

# ***ALTERNATION***

Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in  
Southern Africa Special Edition 30 (2020)  
Print ISSN 1023-1757; Electronic ISSN 2519-5476

## **Spirituality and Wellbeing in Africana Contexts**



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\* *Alternation* is an international journal which publishes interdisciplinary contributions in the fields of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa.

\* Prior to publication, each publication in *Alternation* is reviewed by at least two independent peer reviewers.

\* *Alternation* is indexed in The Index to South African Periodicals (ISAP) and hosted online on the UKZN platform, on OJS, and by EBSCO

\* *Alternation* is published every semester. Special editions may be published p.a.

\* *Alternation* was accredited in 1996.

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**Print ISSN 1023-1757; Electronic ISSN 2519-5476**

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# *Alternation*

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Arts and Humanities in  
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## **Spirituality and Wellbeing in Africana Contexts**

Guest Editors  
*Chammah J. Kaunda &  
Roderick R. Hewitt*

2020

CSSALL  
Durban

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We wish to acknowledge the participation of the following reviewers in the production of this issue of *Alternation*.

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# Editorial: Spirituality and Wellbeing in Africana Contexts

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## Introduction

Internationally, numerous scholars argue that religion/spirituality has critical implications for human wellbeing (Agorastos *et al.* 2014; Idler 2014; Koenig 2012; Koenig *et al.* 2012; Yehyaand Dutta 2010). Research has shown, that the same is true with regard to Africa (Sabuni 2007; Manda 2008; Dube 2009; Sovran 2013; Manguvo & Mafuvadze 2015; Kasenene 2000). Across Africa, religion/spirituality remains a factor that influences and shapes the wellbeing of many Africans. Religion occupies a central position in the personal and social lives of many Africans. As such, it functions with a framework for interpretation and formulation of ideas that inform daily interactions with other people and the world (Kasenene 2000; Manda 2008). But the role of religion in Africa has not always been constructive and clear-cut. Affirmatively, religion has contributed to the struggle against colonialism, for national independence, for fostering and support of modern democracies, and the establishing of independent nation states. Negatively, religion(s) has, at times, and in some contexts, also contributed to endorsing and perpetuating postcolonial autocratic life-denying tendencies among politicians, patrimonial autocratic and oligarchic systems, and the denial of human rights, for a wide variety of minority groups, not aligned with the hegemonic power structures and it has also contributed to spread of infectious diseases such Ebola as was the case in West Africa (Manguvo & Mafuvadze 2015). The question is whether and how religions and religious formations in Africa have intentionally positioned themselves as forces for wellbeing, safety and security, or, for ill? How have they engaged the individual, as well as social challenges that African people face? How do they function for the continuous improvement of the quality of life and wellbeing of people? OR: if they do not

function in this way, what roles do they play in society in general, but also specifically, and practically? Acknowledging that there have been some valuable research focusing on particular contexts, there is inadequate scholarly literature, which specifically explores the interplay between religion/spirituality and wellbeing, or its opposites.

## **Background**

Scholars have argued that in Africa, religion/spirituality in all its various manifestations is a seminal, ingrained, aspect of life, identity construction, social practice and reality construction and interpretation. They argue that religion/ spirituality should not be regarded as separate from the totality of human life in Africa. For all intents and purposes, it saturates the lives and cultures of most African people. Concomitantly, religion/spirituality and its related practices, are perceived as a social and humanistic resource for African cultural, moral-ethical, political and economic functioning, but also development and advancement. This perception of religion/ spirituality, is usually endorsed by views from John Mbiti (1969), who, described Africans as ‘notoriously religious’; Fabien Boulaga (1984), who embedded all of African life – ‘self-transcendence, nature, earth, sex, anything that moves’ – in religion; Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar (2004), who argued that ‘it is largely through religious ideas that Africans think about the world today, and that religious ideas provide them with a means of becoming social and political actors’; and, more recently, Trinitapoli and Weinreb (2012), that Africa is ‘the world’s most religious continent’. That this form of essentializing, if not erroneous idealisation, of the importance of religion/ spirituality, or of a broad-based religious world view, for Africans, is obviously contentious.

Given the myriad of challenges and struggles some Africans face on a daily basis in all spheres of life, in all the sociocultural, -political, and -economic dimensions, and societal levels of a rapidly – if also very unequally – modernising continent, we need to move beyond the simplistic and idealistic understandings of the significance of religion/ spirituality in Africa. Moreover, the scholarly homogenising assumptions, common generalisations, and generic intellectual simplifications about African life and culture, not only obfuscate and befuddle very complex issues, as these differ from context to context, and country to country. They also mask a lack of the equal recognition of the wide

diversity of African people, as well as religions and spiritualities on the continent, and their dynamism, fluid functioning, and impacts.

Against the background of these primary misconceptions, African social life should rather be fully recognised and studied with regard to its complexities, its fluid and experimental practices, and the inherent, and often tacit contestations of power and privilege, as these are present in its numerous sociocultural contradictions embedded in the articulations of the person and community; religion and the secular; health and disease; and democracy and un-democratic hegemony; as these grow, and at times collide. This means there is a need to ask about Africa's experiential questions. In this context, it is important to better delineate the significance of religion and spirituality for African life and culture, and if not, how this is the case. Finally, can one distinguish between the nature and impact of religion and spirituality that add to the wellbeing of people, in specific contexts, and that which is to their disadvantage, and detriment? And, what do African people regard as the religion or spirituality that serve them and their wellbeing, and what not?

Amongst others, this Special Issue of *Alternation* seeks to clarify these key issues, as briefly outlined above, with a primary focus on the ways in which religion/ spirituality contribute to wellbeing as understood by Africans themselves in various contexts – local, national and continental or, cosmically/ environmentally. By explicating the concepts and researching the nuances of the wide variety of relationships between religion/ spirituality and wellbeing in Africa, from indigenous African perspectives, this issue is critical addition to the discourse and knowledge production on this very important interdisciplinary area. It has also opened up more possibilities and directions for future research, and research-led teaching and learning. This special issue is developed around four overarching themes in which various contributions are best understood together.

## **Religio-Spiritual Heritage and Wellbeing**

In the first part, contributors interrogate the tension between African religious/spiritual epistemology and contemporary human search for wholeness. **Stephen Morgan** and **Beatrice Okyere-Manu**, open this section with their article, 'The Belief and Veneration of Ancestors in Akan Traditional Thought: Finding Values for Human Wellbeing', in which they argue that the belief and practice of ancestor veneration is embedded in African moral search

for wellbeing. They stress that such Akan ancestral traditions are embedded in the quest for peaceful coexistence underpinned on the moral principle of responsibility which requires radical solidarity and mutual obligation within the community of life.

The above argument resonates with **Yusuf Luxman**, Chammah J. **Kaunda** and **Roderick Hewitt**, who propose, ‘Decolonizing Penal Substitution Theory of Atonement in Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in the Violent Context of Jos, Nigeria’. They argue that the retributive element embedded within the church’s understanding and practice of the Penal Substitution Theory negates peaceful co-existence in pluralistic societies such as Nigeria. Inculturation is used as analytical tool for decolonising Penal Substitution Theory in dialogue with Pyem people’s philosophy of forgiving-love. This qualitative research demonstrates that the Pyem religio-cultural experience is embedded in its religio-cultural notion of *Ngwakin Darsai Daal* (the male that reconciles) that presupposes humanity as the backdrop of forgiving-love. They conclude by calling for intentional conversations between the Gospel and African cultures in which religious practitioners are engaged in order to stimulate practical creation of new culturally informed theologies of reconciliation and peaceful co-existence.

On a similar argument, **Emmanuel Ofuasia** in ‘On Religious Intolerance in Yorùbá Society: An Exploration of the Pluriverse Alternative’, considers the Yorùbá religions of Nigeria being unfairly implicated in religious conflict. He argues the contemporary religious conflict in Nigeria was engendered by two warring religions - Christianity and Islam which have also upset the serenity and spiritual equilibrium of Yorùbá people. Ofuasia contends that the solution to religious conflict in Nigeria cannot be found only Christianity or Islam but in dialogue with African religio-cultural heritage. Thus, he proposes Òrìṣà philosophy in Yorùbá religio-spirituality as a paradigm for resolution and peaceful coexistence of the imported religious traditions which now exert strong influence in Yorùbá society.

## **Religious Marriages, Gender and Wellbeing**

The second part, is introduced by **Sindile Ngubane-Mokiwa**, who raises an auto-ethnographic question of her ‘Marriage Journey: Could Misinterpretation of Religious Script Lead to Misguided Spirituality?’ Ngubane-Mokiwa describes and analyses her personal experiences as a Muslim married woman

in order to expose how basic tenets of Islamic religion impacts on her marital life. She resists that it is not Islam as a religion that negates experiencing the fullness of life in marriage, but patriarchal informed hermeneutics to which its sacred texts are subjected. Ngubane-Mokiwa's analysis of her story demonstrates that despite Islamic religion's embedded values that can promote women's human rights and gender justice, the patriarchal structures, cultural conditioning and androcentric hermeneutics at work in the interpretation of the sacred text tend to reinforce and perpetuate power relations and subjection of women and children to life-denying experiences.

**Martin Mujinga's** 'The Interface of Zezuru Marriage Custom with Modernity: An Analysis' argues that even though marriage is central to the Shona people of Zimbabwe, the five ethnic groups that make up the Shona tribe all view marriage differently. One of these ethnicities is the Zezuru, who regard marriage as a unifier of families. The communities involved in a marriage share their very existence in that reality, and they become one people. The centrality of marriage among the Zezuru is experienced through the continuous coming together of people through this rite. However, recent developments show that some valued, traditional Zezuru marriage practices have failed to stand the test of modernity, and others are gravitating towards extinction. The question that begs an answer concerns how the interface of Zezuru marriage customs and modernity impacted this ethnic group. The empirical research collected data through unstructured interviews with 20 randomly selected males and females from different age groups and ethnicities. The sample included bridegrooms, brides and traditional leaders. The article argues that the effects of acculturation and modernisation have given the Zezuru people a modernised understanding of marriage, and that this has beneficial and adverse challenges, on culture, with adverse challenges being more pronounced.

Marriage, for the Ndebele of Matetsi in Zimbabwe, is a spiritual practice, and they believe it is ordained by God and the ancestors. The process of marriage among the people of Matetsi is conducted according to patriarchal spiritual systems, which require a woman to be introduced to her husband's ancestors through certain rituals. In her, 'Until He Releases Me from His Ancestors: An African Spirituality Pastoral Response to Wife Abuse' **Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale's** article explores the traditional marriage rituals of the Ndebele of Matetsi that connect the bride to her husband's ancestors, and the role this practice plays in the way a wife makes decisions in the context of abuse. Written from the perspective of African feminist cultural hermeneutics,

this paper seeks to explain how marriage rituals that connect a bride to her husband's ancestors imprison her in the context of abuse, and obliges her to remain married to her husband through 'thick and thin'. In addition, the paper offers a pastoral response that addresses the African spiritual nature of marriage in the context of abuse of women, with particular reference to the Ndebele of Matetsi, and suggests pastoral interventions in an attempt to liberate wives who are imprisoned by these rituals. This was an empirical study that followed a qualitative participant observation approach, which allowed the researcher to observe the customs and practices of the traditional marriage process in Matetsi, which she participated in, in her marriage process as a young woman.

Another interesting study is done by **Zamambo Mkhize** among Zulu polygamous marriages in KwaZulu-Natal. In the study, 'A Feminist Perspective on Religion in Polygynous Families in KwaZulu-Natal', Mkhize argues that polygamy studies have largely overlooked the role of religion in how women in such contexts forge their identities. Through qualitative research, Mkhize interviewed ten female adults with formal education who were raised in polygynous families and questioned how religion influenced their gendered identity. She discovered that religion was an important factor for the participants, and some of them found comfort in their religion whilst other women found confirmation of what it means to be a good woman.

This, however, is in sharp contrast to the experiences of single women in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism. In her study, "Handisi Mvana" (I am not a disgraced but honourable single lady): Pentecostalism, Tradition and Re-imagining Singlehood in Zimbabwe', **Kudzai Biri** examines the traditional perception of *mvana* (a woman divorced or become pregnant out of wedlock without possibility of marrying the man). She unveils how Shona traditional discourse has been uncritically adopted by some Pentecostal churches and entrenched in their beliefs and practices. Consequently, the traditions of stigmatising and stereotyping single women are perpetuated in Pentecostal circles to their discredit as movements of liberation and emancipation for all.

## **Christianity and Contemporary Issues**

The final part explores engagements between and the implications of such engagements. The contributions in this section demonstrate that Christianity plays an ambivalent role in its engagements with social issues in

Africa. This **Molly Manyonganise** observes of Zimbabwean Pentecostalism in her ‘Commoditising Health? Of Guesthouses and Spiritual/ Faith Healing in Zimbabwe’s New Pentecostal Movements’. She noted that while traditionally Pentecostal churches laid hands on the sick, there has been a new phenomenon where the sick have to visit guesthouses if they want to have a one on one encounter with the faith healer. Manyonganise explores this practice from a qualitative approach to find out whether ‘visit guesthouse’ practice could be a vehicle for commoditization and commercialization of healing and health among Zimbabwean faith-healers. She noted how such practices are promoting neo-capitalism tendencies that sideline the poor who cannot afford to buy faith-based or secular healthcare.

In their, ‘The Perceptions of Faith-based Healing among Public Health Practitioners and Pentecostal-Charismatic Believers in the Eastern Cape Province’, **Nelly Sharpley** and **Chammah J. Kaunda**, analyse the perceptions of public health practitioners and a Pentecostal-Charismatic community of faith-based healing in Eastern Cape. Data was collected through qualitative techniques, which included observations, questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The qualitative data was analyzed using an interpretive approach. The findings demonstrate a conflict between public health practitioners and Pentecostal-Charismatic believers on the issue of faith-based healing. While the public health practitioners argue for the medical model, which is a reductionist approach to health problems, Pentecostal-Charismatic believers argue for a purely religious model, which is another reductionist approach to health challenges in Eastern Cape. This article argues, as a way of bridging the knowledge gap, for a more systematic transformation of public health by acknowledging the role of faith in people’s lives and consequently reconceptualizes relationships between faith and health problems in the province.

**Nelly Mwale** and **Joseph Chita** in their research on ‘The Catholic Church and Epidemics: Safeguarding People’s Wellbeing in the Advent of the 2017/ 2018 Cholera Outbreak in Zambia’, argue that Cholera outbreak in Zambia sparked religious conversations on the role of the Church during outbreaks of infectious diseases. A descriptive case study design was employed to collect data through interviews, document reviews and observations, Mwale and Chita stress that Cholera was not only a public health issue but also a social justice issue which demanded a prophetic voice of the Church to call for lasting interventions. They concluded that the action of the Catholic Church was influenced by social teachings, which inevitably resulted in partnership with

the state to restore national wellbeing. This suggests that there is a strong interplay between religion and public health.

From an ecumenical economic perspective, **Roderick Hewitt's**, 'Transformative Ecumenical Economic Justice: Implications for the Church's Witness within the Southern African Context', argues for an ecumenical action that can urgently bring about fundamental changes in global policies and structures that affect the economy of African nations. He argues that the church has an ecumenical missional calling with implications for emancipatory economic justice. He calls for the church in Southern Africa to adopt a missional praxis for economic transformation to authenticate their witness through making economic justice a matter of faith confession. The context of struggle for the fullness of life suggests rethinking many of the theologies inherited from missionaries.

If there is any critical observation emerging from all the contributions to this special issue, it is that there is no stable, singular or linear narrative or trajectory that can accurately explain various developments taking place in contemporary African societies, not least concerning their 'Spirituality and Wellbeing in Africana Contexts'.

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732310362400>

PMid:20181823

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# **The Belief in and Veneration of Ancestors in Akan Traditional Thought: Finding Values for Human Well-being**

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## **Abstract**

Traditional Africans' belief in and veneration of ancestors is an almost ubiquitous, long-held and widely known, for it is deeply entrenched in the African metaphysical worldview itself. This belief in and veneration of ancestors is characterised by strong moral undertone. This moral undertone involves an implicit indication that individual members of communities must live exemplary lives in accordance with the ethos of the community. Living according to the ethos is among the conditions for attaining the prestige of being elevated to an ancestor after one's death. The aim of this paper is to gain an understanding of the metaphysical and moral demands connected to ancestor veneration. With this understanding, the paper suggests values that can promote a better way for humans to coexist, and indicates a moral sense of the responsibility people should hold towards each other. The paper's focal aim is to expose what it considers to be the moral undertones or features associated with a belief in and veneration of ancestors, mainly from traditional Akan perspectives. The paper also considers how principles and values of Akan communitarianism can be espoused to promote human well-being. It is the position of the paper that the metaphysical and, especially, the moral underpinning of ancestor veneration in the traditional Akan society, can provide values that can serve as catalysts for the furtherance of human well-being.

**Keywords:** Ancestor, African morality, African values, human well-being, African worldview, communitarianism

## **Introduction**

Supreme God, who is alone great, upon whom men lean and do not fall, receive this wine and drink. Earth goddess, whose day of worship is Thursday, receive this wine and drink. Spirits of our ancestors, receive this wine and drink (Gyekye 1995:68).

The quote above is one of the many prayers of libation of the Akan people of Ghana. The prayer gives insight into an aspect of the ontology, or the metaphysical worldview, of the traditional Akan people, that is, their belief in God and in the existence of a plurality of supernatural beings, including the spirits of ancestors. Generally, Africans living south of the Sahara are known to be very religious. Evidently, their religiosity permeates almost every aspect of their daily lives, sometimes making it difficult to draw a distinctive line between what is cultural or social, and what is religious. However, Zulu (2002:478) believes there is no such dichotomy at all. His position is corroborated by that of Teffo and Roux (2002:167), who claim that the distinction between the natural and the supernatural does not exist for the African metaphysician; they state, '[a]nother dichotomy which plays an important part in Western reflection, the distinction between the material and the spiritual, has no place either in African thinking'.

The African belief in and reverence for ancestors are rooted in the African people's ontological worldview itself. Ugwuanyi (2011:112-113) notes that the spirits of ancestors, as well as the spirits of other divinities, can dwell in various aspects of the natural environment, including hills, forests, rocks, trees, mountains and animals, and whatever people consider to be home of a spirit is usually set apart as a sacred place, where people make offerings to worship that particular spirit.

According to Peter Sarpong (1974:33) only a few traditional societies in Africa lack an organised approach to venerating the dead. Among the tribes that do not venerate the dead are the small tribe of the Nuer, in the southern part of Sudan, and other Nilotes, like the Dinka, the Shilluk and the Anuak. These tribes aside, the belief in and reverence for ancestors play an integral role in the socio-religious practices of sub-Saharan African people in general. Ancestors, are regarded as the spirits of departed elders, who live in a world

similar and parallel to that of the world of the living (Gyekye 2002:25). They work to promote the good of the living, and keep watch over humans' morals. Ugwuanyi (2011:112) regards ancestors as spirits of dead human beings who had lived *extraordinary lives* while alive, and thus, after death, were given a place among the divinities. These beliefs in ancestors and the held perceptions about them contain some degree of moral undertone, for as Dzobo (1992:231) notes, not just anyone who has died can be called an ancestor.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to come to a better understanding of these moral and metaphysical notions of ancestors and, based on this understanding, suggest values that can promote better human coexistence and a moral sense of responsibility between people. The paper considers what the moral undertones or characteristics attached to the belief in and veneration of ancestors are, and how some of these principles can be embraced to improve human well-being. Overall, it is the position of the paper that the metaphysical and, especially, the moral underpinning of ancestor veneration can uncover values that can serve as a remedy for the current day depreciation of humanism, and can be utilised to promote human well-being.

This article is a philosophical or a meta-analysis of existing literature, and not an empirical study. This means that it critically analyses and evaluates the Akan notion of ancestor, human well-being and related topics and subtopics as they are presented in both primary and secondary texts. The paper begins with an investigation of the metaphysical worldview of the Akan people, in an attempt to locate the place of ancestors in their socio-religious lives, and some of the characteristics they associate with their belief in ancestors. It also takes a brief look at Akan communitarianism, in a bid to reach an understanding of what the notion of well-being means to the Akans. This will be followed by an examination of the moral connotations and implications surrounding the beliefs in and the veneration of ancestors. The fourth section will link the salient points of the preceding sections to show how both the metaphysical belief and, especially, the moral undertone associated with the Akan belief in and veneration of ancestors can be used to frame a condition that promotes human well-being. It is important to state here that, although most of the examples and references used are based on the beliefs and experiences of traditional Akan people of Ghana, it does not suggest that their applications are limited to these people only. As Christopher Agulanna (2010:284) notes, 'While Africans may differ in respect of certain aspects of their cultures, they nevertheless share those aspects that are universal in nature'.

