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## SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Religious testimonial narratives and social construction of identity: Insights from prophetic ministries in Botswana

Gabriel Faimau<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** Giving a testimony forms a central part of the religious practices among Pentecostal churches including prophetic ministries. Testimony links the understanding of one's religious experience and the configuration of the divine intervention. Utilizing data collected through ethnographic observation among prophetic ministries in Botswana and digital ethnography of the testimonial narratives circulated online through various new media outlets of these ministries, this paper examines the ways in which religious identity is constructed and understood through the testimonial performance in various religious services. Informed by the premise that narrative is closely related to identity, the paper pays particular attention to the extent to which religious testimonies influence the dynamic relationship between individual, communal and institutional religious identity. The following questions are central to the analysis: In what ways does a religious testimony inform us about the construction and negotiation of religious identity? To what extent does a religious testimony influence the dynamic relationship between individual, communal and institutional religious identity? While suggesting that religious identity constructions and negotiations are embedded within the sharing of religious testimonies, I also argue that the sharing of a religious testimony has an agentive function of extending the social relationship between an individual believer, other believers and the religious community within which the testimony is shared.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabriel Faimau, PhD, is a senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Botswana. His main research interests include new media and religious practice, politics of multiculturalism, social implications of HIV/AIDS and graduate employability. His current research focuses on new media and religious practices among prophetic ministries in Botswana. He was the principal investigator of a study on "New Media and Cultural Application on Religion", funded by the Nagel Institute with a generous support of funds from the John Templeton Foundation, USA.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Giving a testimony forms a central part of the religious practices with the circle of Pentecostal Christianity including prophetic Christianity. Through giving a testimony, a believer is expected to tell a personal story of encounter with God and how such an encounter has become a life-changing event and experience. Using insights from the practice of "testimony time" among prophetic ministries in Botswana, this article focuses on examining the ways in which religious identity is constructed and understood through the testimonial performance in various religious services. The article advances two related arguments. Firstly, religious identity constructions and negotiations are embedded within the sharing of religious testimonies. Secondly, the sharing of a religious testimony extends social and religious relationship between an individual believer, other believers and the religious community within which the testimony is shared.

**Subjects: Social & Cultural Anthropology; Ethnography & Methodology; Sociology of Media; Sociology of Religion; Christianity; Religion; Cultural Studies**

**Keywords: testimony; religious testimony; identity; construction of identity; prophetic ministries; Botswana; Facebook; YouTube; new media**

### 1. Introduction

Giving a religious testimony forms a central part of the religious practices among Pentecostal churches including prophetic ministries. Testimony links the understanding of one's faith and the configuration of the divine intervention. Although it is often classified as a genre of speech, within the realm of religious belief, testimony becomes a way of communicating religious experience. While the experience may be subjective, an experience becomes a religious experience when it is framed within the context of religious belief of an individual and community. Since religious experience is very central to the life of believers, Pentecostal churches introduce the idea of testimony time where believers are given the opportunity to share their personal experience with the Divine and how an encounter with the Divine creates, shapes and transforms one's life (Cartledge, 2016; Ellington, 2000, 2001, 2008; McGuire, 1977; Richie, 2011; Sepúlveda, 1989).

Utilizing data collected through ethnographic observation of testimonies among prophetic ministries in Botswana and digital ethnography of the testimonial narratives circulated online through various new media outlets of these ministries, this paper examines the ways within which religious identity is constructed and understood through the testimony performance in various religious services. Moreover, it analyses the extent to which religious testimonies including those circulated through various new media platforms associated with the prophetic ministries influence the dynamic relationship between individual, communal and institutional religious identity. This analysis is based on the premise that narrative is closely related to identity because narrative is a core element and source of identity construction and negotiation (Cornell, 2000). The following questions guide the analytical approach in this paper: In what ways does a religious testimony inform us about the construction and negotiation of religious identity? To what extent does a religious testimony influence the dynamic relationship between individual, communal and institutional religious identity? In an attempt to address these questions, I will first provide a background note on the prophetic Christianity in Botswana followed by a brief overview of the explanatory framework that shaped the analysis and methodology that regulated the study process. This will provide a context for analyzing the phases of religious identity construction in the religious testimonial narratives as well as examining narratives of social relationship between an individual believer, other believers and the religious community embedded in the testimonies. Through this paper, I approach religious testimony as a form of narrative.

### 2. Background note on prophetic Christianity in Botswana

Botswana is a landlocked country in Southern Africa. It shares borders with South Africa, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The 2011 Population and Housing Census indicated that Christianity is the predominant religion with 70 per cent of the population stated that they were Christians (Statistics Botswana, 2014). Studies on Christianity in Botswana generally classify Christianity into three main families of churches: Mainline churches; Africa Independent churches; and Evangelical, Pentecostal or Charismatic churches (Amanze, 1994; Haron & Jensen, 2008). Currently there are over 2,000 registered churches in Botswana; the majority of which are Evangelical or Pentecostal Churches (Faimau & Behrens, 2016).

The Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity in Botswana has become the fastest growing religious movement in the country. This religious movement arrived in Botswana in the early 1930s (Amanze & Hamathi, 2011; Togarasei, 2016). Morton, Ramsay, and Mgadla (2008) noted that the first Pentecostal church in Botswana was founded in 1935 with the establishment of the Church of God in Christ. Studies revealed that the introduction of Pentecostalism during this period was marked by misunderstanding, mistrust and rejection to the extent that it was regarded as subversive of local

political and religious landscape dominated by traditional religions and missionary churches with the support of colonial administrators and traditional leaders (Morton et al., 2008; Nkomazana, 2014). Pentecostalism began to have a lasting impact at the beginning of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly through the establishment of well-known Pentecostal-Charismatic churches such as the Assemblies of God, Apostolic Faith Mission, Church of God in Christ, Pentecostal Holiness Church and Full Gospel Church of God (Amanze, 2007). Nkomazana (2014) noted that the impact Pentecostalism in Botswana during this period was possible, due to Botswana's new Constitution at independence in 1966 that allowed for and guaranteed religious freedom, expression and assembly.

In recent years Botswana has seen the rise of new pentecostal churches, particularly prophetic ministries, introduced by pastors and evangelists from countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Malawi and other parts of Africa (Amanze & Hamathi, 2011). The introduction of prophetic Christianity gave space to the birth of Botswana-based prophetic ministries, led by Botswana-born prophets or charismatic religious leaders. This can be seen in the establishment of prophetic ministries, such as the Gospel of God's Grace Ministries also known as 3G Ministries in Kopong village led by Prophet Cedric Kobedi, Be Free Christian Church in Tsolamosese village led by Prophet Keletso Moenda, Healing Faith Ministries in Ramotswa village led by Apostle Daniel Ebenezer, and Gates of Heaven Network widely known as Saving Grace Ministries in Maun village led by Prophet T.P. Elias.<sup>1</sup> Like Pentecostal-charismatic churches, the newly emerged prophetic ministries maintain the dogmatic emphasis on prophecy, healing and deliverance. Similar to the Pentecostal movements in general, one of the characteristics of prophetic ministries in Botswana is the use of media, particularly the new media. By new media, I refer to forms of computer mediated communication in a digital world such as the Internet, social media and social networking. Prophetic ministries in Botswana generally use websites, social media and social networking sites (Faimau & Behrens, 2016; Togarasei, 2012). Through these new media outlets, prophetic ministries provide information relating different religious practices, including the circulation of religious testimonies.

### 3. Explanatory framework: Narratives and construction of identity

This paper focuses on examining the religious identity construction through the sharing of religious testimonial narratives among prophetic ministries in Botswana. The construction of identity occurs within the social relationship between the testifier and the self and the relationship between others and the religious community within which the testimony is shared. In his notable work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman introduces the notion of the socially situated self. According to Goffman (1959, p. 223), "[the] self does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses." In other words, a sense of self and identity is socially constructed. I, therefore, approach the notion of identity construction from a constructionist perspective on the grounds that identities "are not given, fixed, or unchanging, but are continually evolving products of material and social circumstances ..." (Cornell, 2000, p. 42). Social constructivism is rooted and centered on the belief that human beings are meaning-making agents. Meaning-making occurs through the interpretations and understandings of the world which is often influenced by the social relationships. Through this construction, people develop imaginative models to rationalize the social world and experiences that occur in a social relationship. In relation to identity, one could argue that "identities are constructed because they are based on the subjective theoretical constructs and values that we bring to our interpretation of our personal experience" (Nguyen, 2000, p. 177) and events that occur in our social world.

As already indicated, giving a religious testimony forms a central part of the religious practices within Pentecostal Christianity, including prophetic ministries in Botswana. Testimonial narratives are central in prophetic Christianity because they shape the history and development of prophetic ministries (Sepúlveda, 1989). Park-Fuller (2000, p. 22) argues that religious testimony "depicts a struggle against sin or suffering and demonstrates the triumph of good over evil." She further outlines the content and substance of religious testimony but, as a discursive practice, narratives of religious testimonies also offer a space for religious identity construction. Harris and Koenig (2006)

study on child development, for example, demonstrates that religious testimonies influence the way children learn, conceptualize and develop their religious identity in relation to the idea of the divine. They also suggest that many adults base their beliefs on religious testimonies and not on firsthand observation. Similarly, Faimau and Behrens (2016) work highlights how religious testimonies posted on a Facebook page inform the religious identity formation of Facebook users and suggest that such posted testimonies also influence the way Facebook users view who they are.

The above assertion is supported by the view that identity is “a narrative construction” (Ammerman, 2003). For Ammerman, narrative, including religious testimonial narrative, provides a tool for understanding the nature of identities because identity construction and negotiation can be seen in the words people use and the stories they choose to tell. Moreover, narrative identity offers a space through which story of the self evolves. Through the use of specific words and the telling of stories the testifier presents and interprets events and experiences that highlight different models and meanings of relationships which, in turn, shape one’s identity. Therefore, Somers (1994, p. 606; also cited in Ammerman, 2003, p. 213) claims that “(A)ll of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives ...” Narratives therefore connect a testifier to himself or herself and provide an opportunity for a testifier to establish social relationships and practices with others because “the core self is constantly being negotiated in the various social context of a life ...” (Ammerman, 2003, p. 214). Within this context, Hewitt (2000, p. 79; also cited in Lovheim, 2013, p. 42) defines identity construction as “the process by which an individual develops the capacity to grasp the meaning of situations in everyday life and their own position in relation to them.” These basic elements of narrative construction of identity are considered by Slocum-Bradley (2010) when she examines four related facets of identity construction. These four facets of identity construction, (namely: storylines, identities, rights and duties, as well as social forces) tend to form what she calls a “positioning diamond.” Here, storylines refer to narrative structures used to provide the meaning of an event or experience. A storyline functions as the context that determines identity formation. The narrative functions as social forces that creates space for interpretation of meaning and sense of self. At the same time, when identities are evoked in a given situation, the process assists the testifier to realize his or her rights and duties in a social relationship with the audience.

