

‘The Glory is Here!’ Faith Brands and Rituals of Self-Affirmation for Social Responsibility in Kenya¹

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Abstract

Female Pentecostal-Charismatic (PC) church leaders have a quest to legitimize their leadership at all levels. This quest for acceptability and legitimacy to the congregation they lead can be daunting especially in the context of a male dominated religious field such as we have in Kenya. Some female PC leaders in Kenya manage the desires and beliefs of their audiences through religious programmes and slogans that enhance social participation and solidarity. This article examines the programme and slogan ‘The Glory is here’ broadcasted by one Kenyan female PC church leader, Margaret Wanjiru of Jesus is Alive Ministries (JIAM). Through the faith brand ‘The Glory is here’, Wanjiru, in the marketing of religion, distinguishes herself from others in the market place and promotes her product and services in order to develop a consumer base. Her programme as a female PC Televangelist functions as an empowering ritual of self-affirmation of women. Both her faith brand and repeated rituals of self-affirmation serve to enhance her solidarity with women of all ages, and serve as social and psychological support to the community.

Keywords: faith brand, self-affirmation, female Pentecostal-Charismatic leaders, social responsibility, Kenya

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Introduction

Female Pentecostal-Charismatic (PC) church leaders overtly and covertly negotiate their claims to religious leadership. This quest for acceptability and legitimacy in the group they lead can be daunting especially in the context of a male dominated religious field such as we have in Kenya. Some female PC leaders manage the desires and beliefs of their audiences through religious programmes which enhance social participation and solidarity among women in Kenya. As ritual processes that impact on society in socially complex ways, it functions as a social responsibility system and system of intervention, for, with, and on behalf of women. It also importantly impacts on the production of a variety of forms of social relations, that patterns social cohesion among women, and as such, also impacting society more broadly speaking.

There is a consensus that religious beliefs contribute to levels of adult social responsibility (Rossi 2001:227). According to Rossi, social responsibility is multifaceted and much more inclusive than mere membership of formal associations or volunteerism related to formal organizations. To her, this includes normative obligations and provisions of social support, care giving and financial assistance at the family level, and also to the community at large (Rossi 2001:128). As female leader, Margaret Wanjiru is strategically positioned to do just this. She propagates and inculcates religious beliefs and moral values and also provides ethical direction, with the aim of supporting socially responsible behaviour in the community (see Frederick 1986).

This article first introduces Margaret Wanjiru and the origins of her ministry. It also highlights her induction into and debut on televangelism. She decided on television as medium for her ministry, because it provides the opportunity to advance not only the propagation of her own faith message, but also the branding and managing of her faith brand. Rather than focusing on specific programme footage, the article focuses on how Margaret Wanjiru has managed to found and propagate her faith brand through televangelism, and through it, to encourage and empower fellow women (Kalu 2008: 149). An important part of her approach is an emphasis on rituals of self-affirmation. These rituals have meaning not only for her audience, but also reflexively, for herself. They provide spiritual support and foster solidarity with the communities comprising her consumer base. They also importantly serve as tools of empowerment, through a process through which she encourages her audience to take up social responsibility for themselves, their families and

communities, and, in so doing, to cultivate social cohesion with dignity, self-respect, and integrity.

Introducing Margaret Wanjiru and JIAM

Margaret Wanjiru was born in 1961 into a polygamous family in Kahuguini, Kiambu Kenya. As a youth she was a member of the Anglican church of Kenya². Since her father was an alcoholic, her mother had to fend for the family³. They found themselves impoverished and having to live within Nairobi's Kangemi slums where she grew up in poverty, even as her mother made and sold illicit brews to educate and feed the children. Kangemi slums is located in a small valley on the outskirts of Nairobi city, on the road connecting Nairobi and Naivasha. It has a population of over 150,000 people and its southern border connects with another large slum known as Kawangware.

By the age of sixteen, Wanjiru had become pregnant⁴. Before she knew what was happening she conceived the second time, despite the many warnings she had received from her mother (Kalu 2008:150). Indeed, studies indicate that living in extreme environments like slums impacts sexual and reproductive health. This is essentially so since slum communities are often characterized by a lack of basic infrastructure, high risk of sexual and gender-based violence, high levels of substance abuse, poor livelihood opportunities and poor schooling facilities, all of which negatively impact young women aged between 15-22 years (Beguy *et al.* 2014). In general, it has been indicated that over 13,000 girls drop out of school in Kenya annually, due to early

² See <http://www.dacb.org/history/aics-kenya.html> Accessed on 13.3.16.

