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Wailing Women: Kenyan Prayer Warriors and the Animating Grounds of Emotions

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ABSTRACT

In Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, women are generally positioned or perceived as prayer warriors. This image is in sharp contrast to their perceived agency as “weaker vessels”, which relegates them to the margins in terms of leadership and preaching. A prayer warrior is a metaphor for strength, evoking a spiritual battle with the enemy, the devil, whose essence is to wage war against Christians. Using a grounded methodology approach, I will dissect the social-cultural elements that view women as weak vessels, yet present them as prayer warriors who engage with spiritual forces. Daughters of Zion, an urban Pentecostal women’s movement, features as a case study due to its reputation for summoning women to pray. The group uses the term “wailing women” to describe the participants in their prayer assemblies. The women engage in intense prayers while sitting, running, and even lying prostrate, addressing domestic and personal issues. The research delves into the concept of women as “prayer warriors”, employing “wailing” as their battle weapon, a form of emotional expression that serves as a unique source of spiritual strength. The study contributes to the growing field of gender studies and how religious contexts understand and value women’s emotional sensitivities.

KEYWORDS

Emotions; prayer warriors;
urban Pentecostalism;
wailing; women

Introduction

The attribution of emotional expressivity to women in various settings has been harnessed for both positive and negative purposes. Due to the cultural socialization of men to be stoic, emotion is taken to be a largely female domain. Contrasting men with women on this basis is to make a case of strength versus weakness, muscled versus fragile. In this typology, emotional weakness corresponds with physical and mental brittleness. As in many religious movements, Pentecostalism and Charismatic groups harbor similar sentiments about women. Yet, and in seeming contrast to their perceived agency as “weaker vessels” that largely relegates their roles to the margins in terms of leadership and preaching, women are also generally positioned or perceived as prayer warriors. A “prayer warrior” is a metaphor of strength born out of Christian mythology of cosmic battles between good and evil (see Adelakun 2022a; Krause 2012). The imagery of prayer as warfare evokes a spiritual battle between a Christian – whose battle gear of

prayer is continuously imbued with supernatural muscularity as they relentlessly give themselves to the intense emotional and spiritual labor of prayer – and their adversary, the devil, whose essence is to wage war against Christians. Given this, overcoming prayer requires intense emotions to connect with the transcendent and draw on mystical sources of strength, and women's purported natural ability to be emotive is thus harnessed in the performance of highly animated prayers.

Using a grounded methodology approach, I unpack the social-cultural ideas that regard women as weak vessels yet see them as prayer warriors to engage spiritual powers on behalf of the nation, making an argument that emotions are the very grounds on which female spiritual power is activated. Daughters of Zion (DOZ), an urban Pentecostal women's movement in Nairobi, Kenya, features as a case study due to its reputation of summoning women to pray. The group uses the term "wailing women" to describe the participants in their prayer assemblies. The description manifests how the women can be seen engaging in highly charged prayers sitting down, running, and even lying prostrate on the floor as they pray about domestic and personal issues. This study explores the notion of women as "prayer warriors" whose battle weapons include "wailing", an intense emotional expression that becomes a unique source of their spiritual strength. With just as much affective display that the women employ to pray, they also celebrate their testimonies of victory and triumph over circumstances. They thus move from being "wailing women" to "joyful women", a distance measured by an intensely emotional performance of prayer. This transition is grounded on the emotional capital of women that is harnessed in the performance of emotionally charged prayers as well as joyful thanksgiving for answered prayers. The wailing woman, crushed under the weight of life's hardships, whether they be social, spiritual, or personal, is where this path of transition begins. It is at these gloomy times that women turn to prayer. For the wailing woman, crying, howling, lamenting, screaming, shrieking, and yelping all express the emotions of encountering adverse circumstances. In the following sections, I take a close look at these emotional performances to clarify why women enact them as a precondition of victory in their social and spiritual life.

