



## The Love of Jesus Never Disappoints: Reconstituting Female Personhood in Urban Madagascar<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Drawing from extensive fieldwork in east Madagascar, this article examines the role of Pentecostal churches in assuaging gendered suffering among middle-aged women who have become vulnerable to social exclusion. It focuses particularly on two techniques that women use to manage their relationships with husbands and children: cultivated passivity and the creation of a relationship with Jesus through prayer and small acts of exchange. It argues that conversion and the practice of Pentecostal Christianity helps women less by changing their husband's behavior than by offering them an alternative source of authority and a new set of practices through which to build valued personhood.

### Keywords

Pentecostalism, gender, personhood, exchange, marriage, Madagascar

During my fieldwork among Pentecostals in Tamatave, a large historic port town on Madagascar's east coast, one social fact stood out against the lively Sunday sermons, the passionate witnessing, and the heartfelt repentances that made up much of the community's ritual life: that many of the women had experienced profound suffering in relation to their husbands, children, and kin. Pastors frequently alluded to women's difficulties during sermons when they urged women to attend church even if their husbands protested, or when they admonished men to not stray from their wives. Although most women were too proud to reveal their husbands' infidelities in public witnessing at church, the topic repeatedly came up in private conversation.

Consider Maman'i Lala, a woman in her forties.<sup>2</sup> She married her husband expecting that he would work and bring home a paycheck while she cared for their four children. She recounted the suffering that she endured because her husband rarely gave her any money, his paycheck spent instead on rum and

other women: 'The end of the month would come, and I would get seventy-five cents'. 'There was a time', she continued, 'when God really tested us because we had nothing to eat in the house'. As if that wasn't enough, she found herself on the losing end of the many daily acts of social competition that are a ubiquitous part of Tamatavian daily life. She would frequently lament that her poverty relative to her siblings shamed her, and that their occasional sharp remarks made her feel as if she had no meaning (*tsy misy dikany*). It appeared that she often felt like a social nonentity.

Or consider Elisabeth, also in her forties. She explained:

I have always suffered in my household. My oldest child is already seventeen years old, and since her birth I have lived with constant suffering. My husband, he doesn't have stable work—he transports cargo on the ferry. When he does get paid he just gives it to other women and wastes it on drink. When he's used up his money, he comes home to me but when he does he beats me. That is why I have high blood pressure and have become handicapped.

As if these hardships weren't enough, Elisabeth lamented that her four children behaved terribly:

Only the last-born girl helps a bit, but the others, they just come and eat the food I cook and leave. My girls, they don't do a thing, they just wander around looking for men. They don't bring a penny home to me but waste it on their pleasures. My neighbors lecture them about their behavior, but to no avail.

Elisabeth readily admitted that it was these difficulties that had prompted her to join a Pentecostal church.

In this essay I follow women like Elisabeth and Maman'i Lala into Pentecostal churches in Tamatave to explore the role of Pentecostalism in assuaging gendered suffering.<sup>3</sup> Maman'i Lala and Elisabeth were not exceptional: women make up about two-thirds of every congregation, and many of them share similar stories. Unlike the social profile that appears to characterize Pentecostal congregants in many parts of Africa, these women are not upwardly mobile nor are they young. Rather, they are in their forties and fifties and barely clinging to a petit bourgeois status, with husbands who worked as masons, policemen, or day workers. Most of them had completed some schooling but none of them held steady employment. They had come of age at a time when it was not unreasonable to hope that their husbands would support them financially and that they could use those resources to secure their place within extended families. Their husbands faced a different predicament. Born in the fifties and sixties and having achieved adulthood just before and

during economic liberalization, they had also grown up with the expectation that they would support their wives, but confronted economic realities that made it particularly hard to do so. Perhaps girlfriends and the short-term distractions of drinking with male friends boosted their sense of masculinity and were easier than sustaining a family in straitened circumstances. Perhaps they just exercised their male prerogative to have girlfriends outside of marriage because they could. Whatever the reasons, women often found themselves dependent on husbands who drank away their paychecks or spent them on other women and sometimes even hit them, leaving them financially, socially, and sometimes physically vulnerable.

While younger women hope to find men to support them and more educated women with jobs know that they can rely on their own income, women who have neither option sometimes turn to Pentecostal churches as a path of last resort. Using Malagasy words like 'suffer' (*mijaly*), 'problem' (*olana*), or 'struggle' (*sahirana*), these women point to their profound social suffering. They join these churches hoping that conversion and the adoption of Pentecostal practice will 'solve', 'lighten', or 'get rid of' their problems (*vahaolana*, *manamaivana*, *mahafaka*). One woman summarized the widespread perception that those who struggled were more likely to turn to Pentecostal churches when she remarked, 'The way I see it, those who are drawn to the new churches, they've been knocked by life'. Where some scholars of Pentecostalism have argued that youth, in contrast to their elders, are the primary religious innovators in these movements (van Dijk 1998; Maxwell 1998; Ryan 1981), I draw attention to how middle-aged women's efforts to assuage their suffering is part of the process through which new models of personhood spread and take hold. Older women's attraction to Pentecostalism appears to be part of a more general reconfiguration of the female life course in the years following childbearing.

