, writing his name inside with charcoal and burying the plate in the river. Within one month, the affair (Interview, 3 April 2024). Such practices raise ethical questions about spiritual coercion and consent that participants themselves debate, some defending love portions as legitimate when restoring rightful relationships, others condemning it as manipulating another's free will regardless of intentions. These practices reveal *mbiya's* moral ambiguity as objects capable of both protective benevolence and manipulative harm depending on user intent, similar to what Evans-Pritchard (1937) documented regarding Azande witchcraft's dual potentials for blessing and cursing.

Plain small *mbiya* (*mbiya duku dzakachena*), unadorned plates typically 15-20 centimetres in diameter, were described as 'everyday' tools for prayer, emphasising humility and unadorned faith. Large communal *mbiya* (*mbiya huru dzeungano*), exceeding 40 centimetres in diameter, are utilised in collective rituals. Individual prayers, represented by smaller plates, are directed through a communal plate, amplifying spiritual forces. One prophet mentioned:

> *Patinobatanidza mbiya diki nembiya hombe, minamato yedu minamato yedu inobatana kuita rwizi rwuhombe rwunoyerera kusvika kuna Mwari. Munamato mumwe chete wakaita sekarwizi, uye kana minamato ikabatana, inoita rwizi rwuhombe.*
>
> When we join small mbiya through this large communal mbiya, our prayers combine into a powerful river flowing to heaven together. One prayer alone is like a small stream; many prayers united become a mighty river that nothing can stop (Field notes, 27 April 2024).

This hydraulic metaphor for spiritual power resonates with what Csordas (1994) terms "somatic modes of attention" where embodied practices and material objects constitute religious experience through sensory engagement rather than purely cognitive belief. Specialised *mbiya* for prayer cooking (*mbiya dzekubikira minyengetero*) serve to prepare mixtures of material substances infused with prayers for consumption, collapsing the distinction between spiritual and material nourishment. Participants explained that drinking from *mbiya* embodies a theological understanding comparable to Christian communion, where prayer becomes a material substance entering the individual.

Beyond typological categorisation, *mbiya* play overlapping functional roles within JMAS spiritual economies. A consensus amongst participants identifies the primary function of *mbiya* as conduits for prayer, enhancing communication with the divine. Compared to verbal prayers, which may feel scattered or ineffective, prayers mediated through *mbiya* are perceived as possessing heightened efficacy. Outside their functional utility, *mbiya* serve as markers of identity within the JMAS community. Possession of properly consecrated *mbiya* signifies authentic membership, whilst unauthorised plates indicate marginal status. During services, congregants often scrutinised each other's *mbiya* to assess their authenticity.

The concept of spiritual reciprocity frames *mbiya* as participants in bidirectional communication between humans and the divine. Some participants, particularly older congregants, described *mbiya* as facilitating not only divine communication but also ancestral

engagement, positioning ancestors as intermediaries. One elderly woman explained that *mbiya* help believers talk to ancestors who are with God now, living in heaven, but still caring about their children. They pour water or milk into *mbiya*, call their fathers' and grandfathers' names, and the ancestors hear because they are close to God.

> *Vadimu vanotakura minamato yedu kuenda pachigaro chaMwari nekuti ndiko kwavari vachitinyengeterera sezvinoitwa vevatsvene vakafa kana tiri kudzidziso dzechiRoma. Izvi hazvireve kuti tinonamata vakafa, asi tinonamata kuna Mwari kuburikidza nevadzimu vedu.*
>
> The ancestors carry our prayers to God's throne because they are already there with Him, interceding on our behalf like saints in Catholic teaching. This is not ancestor worship; we don't pray to ancestors but through them to God who created them and us. (Interview, 5 April 2024).

However, this theological openness to ancestral mediation was contested within JMAS communities. Some younger prophets explicitly rejected ancestral dimensions, insisting that *mbiya* connect exclusively to God through Jesus Christ without intermediate spirits (Interview, 9 April 2024).