## **The Place of Ancestors in Akan Ontology**

As indicated above, the African ontology of the world is composed of both physical and nonphysical beings, lined up in a hierarchy of importance and power. This idea, of course, is made evident in many works on the indigenous beliefs of African people (Gyekye 1995; Wiredu 2010). Both Wiredu and Gyekye explain that the traditional Akan people of Ghana believe in a hierarchy of beings, with the supreme being, God, at the apex. After God, in a descending order, are found various kinds of spirits (smaller gods and the spirits of ancestors). Some of these spirits are believed to reside in some part of nature, notably trees, mountains, animals and rivers. After these spirits, is the human species, which is, in turn, followed by lower animals, vegetation, and the rest of inanimate objects, in a descending order. The nature of God in the Akan belief system can be deduced from the qualities ascribed to Him; the supreme being, who occupies the summit of the hierarchy, and who is considered to be the source of all life and the ultimate creator of all that there is. He is, thus, given the ultimate veneration and worship. As Wiredu (2010:35) points out, the supreme being is considered to be in charge of the world order, and attributes that are commonly ascribed to him are omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent. A sense of dependency, trust, and unconditional reverence is evident throughout Akan attitudes to the supreme being. Danquah (1968) explains that the Akan people identify God as, among others, the father of all, the creator, and as one whose nature is good.

Among the plurality of beings, the human species appears to play a key role in the general framework of this physical and nonphysical ontology; immediately above the human species are the spirits, which, Wiredu (2010:36) explains, are recognised as having the capacity to aid or to destroy human beings. They do this in ways that are beyond the causes and effects recognisable in everyday life. Wiredu continues that human beings are cautious, and try their best to establish good rapport with the more susceptible spirits, which usually involves rituals of supplication, sugar-coated by flattery and praise. The spirits of ancestors, as we will learn, serve as the ultimate aspiration of the living for after they pass on from the physical world.

Just below the human species are the lower animals, the vegetation and the rest of inanimate objects, both natural and artificial. These lower beings or entities are used by the human species for its daily survival needs, including its need for food, water, clothes, medicine, and shelter. Thus, from the African metaphysical outlook, it appears that all the beings above the human species

(which are nonphysical beings) on the hierarchy are there to ensure the spiritual well-being of the human species; whereas the beings below the human species (which are all physical beings), ensures its physical well-being. However, for some, drawing a line between the physical and nonphysical aspects of Akan ontology would be quite an imprecise or evasive line, given what is known of Akan ontology. As Gyekye (1995) explains, in traditional Akan ontology, ‘there is no distinction between the sensible (perceivable) world and the nonsensible (nonperceivable) world in the sense of the latter being real and the former being unreal, as in other metaphysical systems’. As such, different from other metaphysical systems, there is a strong interconnection, and inter-relationship between everything constituent of nature, whether physical or nonphysical.

In considering some of the features of the ancestors as held by indigenous Akan people, Wiredu (2010:36) reports on the special position occupied by ancestors among nonphysical beings: ‘They are not the most powerful, but they are, in the great majority of African societies, the most loved and respected’. Ancestors are believed to dwell in a nonphysical world comparable, in many ways, to the physical world that they left behind. They are also believed to engage in similar roles, professions and positions as those they held in the land of the living just before their death. These ancestors have the power to interact with, and do, indeed, interact regularly with the living. In this regard, Teffo and Roux (2002:168) remark that,

The ancestors interact with mortals, and because the world of the ancestors is ontologically both analogous and contiguous to that of the mortals, that is, there is no difference in kind between these worlds (as was pointed out, it is all one and the same world) there is no logical problem with this interaction; category problems do not arise; the actions of the ancestors are believed to be within the regular pattern of events. The immortals merely happen to occupy a higher status in the order of things than mortals.

Sarpong (1974:38) corroborates this notion, and indicates that ‘a chief here is a chief there, a farmer here is a farmer there’. For the Akan, death is not the end of one’s life, but a transition from one state of existence to another, elevated state of existence. Sarpong (1973:22) describes the meaning of death for the Akan:

Death is regarded as the occasion when the deceased person sets out on a journey to the underworld or spirit world to which his ancestors have already gone ... In death one only changes his earthly mode of existence to another, in fact, better one. In the life after death, there is no cheating, there is no physical pain or deformity, there are no evil intentions or machinations ... part of man's personality survives after death. He calls this 'ghost' or in a more respectable terminology 'ancestor'.

Furthermore, the concerns of the ancestors are limited to the affairs of a specific family, clan or lineage; however, if an ancestor had been a ruler, then his or her concerns may extend to all the lineages in his or her town or kingdom, though not beyond (Wiredu 2012:32; Sarpong 1974:34). The ancestors are also credited with extra-human powers, which can be tapped into by the living to their benefit. Despite the special place and the role the ancestors play in the lives of the Akan people, and even though they hold ancestors in high esteem, it is important to mention that ancestors are not worshipped by African people. This is an error or misrepresentation by some scholars, Western and African alike. This error has been observed by the likes of Zulu, Wiredu, Dzobo and Sarpong. Zulu (2002:476), for instance, remarks that ancestors are considered to be human beings, and Africans worship God alone. Thus, for him, to claim Africans worship ancestors is to make a false generalisation, because, to worship a human being in the real sense of the word, is foreign to the African. Wiredu (2010:35) agrees with this position, by suggesting that it may be impossible to find a directly corresponding word for worship in many African languages. Therefore, he describes the allusion to ancestor worship as a misnomer for ancestor veneration (Wiredu 2012:32). To this end, Zulu, Wiredu and Sarpong would prefer to describe the African belief in ancestors as a 'reverence' or 'veneration' of ancestors, rather than the worship of ancestors. This reverence or veneration, Wiredu (2010:35) holds, is nothing more than an accentuated form of the respect given to the living elders of a community.

### **The Moral Undertone of the Akan Belief in Ancestors**

Morality, as we know, deals with right and wrong behaviour and serves as a guiding principle according to which people are supposed to live their lives. Morality is needed to ensure peace, harmony and mutual coexistence of people

in societies. In this section, the paper identifies some features of the traditional Akan belief in and veneration of ancestors that express the moral connotations therein, and require individuals to act in accordance with the community's sense of morality if they are to qualify as ancestors. In doing this, the paper is not arguing that traditional Akan people find their sense of morality in their ancestors. Indeed, several authors, including Wiredu and Gyekye, have shown that, despite evidence of a high level of religiosity and supernaturalism embedded in traditional African societies, their source of moral norms and precepts does not stem from religion. Gyekye (1995:131), for instance, in commenting about the Akan concept of the good, writes that, 'what is morally good is not that which is commanded by God or any spiritual being; what is right is not that which is pleasing to a spiritual being or in accordance with the will of such being'. Traditional African ethics, it has often been argued, is rooted, rather, in humanism, that is, in that which leads to the betterment or well-being of humanity or the community. To this, Gyekye (1995:132) states concerning the Akan:

In Akan moral thought the sole criterion of goodness is the welfare or well-being of the community ... Within the framework of Akan social and humanistic ethics, what is morally good is generally that which promotes social welfare, solidarity, and harmony in human relationships. Moral value in the Akan system is determined in terms of its consequences for mankind and society. 'Good' is thus identical with the welfare of the society, which is expected to include the welfare of the individual.

Wiredu (2010:35) describes Akan ethics as a 'rational humanistic ethic', of which the criteria of good conduct are founded on 'the quest for the impartial harmonization of human interests'. Despite the humanistic origins of morality in traditional Akan societies, the role of the supernatural, that is, God and the other spiritual beings, is not completely absent. Gyekye (1995:141) himself acknowledges this, when he notes that God and other spiritual beings, even though they are not the people's source of morality, do, in a way, act as their motivation to act morally, or influence how people respond to moral norms. 'Since some of this sanction derive in the Akan system from religious beliefs, it follows that religion cannot be completely banished from the practice of morality', Gyekye writes, '[my] conclusion, then, is that in terms of behaviour,

of responses to moral norms and rules, Akan morality cannot be said to be wholly independent of religion'<sup>1</sup>. Menkiti (2004:131), similarly, notes that, although morality for the African is not based on the supernatural, 'the moral domain admittedly contains a ubiquitous reference to ancestors'.

What, then, is the moral undertone of the belief in ancestors? Part of the answer is found in what Africans believe it takes to become an ancestor. Death, for the Akan, is a transition to the world of ancestors, yet not everyone who has transitioned gains the title, honour or prestige of becoming an ancestor to a family, clan or a community. Thus, Sarpong (1974:34) notes that dying, alone, is not enough to earn you the prestigious honour of an ancestor. For one to merit such an honour after one's death, he opines, one must fulfil certain conditions while alive. What are the conditions for ancestorship? Dzobo (1992:231) notes that *Nananom* (the Akan word for ancestors) is, first and foremost, a moral title and is earned by living virtuously before one's death; it is also conferred upon living chiefs and elders of the society – people who are considered to be moral paragons. Pobee (1976:8 as cited in Zulu 2002:479) gives more insight into this held belief:

The most important aspect in this whole belief in ancestors is that not everyone becomes an ancestor after death; it is only people who had a credible life as heads of families, clans or tribes. For example, among the Akan people the man who was morally bankrupt is disqualified from being an ancestor; so is the one who dies tragically or through some loathsome disease such as leprosy or madness.

The moral undertone is indicated by the use of words such as 'credible life' and 'moral bankruptcy'. Dickson (1984:198) notes that, 'those who became ancestors must have lived exemplary lives; it is not everyone who dies who becomes ancestor, so that the cult of the dead is not to be equated with that of

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<sup>1</sup> Gyekye makes a distinction between two types of morality. The first type refers to the sources and principles of morality (which, he argues, does not originate from religion, but is humanistic in nature). The second type of morality refers to the patterns of behavior, motivation and response to moral norms and rules (which, he argues, is somewhat influenced by religion, that is, by God and spiritual beings). It is to the sense of the second type of morality that we refer to in this sentence.

the ancestors'. This indicates clearly that moral uprightness is an important requirement for becoming an ancestor after death. We refer to this requirement as the 'moral uprightness criterion'.

In addition to the moral uprightness criterion, a second part of the moral undertone in connection with ancestor veneration in the traditional African setting, originates from the belief that part of the duty of an ancestor is to enforce the morality of the people. As Wiredu (2010:35) points out, ancestors have moral authority they exercise by enforcing predetermined moral norms. As we have established, ancestors are not the source of the people's moral codes, instead, they are believed to enforce already established moral norms of their people. This, they do, to ensure that living members of their ancestry do not engage in immoral behaviours that would bring disgrace to the clan's name. To do this, the ancestors are believed to have the power to bless those who do well and curse those who falter in character. The curses may take the form of sudden diseases that are incurable without the help of a spiritualist. To this, Wiredu (2010:36) explains further that:

the ancestors may be called the extra-mundane guardians of morality; their entire concern is to watch over the affairs of the living members of their families, rewarding right conduct and punishing its opposite, with unquestioned justice, while, at all times, working for their well-being. It is on this ground that the ancestors are so highly venerated.

Dzobo, likewise, observes in this regard that, because of the perceived moral and positive attributes of the ancestors, their life patterns and the values and principles they esteem are used as normative standards of conduct for the people. Dzobo (1992:232) reports that,

The ancestors likewise exercise moral constraints in the behaviour of the living through the periodic rituals which remind people of what they stand for. They are able to play this role not because they have become 'spirits' or 'ghosts', but because they have become internalized superegos as well as moral authorities. Thus, the exemplary way they lived can be used to help others grow and pursue the ideal life.

The 'moral enforcement duty' explained above accentuates the importance of

the moral uprightness criterion, because it will not make for sound reasoning to think of someone who never lived a morally upright life in the land of the living, to be an enforcer of the people's morals after their death, or for their lives to be used as an instance of an exemplary life led for others to emulate – the contradiction will be too glaring to ignore. Thus, Wiredu (2012:30) is right to point out that the rules of conduct that ancestors are believed to help enforce are the same rules that the ancestors themselves lived by, or were required to live by when they were alive.

The paper demonstrates that the moral undertone or connotation embedded within the traditional Akan belief in ancestors is made up of two closely related factors. In the first place, it is found in the moral uprightness requirement of becoming an ancestor, which denotes that only those who have led exemplary lives can qualify to be ancestors. Secondly, it is found in the held belief that ancestors are 'moral enforcers' of behaviour of members of their living lineage.

The question, then, remains: What does it mean for the Akan to live an exemplary life? Dzobo (1992:233f) provides information on what can be described as the demands or criteria of a life lived exemplarily in a traditional Akan community. He reports that the traits of an exemplary life that qualify anyone to become an ancestor after death are being married, having children, living with good health, and dying of natural causes in one's old age. Dzobo holds that marriage and childbearing are to be considered the first signs of an exemplary life according to the African understanding. The reason for this requirement, he reports, is that a bachelor or spinster does not help to increase the number of their relatives, as customs demand. One may be tempted to think that one does not need to be married to have children; however, we have to bear in mind that bearing a child without being married is abhorrent to traditional Akan societies. This marriage condition, thus, imply that, should one choose not to marry, he or she automatically becomes disqualified to become an ancestor. Dzobo reports further that being married, alone, is not enough for one to qualify to become an ancestor. In addition, the couple should bear children to continue the family lineage. Thus, a childless person, even if married, will not be acknowledged as an ancestor upon his or her death. This is because, for the traditional Akan people, a person's most important goal as an individual and member of the clan, is to multiply and increase the size of the clan. Failure to do so is considered failure in life, and no person who is a failure can be an ancestor.

The third demand of an exemplary life is good health. This, according to Dzobo, requires an aspiring ancestor 'to have a sound mind in a sound body'. The individual must not suffer from any of the diseases considered to be 'unclean', because unclean diseases are considered to be the result of curses by the gods for immoral behaviour, including breaking a taboo, or neglecting one's customary duty, which could have repercussions for the entire community. Diseases that are considered unclean, Dzobo notes, may include leprosy, dropsy, epilepsy, madness, sleeping sickness, smallpox, and blindness. Anyone who comes into contact with any of these diseases is regarded morally unclean and, as such, unfit to be an ancestor of the people.

The fourth criterion for an exemplary life relates to one's circumstances of death. Dzobo reports that the Akan generally believe that some manners of death denigrate a person, while others enhance a person's status. Obviously, death by any of the unclean diseases listed above is a disqualifier. Dzobo adds that death by suicide, by drowning, death as a result of vehicular accidents or any accidental death, are not considered honourable. Also, death as a result of falling in war through acts of cowardice, like retreating from the enemy, is unacceptable death. Dying in any of these ways excludes an individual from becoming an ancestor. As Sarpong (1974:35) explains, these kinds of deaths are considered to be the result of a person's hidden crimes. Instead, what is preferred are deaths that are the result of bravery in defending one's community, or death in old age. These are when one is believed to have lived a fulfilled and destined life.

Interestingly, Sarpong (1974:34) states that attaining adulthood is the first condition for becoming an ancestor. He writes:

When the Ghanaian is pouring libation and you listen to the names of the dead which he mentions, you will notice that names of babies, boys or girls are omitted. The names that are mentioned are those of adults, chiefs and queen mothers. The first condition therefore is adulthood.

Even though there seems to be a difference between what Dzobo says is the first condition (that is, marriage and childbearing) and what Sarpong claims, the difference tends to fade when one considers that Sarpong does not define an adult in terms of age, but in terms of being married. Sarpong (1974:34) notes that, among the Ashanti (a major subgroup of the Akan), an adult is almost by

definition a married person. As such, a married teenager is considered to be an adult, while an unmarried sixty-year-old person is not.

Despite these conditions, there are some notable exceptions. It is possible for an adult person who has shown bravery in war or in defence of his or her people to be conferred the title of an ancestor, despite being unmarried or having no child. This is because the act of bravery, and sacrificing one's life for the community is a highly regarded virtue. Secondly, as noted by Sarpong (1974:34) concerning the Ashantis', if an unmarried young man is made a chief or a leader of his people, that man is regarded as an adult, and he qualifies to be an ancestor if he does right by his people. He is considered to be married, partly because of the 'stool wives', that is, women permanently attached to a stool as the ceremonial wives of any incumbent ruler who occupies the stool at any point in time – the young unmarried king is be regarded as 'ceremoniously' married, so to speak.

Additionally, Dzobo draws attention to other moral etiquette and character traits that add to the making of an exemplary life. An aspiring ancestor, he notes, should not be someone who is known for insulting others, particularly in public. The person should not be a thief, an adulterer, a talkative person, an alcoholic, an extravagant type or a person who harbours malice towards another. The person is, rather, expected to exhibit such positive traits as being hardworking, kind, loving, pacific, respectful, merciful, and a keeper of promises. Likewise, he or she must keep the right sort of company, speak the truth and be someone who can be trusted to keep secrets, among other character traits. Only such a person is considered someone worth emulating, a moral paragon, so to speak. As Dzobo (1992:234) explains, if one is not good in life, how can one's 'ghost' be any good?

## **On the Notion of Well-being**

The notion of well-being, in general, presents a philosophical conundrum that space will not allow this paper to delve into fully. As such, the concern of this section is to introduce readers to what an Akan understanding of human well-being involves. Stephen Campbell (2016:402) notes that the notion of well-being is typically about 'what makes a life go well or poorly for the one who is living it'. He mentions some four notable theories of well-being: The theory of hedonism claims that well-being is all about what leads to pleasure and avoids pain. The desire-fulfilment theory holds that well-being is about the

fulfilment of our actual or idealised desires. The objective-list theory asserts that well-being is to be found in a plurality of things while the perfectionist theory claims that well-being depends on developing and exercising an individual's natural capacities.

The focus of these Western theories of well-being on the individual agent is glaring. In the African setting, including the Akan, an understanding of individual well-being is deeply rooted in a shared community life; it is a notion of well-being deeply rooted in the theory of communitarianism, by which Akan societies are characterised. Gyekye (1995:155) defines communalism or communitarianism as 'the doctrine that the group (that is, the society) constitutes the focus of the activities of the individual members of the society'. He understands communitarianism to be a doctrine about social organisation and relations, which essentially sprout from the Akan concept of humanism. The Akan concept of humanism, Gyekye notes, basically ensures the welfare and interests of each member of the society. Gyekye (1997), however, argues that Akan societies are characterised by a theory of a 'moderate communitarianism', which allows for the promotion of the good of the individual as well as the good of the community, rather than a 'radical communitarianism', which suppresses individual needs.

Some of the basic tenets of Akan communitarian and its humanistic attitude is that the individual needs assistance from and a connection with others in order to attain or satisfy basic needs. The philosophy enjoins individuals to live a life of harmony and corporation with others, in order to attain the good of individuals in line with the good of their community. The sociability of humans is recognised to be a result of basic human nature, though it is also regarded as that which leads to personal well-being and worth (Gyekye 1995:157).

Deeply embedded in this communitarian attitude is the idea of the 'common good'. Gyekye (1997:45) defines the common good as 'a good that is common to individual human beings ... a good the possession of which is essential for the ordinary or basic functioning of the individual in a human society'. This idea of human well-being has its foundation in what promotes the good of all in the society, and is expressed in numerous Akan proverbs, such as the proverb, *obi yiye firi obi*, which means the well-being of a person depends upon another person.

In relation to the above, Antwi (2017:96) notes that, in traditional Akan societies, the normative concept of a person develops from how a person is

understood in terms of his or her relations with others. This conception of well-being of traditional Akan societies is, of course, closely aligned with what is known in traditional southern African communities as the principle of *Ubuntu/Boto* or *Ukama*, which is an ideology and a philosophy of life that is recognised and promoted in every aspect of traditional and modern life. Just like the quest to seek the well-being of all, or to promote the common good of the community, Ubuntu 'implies that humanness is derived from our relatedness with others, not only with those currently living but also through past and future generations' (Murove 2009:315). Thus, Ubuntu requires members of a community to look out for each other's interests, because one's progress as an individual is interconnected with the progress of others as a group. It is this notion of human well-being embedded in the communitarian attitude of the traditional Akan people that the paper advocates for.