Studies around women have explored in diverse ways how the symbolic possibilities of gender are either exploited or explored in popular arts and performance. Whether it is Popoola (2021) looking at the awkwardness of male hip-hop artists profiteering from the global circulation of feminist ideals, or Duignan-Pearson's (2019) study of female DJs in South Africa who insist their performances should be seen as genuine rather than a gimmick, or Sieveking (2017) looking into how the extended culture of male dominance in performance arts has opened up spaces for women to also come forward because they represent an underrepresented category, gender in arts and performance is frequently scrutinized for its signification. The binary of strength/weakness is not the only popular typification of gender in social and popular culture that is reproduced in churches. Another is the public/private demarcation of spaces whereby men dominate the former and take the high intellectual decisions that shape the society while women take up their "natural" space in the private spheres, the homestead, where their nurturing skills confine them to domesticity. In such arrangements, women – especially in contexts where they have been historically subjugated based on the norms of religion and culture – give their voices to popular culture from within the domestic spheres where they operate (see Lwanda 2003; Kassam 1996). Even when displaced or forcefully exposed

to the transnational and global “public” through migration and exile, women still return “home” through their longings and nostalgia. In Webster-Kogen’s (2013) study of Ethiopian female artists, we see this vividly expressed in their conflation of home (as a private, intimate, and domestic sphere) with the nation (whose disintegrative politics reconstitute family units). Because prayer is hardly acknowledged as part of popular culture, the generative role that women play in the social arena to shape art, identity, ideas of professional and personal self-fulfillment, and, overall, the imaginations of private life and domestic wellbeing are hardly ever factored into consideration. Furthermore, religious women going overboard in their emotional expressions to demand a higher form of power that will benefit their domestic life easily fit into the categories of “weakness” and domesticity from which feminist discourses shy away.

This article brings together the discourses of women, religion, popular culture, and performance, and the affective power of their intersection, to discuss Kenyan prayer warriors whose emotions constitute their weapon of warfare. Wailing is an emotional expression, but construing women through such performances is also a metaphor that generalizes and even genders pain. It is much more important to understand how these women wailers think of their performance, what it is calculated to achieve, and what they think of themselves as they wail. One of the goals of this article will therefore be an understanding of “Hannah”, the trope that these wailing women designate to express their distress, emotional response, and, just as importantly, eventual triumph. In the Bible, Hannah was a childless woman who was scorned and mocked for her condition. During an emotionally distressing prayer whereby a priest mistakes her for a drunk, she makes a breakthrough. After her prayers are answered and she eventually has a son, she rejoices by breaking into a song of joy (1 Samuel 1.2). This narrative of overcoming fruitlessness to becoming a productive woman resonates with these Kenyan prayer warriors so much that they appropriate her story by going through its phases – distress, prayer, and testimony – and by performing their distress and their joys in sequence. They enact their jubilant status when their prayers are answered by breaking into songs and dances to express their joy.

Prayer and the African Woman

The popular Christian film *War Room* (2015), directed by Alex Kendrick, tells the story of a woman, Elizabeth, who turns to prayer to save her ailing marriage. Elizabeth and her husband Tony Jordan face difficulties in their marriage, including infidelity and work challenges. Elizabeth meets an elderly woman called Clara who mentors her in the power of transformative prayer. The film thus introduces the concept of the “war room”, a private room consecrated for prayer, spiritual reflection, and meditation. Elizabeth begins to use her war room to pray for her husband and marriage. The prayers lead to significant changes in her marriage and the film triumphantly ends with a romantic scene between her and Tony. The “war room”, which may be interpreted by a casual observer to mean a military command center, is a metaphor used in the film to underscore prayer and spiritual warfare. *War Room* suggests that life challenges, such as marital problems, may be approached as spiritual battles. Elizabeth understands through Clara that prayer is a powerful weapon to fight against negative forces such as marital challenges. The film, though centered around an affluent African American family, became influential to the point where it would be watched by women’s prayer groups in African churches.

While the film did not exactly introduce a new concept into spirituality or gender, it nevertheless reinforced these African women's firm belief in their duty to pray for their husbands and families. *War Room* was a commercial success because its pleasant ending inspired and empowered women to believe in their spiritual agency. Its triumphant ending, which underscores victory over the dark forces ailing Elizabeth's marriage, also attracted criticism from those who thought the film encouraged women to confront mistreatment in marriage with prayers (see Moore 2018).