Understanding religious identities involves “attending to episodes of social interaction (whether face-to-face or mediated) that are emplotted in a *religious* narrative ...” (Ammerman, 2003, p. 216). Religious narratives such as testimonies provide a setting where a testifier activates his or her socio-religious relationship and defines him/herself within that relationship. This reinforces the idea that telling a religious narrative is “the relational ordering and framing of event and experience” (Cornell, 2000, p. 44). Therefore, the construction of religious identities is always multilayered as the construction and negotiation of a religious identity cannot be separated from religious actors, ideas, events, experiences and institutions. Identity construction, including religious identity construction, is an on-going process that changes with evolving contexts and relationships and involves critical negotiation and internal disposition. In the context of religious identity construction, religion and the religious communities in which religious identities are constructed and negotiated provide religious meaning-making filters that enable the orientation of individual and social perception of identity dimensions (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Religious communities or organizations function as the space and context providers for transitional meaning-making as well as for the development of integrated identities. When a testimony is shared in a religious community, socialization process takes place — individuals and members of the community internalize socio-religious meanings, re-interpret them as well as respond to them through various religious expressions (Thumma, 1991). It is through this socialization process that religious identity formation take place. Within this frame of social constructivism, the data analysis and interpretation will be framed.

#### 4. Note on methodology

This paper draws on data collected for two research projects: “Marketization of Religion in Botswana”<sup>2</sup> and “New Media and Cultural Application of Religion: A Case Study of Prophetic Ministries in

Botswana.”<sup>3</sup> Fieldwork for both studies took place between September 2014 and April 2015, and between April and December 2016 respectively. Both studies involved eight purposively selected prophetic ministries based in Gaborone city and its surrounding areas, Francistown city and Maun.<sup>4</sup> Although the research fieldwork employed multiple research methods, the present paper focuses on 53 testimonial narratives gathered through digital ethnography of websites, YouTube channels, Facebook pages and blog posts of the selected prophetic ministries. Using digital ethnography as a methodological approach, I develop new understandings of “observation” and “participation” as I engage in a digital research fieldwork (Markham, 2013; Pink et al., 2016). The observation includes archiving religious testimonies circulated online in various new media outlets by the selected prophetic ministries. After archiving the testimonies, I categorized the data using pre-coded themes for the purpose of data analysis. ‘Digital participation’ encompasses following closely the online circulation of religious testimonies. It is a common practice within Botswana’s prophetic ministries where testimonies are shared offline during church services and are circulated online through various new media outlets thereafter. Apart from using digital ethnography, I also observed most of the selected testimonies shared during offline church service before they were circulated online through various new media outlets.

Narrative analysis was employed as an analytical technique to determine how religious identities are constructed and negotiated in various religious testimonies. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1986, p. 16), “narrative refers to the making of meaning through personal experience by way of a process of reflection in which storytelling is a key element and in which metaphors and folk knowledge take their place.” Since narrative is about meaning-making, narratives can be considered as representations and discursive in nature. The object of investigation of any narrative analysis is the story itself (Riessman, 1993). Narrative analysis uncovers how a story is told, what is said and determines how the testifier interprets the events and the experiences through how one tells one’s story. Moreover, narrative analysis examines multiple meanings that are embedded in various stories. In other words, narrative analysis unpacks the world of a testifier and how it is constructed. In Riessman’s words, “[i]nformants’ stories do not mirror a world ‘out there.’ They are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive” (1993, p. 5).

Additionally, positioning analysis was used to examine the positioning strategy of a testifier in the identity construction enterprise (Bamberg, 1997, 2011; Georgakopoulou, 2013; Watson, 2007). This technique of analysis pays particular attention to how a testifier positions himself or herself and how he or she is positioned in the story. According to Bamberg (2011, p. 10), the positioning model allows identity constructions to be viewed in two related ways: “we are able to analyze the way the referential world is constructed ... and ... we are able to show how the referential world (of what the story is about) is constructed as a function of the interactive engagement, where the way the referential world is put together points to how tellers ‘want to be understood’; or more appropriately, how tellers index a sense of self.” Generally speaking, positioning analysis operates on three levels, as pointed out by Watson (2007). The first level deals with how the characters are established within the story. It is concerned with questions such as “What is this story about?” and “Who are the characters and why are they positioned this way?” The second level focuses on what the testifier is trying to accomplish with the story, including the narrative strategies and the interactional effects. The third level addresses how identity is constructed. Here, the focus is on questions such as: “who am I?” and “what does society say I should be?” In employing this micro-technique of analysis, I aim to uncover the discursive construction of identity as seen in the testimonial narratives given in prophetic ministries in Botswana.

When testimonial narratives are told and shared in the public domain through various new media outlets, testimonial narratives emerge as discursive activities. In using narrative and positioning analysis, I examine such discursive activities to determine the process of identity construction and negotiation. To facilitate the narrative and positioning analysis, I implemented three stages of data coding: open, axial and selective coding (Boeije, 2010; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss, 1987). Through open coding, I examined the structure of testimonial narratives and categorized the

emerging themes in those narratives. Using this technique, I cover both aspects of a narrative: how it is told (narrative structure) and what it said (emerging themes). In the axial coding phase, I increased the level of conceptual abstraction and determined the relevance of the categories for the in-depth analysis. In the final phase, selective coding, I identified “connections between the categories in order to make sense of what is happening in the field” (Boeije, 2010, p. 114).