## **Ancestor Veneration and Aspiration as a Vehicle for the Well-being of Humans**

The central question remaining now is how we can use these features surrounding the belief and veneration of ancestors to foster human well-being in the sense explained in the previous section. An important point worth noting here is that there exists within the Akan traditional culture a desire by its people to be joined to the ranks of ancestors upon their demise (Wiredu 2012: 32; Wiredu 2010:35). For Wiredu, 'ancestorship is simply the crowning phase of human existence' (Wiredu 1996:48). Thus, becoming an ancestor after one's life on earth is considered to be one of the greatest honours that can be bestowed upon a person. However, there is more to the desire of becoming an ancestor. The aspiration to be an ancestor is not just a quest to have one's name immortalised; it is essentially an opportunity for privileged people to continue contributing to the welfare of their people, even in the afterlife. Since it is the desire of individuals in traditional African society to become ancestors after their demise, and since the criteria for becoming an ancestor requires of individuals to have lived a virtuous, moral life, individuals are, thus, motivated to live their lives in their community in a manner that is acceptable to society, and which includes living in peace and harmony with others in the community.

In addition to the living conferring on the deceased the honourable title of ancestor based upon their moral uprightness during their lifetime on earth, the motivation to live a morally worthy life in one's lifetime is also essential if

one wants to be accepted by the ancestral spirits in the land of the ancestors. Sarpong (1974:22) describes the journey one makes to the ancestral world after death. He writes:

The journey [from the land of the living to the land of the living-dead] is arduous and unavoidable. One who sets foot on it, cannot and should not come back, except as a respected ancestor spirit. *But if he had been particularly wicked in his life time* [e.a.], or something had gone wrong before his journey or in the course of it, he might not be admitted to the world of spirits.

What this means is that living a virtuous life in one's lifetime on earth is not only motivated by the pursuit to meet the requirement of ancestorship, but also by the quest to please the spirits of the ancestors who will admit the dead into their midst in the ancestral world.

Even if someone does not desire or aspire to become an ancestor after death, and even if someone does not necessarily care about being accepted into the ancestral world after one's demise, there is a belief that the ancestors are capable of punishing living members should they conduct themselves in a way that brings the name of the clan into disrepute. As was explained earlier, the ancestors are credited with the power to reward and to punish. They reward those whose lives conform to established norms, that is, those that promote the good of the clan, and punish people who live detestable lifestyles. Their punishment can be in the form of incurable strange illnesses, or as other misfortunes, including accidents resulting in premature death. Surely, anyone will dread punishment from their ancestors, and this dread can serve as an incentive for people to want to live a life worthy of praise or, at least, to avoid lifestyles that can bring harm to their clan and community.

It is the position of this paper that the aspiration to become an ancestor after death, coupled with the moral and non-moral requirements for making this possible, lead us to some virtues that can be used to promote human well-being. The fear of earning the curse of the ancestors or not being accepted in the ancestral world because of one's bad deeds on earth can serve as motivations for individual members to aspire to do well in their community, not just in terms of attaining personal laurels, but to promote better human-to-human relationships in accordance with the Akan communitarian principles of human well-being, which seeks to promote the common good of the society.

Again, considering what goes into living an exemplary life as detailed by Dzobo and Sarpong, it is evident that the general idea behind these conditions is to ensure that individuals in the community live lives that depict maturity in thoughts and in deeds. These conditions ensure that individuals live a life of responsibility worthy of emulation by the younger generation, which is what it means to leave a mark. It may be argued that using marriage and childbearing as part of what it means to have lived an exemplary lifestyle, in our contemporary time, may not be effective, since a person's sense of maturity or responsibility is not determined by marriage or by the bearing of children. However, the principle found here, it should be argued, is not to be placed on marriage and child bearing only, but, instead, should be considered as a prompt to do what one can to promote the cause of humanity, and avoiding the annihilation of humanity in the long run. Looking at it from this perspective, of course, coincides with the very importance the Akan people place on marriage and procreation, which is, to ensure the continuation of the family lineage and ancestry. It also emphasises the importance and relevance of marriage in such a communitarian society.

The other marks of an exemplary life, i.e., to live a healthy life and to die of a natural cause in one's old age, is undeniably relevant in today's time. As Dzobo noted, a would-be ancestor is expected to be of sound mind and of sound body. In these days of unhealthy lifestyle choices that have led to many new diseases that kill people before they reach their prime, these two requirements for ancestorship serve as motivation to live a healthy lifestyle, and ought to be considered as a welcoming call that can promote better human well-being. The paper need not go into the details of the benefits of having a sound mind and a sound body, since these benefits are generally well known. A long and a healthy life can enable those who seek it to take care of their children and contribute their share to their community and to their nation. The alternative is to become a burden on the family and community due to ill-health. Accidents can occur at any time, whether one is healthy or not, yet the point is to live a cautious and moderated lifestyle, to avoid avoidable accidents, so that one can live the full extent of his or her life and serve his or her community to the fullest. Such a call resonates with the communitarian character of the Akan people, which encourages individuals to live a life of altruism and care for others.

A look at, what we call, other 'auxiliary' traits of an exemplary life required of an aspiring ancestor, provides more values for mutual living that

can promote human well-being, in consonance with the Akan communitarian ethos. Dzobo, as we have seen, indicates that an aspiring ancestor should not be a person given to insults, thievery, adultery, alcoholism, or an extravagant lifestyle, among others. Such an aspirant should, instead, be truthful, hardworking, kind, loving, respectful, trustworthy, and merciful, a keeper of promises, and someone who keeps good company. In effect, the underlying principle here, is for individuals to eschew vices and embrace virtues that facilitate healthy coexistence among members of the community. Undoubtedly, where peaceful coexistence exists among citizens, individuals can enjoy a healthy state of mind and experience rapid socio-economic progress and development, which are important factors for the physiological well-being of any individual.

Interestingly, in indicating the traits of an exemplary life or the conditions for becoming an ancestor, Dzobo notes that wealth does not appear on the list – that is to say, that the amount of wealth one has or does not have is not a condition for becoming an ancestor. Instead, as Dzobo (1992:234) states, ‘it is the use of wealth that determines whether its owner should be called *nana* or not. It is the generous use of wealth that is always encouraged and qualifies a person to be called *nana*’. This approach, as Dzobo explains, encourages sharing, not just with the living, but also with the living dead (that is, the ancestors). This is exhibited through the sprinkling of water or drink on the ground for the ancestors when someone is eating or drinking. A principle that encourages the sharing of one’s wealth with others, which is a very important principle for social well-being. In traditional Akan communities, wealthy individuals who are known to be self-centred are seldomly admired. In the spirit of communal living, for the common good, and in line with the principles of Ubuntu, any successful individual should benefit others with their wealth. This is not to be interpreted, as may be done by some, that the acquisition of wealth is abhorred or seen as a vice in these communities; rather, the principle of sharing should be seen as a way to ensure that those who have gained advantage in the community do not neglect the less privileged.

According to Dzobo (1992:235), to the Akan, life is a process of never-ending human and communal relationships, which are defined in terms of reciprocal obligations and privileges. Death, therefore, does not end the obligations of the living to the living dead, or the privileges that the living enjoy from their forebears. Even the relationship between God and man, Dzobo maintains, is defined in terms of reciprocal obligations and blessings. The

living are, therefore, continually interested in the well-being of the living dead and the living dead are interested in the well-being of the living. As it was shown earlier, there is a close interconnection and collaboration between the physical realm and the nonphysical realm.

The aforementioned principles derived from ancestor veneration in traditional Akan societies are very plausible, for they are embedded in the communitarian attitude of African people. Menkiti (2004:130) notes that:

Ancestorhood, as we know, is part of the continuing process of elderhood, with those who have achieved its status still tied to the living, still invoked as members of an ongoing moral community. This community, which embraces both the living and the dead, not surprisingly, is bound by considerations of mutual concern—paternal care on the part of the ancestors and filial piety on the part of the living.

Thus, the well-being of the individual and of the community is expressed in mutual concern, social ties and sociability that extend beyond the living and, as Agulanna (2010:286) notes, ‘human well-being, peace and order are only achievable in a communal or social setting’. If that is the case, then it is the paper’s position that ancestor belief and veneration provide a catalyst that can promote the attainment of human well-being that is not based in individualism, but based in the people’s communitarian character.

## **Conclusion**

As stated by Gyekye (1995:41), ‘communitarianism immediately sees the individual as an inherently communal being, embedded in a context of social relationships and interdependence, never as an isolated individual’. If this is the case, a search for human well-being should start, essentially and firstly, in those actions that promote these positive communitarian attributes. The reverence for ancestors is, no doubt, losing its essence and impact in these modern times, partly as a result of the continuous spread of Christianity and Islam, and with the growth of reliance on scientific explanations. This decline in the reverence for ancestors is heightened by the rise of postmodernism, with its array of new ideologies that are both inharmonious and adversative to many traditionally held beliefs. Nevertheless, it is the position of this paper that there

are values and principles embedded in the belief in and veneration of ancestors by traditional Akan societies that are not outdated, and still hold value for modern times that can promote human well-being.

The paper noted that belief in and veneration of ancestors come with an embedded moral undertone, which is seen mainly in what the paper tagged as the ‘moral uprightness criterion’ (a condition for becoming an ancestor) and the ‘moral enforcement duty’ (the power of ancestors over the living). The paper identified some moral principles found within these requirements for becoming an ancestor that can help in promoting a strong sense of community among individuals in accordance with the communitarian character of the African people. The paper maintained that the quest to become an ancestor after death is a good motivator to encourage individuals to live virtuous, moral lives, worthy of emulation by the younger generation, and can safeguard peaceful coexistence. In addition, the condition for ancestorship requires of individuals to live exemplary lives, a life of responsibility and a show of maturity if they are to secure a place in the ancestral world. Thus, the paper maintains that, these requirements or conditions for becoming an ancestor in traditional African communities produce certain virtues and moral principles that could remedy the continuous decline in our sense of humanity. Such a move could serve as a catalyst to improve human well-being, for, as Menkiti (2004:131) points out concerning African communitarian societies, ‘morality is seen in light of what ‘fits’, what leads to societal harmonization and village flourishing’. Also, if Gyekye is right in his claim that the ‘good’, for the African, is considered identical to the welfare of society, then the belief in and veneration of ancestors has positive principles that can help attain this good.

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# **Decolonising Penal Substitution Theory of Atonement: A Theology of Forgiving-Love in the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in the Violent Context of Jos, Nigeria**

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## **Abstract**

This article argues that the retributive element embedded within the understanding of the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) of the Penal Substitution Theory (PST) has the potential to promote indifference to people of other faiths. The article employs Inculturation as the analytical tool to decolonise the PST, with reference to the Pyem people's philosophy of forgiving-love in a context plagued by religious violence. The primary data was created through a qualitative research method and thematic analysis of relevant information. Qualitative, open-ended questions that allowed participants to contribute freely based on their experiences, were asked; also, focus group interviews were conducted among the Pyem people in Jos, Nigeria. The key findings that emerged show that the Pyem religio-cultural experience is embedded in its religio-cultural notion of *Ngwakin Darsai Daal* (the male that reconciles), which presupposes humanity as the backdrop of forgiving-love. The article concludes that the conversation between the Gospel and culture is aimed at stimulating practical forgiving-loving.

**Keywords:** Decolonisation, penal substitution theory, Church of Christ in Nations, Nigeria, forgiving-love

## **Introduction**

This article relates to the Pyem people's notion of *ngwakin darsai daal* (male goat of forgiving-loving), which represents an advanced symbolic expression of a love for humanity, and which is embedded in their concept of forgiving-love as a resource for conflict resolution. This notion is rooted in the Pyem adage, *Do ta chalai ram* (humanness comes first before any other thing). The concept of forgiving-love is expressed in its present continuous tense; it is a practical lifestyle of unconditional love clothed in a consistent ethic of forgiveness and reconciliation, rooted in African accumulative wisdom through interaction with reality. It is poignantly expressed in a proverb of the Bemba people of Zambia: *Imitiilipamotailbulakushenkana* (trees near to one another do not stop rubbing each other and do not stop appreciating, forgiving and loving each other). This honest and authentic interpretation of reality is significant in the context of religious pluralism, which tends to ignite violent religious conflicts. The *ngwakin darsai daal* is used as a traditional idiom to decolonise the penal substitution theory (PST) of the doctrine of atonement as understood and practiced by Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in Jos, Nigeria<sup>1</sup>.

The PST, as practiced by the COCIN, is based on colonial missionary and judicial understanding, which presupposes that Christ, through his death, bore the punishment that fallen humanity were to suffer for. The colonial missionary notion of the PST of atonement is entrenched in a retributive theology that was uncritically embraced by the COCIN. Scholars, such as Ben Pugh (2015), and Anthony Bartlett (2001), have called for a shift from the Eurocentric and judicial understanding of PST of atonement, to appreciating

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<sup>1</sup> COCIN is an evangelical mission founded under the auspices of the Sudan United Mission, whose Protestant European missionaries came from Germany, through Sudan, to Nigeria, with the objective of engaging in mission work in the sub-Saharan region of Africa. Originally, the Church was named using the indigenous language Ekklessiyar Kristi a Sudan (EKAS) (Rengshwat 2012:88). The name of the Church was first changed to Ikklisiyar Kristi a Nigeria (EKAN), after it was renamed Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN), and then Church of Christ in Nations (Goshit, Lere, Tang'an, Longkat & Gutip *et al.* 2013:2-6). COCIN, as described in this article, serves as the church where the penal substitution theory is understood and practiced within the violent context of Jos.

the atoning work of Christ as representation of love and forgiveness between conflicted communities. The forgoing raises the following key questions for investigation: To what extent has the COCIN's understanding and practice of PST contributed to much-needed peace in Jos? How was this doctrine transmitted into the missional thrust of COCIN? To what extent does the understanding and practice of the PST of atonement within the COCIN demonstrate forgiving-love? How can the idiom, *ngwakin darsai daal*, be utilized as resource to decolonise PST within the COCIN?

## **On Decolonial Methodology**

Decoloniality refers to the struggle to destabilise universalisation of colonial-missionary-dominant missiological thought. Decoloniality underlines that the historical colonial missionary theology of PST of atonement continues to inform the COCIN's theological imagination in contemporary Nigeria. Colonial missionary theological thought was informed by the idea of civilizing the so-called dark continent of Africa through evangelism – not merely evangelism of the people, but a comprehensive process of cultural alienation and redesign of the African at its fundamental level, to become a people that mimic and reflect European Christian interpretation and understanding of religion. This process is classified as Coloniality of Christian faith and religious imaginations. A Christian worldview, 'entangled, woven, trapped in the colonial matrix of power' (Mignolo 2007:155) emerged, based on missionary theological thought and a foundation for organising human relationships and interactions with the world. Coloniality, as long-standing patterns of Christian imaginations, beliefs and practices, which emerged as a result of colonial missionary evangelisation of Africa, continues to define Christian expressions of African culture, social relations, and theological production, long after the end of the direct colonial missionary enterprise (Kaunda 2015; 2016).

This article utilises the concept of decoloniality as an analytical tool to decolonise the PST in conversation with African religio-cultural experience, as the medium of expression, in an attempt to divorce the alleged retributive tendencies from the PST of atonement as practiced by the COCIN, and to present an understanding of Christ's substitutionary atonement that adequately expresses forgiving-love, in the violent context of Jos. The fluid nature of Decolonial approaches makes it easy to adapt them to cultural philosophies,

such as *ngwakin darsai daal*. This African religio-cultural practice, which is found among the Pyem ethnic group in Jos, Nigeria, is utilised by the Pyem as a Decolonial idiom within which PST could find a more locally embedded meaning and application. This notion stems from the Pyem people's understanding of forgiving-love in the context of violent conflict between two warring communities.

As part of a qualitative Decolonial research method, group discussions were conducted with Pyem indigenous people. Participants were selected purposively, based on experiences of participants and whether the information they could provide would benefit the subject under consideration. The method allowed participants to contribute freely, based on their understanding of the traditional notion of forgiving-love, and how it can be applied in response to conflict between conflicting parties. The strategy for recruiting research participants was heterogeneous (not of the same kind or nature).

A group of nine male and female elders who were well-versed in indigenous forms of knowledge were selected from the Pyem ethnic group; they may or may not have been members of the COCIN. Those who were COCIN members expressed themselves based on their understanding and practice of PST, and from their cultural experiences within the Pyem ethnic group. Participants suggested how their religio-cultural experiences can serve as resource for reconceptualising the doctrine under consideration for peace building in Jos.

## **Coloniality of Missions**

Eurocentrism is a system of thought that developed within the cultural and social sphere of Europe, and that seeks to undermine other systems of thought by taking western European values and culture as the universal standard through which humanity can be ascertained (Araujo & Maeso 2017). A Eurocentric system of thought postures ethnic, cultural and religious superiority over African people and their life worlds (Serequeberhan 1997). This assumption has been expressed in different forms by traditional Eurocentric epistemologies, for example, Emmanuel Kant states that, 'The Negroes in Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling' (1960:110-111). Similarly, Georg W.F. Hegel (Hegel 2001:93) states that,

The Negro as already observed exhibits the natural man in his com-

letely wild and untamed state. We would lay aside all thought of reverence and morality—all that we call feeling if we would rightly comprehend him there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character.

European-centred ontology applied to non-European epistemology connotes supremacy and bias against a system of thought, especially that of Africa, with its pluri-religious context. The Eurocentrism-characterised COCIN missionary notion of PST of atonement was imposed on the Pyem people in Nigeria. The approach employed by the European missionaries in the process of planting the COCIN within the local context is explained by the pioneering missionary, Karl Kumm<sup>2</sup>.

We lay aside the newspaper and ask what does this mean this seems in the Central Sudan? Among semi-Muslim, semi heathen, wholly non-Christian people. What does this cheering for the greatest, darkest, and most suffering of all and ruled by Islam, Islam can rule no longer. The land of God is taking its power away (1907:15).

One of the main aims of the COCIN missionaries was to halt the advance of Islam across West Africa. Initial efforts focused on the Benue region of Nigeria. As a result, the Church and its mission has functioned in a perpetual ‘crusading state’ against those in society that follow other belief systems. This ‘devaluation of the other’ in the understanding of the doctrine has contributed to weak social cohesion in Jos, and this has led to a disposition characterised by an embrace of physical force as a way of expressing power and control over others (Boer 2014:16-17). COCIN’s traditional teachings of PST and the doctrine of the atonement has promoted religious superiority, and a belief that the Christian faith has the only authentic claim to truth, namely, that God sacrificially offered the life of Jesus, his only son, as the means to overcome the consequences of sin in the world (Boer 2014:16). Inculcating this understanding in the clergy and members during leadership and discipleship formation may breed contempt and retaliatory responses to people of other faiths.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Hermann Karl Wilhelm Kumm was a German missionary who started the Sudan United Mission (SUM), mission agency that sent missionaries to Africa and also worldwide through which COCIN was established.

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Furthermore, PST was conceptualised within a context characterised by the classical European judicial system of justice (Green & Baker 2000:169). Therefore, the COCIN adopted PST into its missional identity within the framework of Eurocentrism. The approach was culturally insensitive to the religious diversity and social plurality of the local context. In view of this retaliatory connotation, this article argues that the PST of the doctrine of atonement, which is supposed to facilitate love, forgiveness and peaceful co-existence within the community where it functions, is likely to become a promoter of intolerance and violence within a context that is already characterized by religious violence (Pugh 2015:154). The classical Eurocentric judicial system of thought during the transmission of the PST into the missional identity of the COCIN was expressed when recipients of the Gospel were asked to take oaths as a condition for allegiance to the new religion. Seth Nden (2013:56) quotes that,

We the undersigned having been baptized in conformity with our faith in Langtang, we solemnly covenant with each other to live together in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ to strengthen and build each other up in the faith.