Why is it that Pentecostalism, a form of Christianity whose doctrine promotes men's authority over women's, so evidently appeals to women and particularly mothers? How is it that Pentecostalism helps women stay in their marriages and endure their conflict-riven families? Many have puzzled over the so-called 'Pentecostal paradox' (Martin 2001).<sup>4</sup> In part, Pentecostalism's appeal to women may be related to how its ideology, which holds that true converts don't 'lie, cheat, steal, quarrel, gossip, give or take bribes, drink, smoke, fornicate' (Marshall 1991, 24), gives women the tools to 'domesticate' men, perhaps aligning their husband's interests with their own (Brusco 1995; Mate 2002; Gill 1990). It may also be related to how Pentecostalism enables practitioners to break with extended kin, ties that are enacted and reinforced through ancestral practices, the occult, and medicines (Meyer 1995, 1998,

1999; Van Dijk 1998; Maxwell 1998). Some have suggested that Pentecostalism fosters upward mobility by redirecting resources towards the household (Martin 2010). Gender relations are central to this process because as women model their behaviors according to Pentecostal ideals of domesticity, they also refocus their energies and resources on the nuclear family (Mate 2002; Frahm-Arp 2010; Marshall 1991; Soothill 2007). The hope of gaining new techniques, practices, and ideologies with which to shape the choices and behaviors of husbands and children, perhaps further cementing an advantageous social position, may also be part of Pentecostal churches' allure.

The argument that Pentecostal practice realigns men and women's goals and interests, which contributes to household well-being, illuminates Pentecostalism's gendered appeal in Tamatave in many respects. Along Madagascar's east coast it is widely expected that men will support women financially, at least in part. A well-known proverb observes 'Men make women living'. At the same time, men's habits of drinking and philandering are notorious for creating difficulties for wives and children, particularly in cities, where women are more dependent on men for income than they are in farming villages. Men's propensity to spend money on other women is so infamous for destroying families that every Malagasy woman I talked to said they want a man who is faithful and doesn't drink or smoke. Since pastors prohibit the consumption of alcohol and the practice of adultery, Pentecostal ideology authorizes women to enforce these behaviors and gives them a set of everyday practices through which to do so (Cole 2010; Marshall 1991).

But if the new models of masculine faithfulness and temperance preached by pastors are part of what draws women to these churches, men's reform is insufficient to account for why women stay there. Most studies of the relationship between women's suffering and Pentecostal conversion focus on the role of 'pathogens of poverty' (physical illness, alcoholism, and domestic violence) in prompting Pentecostal conversion and practice (Burdick 1993; Chestnut 1997). However, these facts alone do not reveal what such experiences signify in terms of local social relations. How people suffer depends in part on the meanings they attribute to the events that impinge on them as well as their interactions with others (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997). The corollary to this point is that if we do not understand the precise nature of women's suffering it is harder to grasp the solutions that Pentecostalism offers.

More concretely, the argument that Pentecostalism changes men's behavior did not appear to apply to most of the cases I encountered. Neither Elisabeth nor Maman'i Lala found that the adoption of Pentecostal practice changed their husbands' behavior or palpably realigned their husbands' concerns with their own, though they hoped that it might over time. In all of the cases

I encountered, it was wives and not husbands who participated in the church. Given that in Madagascar ancestors have long been central to the constitution of social relations and that men figure as dominant in ancestral practice, one might think that it was men's commitment to their ancestors that made them less likely to convert. However, in many cases these families lived far from their natal kin and by extension far from the place where they would normally carry out ancestral rituals, obviating one common source of tension. These potentially propitious conditions notwithstanding, their husbands did not convert. Although both these women have belonged to Pentecostal churches for many years and both remain married to their husbands, they continue to experience problems in their marriages (see also Soothill 2007). Despite the fact that their conversion to Pentecostalism failed to solve the problems that prompted them to join the church, both these women continue enthusiastically to pray. So, too, do many other women who share their predicament. Women like Elisabeth or Maman'i Lala suggest that if gendered realignment partly accounts for Pentecostalism's attraction, other elements are also at play.

In this article I argue that Pentecostalism helps these women less by reforming their men and changing their behavior than by offering women an alternative source of authority, as well as an alternative set of social practices, from which to forge social personhood and a subjective sense of self.<sup>5</sup> As a concept that indexes what it means to be a human being, personhood encompasses ideas about essence, agency, roles, potential, and limitations (Kray 2002). Conceptions of personhood are also deeply tied to notions of morality and human worth, part of what shapes people's perceptions and judgments of one another (Cole 2010; McIntosh 2009). Religious practice, in turn, brings with it culturally and historically specific conceptions of self, agency, and discipline that may reinforce, displace, or partly transform local ideas and practices (Mahmood 2004; Robbins 2004). Adopting new religious convictions may provide new ways of imagining what personhood is and new kinds of authority on which to base it.

In Tamatave, as along many parts of Madagascar's east coast, people ideally accumulate material resources that they use to build relationships with others. When older women are dependent on their husbands or adult children for resources but do not receive them, it hurts them both practically and in terms of their social relations and sense of self-worth. Since many Pentecostal churches preach the prosperity gospel and prohibit some of the behaviors that women dislike, middle-aged women turn to them to find a solution; given their assumption that men are supposed to 'make women living' they see the reform of men and the achievement of prosperity as closely linked. They also sometimes turn to Pentecostal communities to find suitable matches for their

children. Ultimately, their conversion does not prevent their husbands and children from engaging in the activities that they disapprove of, but it does teach women to control their own behavior in keeping with Christian precepts. Additionally, it offers them new ways to interact with God through prayer and to see the answers to their prayers in the occurrence of small wind-falls or good luck (Coleman 2004; Wiegele 2005, Robbins 2010). Women also acquire spiritual gifts like preaching or prophecy that empower them, offering further evidence of their relationship with Jesus.

These various practices converge to offer an alternative model of what it means to achieve valued female personhood. As we shall see, they do not do so in a coherent manner. Pentecostal churches offer a new, heterotopic space of social reordering, as Bochow and van Dijk argue in the introduction to this special issue, but the social practices and conceptions of behavior that characterize such heterotopias vary across domains of practice. Women learn to cultivate passivity in the home while their activities in church provide them with recognition, pleasure, even a sense of power. In maneuvering between these different albeit linked domains, women, however contingently and imperfectly, manage their suffering.

