

# **Public Theology or Private Bewitchment?**

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**East African Christian Diaspora Views on the Opportunities  
and Dangers of Social Media**

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DOI: 10.7252/Paper.000077

In her popular song and video “Facebook,” Rose Muhando, Tanzania’s most famous Christian revival singer, warns of the potential dangers of social media as a threat to Christian faith and community. The video comically and tragically depicts pastors and lay Christians alike distracted by phones and computers as they reject and ignore spouses, friends and loved ones who desperately vie for their attention. For the past eighty years the East African Revival has promoted and nurtured Christian community and accountability in Tanzania. Now, many Tanzanian Christians see social media as a tool with the potential to destroy families and communities. In this song, Muhando laments the overuse of Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp Messenger as she repeatedly sings the question, “*Hivi nani aliyewaloga?*” (“Who bewitched you?”) The answer is emphatic and clear: “*Ni utanda wazi!*” (It was globalization!) Muhando’s warning illustrates how many Christians in Tanzania and throughout East Africa emphasize that faith must be lived out in community in ways that simultaneously critique and shape public life.

In this age of intensified globalization, increasing numbers of Tanzanians and Kenyans are also using the Internet and social media to explore and seek academic and professional opportunities outside of East Africa, often in the United States. Many join transnational, diaspora communities that use social media as a lifeline to stay connected with family and friends scattered across the globe. For those living transnational lives, social media provides a borderless and virtually instant mode of communication. While Christians from East Africa are well aware of the potential dangers of the misuse of social media, many in diaspora contexts have a more positive view of social media as they appreciate its power to help them maintain a sense of belonging in transnational communities scattered across continents. Social media is also a powerful tool that allows Kenyans and Tanzanians to share their faith in ways that engage with and critique public life both at home and in diaspora.

## OUR PERSONAL INTERESTS AND ORIGINS OF THE STUDY

When I (Reuben) was a young boy, growing up in Kenya, our means of communication were those that had been passed down from previous generations. The main method of communication was in the oral form. If a major event like a death, wedding or circumcision had happened or was planning to happen in a

village, the family would tell a messenger who would travel to inform other family members in other villages. Information would generally spread through word of mouth except during some instances when the elders would use smoke signals to communicate certain information.

Times have changed since then and culture has tremendously evolved. When my family and I moved from Kenya to United States in 2004, the use of social media was not as prevalent as it currently is especially in Kenya, but rapid change has taken place within the past twelve years. These changes in the use of technology have changed not only how people communicate and socialize; it has affected other areas of society such as the banking system, the spread of the Gospel and other areas. Virtually all Kenyans, ranging from the elite in the city to those in the villages who do not speak English, own a cell phone and use it for branchless banking with M-Pesa, a mobile money transfer service that is extremely popular in East Africa. Millennials now easily plan political protests through the use of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Analog television sets in Kenya have been upgraded and almost everyone has gone to digital systems. Gospel artists, preachers and evangelists can now easily spread the gospel through different media platforms.

After serving full-time in partnership with the Morogoro Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania from 2000 to 2008, I (Grant) transitioned into a volunteer role. I have returned to Morogoro for brief visits every year since. In 2009, on a flight from London to Dar es Salaam (Tanzania's global city), I was seated next to a Tanzanian man who shared that he was returning to Tanzania for the first time since he had emigrated in 1995. He had been living near two older siblings outside of London. When I asked him if he and his siblings were able to connect with other Tanzanians living in the United Kingdom, he looked at me almost dumbfounded and said, "Sure." When I proceeded to ask him exactly how they were able to connect, assuming he would mention an African diaspora congregation, he answered, "There is a website." (Miller 2016) Five years later, in 2014, I began interviewing Tanzanians living in the United States. When I asked the very first Tanzanian I spoke with how he stayed connected with family and friends scattered across multiple continents, he proudly showed me WhatsApp Messenger (an app specifically and harshly criticized in Muhando's song) on his phone and spoke of how essential this free app and service was for those living in diaspora.

This informal study focuses on how Kenyan and Tanzanian Christians in diaspora contexts view and use social media today. This paper will explore how these members of the East African Christian diaspora in America view social media as a tool not just for maintaining social capital, but also for maintaining spiritual capital they have experienced and developed in ministries flowing out of the East African Revival. In the ministries of the ongoing East African Revival, social capital and spiritual capital of the Christian community are intertwined and inseparable. Private faith and public faith are also inseparable as religion is not relegated or limited to private spheres in Kenya and Tanzania. In diaspora, Christians from East Africa use social media to help them maintain spiritual capital even as they remain aware of its potential to “bewitch” and “brainwash” users. We will explore how social media helps to connect isolated individuals and groups of the East African Christian diaspora by providing them with forums for prayer, accountability and community-building as well as for the expression and sharing of grassroots public theologies and public faith.

