


# Karma and spiritual warfare: The ‘back to sender’ practice in South African New Prophetic Churches

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**Background:** This article discusses the rapid rise of New Prophetic Churches (NPCs) in South Africa, a charismatic Christian movement focusing on spiritual gifts, prosperity and deliverance. It highlights the practice of ‘back to sender’, which involves prayers designed to reverse perceived spiritual attacks or misfortunes, often attributed to evil spirits or human enemies. The ‘back to sender’ concept emphasises divine intervention rather than fate and illustrates connections among African Neo-Pentecostal Christianity, African spiritualities and the idea of karma.

**Objectives:** This study aims to analyse the ‘back to sender’ concept within NPCs and its sociocultural implications.

**Method:** This article explores the dynamic world of NPCs, using a combination of descriptive and analytical methods to reveal its unique characteristics and the influence of syncretism as its theoretical framework.

**Results:** The findings reveal that the ‘back to sender’ prayers not only serve as a coping mechanism for believers facing societal challenges, but also contribute to social tensions regarding accusations of witchcraft.

**Conclusion:** The practice effectively blends African Traditional Religions with Neo-Pentecostal beliefs, offering a unique framework for addressing spiritual and social issues.

**Contribution:** This article is crafted from a perspective rooted in the study of religion. This study enhances understanding of the intersection between religion, culture and social justice in contemporary South Africa, highlighting the role of spirituality in navigating real-world crises.

**Keywords:** New Prophetic Churches; karma; syncretism; creolisation; cosmic balance.

## Introduction

This study examines the intersection of karma and spiritual warfare within the context of South African New Prophetic Churches (NPCs), with a particular focus on the ‘back to sender’ practice. This phenomenon has gained significant traction among congregations, reflecting broader cultural beliefs and attitudes towards spirituality, agency and accountability. Several scholars (Bachmann 2017; Hackett 2003; Kgatle 2024; Kgatle & Ngubane 2023; Marshall-Fratani 1998; Robbins 2004) attribute concepts like ‘back to sender’ to the significant cultural influences present within some of the Neo-Pentecostal churches. South African New Prophetic Churches reject ritual offerings and libation, particularly sacrifice to the ancestral spirits and divination, yet they simultaneously acknowledge the impact of demonic forces on the material world. This perspective emphasises the importance of prayer and the performative power of speech as means to counter these threats (Burgess 2008:133–137).

The article explores the theological underpinnings of this practice, analysing its societal ramifications and its interplay with traditional African religious beliefs. The religious landscape of South Africa is notably diversified, with the NPCs having a significant impact in recent decades. This movement, recognised for prioritising a direct personal encounter with the divine, frequently integrates diverse aspects of African spirituality into its ceremonies. An exemplary instance of this integration is the ‘back to sender’ ritual, which has garnered attention for its unique methodology in spiritual warfare and its association with karma principles, that is, the desire for good and bad people to get what they deserve.

Recent studies indicate that NPCs are undergoing significant expansion in the Global South. Pasura (2023:80–90) examines Neo-Pentecostal pilgrimage in Africa and reveals the significant growth of Pentecostalism throughout the Global South and beyond. While the prophetic ministries are often biblically justified, it is important to note that many Africans are also well-acquainted with consultations from *sangomas* or mediums, which sometimes puts pressure on the NPCs. Neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic churches have dominated the domain of faith healing for decades. However, among many phlegmatic denominations, especially the mainline churches, there exists a latent, although unexpressed, desire for the same healing approach (Mudyiwa 2016:21). The mainline churches have steadfastly maintained their belief in the healing power of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and church-affiliated healthcare systems, yet critics have consistently contended that Western medicine fails to address the extensive array of health issues in Africa. For generations, Africans have upheld their ancestral cosmology wisdom, which asserts that ‘illness and suffering pertain not solely to man’s physical being, but to the entirety of man and his somatic-spiritual unity’ (Pope St. John Paul II’s apostolic letter *Dolentium hominum* in FitzGerald 2017:111). The ‘back to sender’ praxis has emerged as a significant practice within South Africa since the late 20th century. This practice includes prayers and rituals designed to reverse or redirect perceived spiritual attacks, curses or misfortunes back to their originators, often attributed to malevolent spirits, witchcraft or human adversaries. Embedded within a broader spiritual warfare theology, adherents invoke divine power, frequently employing phrases such as ‘Holy Ghost fire’ or citing biblical texts, notably Psalm 35, during nighttime vigils, deliverance sessions or prophetic declarations. These actions are undertaken with the aim of neutralising harm and attaining breakthroughs in various domains, including health, finances and interpersonal relationships (Alagbe 2024:36).