War Room is not the only cinematic representation of women's agency through prayers. *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, a 2008 documentary directed by Gini Reticker, tells the story of a group of women in Liberia who came together in an effort to end the country's devastating war through prayer. As the name suggests, the women saw the war as an evil they needed to engage spiritually through prayers. The movement was led by peace activist Leymah Gbowee (who later won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize) and facilitated by Asatu Bah Kenneth, a social worker. This documentary featured prayers as a powerful element weaponized by women of different religious backgrounds fighting for peace in the war-troubled country. *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* portrayed prayer as a source of the women's spiritual strength during the adversities caused by war. Additionally, the performance of prayer in unity offered the women a coping strategy both emotionally and psychologically to cope with the violence. As captured by the documentary, the collective prayers offered the women solidarity and resolve to ease the conflict and stop the war. Their efforts got the attention of the international community and are credited with going a long way to bring sustained peace to Liberia. Like Gbowee's later book, *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer, and Sex Changed a Nation at War* (2011), which reprises the themes of *War Room* and *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, the idea of prayer as a ready technique and tool for women to engage seemingly intractable challenges both at the domestic level and at the national one is resonant.

As such, prayer is key to understanding how many African women experience this activity as deeply intertwined with identity and lived experiences. Historically, women have borne a great burden in their families and communities due to the historical assignment that gives them domestic and caregiving tasks. Deeply rooted social norms that can be difficult to break down lead to this split (Kabeer 2005). Women experience the pain and agony of disease and poverty in their families (Amenga-Etego 2011). These women seek divine intervention as they feel overwhelmed by the challenges in their family (Parsitau 2019). While both men and women seek prayers, many followers are women from all demographic backgrounds. Sandra Pertek in her study interviewed women to understand how they coped in difficult circumstances in the context of Tunisia; their resounding answer was "God helped us", alluding to the importance of personal prayers during turmoil (Pertek 2022). Social evolutions have shaped expectations to give women the role of nurturers and men the role of breadwinners, and prayer by its nature is also the means of nurturing the private domestic sphere with norms and aspirations that will eventually be taken public. Prayer thus becomes a source of solace, strength, and hope for African women. Through prayers, they express hopes, worries, and desires, as is typically evident in what they pray about. Prayers help them confront challenges with resilience. So naturalized have women become with prayers that it becomes a gendered weapon of warfare (Agyepong and Diabah 2021).

As Adelakun (2017) pointed out in her study of Felicia Iyabo Ogunsola, a famous actor who became a minister, prayer can also be a means to religious professionalization for women, especially in church traditions where men are dominant. The patriarchy of social life does not exclude the church, where, based on biblical verses and tradition, women's voices are silenced. In many African church denominations, women are often prohibited from fully participating in spiritual practices, reinforcing the perception that their spirituality is inferior (Kanyoro 2002; Oduyeye 2005). The consequences of this are that women feel powerless and therefore find their strength in prayer, where they feel they gain a voice and power. Some women turn to prayer ministers, taking advantage of the popular idea of women as natural "prayer warriors". Within the African context, numerous prayer groups are constituted by women who seek to pray for the various challenges they face. In Nigeria and South Africa, for instance, women pray away various social injustices such as rape, xenophobia, poverty (affecting mostly women and children), and violence against women (see Durueke 2023; Adelakun 2023). In the Pentecostal charismatic movements where prayers are understood as means of spiritual welfare (see Droll 2023; Wariboko 2018), the extensive role women play in engaging with evil powers within their communities makes them known as prayer warriors. Their prayers are seen as a source of security and guidance, providing a shield against the attacks of the enemy. This can also be understood in the African sense of a warrior who has always acted as a shield and defender in many communities. They provide security from both internal and external dangers, like conflicts and invasions, as well as diffusing tensions. The warriors are often young men who are strong physically and have a strong mental tolerance for adversity. In the same way, their strong spirituality, as seen in historical and biblical figures, affirms the continuous recognition of women as effective prayer warriors in various contexts.