## A GAP IN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN DIASPORA LITERATURE

Afe Adogame (2011, 2013) and J. Kwa Bena Asamoah-Gyadu (2013, 2015) have both written invaluable and extensive accounts of West African Pentecostalism. Adogame (2011, 2013) has described the use of social media in the development of global, transnational ministries both in West Africa and in diaspora. Few, however, have conducted such in-depth studies of the smaller East African Christian diaspora, influenced by the unique legacy of the East African Revival, an ongoing evangelical awakening. As studies on the African Christian diaspora become increasingly common, there is a need for more extensive studies of the smaller East African diaspora.

From 2008-2009, while 201,000 Nigerians and 110,000 Ghanaians were admitted to the United States, only 68,000 Kenyans and merely 10,000 Tanzanians were admitted during the same period (Capps, McCabe, Fix 2011: 4). As Nigerians, Ghanaians and others from West Africa living in the United States greatly outnumber Kenyans, Tanzanians and others from East Africa, it is not surprising that the majority of studies on African diaspora Christianity in the United States focus on West African immigrant churches. These studies include *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Hanciles 2008); *Word Made Global: Stories of African Christianity in New York City* (Gornik 2011); *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity*

(Adogame 2013); *Scattered Africans Keep Coming: A Case Study of Diaspora Missiology on Ghanaian Diaspora and Congregations* (Wan and Edu-Bekoe 2013). We hope this small study will highlight an important gap in literature on the African Christian diaspora that has often concentrated heavily on the larger West African Christian diaspora. Kenyans and Tanzanians from East Africa have their own unique diaspora stories, theologies, ministries and contributions that have yet to be shared and heard on a large scale.

Like Adogame (2013, 161) in his research on the West African Christian diaspora, this paper will use transnational theory to explore practices of “religious transnationalism from below” at the micro- and meso- levels of community as we shift the focus to the East African Christian diaspora and the unique legacy of the East African Revival. We will specifically describe how Kenyan and Tanzanian individuals, families, and congregations in America use social media both privately and publicly as they develop and share both private and public faith living transnational lives in an increasingly interconnected world.

## THE KENYAN AND TANZANIAN CHRISTIAN DIASPORAS

Kenyans and Tanzanians, like many Africans in diaspora, often leave East Africa in search of higher education. Social media allows them to communicate with friends and family who have already successfully studied in diaspora. According to a research study conducted by the Migration Policy Institute, “the number of African immigrants in the United States has grown 40-fold between 1960 and 2007, from 35,355 to 1.4 million...compared to other immigrants, the African born tend to be highly educated and speak English well” (Terrazas 2009, 1). Research further indicates that two of every ten African-born adults in the United States has earned at least a bachelor’s degree or higher. Not only do many hold an academic degree, most of them are employed in the civilian labor force in jobs including management, business, finance, physician, nurse, administrative support and manufacturing, just to name a few (Terrazas 2009, 1). For example, thirty percent of Kenyans in the United States over the age of 25 hold a bachelor’s degree (compared to twenty percent in the American population overall) while sixteen percent hold a master’s degree, PhD or advanced professional degree (compared to only eleven percent of the American population) (Migration Policy Institute 2015: 6).

Religion still plays a huge role in the lives of most Africans, including the highly educated. Therefore, even though some might not be sure of their identity in diaspora, most will refer back to their spiritual roots and hold that as their identity. According to Walters and Auton-Cuff (2009: 764), “religion potentially offers ideologies, relationships, and spirituality necessary for identity formation, helping to trigger considerations of identity issues as well as suggesting resolutions for identity concerns. It is not rare to see churches started by Africans in different communities in the States. Africans can find identity amidst these churches because it is where they find a sense of belonging in the first place; it is where they can find support as they transition because almost everyone in the church is going through the phase together. Russell and Bartchy (2014: 4) refer to this phase as liminality. Individuals in liminality “do not have structural status and roles... they often exhibit properties of homogeneity, equality, anonymity, and absence of property.” Most of the Kenyans living in diaspora can be described as living in what Stephane Dufoix calls “enclaved mode” meaning a local community in a host state or country, that “operates locally and helps its participants to get to know and stay in touch with one another” (Dufoix 2008: 63). Members share the same identity or place of origin and while they live in a host country they keep in touch through social media and other means. The atopic mode “refers to a way of being in the world between states that is built around a common origin, ethnicity, or religion that does not reduce one to being a subject of a host country” (Dufoix 2008: 63). This also appropriately describes diaspora life for many Kenyans who live in groups in different states in the US, but are connected to other groups in other states, who all share the same country of origin, culture, and faith. For example, the Kenyan Christian Fellowship in America, has different chapters in different states, but gathers for an annual conference each year.

The Tanzanian diaspora in the United States is even smaller than the Kenyan diaspora. As a small minority in the larger African meta-diaspora, Tanzanians can easily become quite isolated from other Tanzanians geographically. As a result, Tanzanians often worship in Kenyan and East African diaspora congregations. Even in small numbers, however, Tanzanians strive to worship, pray and meet together as Tanzanians united by the common, national language of Swahili as often as possible. They often travel great distances to celebrate and mourn together at graduations, weddings and funerals. Tanzanians organize their own hometown associations as well as regional and national conferences. They

highly value inclusiveness, inter-ethnic harmony and inter-faith cooperation in these communities that demonstrate a strong desire to express public faith.

