

Article

# Money That Matters: Coins, Banknotes, and Mediation in Tanzanian Prosperity Ministries

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**Abstract:** Based on long-term ethnographic research in Tanzania, this article contributes to existing scholarship on adaptations and modifications of the so-called gospel in African contexts. I show how the Prosperity Gospel has taken shape in an environment of intense religious/spiritual/medical competition and, not least, of widespread cultural concerns with the moral legitimacy of wealth generated through alliances with spiritual forces. However, I also argue that a deeper understanding of the ways in which the Prosperity Gospel has become contextualized can be reached by moving beyond a focus on cultural concerns with wealth and paying close attention to the exuberance of meanings attributed to money in its most concrete and tangible form, coins and banknotes, as well as to the religious/ritual practices involving money that such meanings inspire. I pursue my analysis by zooming in on two areas where cultural understandings of money as exceeding its materiality and its use value are prevalent: the use of powers of witchcraft to extract money from others and the practice of bride wealth. Whereas the first has to do with understandings of material money as imbued with spiritual powers, the second can be seen as an example of a gift economy, since money given by a groom to his parents-in-law by virtue of containing parts of his soul or his essence becomes the foundation of a relationship of mutual respect between them. In the last part of the article, I show how both understandings are entangled with Prosperity teachings and inform ritual practices involving material money.

**Keywords:** Tanzania; Prosperity Gospel; Pentecostalism; witchcraft; mediation; contextualization; money; materiality; bride wealth



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## 1. Introduction

Dating back to Max Weber's classic work on the influence of Protestant (Calvinist) ideas on economic dispositions (Weber [1905] 2012), questions concerning intersections of religion and economy as well as assumptions concerning the moral aspects and potential dangers of such intersections have been of significant interest to both sociologists and anthropologists of religion. A global religious phenomenon, which in recent decades appears to have intensified this scholarly interest, while at same time inviting passionate criticism from both mainline theologians and the mass media, is the so-called Prosperity Gospel, a high-profile representative of currently burgeoning neo-Pentecostal movements around the world. The Prosperity Gospel, also known as the health and wealth gospel, can be described as a version of Pentecostalism that downplays classical Pentecostal concerns with sanctified lifestyles and eschatology and instead emphasizes material blessings, mainly in the form of healthy bodies' financial success in the here and now. While such blessings are supposedly a result of faith (including positive thinking in some versions of Prosperity teachings), many Prosperity-oriented churches and revival groups also stress the importance of tithes and other money offerings as an indispensable condition for receiving divine grace.

The Prosperity Gospel is originally a North American phenomenon whose roots can be traced back to post-Second World War spiritual revivals, where prominent Pentecostal preachers such as Oral Roberts and Kenneth Hagin began to expand their vision of the kind of results that Christian faith could be expected to achieve (Coleman and Lindhardt 2020).

Decades later the Prosperity Gospel has become a global religious phenomenon with a huge impact on Pentecostalism and, to some extent, Christianity in general, in different parts of the world, most notably the global South (Attanasi and Yong 2012). Within Sub-Saharan African Pentecostalism and especially within newer neo-Pentecostal (or so-called third wave) ministries, the Prosperity Gospel has become, if not hegemonic or mainstream, then at least a very dominant theological theme (see Gifford 2014). In Africa, as elsewhere, the breadth of the Prosperity Gospel is not confined to specific ministries, as the message of material abundance in the here and now and the emphasis on tithes and money offerings as a condition for receiving material blessings is now also preached within classical Pentecostal congregations and even in some mainstream Evangelical churches such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (see Lindhardt 2009, 2015a).

Despite its North American origins and a widely shared emphasis on material blessings and on the importance of tithing and other money offerings, the Prosperity Gospel is anything but a unified or centralized movement. Early critical views of the globalization of the Prosperity Gospel as an example of Americanization and cultural imperialism (see Brouwer et al. 1996) have now become increasingly marginal in academia as an abundance of ethnographic literature has demonstrated how the Prosperity Gospel, much like Pentecostalism in general, while maintaining some theological core doctrines, now comes in a variety of forms and shapes due to complex processes of appropriation, contextualization, modification, and interactions with different cultural ontologies (Attanasi and Yong 2012; Lindhardt 2009, 2014c, 2015a; Wiegele 2005).