³ Wanjiru herself repeats this often in her church services. When she proclaims her message, it comes with the support of her own experience, that she has had to fend for herself and her two children.

⁴ There seems to be inaccuracies and imprecisions in some of the information Wanjiru has supplied to interviewers and researchers. This came to light from media revelations following her debut into the political arena in 2007 when one James Kamangu insisted that he had formally married her according to Kikuyu traditions. Consequently, the age at which she became pregnant differs in several accounts. According to Parsitau, she was seventeen (Parsitau 2011:134). Kamangu's account brings her age to about 19 or 20. Clearly, the exact age when she became pregnant remains contested to date.

childbearing (Muganda-Onyando *et al.* 2008). For a while, Wanjiru got a job as a house servant in Nairobi, in order to feed her children (Mwaura 2002:202). Wanjiru's mother took up the responsibility to raise her two children. While working as a servant, she returned to school and completed her elementary education.

Later, she got a cleaning job, and enrolled for a marketing diploma course. In this course, Wanjiru learnt the process or technique of promoting, advertising, selling and distributing a product or service. She later got a job as a marketer for Marlboro cigarettes which she did so well, that she moved up the ranks (Kalu 2008:150-151). The JIAM website states that her discipline and determination to succeed resulted in rapid promotions and various accomplishments until she became a sales and marketing executive for a multinational firm in Nairobi. She later went on to form her own business in the city excelling as an entrepreneur⁵.

In March 1991, Wanjiru attended a crusade by the Nigerian preacher, Emmanuel Eni where she converted to Christianity, and turned away from the path she had earlier walked (Kalu 2008:151). Eni is a Nigerian evangelist renowned for his book *Delivered from the Powers of Darkness* (Eni 1987)⁶. In this book, Eni claims to have been married to a woman from the spirit world and became an agent of Satan. According to Gifford, this is a continent-wide best seller in the religious domain (Gifford 2004: 85). This struck a chord in Wanjiru who had been initiated into witchcraft at a young age when a wizard convinced her mother to subject her and her siblings to witchcraft rituals for protection from evil spirits (Mwaura 2008:282). Later in life, she associated with dark powers of witchcraft to enable her to be a successful marketer and to outwit her competitors. After Wanjiru's conversion she soon started preaching the gospel in the streets with a group of South African Christians of the World Intercessory Ministry (Parsitau 2011: 134-135).

Jesus is Alive Ministries (JIAM) was founded by Wanjiru in September 1993. Currently it has a membership of over 11,000 members⁷. In 1997 she was ordained a minister, and in 2002 a Bishop by Archbishop Arthur Kitonga of the Redeemed Gospel Church. Wanjiru is the second woman to be ordained a Pentecostal Bishop in Kenya after Margaret Wangari, Bishop of the

⁵ See <https://www.jiam.org/bishops-profile/> Accessed on 1.3.16

⁶ See also Ellis and Ter Haar (1998); and Corten, Marshall-Fratani (2001).

⁷ See <https://www.jiam.org> Accessed on 1.3.16

Church of the Lord in Kiambu County. This position, combined with her political interests have ushered her even more into the limelight. As a female Bishop within the patriarchal religious landscape of Kenya, controversial perspectives commonly emerge on gender roles in ministry. And, in this complex context, she is standing her ground very well.

Whereas she started street preaching in the early 1990's, she moved to her Haile Selassie premises in 1998. In the same year, she began her televised show 'The Glory is here' (Parsitau 2011: 134). Her ministry has a vibrant media look with website live-streaming, you-tube postings, flyers and numerous activities on face book and twitter. JIAM has ventured into diaspora communities of Uganda, South Africa, United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. Besides being a televangelist, she is also a business-woman running the Glory Investment Fund, the *Faith Digest* magazine, fleets of buses, cafeterias and a bible school. She is a beautiful woman with over twenty two other services during the week, each drawing large crowds. She can be said to have challenged the conservative Pentecostals that restrict the levels of women's ritual status (Kalu 2008:151-152). She has an academic background in marketing and Theology.