The two research projects mentioned earlier received ethical approval from the University of Botswana Ethical Review Board as well as research permits from Botswana’s Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs. While the new media outlets belonged to the selected prophetic ministries are open to public view, I did not participate in posting comments. Nevertheless, I participated in the sense that I closely followed the dynamics of the testimony posts and the variety of comments from the new media users. I consider the new media outlets as a public environment because they are available for all new media users and registration is not required for watching YouTube videos or the reading of posts, comments and reviews (Peuronen, 2011). The testimonies were also shared publicly during offline church services. Informed consent was therefore not sought from the testifiers. I did, however, receive permission from the selected prophetic ministries to conduct the studies. While testimonial narratives shared offline and circulated online through new media outlets are easily available to the public with real names of the testifiers, to protect the testimonial narrative testifiers, their names are abbreviated throughout the analysis in this paper.<sup>5</sup>

## 5. Testimonial narratives and phases of religious identity construction

The religious testimonial narratives that form the data of this study generally appear as ontological narratives. “Ontological narratives are the stories we tell in an effort to make sense of how we experience ourselves and how we would like to be understood in order to bring structure to our personal lives” (Soreide, 2007, p. 529; see also Somers & Gibson, 1994). Therefore, these narratives normally include the following: they have a subject or subjects (main actor(s) or group(s) in question), an event or action (what happened), and the underlying value of the story. In general, a narrative attaches a value to its subject(s) (Cornell, 2000). When a narrative is told and shared, the testifier includes a selection of events which he or she attempts to link together, and claim-making concerning the significance and meaning of the events (Ricoeur, 1988). During the data analysis process, I noticed the strong relationships between individual religious identity, shared identity and institutional identity. In other words, within a religious sphere, religious testimonial narratives extend the construction of the individual, collective, and institutional identity. Through the coding process, three phases of identity construction were identified: setting the narrative orientation, narrative of encounter and self-discovery, narrative of transformation and religious commitment (see also Faimau, 2017). In this sub-section, we shall examine the identity construction process in each phase.

### 5.1. Phase I: Setting the orientation: Narratives of a lost self

The testimonial narratives I examined began with “setting the stage” for telling the event and the experience. The stage setting starts with a profile introduction by the testifier. Generally, this includes: the testifier’s name, place of residence and employment. This stage setting often includes a brief statement related to a life event. A testimonial video uploaded onto the 3G Ministries’ YouTube channel on 10 March 2016 was entitled “Prophecy Becomes Rescue to A Threatened Marriage” and was a story co-told by a married couple, Mr. OS and Mrs. FS.<sup>6</sup> Setting the story orientation, Mrs. FS said, “[Mr. OS and I] fell in love in 2008 before we got married ... In 2012 we started preparations for the wedding and the same year we got married.” With this setting, the audience and listeners are now oriented to the narrative theme, that is, marriage. As the story progresses, the testifiers describe how an inciting moment took place, the internal conflict that developed and the crisis that intensified. To illustrate the above process, Mrs. FS’s account will be quoted at length:

... we married in 2012 and in November I noticed that I was pregnant. To be precise after the wedding we stayed together as husband and wife. We had so much hope in marriage and we were on the right track. But that proved us wrong, we started having tension in the house and anger towards each other and there was nothing to show what we were angry

about. On my side, when I couldn't meet my husband as husband and wife, I thought it was a result of the pregnancy fatigue and it will get better after I give birth. Finally I gave birth but still I had no affection for my husband ... There was no interest at all! We continued to live like that, without joy and having no interest to meet as husband and wife ... It went on like that and many times he would take me out for a date hoping to make me happy but it all failed. It went on like that without peace in the house and it was painful because when he was away I would introspect myself to know what the problem was but I could not come to any conclusion. Many times my husband would encourage us to go for counselling ... I did not believe in these things... He knew my friends so he would ask them to talk to me but they never solved our issue ...

The above quotation indicates that narratives reconfigure events. The reconfiguration process is based on a storyline. Storyline is thematic because it covers the main idea that the testifier wishes to communicate. In the above account the storyline is about tough married life or problematic marriage. When the storyline is set, the testifier relate the story to multiple perceptions that form one's identity formation. Mrs. FS's account suggested identities such as "married woman", "angry couple" or "home without peace." Since this is an orientation setting stage, generally the testifier presents negative self-images. The self-perception at this stage is closely linked to views of rights and duties such as "the rights to be happy in married life" or "common duties and responsibilities as husband and wife." Reconfiguration of the narrative setting within this context includes perception of social forces that influence the beginning of a storyline. Using the strategy of the positioning diamond (Slocum-Bradley, 2010), the reconfiguration of events with perceived identity formation in the account of Mrs. FS can be summarized in the Table 1 below.

Although testimonial stories in this study have different settings, the setting the orientation phase is of the same structure. It involves the establishment of a theme or themes and a description of an intensified conflict and crisis. Intensification of conflict and crises can be seen in statements such as

I faced stagnancy and I never received promotion; because of my stagnancy I was not able to possess fixed assets.

Since getting married, we have been looking for the fruit of the womb but from time to time, we faced disappointments that came in the form of miscarriages. I could only carry the pregnancy up to three months, but only to miscarry thereafter. This caused great concern and worry our lives.

In 2001, I got married and five years later I got divorced. This then became the cause of the disastrous life I was leading in years that followed. I was hopeless, having lost everything, I was in shambles. What followed was catastrophe.

