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ETHICAL ISSUES IN WARFARE PRAYERS IN SELECTED AFRICAN PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES IN OYO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Warfare prayer, popularly described within Nigerian Pentecostal-Charismatic circles as "prayer warfare" or "aggressive prayer," has become a defining liturgical feature of many African Pentecostal churches, including those found across Oyo State, Nigeria. Rooted in a cosmology that reads misfortune, poverty, sickness and failure as the direct handiwork of demonic agents, ancestral curses or malevolent human agents operating through witchcraft, warfare prayer mobilises believers into a combative posture in which prayer functions less as supplication and more as spiritual combat. While this practice offers adherents a language of hope, agency and resilience in the face of real socio-economic hardship, it also raises far-reaching ethical questions. This paper interrogates the ethical dimensions of warfare prayer as practised in selected Pentecostal churches in Oyo State, focusing on the rhetoric of imprecation and cursing, the demonisation of religious and social "others," the psychological and financial burdens placed on adherents, the gendered targeting of women as witches, and the tension between warfare spirituality and orthodox Christian ethics of love, mercy and forgiveness. Using a qualitative, literature-based, phenomenological approach informed by virtue ethics and Christian moral theology, the paper argues that while warfare prayer is not inherently unethical, its uncritical practice in certain congregations generates real moral harms that call for pastoral, theological, and social re-evaluation. The paper concludes with recommendations for more ethically responsible spiritual warfare within African Pentecostalism.

Keywords: Warfare Prayer, Pentecostalism, Ethics, Spiritual Warfare, Oyo State

1. Introduction

Over the last four decades, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity has grown phenomenally across sub-Saharan Africa, transforming Nigeria's religious landscape in particular.

Ogbu Kalu describes this expansion as part of a broader global re-enchantment of Christianity, in which African converts have domesticated Pentecostal theology within indigenous cosmological frameworks that take the reality of spirits, ancestors and witchcraft seriously.¹

Oyo State, with its dense concentration of mission-founded, African-Independent and newer Pentecostal-Charismatic churches, offers a particularly instructive site for examining how this re-enchanting Christianity expresses itself liturgically. Among the most visible expressions of this re-enchantment is the phenomenon of "warfare prayer", which is an intense, often loud and physically demonstrative mode of prayer in which believers address, rebuke, bind and cast out spiritual forces held responsible for sickness, poverty, barrenness, marital breakdown, business failure and other personal or communal misfortunes.

The theological roots of warfare prayer are frequently traced to the Pauline injunction that believers do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against principalities, powers and spiritual wickedness in



high places. This text has become foundational to what C. Peter Wagner and other proponents of the "Third Wave" charismatic movement popularised globally as "strategic-level spiritual warfare."² Nigerian Pentecostal churches, including numerous congregations across Ibadan, Ogbomoso, Oyo, Iseyin and other towns in Oyo State, have appropriated and localised this theology, producing weekly "prayer warfare" services, all-night vigils, deliverance sessions and "anointing services" structured around combative, imprecatory prayer.

This paper is animated by the observation that, while warfare prayer supplies believers with a compelling vocabulary of agency and hope, it simultaneously generates ethical tensions that have received insufficient scholarly attention within the Nigerian context. These tensions include the use of violent and imprecatory language in worship, the demonisation of religious and social others (including adherents of African traditional religion, Islam, and even fellow Christians deemed spiritually compromised), the psychological toll of living in a perpetually besieged spiritual universe, the financial exploitation that sometimes accompanies deliverance ministry, and the disproportionate targeting of women, children and the elderly as agents of witchcraft. The paper therefore identifies, describes, and ethically evaluates these issues as they manifest in selected Pentecostal churches in Oyo State, and proposes a framework for more ethically responsible spiritual warfare.

The paper is organised as follows. Section two clarifies the key concepts of warfare prayer, ethics and African Pentecostalism. Section three outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. Section four situates warfare prayer within the historical development of Pentecostalism in Nigeria and Oyo State. Section five describes the methodology. Section six presents the manifestations of warfare prayer observed in selected churches. Section seven constitutes the paper's analytical core, examining specific ethical issues. Section eight offers a theological-ethical evaluation, while section nine discusses the findings, and section ten proposes recommendations before the paper concludes.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Warfare Prayer

Warfare prayer, sometimes rendered as "prayer warfare" in Nigerian Pentecostal parlance, refers to a mode of prayer in which the believer assumes an explicitly militant posture toward perceived spiritual antagonists.³ Unlike contemplative or supplicatory prayer, which addresses God in a posture of dependence and petition, warfare prayer is characterised by direct address to spiritual entities, which includes Satan, demons, "territorial spirits," ancestral curses and, in some cases, the spirits believed to animate human witches and wizards, using the

language of binding, rebuking, casting out, destroying and silencing.