The prominence of this ‘back to sender’ framework is particularly evident in South African ‘new prophetic churches’, a distinct subset of NPCs, where prophets claim the ability to diagnose issues through visions and subsequently prescribe aggressive prayers. This has, at times, resulted in social tensions, manifested in familial accusations of witchcraft and the emergence of unsafe church environments. The theological underpinnings of this practice exhibit parallels to the Eastern concept of karma, which is centred on a principle of cause and effect wherein actions, whether virtuous or malevolent, rebound upon the individual (Kaufman 2005:20). Within this retributive framework, harm intended for others is believed to return to the perpetrator.

However, in the South African context, this notion is reinterpreted through an African Christian lens that blends the Neo-Pentecostal emphasis on demonic influences with indigenous African Indigenous Religions (AIRs). This is evident in the role of traditional healers, such as the *n’anga*

within Shona culture, who similarly aim to redirect curses or negative energies to restore cosmic balance. The syncretic nature of this practice addresses tangible socio-economic crises, such as poverty, unemployment and inequality, reframing these challenges as spiritual attacks that can be remedied through ‘sending back’, thus providing adherents with a sense of agency and justice (Bobo 2020:75–79).

### Understanding karma and ‘back to sender’: The law of cause and effect

Karma refers to the ethical principle of cause and effect, where an individual’s actions, good or bad, determine their future experiences. This concept emphasises personal responsibility and the idea that our intentions and deeds shape our destiny, both in this life and potentially in future lives (Finnigan 2022:10–14). The phrase ‘back to sender’ implies that the energy or intentions we project into the world inevitably return to us. This concept, ‘back to sender’, within some of the NPCs, such as Shekainah Healing Ministries, echoes karma, suggesting that negative or positive actions have consequences that come back to the individual, reinforcing the importance of mindful behaviour and empathy in our interactions with others. This article examines how the concept of ‘back to sender’ engenders a pervasive climate of fear, distrust and heightened vigilance towards perceived threats. This phenomenon fosters an environment where individuals may become hyper-aware of their surroundings, interpreting neutral or benign interactions as potential sources of danger, thus compromising social cohesion and encouraging a culture of suspicion.

### Research methods and design

This article explores the dynamic world of NPCs, using a combination of descriptive and analytical methods to reveal its unique characteristics and the influence of syncretism as its theoretical framework. By conducting a comprehensive literary analysis of the existing literature, it effectively examines and highlights the contemporary trends of syncretism. Furthermore, the article presents several cases of ministers from the NPCs who have incorporated ‘back to sender’ practices into their pulpits and deliverance services. The author has carefully observed these practices through participant observation. Syncretism is employed as a conceptual framework to critically examine the beliefs and practices associated with the ‘back to sender’ ideology, a spiritual defence mechanism rooted in AIRs that finds resonance within contemporary Neo-Pentecostal Christianity. Furthermore, syncretism is defined as the amalgamation, integration or harmonisation of disparate and often conflicting components encompassing beliefs, practices, cultural traditions, philosophies and ideologies into a cohesive new entity. Utilising this theoretical perspective enables a nuanced understanding of the emergence of hybridity in contexts marked by contact, conflict or exchange, thus transcending a simplistic interpretation of change as mere replacement or dominance (Kgatle & Ngubane 2023; Schineller 1992:50–53).