According to Nden, about 18 converts signed a document to demonstrate their acceptance and that they would obey the rules of the new religion, to which they were now converted. It can be argued that the missionaries acted according to their European religio-cultural and judicial system of thought (Bate 2000:27). It can also be argued that the symbolic representation of PST in the COCIN appears to facilitate the use of violence, because the doctrine implies that every wrong is punishable by law (Lenman & Parker 1079:140). Scholars point out that reformers, such as John Calvin, placed great emphasis on God as being avenging judge, who would prevent the law from being violated by those who have committed wrongs (Pugh 2015:67-82). Lenman and Parker (1993:140), in their evaluation of criminal law in early modern Europe, argue that Calvin the reformer, who was a lawyer, oversaw several executions of persons accused of breaking the law, and this was attributed to his regressive interpretation of the PST. In order to decolonise PST of atonement, there is a need to converse with local idioms that provide a better expression of the atoning work of Christ that represents love and forgiveness. The decolonisation of PST is carried out in conversation with the African

notion of *ngwakin darsai daal*, which adopts forgiving-love as its praxis, to reconcile conflicting communities.

## **The Challenge of a Christian Response to Religious Violence**

Scholars highlight that Christians' responses to violence against people of other faiths (religions) seems to exacerbate religious conflicts in Nigeria (Ezigbo 2018). The theological rhetoric within the public square reveals that the retaliatory responses of Christians to the religious violence may be attributed to the triumphalist expressions of the Christian claim to truth, as the only true religion, the quest to fight for their own rights, and the fear of religious hegemony by Islam and Muslim, as experienced as attempts to Islamise Nigeria (Ezigbo 2018:238). Christianity is the dominant religion in Plateau State, particularly in Jos. Among various Christian denominations, the COCIN is the 'oldest and perhaps largest Christian denomination in Plateau State with branches in almost all the states of Nigeria' (Wika 2014:3). However, the COCIN's understanding and practice of PST has not adapted to engaging the phenomenon of religious violence through the traditional notion of forgiving-loving.

Bishop Kaigama of the Roman Catholic Church of Jos, who was one of the inter-religious committee members for peacebuilding between 2001 to 2010, argues that religious leaders should place more emphasis on practical works of forgiving-love that improve the lives of people, than on limiting their ministry to simply preaching and teaching (Krause 2010:56). The Bishop's comment suggests that the ecclesial community has embraced a schizophrenic missional identity, in which preaching the good news has failed to conform with the way the mission of Jesus's love and forgiveness embraces everyone, irrespective of their affiliation (Kaunda 2015). This failure was especially visible in the Christian response to the threats of religious violence in Jos. The COCIN's teachings on the finished work of Christ, which embodies love and forgiveness, seem to have been replaced by intolerance and violence against people of other faiths (Ezigbo 2018:238). Scholars have observed that the involvement of Christians and Muslims in reprisal attacks has resulted in mosques and churches being burned (Ezigbo 2018; Pokol 2015; Uzodike & Obaje 2013). Writing on the response of the COCIN to religious violence, scholars attribute the COCIN's retaliatory attitude to a legacy of missionary intolerance and triumphalist proclamations of the Christian message against

Islam (Eden 2013; Pokol 2015).

Although the superlative statements in the COCIN missionary heritage were meant to motivate people to give attention to the need of reaching North Central Nigeria with the Christian message, its missional posture and strategy advocated competition and judgment against Muslims (Pokol 2015). As Ezigbo (2018) observes, missionary intolerance against Islam could be easily be misconstrued by fundamentalists as a means of sanctioning the use of violence against the followers of Islam and other religions. In the COCIN-dominated communities of Dutse Uku in Jos, a group of Christians was seen chanting, ‘come out and fight for Jesus’ before the violence started (Higazi 2011:24). To them, fighting Muslims was equivalent to fighting for Jesus.

Responses of COCIN members to violence against people of other faiths in Jos suggests that their understanding and practice of the finished work of Christ is restricted to meeting their inner ecclesial needs, and does not extend to offering love and forgiveness to those considered to be enemies (Pokol 2015). This notion of PST of the atonement, seems to perpetuate an intolerant legacy of missionary evangelistic heritage, which is rooted in combating the scourge of Islam and the slave trade in Northern Nigeria (Nden 2013; Pokol 2015). This doctrine was transported and transmitted into the missional identity of the COCIN, to perpetuate a retaliation discourse against those perceived to oppose the Christian message of salvation in Christ. The retributive and retaliatory features of PST, as practiced by the COCIN, seem to pose a serious challenge to its missional thrust in Jos. Due to the violent implications of the doctrine, the reciprocity of love and forgiveness that the PST should embody may not be realised by the Church’s mission, because of religious bigotry and violent attacks by people of other faiths (religions) in Jos (Taylor 2006: 2). It is in the light of this assumption that this article calls for an afro-centric religio-cultural and contextual perspective to decolonise PST. The promotion of this shift is based on ongoing discourse, which holds that, within the African worldview, there are viable religio-cultural experiences that can serve as mediums of expression, and which have the capacity to express love and forgiveness in the context of violence.

## **Reclaiming the Pyem Decolonial Motif**

Forgiving-love within the African system of thought is rooted in its worldview that the value and dignity of a human is derived from other human beings, and

the value and dignity of all humanity is derived from an individual human being. Both Christians and Muslims are embedded in the Pyem worldview, which prioritises humanness of all above anything else. There is hardly any practice of Islam or Christianity that takes a complete break from an African cultural heritage that is embedded in humanness as the common essence (Pokol & Kaunda 2015). This ideological principle is embedded in the way Africans understand God in relation to humanity and the community (Bujo 2015). The concept of humanness unifies African people's thoughts and ideas about life, thereby maintaining harmonious relationship through forgiving-love in the situation of violent conflict (Pokol & Kaunda 2015). Bishop Desmond Tutu affirms the relevance of African epistemology for conflict resolution through the adage, 'A person belongs to a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished when others are tortured and oppressed' (1999:27). Thus, in belonging to a greater whole in the context of religious conflict and animosity, the implication of the African worldview connotes an idea of forgiving-love, irrespective of who is seen as the winner or vanquished between conflicting communities. Within the Pyem system of thought, *ngwakin darsai daal* is a symbolic cultural practice that enshrines forgiving-love as the basis for overcoming violence, and restoring loving relationships and humanness among conflicted people. Religious violence robs both Christians and Muslims of their humanity and humanness (Kaunda, Luxman & Hewitt 2018).

The Pyem ethnic group is popularly known for its loving hospitality and inclusivity. They believe and affirm the humanity of all, despite others' race, colour, and religion or gender (Kaunda *et al.* 2018). This is evident in the way the Pyem have accommodated many other ethnic groups within Plateau State of Nigeria, which used to be exclusively theirs (Temple 1965:120). Machunga (1964) notes that, due to their hospitality, tolerance and love, the Pyem welcomed and received Western missionaries, especially those of the SUM, and adherents of Islam from the far northern part of Nigeria.

The belief and practice of *ngwakin darsai daal* could be attributed to the Pyem's ontology, which is centred on promotion and appreciation of humanity of all before anything else. In the case of conflict, Pyem people are quick to call for conflict resolution, in which middle persons, in consultation with *Bwalbwang*, the chief priest and his subordinates, have the responsibility to initiate dialogue between two warring communities (Bida 16 November 2017). A meeting of the communities is organised at the boundary, where each

community presents a male goat through its representative. After an instruction by *Bwalbwang*, whose words were believed to be empowered by the Supreme Being, through the ancestors, the two representatives, in the presence of the communities, exchanged goats. Samuel Kallamu stated that,

Bisagawannaladan, kabilubiyu da sun yifada da juna, kowannensu-zaikawobunsurudaya, saannanzasumusanya a wurinhaduwa, [Based on the Pyem cultural practice, after each of the conflicting community presents a male goat, it should be exchanged at the meeting place by the warring communities] (Kallamu 16 November 2017).

The use of the male goat is based on the understanding that it is a notorious animal that is known for its predatory nature. The male goat represents the ugly nature of human beings, which causes conflict. This evil nature is believed to cause destruction of lives and property. The goat also represents violence against women and children during a fight (Tafida, 16 November 2017). The male goat is known for its ugly forehead, in particular. AuduWani (16 November 2017).stated that, *Nyen sai Ngwakin Darsai Daala*, which can be translated as, ‘see his or her forehead as the male goat that stops fighting’. Among the Pyem people, children, women, men and slaves who are disobedient and arrogant in respect to life in the Pyem community are, therefore, described as goats (Moko, 16 November 2017). According to Mary Sokale and Lori Tafida (16 November 2017), the sacrifice and eating of the male goat implies that the anger, animosity and grievances that each member nurses against the other is forgiven through unconditional love that emanates from the understanding that all are human, irrespective of differences.

Within this system of thought, the beauty and essence of the community are human beings, and the beauty and essence of human beings in the community is an individual person. A Nigerian proverb says, ‘A single tree cannot make a forest’. However, it is equally true that no forest can be made without individual trees. This assumption is expanded further by the Igbo people of Nigeria, who consider forgiving-love within the Igbo religio-cultural experience to be embedded in the understanding that humanity lives in a chaotic world and that every member of the community is duty-bound to tame the scourge of violence and other life-denying threats within the larger community. Community members participate in negotiations, and dialogue is initiated purposely to reconcile conflicting individuals and communities. In

this practice, love and forgiveness is expressed by religious and social interactions between conflicting parties in the aftermath of violence (Njoku 2009: 94). Thomas Aquinas argued that *eminentia* is humanness, which can be seen as the backdrop for peaceful co-existence, and explained that a human person is naturally inclined to harmony, irrespective of affiliation, and that there is a natural disposition for forgiveness in the heart of every human being. Although Thomas Aquinas's supposition emanates from a Eurocentric background, its relevance for forgiving-love as expressed within distinctive African moral ethics cannot be underestimated (Bujo 2015:86).

Forgiving-love, as expressed in the African religio-cultural experience, has the potential to create a space to explore it as a medium through which the love and forgiveness acts of the PST can be expressed by the COCIN. Applying the Pyem notion of *ngwakin darsai daal* as an alternative, symbolic, African medium for understanding PST appears to have the potential to promote a more humanity-prioritising approach to violence in Jos, instead of the approach of religious and political prioritising.

## **Towards a Theology of Forgiving-Loving**

The Pyem notion of *ngwakin darsai daal*, used as a tool to decolonise the COCIN's understanding and practice of PST, focuses on forgiving-love as the basic tenet of the atoning work of Christ. This reconceptualization is essentially aimed at developing a Christian culture of forgiving-love within the COCIN's missional thrust, which represents Christ's model of love and forgiveness in the context of religious violence in Jos. Although there could be different understandings and interpretations of PST, based on the context being theologised (Ukpong 2000:17), the basic tenets that constitute the doctrine under consideration cannot be negated. Wynne Grudem (1994:567) holds that love is the ultimate cause of the substitutionary work of Christ. The kind of love expressed in the atoning work of Christ is the transforming instrument for forgiveness and reconciliation (Buthelli 2015:782-783). Vanhoozer (2004:397 - 399) argues that the substitutionary work of Christ is rooted in God's unconditional forgiving-love, which cannot be explained by any human word. Although these scholars speak from different perspectives and contexts, love is projected as the main element of the atoning work of Christ. Taking root from John 3:16 and its projection of love, Jesus reaffirms that love is the greatest of all commandments (Matthew 22:39), and is a clarion call to his

disciples to reciprocate love, not only to those who love them, but also to their enemies (Matthew 5:44).

The second key element of PST is forgiveness. Within the dialogical disposition of the atoning work of Christ, forgiveness is understood as an element of PST that should be exhibited by Christians in the context of religious violence, such that as in Jos. As argued above, the retributive inclination of the COCIN's PST doctrine relegates forgiveness, which is a critical part of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, to the background. It is important to shift, from retributive justice, to forgiving-love, healing, and reconciliation.

Thus, the theology of forgiving-love forms the basis for interpreting PST within the COCIN, as expression of a life-giving response to the perpetrators of religious violence in Jos (Bevans 2015:195) Reconceptualisation through the Pyem's symbolic religio-cultural experience, seeks to project forgiving-love as the key asset of PST against retributive behaviour by Christians. The Pyem religio-cultural experience also makes dialogue an inescapable and non-negotiable element of forgiving-love theology (Antonio 2006) Dialogue constitutes the process of God's plan to reconcile fallen humanity. The atoning work of Jesus is an expression of God's dialogical love for the fallen humanity. According to Emmanuel Katongole (2009), the dialogue between God and the fallen humanity is expressed fully in the incarnation of Christ. He contends that the missional identity of the church should respond to violence by resisting all forms of retaliation or revenge within the context of religious, tribal and ethnic violence. He emphasises that God's dialogue with the fallen humanity is expressed in the incarnation of Jesus, through the biblical narrative 'Word made flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14). Katongole interprets 'Word' as God's gift, which can be accessed by remembering God's act of love and reconciliation (Weaver 2013). 'Made flesh' is interpreted as God identifying with the human context, and 'dwelt among us' is God's practical dialogue with the human context (Katongole 2009:7-8).

This concept offers a theological perspective that uses a practical and contextual dialogue for love and forgiveness. The Pyem notion of *ngwakin darsai daal* is dialogical. This is expressed in the Pyem response to violent conflict between two communities. Findings from the group discussions of members of indigenous groups revealed that the meeting of the two conflicting communities initiated by *Bate Ya* (middlepersons) is believed to be 'a dialogue

of the equals' (Bida 16 November 2017). Members of the two warring communities are guilty of undermining love for human dignity, and both victims and perpetrators are called to forgive, based on human consciousness, and irrespective of possible damage caused by the violent conflict. Dialogue is expressed, furthermore, at the meeting of the two warring communities, which involves an exchange of male goats and eating male goat meat (Kallamu 16 November 2017). The Pyem notion can be an African symbolic medium, which expresses God's dialogue with the fallen humanity through PST. Unlike the Eurocentric and triumphalist dialogue of PST, which postures with a tendency to discriminate based on religious and cultural affiliation, the concept of dialogue within the Pyem milieu embodies forgiving-love and inclusivity. The dialogical nuance, as perceived, presupposes that God's forgiving-love informs divine dialogues with humanity through Jesus Christ (Buthelli 2015:782-783; Pederson,McKee, Berndt, DePerno&Wehde 2015:173). Thus, the Pyem notion provides a distinctive option, which advances a life-giving dialogical dimension to understanding and applying the atoning work of Christ within a context plagued by religious violence, such as Jos. In the light of Jesus's teaching, forgiving-love is seen as the voluntary act of responding to harm done to Christians without retaliation (Ezigbo 2018:251-252).

Forgiving-love is expressed through the dialogical exchange of male goats and the communal eating of the goat meat as gesture of negating violence and embracing reconciliation. The act of eating the goat meat is based on the belief that all the grievances, hatred, anger, and un-forgiveness as a result of a fight, are ingested and put to rest. Forgiveness and reconciliation are demonstrated by members of the community through social interactions (Bida 16 November 2017). In general terms, forgiving-love becomes necessary because all who participated in the fight are guilty of undermining the dignity of humanity, which is the bedrock of the life in the community (Bujo 2015:81). The Pyem notion considers every member of the community guilty for failing totake the responsibility to sustain and protect human dignity. The Pyem notion, therefore, has potential to promote forgiving-love as a response to religious violence (Belousek 2011:50). The authenticity of Pyem forgiving-love and reconciliation within their belief system is demonstrated in the value they assign to human dignity and the promotion of inclusive justice for all. Based on this analysis, the Pyem notion becomes a viable symbol, through which PST can be expressed by the COCIN in its response to religious violence in Jos.

## **Conclusion**

The ongoing discourse that seeks to unearth Eurocentric Christian doctrines in Africa cannot be underestimated. This is because the de-colonial perspective used for introducing theology in Africa is aimed at stimulating African theologians to utilise their rich, relevant African religio-cultural experiences as symbolic mediums for expressing Western Christian doctrines in the missional identity of the church in Africa, which, in turn, can foster practical Christian living in the context of religious violence in Africa. Following from the Pyem African cultural experience, as described in this article, it is evident that there are relevant alternative models in Africa that can be used to decolonise European-informed Christian doctrines, such as PST, which tends to misrepresent God's broader perspective of mission, especially in a religio-pluralistic context, such as Nigeria.

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*A Theology of Forgiving-Love*

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# On Religious Intolerance in Yorùbá Society: An Exploration of the Pluriverse Alternative

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## Abstract

In recent times, conflicts and extremism linked to Abrahamic monotheisms have reached an alarming level, both nationally and internationally. The Yorùbá, aboriginals in south-west Nigeria, have experienced an unfair share of this horrid trend. Unfair, because the intrusion of Christianity and Islam into Yorùbá life contributed to upsetting the serenity and spiritual balance of the people. Forced conversion, faiths preaching hate towards and inferiority of other faiths, and many other ills that are characteristic of these ‘foreign’ religions have been imported into Yorùbá society. The consequence of the arrival of these ideological differences into the Yorùbá space-time has not only caused religious conflict, but unnecessary and needless homicide. In this study, I employed the method of critical analysis and interpretation and I propose a pluriverse perspective that emphasises an understanding of contemporary African realities within religio-cultural and spiritual experience, which I explored as groundwork. Specifically, this study proposes *Òrìṣà* propriety in traditional Yorùbá religion and spirituality as a paradigm to resolve conflict and achieve peaceful coexistence with the imported faiths that wield such influence in Yorùbá society.

**Keywords:** Africa, *Òrìṣà*, peace studies, religion, Yorùbá, spirituality.

## Introduction

‘My daughter will not marry a kiriyo!’,<sup>1</sup> Fadilat Abdul-Jeleel Òṣúntólá, the chief imam of the community’s central mosque, pronounced to his followers,

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<sup>1</sup> Yorùbá slang for Christian.

when he was informed of his daughter's emotional proximity to Peter Fáṣínà, the son of one of his numerous tenants, who professes and practices the Christian faith. But Fatimah is in love with Peter. And Fatimah is the one and only daughter of Fadilat Òṣúntólá. There are some similitudes between the families: They reside in *Ilẹ̀ṣà*, in *Òṣún* State, Nigeria. They are Yorùbá, albeit thoroughly steeped in the respective tenets of Islam and Christianity. What is remarkable is that, after several months of fervent resistance, and as a result of endless pleas and evidence of affection, the *fadilat* recants to grant his approval, though subject to a condition: 'Pétérù!<sup>2</sup> My daughter will remain a Muslim and practice the Muslim faith if you marry her. Do you agree?' This seemed a reasonable condition. Peter was in love too, so he consented. The wedding was grand and everyone was happy.

Five years after the wedding, Fadilat Abdul-Jeleel Òṣúntólá died in his sleep. Over time, Peter's reputation as a powerful man of God has brought him rapid promotion within his Christian denomination. On the other hand, Fatimah still wears her *hijab*, as if she is married to a Muslim. The promise to the *fadilat* seems not to have been compromised, however, things soon took a turn for the worse.

Peter was told that, before he could be appointed as the head of all the churches in that district, he had to convert his wife to Christianity. What kind of pastor heads a district with a Muslim for a wife? Technically, his wife's faith is an impediment to his calling. So, he starts pressuring Fatimah: 'Since your father, to whom I made the promise, no longer lives, of what use is the condition? The condition no longer holds weight. You MUST become a Christian, accept the Lord Jesus and be saved!' However, Fatimah was not willing to trade her Muslim faith, and a standoff develops.

To avoid using a gallon of words for a spoonful of thoughts, the consequence is that the marriage is no longer what it used to be. Two entities that had been deeply in love, initially separated by religion, but who had *seemingly* transcended their differences, are now faced with the existential realities of life. After concerted efforts to convert her to Christianity failed, domestic violence enters the fray. Furthermore, another crucial decision has to be made about a sensitive subject: Should their four-year-old daughter attend *islamiyyah*, or Sunday school? They argue over the school and the child's dress. On the domestic front, Peter wants to be intimate with his wife,

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<sup>2</sup> Yorùbá equivalent of the Biblical name, Peter.

but ‘it is the Holy month of *Ramadan*’, Fatimah insists. Peter can no longer cope; he started to see and imagine things he had hitherto bracketed as otiose. Finally, he admits to himself: ‘I am married to an enemy of the Gospel’. Gradually, the love between the couple started to decline rapidly. In the end, things fell apart as the centre could not hold. They had to go their separate ways, because no compromise was possible between the demands of their faith and their love.

Experiences of this type are not limited to the Yorùbá parts of Africa, but are endemic in almost all parts of Africa, and even the world. In the face of the tragic end of the love between Fatimah and Peter, I contend that, had the spirit of cohesion, mutual love, tolerance and charity, which is indicative of traditional Yorùbá religion, been employed, the love story would not have evolved into a tragedy.