Common liturgical markers of warfare prayer include repeated declarations such as "fire", "die", "be roasted" and "catch fire in the name of Jesus", the deployment of military and combat metaphors (soldiers, weapons, battle, victory, enemy camp), the use of anointing oil, handkerchiefs and other "points of contact" believed to carry spiritual potency. Collective, often simultaneous, loud vocalisation intended to overwhelm opposing spiritual forces.

2.2 Ethics

Ethics, understood broadly as the systematic study of moral principles governing right and wrong conduct, provides the normative lens through which this paper examines warfare prayer. Three broad ethical traditions inform the analysis: deontological ethics, which evaluates actions against fixed duties and rules; consequentialist ethics, which evaluates actions by their outcomes; and virtue ethics, which evaluates actions by their contribution to, or erosion of, good character. Christian ethics, as a theologically grounded sub-discipline, further situates moral evaluation within the framework of scripture, the character of God, and the exemplary life of Christ, particularly the ethic of love articulated in the Gospels.

2.3 African Pentecostalism

African Pentecostalism refers to a broad family of Spirit-centred Christian movements that emphasise conversion, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, healing, prophecy, and deliverance, while remaining deeply attentive to the African cosmological reality of spirits, ancestors, and witchcraft.⁴ It encompasses Aladura and other African-Independent churches, classical Pentecostal denominations such as the Christ Apostolic Church and the Apostolic Church, and the newer neo-Pentecostal or Charismatic churches, such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, Deeper Life Bible Church, Living Faith Church (Winners' Chapel) and Christ Embassy, all of which maintain a significant presence across Oyo State.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts a hybrid theoretical framework combining Aristotelian virtue ethics with Christian moral theology. Virtue ethics evaluates warfare prayer not merely by its immediate stated intention (spiritual protection or breakthrough) but by its cumulative effect on the practitioner's moral character, whether it cultivates virtues such as love, patience, humility, and forgiveness, or vices such as suspicion, hatred, pride, and cruelty.⁵

This is complemented by a Kantian emphasis on respect for persons as ends in themselves rather than merely as means, which

²C. Peter Wagner, *Warfare Prayer* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1992), 21-27.

³J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 178-181.

⁴Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 233-236.

⁵Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, Book II, on virtue as a disposition of character formed through habituation.

becomes analytically useful when warfare prayer names, targets or stigmatises specific individuals as demonic agents.⁶ Christian moral theology, particularly the love ethic articulated in the Sermon on the Mount, supplies the theological standard against which the rhetoric and practice of warfare prayer within a professedly Christian community is measured. Together, these frameworks allow the paper to move beyond a simple description of warfare prayer toward a normative assessment of its moral consequences for practitioners, targeted others, and the wider society.

4. Historical Background: Pentecostalism and Spiritual Warfare in Nigeria and Oyo State

The roots of Nigerian Pentecostalism can be traced to the Aladura revivals of the 1920s and 1930s, which emerged partly as indigenous responses to the 1918 influenza pandemic and partly as a reaction against the perceived spiritual inadequacy of mission Christianity in confronting African existential anxieties around sickness, infertility and misfortune.⁷

Oyo State, as a historic centre of Yoruba Christianity and traditional religion alike, was central to this development; towns such as Ibadan, Ogbomosho and Oyo hosted early Aladura congregations, classical Pentecostal missions, and, from the 1970s onward, the university-based charismatic renewal movements that swept through institutions such as the University of Ibadan. The charismatic renewal of the 1970s and 1980s, associated with fellowships that would later mature into independent ministries, intensified the emphasis on the Holy Spirit's power over demonic forces, a theology further amplified from the late 1980s by the importation of American "spiritual warfare" teaching through literature, crusades and, later, satellite television and social media.

The Redeemed Christian Church of God's expansion under Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye and the founding of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries by Dr Daniel Olukoya in 1989 were particularly significant in popularising deliverance and warfare prayer as central features of Nigerian Pentecostal practice, with both ministries and their numerous branches becoming firmly established across Oyo State by the 1990s and 2000s.⁸

By the early 2000s, warfare prayer had become normalised well beyond ministries explicitly dedicated to deliverance, appearing in the liturgical calendar of mainstream Pentecostal denominations as "prayer warfare night," "midnight cry" and "fire service," reflecting what Ruth Marshall terms the pervasive "political spirituality" of

Nigerian Pentecostalism, in which spiritual and material realities are understood as continuous and mutually determining.⁹

5. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, library-based and phenomenological methodology. Data were drawn from published scholarly literature on Nigerian and African Pentecostalism, publicly available sermons, church programme materials, and observable liturgical patterns documented in existing studies of Pentecostal churches operating within Oyo State, including branches of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, Deeper Life Bible Church, Christ Apostolic Church and Living Faith Church. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to describe warfare prayer as adherents experience and practise it before proceeding to ethical evaluation, avoiding premature moral judgment that ignores the lived meaning of the practice for believers. The paper treats selected churches as illustrative rather than exhaustive or individually indicted; it focuses on recurring patterns rather than the conduct of any single congregation or leader.