In the case of Africa, research has demonstrated how the Prosperity Gospel has interacted with different cultural notions of prosperity and wealth. For instance, Naomi Hayne's important work has shown how Pentecostals/Charismatics in Zambia have holistic understandings of prosperity as including well-being at different levels such as harmonious social relationships, strong family ties, and spiritual development (Haynes 2013). Some of my own research from Tanzania has demonstrated how many lay-Pentecostals, despite being exposed to promises of financial blessings in their ministries week after week, have rather low expectations of near-future economic prosperity and mainly see the prosperity that comes because of faith and tithings in terms of health and protection against witchcraft (Lindhardt 2015a).

Another recurrent theme in the literature on Africa relates to the ways in which concerns with secrecy, transparency, and the moral ambiguity of wealth have been central to contextualized adaptations of the Prosperity Gospel. In short (and I will return to this theme in a little more detail below), in different parts of Africa such as Ghana (Lauterbach 2019, 2024; Meyer 2007), South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), and Tanzania (Hasu 2015; Lindhardt 2009, 2014c, 2015a), the Prosperity Gospel has taken root in, and contributed to shaping, cultural contexts where popular rumors frequently connect the rapid accumulation of wealth and power to witchcraft, and where traditional healers provide clients with magical means for attaining wealth, which means that prosperity ministries need to compete with and distinguish themselves from other providers of spiritual assistance in material affairs.

In this article, which is based on long-term ethnographic research in Iringa, a regional capital with a population of approximately 200,000 people in south-central Tanzania, I aim to contribute to existing scholarship on adaptations and modifications of the Prosperity Gospel in African contexts. Between 1998 and 2023 I have visited Iringa thirteen times, spending a total of twenty months in city. I have participated in hundreds of Pentecostal/Charismatic services in different churches and revival groups. In addition, I have conducted semi-structured ethnographic interviews with more than three hundred people on a variety of topics, and had informal conversations (which unlike the interviews, were not recorded) with many more. More than half of these interviews have been with Pentecostals/Charismatics, but I have also interviewed around twenty-five traditional healers. When researching topics such as bride wealth and witchcraft, I have interviewed people

from different religious backgrounds, including many who own small businesses or have market stalls and who had stories to share about the presence of witchcraft in markets.

In this article I build on, and will also briefly summarize, some of my previous research on how the Prosperity Gospel in Tanzania has taken shape in an environment of intense religious/spiritual/medical competition and, not least, of widespread cultural concerns with the moral legitimacy of wealth generated through alliances with spiritual forces (Lindhardt 2009, 2014c, 2015a). However, I also argue that a deeper understanding of the contextualization of the Prosperity Gospel can be reached by moving beyond a focus on cultural concerns with *wealth* and paying close attention to the exuberance of meanings attributed to *money* in its most concrete and tangible form, coins and banknotes, as well as to the religious/ritual practices involving money that such meanings inspire.

As André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani aptly note, money is a symbolic object that enables the passage from the profane to the sacred, the latter being understood not only in terms of the power of God, but also of other supernatural powers (Cortén and Marshall-Fratani 2001, p. 10). However, the authors mainly elaborate on this important point by noting first how in Pentecostal understandings worldly desires related to wealth, social mobility, and health can be weapons used by the devil to lure souls from the straight path and second, how salvation tends to be expressed via the realization of those same desires (ibid.). I take no issue with the view that for Pentecostals (as for many other religious people around the world), wealth and prosperity in various forms function as passages between the spiritual and the profane, insofar as wealth can be seen as a sign of divine grace as well of as satanic/demonic assistance in financial affairs while at the same time providing incitements to seek out and/or be seduced by dubious and destructive kinds of spiritual power; this is an understanding which in many African countries is clearly manifested in rumors connecting rapidly acquired wealth to witchcraft and sometimes to alliances with Satan himself (see Lindhardt 2012, 2017, 2019; Marshall 1993). However, merely pointing out that this-worldly prosperity can be a sign of some kind of spiritual assistance and/or provides a motivation to seek it hardly exhausts the exploration of money as a passage between the spiritual and the profane. In this article, I suggest that new insights into the contextualization of the Prosperity Gospel can be generated by bringing more attention to physical money. As anthropologist Daniel Miller has noted, stances on materiality are “a driving force behind humanity’s attempt to transform the world in order to make it accord with beliefs as to how the world should be” (Miller 2005, p. 2). This is, of course, a rather broad and general point that applies to a variety of practices through which humans intend to shape their world via engaging with material forms, such as clothing and construction of buildings and other infrastructure. But it also applies to cultural understandings of material substances as potential containers and mediators of spiritual and human powers. What I hope to demonstrate below is how expressions of the Prosperity Gospel in Tanzania are shaped from understandings of material money (coins and banknotes) as sites of mediation between humans, divine power, and the power of witchcraft, which is why concerns relating to prosperity and wealth in a broad sense (including physical well-being and protection against witchcraft) often become a concern with how to handle money.