### **Christianity, Precarious Exchange and Unravelling Urban Motherhood**

Christianity and participation in church life has long been associated with modernity in Madagascar (Hubsch 2000; Raison-Jourde 1991).<sup>6</sup> During the colonial period the church provided an important means of social ascension for many men and women. It was men educated in Protestant mission schools who wanted to modernize Madagascar and who led the fight for independence from France (Esoavelomandroso 1981). Women also attended missionary schools, where they learned to sew, do needlework, and keep house according to missionary ideals of domesticity, becoming emblems of modern femininity (Predelli 2000, 2001; Skeie 1999). Although achieved by few, church marriage, referred to as *mariazy* from the French word ‘marriage’, was an esteemed mark of social status (Cole 2010; Predelli 2000). In the new aspiring urban world that emerged after independence a few, elite women obtained prestigious work as teachers, midwives, or nurses. Others sought a different, though also coveted, modern life in which the husband worked in salaried employment and the wife stayed at home, but supplemented the household income by sewing or having a small store attached to the house.

With Madagascar’s prolonged economic crisis in the 1980s and over the course of the 1990s, the domestic arrangements of many Tamatavians began to

unravel as urbanites adjusted to the newly liberalized economy. A small minority of men have enriched themselves through politics or business. Most people, however, particularly low-level functionaries like policemen, or day workers, have found it hard to make ends meet. Government wages have remained steady (when they have been paid at all), and buying power has diminished even as more foreign commodities have become available, creating tensions between what people want and what they can reasonably expect to achieve. In many families a single, insufficient salary supports an entire extended family, with most household members contributing what little they can through work in the instable and low-paying informal economy (INSTAT 2003).

Local ideas of personhood, gender, and the life course powerfully mediate the impact of these economic circumstances. In much traditional Malagasy thought and customary law, one's social position emerges in part from one's *zo*—a word that translates roughly as right in the sense of a recognized right or social entitlement. Men, women, and children all have particular rights that are also associated with specific duties and obligations. Nevertheless, how one inserts oneself into networks of economic exchange always complicates and elaborates these ideas of one's social place or right. While everyone is supposed to have their proper social role and accompanying rights, it is widely recognized that those who have more wealth are more powerful and more socially valued than others. Tamatavians assume that giving gifts or services to a person implicitly recognizes the social power they are already considered to possess. Conversely, to withhold implies a failure of social recognition—a snub. If a person has little to give, those around them are more likely to withhold, reproducing and exacerbating their lack of connection to others. An oft-cited proverb observes, 'The thin cow is not licked by his friends'.<sup>7</sup> No one wants to be the metaphorical thin cow. To find oneself in this position is a deeply humiliating experience, implying that one's social worth—or very humanity—is not recognized by one's kin or peers. Recall how Maman'i Lala lamented that she felt as if she had 'no meaning' (*tsy misy dikany*).

The practice of personhood that emerges from how social rights are made meaningful through ongoing productive activity deeply informs marriage. In rural areas, when a man marries a woman and brings her to live in his house he expects to have exclusive rights to her sexual and reproductive capacities: her faithfulness is a sign of respect for him. In return for his wife's sexual and reproductive labor as well as her productive labor sowing or transplanting rice, the man usually performs the more difficult physical labor of clearing or tilling fields. This mutual exchange and cooperation constitutes recognition and respect. Being treated correctly according to social norms is part of a woman's *zo* and makes her feel valued. Women in turn build their social personhood as

life-giving wives and mothers through the care and resources that they give to and receive from their husbands and children. A woman who is situated in this triangle of exchange can become a pivotal, honored member of her natal as well as her affinal family. Her ability to create and sustain the networks of affective and material exchange that knit families together earns her the love and respect of those around her.

But this position can easily be lost if a man takes his resources and gives them to someone else, particularly if a woman still has children to care for but no income of her own. Although the potential for men to deprive women of affection, material resources, and social respect has long been part of east coast married life, stories like Elisabeth's and Maman'i Lala's appear to have become more common.<sup>8</sup> The way the urban economy intersects with the division of labor in households partly illuminates the increase in marital strife and intensification of women's vulnerability that appears to have occurred since in rural areas both men and women work the land and so women never entirely depend on their husbands. Moreover, if a man treats his wife badly when her kin are nearby they are likely to intervene, but this is harder to do if they live far away. Even when families do not live far in geographic terms, poor roads and the cost of transport often mean that they cannot offer the same support as if they lived close by.

Middle-aged women's vulnerability is closely related to the age-specific opportunities of the female life course. Any woman growing up along the east coast knows that one way to acquire material resources is through relationships with men. Although ideally urbanites want their children to stay in school and then get married, most parents cannot afford to pay for extended schooling. Eager to make their way, some young women forge relationships with older Malagasy men as a way to accrue resources (hence the problems that older women experience). Others seek relationships with Europeans or balance relationships with multiple men at home and foreign boyfriends whose remittances can help sustain a household (Cole 2010). Younger women often hope to succeed in the sexual economy, at least until they accumulate enough resources from men to invest in a business of their own. They are also more likely to be successful in obtaining employment with NGO's or other pink-collar jobs that may be available. These women are unlikely to join Pentecostal churches because they believe that the strict moral code and prohibitions concerning what one can wear or how one can behave will hinder rather than help their aspirations.