As Kenyan and Tanzanian Christians have all been influenced by the legacy of the East African Revival, they strive to maintain core elements of their culture and religious faith and spirituality as they live in diaspora. In Kenya and Tanzania, all faith is a public faith that engages with and critiques public life. Many people in the world today are “increasingly unwilling to keep their convictions and practices limited to the private sphere of family or religious community” (Volf 2011: ix). Diaspora life can be a struggle for many Kenyans and Tanzanians as they live in an American culture that often discourages people from sharing faith in public spheres and often values individual freedom above both faith and community.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EAST AFRICAN REVIVAL AND ITS LEGACY**

Kenyans and Tanzanians living today were born and raised during a time of remarkable church growth throughout their entire region and continent. In 1900, there were only 10 million Christians in Africa. Only a century later, in 2000, there were 400 million (Shaw 2010: 11). This number continues to grow as roughly half of the continent professes faith in Christ-making Africa arguably the world's most Christian continent today. As Africa became a Christian continent, Christianity in East Africa spread very rapidly in a very short time. The East African Revival became one of the many global awakenings “at the heart of the global resurgence of Christianity” (Shaw 2010: 12). In East Africa the numerical growth of Christianity between 1914 and 1944 was “phenomenal” (Oliver 1952: 234). By 1938, when the East African Revival entered Tanzania, about ten percent of the population of Tanganyika (the name for Tanzania from 1922 until 1964) and eight percent of the population of Kenya was already Christian. As revival flourished, indigenous pastors, evangelists and lay leaders, spread the gospel quickly with great passion. Overall, the percentage of Christians in East Africa rose rapidly from 15.9 percent in 1910 to 64.7 percent in 2010 (Johnson and Ross 2009).

Kevin Ward (1991, Wild-wood and Ward 2010, 2013) has written extensive accounts of the history of the East African Revival, especially its early and rapid spread throughout Uganda. As the East African Revival flowed from Uganda into Tanzania in 1938, it emphasized holiness and accountability in community. In the 1970s, this emphasis on holiness and accountability combined with a sudden, new

emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit to heal sicknesses and deliver demons. Many experienced healing and deliverance at this time and shared testimonies reminiscent of the events in the book of Acts. These powerful testimonies drew even more to the Christian faith and the church continued to grow rapidly throughout East Africa. The 1990s, the end of the Cold War and the age of the Internet and intensified globalization ushered in the age of global charismatic/Pentecostal churches that shared this emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit to heal and deliver. Kalu (2011: 107) noted, “Perhaps, Pentecostalism has picked up the core elements of Evangelicalism and imbued them with new life.” Many Tanzanian Christians in diaspora stress this combination and balance of the “sound” biblical teaching of global evangelicalism with the passion and freedom of global Pentecostalism (Miller 2016). Many indicated that just as evangelicalism that ignores the power of the Holy Spirit is lifeless, Pentecostalism that ignores sound biblical teaching is dangerous. Many Tanzanian Christians see that Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism are both necessary as each emphasis compliments and balances the other.

Another lasting legacy of this ongoing evangelical awakening in East Africa is the emphasis on Christian community and unity. As traditional life in Africa was always communal, Christians in Africa are quick to notice and embrace the strong emphasis on community and communal life described throughout the Bible. Just as they do back in Tanzania, Tanzanians in diaspora place a high value on gathering to celebrate and mourn together. Weddings and funerals are extremely important community events in diaspora just as they are back home. Tanzanians emphasized, “every celebration is a community celebration and every tragedy is a community tragedy” (Miller 2016). Tanzanian pastor Elieshi Mungure (2011: 442), who ministered to the East African diaspora in the United States describes the essence of what she calls “African relational theology” stating, “Life is recognized as life in community. To be truly human is to be true to ones own community.”

For many Christians from Africa, these communities include communities of prayer and worship. One young woman from Tanzania, who frequently worships in a Kenyan congregation in diaspora, explained, “I can’t leave church on Sunday until I have taken time to speak to everyone and make sure everyone is doing well.” While stressing the importance of these face-to-face interactions, she also praised social media as a means of staying connected with family and friends scattered in diaspora and back home in East Africa.



## **THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY THE KENYAN AND TANZANIAN DIASPORAS: NO ONE REJOICES OR MOURNS ALONE**

In diaspora, social media becomes an essential tool for Christians from East Africa who value the biblical call to rejoice and mourn together. Acknowledging weddings and funerals and major life events even when isolated and distant physically helps them maintain social capital and a sense of belonging of community. Even when they are unable to attend these important events in person, Christians from East Africa can use social media to let family and friends know that they are still thinking of them and still value being a member of distant communities. Even in diaspora, Christians from East Africa want to ensure that no one rejoices or mourns alone. Diaspora pastors often use social media to reach out to young members of their congregations who can become isolated and lost in diaspora. Pastors use social media to frequently remind members that even when they quit attending church, people are still praying for them and ready to welcome them any time they choose to return. Even when some choose to isolate themselves in diaspora, communication through social media can remind them that they are never forgotten or alone.