African cultures usually place great emphasis on spirituality and on the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds, and prayer is therefore quite popular. Prayer is a means to communicate with the divine, seek spiritual direction, and meet one's spiritual needs. In a culture where it is believed that calamities (such as infertility, failed or failing marriages, and wayward children) are attacks by evil spirits, prayer is the ultimate solution. These various beliefs are deeply rooted in the belief systems of many African societies and manifest in how calamities are linked to the actions of witches (or sorcerers), who are often consulted to harm people. People regularly seek protection against assaults and attacks by the powers of darkness, as they are referred to. African women therefore understand prayers not just as a spiritual discipline (as taught by the Catholic Church, for instance) but as a fierce and ongoing confrontation with evil powers seeking to destroy their homes and all they hold dear. The (body) language used in prayers indicates a spiritual battle that women must win. Adelakun (2022a, 2022b) has noted that, within charismatic Pentecostalism (where this study is situated), the impulse is to dominate and subsume all things under the authority of God; this explains their attitude to spiritual warfare.

Wailing Women

Daughters of Zion (DOZ) is an urban Pentecostal women's movement based in Nairobi, Kenya. Armed with the mission to empower women, the persistent call for them to

pray, weep, and mourn has become their most identifiable feature. DOZ seeks to empower and provide women with the resources and assistance they need to succeed in all facets of their lives through a variety of programs, courses, and events. Some of the events include a televised program known as *Women Without Limits*, a popular show in Kenyan society. There are also several other annual DOZ events aimed to empower and educate women to be better in every aspect of their lives. DOZ is a Jubilee Christian Church-affiliated women's ministry that was founded by Reverend Kathy Kiuna, the spouse of well-known minister Bishop Allan Kiuna. Together, they founded Jubilee Christian Church, which hosts DOZ. Kathy Kiuna is the author of several books, such as *The Transformed Woman*, *Appointment with Destiny*, and *Marriage Works, Celebrate Yourself*. The stated vision and mission of DOZ is to raise the standard among women, and the relevant inscription (Raising Standards Among Women) is boldly included at every event. In Nairobi, the "wailing women" ministry has played a significant role in establishing a sense of sisterhood and solidarity among women, and it is a source of motivation and empowerment for many. Due to its inclusive nature, DOZ has become a multigenerational, interdenominational, international women's movement. Kathy Kiuna, who is at the center of DOZ and runs the program with the support of other women pastors (referred to as the College of Pastors), has shaped narratives of women in the tradition of the biblical Hannah who chooses not to confront the mockery of her co-wife with antagonism but to bring it to the higher power through prayers. DOZ happens at the end of every month; its liturgy is fluid but follows an urban Pentecostal rhythm that features prayerful worship, testimonies, and sermons, and ends with rounds of prayers. Prayers take center stage in DOZ; prayer precedes every meeting, there is prayer in the middle of the service, and prayer concludes their services. The events end with a prolonged session of prayer and testimonies meant to encourage everyone present to deeply engage in prayer and expect positive results, especially in their marriages.

But why the choice of a metaphor like the wailing women, which evokes an image of intense emotion, and which, frequently associated with women, describes a woman crying or lamenting, expressing extreme sadness with loud howls? In the Bible, wailing women harnessed the women's ability to express their emotions in mourning and make their conveyance of their pain the grounds of moral and social reformation. The text, Jeremiah 9.17–20 (NIV) says:

This is what the Lord Almighty says, "Consider now! Call for the wailing women to come; send for the most skillful of them. Let them come quickly and wail over us till our eyes overflow with tears and water streams from our eyelids. The sound of wailing is heard from Zion: 'How ruined we are! How great is our shame! We must leave our land because our houses are in ruins'". Now, you women, hear the word of the Lord; open your ears to the words of his mouth. Teach your daughters how to wail; teach one another a lament.

The biblical depiction of wailing women as those who could move divine power based on their emotional expression made a profound impact on the religious and cultural practices of Ancient Israel and the surrounding communities. The wailing was a heartfelt and intense kind of grieving that was sometimes associated with ceremonial actions, loud cries, and tears. The community's response to death, suffering, and other tragedies was thus largely shaped by the wailing women. The cultural significance of wailing

women in Ancient Israel is demonstrated by this verse. These women were tasked with not only sharing their sorrows during crises or approaching crises but also transmitting the art of mourning to the next generation. Their work was to give the community a voice to help express its collective grief, and also to transmit the memory across generations.¹