By contrast, as women age and give birth their options diminish. Many Tamatavians assume that no man wants to care for another man's children and that there are always plenty of younger women to choose from. Men

sometimes make women's disposability explicit when, in the heat of a fight, they retort, 'Go on, now, who will take you? Stinking of baby's piss as you are?', a reference to how women carry babies on their backs, wrapped in a cloth, or sleep with their babies, sometimes becoming soaked in the infant's urine. One of my friends tried to make the relationship between a woman's earning power and her power within the marriage clear, explaining, 'You see, Jennifer, my aunt? She's married to a policeman and she doesn't have much schooling. Before, he mistreated her. Now, she's found a job trading in gold [and so has money], and so he respects her'. A woman who ages and does not work potentially loses social value; a woman who works and contributes financially to the household is far more protected. Many women who can support themselves often choose to remain alone if a marriage breaks up after their childbearing years.

When a man takes his money and gives it to another woman or when he repeatedly spends his wages drinking with his friends, he does more than simply make his wife jealous or poor. He ignores her right (*zo*) and destroys her ability to insert herself into the network of exchange through which she achieves social recognition. When women do not receive income from their husbands they cannot give it to their children, weakening their control over them and unraveling the network of intimate exchanges that weave families together. Perhaps this is why Elisabeth's children wouldn't listen to her or share the money that they received from their lovers: she had nothing to give in return. Mothers require food, medicine, money, and household goods to express their care and to elicit care from others. Without such resources, however small, they become socially invisible.

Women who find themselves in this situation face a predicament. With relatively little education or work experience, finding a job and becoming economically self-sufficient is not easy. Nor, as adult women with children, can they easily escape their circumstances by returning to their kin who can rarely sustain the extra financial burden. Although some NGOs occasionally offer support to women in difficulty, none offer the kind of long-term help that women need. The Catholic and Protestant churches, to which these women have long belonged, and to which many of their kin still belong, sometimes offer succor. Still, the life events into which these so-called ancestral churches intervene are fairly limited. They are also closely associated with social mores and standards of success in which these women can no longer participate given their circumstances, potent reminders of women's failure to succeed according to existing norms. They certainly do not promise women that joining them will assuage their physical or financial suffering or bring them joy, as the Pentecostal churches do.

### **Pentecostal Promises**

Pentecostal churches attract women like Maman'i Lala or Elisabeth because they appear to offer a solution to the intertwined problems of men, money, and social impotence that plague their daily lives. Since women take an active role in the church, often leading services alongside their husbands, they also offer women an appealing model of feminine power and conjugal cooperation. Although the churches I attended did not promote as intense a prosperity gospel as has been described in some parts of Africa, pastors did imply that God blesses the faithful, an idea that congregants, drawing from their own assumptions about the connection between spiritual power and worldly flourishing, assumes means material well-being and physical health. In addition to promising that God works miracles and can make the lame walk and the blind see, pastors regularly invite their followers to imagine the possible material blessings that God might bestow on them. Once, during a sermon at the Rhema church, the pastor evoked a luxurious house that she had visited in Réunion as part of a sermon on how to receive guests in a proper Christian manner. She proclaimed,

When I went to that meeting in Réunion, I was very surprised because the house I lived in there was truly beautiful. The shower was much nicer than the living room in my own house! The car that picked me up [at the airport] if it wasn't a 4x4, it was one of those new kinds of cars, really luxurious!

Her narrative implied that God will grant you riches like those of her Réunion hosts if you follow his ways.

Pastors also insist that to manifest their inner transformation both men and women must live according to God's rules. Pastors teach their flocks to orient toward Jesus by adopting a new moral code. In the three Pentecostal churches I attended regularly, not a Sunday went by without the pastor lecturing people about the behavior befitting of Christians, particularly with respect to sex, drinking, and smoking. One Sunday, for example, the pastor at the small Power of Faith Church used the example of adultery to warn his flock about the danger of the devil's temptations. He started his sermon by remarking how the devil knows our weaknesses. For that reason, he said, the Bible recounts that the devil once sent a pretty woman to tempt soldiers on their way to war, distracting the soldiers and making them lose the battle. He then explained that there were two kinds of adultery. In one kind the couple is not properly married, meaning they have not completed the necessary customs of being blessed by one's parents (according to local custom), having a civil marriage (according to Malagasy civil law), and having the marriage sanctified in

the church (in keeping with church law). In the other kind, the man gets tired of the 'chicken in the house' and becomes tempted by the 'pretty colored bird' outside. The pastor concluded that divorce was wrong, exhorting his flock to believe in Jesus and stay married.

Another time this pastor used the story of Sampson and Delilah to warn young people about the dangers of sexual temptation. Tempted by Delilah to reveal that his power lay in his hair, Sampson exposed his vulnerability. The pastor concluded that men should not be tempted by women. He further urged young people to be patient when it came to sex and love, an allusion to what many perceived as youths' headlong rush into the sexual economy. They should think of themselves, he exhorted, as part of the army of God: Their Bibles were their weapons. For women who worry that their daughters will wind up pregnant and abandoned, leaving them with yet another mouth to feed, or who suffer because their husbands have shunted them aside in later life, the messages of faithfulness and prosperity are appealing indeed.

### **Remaking Women: Marriage, Passivity, and Endurance**

Pastors also teach women specific behavioral techniques for dealing with their husbands and responding to their quotidian travails in a properly Christian manner. Writing of the Universal Life Church in Mozambique or the new Charismatic churches in Ghana, scholars have shown how the idiom of spiritual warfare, common in Pentecostal practice, helps explain men's drinking and philandering but may also incite marital tension (van de Kamp 2011; Soothill 2007). In Tamatave, too, pastors often attribute these behaviors to the devil. Rather than encouraging women to have a conflictual relationship to their husbands, however, pastors dissuade women from divorce and teach them to cultivate acceptance. They see this as a way of sparking the man's private revelation.

