

## Article

# Uncovering Covert Syncretic Holy Water among ANPCs in South Africa

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**Abstract:** In most societies where Christianity is dominant, it has manifested itself in different ways, reflecting its admixture with indigenous religious practices, an admixture commonly seen in most African contexts. This is evidenced by overt syncretic practices and rarely covert syncretic practices that conceal the blending of beliefs, including belief in the mystical powers of water. In part, this explains why African Christian believers, particularly African Pentecostal believers in most African countries, often uncritically believe claims about holy water. To that end, this article examines the literature to uncover the existence of covert syncretic holy water in African Neo-Pentecostal Churches (ANPC), particularly in South Africa, where ANPC pastors make arbitrary claims about the power of holy water. Contrary to the apparent syncretism, claims about holy water as witnessed among ANPCs in South Africa, covertly combine elements of two belief systems (ancient African traditions and contemporary African Christianity), resulting in covert syncretic holy water. As little or no literature understands the covert syncretic holy water, the work of this paper warrants future research to further examine the covert syncretic holy water, particularly in relation to ANPC holy water claims.

**Keywords:** pentecostalism; Neo-Pentecostal Churches; African traditional beliefs; Christian beliefs; covert syncretic holy water



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## 1. Introduction

Syncretism constitutes an important, but controversial, research topic throughout the religious space and especially in theology, as it manifests itself in the realm of the Christian religion in relation to other indigenous religions. Consequently, or as a result, there is a very extensive literature on the subject of syncretism, especially in host communities where Christianity is dominant. The importance of syncretism in the religious space is clearly shown by scholars such as Ringgren (1969, pp. 1–14), Baird (2004, pp. 48–58), Pandian (2006, pp. 229–33), Leopold and Jensen (2016), and many others, who have shown great interest in the study of its nature. Similarly, in terms of the Christian faith, several scholars such as Gort (1989), Schreiter (1993, pp. 50–53), Zehner (2005, pp. 585–617), and Chung (2001) emphasized its manifestation in different geographic areas, while Berner (2001), Stewart (1999, 2016), Ezenweke and Kanu (2012, pp. 71–84), and Nel (2018) underlined its manifestation in Southern Africa. Umoh (2013, pp. 32–40), Mofokeng (2021, pp. 75–98), and Masuku (2021, p. 3) underscored it in terms of African Initiated Churches (AICs), while, correspondingly, Anderson (2001, pp. 98–119) and Kgatle (2023, pp. 1–9) described its manifestations in the African Neo-Pentecostal Churches (ANPCs) area in the South Africa.

Although the scholars listed above have done exceptional work in describing syncretism in its various manifestations, there is still an opportunity to explore relatively unexplored territory related to covert syncretic holy water. In contrast with what one might term ‘overt syncretism’ or overt syncretic practices, which are often obvious and take place in full view, covert syncretism or syncretic practices are either intentionally or unintentionally obscured. Put simply, covert syncretic practices, unlike overt syncretic practices, are neither overtly practiced nor imperceptible to the eye and thus often fall

through the cracks of scholarship. To this end, this article attempts to unearth the covert syncretic holy water in African New Pentecostal Churches (ANPC), particularly in South Africa, where ANPC pastors have been known to make arbitrary claims about holy water. In this paper, syncretism refers broadly to the integration between indigenous religious practices with the teachings and practices of Christianity. As such, it is used here to help describe how the African religious approach to the importance of water finds a syncretic expression in the use or understanding of holy water by NPC leaders in South Africa. In other words, this paper will attempt to show how traditional African belief in the power of water covertly presents itself or is integrated into the holy water claims by ANPC pastors in several African countries, but particularly in South Africa.

This paper consists of approximately six subtopics, each geared towards exploring covert syncretistic holy water as often witnessed within or on the basis of ANPC claims in South Africa. First, the broad definition of syncretism is provided, or appropriately presented, to set the stage for the discussion of covert syncretism. Second, the spiritual significance of water in general and sacred water in the context of African religions is presented. Third, the symbolic spiritual significance of water is similarly considered in the context of, or emphasized in, the Christian religion. Fourth, the concept of living water is considered in relation to both traditional African religions and Christian biblical accounts. Fifth, and, accordingly, the account of Jesus Christ turning water into wine is considered in more detail, as it arguably identifies the use of water as the first and dominant feature in the miracle narrative. Sixth and, finally, the idea of holy water is presented as it relates to various religious traditions including African Initiated Churches (AICs) and African Neo-Pentecostal Churches (ANPC), among others, culminating in the conceptualization of covert syncretic holy water.

