

"Politics is a Dangerous Thing, but We Need to Take the Risk". Pentecostals Engaging in the Public Sphere in Uganda

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Based on fieldwork data collected since 2005 in Uganda, this paper focuses on the significant space acquired by the Pentecostal movement in the public sphere in Uganda, especially in connection with the involvement in the debate on HIV and AIDS prevention. Politics has long been thought as a dangerous sphere by the Pentecostals, which maintained an "other worldly" perspective in which there was no room for engagement in "this wordly" activities.

Nevertheless, during the last ten years some of the main Churches has become more and more engaged in the public sphere, through social programs, AIDS campaigns, creation of FBOs' and even with direct engagement with politics.

This new perspective brought many young born-again to become "social workers" and "volunteers", problematic categories which will be analyzed and discussed through some testimonies collected in the field.

I'll then explore the existence of a double direction of influence, analyzing how AIDS came to configure (or, using the language of social movements theory, "to frame") the collective identity of Pentecostals in Uganda; on the other direction, Pentecostalism itself framed the discourse and politics of AIDS through a growing influence both at a social and at a political level. The parallel history of Pentecostalism and HIV/AIDS in Uganda is of particular interest as it shows how an external, unpredictable circumstance (the raising of the epidemic), can contribute in a decisive way in framing the construction of meaning, and thus the action, of a social movement, as well as the movement itself, once established, was able to reconfigure the social representation of the epidemic, and to influence politics and interventions in the health sector as well as in other areas. The moralizing attitude which is a character of Pentecostalism has been amplified by the spreading of the virus, which has been read through the lens of the "sinful behavior" and "satanic action" perspective.

I'll finally discuss how this engagement is re-configuring the collective identity of the young people involved in the movement, with a special attention for the abstinence campaign.