I started imbibing on alcohol during my teen years after falling prey to peer pressure. The situation got worse when I went to tertiary school in South Africa; I drank more especially because I was now without an elderly guidance. In my second year of varsity, I lost both my parents and that exacerbated my addiction to alcohol. With time, my addiction grew and thus consuming alcohol became a 'need' for me, so much to a point where I opened my own personal bar so as to have the liquor at arm's reach.

**Table 1. Summary of narrative reconfiguration**

Storyline	Identities	Rights and duties	Social forces
"Tough married life", "Problematic marriage"	"Married woman", "home full of tension", "angry couple", "failed wife", "marriage with no affection", "joyless marriage", "home without peace"	"Rights to be happy", "Duties of husband and wife", "Responsibilities of showing and maintaining affection in marriage"	"Belief in marriage and its implications", "the hope of having a marriage on the right track", "self-introspection and reflection to find solution to a problematic marriage"

These narratives of intensifying crisis and conflict describe how these life events begin to define and direct the testifier's life. The above accounts demonstrate that "dark" and "getting lost" events occupy this phase. In this phase, testifiers describe past events that contributed to the development of this dark past. Testifiers describe how troubles emerge, how tough times occur and how hostility develops. In this phase, a testifier reconstructs this "past self" as one where the self is drowned in a sea of tough problems or lost in the dark wilderness. This dark past provides a condition whereby testifiers construct and negotiate who they are.

In his notable work, Hewitt (1989) defines continuity in relation to identity construction as a feeling that one's experience of self is the same over time. The accounts quoted above demonstrate that the continuity aspect of identity construction can be seen in the ways in which testifiers describe "sameness of a sense of self," "the stagnancy of self," "a going nowhere self," "constant disappointed self," "a lost-self," "an unguided self," "a hopeless self," "a disastrous self," and "a catastrophic self." This demonstrates that within religious testimonies, religious identity is multifaceted. The continuity aspect of identity construction is often described in an intensified outline of a chain of failures that are difficult to overcome. Phrases such as "we continued to live like that," "I never received promotion," "I lost everything," "with time consuming alcohol became a need" explain how the feeling of sameness provides no space for negotiation of a new self.

Self-positioning considers how the testifier positions himself or herself in relation to others. Within the realm of identity construction, self-positioning is about how a testifier views the self in conjunction with the presence of others. In her testimonial narrative quoted above, for example, Mrs. FS positioned herself in relation to her husband and her marriage. Within this context, she viewed herself as "a failed wife" or "a wife without affection." Through self-positioning, the testifier often indicates self-differentiation or uniqueness (Bamberg, 2011; Hewitt, 1989). An important aspect of the orientation setting phase is the constitution of "imagined" agency. The term "imagined" is used to highlight how the testifier constructs this agency and the agents who influence his or her life at this stage. In Bamberg's term, the constitution of agency is about "who is in control" (2011, p. 9). In relation to this study, the constitution of agency plays a crucial role in the way religious testifiers interpret the event of stagnancies and disappointments. While descriptions of agents vary, the data indicate that most testifiers consider socio-cultural constraints as agents that position the testifier in a continuing crisis. Religious language is often attached to describing these agents. In this context, testifiers attribute the agents of self-stagnancy to "hidden and dark powers." In this construction, the self is narrated as "a self owned by hidden and dark powers." We, however, may ask the following question: how is a testimony relevant to the question of "who am I"? Of course, identity construction is not fixed. Reading through the above accounts, one would argue that the construction of identity in the narrative orientation phase involves the interpretation of continuity, self-positioning and constitution of "imagined" agency (see also Bamberg, 2011).

### **5.2. Phase II: Encounter: Narrative of a rediscovered self**

The second phase in the testimonial narrative plot can be called the encounter phase. The encounter phase involves an intervention that makes a solution as well as breakthrough possible. In their testimony, Mr. OS explained that as he and his wife continued visiting 3G Ministries, they became open towards each other because of the religious messages and teaching they received in the church. The climax of their encounter phase took place when his wife received a prophecy in March 2016. Mrs. FS described the encounter phase in the following words:

On Friday last week during the church service, the man of God [the prophet] came to me and asked where my husband was. Since I was sitting close to my husband, I pointed out at him. The prophet asked me what I could say concerning marriage. I responded that there had been no affection in our marriage. As he listened to our story, he prayed for us and told us that everything will be fine. Indeed the prayer of the prophet changed our lives. It is true people of God, there is solution to loss of affection in marriage. Before the prophecy, I used to experience pains when we met as husband and wife. It was like a burning sensation. Often I tried to cool myself with cold water ... Meeting as husband and wife was really a



struggle. But after receiving the word of prophecy from the prophet last Friday, everything disappeared. I did not know how it disappeared. I certainly believe that upon hearing the word from the man of God, the pain disappeared and left my life for good ... The prophecy has ignited our affection; God has restored our marriage.