Wanjiru's Debut into Televangelism and her Faith Brand

We have already noted that Wanjiru was involved in aggressive marketing as a salesperson for the Marlboro cigarettes company outlet in Kenya. Through her work she was able to climb the ranks in marketing to senior positions. Thus, marketing for Wanjiru should not be considered strange. According to Harri Englund, Pentecostalism in Africa have initiated and developed numerous social aspects and related practices to their ministries, e.g. the commodification of goods and services, the development of numerous transnational connections and relationships in Africa and various kinds of relationship with Africa's diasporas, the utilising and operationalising of the mass media in the interests of their programmes and projects, and also to intervene and address the numerous crises in public health (Englund 2011:15).

JIAM TV programme 'The Glory is here' started broadcasting on national TV close to prime time, every evening, from as early as 1998. Very few men and women in the religious circles could air their programmes at the time. She organized herself and her congregants to fund this enterprise and

ensured that each programme was broadcast. This was at a time when current media and streaming options were not common. Thus, it was a very expensive venture. It is therefore important to see how she packaged her message and produced her faith brand.

Owing to the overcrowded commercial environment and noisy popular culture, it follows that branding is an indispensable tool in the propagation of one's movement, and its values and beliefs, in a rising mediatizing and digitising world. Mara Einstein asserts that:

Religious organizations have taken on names, logos and personalities and slogans that allow them to be heard in a cluttered, increasingly competitive marketplace Faith brands, like their secular counterparts exist to aid consumers in making and maintaining a personal connection to a commodity product (Einstein 2008: xi).

Consequently, to her, religious products and institutions have become branded in much the same way as consumer products. Branding includes making meaning and giving consumers a product or a service to think about and engage, as a total package (Einstein 2008:91, 94). Wanjiru's main rationale and motivation that she gives her audience, to likewise associate with, imitate or replicate and practice, are the lessons from her own life. For the branding of JIAM, as well as the propagation of her faith brand, the media is essential. Moreover, she was a pioneering and currently is, a leading Pentecostal Bishop in Kenya, and her programmes are aired consistently in weekly programmes on national TV. Today, she is a household name in Kenya. Indeed, she even runs a print magazine alongside her television and social media programmes, called *Faith Digest* (Kalu 2008:151). Further, in 2007, she was listed among the 50 most influential women in East Africa by *True Love*, a leading women's Magazine in Kenya, for enabling spiritual empowerment to thousands of people through her outreach (Parsitau 2011: 134).

As people started and kept watching 'The Glory is here', the programme became a household name, and very few in Kenya can say they do not know the programme and its host. Clearly, Wanjiru made use of marketing strategies, where the message is to be repeated as often as possible and be packaged so as to ensure loyalty and allegiance to the same brand. Even as other products in the market are propagated through the media, in order to raise awareness of them, and to buy into them, so, what we see here, can the

religious, or spiritual products, in the form of faith brands, be given popular meaning and awareness through marketing. Hence, religion and marketing are deemed to be mutually beneficial and not contesting (Einstein 2008:74).

Faith brands create financial value for their owners, become part of a culture and create various forms of loyalty to commodity products availed by religious organizations (Einstein 2008:91). These products include a wide array of items that enhance spiritual progress such as television programmes which have a readily recognizable name and logo. They can go further to include books, live streams, a pastor, a spiritual practice, religious courses, DVD's and CD's or a combination of these created to aid target consumers. These products are expanding by the day, and may even include film and screen plays by various religious groups. Key is that these spiritual products are readily identifiable. The programme the 'Glory is here' was known to belong to one Wanjiru and no one else. At all times, she was the minister in the programmes and was given prime airtime. Essentially, Einstein points out that when marketing is introduced into a category, it alters the assumptions therein of the category. Thus, when Religion is marketed, it acts just like other branded products (Einstein 2008: 75). Consequently, with the marketing of spirituality comes the idea that religion, like any other good, is a product for which consumers can shop, can be tailored into individual preferences and its consumers can expect convenience and perhaps entertainment from its marketers.