Schineller (1992:53) argues that the concept of syncretism is limited and should be replaced by the notion of inculturation. This assertion stems from the contention that syncretism implies the replacement of essential and vital elements of the Gospel during the process of contextualisation, incorporating religious elements from the surrounding culture. Syncretism, as characterised by Schineller, can be understood as an unjustified fusion of fundamentally opposed belief systems and practices or the integration of intrinsically contradictory doctrinal elements. Furthermore, it encompasses the complex blend of authentic ideas and truths from a disclosed belief system with various other religious claims, often incorporating elements from different religious traditions without rigorous analysis through the lens of Christianity. Schineller (1992:50) posits that under certain circumstances, syncretism may represent a repudiation of Christ or the teachings of Christianity. Hence, some scholars propose that creolisation could be a way to address the erosion of beliefs or the weakening of cultural foundations (eds. Baron & Cara 2011:20; Cohen 2007:371; Schlums 2025:34). This intriguing idea suggests that blending different cultural influences may help revitalise and strengthen our values in the face of change.

Creolisation serves as an apt concept or theory to explain the dynamics observed in NPCs alongside traditional African beliefs, particularly the 'back to sender' mentality. Creolisation stands out as a dynamic cultural theory. It conceptualises culture as an open-ended, generative process characterised by mixing, improvisation and innovation that emerge from sustained, intense contact between diverse groups, often under conditions of displacement, inequality and creole ecologies, such as plantation societies, port cities and migration hubs. Unlike syncretism, which frequently suggests a stable fusion, Creolisation highlights the importance of ongoing transformation, unpredictability and relationality (eds. Baron & Cara 2011:20; Cohen 2007:371; Schlums 2025:34). In this specific research endeavour, the focal point is syncretism, which is posited as the most appropriate framework for understanding the ongoing appropriation of the 'back to sender' mentality by certain Neo-Pentecostal spiritual leaders, drawing from traditional African religious practices. This investigation aims to elucidate the dynamics involved in this cross-cultural exchange and its implications for contemporary spiritual practices.

In the context of this study, however, the term syncretism is not employed pejoratively; rather, it is appreciated from a religious studies perspective. Goosen (2000:138) suggests that syncretism can be viewed positively, in contrast to assimilation, where one culture subsumes another, or pluralism, which permits coexistence without deep integration. Syncretism, then, signifies a process of innovative synthesis, resulting in a transformative third entity that emerges from the interplay of diverse influences, rather than a mere combination of an original or wholly foreign construct.

Syncretism, as a theoretical framework, aids in understanding the 'back to sender' practice, wherein we examined the theological dimensions of karma and spiritual warfare. Karma, traditionally rooted in Eastern philosophies, emphasises the moral dimension of an individual's actions and their consequences. In contrast, spiritual warfare within Christianity involves direct confrontations with perceived malevolent forces. The integration of these concepts within NPCs in South Africa provides a rich ground for examining belief systems and practices. Some NPCs utilise the concept of 'back to sender', which resonates with beliefs found in AIRs and Eastern karmic philosophies. In the context of South African NPCs, this practice manifests as a means of invoking the divine to punish or halt the entities or enemies responsible for their misfortunes. Furthermore, certain Neo-Pentecostal churches represent a development of new religious movements, a phenomenon that is not new in the history of religion.

In this article, syncretism is employed to explore the tendency of certain Neo-Pentecostal pastors who encourage their congregants to declare 'back to sender'. This phrase has evolved from addressing traditional societal evils to addressing a broader array of everyday challenges, including workplace tensions, familial conflicts and socio-economic struggles. However, before delving into this phenomenon, it is essential to discuss the concept of 'back to sender' as understood among *sangomas* [a traditional healer or diviner] and its connection to the notion of karma, which often justifies notions of revenge.