We have established one thing: both Fatimah and Peter are Yorùbá persons. Their surnames say more about their family history and background than the Abrahamic monotheisms they profess. I postulate that, had they been able to tap into their rich traditional and religious heritage as Yorùbá, perhaps their marriage would not have crashed. It is clear that religious skirmishes that have been ushered into Yorùbá life by Abrahamic monotheisms have done more harm than good. What is even more unfortunate is that the foremost theoretical framework usually foregrounded for succour – religious toleration and pluralism – has not been effective. It is for this reason that I propose a pluriverse perspective that emphasises comprehending contemporary African realities within their religio-cultural and spiritual experience, as a plausible possibility of resolving conflicts, and achieving peaceful and mutual co-existence.

At this juncture, a critic could ask: What is the pluriverse theory about? How does it intersect with traditional Yorùbá religion and spirituality? Will it serve as a suitable, adequate and applicable framework for saving marriages, lives, and relationships, like that of Fatimah and Peter? Can it promote peaceful relations and snuff outbursts of religious conflict, which are now commonplace in contemporary Yorùbá life?

In the pages ahead, I initiate a groundwork that will answer each of these questions in the third part of this study. In the second part, I explore the application and limits of the principles of toleration and religious pluralism, which is the most widespread and accentuated position endorsed by scholars as a paradigm for conflict and altercations resulting from religion. There have

been torrents of scholarly articulation on the subject of religious pluralism and toleration. My aim is to engage with this articulation in order to provide an explanatory justification for the pluriverse option, which I admit. In addition, I uncover the aggregate submission of scholars in relation to the perspective of religious toleration and pluralism, and its suitability and utility within Yorùbá space-time. This approach is in line with ‘the pragmatic maxim of Pierce and James that, if an idea cannot be lived in practice, it should not be affirmed in theory’ (Griffin 1998:2). The fourth section concludes this inquiry.

### **Applying the Thesis of Religious Pluralism and Toleration to Nigerian [Yorùbá] Society: Exposing Flaws and Limits**

The Yorùbá are aboriginals of the south-western part of modern-day Nigeria (Atanda 1990:1). The religious life of the people involves a triad of Christianity, Islam and traditional religion (Isichei 1983). Whereas Christianity and Islam are dominant and influential in the lives of the people, traditional religion has been on the defensive. It is important to note that, in Nigeria, available record indicates religious conflict to be endless and spontaneous as notable towns, and the years they engaged in religious conflict, post-independence, have been documented in the research of Fatima Nuzhat (2014) thus: the Maitatsine riots in Bulumkutu (1982); the Moon-Eclipse crisis in Borno (1996); Kaduna (Maitatsine riots in Rigassa 1982; 1992; 2000); Tiv and others in Nassarawa (2001); Jos (1994; 2000; 2001-2003; 2008; 2009; 2010); Ikulu-Bajju (2001); the Maitatsine riots in Jimeta (1984); Kano; Maitatsine (1980; 1982; 1987; 1990; 1995) Maitatsine riots in Gombe (1985; 1991); Illorin religious conflict (1986); Jalingo (1992; 2009); Maiduguri (2006; 2009) Iggah-Oyikwa (2002); Kano(2004); Numan (2004); Azare (2001); Bauchi (2010); Shagamu (1999); Kafanchan (1987); Tafawa Balewa (1991; 1995; 2001); Zangon-Kataf (1992); Tiv-Jukun and Tiv-Kuteb (1992-1993); Potiskum (1994; 2009); Kuteb-Chamba (1997-1998); Igbirra-Bassa (1986-2000); Yelwa-Shandam (2002; 2004); Mangu-Bokkos (1992-1995); Bukuru-Gyero (1997); Ibadan (2010); and Wukari (2010).

Furthermore, it has become almost the norm that the way people are treated in Nigeria, largely depends on the faith (Christianity or Islam) they profess but closely followed by what ethnicity they hail from. How can these religions preach peace and love, but do the opposite in society? An attempt

has been made to explain this phenomenon:

These religions cannot bring peace and tranquillity to our beloved country, to any country. The history of Christianity in Europe, the Crusades, the obnoxious inquisition, the Jihads, the bloody Iranian Islamic Revolution, the Maitatsine religious revolt in Kano in 1981 are all pointers to this hard fact. These religions proclaim peace in churches and mosques but outside them they are doing exactly the opposite of what they proclaim. They are only religions of words and precepts, not of deeds (Mala & Oseni 1984:2-3).

The direct and non-direct causes of these clashes, to my mind, are ingrained in the four distinctive features of Christianity and Islam. I will explore them in the next section. For the moment, it is crucial to relay too that the conflicts usually involve Muslims and Christians leading to loss of precious lives and properties. More so, it is important to not wish away the increase in ‘the feeling of hatred among both religions’ (Nuzhat 2014:16). It also needs to be on record that,

the overwhelming majority of Muslims and Christians are moderate in their interfaith relations. Only the extremists have taken to violent conflict. The current Boko Haram crises throughout the North, and increasingly throughout the Middle Zone of the Federation, have the potential to destabilize the entire country, however (Paden 2015: 9).

Since Nigeria is a heterogeneous society, I do not boast to have a theoretical framework that can work for all shades. As a result, I limit my investigation to the south-western part of the country, which is dominated by the Yorùbá.

What makes intolerance rife between Christians and Muslims? What theoretical frameworks are in place to check the excesses of religious intolerance? How plausible and adequate are they, especially within the African space-time?

Discourses on the subject of religious toleration and pluralism has various aims, among which the intention of making the world a better place, devoid of antagonism, coercion, and discrimination, and irrespective of the religious views professed and/or practiced. It is, therefore, not surprising, as John Hick (2010: 717) claims, that,

the whole subject, within philosophy of religion, of the relation between the religious traditions presents so obvious a challenge to a dominant contemporary form of confessional religious apologetic, that it seems inevitable that it will be increasingly widely discussed in the coming decades.

However, before engaging critically with the foremost articulations comprising the discourse, it is important to have a working comprehension of the concepts toleration and pluralism. In the words of E. Langerak (2010: 606),

Toleration is the enduring of something disagreeable. It involves a decision to forgo using powers of coercion, so it is not merely resignation at the inevitability of the disagreeable, although begrudging toleration can be granted when one believes that coercion, while possible, would come at too high a price.

To appreciate the inner kernel of toleration to be attained, knowing the meaning of tolerance could be helpful. This is important to clear the air of confusing toleration and tolerance as necessary synonyms. To this end, Thomas Scanlon (1996: 226) helps with this idea by stating that ‘tolerance requires us to accept people and permit their practices even when we strongly disapprove of them. Tolerance thus involves an attitude that is intermediate between wholehearted acceptance and unrestrained opposition’. The implication is that whereas tolerance involves the mere acceptance of the other, toleration goes deeper as it tasks one to understand the other in addition to mere acceptance. It places premium on having a core comprehension of perceived disagreements with the aim of transcending same. So for this discussion, toleration will be the focus not tolerance.

As a result of this conceptual exposition, I conclude that religious toleration, then, ‘generally applies to expressing or acting upon theologically-related beliefs, although the mere holding of beliefs or the persons holding them have also been the objects of intolerance and toleration’ (Langerak 2010:606).

Pluralism, on the other hand, refers to a position that rejects the privileging of any one value or worldview over all others. This is because pluralism accords inherent value to a diversity of perspectives. Pluralism goes

‘further than tolerance in that it rejects the hierarchal privileging of one’s own position over the others as morally and politically problematic’ (Erlewine 2010: 8). Religious pluralism can, then, be understood as an ideological framework that gives equality to or acknowledges the equality of all religions, without placing one higher or above another. It should, however, be emphasised that, regardless of the demarcation between religious toleration and religious pluralism, both concepts acknowledge the necessity for respect for and the dignity of the religious world-views of one by another (Hick 2010:719).

Having exposed the meaning of toleration and pluralism, what, then, is intolerance? Intolerance may be perceived as, ‘the unwillingness to suffer the otherness of the Other, the unwillingness to limit the implications of one’s worldview in order to make room for the Other and her worldview’ (Erlewine 2010:9). In plain language, it means the failure to appreciate the thought system of the other, given the prejudice that one’s own outlook is superior.

The denigration and prejudice directed at the thought system of the other, I maintain, is responsible for the spate of intolerance exhibited by some religious adherents. I propose that this lack of toleration has culminated in torrents of reports about religious conflicts, loss of life and valuables, as well as a total disregard for humanity and nature, all in the name of protecting the sacredness of God and what the Divine entity represents. It cannot be denied that, even among the Abrahamic monotheisms, fissures and disagreements as a result of lack of toleration are rife. In social life, the consequence is cases of persuasion, discrimination, segregation, antagonism and, worst of all, coercion and violence against the other, the one who does not share the same ideas about the Divine as held by adherents. My contention is that there is a structural antagonism against the other that thrives unchecked. By the other, I mean individuals or groups of individuals who do not profess a particular faith.

Given the above antecedent, philosophers, religionists, liberals and other concerned scholars have articulated variants of theories that have come to be branded under the label of religious toleration and/or religious pluralism. Foremost scholars who have contributed to the subject matter are Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1997), John Locke (1983), J.S. Mill (1978); highly influential scholars are John Hick (1989; 1985; 1980), John Cobb Jr. (1999), Jürgen Habermas (2002; 1996) in the preceding century, and Robert Erlewine (2010) within the last decade. The aggregate verdict deriving from these

scholars is that, ‘calls for tolerance and pluralism either go unheeded or only further exacerbate the situation, given that those who make them fail to take into account the contours of the symbolic or discursive structure shared by the Abrahamic religions’ (Erlewine 2010:3). What, then, are the basic similarities of the Abrahamic religions/monotheisms? Is it the case that these shared similarities have the potency to solve inter-religious conflict, even in Yorùbá society? Can they promote mutual cohesion and save the marriage of Fatimah and Peter? Perhaps they can; the rest of the present section is committed to these three questions.

According to Martin Jaffee (2001:759), ‘Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are equally rich, historical embodiments of a single structure of discourse that underlies the historically developed symbol systems specific to each community’. This implies that, in each of these faiths, there are some common denominators,

whose metaphysical underpinnings follow a logic that is rooted in a tense dynamic between particularity and universalism, wherein a particular community is imbued with universal significance, and as a result is brought in conflict with all other particular communities, which lack this universal significance (Erlewine 2010:10).

These metaphysical underpinnings, which form the common denominators among these faiths, manifest in four ways: revelation, election, historical mission, and eschatology (Jaffee 2001; Erlewine 2010)

Revelation refers to the commonality that each of the three Abrahamic monotheisms derives from a supernatural encounter with the Divine. Robert Erlewine (2010:11) expatiates in this connection: ‘In the moment of revelation, the universal God of creation becomes manifest to a particular community through an act of revelation’. The process of ‘manifesting to a particular community’ already attests to the quality of election. Judaism, Islam and Christianity each claims to have received the mandate to be used (elected) by the Divine as a voice for the rest of humankind. The entire trajectory of spreading and adding converts from all corners of the planet to their ranks is suggestive of the historical mission. The three monotheisms also share the eschatological view – the outlook that the world will come to an end. Hence, the mission, throughout history, has been to propagate the end of the world and acquire as many converts as possible

for the Divine, who had elected the devotees of these monotheisms to follow the supernatural revelation.

As simple as these similarities are, I must hint that there is an implied tension and competition among the Abrahamic monotheisms, as each strives to muscle out the other as the one true path to the Divine. If Judaism claims to have been elected and entrusted with the historical mission, does Islam have a better voice, or does Christianity, for that matter?

At this juncture, it needs no elaboration to realise that, deep within the structure of each of the Abrahamic monotheisms, there is a tendency to repress and disdain, whether through force, persuasion or violence, whatever ideology that contradicts among them. Furthermore, within each of these monotheisms, there is an inherent tension, which found further extension in Yorùbá land. However, before examining the impact of this interference on the relegation and abandonment of traditional Yorùbá religion and spirituality, the position of scholars in this regard is pertinent.

The four common denominators of the Abrahamic monotheisms are not consistent with the thrusts of religious toleration and pluralism championed by renowned and erudite persona like John Hick (1989; 1985; 1980). This means, religious people who adhere to any of the Abrahamic monotheisms face a dilemma: They can accept the principles of pluralism and toleration, which may demand that they ignore the common denominators, and practice a ‘reconfigured’ religion away from the particular monotheism they profess and practice, or they can affirm an account of a monotheism that takes cognisance of the four denominators present in other monotheisms (Erlewine 2010:28). The implication of this claim is that a believer can either affirm the common denominators and suppress other religious truths, *or* make adjustments to her particular monotheistic faith for the sake of pluralism and/or toleration, and render these faiths inherently distorted. Scholars, such as John Hick (1989; 1985; 1980), John Locke (1983), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1997), and Jürgen Habermas (2002; 1996) have endorsed the latter disjunction. The implication of such an approach is that it initiates the Abrahamic religions away from their true, inherent natures. The view of John Hick is worthy of consideration. In his philosophy of pluralism, Hick (1985:42) announces that,

Yahweh and Shiva are not rival gods or rival claimants to be the one and only God, but rather two different concrete historical personae in

terms of which the ultimate divine Reality is present and responded to by different large historical communities within different strands of the human history.

Elsewhere, he is even more explicit, and states that Christians,

can revere Christ as the one through whom we have found salvation, without having to deny other points of reported saving contact between God and man. We can recommend the way of Christian faith without having to disregard other ways of faith (Hick 1980: 75).

Hick gives less emphasis to the distinctive common denominators present among the Abrahamic monotheisms (Erlewine 2010). His solution endorses an unfair rendition of Christianity. My opinion is similar to the reflection of Robert Erlewine (2010: 21), who indicates that:

It is imperative to notice that while ostensibly operating out of an explicitly Christian, and therefore monotheistic framework, Hick has undermined or transfigured every moment constitutive of the basic structure shared by the Abrahamic monotheisms. Hick is able to reconcile Christianity with pluralism only by entirely shedding the discursive structure of the elective monotheisms, a move which he clearly does not view as problematic.

The aftermath of Hick's intellectual contribution to the discourse has inspired many conservative Christian theologians and apologetics, such as Pope Benedict XVI, to reject subscribing to what they perceive as Hick's stripping of the very essence of Christianity and the monotheistic thought system (D'Costa 1990; Ratzinger 2004). The point is that the debate will continue to generate diverse perspectives. It is my conviction that retaining these denominators provides a platform for tussles and conflict. It is important that the common denominators should be reviewed in the light of how they provide the breeding ground for conflict among the people whom they intend to save from impending disaster.

It is valid to hold that religious toleration and pluralism has not been wholly successful in the West either. Given this, is it likely to ever birth success among Africans, with their unique backgrounds and histories?

Personally, I am not optimistic. I am not convinced of the possibility: African indigenous knowledge systems are unique and born out of the lived experiences of the people. That fact that they are African does not diminish the authenticity of their religious and spiritual perceptions. This is exactly what Godwin Sogolo (1993: 74) has in mind when he says that,

The mind of the African is not structurally different from that of the Westerner. Also, the contextual contrast between Western thought and traditional African thought, which considers only the former as a suitable material for philosophical reflection, rests on false premises. The truth is that both are similarly marked by the same basic features of the human species. The difference lies in the ways the two societies conceive of reality and explain objects and events.

The Western and African mind see reality from different perspectives. Hence, it will be a form of ideological superimposition if submissions of Western scholars on religious toleration and pluralism are brought to bear within the African space-time. Instances of religious intolerance and then violence exploding between African Christians and Muslims account for the lives that have been cut short. Africa is no longer at ease. If Africans do not take cognisance of religious toleration and pluralism, and curtail the conflict and violent potentials of the Abrahamic monotheisms, then it is pertinent to explore the African indigenous knowledge option, in order to seek a more plausible recipe that will bring them closer to the divine without violent confrontations without compromising their love for Christianity and Islam.

### **Indigenous Knowledge on Conflict Resolution: A Pluriverse Account of Traditional Yorùbá Religion and Spirituality**

In this section, I expose a pluriverse approach to religious conflict and the quagmire that religious toleration and pluralism does not adequately comprehend, particularly, as it pertains to Africans. It is the thesis of the pluriverse that ‘contemporary realities in Africa can be better understood within indigenous religio-cultural experience’ (Kaunda, Luxman & Hewitt 2018: 1). Via the framework of the pluriverse theory, I foray into indigenous Yorùbá religio-cultural experience, to extract a platform for checking religious intolerance and conflict in Yorùbá society.

For the sake of the outlook that I intend to employ, it is instructive to commence by stating that ‘scholars have argued that a lack of intentional contextualization of Islamic and African beliefs and practices within African world-views promoted dysfunctional interaction between these religious systems and the traditional African system of thought’ (Kaunda *et al.* 2018:2). This outlook is shared by Mbiti (1969) and Sindima (1995). However, the repercussion is that the adoption of Christianity and Islam by Africans have caused them to be removed from indigenous systems that are capable of transcending the conflict and tussles that are characteristic of these foreign religions (Kaunda *et al.* 2018; Ramose 2012; Sindima 1996; Tafese 2016). Therefore, the demonstration by scholars that ‘African approaches to reconciliation and conflict resolution are not monolithic, but rather dynamic and highly adaptive to the ever-changing socio-political landscape of the world’ (Kaunda *et al.* 2018:3), comes as no surprise.

At this juncture, I offer that, even in the face of lack of consensus about a definition, I conceive African indigenous knowledge to be ideas or thought systems that are distinctively original to traditional Africa, but relegated by advances in Western science and *episteme* as otiose, antediluvian and chaotic. Such an unfair rendition has done more harm than good, and due to the failure of Western paradigms to solve religious conflict in Africa, it is my contention that a revival of some of these indigenous epistemologies may assist in overcoming some of the conundrums that plague contemporary Africans. It is also essential to note that, in an African indigenous approach to conflict resolution, there are no victors or vanquished, as all the individuals concerned aim to proffer humane panacea to the dilemmas and conundrums that initially nurtured the conflict (Bukari 2013; Kaunda *et al.* 2018; Ramose 2012; Querejazu 2016).

It is unfortunate, however, that, in spite of the bulk of literature on the discourse on how local epistemology can serve as a dais for conflict resolution, it has yet to be applied to the Yorùbá space-time. This is where this study diverges. I explore the pluriverse approach to serve as groundwork to harness the indigenous thought system to extinguish religious skirmishes. I employ this approach with the caveat that,

[i]ndigenous epistemology is not perceived as an alternative perspective but rather as an option that can function independently or

concurrently, or with already existing universally favored perspectives and/or is inculturatively integrated within Christianity and or Islamic notions of reconciliation and conflict resolution' (Kaunda *et al.* 2018:3).

What, then, is the inner kernel of the pluriverse thesis? The pluriverse theory is an approach that acknowledges diversity, or the multiple ways in which reality can be understood and interpreted in relation to other perspectives (Kaunda *et al.* 2018: 3). It needs to be emphasised that, 'this perspective advocates a paradigm shift from the Western familiarized ontology and methods of discovering human realities, in favour of distinctive indigenous concepts for understanding reality' (Kaunda *et al.* 2018: 3). It is a perspective that connects with other ways of understanding and interpreting reality (Escobar 2010:9). The pluriverse theory rejects the domineering theories of the West as the final court of appeal. The pluriverse option offers an opportunity to examine critical issues with the yardstick of 'the natives' (Fanon 2008:4). The rest of this essay will present arguments that strengthen my case. The starting point then is to provide a concise understanding of traditional Yorùbá religion.

Contrary to the shades of atheism that is rampant in Western societies, the starting point of traditional Yorùbá religion and spirituality is the admission of the existence of *Olódùmarè*, the Supreme Deity. This is a contention that John Ishola Bewaji (2007: 369) entertains when he says that,

The existence of Olodumare is not geotactic, nor is it dependent upon any human whim. This, perhaps, explains why no elaborate arguments of proofs are thought necessary for the existence of God in Yoruba religion. The starting point of wisdom among the Yoruba is the acceptance of the *de facto* existence of Deity.

So, if the traditional Yorùbá takes the belief and existence of *Olódùmarè* as the starting point of their theology, how do they worship or adore this Deity? The consensus is that, in traditional Yorùbá religion, worship of God, the Supreme Being, *Olódùmarè*, is not direct, but channelled through the *òrìṣàs*, that is, divinities. Furthermore, it is an incontestable claim that,

the divinities (called, variously, Imales or Irun-Males, or Orisas in

the *Ifá* corpus) were the first creations of *Olodumare*; and that they were created by Him in His capacity as *Eleda*, for the primary purpose of assisting Him in the management of the planetary system (Akintola 1999: 52).