Kenyan and Tanzanian diaspora communities of faith provide social, cultural, and spiritual capital far from home. Adogame (2013: 106) explains, "Generally, religious capital is associated with the investment an individual makes in his/her religious faith and organization." He adds, "Spiritual capital energizes religious capital by providing a theological identity and worshiping tradition, but also a value system, a moral vision and a basis for faith...embedded locally within religious and faith-based groups, but...also expressed in the lives of individuals" (Adogame 2013: 106). Social, cultural, religious, and spiritual capital should be understood as "interconnected" and "dovetailing...in practical terms" (Adogame 2013: 106). Kenyan and Tanzanian diaspora communities demonstrate this interconnectedness and "dovetailing."

For example, Kenyans in Kentucky have come together to form an annual gathering. The gathering is usually planned by a small group of committee members. The aim of the gathering is simply to fellowship, provide an avenue for networking, and celebrate shared Kenyan heritage. They usually invite a keynote speaker who

talks about an issue affecting them. Some of the issues that have been addressed by this community include “how to navigate through immigration issues, how to raise children in America who might be going through marginality, and how to live in diaspora. Many of these immigrants are interested in investing in Kenya while they are living in the States. This shows that it is becoming easier and easier to be transnational, especially because we are at the peak of globalization” (Lang’at 2015: 7). For example, last year’s (2015) topic was “Heritage and Education as Foundations for Success and a New Identity.” This year, the topic will be “Investment Opportunities for Kenyans living in Diaspora.” They utilize the resources available by requesting Kenyans in the community who have experience in particular topics to be speakers. Kenyans who attend range from well-educated professors, lawyers, doctors, students, and those who recently arrived from Kenya.

Many members of Kenyan and Tanzanian diaspora communities also share a commitment to rejoice, mourn, and worship together. For example, Kenyans in a small American city quickly mobilized to help a Kenyan woman who suddenly and tragically lost her husband while living in diaspora. They provided this widow with spiritual as well as social and financial support. Tanzanian communities frequently do the same as they mobilize quickly to celebrate with those who celebrate and mourn with those who mourn. Tanzanians in diaspora support those who have lost family members back home and frequently help them with funeral and travel expenses. A Tanzanian pastor spoke of cancelling important church events in order to help his congregation support and mourn together with a young woman in their community after she suffered a devastating miscarriage in diaspora far from her traditional support network back home.

While social/cultural capital is extremely important in diaspora communities, for many raised in the East African Revival, the spiritual capital through constant prayer and accountability provided by these communities is as important, if not more important, than social/cultural capital (Miller 2016: 128). For many in the East African Christian diaspora, social capital, and spiritual capital are indeed interlocked, intertwined and inseparable. A Kenyan professor explained how fellowship without prayer is empty just as prayer without true fellowship is lacking.

Social media helps many Kenyans and Tanzanians in diaspora mobilize to meet and support one another in times of need. Many Africans in diaspora use the Internet as a “complimentary vehicle” rather than a replacement for interpersonal

bonds and social networks (Adogame 2011: 235). It can also help many who are truly isolated maintain a sense of fellowship while providing prayer support at a distance. In communal diaspora communities, someone might put a prayer request on social media, but still prefer meeting with a person face-to-face to share more and pray together. In fact, some find more courage to post prayer requests on social media. These posts can prompt friends to call them, or meet with them in person if possible, to speak and pray in greater detail.

The transnational practice of African Christian phone prayer groups has emerged as a vital and unique diaspora phenomenon and innovation (Miller 2016). Almost every one of the Tanzanians I interviewed in diaspora described how they join prayer groups by phone almost daily, with the option of joining two to three times a day. While descriptions varied slightly, one pastor gave a typical example explaining how through a ministry of their congregation, approximately twenty-five people will join together by phone for about thirty minutes, three times a day at 6:00 AM, 1:00 PM and 7:30 PM, seven days a week to hear scripture, a short sermon and then share prayer requests and prayer. Another Tanzanian pastor on the East Coast of the United States explained that they start every day with a phone prayer line that regularly draws over forty participants from as many as eighteen different states.

Through the ministries of these phone prayer lines, often organized and connected through social media, Tanzanians in diaspora, who may not be as able to meet in person as they are back in Tanzania, regularly pray for and receive healing and breakthroughs just as they do at worship services. These phone prayer lines provide a way for Tanzanians to experience and share in some way the spiritual capital and accountability provided by the Christian communities they value so highly, even at a distance, when logistics in diaspora make meeting in person difficult (Miller 2016).