Digital Platform Utilisation and Economic Dimensions in** Mbiya **Trade

Digital platforms have fundamentally transformed the *mbiya* trade, changing how sacred objects circulate and how spiritual commerce operates. Interviewed participants highlighted WhatsApp as the dominant platform, with nearly all digitally active respondents identifying it as their primary means for engaging in spiritual commerce. One seller described WhatsApp as everything for this business, explaining that he communicates with customers, sends photos, negotiates prices, confirms payments, and arranges delivery all through WhatsApp (Interview, 15 July 2023). Digital ethnography revealed sophisticated commercial ecosystems operating through seemingly informal communication channels, with groups ranging from small networks to massive communities exceeding 500 participants. One group observed for three months displayed weekly updated price lists, product descriptions, and customer service protocols. In contrast, Facebook acts primarily as a marketing and community-building tool. An analysis of 37 Facebook pages run by prophets and spiritual entrepreneurs revealed common strategies such as professional photography, testimonial videos, and spiritual credentials that not only attract followers but create an illusion of celebrity within the spiritual

marketplace. *Madzibaba* Prosper, a prominent digital entrepreneur with over 5,000 followers, shared his approach*:*

> *Ndinonzwisisa nzira nemaitiro esocial media, uye ndinogona kugadzira Nyaya dzinodiwa nevanhu vachidziverenga, kudzishambadza kana kutaura nezvadzozvinoita Kuziva kwangu kurambe kuchionekera*
>
> (I understand social media algorithms and how to make content that people engage with, like, share, and comment to increase algorithmic visibility) (Personal interview, 28 July 2024).

However, the integration of technology into sacred commerce also generates significant tensions. Traditional prophets often criticise this technological mediation, arguing it undermines the necessary spiritual preparation associated with acquiring *mbiya*. Rutendo, a traditional prophet, voiced his concerns: *"Digital commerce violates sacred protocols, it encourages people to treat mbiya as commodities rather than sacred gifts requiring reverent reception."* (Interview, 3 August 2024). This critique highlights a fundamental tension: traditional rituals about preparation and relationships clash with the efficiency and convenience of digital commercial practices, reflecting deeper disagreements about the nature of spirituality itself.

Mobile money systems, particularly EcoCash as Zimbabwe's dominant platform, also emerged as crucial infrastructure enabling digital *mbiya* commerce by providing accessible, instantaneous payment mechanisms that bypass dysfunctional formal banking systems whilst creating digital transaction records. Interview participants universally mentioned mobile money as their primary payment method, with very few resorting to bank transfers or cash. Chipo, a 29-year-old vegetable seller, highlighted mobile money's practicality*: "EcoCash makes me pay for mbiya immediately without carrying large amounts that risk robbery."* (Personal interview, 22 July 2023). However, the convenience of mobile money comes with challenges. Transaction fees can eat into profit margins, and technical problems can disrupt transactions, leading to conflicts between buyers and sellers over delayed confirmations. Sibusiso, a digital seller in Bulawayo, explained: *"Sometimes EcoCash goes down, customers think I'm lying about non-payment, and I also think they're lying; these technical problems hurt my spiritual reputation."* (Personal interview, 18 August 2023). This dynamic illustrates how technological infrastructure intertwines with religious authority. When mobile platforms experience failures, the repercussions stretch beyond financial transactions to affect spiritual

relationships and reputations, creating precarious dependencies that leave spiritual entrepreneurs vulnerable to corporate priorities.

Marketing Strategies and Spiritual Entrepreneurship

Digital platforms allow for innovative marketing strategies that were previously inaccessible to prophets limited by geographic constraints. Observational studies revealed promotional practices that blend secular marketing methods with spiritual authenticity. Professional product photography, engaging testimonial videos, and clear ministerial credentials together establish a strong brand identity. *Madzibaba* Prosper's promotional tactics exemplify this sophistication, utilising both common marketing techniques and specific spiritual language. However, the rising commercialization of *mbiya* has drawn criticism from traditional religious authorities. *Sekuru* Madzivire, an elder prophet, lamented: *"vechidiki vari kutora kutengesa mbiya sebhizimisa zvinove zvaparadza kukosha kwembiya pamweya"* (These young sellers treat mbiya like merchandise, this commercialisation corrupts spirituality). (Personal interview, 12 August 2024). This sentiment resonates deeply among some believers who feel that reducing sacred objects to commodities detracts from their spiritual integrity. Conversely, some argue that spiritual and economic dimensions can coexist without corruption if practitioners maintain proper intentions. *Madzimai* Rudo, a 42-year-old businesswoman, articulated this viewpoint during an interview: *"Why spiritual and commercial must be separated? Digital platforms simply make this exchange more efficient and transparent."* (Personal interview, 19 July 2023). This perspective suggests that the essence of the spiritual relationship remains intact, regardless of transactional methods, arguing that God can work through diverse means of access to spiritual help.