### The 'back to sender' practice: Description and significance

The 'back to sender' practice involves the ritualistic sending back of negative energies, ill intentions or curses directed at individuals. In a recent broadcast on SABC2 (2025), practitioners of traditional healing, known as *sangomas*, provided insights into the concept of 'back to sender' within their spiritual practices. One participant recounted an experience involving a connection to an unknown spirit associated with witchcraft. The individual articulated the necessity of maintaining composure while engaging with this unfamiliar spirit, reflecting a deeper inquiry into its intentions and desires. The *sangoma* emphasised the importance of recognising the nature of this spirit, which was distinct from familial ancestral spirits, and subsequently acknowledged the need to retain this association for protective purposes. The interviewee metaphorically likened the spirit to a weapon in a conflict, asserting that knowledge and understanding of witchcraft are essential to combat its influence: 'You need to have a witchcraft so that you can fight the witchcraft'.

Another *sangoma*, a novice healer with just 2 years of experience, highlighted the jealousy often exhibited by more established practitioners. This jealousy has allegedly manifested in harmful actions directed towards the young healer, who has quickly garnered a following of 17 initiates.

To counteract these negative energies, the *sangoma* employs a *tokoloshe*, a mythical creature in African folklore primarily for defensive purposes, asserting that it serves as a protective force against malevolent intentions. The African perspective posits that misfortunes are often attributed to the influence of spirit agents or concealed human adversaries. This belief highlights how South African *sangomas* are socialised to cultivate a sense of vigilance against metaphysical threats and to remain alert to potential enemies that may seek to undermine their destiny (Agwuele 2016:5–10; Ngubane 2023:44; Nwoye 2011:315).

These narratives reflect the fundamental belief in cosmic balance inherent in AIRs, wherein the physical and spiritual realms are seen as interconnected and inseparable. The principles governing the physical world are perceived to originate from the spiritual domain, suggesting a complex relationship between the two realms that informs the practices and beliefs of traditional healers. Nel (2019:5–8) observes that the African outlook often perceives the universe as sacred or magical, where physical occurrences mirror spiritual truths, and divine influence is assumed in all events. Incidents like accidents, health problems or academic difficulties are commonly ascribed to witchcraft or invisible adversaries (Bachmann 2017:7–9).

### The role of intention in karma across religions

Karma, derived from the Sanskrit language meaning 'action' or 'deed', is a fundamental philosophical and ethical principle in Hinduism that delineates a universal law of cause and effect regulating all human actions, thoughts, words and intentions. It asserts that every action, whether advantageous or detrimental, generates commensurate consequences that influence an individual's future experiences, both in this life and across successive lifetimes through the cycle of rebirth [*samsara*]. This establishes a moral framework that underscores human responsibility, expressed in the belief that 'as one acts, so does one become', whereby virtuous deeds result in positive outcomes [*punya*], but detrimental actions produce negative consequences (*papa* or sin) (Harvey 2001:25).

In Buddhism, karma [Pali: *kamma*, Sanskrit: karma, meaning 'action' or 'deed'] is a fundamental principle of moral causation that governs the consequences of intentional actions, shaping an individual's experiences across this life and future rebirths within the cycle of *samsara* [rebirth]. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism views karma as a natural, impersonal law without a divine overseer, emphasising intention [*cetana*] as the core determinant of karmic outcomes. The Buddha famously stated, 'Intention, I tell you, is *kamma*. Intending, one does *kamma* by way of body, speech, and mind' (Anguttara Nikaya 6.63, cited in Sorensen 2020:65). Ramanujan (1976) emphasised three fundamental elements within the framework of the ancient Indian theory of karma: (1) causality, encompassing both ethical and non-ethical dimensions, affecting one or multiple lives; (2) ethicalisation, the belief that good and bad actions yield specific results in

one or several lives; and (3) rebirth (Doniger & O'Flaherty 1980:11; Kumar 2022:136). In Buddhism, practitioners strive to break free from the cycle of *samsara* by cultivating good karma. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to attain enlightenment by understanding concepts such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path (Doniger & O'Flaherty 1980:11). This journey involves recognising that attachment to desires in the physical world is what keeps individuals bound to this cycle. Once one realises that releasing desire leads to a deeper connection with the universe, a sense of self can begin to dissolve. The concept of karma operates similarly in Hinduism, where individuals experience the consequences of their actions, receiving just rewards or punishments that impact future lives. In this framework, the justice inherent in karma often comes at the expense of mercy.