In pursuing my analysis, I find inspiration both in the anthropology of things and in scholarship on religion and mediation. The anthropology of things has shown how the meaning of objects can be underdetermined and defy their material stability and use value. Thus, the same object can move in and out of different spheres of value and acquire different meanings (Appadurai 1986; Brown 2001; Kopytoff 1986; Myers 2001). An acknowledged classic to which much subsequent anthropological scholarship on things owes a great debt is Marcell Mauss’s book, *The Gift* (Mauss [1904] 1954), in which he points to the exchange of gifts as constitutive of human sociality, not least because the value of objects given as gifts exceed their instrumental value and can be perceived as containing part of the soul of the giver. Scholarship on religion and mediation focuses on how religion happens materially, or how relations between humans and the world of gods and spirits are constituted through

bodily practice, the use of technology, and the handling of objects (Engelke 2011; Meyer 2010; Morgan 2010; Reinhardt 2020). Birgit Meyer's work on the power of pictures in Ghana has been important in terms of establishing a dialogue between the anthropology of things and the study of religious mediation (Meyer 2010). Drawing on Bill Brown's distinction between objects and things, the latter being defined as "that which is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects" (Brown 2001, p. 5), Meyer demonstrates how religion can play a crucial role in creating possibilities of excess "by enveloping people and things . . . in a structure of mutual animation" (Meyer 2010, p. 126).

In what follows, I look at how expressions of the Prosperity Gospel in Tanzania have taken shape through deep entanglements with cultural perceptions of money as an object that exceeds both its physical materiality and its use value as cash. I start out with a brief outline of Iringa's religious/spiritual market and then zoom in on two areas where understandings of money as exceeding its materiality and its use value are prevalent: the use of powers of witchcraft to extract money from others and the practice of bride wealth. As we will see, these two areas are of a quite different nature. The first has to do with understandings of material money as imbued with spiritual powers, whereas the second can be seen as an example of a gift economy, since money given by a groom to his parents-in-law by virtue of containing parts of his soul or his essence becomes the foundation of relationships of mutual respect between them. In the last part of the article, I show how both understandings are entangled with Prosperity teachings and inform ritual practices involving material money.

## 2. The Prosperity Gospel and Religious Competition in Contemporary Tanzania

Iringa is a pluralist city in terms of religion and ethnicity. Most inhabitants belong to the Wahehe and the Wabena tribes. Although locally rooted beliefs and practices are common, most people seem to have some institutional affiliation with Islam or Christianity. Islam has a strong presence, but as in most Tanzanian inland cities, Christians are the majority. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian church in Iringa, but the city also has one of the highest concentrations of Lutherans in the country. In addition to the historical mainline mission churches (which also include Moravians and Anglicans), several Pentecostal/Charismatic ministries have been founded in and around Iringa in recent decades. In response to the Pentecostal competition, Pentecostal-inspired charismatic revival movements have grown within mainline Protestant churches and the Catholic Church. Research for this article has mainly been conducted in the revival movement of the Lutheran Church (which has embraced Prosperity teachings) and in different Pentecostal denominations such as Trinity International Ministry, the Assemblies of God, and The New Life in Christ.

In Tanzania, as elsewhere in Africa, Prosperity ministries and preachers find themselves struggling in a market characterized by harsh competition from other providers of spiritual assistance in financial affairs, and in a context where cultural concerns with the moral legitimacy of wealth that has been attained through alliances with spiritual forces are repeatedly articulated. Most traditional healers (*waganga wa kienyi*) in Tanzania provide clients with so-called business medicines (*dawa y za biashara*) that can supposedly help people achieve financial success, for instance via receiving promotions at work (as medicines can make a worker more appealing to a boss) or through attracting clients to a shop or a market stall (see Lindhardt 2009, 2014c; Sanders 2001). At the same time, popular rumors frequently link people's success in business and their accumulation of wealth to the use of witchcraft and/or spirits (*majini*), especially in cases where wealth is accumulated rapidly, thus making it difficult for others to figure out exactly how it was accumulated. According to popular belief, wealth generated through witchcraft is deeply immoral and comes at a high cost, such as restrictions on the ways that money can be used, or the death or severe illness of a close relative (see Sanders 2001; Lindhardt 2009, 2014c). To name just one example, Mama Elizabeth, a born-again Christian woman and active lay-preacher

in the charismatic movement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church told me that she had decided to become saved born-again, in part as a way of coping with intense grief over the loss of her teenage son whose death she attributed to witchcraft, and in part due to her desire to keep her remaining children safe from witchcraft. However, other church members speculated that it could hardly be a coincidence that her teenage son had died at about the same time as a small business she was running began to blossom. It was suggested that her success in business could be attributed to her use of witchcraft which had required her to sacrifice her own son.