Olarenwaju Shitta-Bey proposes that this is suggestive of ‘is that the divinities were created by *Olodumare* to assist ... That they are to assist suggests that they are deputising *Olodumare*, which make them all the deputies of *Olodumare*’ (2013:79). Furthermore, ‘the Orisha have specialized priesthoods and cults of worshippers/followers, whereas *Olodumare* has no specialized priesthood and his cult is either universal or nonexistent’ (Ogunnaike 2015:226). This reveals that, in addition to the assistance rendered to *Olódùmarè*, the *òrìṣàs* are also the bridge through which *Olódùmarè* receives worship and supplications from humans (Ofuasia 2020).

The major *òrìṣàs*, or those whose worship has become widespread throughout various Yorùbá cities and the diaspora, include *Ọbàtálá*, the old, wise, and gentle arch-deity of white cloth who fashions the bodies of people; *Èṣù*, the mischievous and powerful trickster deity of the crossroads, who delivers sacrifices to other *òrìṣàs*, and serves as a divine ‘policeman’ and messenger; *Ògún*, the powerful, hot-tempered, solitary deity of iron, war, and justice; *Ọ́rínmílà*, the wise and patient god of *Ifá* divination and messenger of *Olódùmarè*; *Ọsanyìn*, the mysterious god of plants, medicine, and magic; *Olókún*, the deity of riches and the lagoon and/or deep sea, *Ẓàngó*, the fiery, proud god of thunder, lightning, and retributive justice, and *Yemọja*, the gentle, maternal goddess of the *Ogun* river in Nigeria, and the ocean and its fish in the New World (Ogunnaike 2015:227). It is obvious that these *òrìṣàs* have a domain of influence from where they assist *Olódùmarè* to manage the universe.

It is also important to understand that there is no coercion between *Olódùmarè* and the *òrìṣàs*. In other words, *Olódùmarè* persuasively, with reason and logic, tasks the *òrìṣàs*, who also possess the fallible characterisation of success or failure (Ofuasia 2019). This is demonstrated in the folklore where *Olódùmarè* commissioned *Ọbàtálá* with the task to create the universe, only for *Ọbàtálá* to slumber, as a result of an overdose of palm wine. The task was, later, assigned to *Ọ́rínmílà*, who executed it quickly. This folklore is in stark contrast to God in the Abrahamic monotheisms, who does not only wield power coercively, but also has angels who are infallible.

While discussing the relation that exists between *Olódùmarè* and the *òrìṣàs*, the late Austrian-born keeper of the sacred *Ọṣun* grove in *Oṣogbo* in present-day Nigeria, Susanne Wenger, expounds through Ulli Beier (1975:33):

Olodumare who contains all the complexities of the world within him. He is the egg from which the world breaks out. As a creator, Olodumare is called *Ẹḷẹda* (*ẹda* =creature). With a gesture of creation Olodumare splits himself up and becomes a multiple being through his innumerable creatures. Olodumare in his pure form cannot be perceived by the senses or understood by intelligence – that is why he receives almost no direct worship and no sacrifice. But as *Ẹḷẹda* we can begin to understand him ... In Susanne Wenger's vision, the *orisha* are part representations of Olodumare. Each *orisha* is the universe looked at from another angle. Olodumare is the sum total of all the complexities, he is the universe concentrated into one intelligence. Susanne Wenger says that one could conceive God as the force from which everything emerges—or else one could see him as the coexistence of all the complexities.

The foregoing attests to the persuasive relation between *Olódùmarè* and the *òrìṣàs*. And, since the *òrìṣàs* are the mediators between humans and *Olódùmarè*, it follows that they are the ones to be worshipped. Each *òrìṣà* has its own unique and distinct ethos and taboos that adherents must observe, and which serves to keep the spirituality and status quo intact. Gentle, patient *Ọbàtálá* will punish his devotees for drinking alcohol. *Ọrúnmìlà*, in spite of being persevering and empathetic, 'can punish his devotees who disregard his taboos by lying, committing adultery, etc.' (Ogunniake 2015:249). *Ọgún* is swift to punish liars and oath-breakers, as is *Ẓàngó*, but no *Òrìṣà* is more volatile than *Ẹṣù*.

*Ẹṣù* is simultaneously a mischievous trickster and a strict enforcer of the will of *Olódùmarè* and the law of sacrifice. When a sacrifice is offered, it is *Ẹṣù* who takes the sacrifice to the intended recipient, thus, the Yorùbá saying: '*Eni rúbo l'Ẹṣu n gbè*', [*Ẹṣù* supports the one who sacrifices]. However, if a sacrifice is not made, or not done correctly, *Ẹṣù* will side with the *Ajogún* (the malevolent spirits) and wreak all kinds of havoc on the offending party. *Ẹṣù* also punishes the other *òrìṣàs* for their refusal to

sacrifice, for their hubris, and sometimes just for fun. *Èṣù* is a notoriously ambivalent figure and is only consistently allied with *Òrúnmìlà*, the god who prescribes sacrifices (Rowland 1994:45).

*Èṣù* is both good and evil, a reflection, on a lower plane, of *Olódùmarè*'s transcendence of both good and evil (Ogunnaike 2015:250). The chaos that *Èṣù* is so fond of creating is a shadow of the undifferentiated 'chaos' of *Olódùmarè*'s transcendence of all categories and divisions. Due to the fear he inspires and his sometimes malevolent behavior, *Èṣù* was the name used to translate 'the Devil/ Satan' in the Yorùbá Bible. However, *Èṣù* actually bears little resemblance to the tempting, evil Satan, or the devil of the Abrahamic traditions, unless one considers the more ambiguous, or even positive role he plays in some esoteric Abrahamic traditions (Massignon 1994:222f). This is why, for Olusegun Oladipo (2004:369) and Kazeem Fayemi (2012:312), the equating of *Èṣù* with the Satan of the Abrahamic monotheisms is an example of conceptual superimposition, which must not be allowed to corrupt African traditional religion.

What I have done so far is to disclose the traditional Yorùbá notion of metaphysics, religion and spirituality. What I intend to point out, because it explains my pluriverse thesis, is that, in traditional Yorùbá religion and spirituality, there is no competition or antagonism among adherents regarding who serves *Olódùmarè* better. The traditional Yorùbá understands and tolerates, with reverence, the taboos, celebration, and worship of *Olódùmarè* through any *òrìṣà*. Someone who adores *Olódùmarè* through *Ṣàngó* never makes fun of or disregards someone who does same through *Ọṣun*. In fact, the traditional Yorùbá mind is tolerant to the extent that the yearly celebrations of some *òrìṣàs* are graced by all and sundry, except where some activities during the celebration could diminish and invoke the anger of their original *òrìṣà*. A little amplification is needed here!

Consider the traditional Yorùbá who is celebrating the *Ògún* festival, for instance. Much as *Ọbàtálá* devotees are welcomed, they must refrain from taking the palm wine/alcohol that is served during the celebration. This is not because the jar or gourd used to serve is unclean, or that the *Ọbàtálá* faithful has personal grievances against the *Ògún* celebrants. The reason, which is not a subject of controversy, is clear among the traditional Yorùbá – *Ọbàtálá* devotees do not consume liquor. They are not perceived as parading a faith or belief that is inferior – they are even accorded greater respect for keeping to the rules of their *òrìṣà*. Respect is necessary, because one angry

*òrìṣà* that has been violated can wreak havoc on an entire community, irrespective of the individual *òrìṣà* that others propitiate. This belief is in tune with Desmond Tutu's explanation of *Ubuntu* in the adage, 'A person belongs to a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished when others are tortured or oppressed' (Tutu, 1999:27). In a nutshell, I am convinced that traditional Yorùbá religion comprises of individuals who watch over one another's spirituality, so as to avoid upsetting the spiritual balance. It is precisely this attitude of tolerance that needs to be revived in contemporary Yorùbá living, instead of allowing the inherent tussle and conflict among the Abrahamic monotheisms to pollute their space-time, leading to loss of love, trust and unity.

Another striking and unique feature of traditional Yorùbá life that has been imported, albeit inadvertently, into modern living, is naming. Surnames of the Yorùbá are loaded with a diversity of antecedents that refer to history, religion, experiences and trade, as well as the family's *òrìṣà* through which petition to *Olódùmarè* is made. Naming goes a long way to connecting the contemporary Yorùbá to their traditional heritage. Unless this aspect of naming is retained and sustained too, the pluriverse approach I propose will have little influence.

To appreciate how naming endorses my pluriverse option, I suggest that the reader revisits the story that opened this essay. In the case of Fadilat Abdul-Jeleel Ọ̀ṣúntólá, Fatimah Ọ̀ṣúntólá, and Peter Fáṣínà, one needs no serious intellectual willpower to realise that the one family originates from a history of traditional Yorùbás that worship the goddess Ọ̀ṣún, whereas the other venerates the god of wisdom, Ọ̀rúnmìlà, popularly called *Ifá* sometimes. An analysis of the surnames of each family – 'Ọ̀ṣúntólá' and 'Fáṣínà' – reveals more than Christianity and Islam. For the former, there is an attestation that the worship of the female goddess Ọ̀ṣún was the traditional religion of that family, even before the reception and practice of Islam. Simply, 'Ọ̀ṣún-to-ólá' translates as 'Ọ̀ṣún equals wealth'. Hermeneutically speaking, it could also mean that wealth derives from the goddess Ọ̀ṣún. But who is Ọ̀ṣún? In the words of the custodian of the Ọ̀ṣún Grove, Susanne Wenger (1977:7),

Ọ̀ṣún can be described as the goddess of the waters of life. As she is an Oriṣa she is supernaturally intense, a metaphysical concentration of a distinct force (sacred force) which also is contained not only in

man and in all that lives, in all that exists physically, but also in Olodumare, God himself.

Peter Fáṣínà is also suggestive of a family that boasts of *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*, the divinity that channels worship of *Olódùmarè*. The surname Fáṣínà is the short form of *Ifá-ṣí-òṇà*, which means, literally, ‘*Ifá* opened the way.’ There is a tendency to ‘use of *Ifá* and *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*’ (Balogun & Fayemi 2008:37) to mean one and the same; on the connection between the two terms, Kola Abimbola chronicles,

Another name of *Ifá* is *Ọ̀rúnmìlà*. The word *Ifá* however, is used to refer to the *Orisa* (divinity) himself, his instruments of divination as well his system of divination and literature. The name *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* refers solely to the divinity himself ... *Ifá* priests and priestesses were counselors, physicians, historians and philosophers of ancient Yorùbá land (Abimbola 2006:119).

The thrust of the philological analysis of the selected Yorùbá surnames serves as a sharp pointer to the peoples’ belief in God, contrary to earlier ethnocentric and ethnographic impressions of scholars, such as Edward Taylor, De Brosses, James Frazier and Samuel Baker. It is the failure to comprehend how the Yorùbá construe the divine and reach him via a pantheon of divinities that informs the impression of Samuel Baker, who is reported as saying,

Without exception, they are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened even by a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms its puny world (Evans-Pritchard 1965:16f).

Necessarily, one of the realities, among many other realities, portrayed by the pluriverse proposal involves the mutual and peaceful toleration of *òrìṣà* propriety by the traditional Yorùbá. It is my conviction that, if this attitude is revived and applied to contemporary Yorùbá living, the marriage of Peter Fáṣínà and Fatimah Ọ̀súntólá will survive the antagonistic and competitive natures that are natural to foreign religions. Moreover, my pluriverse theory

has the capacity to extinguish quagmires and frictions or hostilities that emanate from religion. To amplify this point, I refer to two types of divinities in traditional Yorùbá religion and spirituality: primordial and personified.

The primordial are the ones that were present, with *Olódùmarè*, from the beginning of creation or the world; the most popular ones are *Òrúnmìlà*, *Àjàlá*, *Ọbàtálá*, and *Èṣù*. The personified *òrìṣàs*, on the other hand, comprise mortal men and women who, during their earthly existence, performed great deeds and wonders, thus, prompting their elevation to *òrìṣà* status. Prominent *òrìṣàs* are *Ọgún* and *Ṣàngó*. I tender that the persistence of personified *òrìṣàs* in traditional Yorùbá religion and spirituality not only strengthens my pluriverse thesis, but advocates for a revision of the Abrahamic monotheism among the contemporary Yorùbá, in order to extinguish all manner of friction and enmity culminating from religion.

How does this work? Since the scourge of religious conflict did not exist among traditional Yorùbá, owing to the perception that *Òrìṣà* propriety is a means of venerating *Olódùmarè*, the Abrahamic monotheisms and their institutions in contemporary Yorùbá societies may glean some truths or principles for their utility. Specifically, if a contemporary Yorùbá, who is now a fervent Christian or Muslim, seeks an end to the religious conflict emanating from these monotheisms, they may entertain that Jesus the Messiah, and the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) are personified divinities. Hence, these popular historic and religious figures are like any other personified *òrìṣà*, since they each serve as a channel to the Higher Being. At this juncture, the debate whether or not God is one or many does not surface. Jesus the Messiah and Prophet Muhammad (SAW) are admitted even by followers of Christianity and Islam as means to the Divine and not God themselves. If they employ this strategy, there is no need for the rampant religious conflict and hostilities in recent times. All '*òrìṣàs*', whether 'imported' or indigenous, will serve as equal, alternative and plausible means to reaching the Supreme Being, with none purporting to wield a unique and forceful hegemony over others.

## **Conclusion**

I commenced this discussion with a story that is reminiscent of one of the countless ways that the Abrahamic monotheisms cause violent clashes in contemporary Yorùbá society. I also hinted that the contemporary Yorùbá is

ignorant of their traditional heritage, owing to the influence of the foreign religions. In the face of the persistent struggles by each of these monotheisms to be the one, true religion, countless Yorùbá lives have been cut short. However, my pluriverse option, which I believe is an improvement on the bulk of discourses on religious pluralism, has the potential to smother conflict and violent confrontations that emanate from religious antagonism and competitiveness. My approach is also pragmatic, at least within the domain of Yorùbá space-time. From the arguments I have marshalled so far, two possibilities are obvious: Either the modern-day Yorùbá entertains the view that Jesus and Muhammad are personified *òrìṣà*, thereby extinguishing religious conflict and hegemony, *or* they retain the four common denominators of the monotheisms, and continue to wallow in sheer ignorance and death. However, for my pluriverse theory to gain a foothold for contemporaneous utility, I recommend the first option. Obviously, the entire gamut of this inquiry had been committed to that cause.

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# My Marriage Journey: Could Misinterpretation of Religious Script Lead to Misguided Spirituality?

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## Abstract

When I embraced Islam 24 years ago, I was excited about the aspects of the Qur'an (Holy Scripture) that liberated women. As an African woman, I am familiar with cultural traditional and religious practices that subject women to oppression and dehumanisation. Within this framework, I joined Islam, because of the liberating potential that the Qur'an offers women. Utilising autoethnography as my methodology and critical feminism as my lens, this paper outlines the basic tenets of Islam that guide and influence my behaviour and how it correlates with my marital life. Furthermore, I explore the extent to which (mis)- or (re)interpretation of religious texts may lead to misguided spirituality. My conclusions illustrate that Islamic pedagogies, in its ideological space, promote women's human rights, but due to the socio-political structures and cultural conditioning that perpetuate obedience and subjection of women and children, it is interpreted to reinforce power relations.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, coping mechanisms, emotional abuse, financial abuse, gender-based violence, spirituality

## Introduction

In Islam, marriage is a sacred and social contract between two parties. Qur'an 4:1 states: 'O men! Fear your Lord Who created you from a single being and out of it created its mate'. Sacredness implies that failure to comply to abstinence before marriage angers Allah. To avoid punishment, Muslims are discouraged from dating before marriage, or encouraged to have a *mahram* (chaperon) accompany them when unrelated men and women interact.

Muslims are encouraged to marry as soon as they have fulfilled the following: they are both adults and sane; have agreed to stay together as husband and wife, and a dowry (marriage gift) has been given to the bride. The marriage gift can be paid in full immediately (*muajjal*), or at a later stage (*muakhkhar*). The verse quoted above denotes that husband and wife are supposed to be mates who live lives of kindness, love, devotion and mutual respect.

Like any other girl from a village, I wanted to get married, so that I could fulfil half of my Islamic belief (Hassouneh-Phillips 2001b) and gain my autonomy. I had witnessed the ill-treatment of my spinster aunts, who were constantly being told that they had no right to determine the affairs of their fathers' homes, because they were old enough to make rules in their own houses. This attitude is accurately articulated by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her book, *We should all be feminists*, in which she explains that African societies consider women who are not married at a certain age as inadequate human beings. In a society where grandmothers and mothers married relatively young (15 to 18 years), being older than 20 and unmarried veers from the normative, and is frowned upon by elders in the family. As soon as I completed my undergraduate studies, I was ready for marriage and familial responsibilities, which would include managing my own home and having children, through which I would be considered a respectable member of my community. The idea that marriage makes a woman a 'respectable member' of society is present in both Islamic and other conservative, culturally bound societies.

Khalil (2016) argues that interpersonal communication is a critical element of Islam. He posits that interpersonal communication is a social characteristic that leads to the attainment of common goals. Islam emphasises that all humans are social beings who realise their value by living in harmony with others. An-Nu'man ibn Basheer narrates that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH or SAW) said, 'The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever' (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 5665).

Through marriage, communities with common purposes are created, and women play a critical role in nurturing these *ummah* (communities of believers). Though men are regarded as the 'heads' or leaders of families and society, their rules/instructions are enforced by women. So, women ensure that there is harmony in the home by being conflict resolvers. Unfortunately, my experience was that, in some Muslim homes, women are not given the space to play this role effectively due to woman-on-woman rivalry. Mothers-in-law

do not give their daughters-in-law the opportunity to navigate their marriages and domestic lives without conflict in the extended family.

The Qur'an states that men are '*qawaam*' (meaning strong and responsible) and, therefore, responsible for women and children. This 'strength' has been (re)interpreted to mean that they have liberty over decision-making and cannot be questioned; yet Allah (God) gave it as a responsibility to protect and oversee, not as a method of control. Overwhelmingly, men regard the 'strength' they supposedly have as permission to dominate their wives and families. Alghafli, Hatch and Marks (2014) assert that the Qur'an gives both Muslim men and women rights and responsibilities over each other. So, it is expected that if men were to carry out their responsibilities for the pleasure of Allah, while respecting the women's rights as prescribed in the Qur'an, there would be no conflict in marriages.

## **Critical Feminism**

In reflecting on my marital journey, I employ critical feminism, which, according to Scatlas (1992), should be an ongoing project that involves 'criticizing, analyzing ... in order to eradicate the misrepresentation, distortion, and oppression resulting from historically male perspectives, use, understanding and practice of religious scripts'. MacKinnon (1983; 1991) asserts that critical feminism is based on the assumptions that,

Gender oppression is endemic in our society .... Traditional claims of gender neutrality and objectivity must be contested ... social justice platforms and practices are the only way to eliminate gender discrimination ... the experiential knowledge of women or their 'unique voice' is valid ... women are differentially discriminated against depending on the interests of the dominant group ... history and historical contexts must be taken into consideration in order to challenge policies and practices and that affect women ... [and] critical feminist theory must be interdisciplinary in nature (Geisinger 2011:13).

The socio-politico normative approach of critical feminism scaffolds an argument on women's marginalisation in Islamic marriage within African communities. The argument is that religion is always assumed to uphold morality, yet, in the case of Islam, experience has shown that it enforces male

dominance (Ghorbani, Watson, Geranmayepour & Chen 2013; 2014). Ghorbani et al. (2014) posit that, in Islam, spirituality is based on full submission to Allah; Pargament (2013:257) asserts that spirituality is the 'search for the sacred'. Hassouneh-Phillips (2003) sees spirituality as a means through which some women become more vulnerable to abuse.

Mangena (2009) posits that critical feminism and feminist ethics provide lenses through which women's experiences with men and society can be critiqued. She calls for careful application of African principles, such as *ubuntu*, which, she argues, can promote subjugation of women if it is not practiced fairly (2009:28). In this paper, I argue that misrepresented and misinterpreted religious texts can lead to misguided spirituality.