Wailing women are integral in another sphere of Kenyan society for cathartic release during the tensions of difficult times. During funerals, for instance, the women are key to displaying sadness at the loss and they express this in the performance of songs and dances, as well as through wailing. In times of loss and sorrow, the community comes together to mourn through women's wailing. Their grieving and presence serve as an agent of unity, offering the bereaved family and the larger community emotional support. The wailing women show the pain and anguish of the community. They express the pain and despair the entire community is going through with their loud shouts and wails.² In Luo culture, for instance, wailing women had the duty to announce the death of a family member by crying, ululations, and singing dirges. The wailing women express their grief by making loud noises, chanting, and singing. Their emotional release aids in externalizing the grief and suffering that the bereaved family and the community are going through. At Luo funerals, their presence and grief act as a unifying factor. During times of loss, the community comes together via loud and expressive expressions of grief, offering the grieving family emotional support. Men in the Luo culture were not allowed to mourn, cry, or show emotions; they must remain stoic even in the face of death. Therefore, society harnessed the emotional agency of women to respect the deceased and mourn their death.³

In *Worries of the Heart: Widows, Family, and Community in Kenya*, Mutongi (2007) analyses the practice of wailing among widows from the Maragoli community. Wailing in this community is an emotional performance act that expresses the widow's pain and loss to the community, as well as to the deceased spirit of her husband. Mutongi also observes that the wailing not only serves as a personal expression of grief but also has a ritualistic role among the community, symbolizing the connection between the living and the deceased. The ritual is believed to transport the deceased's spirit to the afterlife and ensure that the spirit does not stay to cause harm to those left behind. The ritual underscores the communal nature of mourning in the Maragoli community, where the community shares the pain. The widow is expected to weep, otherwise she faces social stigma. Mutongi argues that wailing is not only a display of vulnerability but also shows widows' strength and resilience in the face of grief. Wailing provides an avenue where the widow can process her suffering while adhering to societal expectations.

In another historical analysis, women also demonstrated their role as prayer warriors in the Kenyan political arena during the Moi regime. Given their inability to argue with political authorities, women resorted to emotional engagement through prayer to request divine intervention for their children's release from prison. During Kenya's Release Political Prisoners movement, the mothers' emotional prayers for their children were a strong act of nonviolent protest. Mothers of political prisoners gathered at Freedom Corner in Uhuru Park, openly praying for their children's release, indicating a strong emotional attachment to their children (Namulundah 2014). Their voices were heard through the city, underscoring the message of agony and pain against the ruling powers.

The Release Political Prisoners campaign became a symbol of hope and defiance in the face of oppression, with the mothers at its heart, bearing their responsibilities at home as well as in the community at large (Tibbetts 1994). The mothers' prayers, led by environmentalist Wangari Maathai, attracted a lot of media attention, creating and increasing awareness of the violations of human rights committed by the Moi dictatorship and ultimately leading to the release of some political prisoners (Maathai 2006). This prayer movement challenged the oppressive government in many ways, thanks to the strength of nonviolent protest and unwavering faith in the nobility of their cause. The voices of the mothers could no longer be ignored, and the tide began to turn; consequently, the political prisoners were released.⁴

In popular culture, "wailing" recalls the famous Jamaican singing group, Bob Marley and the Wailers. Renowned not only for entertainment but also for raising a social conscience, their music had a potent political aesthetic. The Wailers were staunch advocates of social justice who used music as a means of protesting injustice and oppression in songs such as "Burning and Looting" and "Get Up, Stand Up". People who were suffering from many forms of social and political oppression, not just in Jamaica but across the world, related to the Wailers' music whether they were denouncing oppression or praising the strength of love, harmony, and community in songs like "Three Little Birds" and "One Love", which remain anthems of optimism and hope, a constant reminder of the value of unity.⁵

The Shouters Baptist Movement in the Caribbean also used the ostentatious expression of shouts as a means of self-stabilization in the context of deprecating colonial circumstances. The cultural musical customs of the Shouters Baptists, which include drumming and singing, persist as an essential component of Caribbean culture and the movement's continuity (De Peza 2007). The experience outside of Africa underscores wailing as global phenomenon.