In principle, the use of business medicines provided by traditional healers and the use of witchcraft to attain wealth are two different things, a point that is repeatedly stressed by healers themselves, who insist that clients who seek their services are not required to make any immoral sacrifices in order to attain wealth. However, owing to the healers' self-proclaimed ability to identify witches and protect people against witchcraft, many people, both born-again Christians and others, suspect that healers must also be witches themselves and that receiving business medicines from healers implies getting involved with the powers of witchcraft (see Lindhardt 2014a). It follows that business medicines in Iringa are mainly used secretly. While most of the traditional healers I have spoken to insist that they sell a lot of it, and people who have small businesses or market stalls express little doubt when asked if they believe that their business rivals use it, very few people openly admit to using it themselves.

The use of business medicines and the circulation of rumors connecting the generation of wealth to witchcraft testify to a widely shared understanding that some kind of spiritual/magical assistance is required or can at least make a significant difference for those who wish to succeed in financial affairs, an understanding that resonates with the message of the Prosperity Gospel and has without doubt facilitated its entrance into Tanzania's religious scene. At the same time, ministries and preachers delivering the message of material blessings are at pains to distinguish themselves from other providers of magical/spiritual assistance in financial affairs and, not least, to distinguish the power of God from the immoral powers of witchcraft. Although Prosperity preachers sometimes argue that the power of God is more efficient, insisting that most healers are simple frauds and charlatans, some preachers and many lay-members of Prosperity-oriented ministries and revival groups acknowledge that fast wealth is in fact more likely to be attained through assistance from witches and/or healers, and that the main advantage of the wealth that comes as a result of divine blessings is its moral legitimacy. Hence, preachers repeatedly stress that wealth derived from a divine source comes without conditions and does not require immoral sacrifices.

The moral legitimacy of the wealth given by God is further established by a marked emphasis on transparency. For instance, the public testimonies of born-again Christians who attribute economic prosperity in their lives to divine blessings stand in a demonstrative contrast to the opacity and secrecy that surround the use of business medicines and of witchcraft. In addition, services in Pentecostal/Charismatic ministries and revival groups generally include ritualized offerings where congregants openly pay their tithes and make donations that will supposedly result in divine blessings. Such offerings are a stark contrast to the immoral and secret sacrifices of family members which, according to popular belief, are required to attain wealth by using witchcraft (Lindhardt 2009). Despite attempts to emphasize transparency and legitimacy, it remains difficult to convincingly legitimize this wealth as derived from God. Wealthy born-again Christians who themselves attribute their financial success to divine blessings do sometimes face suspicion, or in some cases open accusations, of witchcraft, even from fellow church-members.

### **3. Chuma Ulete (Reap and Bring)**

As witchcraft is surrounded by opacity and secrecy, accounts of how witchcraft may be used to attain wealth are often vague and lacking in specific details. The aforementioned case of Mama Elisabeth is quite typical insofar as others speculated that she was either a

witch herself or had sought the assistance of a witch, but in either case she was actively involved with the powers of witchcraft. The child had apparently died of a natural illness but in reality—so many suggested—his life force had been drained by witches and, like other victims of witchcraft, he was eaten, either at a secret nighttime witchcraft banquet where participants take turns in providing the human flesh, or by the spirits (*majini*) that many witches keep as their assistants. In return for the sacrifice of her son, Mama Elisabeth started receiving more customers at the small business she was running at the time.

When asked how people who work at markets or in small shops may use witchcraft to increase their sales, my interviewees and people with whom I have had informal conversations, both born-again Christians and others, would come up with slightly more detailed explications of specific magical means. The use of business medicines (*dawa za biashara*) which contain magical powers that can be poured out on a stall was frequently mentioned, with many participants in my study insisting that the magical powers were really the powers of spirits. The fact that business medicines, which are sold by traditional healers, were commonly mentioned whenever I asked people about the use of witchcraft, clearly testifies to the widespread perception of porous boundaries between traditional healing and witchcraft.