In one discussion with his flock Pastor Aimé told the assembled women, 'When your husband is drunk and comes home, do not put him outside on the ground. Help him into bed and show him that you love him as a wife should. That way he will realize what he's doing and stop his bad behavior'. According to this logic, modeling feminine Christian behavior of gentleness, acceptance, and respect—the abdication of personal power—and waiting for the power of Jesus to do its work is the best way to effect change. Another time Pastor Aimé even advised his flock in a sermon that Jesus would assure their material needs, promising them, 'Even if your front teeth are all broken by the punches that your husband gives you because he does not want you to pray, that doesn't matter for you'll get new teeth once you get some money'. With

these assurances, he implied that continued prayer and the promise of gifts from Jesus are more important than the experience of physical violence. Many women appeared to agree, suggesting that the pain they experienced from social disconnection was worse than, if not equal to, physical harm.

When women are able to internalize Pentecostal prescriptive teaching regarding passivity and the importance of giving one's life to Jesus, they change how they interact with their husbands. Maman'i Olivina, a woman who prayed at Pentekotista Afaka, recounted how she adopted the church's strategy of gentle accommodation.

There is a meeting for all the married women at the church and they tell us what we, the mothers of families, should do for our households, lessons we should bring home to create goodness in our homes. For example, if there is something that makes my husband mad, even if I want to talk back I do not so that we don't fight. If I answered back he would answer back and we might really start to fight, but bending to teach other is critical and necessary. He has to assume his authority because the word of God says that man is the head of women. I beg for wisdom from the Lord to avoid problems. If he comes home late from work, if the house was dirty or food wasn't ready he would be mad. So I must do what I can to make him happy. So I tell the children, 'Clean up the house for father is coming'. That is one way we avoid problems.

Maman'i Olivina took the lessons that she learned in the women's prayer group and directly incorporated them into how she managed her household.

Women also rely on their faith to endure their marriages, often coming to see their commitment to their husbands as a sign of their devotion to God. Pirette, for example, had been married to a policeman, the father of her children, and described him as 'always drunk and cruel'. She recounted, 'When he would come home, I couldn't even look at him or speak to him, or he would beat me and my face would swell up for days. If that wasn't bad enough, he kept many mistresses. I don't work, and yet I would never see a penny of his money'. But Pirette said that she wouldn't leave him because 'God doesn't like that'. Similarly, Elisabeth told the friend who first brought her to church that she wanted to leave her husband because she suffered too much in the marriage. Her friend responded scoldingly, 'That would be very selfish! What will you do with those children? Go, my sister, give your life and your family's life to God, for he works miracles that our minds can not even comprehend'. Elisabeth remained married—at least for a time. She interpreted her willingness to stay with her husband despite his behavior as a mark of her faith.

What amazes me is that I just endure my husband, no matter what he does. Other people [e.g., non Pentecostals] ask me why I want to kill myself over one man? [in other words, other people look at her situation and can't understand why she doesn't

leave]. But I know he is the husband that God has given me. I will never leave him, no matter how the devil tempts me.

By learning to see her husband's actions as the devil's effort to tempt her into unchristian behavior, Elizabeth attributed it to a force that he could not control (see also Soothill 2007). Not only was her husband no longer responsible for his behavior, but also his behavior no longer reflected on her. Responding correctly helped her assert her identity as a Christian. Normally when men do not bring home money or when they stay away from home, presumably with mistresses, they earn their wives' recriminations. But those who pray and give their lives to Jesus also learn to wait, making the marriage at least less overtly conflicted if not more prosperous. Elizabeth's desire to achieve Christian selfhood motivated her to behave in ways befitting a good Christian wife. Together these alternative scripts provided her with new ways to interpret her husband's behavior and respond to it.

These strategies of passivity, externalization, and deflection sometimes work, inspiring husbands to reorient their resources and affections back to the household. For example, Maman'i Olivina explained:

When we started praying God made my husband love our household. And he started taking responsibility for our family. He couldn't stand to see us suffer or not have food. He tried to make our household happy. When Christmas came, he couldn't stand it if we couldn't have new clothes. And the anger he used to show us disappeared. I know too that it wasn't just us who noticed the change. Even people outside the house realized he'd become gentler. He would even urge us to go to church. What I realize is that if my family supports my faith, it is because they realize that God is blessing this house, both materially and spiritually.

It is possible that Maman'i Olivina's gentle, passive approach shored up her husband's otherwise fragile masculinity, eliciting a caring rather than confrontational response. Perhaps enacting an exaggerated version of the ideal relationship between husbands and wives, in which men are dominant and responsible and women submissive and caring, reminded men of certain cultural ideals and worked to elicit care. Some women implied as much, saying that treating their husbands like the heads of the household that they wanted them to be, and that the church said they were, enabled a more equitable division of household labor. Husbands, it seems, could interpret the message of hierarchical yet mutual respect between spouses as authorization and encouragement to participate in what had been traditionally marked as feminine tasks.

Pentecostal practice also provides women with a context in which to influence their children's, and particularly their daughters', choice of partners. In

Tamatave it has long been the case that young people are allowed to choose whom they married. Nevertheless, parental concerns, ranging from family feuds to the desire to ensure social mobility, have long influenced young people's marital choices.<sup>9</sup> One popular proverb sums up widespread wisdom by noting, 'Better to be loved by your mother (or father)-in-law than your husband/wife'. The logic is that if the in-laws like the bride, the husband will also treat her well out of respect for his parents. However, if the husband loves his wife and his parents oppose the marriage, the couple is doomed: ultimately the parents' influence over their son will destroy the marriage because their opinion about how to live and especially where to invest resources will prevail. Today, however, increasing numbers of young women seek their futures in the sexual economy and many men cannot afford to get married. Parents worry that their daughters will form liaisons with men from which they will gain gifts and money for a short time but do not lead to formalized marriage. They also worry that if a girl is spurned she will inevitably turn to the sexual economy out of anger and frustration. Many parents fear that once girls start to engage in such behavior they have set foot on the slippery path toward prostitution (Cole 2010).