## 2. Syncretism

Although the definition of syncretism can be a well-known phenomenon that is monotonously repeated, it is important that its basic understanding is expressed here in a manner consistent with the direct scope of this paper. Broadly speaking, syncretism describes the reflective or covert process by which particular cultural and religious practices are constituted at a particular point in their existence. According to [Baerman \(2007\)](#), syncretism occurs whenever multiple practices are collapsed into a single pattern, resulting in a unique practice ([Baerman 2007](#), p. 539). According to [Ezenweke and Kanu \(2012\)](#) the concept of syncretism can broadly be traced back to the ancient custom or practice called ‘syncretismos’ (Greek), which involved people living on the island of Crete who, although often fighting among themselves, joined forces to fight their foreign enemy ([Ezenweke and Kanu 2012](#), p. 73). This is in the region of what [Madsen \(1967\)](#) would see as a process of acculturation manifesting itself or resulting in a new form of culture ([Madsen 1967](#), p. 369). Somewhat complex yet linguistically simple, [Hill \(1999\)](#) used words such as borrowing and code-switching to describe syncretism as a process of borrowing or code-switching between practices, particularly religio-cultural practices ([Hill 1999](#), p. 244). Similarly, but more from a religious perspective, [Kamstra \(1970\)](#) defined syncretism as referring the ‘coexistence of elements foreign to each other within a specific religion, whether or not these elements originate in other religions or for example in social structures’ ([Kamstra 1970](#), p. 10). [Peel \(1968\)](#) appeared to be hitting the nail on the head with his description, which suggests that syncretism describes what happens when people abandon their previous religion for a new one and end up mixing old with new beliefs ([Peel 1968](#), p. 121).

In accordance with the above briefly reviewed collection of literature, in this article, syncretism refers broadly to a process of hybridization, cultural borrowing, or blending of doctrines within the religious space that encompasses Christianity and African religious concepts. This intermixture is considered purely for its manifestation as opposed to being considered on the basis of its authenticity or lack thereof. With the increasing claims about holy water in Pentecostalism, particularly in the New Prophetic Churches (ANPC) in South Africa, there is a significant need to reflect on the hybridization or syncretism that

continues to manifest within the use of holy water. What should be emphasized, however, is that this article theorizes a form of syncretism encompassing the concept of holy water, without commenting on the benevolence, suitability, or unscrupulousness of such a mixture. Consequently, the intent behind this theory is to support attempts to articulate reasons why most Africans, particularly South Africans within ANPCs, are easily tricked into believing claims about holy water.

### 3. Overt and Covert Syncretism

As outlined above, much work has been done on the concept or manifestation of syncretism, but it remains characterized by inherent complexities, which prevent its full understanding. Perhaps what complicates it is the fact that it encompasses multiple dimensions and practices, which make it difficult to understand. Accordingly, any exploration of syncretistic practices, regardless of the complexity involved, usually begins with the obvious (overt syncretism) and then moves on to what remains hidden, or what might be termed covert syncretism. In other words, overt syncretism is the premise that enables the discovery of covert syncretistic practices, which subsequently evolve into overt syncretism.

The mere fact that there is a practice called syncretism does much to support the apparent existence of what may be termed overt syncretism. Although syncretism has been introduced above, it remains necessary at this point to describe or define somewhat fully what exactly is meant by overt syncretism as the precursor of covert syncretism. Overt syncretism refers to a process in which syncretic practices, or the intermingling of religious beliefs as it were, occurs in an explicit or blatantly recognizable fashion. In other words, particularly in the context or domain of religion, open syncretism openly acknowledges the reality of intermingling beliefs or practices, to the point where a distinct hybrid system has emerged. This is often characterized, among other things, by the visible or easily recognizable presence of different religious symbols and the visible performance of different religious rituals within a single religious framework. However, as discussed below, in contrast with overt syncretistic practices, covert syncretism is extremely complex as it tends to be characterized by intense abstruseness.

Covert syncretism refers to a case where syncretic practices or beliefs are intentionally or unintentionally, as it were, hidden from perceptible scrutiny. In most cases, the driving factors behind covert syncretism are either the intentional preservation or unintentional maintenance of indigenous cultural beliefs or practices that find inaudible expression in mainstream belief practices. In other words, the integration of different beliefs or covert syncretic belief practices, so to speak, are obscured either intentionally or unintentionally. On the one hand, when the concealment of such practices is intended, knowledge of their presence is strictly limited to an individual, a select few, or a secret group. In a hypothetical scenario involving a church founded by an individual, they would then choose to either solemnly keep the secrecy of such a practice to themselves or share it with an intimate partner. In another hypothetical scenario involving a cult or closed group, secrecy is then revealed to the select few who have proven themselves worthy or have shown unwavering loyalty to a group's founders. However, when the concealment of such practices is unintentional, the intermingling of belief practice is effective but remains imperceptible to the practitioner, be it the initiator or the follower. Covert syncretism, then, is either a carefully guarded or an entirely unknown blending of religious beliefs and practices that are not openly revealed to outsiders or at times understood by its practitioners. Such blended beliefs or practices, thus, become a subculture, working discreetly towards maintaining a unique identity and intentionally or unintentionally remaining hidden from scrutiny.