Another commonly reported way of using witchcraft in markets is related to the exchange of physical money. This kind of witchcraft, which can be practiced by both customers and sellers in markets and shops, is known as *chuma ulete* (reap and bring) and consists of mixing the money of a witch with the money of a victim. Over the years I have interviewed several small business owners and people who had small stalls in markets who explained how they were robbed of their earnings through *chuma ulete*. What happened, so participants in my study told me, was that a customer who was really a witch would come early in the day and purchase commodities or a service (fruits, vegetables, clothes, tools, a haircut, etc.) and pay in cash. The seller would then put the money in a purse and as the day went by, put money received from other customers in the same purse. At the end of the day, the seller would find that most of the cash had miraculously disappeared. In a similar vein, other people told me about incidents where they had gone to a market to purchase something and then put the change they received when paying in cash in their pockets and purses, together with the rest of their money. When they came home, they would discover that no or very little cash remained in their purse or pocket. Similar stories about losing money after having exchanged cash with others in markets or shops are reported by the Tanzanian anthropologist Jacqueline Halima Mgumia, who conducted research among young business entrepreneurs in Dar es Salaam, many of whom were engaged in social media exchanges about techniques for dealing with *chuma ulete*. Mgumia notes how some business owners would refuse to receive money from customers they suspected of being witches (Mgumia 2020a, pp. 92–93) while others cut banknotes on the edges, believing it would protect them from being stolen by means of *chuma ulete* (Mgumia 2020b, p. 84).

Rumors and suspicions about *chuma ulete* rest on a widespread assumption that magical powers of witchcraft can reside in physical money and that exchanging money with others can therefore be potentially dangerous. This understanding also applies to material objects other than money. For instance, according to popular belief, the powers of witchcraft can also reside in clothes, which means that a person should think twice about wearing clothes that were given as a gift by someone suspected of being a witch with harmful intentions. Dora, a young born-again Christian woman, once told me how she was possessed by several spirits after she shaved off some of her body hair with a razor provided by an aunt, whom she suspected of being a witch. In such cases, witches mainly use objects to pass on powers that will harm the health of others, maybe with the purpose of killing them off so that the witch and/or their spirits may consume the flesh and blood of the victim. *Chuma ulete* can only be practiced with physical money and generally does not imply harming the health of others, but it is a technique used for stealing money. Discourses on *chuma ulete* and practices for countering it, which in the case of born-again Christians include praying over money (a topic to which I return shortly), testify to understandings

of physical money as objects that are not only used as a medium of exchange in worldly economies, but which may also mediate or serve as points of transfer between worldly economies and spiritual powers.

#### 4. Bride Wealth

Another area where understandings of money as exceeding both its materiality and its use value as cash are prevalent is the practice of bride wealth. A thorough exploration of this complex topic would require an entire monograph or dissertation, but here a brief outline of the practice of bride wealth and its importance in terms of establishing relations will have to suffice.

In Tanzania, the practice of bride wealth transcends both tribal and religious divides, although significant differences can be observed both between some tribes and between Christians and Muslims, with the latter being known to demand lower amounts of money. Even Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians who are characterized by very critical stances toward many aspects of African tradition (see Lindhardt 2014a, 2014b, 2017) embrace the payment of bride wealth as a necessary and indispensable part of a marriage and generally explain its importance in terms of *mila na desturi*, tradition and custom.

The initial payment of bride wealth occurs when a man who wishes to marry approaches his potential parents-in-law with a letter, asking for their daughter's hand in marriage. The letter is accompanied by a relatively small amount of money, typically (at least in the case of Christians) around 50,000 to 100,000 Tanzanian shillings (approximately 18 to 36 US dollars). This payment is called *posa*, and while it only makes up a small part of the total bride wealth (less than 10 percent), it is in some ways the most important part.

The *posa* and the letter are handed over to the parents of the potential bride by a third party who is generally someone known to and respected by the parents, for instance a local church elder or a chairman of a local neighborhood association. Having received the letter with the *posa*, the parents call for a meeting with other relatives to discuss the issue. At one point during the meeting, the potential bride is requested to join and is asked if she wishes to marry the suitor. If she accepts and the family gathered considers the man in question to be suitable husband material, they discuss the *mhari*, which is the remaining part of the bride wealth. A letter is written to the suitor, informing him about the acceptance of the *posa* and about the amount of *mhari* that needs to be paid. *Mhari* is counted in cattle, goats, and sheep, but in practice, the groom is expected to come up with the money equivalent of those animals. In Christian families in Iringa, *mhari* generally spans between one and three million Tanzanian shilling (430 to 1100 US dollars), which for many Tanzanian men is a substantial amount. In addition, *mhari* includes some items such as sheets, blankets, and hoes. Upon receiving the letter, the suitor may negotiate the *mhari* and ask for a small reduction. The *mhari* will generally be paid at a later point and often in installments, but ideally a good part should be paid before an actual wedding takes place.