6. Manifestations of Warfare Prayer in Selected Oyo State Pentecostal Churches

Across the selected churches, warfare prayer takes broadly similar forms, despite denominational variation in intensity and frequency. Weekly or monthly "prayer warfare" or "deliverance" services are dedicated specifically to combative prayer, often held at night or in the early hours of the morning on the understanding that spiritual forces are believed to be more active during those hours. Congregants are led through structured cycles of imprecatory declarations directed at "the enemy," "household wickedness," "marine spirits," "ancestral covenants," and "witchcraft powers," often accompanied by physical gestures such as clenched fists, stamping, and the symbolic "casting out" of afflicting spirits.

Personal testimonies shared during services frequently attribute specific misfortunes, such as a failed business, a stalled marriage, or a chronic illness, to identifiable spiritual causes, which are then named and confronted in subsequent warfare prayer sessions. Deliverance sessions, often conducted individually or in small groups after the main service, involve more intensive and personalised warfare prayer, sometimes extending for hours and involving the interrogation of the afflicted person about family history, dreams, and relationships to identify the presumed spiritual root of their troubles. Some churches produce recorded prayer guides, handbooks, and "prayer bullets" in the form of short, memorisable imprecatory declarations meant for private use by members between services, extending warfare prayer practice beyond the church walls into homes and daily devotional life.

⁶Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, on the categorical imperative and respect for persons as ends in themselves.

⁷Matthews A. Ojo, *The End-Time Army: Charismatic Movements in Modern Nigeria* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2006), 111-115.

⁸Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 177-183.

⁹Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 202-209.

7. Ethical Issues Arising from Warfare Prayer Practices

7.1 Imprecatory and Violent Rhetoric

Perhaps the most immediately striking ethical concern is the sheer violence of the rhetoric employed in warfare prayer. Declarations calling for enemies to be "roasted," "consumed by fire," "paralysed", or "destroyed" raise the question of whether prayer that rehearses violent imagery, even against unseen spiritual entities, cultivates habits of aggression, retaliation and intolerance that spill over into believers' everyday social relationships. Because warfare prayer frequently blurs the line between impersonal spiritual forces and the human beings believed to host or wield them within a neighbour, an in-law, a business rival, a former spouse, and the ethical risk is not merely rhetorical excess but the real possibility that violent language directed nominally at "the enemy" becomes, in practice, violent sentiment directed at actual persons.

7.2 Demonisation of Religious and Social Others

A second ethical issue concerns the demonisation of religious and cultural others. Birgit Meyer's study of deliverance theology among the Ewe of Ghana demonstrates a broader West African pattern in which traditional religious practices, ancestral veneration and indigenous healing are systematically reclassified as demonic rather than merely different.¹⁰ This pattern recurs in Oyo State, a region with a rich Yoruba traditional religious heritage, where warfare prayer rhetoric routinely characterises Ifa divination, orisa worship, traditional festivals and even ordinary ancestral customs as sources of curses to be "broken" through prayer.

Rosalind Hackett's analysis of demonisation discourse in Africa cautions that such rhetoric, while functioning internally as a resource for believers' sense of spiritual security, can externally delegitimise the beliefs and dignity of religious others, straining interfaith and intra-communal relations in religiously plural settings such as Oyo State, where Christians, Muslims and traditionalists frequently share family lineages, streets and marketplaces.¹¹

Similar dynamics attend Christian-Muslim relations in parts of Yorubaland, where warfare prayer targeting "the spirit of Islam" or "strange altars" risks converting theological difference into spiritual enmity, with implications for social cohesion that Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission has flagged as a broader concern for religious freedom and communal peace.¹²

7.3 Psychological and Emotional Burdens on Adherents

A third ethical concern is the psychological and emotional cost warfare prayer imposes on adherents. A worldview in which nearly every setback in the form of illness, poverty, delayed marriage, or academic failure is attributed to demonic attack or ancestral curse can produce chronic anxiety, hypervigilance and a diminished sense of personal or systemic responsibility for circumstances that may have straightforward medical, economic or social explanations. Believers who experience repeated "breakthroughs" that fail to materialise despite intense warfare prayer may internalise feelings of spiritual inadequacy or hidden sin, generating guilt and shame rather than the comfort and hope that prayer is meant to provide. The relentless framing of daily life as spiritual combat can also corrode trust within families and communities, as relatives, neighbours and even spouses become potential suspects in the search for the spiritual source of misfortune.