As much as I am guided by the principles of *ubuntu*, an African philosophy that promotes an 'humane, respectful and polite attitude towards others' (Ramose 1998:231), I take caution from Mbiti (1970:318), who warns that *ubuntu*,

tends to whittle down the autonomy of the person; that it makes the being and life of the individual person totally dependent on the activities, values, projects, and practices, and the ends of the community; and, consequently, that it diminishes his/ her freedom and capability to choose or question or re-evaluate the shared values of the community.

It is, therefore, crucial that women learn to be critical of their religious and cultural practices, to avoid self-oppression.

## **Methodological Considerations**

Much research and publications on Muslim communities tend to focus on gender roles and the treatment of women (Macdonald 2006). This reflexive paper is autoethnographic in nature, as it presents my self-reflection (*auto*) of my personal marital experiences while participating in and observing the world and Muslim marital culture (*ethnos*) and capturing the experiences through writing (*graphy*) (Wall 2006). As a female researcher, I begin investigating my marital world from a grounded position in my own subjective oppression (Weiler 1988). This autoethnographic study is underpinned by my African Muslim standpoint.

## **My Marriage Journey and Misguided Spirituality**

I have witnessed many successful, unhappy and failed marriages. I did not date first, but followed the Islamic way of settling, and I knew I was taking a risk. However, there are people who date their partners first, and who think they understand them and are compatible, and then it does not turn out to be true. As I prayed, asking Allah for guidance in choosing a life partner, I reached the stage when I felt that marriage was not for me to control, but a sacred institution, purely in the Creator's capable hands. Siddiqi (1984) posits that 'the teachings of Islam, all duties, whether they concern politics, economics or social well-being in general, are religious duties, in no way different from prayers, fasts and the organization of social charity'. I handed over the choice of my partner to divine intervention.

Spirituality has two benefits for individuals: opportunity to rediscover oneself, cope with difficult situations and take critical decisions without worrying about the consequences (Siegel & Schrimshaw 2002). In my case, I believed that God would be in charge of my marriage. I had a belief in a greater force that is powerful beyond time and physical beings and spaces. My spirituality enabled me to rise above the many instances of discrimination I had experienced due to being a female child; I believed that God would give me a man who would protect and cherish me.

**Spirituality rejuvenates your soul:** After being disregarded and treated like a second-class citizen, I had learned to leave the control of my life to God. In a way, I taught myself to be content with whatever happened in my life; I believed strongly that God would not give me a burden I could not handle. Spirituality carried me throughout my childhood, and my experiences of boys being treated better than girls. Spirituality kept me positive when I was a maid to generate money to attend a tertiary institution. It was as a result of my beliefs that I received a scholarship and attended university in another country. Through spirituality, I excelled at university, because I was not pursuing an education for the sake of it, but so I could return home and promote the dignity and education of the girl child. So, once I completed my Bachelors' degree, I was fully revitalised and believed I would meet a strong, God-sent man to protect me and father my children.

**Delayed or a lack of vigilant response to abuse:** Chisale (2018), in a paper

on ‘Domestic Abuse in Marriage and Self-silencing: Pastoral Care in a Context of Silencing’, states that religion complicates the fight against domestic violence. She quotes a verse from the Bible (Proverbs 21:9), which, she contends, ‘is used to justify self-silencing’. Hassouneh-Phillips (2003) agrees with this notion in her research on *Abused American Muslim women’s lives*; she states that spirituality makes women more susceptible to domestic violence, and they find it difficult to stand up to. Most abused women keep their marital abuse a secret, because they fear humiliation and spiteful attacks for washing their dirty linen in public. In Islam, *whoever conceals [the faults of] a Muslim, Allah will conceal [his faults] in this life and the Hereafter* (Muslim). So, it is because of their spirituality that most abused women do not respond to, or delay responding to abuse. I also believed that keeping quiet about my marital challenges meant that I was a good believer. However, an analysis of publications, like that of Chisale, illustrates the extent to which spirituality can lead people to tolerate oppression, and thinking they are doing well.

## **Plights of a Muslim Wife and Misinterpretation of the Religious Script**

My primary aim is to present my lived experience of being a Muslim wife. In doing so, I ask myself the question: Did my spirituality protect me or make me more vulnerable? In the next section I present and discuss themes in light of the religious scripts that motivated my behaviour. I go further, to show how my misinterpretation of the religious script could have led to my vulnerability. In every religious context, there are popular verses and texts that tend to be overused to emphasise certain aspects of human interaction. These excerpts are usually a selection of verses deliberately selected by male scholars to subvert vulnerable groups, such as women.

### ***Importance of Respecting and Honouring a Mother***

In most cultures and societies, mothers are held in high esteem as the givers and nurturers of life, due to their sacred role of giving birth and looking after children. In many verses of the Holy Qur’an, Allah repeatedly emphasises the importance of excellent treatment of one’s parents. Regarding our blessed mothers, God says in the Qur’an, ‘And We have enjoined upon man kindness

to his parent. His mother carried him with hardship and gave birth to him with hardship'. Prophet Muhammad (peace upon him) also emphasises the importance of a mother when he says, '[Your] Heaven lies under the feet of your mother' (Sahih Bukhari).

However, my husband said in the first few days of our marriage, 'My dear, if I am asked to choose between you and my mother, do not fool yourself .... I will always choose my mother!' When he uttered these words I was alarmed; I wondered why someone would make such a statement without any provocation. Then I responded calmly by saying: 'My love, I would wonder what kind of person would first ask you to choose. A mother and a wife are two different departments, each fulfils different roles in your life'. Through the years, my husband visited his mother, and claimed that his mother needed him. I was never invited to accompany him – his reason was that he was saving money. As a Muslim who knows that 'Heaven is under the feet of a mother', I sacrificed my own right to his time and affection, so he could tend to our mother, my mother-in-law.

Though I agree and understand the importance of a mother, I know that this Hadith was and is still misinterpreted, which leads to the ancient tension between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. In fact, some wives are deprived of their marital rights, including conjugal rights, because their husbands must tend to their mothers. The husband's quest to attain entrance to heaven through a mother is pursued at the expense of the wife. Many husbands fail to maintain the balance and fulfil the Qur'anic verse that states: 'They are an apparel for you and you are an apparel for them' (Chapter 2:188).

It is hard to understand why a man would take a woman from her parents' home, and abandon her at his home. Why would a husband buy elaborate gifts for his mother and the extended family, and fail to clothe and feed his wife? This is a typical case of misinterpretation of the religious text, which leads to marital abuse. Many women, myself included, believe that they will receive God's blessing if they sacrifice their happiness for happiness of their spouses and other family members.

### ***The Curse of the Angels***

The Prophet Muhammad emphasises the importance of romance, which is expressed by brushing one's teeth regularly, joking and playing with one's spouse and performing foreplay before penetration. However, most husbands

tend to ignore these essentials of romance, and it causes bitterness and lack of interest in intimacy in the wife. Lovemaking is understood differently by different people; some place it in a dark bedroom under a blanket, and others know that it starts long before that. Some men expect their wives to do all the household chores, and to attend to the needs of children, visitors and some senior members of the family, without helping. Yet, when the wife gets to bed, exhausted, she is expected to automatically turn her tired body 'on' and provide sexual pleasure. Societal narratives point out that, regardless of the wife saying that she is exhausted and would like to sleep, the husband still demands his right to intimacy. If the wife does not acquiesce, she is likely to be told that the angels will curse her the whole night. 'It is obligatory for the wife to obey her husband if he calls her to his bed. If she refuses, she is sinning' (Al-Ikhtiyaaraat al-Fiqhiyyah p. 246).

This scripture has been misinterpreted and misused, to prevent women from advocating for their husbands to be involved in the running of the household, or paying for a helper to assist with household chores. A wife who is not exhausted by housework would, perhaps, have time to beautify herself, to be playful and to enjoy her husband's romantic attention. Some men complain that their wives stop grooming themselves to remain attractive after marriage, but the men don't realise that the wife has no time for that when she is swamped by children and never-ending chores. In African Muslim marriages, wives are expected to wash, cook and serve the whole family; such expectations are perpetuated by popular wedding songs, such as *Umakoti ungowethu* [the bride is ours] *uzosiwashela asiphekele* [she is going to wash and cook for us] *Siyavuma* [we agree]. The participants in the study by AlGhafli *et al.* (2014) reported misconceptions regarding gender roles, which lead to men believing they have no role to play in keeping their homes tidy and habitable. The Prophet Muhammad did housework, he cooked, mended his clothes, etc. as well as many other things. Muslims claim to emulate the Prophet, but they are selective in their practice when they supposedly emulate him. They also tend to misrepresent Islam to favour themselves.

In the process of my misguided spirituality and cultural conditioning, I thought that going to work, and then, upon my return, exhausting myself with housework, would make me the best Muslim wife. Considering the rights of a Muslim wife, I realise that I should have encouraged my husband to pay for a helper to assist with household chores, so I could spend quality time with him and our children.

### ***God Loves those who Persevere***

Islam, like most religions, refers to the importance of exercising patience. However, the need to be patient is overemphasised for women, and portrayed as the most important ingredient for a successful marriage. The following verses are often quoted to indicate that godliness lies in perseverance: ‘Indeed, Allah is with those who patiently endure’ (Qur’an 8: 46); ‘Indeed, the patient will be given their reward without account’ (Qur’an 39:10).

Chisale (2016) posits that *ukubekezela* (exercising patience) is a biased practice that focuses on making women responsible for carrying the burden of marriage. She argues that societies should teach men to be patient and exert effort to make their marriages and relationships work. In my marriage, I, too, applied these verses in a misguided manner. I thought that, regardless of how unhappy I was, I had to be patient because God was happy with me. In the process of persevering, women could indirectly reinforce their husbands’ belief that the wives are content with the status quo. God is loving and merciful and, therefore, dislikes injustice and maltreatment. It is critical to avoid informing spirituality by dominating (re)interpretations of religious scripts.

### **Searching to Liberate Muslim Wives**

The question I seek to answer in this paper is, did my spirituality protect me or make me more vulnerable? As I argued above, I was made vulnerable by my misinterpretations of religious scripts and my spirituality in relation to it. Although I was aware that both my partner and I interpreted the Qur’an naïvely, I kept my silence, because I, like many other women, had been socialised to be silent. Nevertheless, I resisted and contested this misinterpretation in my private space. Chisale (2017) argues that women resist patriarchy and the oppression of marriage in diverse ways. In the Islamic belief, women cope with abuse through spirituality, Qur’anic recitation, prayer (*salaah*) and meditation (*dhikr*) (Hassounah-Phillips 2003).

African women who are theology scholars continue to contest the misinterpretation of religious scripts and call on women and men to unite and interpret religious scripts in life-affirming ways (Kanyoro 2001; Oduyoye 2001). The challenge is not the scripture, but the way the scripture is interpreted. It is, therefore, imperative that, in spite of limited involvement of women in the leadership roles of religious affairs, platforms should be created for women to create harmonious families and communities.

I believe that more Muslim women should learn the Arabic language, so they can have a better understanding of various liberating scripts in the Holy Book. There should be more platforms where the religious scripts are discussed, with the aim of promoting respect for all humans, including women. Since it is already known which texts tend to be misinterpreted, and which lead to the oppression of women, these texts should be targeted specifically and debunked, to empower both men and women, and strengthen marriages. Since I learnt the appropriate interpretations of the scripture, I now stand my ground and oppose any kind of oppression. I oppose anyone who makes me feel as if I am a slave who does not deserve to be treated with love and kindness. Hassouneh-Phillips (2001a) points out that most oppressed Muslim women end up leaving their partners, because their husbands refuse to change their behaviour. She does, however, also mention that religion and spirituality cause women to put off leaving their abusive marriages. Cohen and Savaya (1997) assert that, because Islam frowns on divorce, abuse victims put off leaving, before they eventually abandon their marriages. My personal experience is a case in point; my spirituality gave me the strength to persevere in an unhappy situation. The fact that Islamic scholars emphasise God's disapproval of divorce, instead of emphasising God's love for justice, makes many women stay in abusive marriages.

## **Conclusion**

This paper focused on whether my spirituality made me more vulnerable. It is clear that the misinterpretation of religious scripts led to my oppression. The author acknowledges that her experience could have been influenced by her own misguided spirituality and cultural conditioning. She goes to great lengths to illustrate how misunderstanding of the most liberating aspects of Islam could lead to subjugation of one group by another. She argues that being socialised in misogynistic ways leads to deliberate exclusion of women and consideration of women as inferior purely because they are women. The study illustrates that Islamic pedagogies and ideologies actually promote women's rights. As a result, this paper argues that women should learn and understand religious scripts on a personal level, to enjoy the maximum liberation these scripts provide. These rights can be enjoyed if both men and women manage their power relations and implement religious teachings appropriately. The rate of abuse of women is likely to decrease if people can desist from using religion

and culture to perpetuate discriminatory behaviour. There is a need for spirituality to be applied in a way that will make women feel safe.

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# **The Interface of Zezuru Marriage Custom with Modernity: An Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

Marriage is central to the Shona people of Zimbabwe, though the five ethnic groups that make up the Shona tribe all view marriage differently. One of these ethnicities is the Zezuru, who regard marriage as a unifier of families. The communities involved in a marriage share their very existence in that reality, and they become one people. The centrality of marriage among the Zezuru is experienced through the continuous coming together of people through this rite. However, recent developments show that some valued, traditional Zezuru marriage practices have failed to stand the test of modernity, and others are gravitating towards extinction. The question that begs an answer is how has the interface of Zezuru marriage customs and modernity impacted this ethnic group? In responding to this question, the empirical research collected data through unstructured interviews with 20 randomly selected male and female from different age groups and ethnicities. The sample included bridegrooms, brides and traditional leaders. The paper argues that the effects of acculturation and modernisation have given the Zezuru people a modernised understanding of marriage. The paper concludes that modernisation presents Zezuru marriage customs with both beneficial and adverse challenges, with adverse challenges being more pronounced.

**Keywords:** Marriage custom; modernity; Zezuru people; Zimbabwe; bride prize

## **Introduction**

Among African people, marriage is regarded as a unifier of families. Communities involved in marriage share their very existence in that reality,

and they become one people (Magesa 1998). Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, formal marriage is something that is viewed as sacred (Mawere & Mawere 2010:225). The Shona people comprise the Zezuru, Ndauro, Manyika, Korekore and Karanga ethnic groups (Doke 2005:12), each of which has different marriage customs. This paper interrogates the effects of the interface of Zezuru marriage custom with modernity. The reason for choosing the Zezuru ethnic group is because this group is found mostly on the central plateau, an area that includes Harare (Doke 2005: 12). The paper argues that, although the centrality of marriage among the Zezuru people is evidenced by the continuous coming together of people in marriage, the interaction of the Zezuru people with modernity has led to a loss of some valued traditional practices, which have failed to stand the test of time; other practices are inclining towards extinction. Macheya, a participant in this study, explained that one of the reasons for this loss is the failure by some Zezuru marriage practices to counter the pressure that is being exerted by modernity. An acculturation process has had a negative impact on the value of marriage among the Zezuru people. The paper argues that the effects of acculturation and modernisation have robbed the Zezuru people of their identity in as far as marriage is concerned. Some cultural practices have already been obliterated, while others are being abandoned gradually.

## **Methodology**

This paper was a result of presentations made to the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (MCZ) Harare West Ruwadzano/ Manyano Women's Convention in 2013 and MCZ Harare East Men's Christian Union Convention in 2014. In the MCZ the term ruwadzano is derived from a Shona verb '*kuwadzana*' meaning fellowship and Manyano is the equivalent Ndebele (Mujinga 2017:131). The discussions during Ruwadzano/ Manyano Convention in 2013 sparked interest to the men of Harare East District who later had their convention in 2014. The male delegates invited me to share on the interface of Shona marriage with modernity (Mujinga 2014). After the presentation at the MCU convention, there was a demand to learn more about Shona marriage values which had been ignored by Christians for a long time. A group of women from Greendale Methodist Church in Harare East District invited me to share the paper at a bridal shower – which, according to an interview with one of the female participants, was breaking the cultural barriers, as bridal showers are

traditionally meant for women only.

Three approaches were used to collect data for this study. First, the empirical part of the study used the insider-outsider approach. As a member of the Zezuru ethnic group, the researcher is an insider, which made it easy for him to reference personal lived experiences. According to Robson (2002:297), it is increasingly common for researchers to carry out studies that are concerned directly with the setting in which they live. As a Methodist minister, the researcher was also an outsider, thus, slightly removed from the everyday practices of Zezuru marriage culture.

Second, the empirical study gathered data through unstructured interviews. This type of interview is conducted without a structured guide (Mouton 2009). In unstructured interviews, the interviewer builds rapport with participants, and encourages them to open up and express themselves in a framework of their choice. According to Crabtree (2006:56), ‘unstructured interviewing is recommended when the researcher has developed enough of an understanding of a setting on his or her topic of interest and needs to have a clear agenda for the discussion with the informant’. In addition to providing information, unstructured interviews enable researchers to have their understanding of the area of inquiry opened to revision by participants—thereby, unstructured interviews help to fill in the knowledge gaps (Crabtree 2006:57). Twenty people, mostly Zezuru, were randomly selected; ten male and ten females, among whom four were newlywed two male and two females respectively. According to Mouton (2009: 138), random samples are unbiased, because every person in the population has the opportunity to be selected. In order to preserve the anonymity of the participants, and the confidentiality of their information, pseudonyms were used (Liamputtong 2011). The advantage of pseudonyms is that they maintain the integrity of the participants who would have provided information in interviews voluntarily.

Table 1 contains a list of the participants by age, gender, ethnicity and marital status.

**Table 1 Demographic information of participants**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Status</b>
Dadi Taso	36-40	F	Karanga	Single parent
Regai Tunga	70-75	F	Ndau	Widow

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Munondii Kasi	66-70	F	Ndau	Married
Rhoda Tandi	70-75	F	Zezuru	Married
Jesca Doro	40-45	F	Zezuru	Married
Tandi Neni	25-30	F	Zezuru	Recently married
Vivian Zuka	25-30	F	Zezuru	Recently married
Ida Muchatuta	50-55	F	Zezuru	Single parent
John Chikokoro	50-55	M	Zezuru	Married
Padi Danda	41-45	M	Zezuru	Married
Ben Feso	56-60	M	Zezuru	Married
Josia Mapu	26-30	M	Zezuru	Married
Nonokai Guri	35-40	M	Zezuru	Divorced
Ruka Macheya	30-35	M	Zezuru	Married
Rongai Jasi	45-50	M	Zezuru	Married
Jasper Chivhu	25-30	M	Zezuru	Recently married
Ernest Chiso	25-30	M	Zezuru	Recently married
Runga Jamu	50-55	M	Korekore	Married
Vimbai Soso	20-25	F	Manyika	Married
Dambudzo Yaku	60-65	F	Manyika	Married

Third, the research referenced existing literature on marriage, in general, and among the Shona people, in particular, to interrogate the effects of the interface of Zezuru marriage custom with modernity. The existing literature presented a variety of marriage experiences among the Zezuru people.

### **Identity of the Zezuru People**

Zimbabwe is home to various ethnic groups, of which the Shona and Ndebele are the majority. According to the Zimbabwean Constitution (2013: 17), there are 16 official languages namely Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Ndau, Ndebele, Shangani, Shona, Sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa. Shona and Ndebele are the major languages. The five ethnic groups of Shona-speaking people collectively constitute about 80% of the total population, while the Ndebele constitute about 12% (Doke 2015: 12). It is not easy to further divide the five Shona, ethnic groups into percentages, although the assumption is that the Zezuru constitute the largest group, especially in the capital city of Harare. Doke (2005: 12) opines that the

Zezuru inhabit the central plateau of Zimbabwe, the Karanga live to the south; the Korekore, to the north and into the Zambezi Valley; the Manyika, to the east, and the Ndaу in Chipinge close to Mozambique and in the extreme northeast. Geographically, Harare falls in the central plateau, and is a cosmopolitan city. The research targeted mostly the Zezuru people since they are the scope of the study.