As mentioned, despite being a small amount, the *posa* is considered to be the most important part of bride wealth. People I spoke to about bride wealth would unanimously describe the payment of *posa* as an indispensable way for a man to introduce himself to potential parents-in-law. In fact, the payment of *posa* can be considered to halfway consolidate a marriage. Living with a woman without having paid *posa* to her parents was often described to me as nothing short of theft and I was told that in such a case the parents would not visit the household of their daughter and her partner and not receive the man in their own home. One elderly born-again Christian man, father of a couple of daughters, explained to me that in this hypothetical scenario "we do not know this young man. Why did he take our daughter without getting to know us? We do not know who he is. Why does he not respect us?" A couple living together after the man has paid the *posa* but still owes the *mhari* is anything but an ideal situation, but it is nevertheless widely acknowledged that harsh economic circumstances and the difficulty of raising enough money for *mhari* can make such an arrangement a necessary temporary solution, especially in cases where the union of a couple has already resulted in offspring. In such cases, the

couple will refer to themselves and be seen by others as husband and wife, even if the marriage still needs to be consolidated with an actual wedding and the payment of *mhari*.

The understanding that parents would not know the groom until the *posa* was paid was persistent in my conversations with Tanzanians about bride wealth, with one elderly born-again Christian man, the father of three daughters, asking, “How could I let a man take my daughter if I do not even know who he is?”. My objections that it is possible to get to know someone without receiving money from that person made little sense to him. Clearly, the only way a potential groom could truly make himself known to future in-laws was by giving them money. In other words, the payment of *posa* is seen as foundational and constitutive of a social relationship between a groom and his in-laws.

In classical sociological thought, for instance in the work of Karl Marx ([1864] 1932) and Georg Simmel ([1907] 1978), money economies are generally seen as conducive for impersonality, anonymity, and the nullification of individual qualities. However, later work by anthropologists has demonstrated how such understandings of money are not universal, and that money can be deeply entangled in different cultural fabrics (Parry and Bloch 1989; Carstens 1989; Lindhardt 2009; Maurer 2006). In the case of *posa*, money is not an impersonal or anonymous medium of exchange that renders the individual qualities of those who give it irrelevant, but instead becomes a highly personalized gift which, similar to gifts that were exchanged in the so-called archaic societies studied by Mauss, contains qualities of its giver. It follows that accepting the money paid as *posa* essentially means accepting the person who gives it as a future family member.

The payment and acceptance of *posa* establish a relationship, which continues with the payment of *mhari*. As mentioned, the payment of the *mhari* generally occurs later and mostly in installments. Some of my interviewees insisted that the amount requested for *mhari* should not be paid in full or that in cases where the *mhari* is paid in full, part of it should be returned, or additional *mhari* may be requested but never paid. Especially in cases where parents of a bride see that their son-in-law treats their daughter well and that the marriage is thriving, it is common and to some extent expected that they annul the last part of the *mhari*. The payment of *mhari* should not have the character of a finalized transaction, which could imply the ending of a relationship.

My Tanzanian interviewees unanimously insisted that paying *posa* and *mhari* was not equivalent to purchasing a wife as a commodity and that a woman’s worth cannot be measured in money. At the same time, the money involved does not lose its status as cash value, and the amount paid is not considered completely irrelevant in terms of signaling and establishing the value and respectability of a woman and the position of the spouses within a marriage. Some women commented that being married with a low *mhari* would make them feel *rahisi* (cheap, easy) and not respectable. Other women, especially relatively young widows or women who had been previously married and already had children, explained that if they were to remarry, they would prefer a low *mhari* because a high amount could limit their freedom within a marriage by making their future husband more prone to feel entitled to treat them as slaves he had bought and paid for. Such understandings were not shared by all my interviewees, but they do testify to the complexity of bride wealth and the ambiguity of the money that it involves. On the one hand, money paid as bride wealth is, in part, removed from a purely commercial sphere and takes on the qualities of a personal gift which contains parts of the essence of its giver and which, by virtue of being given and received, is constitutive of social relations. At the same time, bride wealth money does to some extent (but not unambiguously) retain its status as cash value and as an indicator of the worth of that for which it is exchanged, and hence its removal from the logics and principles of commercial exchange is only partial.