The utilisation of digital platforms in the *mbiya* trade among Johanne Masowe Apostolic sects reveals a complex interplay of technology, spirituality, and commerce. WhatsApp serves as a primary communication and transaction tool, creating informal yet sophisticated marketplaces, while Facebook functions as a marketing platform for branding. Mobile money systems like EcoCash facilitate transactions but introduce vulnerabilities that can undermine reputations. Despite criticisms concerning the potential commercialization of spirituality, some participants advocate for the coexistence of spiritual and economic dimensions, viewing digital commerce as a modern evolution of traditional practices. This multifaceted landscape illustrates ongoing negotiations and tensions between the sacred and the secular in an increasingly digital world. Ultimately, the significance of *mbiya* transcends mere transactions, reflecting deeper truths

about belief, community, and the evolving practices of faith in contemporary society. This supports the Actor-Network Theory's emphasis on technology's active agency whilst extending Campbell's (2013) digital religion scholarship by documenting how platform architectures specifically shape sacred object commerce in African contexts characterised by economic informality, mobile-first internet access, and weak formal institutions.

The data reveals the platforms' dual effects that create profound ambivalence amongst participants: expanding access and convenience for believers who previously struggled to obtain *mbiya* through traditional gatekeepers, whilst potentially compromising ritual integrity and spiritual authenticity by removing embodied preparation and personal relationships that traditional acquisition required. This paradox cannot be resolved through simple judgments about digitisation as either progress or corruption, requiring instead a nuanced appreciation for how technological mediation redistributes benefits and harms across different social positions whilst transforming sacred objects' meanings in ways that some find liberating and others find troubling. The challenge lies not in determining whether digital *mbiya* commerce is authentically spiritual, a question with no objective answer, but in understanding how different actors negotiate these transformations whilst pursuing their diverse interests in spiritual efficacy, economic survival, institutional authority, and theological integrity.

Economic Dimensions and Spiritual Exploitation of mbiya

Mbiya pricing reveals complex value determination processes. Interview participants reported purchase prices ranging dramatically from USD5 for simple plain *mbiya* from unauthorized street vendors to USD150 for elaborate varieties consecrated by nationally recognized prophets, with most purchases (28/45, 62%) falling between USD30 and USD50. This demonstrates significant market segmentation serving different customer segments. Despite the sellers' claims to spiritual motivations, *mbiya* purchases impose significant economic burdens. *Madzimai* Fortunate described needing *mbiya* for her sick child:

> *Muripo weMuporofita aive madhora gumi nemaviri emari yekuAmerica iyo inomiririra zvekudya zvedu zvemazuva matatu. Ndakatenga mbiya nekuti hutano hwemwana wangu ndihwo hwakakosha. Isu takadya sadza rakange risina muriwo.*
>
> The prophet's price was USD12, which represented our food money for three days. I bought the mbiya because my child's health mattered most, but we ate sadza without relish that week (Interview, 28 February 2024).

Among 21 buyers willing to discuss finances, 14 (67%) reported that *mbiya* purchases created household financial strain requiring sacrifices of basic needs or increased debts. Mean expenditure represented 6.2% of monthly household income (median 4.8%, range 0.8%-15.3%).

The study's findings revealed monopolistic gatekeeping mechanisms. In 7 of 10 congregations whose members were interviewed (70%), prophetic leaders exercised monopolistic control over *mbiya* sourcing by prohibiting members from purchasing plates from unauthorized vendors. Investigations revealed that gatekeeping prophets often maintained financial relationships with designated vendors, receiving commissions (20-30%) from sales. *Madzibaba* Zviripo, a vendor supplying *mbiya* to three congregations, acknowledged:

> *Ichokwadii pandinotengesa ndinopa muporofita chikamu chemari chinogona kuita 20% kana kuti 30%. Vatengi vanowana mbiya dzakayeresa, muporofita neni tinowana mari zvekare, tose tinezvatiwana pambiya.*
>
> (Yes, I give the prophet something when I sell to his members- maybe 20% or 30%. Customers get genuine consecrated mbiya, I earn income, the prophet earns income - everyone benefits) (Interview, 22 March 2024).

Such practices create what could be termed spiritual "rent-seeking", prophets extracting economic rents from controlling access to spiritual resources whose scarcity results from artificial restrictions rather than genuine supply constraints. These arrangements create structural exploitation where congregants pay inflated prices covering both production costs and prophets' commissions without knowledge that alternatives exist. These dynamics exemplify what Lindhardt (2015) terms "spiritual economies of inequality" where material resources determine spiritual opportunities.