In sum, all the expressions of wailing describe an emotional activity with political ends. From ancient to contemporary Israel, to the socio-religious culture of the Caribbean, to that of Kenya, wailing describes responses to events of tragedy, attendant trauma, and consequent efforts of survival. Through wailing, people attempt to turn a defining catastrophic event into a memory, means of sustaining the community morally and socially, generating identity and healing. The concept of wailing does not differ much in DOZ. Women play similar roles of bringing forward private grief and they collectively try to derive healing from pain. The women proudly wear the identity of wailers whose emotions are expressed through prayers. Reverend Kathy Kiuna appeals to the members of DOZ as the Wailing Women of the City. Once, after her sermon, when she invited the women to pray over their lives, she asked, "Where are the wailing women?" The women in the audience stood up enthusiastically to affirm their presence as those willing to stand in the gap for the nation, their families, and the church; this went a long way to demonstrate how much they had accepted the identity both as a social status and as a spiritual exercise they must discharge. In the service, they go into a charged mood of prayer and various emotions run high during the sessions. From the expressions of delight, grief, anguish, gratefulness, confession of sins, and intense spiritual yearning, the atmosphere is electrifying. They also pray in tongues, a spiritual engagement that requires fervency. Apart from prayers, they also engage in supplementary activities of dancing and clapping, in response to the spirit that has filled the environment with emotional energy.

The physicality of the performance of prayer is so integral to the spiritual experience that some women can be singing and running, and others can be seen falling to the ground because they have become drunk in the spirit. Some women kneel at the altar, holding various items, including photos of their children or relatives, while they pray fervently. Some pray with their hands lifted as a sign of complete surrender to God's higher power. As the prayers go on there are at least three ministers on the podium praying along while the microphone transmits their voices at full blast. Other women in attendance follow the lead of these ministers as they pray with intense energy and voices blaring through the speakers. Usually, it can be hard to hear the women's words clearly because the three use microphones and they are praying in tongues (glossolalia). The prayers go on for several minutes until one group is asked to come forward for special prayers. For instance, women without children within DOZ receive special prayers. Reverend Kathy Kiuna appeals to women who do not have children to come and lie down at the altar. After the announcement, a significant number of women come running to the altar and lie prostrate at the altar. The whole congregation prays for them as Kiuna lays her hands on them. While lying on the ground, the women can be felt praying and crying while the other congregation members also join to pray for them. This goes on for several moments while the musical instruments continue to charge the church with music that evokes a prayerful emotion.

Becoming Hannah: Women and Fruitfulness

Kenyan women have selectively picked the character of Hannah to narrate themselves in prayer, to create an image of an ideal triumphant woman they want their lives to reflect. Hannah is a remarkable figure who symbolizes the zeal and power of a praying woman. According to 1 Samuel, where her story is told, Hannah was one of Elkanah's two wives. Her co-wife, Peninnah, had children and she taunted Hannah. Hannah took her pain to the only one who could alleviate it, the Lord her God. During one of the family's annual trips to the tabernacle, Hannah left the dinner table and went straight to God with her plea in prayer. The narrative indicated that Hannah's emotions were so intense that her prayers echoed silently throughout the sacred space until Eli, the priest, thought her emotional fervency was because she was drunk. Hannah's prayers went beyond mere words. They were a performance of her deepest pain and longing. Hannah understood prayer as a refuge and a voice that could not be silenced. It served as a channel to pour out her heart to her God, the only one who could hear and help her in her greatest time of need.

While Hannah's triumph came from her unwavering faith and her agency to solicit a higher power, she had to perform intense emotion to trigger divine agency to favor her. The anguish of not having a child was soulfully and truthfully conveyed in her excessiveness that made the priest assume she must have been drunk. For a priest who leads prayer to not have recognized her act as prayer and instead to mistake it for drunkenness shows a difference in the ways they know to approach God. Her emotional act that led to triumph is appropriated by DOZ's wailing women, especially during times of intense turmoil and oppression associated with being barren in Kenyan society. Hannah's fervent prayers at the sanctuary of Shiloh, where she poured out her heart and soul, become a script they perform to get the miraculous result that she received. The performance of prayer that Hannah exemplifies is variously interpreted by women to match the

context of their lives. While not everyone in DOZ's wailing women group who identifies with Hannah is childless, suffering and deep emotional prayer are a formula for advancing from fruitlessness to fruitfulness while enduring taunts, ridicule that activates one's agential impulse to pray for eventual triumph.