### 4. African Religions and Water

In any literature review that cites ancient beliefs about or practices relating to the use of water, it is unreservedly recognized that ancient cultures appear to have valued it far more than modern societies. This is more akin to what [Laborde and Jackson \(2022\)](#) tried to recall by reciting [Hamlin's \(2000\)](#) argument, albeit in relation to European societies,

that pre-modern European societies were somewhat richer in vocabulary expressing the value of water than new generations (Hamlin 2000, p. 313; Laborde and Jackson 2022, p. 359). Similarly, the manner in which Africans have historically maintained a spiritual connection to various aspects of creation, including water, has been a major subject of study in African literature for many years (Gumo et al. 2012; Olupona 2000). Historically, and more generally, Africans worship water in all its guises, not only because it remains a scarce, essential commodity, but because it exists in the spirit world sphere with magical properties used in various ritual ceremonies involving purification or cleansing, baptism, bestowing of blessings, and revitalization, among others.

Consequently, or perhaps as Panyin Hagan (2020) maintained, most African cultures accept the spiritual importance of water, such that its absence in the form of droughts, lack of rain, or even drying rivers is interpreted to mean or suggest the spiritual absence of the supreme being in such respective human community (Panyin Hagan 2020, p. 2). Similarly, or to emphasize how the constant presence of the divine is symbolized by the presence of water, Müller and Kruger (2013) suggested that for Africans, the presence of water signifies a form of continuity linking creation's past and present (Müller and Kruger 2013, p. 143). What is underscored here is that, for most African cultures, the continued presence of water signifies the continued life of creation, or, at best, a sign of how God continues to breathe life into His creation. Actually, this very fact is noted by Panyin Hagan (2020), stating 'African cultures characterise water, by virtue of its life-giving nature, as both physical and spiritual in essence—but even of greater spiritual utility than physical' (Panyin Hagan 2020, p. 2). This explains in large part why the San people of southern Africa ensured the continued provision of water by performing the rain-making ritual in special locations for many centuries in the history of their existence (Lewis-Williams 1980, pp. 471–73).

Consistent with the above logic regarding the natural elemental use or perspective of water in Africa, it is more likely that the spiritual significance of water or teachings about it will be assimilated into African religiosity in a syncretistic mode, or, at best, play an integral part in the imagination of most African Christians. In other words, or at least as remains to be seen in relation to ANPC devotees, regardless of how many thousands of years this water-related spirituality existed, Christians of African descent often tapped into such spiritual remains when performing rituals or encountering holy water claims. Such devotees, whether in the form of ANPC leaders or mere followers, would almost immediately believe that water has spiritual magical properties or supernatural functions appropriately intended to fit any human trials.

## 5. Christianity and Water

Right from the onset of the Old Testament in the book of Genesis, the essential presence of water as a component of life wherein it is stated 'The Earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters' (Genesis 1:2). The multiple mentions of water right at the beginning of time seem to somehow envision water as a dominant element in God's creation, or at least as having some sacred significance in relation to creation. This is then followed by multiple Old Testament instances where God is portrayed as using water as a key symbolic element of spiritual life or in connection with the miracle of salvation. Among such instances of water being used in conjunction with miracles of salvation is the Great Flood of Genesis 7 where water was used to remove human corruption and consequently bring about redemption of Noah's household. Similarly, at the Red Sea in Exodus, water is again used to destroy the Egyptians, while at the same time saving the Israelites from Pharaoh (Exodus 14:1–31). Comparably, during the crossing of the Jordan River as described in the Book of Joshua, the water is cut off to allow the Israelites to cross safely (Joshua 3:4). As will be seen in the case of the New Testament, water was used metaphorically in the Old Testament to symbolize either holiness or some sort of impurity, particularly in connection with the credible presence of God. An example of this is in the book of Chronicles, wherein shortly after David was anointed king over Israel, he began longing to drink specific water saying

‘Oh that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate’ (Chronicles 11:17). Consequently, when three mighty Philistines brought it to him he refused drinking it saying, ‘Far be it from be before my God that I should do this. Shall I drink the lifeblood of these men? For at the risk of their lives they brought it’ (Chronicles 11:19). The fact that water brought to David was from the very place he requested, but he refused to drink it due to the impurity associated with the Philistines as idol worshipers and fortune tellers (1 Samuel:1–5; Isaiah 2:6), in many ways speaks to the extraordinary spiritual element of water or its usage.