Digitalisation has created complex transformations in religious authority. Participants frequently emphasized that digital platforms expand *mbiya* accessibility by eliminating geographic barriers, reducing dependence on personal networks, and enabling price comparison. Tawanda explained how digital access liberated him:

> *Ndisati ndawana vanoshambadza paFacebook nepaWhatsapp, raive dambudziko Kuwana vaporofita vemandorokwati pasina kuzivana. Parizvino,ndave kugona Kuwana vanotengesa vane mukurumbira nekutarisa kusiyana kwemitengo. Kusununguka uku kwakashandura hupenyu hwangu hwemweya*

> Before discovering Facebook and WhatsApp sellers, accessing powerful prophets was nearly impossible without right connections. Now I can find reputable sellers online, reading reviews, and comparing offerings. This freedom transformed my spiritual life (Interview, 5 August 2023).

Such testimonies articulate democratisation narratives celebrating digital platforms' capacity to redistribute power away from institutional authorities toward individual consumers exercising choice dynamics that the Religious Economy Theory predicts when religious markets become more competitive and pluralistic (Stark & Finke, 2000). However, democratisation claims require critical examination because expanding choice does not automatically produce better outcomes when information asymmetries remain severe, and quality verification proves difficult. Interview participants frequently expressed concerns about fake prophets exploiting digital anonymity to sell ineffective or fraudulent *mbiya* to vulnerable believers lacking verification means, with nearly half reporting personal knowledge of fraud cases involving online sacred object purchases.

The digital marketplaces' expanded access comes with weakened quality assurance, as traditional institutions that provided some oversight, however imperfect, lose the capacity to regulate increasingly autonomous spiritual entrepreneurs operating across geographic and denominational boundaries. Church leaders interviewed unanimously expressed concern about digital commerce undermining institutional authority by enabling spiritual entrepreneurs to operate independently of established churches whilst claiming prophetic legitimacy. Bishop Chiwara, presiding over a large Johanne Masowe congregation in Harare with several thousand members, lamented institutional fragmentation during an interview at his church office. (Personal interview, 30 July 2023). These institutional concerns reflect genuine challenges churches face in maintaining authority and protecting members in increasingly disintermediated religious markets where individuals can access spiritual resources without institutional mediation. However, institutional critiques of digital commerce also serve self-interested defensive purposes, protecting institutional privileges threatened by entrepreneurial competition, making it difficult to distinguish between legitimate concern for believers' spiritual welfare and institutional self-preservation disguised as pastoral care. The tension between institutional gatekeeping's protective and exploitative dimensions cannot be easily resolved because both functions coexist; institutions simultaneously protect believers from some forms of exploitation whilst potentially engaging in their own exploitation through monopolistic practices that benefit institutional authorities economically.

Digital platforms create new forms of religious capital and status markers distinct from traditional hierarchical positions earned through years of service and community recognition, with social media metrics like follower counts, engagement rates, and viral content becoming quantifiable measures of spiritual influence. Interview participants frequently mentioned evaluating sellers' spiritual legitimacy partly through Facebook followers or WhatsApp group membership numbers, treating popularity as a proxy for prophetic authority in ways that traditional religious authority based on institutional credentials and community respect did not anticipate. Digital entrepreneur *Muporofita* Prosper explained how he consciously cultivates digital religious capital through strategic content management:

> *Zvuuru gumi nezvishanhu zvevanhu vanonditevera paFcebook hazvina nengotevera nekuda kwekuti ndakazodzwa chete. Ndakatoshinga kushambadza zvinhu zvemweya nehunyanzvi handiinaho. Kukura kwakaita boka revanonditera kwakaita kuti vanhu vave nechivimbo neni, kutengesa kwangu kukaramba kuchikura. Izvi zvakaita kuti ndirambe ndichibudirira nerutsigirwo rwaibva kuvanhu nekuti vanhu vanotenda kuti Muporofita akaita mukurumbira kwazvo zvinoreva kuti anoshandiswa zvakanyanya naMwari.*
>
> (My 15,000 followers were not gained by spiritual charismatic alone. My audience grew through my regular effort using marketing techniques for spiritual content. A larger following builds more trust and boosts sales, since people equate popularity with spiritual effectiveness, creating a positive feedback loop where success breeds more success) (Personal interview, 28 July 2024).