The triumph aspect is just as crucial to their interpretation and adaption of the biblical imagery of Hannah to their lives. Hannah's story had long passages of her celebration of her triumph, and DOZ's wailing women follow their wailing and intense emotional travail with celebration and testimonies. Jubilation, a core component of the emotional performance, seals the image of Hannah they are enacting. Testimony presents the shift from sadness, sorrow, fear, and anxiety to moments of joy and celebration.⁶ Faimau (2017), in an analysis of religious testimonial narratives and social construction of identity in the Botswana context, argues that testimony links the understanding of one's faith and the configuration of divine intervention, which becomes a way of communicating a religious experience. The women in DOZ are given the chance to construct their identity within the community by shaping their narration of how they have encountered God. During DOZ meetings, the testimonies are thus taken seriously because of how they represent an advancement in one's personal history. For instance, a woman shared this testimony:

I still remember the day when my faith in the power of prayer was reaffirmed most wonderfully. I do not belong to this church, but I have been attending DOZ since 2009 and since then I have seen major changes in my life through my mum Reverend Kathy Kiuna. I was in a hopeless situation after years of battling infertility and enduring several medical treatments. I expressed to God my greatest wish to have a child in the DOZ fellowship. I remember Reverend Kathy Kiuna asking for childless women to come forward, which I did. I held onto her words and faith in God as weeks grew into months. Then, one day, an unexpected pregnancy test result showed up: I was carrying a child. I have no words to express my utter delight and thankfulness. I thank my mum Reverend Kathy Kiuna for her prayers and prophesy on my life.

Since the imagery of Hannah is also a formula that the drama of individual lives follows, the plot triggers of mockery and taunting must always be part of the narrative. As one of the DOZ testifiers put it during a meeting, "My life has become unbearable due to lack of children since my marriage of seven years ... but since I joined the DOZ I now have three children. I thank mum Reverend Kathy Kiuna for prayers that changed my life". For others, the testimony also becomes a time to share their upward mobility and even assert their feminist credentials to the assembly of other women. As another woman's testimony stated: "Since I started coming to DOZ my life has changed. I have experienced promotion after promotion in my workplace. Even as a single woman I have been able to acquire property here in Nairobi. So, for the single women in this church, as you wait for the man, you can become something in the society".

These testimonies are met by rejoicing and collective celebration for each woman, whether her success is birthing a child or attaining a career goal. The sense of sisterhood is usually palpable, and the atmosphere in the church becomes electric especially after a woman shares her testimony of having received a miracle child. Despite the repetitiveness of this formula, the uses of emotions to animate oneself and one's agency, the divine power that can grant petitions, and even the fellowship of women in DOZ who celebrate together never grow stale. The continuous cycle of "becoming Hannah" gets enlivened by the implicit understanding that a miracle might not be new, but it is life changing for the

person involved and thus deserves to be celebrated. Some of the wailing women start jumping as the congregation begins to shout, and the instrumentalists too begin to play their instruments to make the joyous moment even more frenzied. Usually, the response of the congregation after hearing the testimony is a moment of joyous celebration of the power of God at work. The congregation sometimes might break into a moment of prayer to thank God collectively for the miracle performed. In addition, the testimonies draw attention to the contribution of Reverend Kathy Kiunas in their life because of her unwavering faith.

Conclusion

This article has looked into the role of prayer warriors in Kenya, particularly women, and how the performance of prayer is intertwined with intense emotions. To be a prayer warrior requires one to possess the ability to fully express emotions in the performance of prayer. Due to the perceived inability of men to express their emotions as a result of cultural socialization, emotion is largely a female domain. It therefore follows that women become the prayer warriors even though they have been portrayed as the weaker vessels within the church context. From the discussion in this article, it is evident that cultural, religious, and now Pentecostal contexts continue to harness the emotional sensitivities of women to further their agendas. The imagery of wailing women, which is derived from the Bible, has other resonances in social culture, as portrayed by Luo women and the Maragoli widows in the performance of bereavement. Women are used to expressing intense pain by wailing, crying, and screaming on behalf of the whole community.