In some Neo-Pentecostal churches, one can observe a similar attitude of karma that often undermines the concept of mercy. Congregants, often led by charismatic leaders, declare that any harm intended for them should return to its source. This practice is rooted in the belief that believers can assert control over negative forces and influence their spiritual realities. In his article, Ekechi (2025:39) discusses Nigerian Pentecostalism, which parallels the practices observed during deliverance services in certain Neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa. He asserts that expressions such as 'I reject it', 'it is not my portion', 'back to sender', 'Holy Ghost fire', 'Blood of Jesus', 'testimony', 'deliverance', and 'binding and casting' have become essential elements of the Nigerian English lexicon and vernaculars (Ekechi 2025:39). These expressions serve as language indicators of Neo-Pentecostal authority and ideology, intricately woven throughout Nigerian social life. The selection of these religiously inspired statements depends on aspects such as the social setting, the emotional states of the interlocutors and the perceived nature of the conversation, whether it involves identity assertion, hostile response or solidarity manifestation. Significantly, although these terms stem from religious discourse, their use in quotidian communication frequently surpasses their theological connotations, instead embodying the speaker's distinct views and communicative objectives. This attests to the power that can be wielded by spiritual leaders (pastors, prophets, apostles and so forth) within Neo-Pentecostal churches (Ekechi 2025:41).

### Cultural resonance

The popularity of the 'back to sender' practice can be linked to traditional African beliefs regarding witchcraft and the manipulation of spiritual forces. Many believers view the 'back to sender' as a modern adaptation of these beliefs, aligning with local cultural narratives while framed within a Christian Neo-Pentecostal context. Again, in traditional African belief systems, *sangomas*, as custodians of AIRs, hold positions of leadership and authority. They possess the ability to perceive the unseen and provide guidance to their clients on how to address issues such as bad omens or witchcraft.

Charismatic leaders within some of the Neo-Pentecostal churches play a critical role in the dissemination and validation of the 'back to sender' practice. Their interpretations of scripture, elaboration of spiritual truths and demonstration of power influence congregational beliefs and behaviours. This leadership dynamic cultivates an environment where spiritual warfare becomes integral to faith expressions. In this context, African Independent Churches have been influential entities in South Africa's spiritual landscape for decades, playing a significant role in shaping the NPCs (eds. Chitando, Gunda & Kügler 2014:7).

In a recent video posted on Apostle Mohlala's YouTube channel, where he hosts the 'back to sender' church services and has branded himself as the 'Defeater of Witches' [*Hlulabathakathi*], he announced that on 31 October 2025, he will be hosting a special service from 18:00 to 06:00. This service, titled '*Inkonzo Yezicelo*' [Service of Requests], invites church members to bring an offering of ZAR700.00. Participants are encouraged to write down their prayer requests on a piece of paper, which Apostle Mohlala will collect, pray over, and then burn. Apostle Mohlala has urged his congregants to attend the service for deliverance from financial lack, generational curses, to gain material possessions, and to receive protection from witches and accidents during the December holidays. Apostle Mohlala, along with prophets like Sbu Mokoena, addresses challenges such as poverty and insecurity from a religious perspective, which aligns with traditional African solutions. Mohlala's concept of 'back to sender' resonates with his followers, who seek relief from issues like unemployment, poverty, and what they perceive as bewitchment. The expression 'back to sender' is predominantly grounded in traditional African culture, which resonates strongly with those who are weary of life's challenges. In traditional contexts, individuals typically seek guidance from mediums and pay consultation fees. Likewise, in certain Neo-Pentecostal churches, congregants seek the counsel of their spiritual leaders and offer 'seed offerings'. In some instances, they may even pay substantial sums for a personal session with a pastor (Kgatlé 2022:7).