This testimony demonstrates what Bourdieu (1986) terms "capital conversion", transforming cultural capital in the form of digital literacy and marketing knowledge into social capital as followers and networks, which then generates economic capital through sales revenue, which retroactively legitimates religious authority by demonstrating divine favour through material success. These capital conversions create new pathways to spiritual authority, bypassing traditional institutional credentials, enabling young tech-savvy entrepreneurs to compete with elderly prophets whose authority rests on decades of community service but who lack digital skills. The result is generational tension where traditional authorities struggle to maintain relevance whilst digital natives leverage technological advantages into spiritual influence, reconfiguring religious hierarchies in ways that privilege technological competence alongside spiritual gifting.

The economic exploitation documented when poor families sacrifice food to purchase expensive *mbiya*, prophets enriching themselves through commission arrangements hidden from congregants, and spiritual gatekeeping creating artificial scarcities serving authorities' interests, raise ethical and policy questions about regulating spiritual commerce without violating religious freedom. Yet regulation proves challenging when distinguishing legitimate spiritual authority from exploitative charlatanism which requires theological judgments that secular states cannot adjudicate, and when believers themselves disagree fundamentally about what constitutes authentic spiritual practice. The challenge lies in protecting vulnerable believers from exploitation whilst respecting religious autonomy and avoiding paternalistic interventions that treat believers as incapable of making informed decisions about their own spiritual lives.

Authenticity, Revitalising and Preserving** Mbiya **Traditions

As believers engage with the complexities of digital *mbiya* markets, they confront significant challenges concerning authenticity and spiritual efficacy. Research indicates that many participants express concerns over counterfeit or unconsecrated plates sold by unscrupulous vendors exploiting the anonymity of online platforms. Nearly half of the participants had personal knowledge of fraudulent cases where congregants or they themselves received ineffective *mbiya* after substantial financial investment. This aligns with lingering concerns in consumer culture about authenticity, particularly in digital contexts (Holt & Thompson, 2004). Experiences among participants vary widely, ranging from receiving mundane pottery devoid of consecration to elaborate deceptions where prophets collected payments but failed to deliver any goods. In some instances, the plates, while seemingly authentic, did not yield the expected spiritual outcomes, leading participants to wrestle with uncertainties about their purchases.

Despite these concerns, many digital buyers report satisfaction with their acquisitions. This indicates that they engage effective verification strategies alongside a firm commitment to their faith, leading to a more positive interpretation of ambiguous spiritual outcomes. *Madzimai* Memory, a participant who previously discussed her fertility *mbiya* acquisition, exemplifies this multifaceted verification approach. By integrating digital research, community recommendations, and rigorous evaluations of the acquisition process, she provides a nuanced understanding of authenticity. Her reliance on experiential validation underscores a complex system of consumer agency that challenges assumptions of exploitation in digital markets. However, this reliance on personal experience highlights a circularity in the authentication

process; efficacy cannot be solely attributed to the authenticity of the *mbiya* but may also depend on individual faith, usage practices, or divine intervention. In stark contrast, traditional prophets maintain that genuine verification requires spiritual discernment, a capability they argue is inaccessible to ordinary believers without prophetic insight. This argument, as noted by Coleman (2000), reinforces the necessity of prophetic gatekeeping, maintaining control over spiritual authority and consumer evaluations. Such assertions limit believers' abilities to function as independent spiritual consumers, thus framing the discourse around authenticity and efficacy within a complex socio-religious landscape.

Comparative Efficacy Perceptions

Believers acquiring *mbiya* through both traditional and digital means articulate varied assessments of efficacy, resisting simplistic generalizations. Their perspectives congregate around three distinct groups based on theological beliefs, practical experiences, and social contexts. The first group finds no efficacy difference between traditional and digital acquisitions, emphasizing that the essence of spiritual power relies on the quality of consecration and the manner of usage. For instance, Sister Tendai, a long-term member of the Johanne Masowe Apostolic Sect, articulates this viewpoint, asserting that sincere faith underpins spiritual efficacy, irrespective of acquisition method. This sentiment resonates with Barbour's (2002) exploration of faith as a central factor in spiritual experiences, suggesting that the nuances of belief can transcend medium.

The second group champions traditional acquisition methods, emphasising the importance of ritual integrity. *Sekuru* Gumbo expresses skepticism about the capacity of digital transactions to convey the same spiritual authority, arguing that genuine power necessitates rituals performed in-person at sacred sites. This view aligns with anthropological insights, notably those by Turner (1969), positing that transformative power emerges from embodied experiences rather than abstract beliefs alone. Conversely, the third group regards digital acquisition methods as superior, citing the advantages of broader prophetic selection and enhanced privacy. Tafadzwa, a digital buyer, highlights how online transactions liberate believers from the scrutiny often associated with local congregations. Her experience illustrates digital platforms' potential to alleviate stigma surrounding personal issues, enabling spiritual seeking devoid of communal interference, a point also discussed by Campbell (2005) in her examination of how digital spirituality can democratize access to religious resources.