I (Grant) had never heard of this practice during my seventeen years of ministry experience in Tanzania. When I asked one man if he had ever participated in these phone prayer lines back home, he said that he too had only heard of this practice since arriving in diaspora. He said that back home it is easier to meet for prayer in person and that even though he was a very successful and busy civil servant in Dar es Salaam, he still met with friends to pray during lunch almost every day. Others confirmed that these phone prayer lines have emerged out of necessity as a unique African Christian diaspora practice and phenomenon.

Pastors often lead these groups and times of prayer, but also delegate responsibilities to laity. Many Tanzanians in diaspora participate in several different phone prayer lines. One man, who is quite isolated from other Tanzanians in diaspora, explained how his sister told him about a great phone prayer line led by a Kenyan woman living in a completely different region of the United States far from where he lives. Another man explained how there are so many different prayer lines here now that many have started prayer phones lines just for specific needs. For example, he said many women have started their own prayer lines just for women. Many of the Tanzanians I spoke with also mentioned using these phone prayer lines to share prayer requests as they pray for American neighbors, co-workers, and friends.

While almost every Tanzanian I interviewed reported being blessed by these phone prayer lines in the United States, a few also noted drawbacks. At least two people I interviewed voiced concern that some can be tempted to use these phone prayer lines in the place of personal prayer and devotion. They worried that people could rely on these phone prayer lines alone as a substitute for private prayer. Another explained it is difficult for leaders to know everyone who joins, so that privacy and confidentiality become an issue. Political prayers can also cause tensions, especially during election years. In the end, however, people spoke in overwhelmingly positive terms regarding these prayer phones lines. When I specifically asked about the efficacy of these phone prayer lines, one Tanzanian pastor stressed emphatically, “People receive healing through these prayers” (Miller 2016: 140).

Kenyans also use social media to organize and facilitate phone prayer lines regularly, often weekly. A number of prayer lines have been formed to bring Kenyans and their friends together in prayer. Those who are here in the USA and those in Kenya and other African countries are able to connect through WhatsApp or Skype and pray together. Tanzanians often find and join these Kenyan-led phone prayer groups just as they often join Kenyan congregations. Tanzanians, who are even more scattered and isolated in diaspora, may be even more reliant on prayer by phone than Kenyans, who can more easily form their own diaspora congregations.

In spite of extensive use of social media and phones in prayer groups by Tanzanian and Kenyan Christians in diaspora, I (Grant) have so far found only one specific reference to these phone prayer lines in the literature on African diaspora Christianity. Mark Gornik (2011: 133) describes how a woman from Ghana who works the night shift, “returns home and sleeps briefly, waking up at 8:00 a.m. for

morning prayers.” He explains, “But instead of travelling to the church, she dials a telephone number that switches her into a prayer meeting with between four and nine fellow members. Over the telephone, they pray for everyday needs.” Gornik’s description reflects both the willingness to sacrifice sleep for God and the appreciation for phone prayer lines that I heard from the Tanzanians I interviewed who often face new cultural and logistical obstacles in diaspora, preventing them from meeting with fellow Christians in person daily.

## **“FACEBOOK CHURCH” AND INTERACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS**

Interconnectedness has been enhanced in this age of globalization. People and other things can be localized, but the Internet cannot. The Internet keeps people connected regardless of where they are in this global world. Interpersonal relationships can be kept going regardless of where the people are (Eriksen 2015: 103). This interconnectedness has helped those who live in diaspora stay connected with the family, relatives, and friends in their home countries. There are a number of Kenyans who have “closed” Facebook groups so as to help them keep the discussions going in the areas of their interests. I am sure this is not limited only to Kenyans. A number of Kenyan artists have used social media (YouTube) to share their talents and even sell their music. This has become a source of encouragement to many who would not have had a privilege of sharing their needs with those who are separated by miles from their friends or family members.

I recently talked to a pastor who migrated to the US a number of years ago, but has kept reaching out to his church members back home through Facebook and he said, “At times I preach through Skype on Sundays.” The distant has been greatly reduced by the Internet. A World Gospel Mission missionary and his wife, who have served in Kenya for many years, took a challenge a few years back and started a “Facebook Church” in which they reach out to many people within Kenya and outside. They have been able to write and post Christian materials for their friends and offer counseling helps using social media. They told me they were very excited about the opportunity to reach out to so many regardless of where they live in this global world.

A Kenyan woman recently saw a need at one of the hospitals in Kenya and shared it on her Facebook page. Within a few days, an American family in another state shared it and took the need to her Sunday school. Within just a few weeks,

they were able to raise over \$1,000 to help meet the need. Social media used well can be of great help in sharing the needs that we have with people that we don't even know, and God can lead them to provide. There are a number of bishops who live in diaspora, but through the Internet, they are able to connect and worship and even do evangelism as well as pastoral care online with some of their followers who can access social media. Internet is borderless and a virtually instant mode of communication for those who live distant from each other.