Within the prophetic Christianity, prophecy has been considered the divine ability to visualize and reveal the hidden and unseen. A prophecy session is a process of diagnosing “the source of the patient’s suffering” through the words of the Holy Spirit, in order to reveal “its causes and its remedies” (Werbner, 2011, p. 22; see also Faimau, 2017). Through the diagnosis the prophet engages in an interactive dialogue with “the patient” to reveal the unseen cause of the problem. For Mr. OS and Mrs. FS, the prophet’s prayer following the diagnosis of the loss of affection in their marriage has solved their problem. Encounter with the prophet through receiving a prophecy therefore gives them a new perspective relating to religious identity and their marriage. This encounter facilitates the emergence of a “rediscovered religious identity” because the encounter with the prophet and the received prophecy marked a complete break with their past married life. For them, the encounter with the prophet has opened a door for a new future and a new identity in which their identity as a married couple is restored. Data indicate that this intervention stage begins with a decision made by the testifier and takes multiple forms. The forms of intervention include: a personal decision to visit a prophetic ministry, invitations from friends to visit and join a prophetic ministry or, in some cases, self-claimed visions of meeting a “prophet.” The encounter phase is characterized by two related decisive events: (1) coming to a prophetic ministry; (2) an encounter with the prophet of a prophetic ministry. The following statements gathered through a digital ethnography illustrate the encounter phase described here:

I made my way to the Gospel of God’s Grace Ministries where the spirit of God located me and attended to the issue of my financial struggle.

The man of God located me and gave me a prophecy.

I came to this ministry and the messages of the man of God encouraged me so much.

After making this prayer, I received a vision where I saw the man of God Prophet Cedric and 3G Ministries and that was how I came to the presence of God.

Upon arriving in the church my faith was lifted up by the messages of the man of God.

When I first arrived [in this ministry], I could feel the change in the atmosphere ...

The event of visiting a prophetic ministry and the moment of encountering the prophet and his message become defining moments through which a testifier constructs the self. In the context of identity construction, Hewitt (1989) introduces the element of integration. Integration relates to the sense of wholeness through which a person may assume different social and interpersonal roles. Through these events, particularly attending the ministry and encountering the prophet, testifiers develop a sense of “an integrated self”, “a rediscovered self”, “a lifted up self” and “an encouraged self.” In other words, the process of arriving at “a rediscovered self” demands a decisive action on the part of the testifier which leads to defining moments and special events that redefine oneself.

Within prophetic ministries, particularly prophetic ministries in Botswana, the prophet is the face of the ministry. Borrowing from marketing language, one could say that the prophet is the brand of a prophetic ministry. A prophetic ministry would not be a prophetic ministry without the presence of a prophet. The presence of a prophet is the key to the success of various prophetic ministries. As the prophet is very central, a testifier’s identity construction in this phase is certainly influenced by the presence of the prophet. This emerges through the efforts of a testifier to affiliate and associate himself or herself with the prophet. This is demonstrated through claims such as “the God of the man of God is also my God,” “I met Christ face to face through the faculties of the man of God,” “I

received a prophetic message from the man of God,” “Just a word of prophecy and a touch of the prophet settle my promotion.” By placing the prophet at the center of these claims, a testifier is, in fact, constructing his or her identity by associating himself or herself with the prophet. In my interviews with members of various prophetic ministries, participants confirmed that the prophet’s life and message give them direction to such an extent that they always make an effort to align how they live their lives with the life and message of the prophet. This symbolic move highlights two central elements of identity, as described by Hewitt (1989), namely: identification and differentiation. Identification refers to a feeling of being related to Others/Other, and differentiation denotes an individual sense of being different and unique. Through personal identification with the prophet, the prophet clearly becomes a mirror through which a testifier views his or her own identity construction (Faimau & Behrens, 2016). This assertion holds merit if we consider the common practice within the circle of prophetic ministries in Botswana where a prophet is generally addressed in a very personal and intimate way such as “daddy,” “dad” or “papa.” This means that the prophet is actually being embedded within kinship networks. The differentiation element lies in the transformative power following the encounter with the prophet, where the self is now transformed into a unique self that is totally different from the old self that was described in the previous section. In other words, the meeting with the prophet and his prophetic ministry elevates the identity of a testifier to one with a sense of uniqueness and being special. In both processes, the testifier positions and locates himself or herself in continuous conversations with the prophet in a religious community setting (Chik, 2015). Religious testimonial narratives, therefore, also offer a performative stage for a testifier to navigate the self-positioning through the chosen story line.

### **5.3. Phase III: Final suspense: Narratives of a “reorganized self”**

The third phase in the testimonial narrative process is the final suspense or post-peak episode where the testifier describes the results and benefits emerging from the encounter phase. The results and benefits are viewed as the fruits of the encounter with the prophet and his prophetic ministry. In this phase, the testifier highlights how life has changed since the encounter phase provides direction for the future. The resolution in the encounter phase gives birth to “an organized or reorganized self” as the post-peak episode in a religious testimonial narrative. Therefore in the final suspense phase, generally testifiers explain how they organize and re-organize themselves after a disastrous life in the setting of orientation phase and a breakthrough event in the encounter phase. If the encounter phase is characterized by a meeting point between past and present life, the final suspense can be viewed as a meeting point between past, present and future life. Often narrative of final suspense includes further narratives of unexpected turning points as a result of a claimed fruitful encounter with a prophet and prophetic ministry. A testimonial narrative of Mr. R. published on the blogpost section of 3G Ministries’ website is a good example. Mr. R. came to the ministry and acknowledged that a meeting and prophecy from Prophet Cedric of 3G Ministries delivered him from his alcohol addiction. The blogpost describes the final suspense of Mr. R.’s narrative in the following words:

From that time forth Mr. R. stopped taking alcohol and as a result his finances kept improving over time. They began to plan for their wedding which was eventually celebrated on the 11th and 12th June 2016. They were also able to buy a car and complete their house something which had been a struggle for many years. With great joy the couple attested that the prophetic message they received have not only brought marriage but has also changed their character; they can now discuss things without quarrelling, their relationship is now a piece of Heaven!