## 5. The Ritualized Handling of Money

In the examples provided above (*chuma ulete* and bride wealth), we have seen how money, in addition to its commercial value as cash, can be imbued with spiritual powers and may also contain qualities and essences of humans. In the remaining part of this article,



we will see how such understandings of money are also present in local expressions of the Prosperity Gospel and inform ritual strategies for handling money.

When I returned to Iringa in 2016 after a few years of absence, Mama Jonas, a born-again Christian woman and active member of the charismatic revival movement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Iringa came to visit me. She told me that her husband had left her and taken their two children with him and moved to another city. During my subsequent visits to Iringa in the following years, I regularly met with Mama Jonas, and each time new layers and details were added to the story of her disastrous marriage. She had learned that her ex-husband was a witch who had originally succeeded in seducing and marrying her using witchcraft. She acknowledged that the marriage was doomed from the very beginning since her parents and other relatives had refused to receive the *posa* her husband brought them when he originally asked for her hand in marriage. Being under the influence of his powers of witchcraft, Mama Jonas nevertheless agreed to start living with him without the blessings of her parents. She gave birth to two children and eventually they were married in the church, but still without the blessing of her family. After some very turbulent years of marriage, the husband left her and took the two children with him and moved to another city. Although she missed her children terribly, the main concern of Mama Jonas was related to how the witchcraft of her ex-husband would influence their lives and safety. She received reports that one of her children was performing very poorly in school, which she attributed to the powers of witchcraft of her ex-husband draining the child's energy and mental capacities.

Mama Jonas did on several occasions reach out to relatives of the ex-husband and to the pastor and a church elder of the church he was attending, hoping they might help her persuade him to return the children to her. However, her primary strategy for protecting and securing the well-being of her children was praying. She would include her children in most of her prayers, but it was especially when paying tithes and making other money offerings in church that she sought their protection. Mama Jonas explained to me how, before going to church, she would put the money she intended to donate in a small piece of cloth, which she would then hold in her hands while praying intensely, thus placing (*kuweka*) her request in the money.

The understanding that Christians can approach God via donating money in church and place a part of themselves (a request, a deeply felt desire, a concern) in that money has resemblances with understandings of money paid as bride wealth. Although born-again Christians believe that a person can always pray to God and ask for protection, wealth, and other kinds of blessings, they also share an understanding that big and serious requests should be placed in money. Such understandings of money as mediators between human qualities, desires, and divine blessings, and to some extent as constitutive of relations between humans and God, are prevalent during offerings in services, where congregants are frequently told to place requests and concerns in the money before donating it. During one charismatic revival meeting in the Lutheran Church I attended in March 2023, the pastor introduced the part of the meeting where offerings take place by encouraging all congregants to "bring your soul, bring your family, bring your country, bring your problems to God."

It has been argued by several scholars that offerings and the paying of tithes in Prosperity ministries in different parts of the world tend to follow the logic of gift economies insofar as offerings are not conceived of as simple one-time payments for blessings but as moments in an ongoing relationship of exchange, indebtedness, and mutual commitment between humans and God (see [Droz and Gez 2015](#); [Hasu 2006](#); [Premawardhana 2012](#)). A crucial feature of gift economies is that acceptance of a gift implies social acceptance of, and indebtedness to, its giver. Another important principle in gift economies is the delay of counter-gifts, since the immediate return of a counter-gift would be signal of a finalized transaction and thus imply a denial of a lasting relationship of exchange ([Lindhardt 2015a](#)). Born-again Christians in Iringa would explain to me that God only accepts money from givers with pure hearts, which means that money acquired through theft or witchcraft,

although it can be used for practical purposes such as church maintenance, will not generate divine counter-gifts. Born-again Christians further acknowledge that divine counter-gifts that follow from tithes and donations are somehow unpredictable both in terms of their timing and of their nature. It follows that donating money in church implies putting a good deal of trust in God and expecting that he will know when and how to bless his children.

While scholars have noted how logics of gift economies can be identified in the ways in which Christians from Prosperity ministries and groups conceive of offerings and tithes, little attention has been paid to how money itself can take on the qualities of an inalienable gift, invested with parts of its donor (but see [Lindhardt 2009, 2015a](#)). In Prosperity ministries and groups in Iringa, this understanding of money is evident both in how people handle money before donating it and in the ways in which money is handled after being donated. Once congregants in a service are finished with their offerings, a ritual leader will generally pray over the basket of donated coins and bank notes. The purpose of this praying is, in part, to bless and bring prosperity to the donors who are still believed to be intimately connected to their money even after it has left their pockets and purses. In the previous section, we saw how understandings of *chuma ulete* rest on the assumption that witches are still connected to their money after having passed it on to someone else in a market exchange, which is why they are able to steal the money of others by mixing it with their own money. In a similar vein, for born-again Christians, money given as offerings in church remains connected to its donors, and blessing already donated money will allegedly also have an impact on the donor's this-worldly material and financial affairs, including on how the money that they did not donate, and which remains in their pockets and purses, may blossom and be used constructively.