Theological Negotiations and Adaptations

Believers are actively engaged in theological negotiations that adapt traditional doctrines to contemporary technological contexts while aiming to preserve authenticity. Some participants articulate hybrid theologies that integrate technology with traditional beliefs, supporting the notion that divine intervention can manifest through various means. *Muporofita* Mubaiwa, a respected JMAS leader, posits that God utilises all available platforms for healing and salvation, adapting divine communication to human contexts. This perspective reflects patterns noted by Campbell (2013), who argues that technological innovations are frequently integrated into spiritual practices as a means of enhancing accessibility to the divine. Conversely, conservative voices within the community caution against these adaptations, arguing that they compromise spiritual integrity. *Madzimai* Chipo articulates concerns that technological shortcuts undermine established sacred protocols instituted by ancestors, reinforcing the view that authentic spirituality demands sacrifice. This dichotomy echoes the concerns raised by Taylor (2007), who emphasizes the tension between modernity and tradition, especially in religious contexts.

Interviews reveal generational divides in theological adaptability. Younger believers tend to embrace digital *mbiya* commerce as a natural extension of contemporary life, while older generations often view the integration of sacred and technological realms with suspicion, even acknowledging practical benefits. This generational schism aligns with studies on intergenerational religious changes and adaptations (Houtman & Aupers, 2007), suggesting that younger generations are more open to reinterpreting spiritual practices within digital frameworks.

Strategies for Revitalisation and Preservation of Mbiya

Amidst commercialisation concerns, church leaders propose various strategies for preserving the spiritual integrity of *mbiya* traditions. These strategies range from radical restructuring efforts aiming to return to communal production models, to moderate reforms focused on enhancing transparency within commercial systems. Other suggestions include educational initiatives designed to empower believers as informed consumers and regulatory frameworks that establish quality standards and accountability measures. Several traditional prophets advocate a return to communal *mbiya* production, suggesting this model could eliminate commercial transactions while still meeting believers' needs through collective efforts. *Muporofita* Jonathan envisions pottery workshops within congregations where skilled

members will create *mbiya* as acts of spiritual service rather than profit-driven enterprises. This communal approach not only emphasizes the sacred purpose of *mbiya* but also re-establishes connections to ancestral traditions, echoing the sentiments expressed by Gibson-Graham (2006), who advocates for alternative economic arrangements that prioritize communal over commercial values. In contrast, some church leaders propose reforming, rather than abolishing, *mbiya* commerce, advocating initiatives that promote transparency and ethical guidelines. Bishop Chenjerai calls for fair trade principles within the *mbiya* market, emphasizing transparent pricing structures that reflect genuine production costs alongside fair compensation for spiritual services. This approach acknowledges commerce's inevitability while demanding ethical standards that distinguish just practices from exploitative ones, a viewpoint supported by Fine and Leopold (1993) in their exploration of social justice within market transactions.

Education emerges as a key strategy to empower believers as informed consumers. Participants suggest educational initiatives, including workshops on digital literacy and practical guidance for identifying fraudulent sellers. Such efforts position believers to exercise agency in their purchases and move away from reliance on prophetic gatekeeping, echoing the findings of McGuire (2008), suggesting that education can be transformational in enhancing spiritual literacy.

Further, some church leaders propose policy and regulatory frameworks to establish quality standards and complaint procedures, allowing for oversight while upholding a commercial aspect. Such structures aim to balance individual freedom with collective protection, ensuring legitimate transactions prevail while minimizing vulnerabilities to fraud. This regulatory approach is supported by the work of Stark and Finke (2000), which underscores the necessity of institutional frameworks in protecting consumers within religious markets. Certain leaders advocate a theological reframing that lowers the emphasis on the necessity of *mbiya*. By framing these items as optional aids to spiritual practice rather than essential components, commercialization pressure may decrease, facilitating a more authentic engagement with faith. This reframing aligns with findings by Engelke (2007), who explores the implications of material culture in religious practices, arguing that the significance of sacred objects often relies on their necessity in mediating divine presence. The diverse strategies proposed for preserving *mbiya* traditions reflect creative and adaptive thinking aimed at reconciling spiritual integrity with economic realities. However, each proposed solution faces implementation challenges, highlighting the complexities of balancing entrenched spiritual traditions with contemporary demands.