7.4 Financial Exploitation and Commercialisation

A fourth issue concerns the financial dimensions of warfare prayer and deliverance ministry. Asonzeh Ukah's study of the Redeemed Christian Church of God documents how the demand for spiritual solutions to material problems has, in some contexts, been accompanied by the commercialisation of prayer, deliverance and "prophetic" services, including special offerings, "seed sowing" tied to specific warfare prayer programmes, and paid consultations for personalised deliverance.¹³ While many churches in Oyo State conduct warfare prayer without direct financial demands, the broader pattern documented in the literature raises ethical concerns about exploiting vulnerable, anxious believers who may be persuaded that financial sacrifice is a precondition for spiritual victory.

7.5 Gendered Dimensions: Witchcraft Accusation and the Vulnerability of Women

A fifth and particularly serious ethical issue concerns the gendered targeting of women, and occasionally children and the elderly, as alleged witches during warfare prayer and deliverance sessions.¹⁴ Selaelo Kgatla's research on church-driven witchcraft accusations in Southern Africa documents a pattern echoed in Nigerian Pentecostal deliverance practice, wherein older women, widows and stepmothers are disproportionately identified during "deliverance" as sources of household affliction, exposing them to stigmatisation, family estrangement and, in extreme cases, physical violence within the wider community even where the church itself does not sanction violence.¹⁵

¹⁰Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 145-150.

¹¹Rosalind I. J. Hackett, "Discourses of Demonization in Africa and Beyond," *Diogenes* 50, no. 3 (2003): 61-75.

¹²Nigerian National Human Rights Commission, *Annual Report on Freedom of Religion and Belief* (Abuja: NHRC, 2019), 12-16.

¹³Asonzeh Ukah, *A New Paradigm of Pentecostal Power: A Study of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2008), 199-205.

¹⁴Opoku Onyinah, "Deliverance as a Way of Confronting Witchcraft in Modern Africa: Ghana as a Case History," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002): 107-134.

¹⁵Selaelo T. Kgatla, "Church-Driven Witchcraft Accusations in South Africa," *Missionalia* 46, no. 2 (2018): 217-231.

Asamoah-Gyadu further notes that the intensely patriarchal framing of much deliverance theology can subordinate women's spiritual agency even as it purports to liberate them from demonic bondage, raising further questions about gender justice within warfare prayer culture.¹⁶

7.6 Health-Related Neglect

A sixth ethical concern arises where warfare prayer is presented as a substitute for, rather than a complement to, medical treatment. Naomi Haynes's ethnography of Pentecostal life on the Zambian Copperbelt illustrates a broader African Pentecostal tendency to interpret illness primarily through a spiritual lens, occasionally at the expense of timely medical intervention.¹⁷ Where warfare prayer is combined with counsel discouraging hospital attendance, particularly for conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, mental illness or obstetric complications, the ethical stakes move beyond psychological or social harm to matters of physical safety and, in the most severe cases, preventable loss of life.

7.7 Strain on Family and Communal Relationships

Finally, attributing personal or family misfortune to specific relatives as "household enemies" or "generational curse bearers" can create lasting rifts within extended families, a social unit central to Yoruba culture. Warfare prayer sessions that encourage believers to "break covenant" with unbelieving relatives, or to treat particular family members with suspicion pending spiritual "confirmation" of their innocence, risk replacing communal solidarity with a climate of mutual distrust, even when the church's official teaching does not explicitly intend it.

8. Theological and Ethical Evaluation

Evaluated against the Christian ethic of love articulated in Christ's injunction to love one's enemies and pray for those who persecute,¹⁸ much of the imprecatory and demonising rhetoric documented above sits in evident tension with the moral centre of the New Testament, even where it draws selectively on Pauline spiritual-warfare language for scriptural warrant.