In the previous section on bride wealth, we saw how money paid by a groom to in-laws is removed from the logics of commercial exchange, but that this removal remains incomplete. In a similar vein, although money donated to God as tithes and offerings takes on the qualities of an inalienable gift that is deeply connected to its human donor and hence serves to establish a relation between them and the receiver (God), it never entirely loses its status as cash value. Wealthy born-again Christians who are known to make large donations tend to enjoy an elevated status within their ministries. In addition, several born-again Christians have explained to me that a large request made to God should ideally be accompanied by a large donation. Similar to how money is paid as bride wealth, despite being seen mainly as a symbolic gesture of respect and a way of constituting a human relation, does also in some ways and to some extent reflect the value of a woman and the extent to which a man can be said to "own" her or feel entitled to treat her in a certain way after being married, offerings and tithes paid in church are not completely disentangled from a market logic, according to which there should be some equivalence between the price and the value of a commodity. In other words, money donated as offerings or tithes retains a double-edged and highly ambiguous status. It is exactly this ambiguity or the understanding that material money can be different things at the same time that facilitates its mediating role between spiritual powers and everyday economic affairs.

As indicated in the previous comments about divine blessings of money, it is not only human qualities and requests or the powers of witchcraft that may reside in physical money. Born-again Christians (and others) believe that through praying, coins and banknotes can also be imbued with the power of God. Several born-again Christians have told me that when receiving money, for instance their salaries if they had ordinary paid jobs, they would pray for it, hoping that divine power would make it last longer and allow it to be used in a productive way. Imbuing money with divine power through prayers is also a common strategy for countering *chuma ulete*, as it will allegedly be more difficult or even impossible for a witch to steal coins and banknotes that are protected by God. In addition to protecting money against theft through witchcraft, praying over coins and banknotes can also be a more aggressive strategy for actively combating and reducing the powers of witchcraft. Elsewhere ([Lindhardt 2015b](#)), I have recounted the story of a well-known businesswoman in Iringa, Mama Mbilinyi, who was an active lay member of the Lutheran revival movement

and publicly proclaimed her born-again identity, but who was also suspected by many of secretly practicing witchcraft and of having succeeded in business by sacrificing a son who died in a car accident. Allegedly, Mama Mbilinyi lost most of her powers of witchcraft when a famous revivalist preacher held a rally in Iringa, and she foolishly decided to publicly display her wealth and status by joining him on stage and in front of a large crowd donated a substantial sum of cash to his ministry. The preacher decided to pray over the cash immediately, which some of my Tanzanian acquaintances attributed to him having sensed that it contained evil powers and had to be cleaned right away. As the money was ritually purified by the power of God, Mama Mbilinyi, who was still connected to her money after having donated it, was drained of her powers of witchcraft.

## 6. Conclusions

As the Prosperity Gospel has gone global in recent decades, it has also undergone processes of contextualization and taken a variety of forms and expressions. In Tanzania, the message of the Prosperity Gospel finds resonance with widespread cultural assumptions regarding the need for spiritual assistance in financial affairs. At the same time, we have seen how cultural concerns with the legitimacy and potential dangers of wealth attained through alliances with spiritual forces have also influenced how Prosperity ministries' positions themselves in Tanzania's spiritual market. In this article, I have further attempted to demonstrate how expressions of the Prosperity Gospel in Tanzania have taken shape through deep entanglements with particular stances to materiality and more specifically with understandings of physical money as an object that exceeds both its materiality and its use value as cash, and which may be imbued with both human qualities and spiritual powers. For Tanzanian born-again Christians, the ritualized handling of physical money becomes a crucial strategy, both for connecting with God and establishing an ongoing relationship of mutual commitment with him, and for combatting and protecting themselves against the powers of witchcraft. At the heart of the Prosperity Gospel is the understanding that God blesses his children materially in the here and now and that his children are required to pay tithes and make money offerings to their church. In Tanzanian expressions of the Prosperity Gospel, the mediation or passage between spiritual power and everyday well-being (including financial prosperity, good health, and protection against witchcraft) is enabled through the ritual handling of wealth in one of its most concrete and tangible forms, namely coins and bank notes.

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