While Tanzanians in diaspora generally view social media as a good way to stay connected to communities both here and back home, Tanzanians living in Tanzania still have a more jaded view of social media reflected in Muhando's very popular song. She describes globalization as bewitching Christians and vividly describes how Facebook and the WhatsApp Messenger lead to the ruin of ministries and marriages. She explains Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp Messenger have become "*mungu wa kanisa la leo* (the god of today's church)" and "*kichaa kamili kwa kizazi cha leo* (complete insanity for today's generation)." Muhando's video vividly portrays pastors checking Facebook and emails in the pulpit while members of the congregation raise one hand in praise even as they use the other hand to check messages on their mobile phones. Similarly, Adogame (2013: 122) describes a notice at a Nigerian Redeemed Christian Church of God church stating, "Please switch off your mobile phones. The only urgent call expected here is the voice of God." While these issues are not unique to Tanzania or even Africa, they are very real. Recently, Tanzanian pastors in Tanzania have confirmed that these concerns expressed by Muhando are genuine.

Tanzanians living in diaspora in the United States do not seem to share this level of concern regarding social media found in home contexts. On the contrary, many described social media as an absolutely essential tool to demonstrate belonging and concern as members of scattered communities in diaspora. Kenyans and Tanzanians in diaspora share positive views of social media in diaspora contexts. At the same time, they are all very aware of its potential dangers and abuses. Some lamented time they simply wasted time on Facebook, while others noted Facebook promoted the formation and acceptance of more superficial and distant relationships. Others mentioned the dangers of addiction to pornography and the temptation to form unhealthy relationships that can be hidden and sustained through the use of social media (portrayed in Muhando's video).

## AMERICAN CONCERN ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA

Concern regarding the overuse and abuse of social media is a global issue that is not unique to Africa. Americans of all generations are often equally overwhelmed and confused with how to adapt and respond to social media as a rapidly growing part of global life today. Mark Bauerlein, author of *The Dumbest Generation*, vividly points out that in April of 2003 Americans spent zero minutes on Facebook, while just six years later, in April of 2009 Americans logged in 13,872,640,000 minutes (Bauerlein 2011: x). The world soon followed.

Facebook boasts it now has 1.5 billion users, which is roughly half of the world's 3.17 billion Internet users (Buchanan 2015). WhatsApp Messenger is used by 1 billion people worldwide and claims "nearly one in seven people on Earth... now use WhatsApp each month to stay in touch with their loved ones, their friends, their family" as they send and receive text, photos and video "without paying steep fees to local wireless carriers" (Metz 2016).

Through social media, people of all ages around the globe create "modern self portraits" that are highly "interactive" as they demand our response (Rosen 2011: 173). This instant and constant ability to seek and receive attention has created an incessant flood of both positive and negative messages and images. In 1979, long before social media, Dr. Aaron Stern (1979) warned of enabling the "Narcissistic American." No one seems to have listened. Thirty years later, Twenge and Campbell (2009) wrote about the "The Narcissim Epidemic" fueled by social media. Now we have a "digital divide" (Bauerlein 2011) and "digital vertigo" (Keen 2012) as social media is "dividing, diminishing and disorienting us." Finally, we were all shocked to hear that "selfie deaths" outnumbered shark attack deaths in 2015 (Breslin 2015).

The warnings have been there all a long, and long before the birth of the Internet. As noted, thirty years ago, Stern (1979: 140) stated that as American media is "the most powerful and pervasive in the world," and one that "sympathetically vibrates with...innate narcissistic forces," we should not be surprised to find that America has "come to be regarded as the most narcissistic nation of all." Stern's (1979: 145) proposal was simple; "If we demand expression of more loving values, we can control the growing narcissistic infestation spread by the media. If we don't



make that demand, the narcissistic infestation will not only continue, it will grow and overcome us all.” Social media has certainly played a major role in the “growing narcissistic infestation” spreading through global culture and society.

Many Americans find social media to be “an architecture of human isolation” rather than of the community it projects so that we are “schizophrenic... simultaneously detached from the world and yet jointly ubiquitous” online (Keen 2012: 14). Relating the terror and fears of many parents today, a father who just allowed his teenage daughter to join Facebook for the first time noted he felt as if he had “passed her a pipe of crystal meth” (Keen 2012: 173). The power and freedom to present ourselves as whoever we want to be, instantly and everywhere at once on social media does indeed become intoxicating to many, and many find themselves addicted.

Social media can negatively affect families, relationships, and communities quickly. Twenty percent of new divorce cases “reference inappropriate sexual conversations on Facebook as a factor in the marriage breakup” (Keen 2012: 68). Muhando’s video clearly shows this reality as well. Life online can also harm true personal relationships and community as social media promotes and facilitates fleeting, superficial, low-risk relationships in cyberspace.

While social media may encourage and enable “shallowness and narcissism” it can also promote and facilitate healthy connections and collaboration across borders instantaneously (Twenge and Campbell 2009: 121-122). East African Christians in diaspora have realized and capitalized on the positives even as they are aware of the dangers. Americans see these positives as well and some are even learning from the rest of the world how to use social media in positive and constructive ways. Palfrey and Gasser (2011: 190-191) note how the large diaspora community of Kenyans “use the internet as a primary means of communication... in highly sophisticated ways geared toward having a political impact.”