Ekechi (2025:42) accurately asserts that the employment of Neo-Pentecostal language in everyday discourse and popular culture clarifies the Nigerian context, which I contend applies to my South African context, illustrating how the socio-economic, cultural and political landscape influences individuals' perceptions and responses to issues such as poverty and insecurity through a theological lens. Loughney (2023:1) notes that viewing the environment as inhabited by perilous 'others' engenders defensive and aggressive behaviours, hence sustaining rivalry and conflict. This investigation demonstrates the integration of religious language into cultural practices, influencing communication and interaction patterns in South Africa.

This analysis enhances socio-linguistic research by illustrating the evolution of language within particular cultural and

religious contexts, highlighting the media's crucial role in distributing and normalising new linguistic forms that shape societal norms and behaviours. New Prophetic Churches and African Traditional Religions both hold the view that the physical and spiritual realms are deeply intertwined and cannot be separated. Many of the laws that govern our physical existence originate from the spiritual world. The belief in the spiritual world within the New Prophetic Churches is deeply rooted in biblical doctrine, specifically Ephesians 6:12: 'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world'. Neo-Pentecostal theology emphasises combating spiritual forces through warfare prayers and liberating persons from their influence (Kgatlé 2024:66–72; Smith 2018:72–76). Warfare prayers are intense fights with invisible entities, providing believers with spiritual 'armaments' to overcome ailments such as illness and conflict (Adelakun 2023:68; Coleman 2020). In both NPCs and AIRs, the use of warfare prayers or traditional enchantments serves to neutralise witchcraft, which has often become a convenient scapegoat for the suffering that many Africans cannot explain.

### Theological implications and social responsibility

While the 'back to sender' practice can be empowering, it also raises ethical questions about the nature of spiritual interactions. The potential for misdirected intentions where individuals seek to return harm to others can perpetuate cycles of animosity and conflict. This aspect urges reflection on the moral responsibilities that come with spiritual authority and belief in karma and 'back to sender'. As mentioned above in this framework, the justice inherent in karma and 'back to sender' often comes at the expense of mercy. It can be asserted that a karmic worldview posits that good deeds will be rewarded, while malevolent actions will be punished. In the Bible, it is suggested that our lives will be evaluated based on the virtues and demerits we accumulate in this existence (2 Cor 5:10). We shall harvest what we cultivate (Gl 6:7).

However, critics of this practice, both from within and outside NPCs, contend that it may encourage sentiments of vengeance, which appear to contradict the teachings of Jesus regarding forgiveness (Mt 18:22), as exemplified in Romans 12:19. In Christian theology, it is posited that Christ bore the weight of all human sins upon himself during the crucifixion. This act of atonement is foundational to the understanding of redemption and the salvation narrative within the faith (Ekechi 2025:42). In this context, the fulfilment of God's law is expressed through its inherent principles of justice. The reason it is fulfilled is that Christ takes on the punishment we deserve, allowing us to receive what we don't deserve in mercy. Importantly, when God's law is broken, he does not simply forgive indiscriminately. God is holy, and he cannot just offer forgiveness without cost. To illustrate this, consider the analogy of someone breaking your laptop. If you choose to forgive that person

and say, 'It's okay; you didn't mean to do it', there is still a cost involved. The cost falls on the person who damaged the laptop, but you have shown mercy by forgiving them. However, that forgiveness is still costly to you. In Christianity, we see that the cost of punishment for sin is fulfilled because Christ takes it upon himself, knowing we cannot bear it (1 Pt 2:24, 3:18, 2 Cor 5:21). Through this act, mercy is extended to us. It is important to note the difference between mercy and grace: mercy is not receiving what we deserve (such as punishment for our sins), while grace is receiving what we do not deserve. So, while mercy means you are spared from punishment, grace goes a step further: not only are you forgiven, but you are also adopted into God's family and given eternal life (Eph 1:5, Gl 4:4-5, Rm 8:15). Although it may seem complex, the concept of grace in Christianity highlights the profound gifts we receive beyond mere forgiveness (Bridges 2018:88).