In what appears to be gendering pain, women act as agents of emotional catharsis in all spheres of social life. While biblical images have been used to disparage women such as Jezebel, the Kenyan women picked the character of Hannah to locate themselves in her prayer and to create an image of an ideal triumphant woman they want their lives to reflect. While Hannah's story starts in a pitiful situation, as a woman scorned and laughed at, it does not end there (see Kuloba 2011). The imagery of Hannah seems to amplify the light at the end of the tunnel which elevates the women's resilience in intense prayer. Another angle of emotional performance is jubilation. This is evidenced when the prayers have been answered; testimonies are met with jubilation and the atmosphere turns electric. Testimonies, as seen in DOZ, connect the understanding of women's faith and the configuration of divine intervention, and become a way of communicating a spiritual experience. Besides the emotion of pain illustrated by wailing, women are also the ones who embody jubilation. Men are not only restrained by society from crying but also from showing immense sensations of joy. The jubilation of women steers the whole community in celebrating moments of joy while the wailing women lead the community in periods of mourning.

Notes

1. The books of Matthew and Luke indicate that wailing women are also present in the New Testament. The wailing women in Matthew 9:18–26 provide witness to the grief surrounding Jairus's daughter's passing. Their cries highlight how serious the issue is since a child has

lost her life. Also, women accompanied Jesus as he bore his cross to Golgotha in Luke 23.27–31. Their grief reflects the deep grief and emotional impact of the story of the crucifixion, a pivotal moment in Christian theology. The Bible's depiction of wailing women provides insight into ancient cultural customs and the importance of community grief. The women found a voice for their collective sadness and a way to process grief and acknowledge the burden of suffering via their cries of lamentation. These women were essential in helping the community cope with loss and disaster by acting as a link between individual and community grief and by providing a voice for the suffering of all.

2. The arrogation of wailing to women is partly due to gender roles and norms within these settings where women are socialized to be loving and empathetic, whereas men are often expected to be tough, stoic, and emotionless. Men are restrained from openly expressing their emotions, including tears, because of these ingrained gender stereotypes. Boys are frequently socialized to hide their emotions to conform to masculinity from an early age. They are instructed not to cry or appear weak by showing vulnerability; during initiation rites, boys are further inducted into masculinity and must prove their manhood. As such, the ability to express intense emotions is a domain of women, and this blends into the biblical notion.
3. Okelloh Ogera, a fellow researcher and colleague, was interviewed as a member of the Luo community to shed light on wailing women within the Luo community.
4. In the current political landscape and at the intersection of politics and praying women, we turn our attention to the current First Lady of Kenya, Rachel Ruto. Ruto has received significant attention for her dedication to prayer and fasting for the country. She is famous for her commitment to her Christian faith and consistency in church attendance. She usually organizes and performs in prayer circles and fasting events, hoping for divine blessings, peace, and prosperity for the nation. "Healing the Nation", her latest prayer session, featured renowned American televangelist Benny Hinn as the primary preacher. In her article, Damaris Parsitau builds a case for gendered soft power in influencing politics in the country, and she looks at Reverend Teresia Wairimu as encompassing a powerful voice in the country (Parsitau 2019; Parsitau and Adelakun 2024). Rachel Ruto had a partnership with Reverend Teresia Wairimu to host a big national crusade that would serve as a stage for a political discourse with a strong theme of healing. A multitude of Kenyans, along with government officials, including the president and vice president, gathered to participate in the healing crusade.
5. The Wailers frequently talked about African identity and African themes. Strong Pan-African patriotism and a sense of African history were evident in their music. They referred to Africa as the motherland of the African diaspora and as a symbol of a common identity. The Wailers were also strong proponents of equality and human rights. They demanded equality and justice for all people, sang about the rights of the underprivileged and disenfranchised, and emphasized their difficulties. The Wailers started addressing topics of sustainability and environmental conservation in some of their later songs. This illustrates a greater awareness of the need to preserve the environment and the health of the planet.
6. In the film *War Room*, too, Elizabeth triumphed after spending time in the "war room". The victory is evidenced by a change of emotional demeanor – the weeping Elizabeth transitions to a jubilant woman. As the film comes to an end, she appears happy, getting along with her husband, and says, "Surely there is a God in Heaven".

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