Around the globe, young people are beginning to influence the course of important events, demonstrating that “when a lot of people care passionately about something the Internet can become a powerful tool of organization, recruitment, and participation in the telling of the narratives of our society” (Palfrey and Gasser 2011: 203). The East African Christian diaspora has realized this but also understand that political activism, like community and fellowship, is always lacking without the power of prayer and the foundation of biblical truth. Kenyans and



Tanzanians in diaspora share not only their own narratives but also their belief that their stories, and all of our stories, must be understood as part of God's larger story. The prayers and testimonies that Kenyans and Tanzanians share on social media are a form of public faith and theology visible to all as they quickly become "friends" with people all over the globe.

Many believe that media should be understood as the "connective tissue of society" today (Shirky 2015: 329). Social media truly connects people as never before, but we are left with questions regarding what kind of connections we want. Do we want our connections and communities to be living tissue that is healthy and growing organically or unhealthy, fleeting, and artificial. Communities of the East African Christian diaspora are grappling with these issues. They can help Americans and the larger body of Christ as they seek true spiritual capital that is never isolated from social and cultural capital in person or online.

In 1993, Robin Dunbar of Oxford University found that a group of 150 individuals seems to be the "optimal social circle for which we are wired as a species." Furthermore, "Dunbar's number" as we now call this "optimal number of complex relationships that our brains can effectively manage" has remained constant throughout human history (Keen 2012: 175). From "neo-lithic villages" to "Roman legions," humans have only ever been capable of managing approximately 150, personal, face-to-face relationships. Even in our new global village, our human brains simply cannot keep up with the technology of social networks (The Economist 2016: 74). In today's increasingly interconnected world, our small, personal social networks as well as our large, impersonal social networks are all becoming increasingly complex and culturally diverse. As diverse members of the worldwide body of Christ are able to communicate and meet more easily than ever before, many are realizing the great potential for mutual enrichment in the world church.

## **NEW TESTAMENT COMMUNITY, PUBLIC FAITH, AND THE POTENTIAL FOR MUTUAL ENRICHMENT**

Many of the seven billion people alive on the planet today, including many of those living in Africa, would not be surprised at all by Dunbar's findings. Many of the cultures in the world still highly value the personal relationships of close communities. Christians from these parts of world, including East Africa,

rejoice to see the emphasis on community life in the Bible. Traditional African community shares much in common with New Testament community. Asamoah-Gyadu (2015) describes how Pentecostalism emphasizes the work and power of the Holy Spirit to heal and deliver today as it did in biblical times in a way that resonates clearly with African spirituality and imagination. Many communities of the East African diaspora would agree with Asamoah-Gyadu (2015: 181) when he declares, “A church that flows in the power of the Spirit can never be an orphan.” True community is a gift from the God who created life in community. God alone nurtures true community as we gather in the name of Christ and trust in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As the African Christian diaspora in the United States continues to grow, there are growing opportunities for Americans to learn from the witness and wisdom of these communities. These diaspora communities can teach American Christians new insights about biblical faith and community from a truly global perspective. They can teach others how God is at work in parts of the world where true evangelical awakenings and revivals still thrive today. In turn, American Christians can help African Christian diaspora communities adjust to life in a culture where true community can be culturally and logistically harder to find and maintain. Offutt (2015: 160) reminds us “a less distinctive religious community does not necessarily mean increased secularism.” Many Kenyans and Tanzanians in diaspora remain committed to faith and community even in challenging diaspora contexts. In the process, many use social media in innovative and positive ways that build community and express public faith simultaneously. Together, Kenyan, Tanzanian, and American Christians can cooperate to develop and share new, more diverse Christian communities as well as new, grassroots public theologies that engage with and critique culture in innovative ways using the combined resources, wisdom, and capital of the world church.

Andrew Walls (1996: 54) reminds us, “It is a delightful paradox that the more Christ is translated into the various thought forms and life systems which form our various national identities, the richer all of us will be in our common Christian identity.” Christians from diverse cultural backgrounds can share and learn from diverse and unique, spiritual and cultural gifts. At the same time, diverse members of the body of Christ are able to help one another see and address the cultural “blindspots” that exist in every one of our cultures. Walls (2002: 47) notes,

“Shared reading of the scriptures and shared theological reflection will be of benefit to all, but the oxygen-starved Christianity of the West will have the most to gain.”

The Christian communities of the East African diaspora can not only teach Americans how to read the scriptures with fresh eyes but they can also help others rediscover and value true, New Testament community and hospitality. Pohl (2012: 161) reminds us, “Hospitality and shared meals fill the pages of scripture.” Embracing this biblical teaching and early Christian tradition, African led-congregations both in Africa and in diaspora value hospitality and shared meals as well. Mungure (2011: 442-443) emphasizes how Christians from East Africa value sharing meals and stories as integral parts of prayer and worship in ways that help us remember the Eucharist. As we gather in the name of Christ to share meals and stories of faith, Christ is present within our homes as well as in our churches.