In the Christian New Testament, at the very beginning of Christ’s earthly ministry, the use of water is mentioned again when John baptizes Jesus and proclaimed the imminence of God’s kingdom (John 1:29–34; Matthew 3:13–17). Although Matthew 3:11 is less inclined to suggest that water itself has a sacred element, his emphasis on a baptism with water for repentance recognized its purity or spiritual significance. As a result, Christian baptism and its execution have been characterized almost exclusively by the constant use of water to this day. Beyond the point of baptism, about three of the four Gospels correspondingly records the famous miracle of Jesus walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee during a storm (Matthew 14:22–33; Mark 6:45–52; John 6:16–21). On the last day of the feast, Jesus Christ once more revealed the spiritual significance of water in a figurative way, saying ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, “Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water”’ (John 7:37–38). As a result, water has been used in a variety of metaphorical ways in the New Testament as is the case in the Old Testament scriptures to symbolize sacred processes such as salvation, eternal life, and even spiritual purification associated with the holy presence of God (Hebrews 10:22; Revelations 22:1, 2, 6, 17). Therefore, for this purpose, consistent with its biblical characteristics, it can be argued that water possesses at least two characteristics, wherein first it has powers to destroy, as demonstrated through the flood account (Genesis 6: 17) and the flight of Israel from Egypt (Exodus 14:1–15:21). Considering the biblical view of water, both in the Old and New Testaments, it is clear that the Bible writers sought to give some importance to the spirituality associated with the use of water. Consequently, or at least in relation to the Christian tradition, water plays an important spiritual role, whether in relation to salvation, baptism, miracles, or generally for multi-spiritual functions well beyond its superficial and natural purposes.

## 6. The Living Water(s)

In Christianity, as in traditional African religions, the term living water depicts a metaphor of spiritual sustenance or a life-giving symbolism. While in Christianity the living water describes the eternal spiritual life that Jesus Christ gave and can give to believers, in traditional African religions, it is assumed that waters such as lakes, rivers, and springs also have life-giving ancestral spirits. In this way, the concept of living water has a profoundly life-giving meaning in both Christianity and traditional African religions. Furthermore, to the extent that water plays an important role in the fertility of fields and plants, and provides much-needed nutrients for the human body, and it is seen in many cultures as a symbol of life itself; hence, the broad term living water. As correctly noted by several scholars including but not limited to [Avidar \(2018\)](#), almost all human cultures on the African continent share the sentiments underscored by the phrase ‘water is life’ ([Avidar 2018](#), p. 1; [Chitata et al. 2023](#)). Referring to it as being among Arab proverbs, [Hoffman \(2019\)](#) restated ‘The Arab saying “water is life” is truism—without water you die”’ ([Hoffman 2019](#), p. 2). The understanding here is that water not only sustains life, be it in plants or human bodies, but it signifies a natural resource from which life originates. Resonating with this understanding, [Laborde and Jackson \(2022\)](#) recited the profound words Deborah Bird Rose who once remarked that ‘indigenous people engage with water as a type of kin. Not only is it the source of life, or a resource for life, it is also another form of life itself’ ([Laborde and Jackson 2022](#), p. 360). Not surprisingly, then, scholars such as [Bernard \(2013\)](#) have written excellent articles on the concept of living water as understood from the perspective

of South African Nguni healing traditions, which mention mythical underwater serpents or mermaids associated with sacred water (Bernard 2013, pp. 138–49). Similarly, Panyin Hagan (2020) argues that Africans have the general mind-set or conviction that water connects the Supreme Being with all the living things, which includes but is not limited to human beings. As if seeking to substantiate this even further, he mentions ‘In the African mind, drought, unfavourable patterns of rainfall, famine and the conflicts that result from these are the consequences of the individual and collective moral and spiritual offences that humans commit against nature and the Supreme Being’ (Panyin Hagan 2020, p. 2). Undoubtedly, or at least as shall be seen, this very indigenous concept of living water is becoming dominant in the way African Christians see water, or at best influencing their attitudes towards the use of what is claimed to be the ‘living water’ in spiritual circles.

In the context of Christianity, the notion of living water underscores water as a symbol of salvation, encompassing the true knowledge of the triune God composed of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, the living water symbolizes the ceaseless salvation or everlasting life that God continually bestows on believers—the Christian community by implication. In the Old Testament, particularly in the Book of Jeremiah, he metaphorically identified God the Father (Yahweh) at least twice as the source of living water. In either case, the Israelites are rebuked for forsaking the Lord for other cisterns that could in no way quench their spiritual thirst (Jer 2:13; 17:13). In the New Testament, this is equally demonstrated in John, where Jesus has a conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well and metaphorically speaks of His salvation as living water and as ‘a spring of water welling up to eternal life’ (John 4:10–15). Likewise, the understanding of Jesus Christ as the source of life is further strengthened in the seventh chapter, where it says ‘Rivers of living water shall flow from his belly’ (John 7:38). In this regard, the belly from which flows the living water or eternal life belongs to Jesus Christ and is given to Christian believers or to humanity in general (Schnackenburg 1968, pp. 153–54). Furthermore, the symbol of the living water is used in relation to the Holy Spirit in a manner similar to how it is used symbolically in relation to Jesus Christ. In fact, Christ’s mention of rivers of living water as recorded at John 7:37–39 referred partly to his presence as a symbol of eternal life and partly to the coming of the Holy Spirit. In this way he sought to identify or relate the streams of living water flowing from within his followers or those who believed in him to the constant presence of the coming Holy Spirit. As a result, many scholars view water and Spirit together, drawing a connection between them. This is as a result of the symbolic use of water as being representative of the Holy Spirit in several scriptures (De Gruchy 2010; Johnson 1995).