Such worries are not only about the well-being of daughters; they also concern the social status and welfare of mothers. If women lose control over their daughters, they are also less likely to benefit from any resources that their daughters' relationships might bring. Although it might seem odd that women rely on their daughters for resources, it makes sense in terms of local kin practices. Not only is kinship determined bilaterally, but women usually control the household finances; they often use the resources they acquire from their husbands to help their natal families. By contrast, families often assume that their son's resources will go to his wife's kin, though they may try to prevent this. Recall Elisabeth's lament at the beginning of this article—that her daughters ran around looking for men but never gave her any of the money that they presumably received from these relationships. She objects to their behavior not simply because as a Pentecostal she sees their behavior as immoral but also because they do not share the money they receive with her. Like her husband, her daughters are people she believes should support her as an expression of their love for her, but they do not.

By forming a community of believers who distinguish themselves from heathens by their comportment and their beliefs, Pentecostal churches provide a richly elaborated context in which mothers seek to influence their children in the domain of marriage, potentially strengthening the networks of exchange through which they obtain social recognition and respect from others. For example, a boy at Olivina's church asked for her hand in marriage. When the boy's parents came to Olivina's house to speak with her parents, her mother

took the boy's photo and prayed for a sign from God to see if He approved of the marriage. Olivina remained hesitant at first, disappointed that the boy was not as well off as she hoped he would be, but her mother received the sign she was looking for. Olivina acquiesced, excited because now, she said, the other boys in the neighborhood no longer dared harass her and neighbors treated her with newfound respect. Her mother brimmed with pride not only because she had managed to protect her daughter from the fate of becoming pregnant with the first boy she slept with, something all parents fear, but because by arranging a successful marriage and 'bringing out' (*namoaka*) her daughter she also rewove webs of social connection around herself. Mothers hope that if they arrange marriages for their children that reinforce their ties to the Pentecostal community they can guard their children's reputations and build their family's social status in the eyes of fellow congregants.

All too often, however, the strategies offered by the church for managing men or influencing the behavior of children fall short. Mothers' efforts to choose their daughters' suitors often end in disaster when girls run away with non-Pentecostal lovers or threaten to commit suicide if their parents do not allow them to choose their husbands. Olivina's fiancé broke off the engagement when he claimed he caught Olivina spending time with another man, leaving her mother ashamed and scrambling to provide Olivina with pocket money in his stead. In another case I encountered, the mother made a pact with a young man at her church that when her daughter turned eighteen they could marry. The man even gave the mother money to cover the cost of the girl's schooling, a gesture that signaled his good intentions but also meant that the mother was in his debt. Unbeknownst to the mother, however, the daughter had already fallen in love with a non-Pentecostal boy, foiling her carefully laid plans. Although in both these cases the mothers were devastated by their failure to shape their children's choices, they also saw it as a way for Jesus to test their faith.

It is not surprising that teenage children are hard to control. Perhaps more striking, given existing arguments about the effect of Pentecostal conversion on marital relations, is that the gendered strategy of passivity and acceptance that women are taught to adopt with husbands often fails entirely or else works only for a brief time. Pirette's and Elisabeth's husbands never fully reformed. Pirette's husband told her that she could go to church, just not too frequently. He started coming home for dinner, providing her with money to buy food for the household, and drank less. As time went on, however, she found herself more and more deeply involved in her faith, eager to travel around the province and preach outside. Her husband soon went back to his old ways. She decided to devote her life fully to God rather than her household,

although she stayed married to him. 'Sometimes he behaves', Pirette told me, 'sometimes he doesn't'. Yet as Pirette's casual comment implies, she no longer really cares.

### **Reconnections: The Power of Prayer and Exchange with God**

One reason that Pirette became less invested in how her husband behaved was because she no longer relied on him for her sense of self in the same way. Her relative indifference with regard to her husband underscores how ritual practices of prayer, witnessing, and faith healing provide women with alternative forms of social recognition from those that come from the giving and taking of money, commodities, and labor with husbands, children, and kin. These practices assuage women's suffering by embedding them in a network of partly spiritual, partly practical exchange that is different from those from which they have been excluded. Practices of prayer and healing offer women new ways to make social connections to Jesus and to the community of fellow believers.

Prayer offers a central ritual and cognitive scaffold through which women learn to 'give their lives to Jesus', as they are often urged to do (recall how Elisabeth's friend told her to do just that rather than leave her abusive husband). In part, prayer holds this power because revealing one's weakness—begging someone for help—opens a person to social ridicule. As a result, people often avoid exposing their needs to all but their close kin. By praying to Jesus, by showing weakness, women make Jesus into a trusted interlocutor, someone they can confide in and to whom they are attached (see also Lurhmann 2012). People beg Jesus to make them well, to help them pay off a debt or pay for school fees, to pass a test, to get a new pair of shoes, to be as well off as their brothers and sisters. One woman I knew begged Jesus to make her husband stop drinking, while another prayed that Jesus grant her husband a revelation so that he too would convert. The structure of prayers was almost always the same: an appeal to Jesus for help, an explanation of the particular problem, and repeated calls for help, guidance, and strength.

Women prayed in church alongside one another, each deeply involved in a private conversation with Jesus; they prayed in small groups led by the pastor or other church members; and they prayed alone whenever they felt the need. Often women cried as they prayed; some women said they wept because talking about their troubles made them feel the weight of their difficulties acutely, bringing them to tears. One woman also told me that she cried because she was so moved by the image of God sacrificing his only son to save mankind.