For many Christians from East Africa living in diaspora, invitations to share meals and stories with their American neighbors in their homes, help to create essential social, cultural and spiritual capital far from home. Shortly after arriving in the United States, my (Reuben) family “often shared meals with friends where we could fellowship and share our stories of living and ministering in Kenya as they shared their stories of living in the United States. As I reflect, I believe it was through sharing of our life stories that good friendships began to be formed” (Lang’at 2015).

If this sharing of meals and life stories does not take place, “mutual suspicion and ignorance” (Adogame 2013: 207) can plague relations between African diaspora communities and their host communities in Europe and America. Genuine Christian hospitality marked by the willingness to truly listen is crucial in preventing and overcoming the ignorance that creates suspicion. While music and shared meals are essential, genuine partnerships and fellowship must go far beyond and “transcend the frequent parading of African choirs of African food cultures” (Adogame 2013: 207). We will all benefit if we strive to “extend hospitality to others, be open to hearing people’s stories, be obedient to Christ, and partner with brothers and sisters from other parts of the world to further the kingdom of Christ” (Lang’at 2015).

Host and diaspora communities must be equally patient, open and flexible. All must be willing to listen and learn. All must be willing to speak and hear the truth in love, when necessary. True community involves sharing prayer concerns

and the willingness to rejoice and mourn together. True spiritual capital involves the willingness to teach, correct and hold one another accountable in the name of Christ. This is one of the unique and important legacies of the East African Revival.

Christians in East Africa continue to write their own histories of the East Africa Revival and its ongoing influence and legacy. Now, members of the East African diaspora, which is still a very young diaspora, are presented the task of documenting and sharing their diaspora experience. They have their own stories to share. While these stories will include shared experiences of faith and migration, they will also include individual voices expressing deeply personal and honest reflections that remind us “we must avoid trying to put too firm a boundary around diaspora communities (i.e., essentializing their identities), seeing them rather as dynamic and changing communities interacting in complex sociocultural contexts in the host society as well as back home” (Ybarrola 2012: 92-93). Hopefully, this small study can inspire Christians from East Africa to continue sharing and writing down their stories and thoughtful self-analyses of diaspora life and public faith.

## CONCLUSION

While Kenyans and Tanzanian Christians agree that Muhando’s warnings about the abuses of social media, especially in their home contexts, are genuine and fair, most also realize that social media in itself is not bad if used properly. Those living in diaspora appreciate the power of social media to help them build and maintain true Christian community even when they are geographically isolated from family and friends scattered across continents. In Kenyan and Tanzanian diaspora communities, the social capital and the spiritual capital of the Christian community are intertwined and inseparable. Social media allows them to share prayer requests and pray with others anytime, anywhere. In diaspora, social media becomes an essential tool for Christians from Kenya and Tanzania who value the biblical call to rejoice and mourn together in community.

Religion still plays a major role in the lives of most Africans, including the highly educated members of diaspora communities. Kenyan and Tanzanian Christians were born and raised during a time of remarkable revival and church growth in East Africa and many seek to maintain core elements of their culture and faith as they live in diaspora. Many embrace the transnational practice of joining phone prayer groups that connect people across continents. This innovative

use of social media, group prayer by phone, has emerged as a vital and unique African Christian diaspora phenomenon. Others use social media to share music and preaching that can inspire and encourage anyone in the world with access to the Internet. Others use social media to continue ministries of mercy, evangelism and pastoral care back in East Africa even while living in diaspora.

As Kenyans and Tanzanians in diaspora share their own stories, they also share their faith and trust in God's larger story. The prayers and testimonies that Kenyans and Tanzanians share on social media express a faith lived in public and visible to Facebook "friends" all over the globe. The self-portraits Kenyans and Tanzanians share on social media are ones that often show a faith that combines social and spiritual capital just as it combines private and public faith. Kenyan and Tanzanian Christian diaspora communities can help Americans rediscover biblical community and hospitality. The new and innovative ways in which these diaspora communities use social media demonstrate their desire to share a dynamic grassroots public theology as they live a public faith.

While Christians all over the world use social media in positive ways to maintain and energize faith in both home and diaspora contexts, many remember that we are called to biblical hospitality and community. Kenyans and Tanzanians understand that social media is ultimately a tool for inviting others to share meals and stories with them. Sometimes these stories must be shared across continents as scattered communities pray together over the phone, but these connections can still create essential social and spiritual capital. Life in Christ has always been life in community, modeled on life in the Triune God of community and fellowship. As the Holy Spirit continues to move, we must continue to research and document how Christians on the move today carry with them not just private faith but also the public faith of ongoing revivals as they cross borders, from new heartlands of the world church to old ones and back again. True hospitality and community will increase mutual understanding and help ensure that our private lives and faith match our public self-portraits and theologies on social media. In the process, we can help one another learn how to share our private faith in public and engage with increasingly diverse and interconnected cultures with a public faith that reflects both the ancient and contemporary wisdom of the world church in a rapidly changing world.

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