Consequently, it can be argued that, in relation to the concept of living water, there has come an intertwining of Western Christian culture and the indigenous African cultural elements, which remain inextricably linked whenever the idea of living water is expressed. In this regard, syncretism exists when the African concept of living water is secretly central or plays the role of inspiring Africans to believe its related claims. On the surface, claims about living water are made as if they came solely from the context of Christianity, yet they touch on the African cultural element that exists naturally in the mind and body of the unsuspecting recipient. Although viewed from a historical perspective, in the context of African cultures, living water remains functional within the framework of modern claims and, as such, assists those determined to harness African believers through religion. While the unsuspecting believer in the matter of the living water will never feel caught between two ideologies, that does not preclude the fact that two sets of traditions are at play in responding to claims about the living water. Consequently, it can be argued that there are elements from more than one tradition or cultural contact when Pentecostal ministers make claims to the living waters or are acted upon by their followers in the context of African Christianity.

## 7. Turning Water

Beyond the context of holy water in the Jordanian context, the water element is once again introduced by Jesus Christ when, in John 2:1–11, he turned it into wine, underscoring its (water) importance in connection with miracles. In this episode, Jesus is said to have attended a wedding in the village of Cana, where his mother and disciples were present along with him. Here he (Jesus) performed his first recorded miracle, turning water into wine after his mother reported to him that the wine had run out. The text reads: ‘When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come”’ (John 2:3–4). To this end, Jesus commanded the six stone water jars to be filled with water, which he immediately turned into wine. Although not much context or practical benefit can be derived from this story, this scenario seems to have reinforced the use of water or the notion of it as an important religious symbol related to miracles. Perhaps what makes this story so typical of a miracle story is that it is the first recorded miracle in which Jesus transformed something ordinary (water) into something extraordinary (wine). As a matter of record, this is the first time in the context of Christ’s earthly ministry that a sudden need (lack of wine) arises that impels Him to perform a miracle in response to or as a divine way of responding to the need. Peters (2020) about this miracle writes, ‘Again, in John 2:11 Jesus’ miracle of turning water into wine was called the beginning (a numerical word) of miracles in Greek; however, some vulgate manuscripts preferred using ordinal numbers instead’ (Peters 2020, p. 4). In other words, the miracle of turning water into wine as described in the book of John represents Christ’s first divine act of mediating, in a somewhat less dramatic way, a messianic solution to human desperate needs.

It is not surprising, therefore, that those who claim miracles often conveniently start with the use of water analogous to Christ’s first recorded miracle (Nel 2018, p. 30). In South Africa, this was observed with Apostle Phillip Sithole, founder of Divine Word Ministries, of Hammanskraal, who, in 2016, not only claimed to have turned water into wine, but also anointed noxious live wires to be harmless and ordered his parishioners to touch them (Matsengarwodzi 2016). Similarly, the senior pastor of Jehovah Mightier Than All Prophetic Church, pastor Ebelenna Chukwu, shared a video of himself sharing with members of his church what appeared to be water turned into a wine. In reaction to a public outcry and disbelief, pastor Ebelenna Chukwu justified the miracle through a publication on social networks writing:

‘Water has been turned into wine during a cult. If you do not believe, you are an anti-Christ. Mark 9:23 Jesus said to him, “If you can, all things are possible to him who believes. John 14:12 Truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and he will do greater works, because I am going to the Father. John 20:29 Jesus said to him, because you have seen me, you have believed. Happy are those who have not seen and have believed!’<sup>1</sup>.

Consequently, in Christian cycles, holy water is believed to have the power to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, or the profane into the sacred. Arguably, this is more in the region of what Panyin Hagan (2020) meant when stating that water plays an important role in facilitating human associated transition from the profane to the sacred state (Panyin Hagan 2020, p. 2). In most traditional Christian denominations such as Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, and various others, the baptismal water is first consecrated or blessed with the sign of the cross by a priest prior to actual baptism. Beyond playing a significant sacramental role in baptism, or, at least that is the case in Roman Catholicism, holy water is used for a variety of sacramental purposes, some of which include blessing people, blessing objects, and sometimes even exorcism. During the actual baptism, water, usually blessed by the priest or deacon, is poured over the person’s head. Traditionally, blessed water is contained in a font at the entrance so that Catholics, either entering or exiting, can dip their fingers and make a sign of the cross, either to commemorate baptism or as a symbol of purification.

This water is also often used symbolically to bless objects such as rosaries, crucifixes, statues, and other items, depending on accession. As this water is also said to have a purifying or protective effect, it is sometimes used symbolically during the exorcism rite, especially when evil spirits are suspected, so to speak. Without going into detail about the use of holy water in the context of Catholicism, it is safe to say that this use has been the framework for the use of holy water in most traditional churches for years. In other words, the sacramental use of holy water as observed in Catholic circles represents the conventional use to which most traditional churches have very often adhered or practiced.