By imagining Jesus as the embodiment of human suffering and sacrifice and addressing their concerns to him, prayer simultaneously helps women narrate their suffering and holds out the hope of a solution.

As women learn to modify their behavior and give their lives to Jesus, they also come to see everyday happenings, gifts, or bits of good luck as answers to their prayers (see also Coleman 2004; Lurhmann 2012; Weigel 2005). The practice of witnessing which is part of most services, further encourages women to do so. During witnessing, congregants who have experienced miracles or had their prayers answered stand up and testify before the congregation. They narrate the difficulties they have experienced, how they prayed to Jesus for help, and how he answered their prayers.

Jeanette, a woman in her early forties who converted to Pentecostalism from Catholicism, recounted how amazed she was when she first entered the church and saw people praying, wondering to whom they were speaking. Following the example of those around her, she learned to pray on bended knee, her hands clasped in supplication, her forehead sometimes resting on the hard wooden bench in front of her. Jeanette also learned to see events in her life as signs from God. One day she told me the following story, which she also gave as testimony in church.

On New Year's Day we went to pray and someone broke into our house. There was nothing left—there was a spoon and a dish left. That was it. And I went to tell our kin about it, and they teased us, 'So where is your Jesus now?' And I said nothing, because I couldn't leave Jesus, because God has said, 'You won't just be blessed by God but may suffer too'. The pastor told the church what had happened, and the people at the church gave us clothes. We kept praying. There was another time when our mother was sick and she went to the hospital. And me and my older brother, we took turns taking care of our mother, and we suffered then. Our kin wouldn't help us because we prayed (e.g. they converted from Catholicism and no longer participated in ancestral customs). When we don't have anything in the house we pray, 'Jesus! Do not let us be ashamed, but help us and return our wealth to us'. Before, there was only one room to this house, but God gave us a miracle and we finished the house and got new fabric. We prayed that people would allow us to borrow merchandise and we would pay them back. And we did.

Note how Jeanette feels ashamed of her poverty. It is tempting to read her shame in terms of a Pentecostal ethic of prosperity. Arguably, however, it is also part of longstanding ideas that associate material signs as evidence of one's insertion into the networks of social exchange that constitute personhood. Jeanette does not exchange goods, services, money, or labor with her kin, nor does she feel herself to be supported by her husband. However, she is recognized by Jesus and builds her sense of self and her expectations in relation to him.

There are many examples like Jeanette's. Mamy, for example, prayed at the Rhema. During our discussions she explained how she struggled to find resources to raise a baby whose mother had abandoned him and to deal with a husband who drank and was in and out of work. She explained,

I put our life in God's hands. Then my husband found new work. And I sell used clothes. In my mind, God knows all that I want to do. But he needs to check your character first. Serving God, there has to be difficulties. But then after your problems you will win.

She continued with a typical witnessing narrative:

There are many miracles that God has worked for me! For example, one day I really dreamed of getting new clothes and I went off to the bazaar and I saw clothes just lying on the ground. And one day I wanted to get a new scarf, and I found a really gorgeous scarf.

Here again, we see how Mamy puts her life in God's hands through prayer and comes to envision herself as engaged in the exchange of gifts and good deeds with an all-seeing Jesus. Unable to bear children of her own, she adopted an abandoned, syphilitic child, taking on a charitable burden as a good deed. She had difficulty supporting the child, but she also found that Jesus ultimately rewarded her acts of Christian care. She explained, 'For me, according to how much I give to people with love, then I get money back. You have to do it with love, for anything you do without love is an empty thing without meaning'. To be sure, her narrative is an act of testifying to God's power. It also reveals the subtle ways in which His love answers and encompasses her own and is made manifest in her life through small signs—clothes lying on the ground or a long hoped-for scarf. For both Mamy and Jeanette, having one's prayers answered in small, everyday ways provides evidence of a relationship. The social recognition and reconnection they gain come from their fellow Christians, not their kin.

Women also interpret their ability to preach, heal, or prophesy as evidence of God's power manifesting within them, further proof of their connection to God and other Christians. Florence explained how her responsibilities in the church grew as she became increasingly skilled at healing through prayer. Maman'i Lala similarly claimed that her ability to preach was evidence of her relationship to God, recounting how she had already convinced eight heathens to join a new branch of their church. 'There are many kinds of God's gifts', she explained, 'For example, preaching, or healing, or knowing how to make people repent, or learning to love sinners. And when you see that your

actions take effect, you know. It is proof of your connection to God'. In her interactions with her siblings and her husband, Maman'i Lala felt 'she had no meaning'. Her ability to influence others proved that God's power works through her. These women gained a sense of Christian personhood and self-respect through their relationship with God, a relationship that supersedes and transcends the mundane ones around them. Madam Florence summed it up, 'For me I don't know how to get my rights [zo] from mere men. What my heart thirsts for is to do the work of God and pray for people. If my husband prevents me from doing the work of God I don't like it, because I have given myself to God to do his work'. Florence has moved from being a 'child of the ancestors', with all the accompanying profane distinctions of status and ancestry that are intrinsic to much of Malagasy society, to being a child of God. She imagines her relationships to others differently, and other people's actions affect her differently as well.