For Wanjiru, it seems, to be a producer of religious goods, and use marketing and media tools for her faith brand, has come naturally, given her background. Ultimately, the use of these systems, helped Wanjiru to develop a consumer base that constitutes a sizable block of religious groups in Kenya. By getting into the public domain of Television broadcasting, Wanjiru continues to invite more people to her audience. This audience is vast in range and array. She is promoting her particular faith brand, and it is continuing to grow.

The Glory Is Here

The catch phrase, 'The Glory is here', was developed in the late 1990's by Wanjiru as she made her debut into televangelism. This was her form of meaning-making of her understanding of the Christian gospel. She sought to

bring across a positive message of self-affirmation and self-assertion in the present. Her packaging of the gospel was unique in the midst of the noisy religious outlets and popular culture, in that it impacted people's dignity and self-esteem. In this context, the term 'televangelism' in the American sense of the word is not wholly applicable to Wanjiru and in some cases, the broader African religious media scene. In the American usage, televangelists are evangelical and Pentecostal ministers whose religious ministries which most often than not, exclusively revolve around their television or radio programmes, whereas in the African context, televangelists are often leaders who lead by example, and are leaders of visible churches or ministries. They are not just faces on television and voices on the radio. They are living among the people, and the people can testify as to their lives and their social commitments for the improvement of the quality of life of people. Consequently, televangelism, when used in Africa, is often used in a broader sense, than in America (Ihejirika 2009:21).

In theological terms, firstly, the notion of 'glory' signifies the presence of God. To lay claim to this glory in a way produces meaning for her consumer base. It suggests that, if God is somewhere, and if there is a God, God is present with people in their own circumstances. This, for many constitutes an invitation, to also join in the glory and presence of God. It follows that if God's glory is with people, God is understood to be present in their own circumstances, sanctioning their lives, and all their meetings, assemblies, and prayers, with goodness. In Wanjiru's theological understanding, the significance of this phrase, points to an identity which is part of the overall eschatological drama of the Kingdom of God. It is eschatological, in that it is the hope-for future that reaches into the present (Kline 2001). And, Wanjiru's message and its impact can be likened to the parables of Jesus in the Bible. The 'glory of God' references the belief in the overall presence of the Kingdom of God, as a 'tensive symbol' (Scott 1989:58)⁸, among humankind. As tensive symbol it opens up to many meanings which allows for a variety of interpretations in a large variety of social contexts.

Secondly, due to Wanjiru's own life story, she can give content to the belief in the presence of the 'glory of God'. For her, to appear on and for having become such a successful TV personality in Kenya, shows, existentially that it

⁸ The parable is a type of discourse or narrative that was used in Jewish tradition.

is indeed possible for a girl from the slums to rise to the level of becoming a National TV personality. Wanjiru's life story which traces her rise from extreme poverty and difficulty, to where she is now, suggests an element of some visible 'glory' or success. In part, she reflects what people desire in terms of their own hopes for success. Presently, she somewhat embodies what the glory may be thought to be in individual lives.

Furthermore, the origin of this slogan, according to Wanjiru, is a vision she had, which lasted nine hours. In this vision, summarily stated, God showed her a black book with writings inside but no title. What she saw next was that God touched it with a finger, drew a map of Africa, and wrote on it, 'The Glory is here: Africa shall be saved' (Parsitau 2014: 128). This was, when financially she was rock bottom. Following a prompting from God, she ventured into the TV ministry. She started her half hour televised religious programme 'The Glory is here', that was first aired on KBC and Family TV and later on, started a programme on KTN (Parsitau 2014:131). In her account, this vision-event, gave rise to her success with JIAM. In her understanding, the notion of 'glory' is present in all life's circumstances: 'Let the God of all Glory show you His glory for when one sees that glory one will be free in all areas'⁹.

Another rendering that Wanjiru has of her notion of 'glory', is that it is based theologically in Exodus 33, where Moses asked God to show him His, i.e. God's glory. Her take on this is that, Moses' desire was to have much more of God. God promised to answer that prayer. God said to Moses that signs would follow him. Wanjiru teaches her followers that, in order for Moses' followers to know that God's glory was with him, Moses would experience all of Gods goodness, he would experience that it is God who protects, guides and fights all his battles; Moses would experience that God is the Almighty who chooses to show grace and mercy to them that He wishes to show. These are the dimensions that she encourages her congregation to desire, and to live out. As her congregants, she encourages them to do as Moses, so as to experience the same glory that Moses did¹⁰.