## 8. Holy Water

In general, holy water refers to water that has been consecrated or blessed by a religious person. Beyond its natural purposes, or by extending its natural purifying properties, water has been used by several religious communities as a means of moral or ritual purification. In ancient traditions, it was inherently believed that water possessed special powers, including the ability not only to purify, but also to heal and even protect against evil. Purification defines sacred in this regard, although distinct from the realm of religious circles, as will be seen below in a section relating the concept of holy water to Christianity and hence its syncretic use within ANPCs. In other words, the broad notion of holy water in terms of its purity properties or purifying special powers dates back to ancient times, long before holy water meant exclusively for religious purposes. In ancient Greek religions, both people and places were purified with conventional water so as to distinguish what would be considered religious from the irreligious, the holy from unholy. In other words, such cultures used pure ordinary water to impart a certain level of sanctity to an object, or to ensure a certain level of inviolability, so to speak. Consequently, or similar to the notion of living water discussed above denoting water as the source of life, the idea of holy water in ancient African belief simply denoted the use of a pure form of water that bestowed a degree of sanctity on the target or recipient.

Aside from its natural symbol of purification, in many religions, water blessed by the clergy for purposes of devotion and ritualistic cleansing is considered sacred, hence the notion of holy water. In the Old Testament, the idea of holy water seems to have appeared in several instances where it is used symbolically for the purification of objects or for the Israelites, according to Yahweh's direction. Such appearances include, but are not limited to, an instance where according to Exodus 30:17–21, Yahweh instructed Moses prepare water in a basin for the washing of the priests. Perhaps to emphasize the symbol of purity or the cleansing power of holy water, in Psalm 51:7, David asked God to cleanse him with hyssop and wash him so that he would be whiter than snow. Hyssop's purported antiseptic properties notwithstanding, David desired purification with water that could only come from God or was blessed by God, which was essentially the meaning of holy water, perhaps even by ancient standards. The idea of holy water in the New Testament, while remaining connected to the Old Testament origin, is related to water having its origin in the holy presence of God. Although John the Baptist could have baptized Jesus in pure water, such water would arguably henceforth be considered holy because it testified to the presence of God in the form of Jesus Christ. For this reason, the Jordan River has been considered a holy site for centuries, and has thus attracted pilgrims from around the world simply because its waters once covered the holy presence of Jesus Christ. In other words, the Jordan River is considered a holy site by most religious communities, which include both Christians and Jews, simply because the holy Jesus Christ was once immersed in its waters. As a result, most religious communities, and especially Christians, not only immersed themselves in the Jordan, but even collected its waters for various purposes, including deliverance, cleansing, and healing.



## 9. AICs on Holy Water

The generational connection between African Independent Churches (AICs) and African Neo-Pentecostal Churches (ANPCs) has been discussed in the literature by several scholars such as Engelke (2010), Pfeiffer (2005), Meyer (2004), and many others, exploring such a relation from multiple perspectives (Meyer 2004; Pfeiffer 2005). There is a very extensive literature detailing the nature of AICs across Africa and southern Africa in particular, including how such a movement has retained African character in its practices (Kealotswe 2004, pp. 205–22; Ositelu 2002). Not only that, there is a large body of literature detailing how the AIC traversed the African continent and clearly took on multiple faces, reflecting the African character of each receiving context, including in countries such as South Africa (Adedibu 2018, pp. 1–9). Both AICs and ANPCs have unique links in many respects as they both sprung up in the African context and seem to be heavily influenced by Pentecostalism (Mwaura 2004). As is certainly the case with most ANPCs, Kalu (2003) was correct in stating that any close examination of Pentecostalism or its growth in Africa points in one way or another to a multidirectional and sometimes evasive religious identities (Kalu 2003, p. 87). In other words, there is a degree to which Pentecostal movements in Africa are reinventing their identity, and thus it would be impossible to ensure categorization, so to speak. As a result, far too often, or at least as scholars such as Bediako (2000) have observed, those who analyze Pentecostal accounts in Africa use opposing lenses to portray African Pentecostalism against mainstream or established Christian denominations, so to speak. His precise words in this regard were ‘much academic analysis tends to press the evidence into something of a dualistic dialectic that sets African pentecostalism and its socio-political effects against “mainline” churches which then appear to be ineffectu’ (Bediako 2000, pp. 311–12). However, this does not mean that it will be impossible to discuss how ANPCs have defined themselves as opposed to or different from most traditional churches in Africa, particularly in certain aspects such as the use of holy water. Although some ANPCs appear to be quite sophisticated compared with AICs, which are more traditional and culturally African in their approach, both groups are largely made up of churches, run by Africans for Africans, so to speak were founded against Western Christians cultural imperialism (Mildnerová 2014, pp. 15, 18). Actually, some have even attempted to argue that ANPCs should be seen, regardless of Western Pentecostal orientations, as an extension of AICs or in the light of efforts and initiatives deepening AICs’ African oriented vision (Mofokeng and Kgatle 2019, pp. 5–9). At this point, it might seem somewhat obvious that these two traditions, which share the roots of African Christian identity, would, in one way or another, exhibit some degree of syncretism in their practices, which include the use of holy water, among others. To this end, it is perhaps important to first examine the syncretic element in the use of holy water in the realm of AICs before venturing into the ANPC context. In other words, there is perhaps no better way to reflect the remaining sacred water practices of an African origin blended with Christian beliefs than through African Independent Churches (AICs). AICs and ANPCs have deep-rooted connections (Da Silva 1993; Meyer 2004). In many ways, the syncretic use of holy water within the context of AICs, will in part perhaps give an expression on the understanding of the syncretic use of holy water within the ANPCs context.