Furthermore, there are concerns that such practices may foster fear and division, counteracting any holistic approaches to addressing social or political issues. Although the manifestation of 'back to sender' prayers is more frequently documented in West African contexts, such as those found in Nigeria, as well as in South African NPCs, its prevalence in South Africa reflects broader trends in African NPCs. These trends are significantly influenced by globalisation, media proliferation and migration patterns. Examples of these prayers, such as 'Evil arrows, return to sender in Jesus' name', epitomise the karmic rebound concept while prioritising divine intervention over the impersonal nature of fate. Media outlets have intensified NPCs' doctrines, particularly the 'enemy concept', which depicts enemies as both spiritual and human threats. Testimonies and confessions from converts and adherents regarding witchcraft have broadened this narrative, cultivating pervasive distrust, especially towards the domain of the 'enemy within' – individuals in intimate relationships who could cause harm through spiritual or material methods. This expanded interpretation has intensified distrust and paranoia within groups, where perceived bad behaviours may result in verbal confrontations and allegations of hostility or witchcraft. NPCs' language has been modified and recontextualised in diverse settings, evolving into a mechanism for both offence and defence that confronts social and personal issues while generating new significances (Ekechi 2025:41-44; Mudyiwa & Mokgoatšana 2021:2-15).

### **The role of language and cultural practices in Neo-Pentecostalism: Understanding community resilience amid socio-economic struggles**

The willingness of individuals to embrace the 'back to sender' ideology can be attributed to the influence of socio-economic challenges. These financial adversities and social uncertainties heighten psychological stress, fostering feelings of distrust, anger and fear of perceived adversaries. This phenomenon also highlights the socially constructed authority of language

in shaping, interpreting, and expanding reality through collective meanings and traditions. Community members often use affirmative language to describe their circumstances, seeking to deter both tangible and abstract opponents from exploiting their expressions. Common Neo-Pentecostal phrases such as 'Blood of Jesus', 'Holy Ghost fire', 'Back to sender', and 'I reject it' are frequently employed to alleviate perceived threats, demonstrating a proactive approach to damage control and emphasising the performative power of language. These expressions have moved beyond their religious origins, having been embraced by various groups within the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements to influence outcomes while maintaining cultural traditions. Many individuals have been promised material rewards in exchange for their seed offerings. When these promises do not materialise, they are often left in a state of uncertainty and are instead informed about obstacles such as witchcraft and generational curses. Furthermore, prosperity theology has adapted to incorporate specific beliefs and practices that align with the spiritual needs of the traditional African culture, contributing to the constant evolution of some Neo-Pentecostal churches (Ekechi 2025:41; Kgatle 2024:68; Kgatle & Ngubane 2023).

### **Ethical considerations**

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### **Results and discussion**

The examination of the 'back to sender' practice in some of the South African NPCs uncovers intricate connections among spiritual beliefs, cultural identities and societal issues. Essential to comprehending this phenomenon is recognising how the notion of karma is reinterpreted within their practice, enabling followers to traverse a world frequently perceived as antagonistic or unjust.

The 'back to sender' practice, prevalent in various Neo-Pentecostal and African indigenous religious contexts, is deeply intertwined with the concept of karma, reflecting a belief in reciprocal justice where actions yield corresponding consequences. In this framework, NPCs' adherence invokes spiritual power to redirect negative energies or ill intentions back to their source, effectively mirroring the principles of karma, which posit that one will experience the repercussions of their actions, whether good or bad. This practice emerges from a desire for self-protection against perceived threats, such as witchcraft or malevolence, and is often viewed as a form of spiritual warfare. While it can empower individuals by giving them a sense of agency over their circumstances, it also raises ethical dilemmas. The intention behind invoking 'back to sender' can reveal a deep-seated desire for justice or revenge, which aligns with the karmic worldview that emphasises cause and effect. However, this can perpetuate cycles of hostility, as individuals might seek to inflict harm on those they perceive as aggressors, thereby contradicting fundamental teachings on forgiveness and compassion.

Critics argue that this practice can lead to a misinterpretation of karma, where the focus shifts from personal responsibility and spiritual growth to a transactional mentality rooted in vengeance. Ultimately, while the 'back to sender' practice may offer a means of coping with adversity, it simultaneously challenges adherents to reconcile their actions with broader moral implications, particularly regarding the profound tenets of mercy and forgiveness present in many spiritual traditions.