### **Gendered Reconfigurations: 'Thinning' and Reorientation**

Of course, Pentecostalism is not the only religious practice that women in Madagascar turn to in order to manage their quotidian difficulties, particularly their marriages. In many parts of the island and throughout the region, spirit possession has long provided a set of ritual practices through which women in particular rework and reflect on their relationships (Lambek 1980, 1981, 1988; Sharp 1992, 1995). Writing of spirit possession among Malagasy speakers in Mayotte, Lambek (1988) details how spirit possession works as a system of communication that potentially creates new links in spouses' everyday relations. In most cases it is the woman who is possessed by a male spirit; the woman's husband, in turn, has both his original relationship with his wife and an additional relationship with the spirit. Lambek argues that the relationship between the spirit and the spouse models itself simultaneously on local ideas about sibling relationships that are enduring in this society, and those of marriage that are not. Although the practice of spirit possession does not determine the outcome of marital strife, it offers the married couple ways of imagining their relations in different terms.

Pentecostal practitioners see their faith as fundamentally opposed to the worldview embodied in spirits (Walsh 2002; Meyer 1999; van de Kamp 2011). Nevertheless, like spirit possession, Pentecostalism provides a third spiritual source of power that transforms social relationships. It does so not by holding out alternative or competing models of relationality (siblings versus

spouses), thereby complicating participants' understandings as spirit possession appears to do; rather, it subtly separates and rearranges various aspects of the Tamatavian gendered system that were once intertwined in order to make women into better Christian subjects. Where spirit possession appears to embrace plurality by thickening participants' relationships, offering new and competing models through which to experience social relations, Pentecostalism appears to have the opposite effect. One could even say that Pentecostalism 'thins' the relationship between husband and wife, at least in the cases that I saw where women's husbands had not yet converted to Pentecostalism, as it pulls women toward a more fully Christian identity.

When women turn to Pentecostal churches to assuage their suffering they learn that they must endure their husband's behavior and treat their husbands with respect despite the men's bad behavior, their pain, and their humiliation. But the practice of Pentecostalism changes how women interpret their husband's actions. Tolerating a man's drinking or an affair becomes not simply bad luck, hardship, or even stupidity but a sign of Christian virtue. Women similarly gain support from other Pentecostals in their efforts to shape their children's—particularly their daughters'—behavior with respect to men. When their efforts fail they see it as a test from God. The practice of Pentecostalism partly separates the care of men from women's access to valued personhood even as it changes the meaning of women's behavior.

Women build connections with Jesus and other Christians through prayer and learning to read the signs of God's work in their everyday lives. Women learn to see small gifts and good deeds as the answer to their prayers, gaining access to another domain of practice that provides them with the social recognition they desire. This domain complements but is not fully contiguous with their experience at home. The church's message infuses the home, but in the cases I have discussed here it does not yet entirely pervade it. For these women the positive signs of their relationship with Jesus and the recognition and sense of valued personhood that it enables make the difficult work of enacting Christian virtue and enduring their husbands more bearable. Gendered inequalities at the level of social organization remain, but they do not mean the same thing.

Women's participation in Pentecostalism rearranges where certain activities take place, with care of men in the home and women's access to resources and recognition, however small, in connection with the church. It also substitutes new kinds of spiritual and social power (healing, preaching, prophesy) for the power and social connection that had come from their control of resources at home. It is the reconfiguration of different domains of social practice, the

meanings associated with them, and women's efforts to navigate among them that lies at the heart of emerging patterns of change and that may help women assuage their suffering.

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## Notes

1. The fieldwork on which this article is based was carried out in 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2007, and built on earlier fieldwork in Madagascar that took place between 2003 and 2004. I thank the American Fulbright program, the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and several small grants from the Social Science Division at the University of Chicago for their support. Warm thanks to Astrid Bochow and Rijk van Dijk whose good-natured impatience prodded this article into existence. Their helpful questions enabled me to clarify my arguments, as did the thoughtful suggestions of two anonymous reviewers.

2. The names are pseudonyms.

3. The women I worked with in Tamatave between 2000 and 2007 all belonged to main-line Pentecostal churches originally brought by American missionaries, such as Jesus Saves (*Jesosy Mamony*), Rhema, and the Assemblies of God. They also belonged to more recent churches that had split off from them, *Pentekotista Afaka* (Pentecostals Save) and the Power of Faith Church being two prominent examples. All of these churches emphasize the importance of receiving grace from Jesus through close adherence to the Bible, repenting, and being born anew. Some of them also preach a mild version of the prosperity gospel according to which Jesus Christ bestows material goods and physical well-being on those who embrace his teachings. Although Walsh (2002) reports that Jesus Saves in the northern Madagascar had a strong emphasis on the coming apocalypse, I did not find this idea dominated the concerns of my informants who were members of that church.

4. Framing the problem as a paradox implies that women in other parts of the world hold Western, liberal feminist ideals, and that their participation in Pentecostalism with its patriarchal ideology entails false consciousness. Nevertheless, setting aside the questions of whether these women want the kinds of marriages that liberal feminists desire and that women's attraction to Pentecostalism represents a paradox, these studies point to a widespread pattern of female conversion.

5. For the classic literature on personhood see Geertz 1984; Hollowell 1955; Mauss 1985. I understand 'self' to be a more subjective construct or how an individual 'envisions him or her self' (Kray 2002, 397).

6. The vast majority of east coast Malagasy urbanites are Christian, usually Catholic and Anglican, though some also belong to the Malagasy Protestant or Lutheran Church. For a recent study of Malagasy Adventism see Keller 2005.

7. *Aomby mahia tsy lafina namana.*

8. During the traditional marriage ceremony when the woman's kin relinquish their daughter to the groom's family, they make the following statement: 'Look at our daughter. Her eyes are not damaged; her hands are not broken. If you decide that you no longer want her, give her back to us in the condition in which you received her'. The phrase establishes a social contract premised on the idea that physical violence may occur and that women are never fully separated from their natal kin.

9. Parents' strategies differ according to their children's gender. Since it is widely assumed that women control households, mothers want their sons to marry women who will accept them. However, they want their daughters to marry someone who will ensure a flow of resources to the natal family.