In African Independent Churches (AICs) as well as in other religious traditions, water holds a powerful element needed for spiritual transformation and it is thus used in a whole range of rituals such as healing, blessing, purification, baptism, and many other water-related rituals (Drewal 2008; Ogungbile 1997). However, what is perhaps more important to note here is that AICs use holy water in an African inclined syncretic way, precisely because of their propensity to integrate traditional African beliefs within the sphere Christian practices. Perhaps one can examine two aspects of ritual in which water plays a role, namely baptism and healing practices. In traditional or cultural practices in Africa, baptism is seen as an opportunity to initiate the baptized into their ancestral roots in order to assimilate them into their respective cultural communities. In most African cultures, a river has a special spiritual meaning and is mostly preferred in the context of cleansing from

old to new. This partly explains why African baptisms are often performed in the river, precisely because the flowing river water symbolizes spiritual transformation, washing away old self and sins. Consequently, in most AICs, converts are preferably baptized in the river in the presence of the entire congregation, who then welcome them into the seemingly purified community (Zvanaka 1997, p. 73). Whenever the baptized enter and exit the flow, it symbolizes the purification or conversion process that identifies them as one who has transformed their old self into a new one, qualifying them as a full member of their culturally rooted community. Furthermore, the symbolic gesture of pouring water over the initiate's head signifies an assurance that the baptized has undergone the water purification from head to toe, as the initiate would still be standing partially submerged in the water. In other words, this deliberate visual representation, which characterizes baptism in relation to traditional African baptism and Christian baptism, merely symbolizes the assurance that the baptized will be fully cleansed and transformed into a new position within the respective community. Similarly, in traditional African healing rituals or practices that seek to restore one's health, water is believed to have spiritual properties that can either heal or treat any physical ailment. Just as water is used during baptism to transform the baptized into new, it is also believed to possess powerful properties that can restore or renew health. Consequently, African herbal remedies or medicines are often mixed with water, as only water has healing properties, thus ensuring that health is fully restored.

#### 10. ANPCs on Holy Water

African Neo-Pentecostal Churches (ANPCs) refers to African Pentecostal Christian churches, which were largely found in the late 20th century. Very extensive literature exists examining the origin, evolution, and spiritual identity of ANPCs (Anderson 2005; Banda 2023; Kgatle 2020). Aside from their evidently strong Pentecostal character, which encompasses an emphasis on a personal relationship with God, speaking in tongues, belief in the power of the Holy Spirit, etc., these churches are often known for incorporating African culture into their styles of worship. Based on this, it goes without saying that such an incorporation of African culture into worship is evident in many ways, including in the concept or use of holy water. Most Pentecostal traditions use holy water similar to other Christian denominations, but ANPCs use it more in almost all practices, including but not limited to bestowing blessings and casting out demons. From time to time, leaders within these churches sprinkle water on congregants or any material objects symbolically to bestow blessings, cure ailments, and at times for exorcism. Not only that, while holy water is offered free of charge in most traditional mainstream churches, ANPC prophets have increasingly adopted the practice of putting a price on holy water that must be taken home for domestic use.

As most ANPCs are independent and single-handedly run by their founders, they tend to have no formal liturgical processes and consequently follow the directives of the leader, including in the region of water rituals. Anderson (2005) spoke of how South African Pentecostals in the early 1990s at the Praise Tabernacle Church in Soshanguve admired Nigerian evangelist Emmanuel Eni after he told the story of how a mermaid-like water deity took him under the sea and bestowed on him extraordinary powers (Anderson 2005, p. 77). It can be argued that this community welcomed the testimony of the water deity because it resonated very much with African water spirituality (Drewal 1988; Olupona 2000), and for them such an experience made Emmanuel Eni a powerful human being. The water-related syncretism emerges not only on the part of Emmanuel Eni, but also on the part of the congregants, who seem to appropriate African water spirituality through the act of deification of one with knowledge and experience of African water deity. Consistent with this observation, Rey (2013) postulated that mermaids, or water deities, as spiritual spouses of pastors, played an important role in popularizing ANPC's deliverance practices, as they created the impression that such pastors had exceptional spiritual powers (Rey 2013, p. 71). When ANPC ministers such as Emmanuel Eni testified that they have been freed from attachment to African spiritual beings such as water mermaids, the real

intention is evidently to inspire reverence among African followers by tapping into their deeply rooted African beliefs and indigenous precepts. Such testimony becomes a purely devotional performance, with the intention of leading African congregants to interpret them in accordance with their indigenous precepts and inadvertently ascribe to or follow such pastors for their water-related spiritual powers. In other words, they (ANPC pastors) invest in stories such as this with no intention of demonizing such experiences, but essentially taking pre-existing African system of beliefs about water-related accounts and dynamically using them to serve their interests. In fact, [Anderson \(2005\)](#) made this exact observation, further stating:

‘His ministry impressed a great many South Africans, for not only did his testimony of intimate relations with evil spiritual powers as a priest of the water goddess fascinate San Pentecostals, but his high-powered preaching and exuberant dancing were welcome in an African society where such religious enthusiasm was evidence of spiritual power’. ([Anderson 2005](#), p. 77)

According to the respective presented in this paper, and including the above scholarship, in reference to ANPC claims, syncretic holy water refers to a perception of holy water that arises through a combination or blending of different religious and spiritual traditions. In other words, in this regard, the term ‘syncretic holy water’ refers to the unique outcome through the merging or combination of two somewhat water-unrelated beliefs embodied through practices, teachings, and claims. This appropriation of traditions related to holy water was largely corroborated by water-related incidents in the African Independent Churches (AICs) and across generations by ANPC claims related to holy water.

### 11. Covert Syncretic Holy Water

In contrast with overt syncretic practices, which are often obvious and take place in full view, covert syncretic practices are either intentionally or unintentionally obscured to unsuspecting minds. In other words, unlike overt syncretic practices, which are often discernible, covert syncretic practices, which include syncretic holy water, among other things, are neither overtly practiced nor imperceptible by the eye. In covert syncretistic practices, the assimilation, or the process of assimilation of elements from different traditions into a harmonious whole or new synthesis, occurs in somewhat obscure and less obvious ways. Likewise, the manifestation of such a mixed reality scarcely arouses suspicion, be it from its practitioners or subjects, and thus can easily deviate scholarly comprehension. In this way, practitioners of covert syncretic practices, knowingly or unknowingly, continue to express teachings aligned with the dominant tradition or mainstream belief, while simultaneously holding onto another belief. On the surface of such practices, the incautious eye will see only the presentation of a dominant or mainstream doctrine and not the covert adherence to other traditions. However, covert affiliation does not necessarily have negative implications for conforming to the dominant tradition, but simply means that there is an existence or an unexpected interplay of different faith traditions that are diluted into a dominant faith practice.

Covert syncretic holy water, or its definition in relation to ANPCs, which this article focuses on, thus refers to the secret fusion of two independent traditions in the form of Christian and African traditional beliefs when it comes to the symbolic power of water. Although the Christian faith or Christian teachings still enjoy a dominant position in this respect, the adherence to the African belief in the symbolic power of water remains surreptitiously rooted in the conduct of African believers. In other words, African traditional belief in the symbolic power of water resonates unhindered or continuously within the belief system of African believers, particularly ANPC’s followers, as witnessed in South Africa. On the surface, the ANPC’s claims of holy water appear to be entirely consistent with Christianity, but instead have some resemblance to African beliefs in the power of water. Therefore, whenever ANPC pastors make claims to holy water, or ANPC followers encounter such claims, they either knowingly or unknowingly rely on African belief systems to validate such claims. Although the belief in the power of water is practiced in the

context of Christianity as the main religion, the reception of such a practice or belief therein is deeply rooted in traditional African beliefs.

Consequently, claims or concepts of sacred water among ANPCs are more likely to be accepted or rooted within the framework of traditional African beliefs in the symbolic power of water.

## 12. Conclusions

In many religious or spiritual traditions, which include but are not limited to African traditional religions (ATRs) and Christianity in the form of African Neo-Pentecostal Churches (ANPCs), water is considered a powerful symbol of sanctification, purification, and spiritual cleansing. Considering ANPCs, particularly in the context of South Africa, holy water claims are used covertly in a syncretic manner through rituals such as cleansing, deliverance, and bestowing blessings upon individuals or objects. Consequently, in their claims about holy water, ANPC leaders covertly mix several traditions in the form of traditional African and Western Christian beliefs about the symbolic power of water. Thus, ANPCs, albeit without clear reasoning, encompass a multi-pronged (African and Western Christianity) approach to the use or claims of holy water. Contrary to the apparent or overt syncretism, this paper uncovered conclusively that claims about holy water as witnessed among ANPCs in South Africa, covertly combine elements of two belief systems (ancient African traditions and contemporary African Christianity), resulting in what is presented here as ‘covert syncretic holy water’.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://afrinik.com/nigeria-pastor-claims-to-have-turned-water-into-wine-video/> (accessed on 8 July 2023): Pastor (Ebelenna Chukwu) claims to have turned water into wine.

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