Discussion

Symbolic Interactionism and the Social Construction of Sacred Authenticity

The findings highlight that the meanings of *mbiya* are shaped through ongoing social negotiations rather than being inherent to the objects themselves. This aligns well with symbolic interactionist frameworks and illustrates the complex processes whereby communities construct, maintain, and transform sacred meanings. Blumer's (1969) foundational premises that humans act towards things based on the meanings assigned to them, that these meanings arise through social interaction, and that they are continuously modified through interpretive processes, are vividly observable in the *mbiya* practices documented through ethnographic engagement within JMAS. The significance of *mbiya* is not rooted in the material properties of clay but is constructed through shared interpretive frameworks among practitioners. These frameworks are influenced by prophetic teachings that elucidate spiritual functions, communal rituals, validating testimonies, and everyday practices captured through participatory observation. When prophets assert that unauthorised *mbiya* lack efficacy while only properly consecrated plates possess spiritual power, they engage in what symbolic interactionists refer to as ‘definition of the situation’ (Thomas, 1928). These authoritative proclamations shape collective understanding by establishing interpretive frames through which experiences are codified and evaluated.

These definitional acts yield material impacts; they designate certain clay plates as sacred vessels capable of mediating divine power, while others, despite superficial similarities, are relegated to the status of mere commodities devoid of supernatural potency. The self-fulfilling nature of these definitions becomes evident as believers approach authorized *mbiya* with reverence and unauthorized ones with skepticism, interpreting their subsequent experiences in a manner that validates their initial expectations. Thus, answered prayers can reinforce the efficacy of authorized plates, while unanswered prayers may highlight the deficiencies of unauthorized alternatives, creating a closed interpretive system resistant to disconfirmation. However, meanings are not monolithic or uncontested. Some congregants, who secretly purchase market *mbiya* while publicly affirming authorized channels, showcase what Goffman (1959) described as "impression management." This strategic self-presentation allows them to navigate conflicting demands, affirming publicly while dissenting privately. Their successful prayer experiences using unauthorized *mbiya* lead to private reinterpretations, acknowledging that these plates can be effective. Yet, public conformity helps maintain social acceptance and

avoids ecclesiastical sanctions. This dynamic reveals a coexistence of official meanings and private counter-meanings that challenge institutional definitions without necessarily confronting them directly.

The process of privatization further illustrates the complex transformation of meanings as *mbiya* shift from sacred gifts embedded in social relationships to spiritual commodities circulating within market exchanges. This transformation necessitates considerable interpretive labor, producing theological justifications and authentication mechanisms to legitimize the sale of sacred objects. Economic and spiritual meanings become intertwined, challenging the sharp sacred-profane dichotomy.

Postcolonial Dynamics: Indigenous Elites and Spiritual Neo-colonialism

Postcolonial theory offers insights into how the commercialization of *mbiya* mirrors colonial exploitation structures within indigenous religious contexts. JMAS initially emerged as a response to the cultural imperialism of missionary Christianity, reclaiming African spiritual agency. Yet contemporary gatekeeping practices often reproduce colonial dynamics, restricting access to resources and knowledge for indigenous populations and perpetuating dependency relationships (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha's (1994) concept of "mimicry" is critical for understanding prophetic gatekeeping dynamics. While prophets may emulate the institutional controls of missionary Christianity by monopolizing spiritual authority and restricting access, they introduce distinctly African elements, such as the material significance of *mbiya* and community engagement structures. This mimicry-with-difference produces hybrid power dynamics that resist binary categorizations of either liberation from colonial influence or new forms of oppression.

Spivak's (1988) idea of the subaltern is pertinent in addressing the economically marginalized congregants whose concerns about affordability and accessibility remain voiceless amidst the church's gatekeeping. When the prophets declare regulations about the pricing and sourcing of *mbiya* with threats of spiritual repercussions against non-compliance, these voices are systematically silenced. It is not that the subaltern cannot speak; rather, structural inequalities render their grievances unrecognized or ignored, often being dismissed as spiritual rebellion. Mbembe's (2001) concept of "entanglement" elucidates how all actors, prophets, congregants, vendors, and church institutions are mutually implicated in the reproduction of commercialization. Prophets benefit economically from gatekeeping yet face pressures from competing spiritual entrepreneurs and a well-informed congregation. Conversely, congregants

experience exploitation while enabling it through their purchases, which validates prophetic authority and reinforces market demand.