Maintaining a faith brand comes along with its backlash that disparages and points out flaws of the personality associated with the brand. For Wanjiru, a female Pentecostal church leader, and single mother who at the same time was making an attempt into the political arena, she became the target

⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtwQcWrr4Dg>. Accessed 1.3.2016

¹⁰ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtwQcWrr4Dg>. Accessed 1.3.2016

of a sexist backlash from her competitors and the media who sought to discredit her. Indeed, her influence and its backlash even moved to the sphere of satire, caricature and comedy plays on national TV such as *redykyulass*¹¹. Thus, it was clear who was being imitated when reference was made to her.¹² However her faith brand continues to assert forms of self-affirmation for many women across East and Central Africa, and ultimately, her legitimacy.

Yet, in the promotion of her faith brand, 'the Glory is here', inevitably, Wanjiru is negotiating and transforming her own self-legitimation. As a female preacher in a religious field, her claims to religious leadership is fraught with those who would wish to cast doubt on her suitability. If God's glory is here, and God is here, then what she and her congregation are doing is sanctioned by God, thus, legitimate. What follows is an enumeration of how this programme, 'The Glory is here' acts as a ritual of self-affirmation particularly for an African female residing in sub-Saharan Africa.

Rituals of Self Affirmation and Social Responsibility

The programme, 'The Glory is here' was initially broadcast by Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) TV and Radio. It later on moved to Family TV and Radio 316. From 2009 to 2011, 'The Glory is here' was aired once a week, every Monday night by KTN at 9:45pm (Parsitau 2014:254). Now it airs on Family TV on Sunday at 8:30 pm and a repeat on Thursday morning at 10:00 pm (Parsitau 2014:252). Wanjiru presents herself stylishly and well groomed each time she is on live broadcast. Her office is well furnished and is testament to good taste. She shares her personal story of hard work,

¹¹ *Redykyulass* comprised of three young college students who were stand-up comedians. The trio's performances focused on Kenyans' way of life and was quite entertaining to many Kenyans.

¹² After her decision to run for a parliamentary seat in 2007 and her engagement announcement, a flurry of media reports surfaced. Granted her spheres of influence in popular culture, this occurrence became a national dialogue with phone in's, letters to the editors, cartoons and newspaper editorials paying attention to her life (Parsitau 2011: 136). Her later political achievements included contesting and winning the Starehe parliamentary seat (2007), contesting and loosing as Senator of Nairobi (2013) and most recently, contesting and loosing as Governor of Nairobi (2017).

determination and moving up the corporate ladder, a story of one moving from rags to riches. A story she attests can hold true for anyone else in the audience.

According to Jonathan Walton, televangelists wield influence and do have a large income base that enables them to air their services. His critical assessment shows that many of these preachers, in their sermons and other media, promote ideologies that reinforce injustice, patriarchy, and inequality, by way of cultural myths. One of such myths is that success is attainable by any hard working person, thus ignoring the structural constraints on financial opportunities, even though they encourage conspicuous consumption (Walton 2009:215). To him, it is clear that television has a unique ability to codify certain norms and behaviours, but, at the same time, strengthen cultural myths (Walton 2009: 178-179).

Pentecostal imagery normally features success and wealth, hiding the pain, suffering and poverty that attract people to these churches (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004). Besides this criticism of opulence and ideological warps that emanate from these groups, Walton argues that some televangelism is valuable and succeeds in motivating its audience, even the direst of circumstances, as they provide a personal strength and motivation, to confront and resist what audiences understand to be unjust. In the Kenyan case, this would include an economically unjust and sexist society while in the American case, it additionally includes racial injustice. The value of televangelism to Wanjiru's audience serves to provide social support to those who are in the midst of such oppressive situations. Her ministry further participates in care giving and offers various forms of assistance for families through counselling, mentorship, marriage programmes thus impacting many.