This is not to suggest that the concept of spiritual warfare is itself without biblical or theological grounding, nor that believers ought to be denied a vocabulary for confronting genuine experiences of affliction, injustice and evil. Rather, the ethical problem identified in this paper lies specifically in the frequent conflation of impersonal spiritual evil with particular, nameable human beings, a conflation that virtue ethics would regard as corrosive of the practitioner's character, since it habituates suspicion and hostility rather than charity, and that Kantian ethics would regard as a violation of the dignity owed to persons, since it reduces the accused to a mere instrument of cosmic conflict rather than treating

them as an end in themselves. A genuinely Christian ethic of spiritual warfare, this paper argues, would confine combative language to unseen spiritual realities while extending only compassion, patience and due process, including recourse to pastoral counselling rather than public accusation to the human beings implicated in believers' narratives of affliction.

9. Discussion of Findings

The foregoing analysis suggests that warfare prayer, as practised across selected Pentecostal churches in Oyo State, occupies an ambivalent moral position. On the one hand, it undeniably meets real pastoral needs, providing believers navigating genuine hardship of economic precarity, illness, and family breakdown with a framework of hope, agency and communal support that more sedate liturgical forms may fail to supply. This function should not be dismissed, particularly given the socio-economic pressures affecting many congregants across Oyo State's urban and semi-urban communities.

On the other hand, the practice as commonly conducted carries identifiable ethical costs: the rhetorical rehearsal of violence, the demonisation of religious and cultural others in a plural society, psychological strain on adherents, financial exploitation in some ministries, disproportionate targeting of women as witches, occasional discouragement of medical care, and erosion of family trust. These findings resonate with Nimi Wariboko's broader observation that Nigerian Pentecostalism's engagement with power in spiritual, economic, and social spheres requires continual ethical scrutiny, given the movement's considerable social influence and the sincerity with which adherents hold its claims.¹⁹

Given that Pew Research Centre survey data indicate the overwhelming majority of Nigerian Pentecostals affirm belief in the reality of demonic affliction, deliverance and the efficacy of prayer against evil spirits, warfare prayer is unlikely to disappear from Nigerian Pentecostal practice; the more realistic and constructive scholarly and pastoral task is therefore to identify how the practice can be reformed to minimise its ethical harms while preserving its pastoral value.²⁰

10. Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, the paper proposes the following recommendations for churches, church leaders, denominational bodies and scholars:

Firstly, Pastoral and theological re-orientation: Church leaders should be encouraged, through denominational training and continuing pastoral education, to distinguish clearly between confronting impersonal spiritual evil and naming or targeting specific human beings during warfare prayer and deliverance sessions.

¹⁹Nimi Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2014), 64-70.

²⁰Pew Research Center, *Spirit and Power: A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals* (Washington, DC: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2006), 1-4.

¹⁶J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Fireballs in Our Midst': West Africa's Burgeoning Charismatic Churches and the Pastoral Role of Women," *Mission Studies* 15, no. 1 (1998): 15-31.

¹⁷Naomi Haynes, *Moving by the Spirit: Pentecostal Social Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 88-94.

¹⁸The Holy Bible, New International Version, Matthew 5:44.



Secondly, Safeguarding vulnerable persons: Churches should adopt clear safeguarding protocols protecting women, children, the elderly and other vulnerable members from public witchcraft accusations, ensuring that any pastoral concern is addressed through private, confidential and dignity-preserving counselling rather than public confrontation.

Thirdly, Integration with medical care: Deliverance and warfare prayer ministries should explicitly encourage, rather than discourage, appropriate medical consultation for physical and mental health conditions, positioning prayer as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, professional healthcare.

In addition, Financial transparency: Churches should maintain transparent, voluntary, and non-coercive giving practices, avoiding linking financial contribution to the promise of spiritual breakthrough or deliverance.

Furthermore, Interfaith sensitivity: Warfare prayer rhetoric should be reviewed for language that demonises other faith traditions, to preserve social cohesion within Oyo State's religiously plural communities.

Lastly, Further research: Denominational bodies and academic institutions in Oyo State should support empirical, field-based research directly engaging congregants and church leaders, to complement the literature-based analysis offered in this paper with primary ethnographic and survey data.

11. Conclusion

Warfare prayer occupies a central and, for many adherents, deeply meaningful place within the liturgical life of Pentecostal churches across Oyo State, Nigeria. This paper has argued that while the practice is not inherently unethical and indeed meets genuine pastoral needs within a context of significant socio-economic hardship, its common expressions raise substantive ethical concerns regarding violent rhetoric, the demonisation of religious others, psychological strain, financial exploitation, gendered witchcraft accusation and, at times, the discouragement of medical care. Responsible spiritual warfare in African Pentecostalism must hold together the movement's authentic pastoral and spiritual concerns with a rigorous ethical commitment to human dignity, love of neighbour, and the wellbeing of the vulnerable. Achieving this balance will require sustained theological reflection, pastoral training and further scholarly engagement, to which this paper hopes to have made a modest contribution.

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