Postcolonial analysis further underscores how *mbiya* practices can act as sites of cultural persistence amid the homogenizing tendencies of globalization. By emphasizing the spiritual superiority of local clay over imported materials, JMAS communities assert cultural sovereignty. Interestingly, commercialization can foster this persistence by enabling the translation of cultural distinctiveness into economic resources, which creates incentives for preservation.

Digital Religion and Platform Capitalism's Spiritual Dimensions

The rise of platforms like WhatsApp illustrates how technological features align with the requirements of *mbiya* commerce. WhatsApp allows low data usage, offline messaging, privacy, and voice notes, catering to users with limited literacy or access. Meanwhile, Facebook serves as a public space for marketing and community engagement. This interplay of platforms represents a duality where expanded access and convenience conflict with the risk of diminished quality control as traditional oversight dissipates. Participants demonstrate ambivalence toward digital platforms: while they increase access and participation in spiritual economies, they also create challenges regarding accountability and spiritual integrity. Helland's (2005) distinction between ‘religion online’ and ‘online religion’ proves unstable; WhatsApp groups evolve from mere information-sharing to participatory ritual spaces. This reflects a fluidity in digital religiosity that defies strict binary classifications.

Analysing *mbiya* commercialization through the lens of comparative religious economies reveals both unique patterns and broader dynamics seen across various traditions. Similar to items like Catholic sacramentals or Islamic religious objects, *mbiya* inhabit liminal spaces between goods regarded as sacred and those seen as commercial products (Zaidman, 2003) However, distinct aspects of *mbiya* warrant focused analysis rather than generic categorization. Unlike mass-produced rosaries, *mbiya* markets are personalized, with prophetic gatekeepers maintaining control. This creates dependency relationships that contrast sharply with the more anonymous nature of Catholic sacramental commerce. The multifaceted ritual functions of *mbiya,* serving as prayer conduits, spiritual tools, and vessels, further enhances their intrinsic value within spiritual economies. Research in Tanzania shows how commodification can create spiritual economies of inequality, where economic capacity dictates spiritual access (Lindhardt, 2015). However, while Tanzanian faith practices often require ongoing purchases, *mbiya,* once

acquired, typically do not necessitate replenishment, which restricts continual economic extraction by prophets. Despite this, prophets maintain demand through product differentiation and ritual innovations, highlighting a nuanced interplay between commodification and spiritual necessity.

From the prophetic perspective, gatekeeping serves to uphold spiritual integrity against fraudulent practices that could endanger believers' faith. This can be framed as a legitimate response to protect the sanctity of *mbiya,* with commissions paid to vendors seen as just compensation for spiritual labor. However, congregants view this differently, arguing that economic marginalization creates unjust barriers to spiritual access. Theological critiques of commercialization raise concerns about idolatry, suggesting that attributing salvific power to material artefacts contradicts the notion of divine grace as a gift. Echoing Protestant Reformation critiques, this reflects deep-seated apprehensions that commodifying sacred objects may lead to transactional religious practices. Indigenous perspectives further complicate these critiques, challenging Western assumptions about the relationship between materiality and divinity. If African cosmologies affirm the necessity of material mediation for divine presence, then dismissing *mbiya* commerce risks imposing Euro-centric theological frameworks onto African expressions of faith (Mbiti, 1990; Magesa, 1997). The challenge lies in discerning authentic practices honoring African spiritual traditions from exploitative practices perverting them.

Conclusion

This research underscores the creative spiritual agency and theological sophistication of JMAS communities while advocating for economic justice against prevalent exploitative practices. *Mbiya* represent profound theological insights into materiality's role in facilitating divine presence and must be approached with respect rather than dismissal. African innovations in theology and spirituality provide critical insights into the negotiation between tradition and modernity, sacred and commercial spheres. The ongoing evolution of JMAS communities, balanced alongside economic justice, significantly shapes the broader landscape of African Christianity as one of the world’s most dynamic religious regions. Economic dimensions and power transformations reveal digitalisation's paradoxical effects that resist simple evaluation as either progressive or regression, requiring instead a nuanced appreciation for how benefits and harms distribute unevenly across different social positions. Digital platforms expand access whilst weakening quality assurance. They create opportunities for previously marginalised

individuals, democratising spiritual resources whilst enabling new forms of exploitation and fragmenting institutional authority that provided some protection, however imperfect. These patterns complicate both celebratory accounts of digital democratisation that ignore new inequalities and vulnerabilities, and critical narratives of total commercialisation that miss genuine empowerment experienced by believers liberated from oppressive gatekeeping.

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