The location of her church, in downtown Nairobi makes it accessible by the down-trodden and socially marginalised, the many who lack the comforts of life and can hardly make ends meet. Such are those who seek a way out of the injustices that society and the political class have continued to put them through. Televangelism for Wanjiru's audience is a way forward beyond glass ceilings that had for a long time seen male preachers dominating the religious field and as such, her broadcasts fit neatly into the category of 'rituals of self-affirmation' (Walton 2009: 173). For the many women mishandled in many arenas of life, a Kenyan female PC leader speaks to their plight, also confronting sexism in the church and in society.

Self-affirmation in this case flows both ways, to the audience and again to the minister, Wanjiru. In affirming her connection to God and his glory,

affirming her female personhood and her priesthood, she dispels traditional sexist religious shackles that celebrate the patriarchal models that rule supreme in some of the Pentecostal and mainline churches. Wanjiru's sermons demonstrate a clear engagement with African women's theology and appeals to women's experience. This entails taking seriously women's experiences and drawing from them for theological reflection. Such a position is particularly a political commitment to the emancipation of women. As an African woman, taking from African women's theology, she attends and appeals to several themes central to African Women's Theology, such as community, empowerment, liberation, a liberative ecclesiology, a Christology for women, and a feminist ecology and missiology (Maseno-Ouma 2014). These themes speak to individual social challenges, many women face, even as she herself provides solidarity and social support to countless women.

Wanjiru is deemed as a trail-blazer by thousands of women (Parsitau 2011:134). Wanjiru also entered the political arena, a road on which very few women leaders dare to venture. She is noted as a person that can be looked up to in admiration for such determination. For the many single mothers who have to raise their children alone, an experience that Wanjiru has had to go through, her broadcasts affirm such persons. According to Kalu, Margaret Wanjiru has also managed to empower fellow women who have established churches (Kalu 2008: 149). In this manner, through her programmes, she gives back to the community. Yet this affirmation is not only a one-way street, but also produces and reproduces opportunities for Wanjiru's own self-legitimation.

In order to understand televangelism as a ritual of self-affirmation, it is important, as Walton points out, to understand the social and religious context into which the preacher speaks, thus making the preachers' message significant to the audience (Walton 2009:215). This article has already indicated in part the contexts of sexism and economic injustices in Kenya. Whereas Walton focussed on male televangelists in America whom he appraises as promoting the strong black man hypermasculinist hero, it is interesting to see how Wanjiru from a developing country, comes onto the scene and negotiates her standing on national TV, in order to critique sexism in the religious and political arenas, and affirm not only herself but all women. Clearly, a hypermasculinist hero cannot be promoted by Wanjiru owing to her realities and the experiences of African women which play a key role in Wanjiru's reflection and theologising. Yet, it can be said, she has created her own category.

Conclusion

This article has considered faith brands and rituals of self-affirmation which contribute to activities that directly advance social goals. When these are placed alongside each other, they redefine emerging Pentecostalism on the African continent. The faith brand 'The Glory is here' for Wanjiru opens spaces for rituals of self-affirmation. Through televangelism and the JIAM ministry, Wanjiru develops a consumer base, connected to her faith brand in the society in which she operates. Within this milieu she furthers religious beliefs which contribute to levels of adult social responsibility for herself and her congregations. Clearly, 'The Glory is here' may literally neither be here nor there, but the use of this slogan, especially as it links up with her own rise from the slums of Nairobi, distinguishes Wanjiru from other faith brands. This distinction makes her products accessible while at the same time Wanjiru as a personality becomes important in relation to this brand.

'The Glory is here', like other faith brands can be noted to be useful largely in Pentecostal circles. These are said to be seeker sensitive churches whose members would go on to seek for themselves products that are spiritually engaging. It would be interesting to see whether these patterns described here are also applicable across fellow religious traditions. On the other hand, the type of religion promoted through religious marketing emphasizes a 'consumer-friendly, feel-good, easy listening type of Christianity' (Einstein 2008:179). This ultimately masks the reality of the product and may dupe newcomers into a set of values while at the same time, leaving them with a religious worldview which is insufficient to cope with life's setbacks existentially and in reality. Wanjiru's televangelism emphasizes on self-affirmation, dignity and self-esteem, both for her audience and herself. This empowerment serves to address notions of individual social responsibility in all the areas of life, such as the domains of work, family and community.

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Faith Brands and Rituals of Self-Affirmation for Social Responsibility

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