This article reveals that the 'back to sender' practice transcends ritualism, functioning as a significant medium for social critique and individual empowerment. Through participation in this spiritual conflict, believers who are mostly from the margins, affirm their autonomy, combating perceived injustices and sufferings ascribed to external malevolent entities. This illustrates a profound cultural comprehension of causation, wherein harm perpetrated by others elicits a retaliatory spiritual reaction, aligning with the fundamental principle of karma that acts yield results.

The analysis of this practice reveals a notable integration of indigenous African spiritualities into Neo-Pentecostal beliefs. The observed syncretism demonstrates the integration of traditional African cosmologies, which prioritise balance and the regulation of spiritual energies, into a modern Christian narrative. This integration fosters a communal strategy for individuals contending with structural challenges like poverty and unemployment. The capacity to 'return' disasters not only provides a sense of agency but also establishes a social framework for the expression and resolution of grievances, although through spiritual channels. Furthermore, the results suggest that the 'back to sender' prayer warfare is interconnected with larger accountability concerns. In a world where corruption and immorality may remain unaccountable, this practice enables individuals to channel their grievances towards a spiritual dimension. It thereby promotes an active engagement with personal and community challenges, placing the faithful in a proactive position against societal injustices that frequently appear insurmountable in the physical world.

The ritualistic invocation of expressions like 'Evil arrows, return to sender in Jesus' name' exhibits empowering language, invoking supernatural intervention to administer justice. This language cultivates a unified identity among adherents, strengthening communal ties through collective prayers and rituals that confront shared concerns and challenges. The widespread adoption of the 'back to sender' prayer carries significant consequences. This fervent spiritual reaction can occasionally result in social discord, especially within families where allegations of witchcraft may arise. The tendency to designate individuals as sources of curses can damage personal relationships and exacerbate stigmas related to mental health, a matter that requires additional scholarly attention.

In conclusion, the 'back to sender' practice within South African NPCs demonstrates a sophisticated comprehension of spirituality that confronts both individual and communal

crises. This discipline reinterprets principles similar to karma, offering adherents a theological justification for their circumstances while cultivating a sense of agency in a world that frequently diminishes their challenges. Additional research is crucial to examine the effects of these practices on interpersonal relationships and community dynamics, particularly within the swiftly changing spiritual landscapes throughout Africa and beyond. Such inquiries facilitate a profound comprehension of the complex interplay among faith, culture and social realities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the 'back to sender' practice within South African NPCs exemplifies a complex interplay between contemporary religious beliefs and traditional African cultural frameworks. This phenomenon illustrates how spiritual warfare concepts, particularly the notion of karma, are being reinterpreted and adapted within a distinctly African context. By framing misfortunes as spiritual attacks requiring redirection back to their sources, practitioners not only assert agency over their circumstances but also engage with broader societal issues, such as poverty, unemployment and inequality, through a lens that offers both comfort and empowerment.

The growing popularity of this practice signifies a shift in the religious landscape, where the integration of indigenous spirituality with Neo-Pentecostal teachings fosters a unique form of syncretism. This convergence allows for a more dynamic understanding of spiritual influences and emphasises the performative aspects of faith, particularly the power of prayer and spoken declarations as tools for overcoming adversity. As researchers continue to explore the implications of this blending of belief systems, it is vital to acknowledge the sociocultural contexts that shape these practices and the wider significance they hold for communities grappling with both spiritual and material challenges.

Ultimately, this study underscores the necessity for ongoing dialogue regarding the intersections of faith, culture and social justice. By critically examining the 'back to sender' ritual and its theological underpinnings, we contribute to a more nuanced appreciation of how religious beliefs can inform and respond to the lived experiences of individuals in contemporary South Africa. Such insights are essential for promoting religious tolerance and understanding as societies navigate the complexities of faith in a rapidly changing world.

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## CRedit authorship contribution

Simesihle Ngubane: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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## Data availability

The author declares that all data that support this research article and its findings are available in the article and its references.

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