The above passage demonstrates how the final suspense phase of Mr. R.’s narrative includes other narratives of success. While “being delivered from alcohol addiction” is the grand narrative, the strategic narrative at the final suspense phase gives room for multiple narratives which are coherently linked to the grand narrative. In the case of Mr. R.’s narrative, multiple narratives occur at the end including narrative of “financial improvement,” “plan for wedding,” “purchase of car,” “completion of house building.” Moreover, the passage also includes the narrative of “character change” that enables more effective communication between Mr. and Mrs. R. It is, therefore, fair to claim that

during this phase, generally, a testifier claims a sense of “changed-for-the-better self,” “successful self,” “focused self,” “open self” and “well-organized self.” The multiple narratives in the final suspense phase provide an in-depth look at how a new identity constructed during the encounter phase also creates space for the possibility for the construction and negotiation of multiple identities. Within the context of social life, the development of multiple narratives portrays the self as an “organizational self” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 44). While Holstein and Gubrium (2000) link this notion to the idea of organization, within the social realm this sense of self relates to a sense of “belonging” to the social life that shapes one’s life. This sense of belonging is achieved through a sense of an individual autonomy and establishing strong social relationships, particularly with a religious institution and a religious figure.

### **6. Digitalized testimonial narratives and the making of shared and institutional identities**

In Botswana, prophetic ministries invite church attendees to share their testimonies. These invitations are transmitted through announcements during service or through various media outlets. During the study fieldwork, I found that prophetic ministries provide testimony registration forms for church attendees who wish to share their testimonies. Church attendees normally register their testimonies by completing the form before they are invited to share their testimonies. Prophetic ministries that have websites provide online forms for testimony registration. Prophetic ministries actively make testimonial narratives available online through various new media outlets including social media and social networking sites. In the practice of prophetic ministries in Botswana, religious narrative testimonies are normally presented offline in and to the community during a church service. Such narratives are recorded and circulated through new media, particularly through official websites as well as social media and social networking sites. As soon as a testimony is shared, a summary of the testimony is immediately posted on the official Facebook pages or is uploaded onto the YouTube channels. This means that the circulation of offline testimonies on online platforms is viewed as an important aspect in extending the reach and spreading the message of prophetic ministries. The circulation of offline testimonial narratives in a church service through new media therefore has the purpose of not only preserving and storing various religious testimonies (Assmann, 2006) but also perpetuating the religious value of such testimonial narratives. Through digitalization, testimonies are not only circulated; they are also preserved and stored. Moreover, by circulating the testimonies online, online world emerges as a new space for testimonial narratives to be presented to a new, online audience as viewers watch the testimony on YouTube or Facebook users read a post on the testimony on a Facebook posting (Faimau & Behrens, 2016). Through the digitalization of testimonial narratives, prophetic ministries sustain, nurture and extend their presence by perpetuating the testimonial narratives.

The question is: why is a testimonial narrative seen as so important that it is digitalized and mediated by prophetic ministries? Within the context of a religious institution and the religious community, testimonial narratives have two important roles. Firstly, testimonial narratives become a “meeting point” that link “oneself,” “others/the hearers” to the “religious institution.” Secondly, testimonial narratives facilitate the intersections of three related stories: the story of individual religious identity, the story of shared religious identity and the story of institutional identity. While offline testimonies depict this intersection, the circulation of testimonies through various new media outlets re-enforces it. Today, it is common practice for testimonial narratives to be circulated through various new media outlets. Prophetic ministries in Botswana generally have a media team that is responsible for media affairs within the ministries. Media teams play a role in videotaping religious events and updating religious websites, Facebook pages and Twitter posts. When religious testimonies are circulated through online media by a religious institution, new media, in fact, mediates the construction of three related religious identities: individual religious identity, shared identity and institutional identity of a religious institution. The individual religious identity is clearly constructed when a personal story is told—whether it is told offline before a religious community or circulated through various new media outlets. In this sense, the decision to tell a personal religious testimony, whether offline or online, functions as “a re-appropriation of voice and reconstitution of self” (Park-Fuller,

2000, p. 21) as already analyzed in the previous section. In other words, a religious testimonial narrative shapes the way one views oneself as well as the journey and direction one is taking.

However, as pointed out by Assmann (2006), the circulation of testimonial narratives through media has the capacity to address unlimited viewers, listeners and new media users. This means that the use of media, including new media, extends the reach of religious groups. Testimonial narratives that used to only influence those attending church to hear them now have a broader audience with the same effect. In addressing viewers, listeners and new media users, testimonial narratives therefore are dialogic in nature because they establish a relationship between “the testifier” and the viewers, listeners or new media users. By watching or reading the testimonies online, viewers, listeners or new media users now become “co-witnesses” of the religious testimonies who, in turn, have the responsibility of sharing and extending the testimonies and their values to others. In my view, a shared religious identity occurs when listeners or church attendees align their religious identity negotiation with the religious autobiographical story of a testimonial narrative testifier. Through this alignment, a listener identifies himself or herself with the story told by a testifier. In this process of identification, the testifier’s story now becomes “a listener’s story” and the identity of a testifier becomes “a listener’s identity.” At the completion of the testimonial narrative, the story becomes a shared story and the testifier’s identity becomes a shared identity. Therefore, when a testimonial narrative is circulated through an online media outlet, the testifier of a religious testimony does not only speak “to” new media users; the testifier also speaks “with” them (Park-Fuller, 2000). Viewing or reading and sharing a religious testimony influences the religious identity construction of new media users, on the one hand, and influences the shared religious identity between the testifier and the media users, on the other. The emphasis here is on similarities and shared attributes between the testifier and media users (Cerulo, 1997). Through the engagement with testimonial narratives, such testimonial narratives now belong not only to the testifier but also to the media users.

Testimonial narratives also create, or at least maintain, the authority and credibility of prophetic ministries. Prophetic ministries facilitate the possibility of sharing the testimonies by giving out testimony forms to be filled before testimonies are presented. In providing testimony forms to be filled and selecting testimonies to be shared, prophetic ministries intensify their influence among believers. The data indicates that narrators of religious testimonies endorse the power of the prophet and the magnitude of a prophetic ministry. Words such as “this prophet” and “this place” are used in various testimonial narratives as seen in claims such as: “the God that I found in this place is alive,” “you people in Botswana are blessed to have a prophet,” “There is life in this place,” “people from all walks of life are welcome in this place,” “indeed God abides in this place” and “the message of the prophet ... was powerful, it hit the core of my heart.” This means that testimonial narratives become a tool for endorsing the institution. In this sense, testimonial narratives enable the construction of an institutional identity both offline and online. They not only help cement the identity for those who attend the prophetic ministry and those who will join but also create an identity of the prophetic ministry for those who will only follow the ministry online. In other words, through testimonial narratives an institution finds its identity and makes it clearer for its followers.

In the context of circulating testimonial narratives, it should be noted that the religious institution and community to whom the testimonial narratives are told play a central role in preserving, storing and archiving as well as circulating the narratives online. In preserving the narratives online, religious institutions including prophetic ministries “accelerate” the process of religious identity formation whereby those who attend the service and hear the testimony can also access it online allowing greater ownership and identity negotiation. Therefore, in providing the framework within which religious narratives are told and circulated, religious institutions or organizations become suppliers and generators of “public narratives” that express the development and purpose of a religious entity (Ammerman, 2003, p. 217). Such public narratives are generated, maintained and sustained by religious organizations because the narratives “create” and “nurture” the identity of a religious institution. This means that religious testimonies help to strengthen the religious cohesion of a religious institution or organization (Ingram, 2006). From the discussion presented above, one could now safely state that in circulating the

testimonial narratives online, new media provide the space for the construction and negotiation of individual, collective and institutional identity by transforming the constellation of an individual story into online presentable information with “a communicative potential for further use in an indefinite future” (Assmann, 2006, p. 270) as well as transformative potential to direct and change the history and religious development of an individual, community and religious institutions (Hjarvard, 2012).

## 7. Conclusion

The above analysis demonstrates how testimonial narratives create and shape the construction and negotiation of religious identity in the context of prophetic ministries in Botswana. As explained, testimonial narratives within the circle of prophetic ministries facilitate the development of individual religious identity. This process emerges through three phases: the orientation and reorientation of a lost self, the narration of a rediscovered self and the emergence of a reorganized self. Through these phases, a testifier makes sense and provides a religious interpretation of events and experiences that have occurred. In this context, narrating religious testimonies becomes a meaning-making process through which religious identity is constructed. The nature of testimonial narratives is dialogic because the narratives are told within the context of a religious community. When a narrative is shared, listeners become part of the story and view the story as their own. Shared religious identity emerges when listeners identify themselves with the testifier and view who they are through their own interpretations of a shared testimonial narrative. Religious institutions, such as prophetic ministries in Botswana, provide the space and framework that allow members to narrate their testimonies. They become providers and suppliers of testimonial narratives. Religious institutions, including prophetic ministries, invest in religious testimonies because they offer a sense of institutional identity. In recent years, prophetic ministries have taken a further step by circulating various testimonies through different new media outlets, particularly websites, social media and social networking sites. On the one hand, the circulation of offline testimonial narratives through various new media outlets has the purpose of not only preserving religious testimonies but also perpetuating the religious values that are embedded in the testimonies. On the other hand, through digitalizing religious testimonies, prophetic ministries perpetuate, nurture and extend their institutional identity as authoritative and credible institutions and are endorsed by testifiers in their testimonial narratives. For a prophetic ministry, the digitalization of religious testimonies becomes a means of strengthening and mediatizing the identity, history and development of the ministry.

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### Notes

1. Kopong Village is 27 km away from Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana, while Tsolamosese, Ramotswa and Maun are 15, 40 and 850 km away from the capital city respectively.
2. This research project was funded by the University of Botswana through its Office of Research and Development (ORD). Field research was conducted from September 2014 to April 2015.

3. The study is funded by the Nagel Institute with generous support of funding from the John Templeton Foundation in the United States of America. The overall aim of the project is to explore and examine the multifaceted characteristics of prophetic ministries in Botswana and how new media shapes religious discourses and the religious landscape in Botswana. Data was collected through a multi-site field research conducted from April to December 2016.
4. Francistown is the second largest city in Botswana, located about 400 km from Gaborone the capital city of Botswana. Maun is popularly known as a tourist destination in Botswana, located about 850 km from the capital city, Gaborone.
5. See Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov, and Stillwell (2015) for explanation concerning boundaries of individual consent when a new media outlet is used as a research field.
6. Religious testimonies circulated in various new media outlets normally include the real names of the testifiers. In order to protect the testifiers, however, names are abbreviated throughout the analysis.

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