## **Understanding Modernity/ Modernisation**

The historical context of modernisation in Africa is based on its encounter with Europe, under the particular conditions of the Atlantic slave trade and European colonial exploitation (Yahia 2016). According to Shilliam (2017: 1), ‘the words modernity and modernisation are frequently used in the discipline of sociology. The terms were created in the nineteenth century specifically to come to terms with ‘society’ as a novel form of human existence’. On one hand, modernity is defined as a condition of social existence that is significantly different from all past forms of human experience; on the other hand, modernisation refers to the transitional process of moving from ‘traditional’ or ‘primitive’ communities to modern societies (Deutsch 1961). The two words demonstrate society’s appetite for renewal, to move from the past and old, to a present, new form of society. Modernity and modernisation assume that the major clusters of old society, that economy and psychological commitment have been eroded, and that people become available for new patterns of socialisation and behaviour (Shilliam 2017: 1) – such new patterns of socialised behaviour are evident in the interface of Zezuru marriage custom and modernity

Huntington (1976 : 30) argues that modernisation is a systematic and transformative process. In order for a society to move into modernity, its traditional structures and values must be replaced totally by a set of modern values. In its essence, modernity has a transformative nature, which builds change into the social system. Since modernity is transformative, its characteristics match that of the enlightenment period, thereby making modernity and enlightenment two sides of the same coin (Lushaba 2006). Yahia (2016) equates modernisation with Westernisation. He states that modernisation requires a change in beliefs about how the material world operates, while Westernisation entails a change in beliefs about how one should live. An interview with Tandi shows that changes in the Zezuru

marriage customs just like any other ethnic group have been affected by the surge of modernisation that has to some extent changed their way of life.

Modernisation, as a process of transformation and development, with its characteristics, be it in social, economic, religious, political and cultural environments, is being advanced technologically and ideologically to meet international standards (Eze-Uzomaka & Akintunde 2017: 82). Zezuru marriage custom has borrowed some aspects of modernisation, which means some cultural aspects of the tradition are rapidly losing meaning. For example, as Tunga explained during the interview, traditionally, *roora* (bride-wealth or dowry) was charged in cattle and ploughing equipment, such as hoes, but today *roora* is charged in cash and kind. Another participant, Jasi, explained:

the marriage that used to take place in the rural area in a round hut has since been relocated mostly to urban areas using modern methods of payments like swipe, Real Gross Time Settlement (RTGS) and mobile money transfer platforms like Econet Wireless' EcoCash, Telecel Zimbabwe's TeleCash and NetOne's NettCash.

The money transfer systems used today enable owners of mobile phones to carry out financial transactions, such as sending and receiving money, paying bills and other mobile transactions, and this means people have rejected the cultural system that involves paying *roora* using real money instead of 'plastic' money (Munyanyi 2014 :258). The hut used to be the central place of marriage, given its round shape, which represents a relationship that never ends, Tandi explained. Zezuru marriage is considered to be a contract between two families as well as between two individuals. This environment of living together was expressed by Zuka in the Shona proverb, *rooranai vematongo*, literally, [marry someone whose background you know]. She said, 'a prospective husband would pay *roora* to his fiancée's family, as a gesture of gratitude for raising her and as compensation for the loss of her labour'.

The effects of acculturated Zezuru marriage custom is also evident in advertising slogans, such as, *mukuwasha chaiye anouya ne chicken slice*, literally, [a genuine son-in-law brings a chicken slice on the day of marriage], as explained by Kasi. The advertisement suggests that the traditional slaughter of chicken as a way of confirming the relationship of the families being joined by the marriage through the blood of the chicken and eating together is now archaic, and that fast food is now common.

The suggestion that Zezuru marriage custom has been acculturated means that it has embraced Western styles of appreciating the rite. This point is reinforced by Castro and Rudmin (2017: 2), who argue that ‘acculturation is when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups’. In this paper, acculturation refers to the interface of Zezuru marriage custom and modernity, and the possible dilution of the Zezuru culture, because ‘Zezuru marriage custom is losing its meaning each day of cultural intercourse’, Doro explained in her interview. The principal effects of modernity as a process are being experienced as the community moves from a traditional, agrarian, rural society, to a more secular, urbanised society that is prone to changing the values, beliefs and ideology of a community (Eze-Uzomaka & Akintunde 2017: 83). Consequently, modernisation is a process of diffusion that draws a heavy line between traditional and modern societies – modernisation believes that the former is inferior to the latter (Offiong 2001: 38 - 39).

## **Shona People’s Understanding of the Concept of Marriage**

In contemporary Zimbabwe, marriage is understood to be a union between two people of the opposite sex. According to (Mawere & Mawere 2010: 225), heterosexual relations are often prized over homosexual ties, for their procreative capacity to bear children. Under the influence of the traditional Shona understanding of marriage, the late, former president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, in 1995, spat venom and attacked sodomists as being worse than pigs and dogs (Gunda 2010:375). Mugabe claimed that homosexuality is un-African; it is linked to colonisation, and Westerners were the originators of homosexuality, and they brought it to Africa (Gunda 2015:1). This research is aware of recent scholarly debates among Shona-speaking people, by the likes of Taringa (2015), Shoko (2015), Mangena (2015) and Mapuranga (2015), who declare that the definition of marriage goes beyond heterosexuality, and includes homosexuality. For the purpose of this research, the definition of marriage by Mawere and Mawere (2010) was accepted, without the intention of disparaging the possibility that marriage can also involve homosexuality (West 2016).

According to the participant, Danda, ‘marriage among the Zezuru people is considered as a covenant between two families that serve as a structu-

ral link of the formerly strange parties'. Chikokoro, in turn, mentioned that, 'a man marrying a woman from the Zezuru culture has to observe the bride wealth commonly known as *a roora* – dowry, or *lobola* in Ndebele'. According to Mawere and Mawere (2010: 224) the normative marriage customs of the Shona people are characterised by negotiation and payment of *roora*, which is the basis of marriage and family obligations. Doro emphasised that 'bride wealth is the most tenacious of all Shona customs that was established because of the marriage taboos that were found in the kinship system'. *Roora* among the Zezuru, said Feso during the interview, is a sign of love and affection, and requires a man to save up resources and marry his beloved. *Roora* is also considered as a noble custom that functions as a safeguard against marital dissolution, because it generally needs to be repaid upon divorce, a recently married participant, Neni, explained. Among the Zezuru people, the payment of *roora* also gives man custody of children resulting from the union and rights to genetic inheritance (Meekers 1993: 36). An interview with Yaku, one of this study's participants, from the Manyika ethnic group, elicited that 'the payment of *roora* was analysed from a Eurocentric perspective and the missionaries who took this approach missed the mark in their attempt to interpret a foreign culture without enough tools for the local language'.

Bhebhe (1979: 112) presents an example, that of Father Prestage, a Roman Catholic Church missionary who came to Zimbabwe prior to 1890. Prestage viewed the payment of *roora* as indistinguishable from the purchase of a wife by a man for the purposes of begetting children, of whom the girls, when marriageable, in turn, are disposed to obtain *roora*, which is used to purchase other wives, the final objective being to acquire position and substance through the possession of women and children. Chigwedere (1996) refutes this assumption as misdirected, and a misunderstanding of the Shona culture by the missionaries. For Chigwedere, 'marriage is not buying a wife but the services of the wife'. Chigwedere (1996) chides that, 'if you hire me to build a house, you are not purchasing me but you are purchasing my services'.

In contrast, Muchatuta asserted in an interview that,

African patriarchy has very little if any consideration for women. They are viewed and treated as sex objects. The payment of *lobola*, in cash or kind by a prospective husband or the head of the family, undertakes to give to the man more powers and this is a first step to be castigated as the 'selling' of a woman to a man.

Muchatuta concluded that, ‘in view of this patriarchal tendencies among the Zezuru people, single life is therefore ideal, ‘you hire and fire boyfriends as and when you like’’. Such statements testify about the impact of modernity on Zezuru marriage custom. According to one of the participants, Soso, in the marriage process, women are not allowed to justify being single, since, among the Zezuru, being married is regarded as being ‘morally normal’.

Scholars such as Holleman (1952), Meekers (1993), Bourdillion (1998), Chabata (2012) and Dodo (2014) generally agree that Shona people are commercialising *roora*. For Chabata (2012), this commercialisation of the cultural rite in contemporary Zimbabwe is a challenge for both men and women because a limited number of potential husbands can raise the *roora*. The commercialisation of *roora* means that the rite has undergone a radical transformation. Payment has changed, according to Chivhu, from a simple cultural practice into a highly commercialised venture. Three case studies of exorbitant *roora* processes by prominent politicians suffice to justify this claim. In 2011, the vice president of Zimbabwe, Costantino Chiwenga, paid *roora* worth US\$ 47 000 to marry Mary Mubayiwa (*Newsday*, 28 October 2011). In November of the same year, the former prime minister, the late Morgan Tsvangirai, paid US\$36 000 to marry Locadia Karimatsenga-Tembo at a traditional ceremony (*Nehanda Radio*, 22 November 2011). In 2013, the former Zimbabwean president, the late Robert Mugabe, charged USD 35 000 *roora* for his daughter Bona (*Newsday*, 15 August 2013). Mugabe and Chiwenga are from the Zezuru tribe, while Tsvangirai was from Manyika ethnic group. Commenting on the cost of Karimatsenga-Tembo’s *roora*, *News Day* (22 November 2011) states that,

What is eye-popping is the amount paid for Locadia’s lobola US\$36,000 is a lot of money and for a woman who was once married and has a child (*mvana*). In fact, it is a lot of money for any woman, to be fair. It is obvious that they looked at the status of the Prime Minister and they decided on a price.

Hefty *roora* charges, according to participants Zuka, Taso and Guri, are contributing factors to marriage breakups. Guri argued that, ‘decisions about the bride price, which are made by the bride’s father, take into account the likely effects of the amount set on the risk of ill-treatment of the wife and the risk of marriage failure’. Obbo (1980: 106) declares that,

It is not surprising from this background that some women prefer to remain single although, marriage remains an important indicator of female status, and some women believe that an unsatisfactory marriage is as good as not being married at all.

In an interview, recently married Chiso opined that, ‘the majority of women feel that *roora* demonstrates love and commitment of men in marriage, builds affinity and social capital rather than creating animosity between families’.

### **Types of Marriages Practised by Shona People**

Although this study focused on Zezuru marriage customs, almost all Shona ethnic groups practice the types of marriage customs discussed here, though they may use different terms to describe the practices for example, the Karanga use the term *rugaba* to refer to the bride prize while the Zezuru use the term *rusambo*. In this paper, Zezuru terms dominate the discourse. Traditionally, Zimbabwe recognised a number of marriages as valid by the indigenous people. However, the colonisation of Zimbabwe influenced the general understanding of marriage by Shona people (Bhebhe 1979). Marriage was redefined using Eurocentric terms and vocabulary, with the aim of mystifying the custom. In the process, some marriage practices were labelled as ‘civil’, while others were called ‘traditional marriages’, with the assumption that the latter were outdated, as Jamu explained in the interview. The Marriage Act of Zimbabwe legalised marriage and divided it into *civil marriage*, registered customary *marriage* and unregistered customary *marriage*, (Marriage Act [Chapter 177 of 1963]). The Marriages Bill (2019) which repealed and replaces the Customary Marriages Act [Chapter 5:07] and the Marriage Act [Chapter 5:11] maintained the same position. The government is represented by the minister of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs, and magistrates’ courts. The magistrates and designated marriage officers are used as extensions of the government’s efforts to legalise the custom of marriage according to Christian, Jewish, Islamic or Hindu rite or the rites of any religion (Marriages Bill 2019:6). Instead of a hut in rural areas where marriage rites were conducted, churches, halls and cathedrals are now venues for solemnising marriages.

The Marriage Bill (2019:5) diverted the definition of marriage from its proper African definition of union, to the Eurocentric term solemnisation.

According to the Marriage Bill (2019:5), a marriage shall not be solemnised or registered in terms of this Act unless each party to the marriage has given his or her free and full consent to the marriage. In view of this, the researcher, is of the opinion that marriage should not be registered in order to be a marriage but partners must live in harmony even without a registered marriage.

The Marriage Bill also states that,

Any marriage officer who knowingly solemnises a marriage in contravention of this Act or any person who makes, for any of the purposes of this Act, any false representation or false statement knowing it to be false, shall be guilty of an offence and liable to a fine not exceeding level 10 or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding five years or to both such fine and such imprisonment (2019:10).

Given that marriage in Zimbabwe in general now refers to a wedding (Mujinga 2020), it is evident that the custom of marriage was acculturated, thereby losing its real meaning and value. Therefore, the researcher will deliberate on the traditional marriage custom among the Zezuru people in the face of the Europeanisation of the rite.

The first type of traditional Zezuru marriage custom is called *kukumbira* (requesting). *Kukumbira* is a customary marriage system where a girl of marriageable age who according to the Marriage Act, Chapter 5:11 (78,2:47) is 18 years old marries with her 'informed consent' and that of her parents to a man of her own choice (see also Kileff & Kileff, 1970; Bourdillion 1998; Mawere & Mawere, 2010). A brief summary by these scholars will help us appreciate the negotiation skills involved and the richness of the Zezuru marriage custom, which were also reported on in the process of interviews with participants. According to Chiso, the day of marriage set, the ritual process. It starts with the intermediary explaining the purpose of his visit, which is the intention to marry. He states that *ndinokumbira kubikirwa* [I would like someone to cook for me]. At the same time, the intermediary produces a *badza* [hoe] (these days money can be used instead of a hoe), and hands it over to the companion who is usually the aunt, grandmother or the neighbour of the girl, who then hands it to the father of the girl (Mawere & Mawere 2010:226). The hoe represents *muromo* (meaning mouth, which represents seeking permission to negotiate with the in-laws), according to Soso, a participant. The girl is called upon to confirm that she knows the suitor, and her informed consent is

sought to enter into marriage with the suitor, before other proceedings take place. When this is done, the *munyai* [go-between] pays a certain amount called *masunungurahomwe* [loosening the pocket]. The suitor pays this money in order to start the *roora* process and the process continues, as explained by the participant Macheya (see also Holleman 1952; Kileff & Kileff 1970; Bourdillion 1998; Rwomire 2001; Mawere and Mawere 2010). Although *kukumbira* is still common among Shona people in general, as Danda explained in an interview, it has also been affected by modernisation, and the rite has lost its value. When the colonisers came, they divided marriage into traditional customary marriage, religious marriage, civil marriage and mutual consent union/cohabitation (Rwomire 2001: 124). In an interview, Kasi emphasised that, 'in spite of the semantics in marriage, all these union systems are anchored on the payment of *roora* by the bridegroom's family to the bride's family'.

The second type of traditional Zezuru marriage custom is *kutizira* [running away to elope]. As reported in an interview with Muchatuta, in this type of marriage, the girl is pregnant, and she runs away from home without obtaining the consent of her parents to marry. In this case, *roora* is paid before she gives birth, to avoid the uncertainty of death. The Zezuru believe that dying in this way causes the *ngozi* [avenging spirit] to haunt the family of the boy (see also Obbo 1980; Shoko 2007). In his interview, Jasi emphasised that a boy could arrange *kutizisa*, or a girl could elope without his help. This type of marriage is common among the Zezuru people today (Mujinga 2020). There are a number of factors that lead to *kutizira*, such as the girl being pregnant, peer pressure, poverty, and lack of parental guidance. According to Guri, some parents think that, if a girl comes home late, she was with her boyfriend, having sex, and they will chase the girl away. Among the factors that drive boys to encourage girls to exercise *kutizira* include the cost of *roora*, which has been commercialised.

The third type of traditional Zezuru marriage custom, which is no longer common, is *kuzvarira*. Mapu explained that a poor family that finds it difficult to survive gives a very young daughter to a family that will provide bride wealth, which will enable the poor family to survive. If the girl is mature, she will go to the family she has been married to. If the father of that family is too old to marry the girl, then the girl is given to his son or nephew. In the event that the girl runs away, the family to which the girl was married will demand return of their *roora* (Mawere & Mawere 2010: 227). Holleman (1952: 115-21) calls *kuzvarira* 'a credit marriage'. This type of marriage is now forbidden

by the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013: 38), which states that ‘no marriage should be entered into without the free and full consent of the intending spouse’. Forbidding this type of marriage implies that modernity has had positive consequences for African women, in general, and Zezuru women, in particular, as their rights are now being respected.

The fourth type of traditional Zezuru marriage custom is called *chigara mapfiwa* [to inherit the fireplace]. Tandi explained that this refers to property of a deceased person, and Doro reported that this type of marriage is also called *chimutsa mapfiwa* [to keep the fire burning]. The marriage implies that cooking for the husband will continue. If a wife dies, her sister or the daughter of the deceased wife’s brother (*atete*) can be given to the husband as a replacement for his wife. According to Taso, a female participant, the deceased wife herself could have requested that her children be looked after by a sister or other relative, instead of another wife of her husband. According to Holleman (1952: 188 - 189), such marriage arrangements are called ‘substitution marriage’. The practice has also been affected by modernity. In the first place, the Constitution of Zimbabwe forbids it; second, the coming of HIV and AIDS has caused this practice to die a natural death, and third, modernisation has encouraged women to fight for their conjugal rights, explained Guri.

The fifth type is *kugara or kugarwa nhaka* [levirate]. In this marriage arrangement, a widow is expected to be looked after by a brother (same father/same mother; or same father/different mother) or other male relative (Mawere & Mawere 2010: 228). Holleman (1952: 234) calls this marriage ‘succession marriage’. For Feso, this type of marriage is closer to *chigadza mapfihwa*, and its effects on Shona marriage custom are the same.

The sixth type was explained by Mapu, and is called *kutemaugariri*. It involves a poor man, who is not able to pay *roora*, living and working at his wife’s homestead for a time, providing his labour in lieu of paying *roora*. This form of marriage is similar to the Old Testament story of Jacob, reported in Genesis 28-29, who worked for 14 years to get his wives Leah and Rachel. In *kutemaugariri*, when the man has fulfilled the requirements, he can settle elsewhere with his family. According to Holleman (1952: 124), this type of marriage can be called ‘service marriage’, since the husband has to work as a way of paying *roora*. This type of marriage has lost its significance among the Zezuru, reported Mapu, because most men can now take a woman in other ways, such as cohabitating and *kutizisa*.

Tandi explained the seventh type of marriage custom, *musengabere* [to carry a hyena and run away with it]. The term refers to a man who rapes a girl in order to force her to marry him. The man takes her to his place and they have sex for a night. The following day he orders the girl to leave. The girl is stranded, and remains at the man's homestead as a new wife, explained Danda. The girl cannot return to her parents' place, because the parents cannot account for where she slept the previous night. Thus, she has no choice but to stay with the man who abused her. This marriage is classified under forced marriage and a girl's family is likely to demand an exorbitant amount of *roora*, or report the alleged rape to the police, Chiso explained. He continued by saying that this marriage is very common among the Zezuru – *roora* is seldom paid and the woman is treated inhumanly, and eventually divorced.

The eighth form of marriage is meant to compensate the avenging spirit of a person who was killed by a relative. The Zezuru, like people speaking other Shona dialects, believe that such a spirit causes illnesses and other misfortune (Shoko 2007: 11). The family suspected of being involved in the killing has to give a daughter to the family whose member was killed. That woman will be married in the name of *ngozi* [avenging spirits]. According to Shoko, the *ngozi* of the spirit of a murdered person usually demands compensation of a person, in the form of a virgin girl (2007: 11). The girl is married to a male relative of the deceased, to bear children, Doro explained. The Shona people believe that, through such a 'ghost marriage', the wish of the angry spirit is fulfilled and, therefore, illnesses and other misfortunes will be prevented (Shoko 2007: 12). Although the *ngozi* spirit is still a common belief among the Zezuru people, this type of marriage is fast disappearing, because of the rise of Pentecostal movements which spiritualise human disorders and exorcism as the answer to 'demons'. This research could not determine how exorcism, which happen mostly in Pentecostal churches, deal with challenges of the evil spirit. However, Shoko (2007) reports that the traditional way of dealing with *ngozi* is compensation.

Although marriage remains central to the Zezuru people, modernisation condemns some of the methods as abusive – some people believe that all marriages among the Shona people are abusive in nature (Bourdillion 1998). Kasi reported the emergence of another type of 'marriage', called cohabitation, *kuchaya mapoto* or *kubika mapoto*, whereby two parties simply move in together without paying *roora*, and have children. The last marriage system is not common among the Zezuru people, because paying

*roora* is valued highly. However, the modernised marriage customs values the conjugal rights of women, too, in contrast to the communal relationships of traditional marriages.

### ***Effects of the Interface of Zezuru Marriage Custom with Modernity***

Africa's encounter with foreign culture culminated in a cruel and disruptive period in African history. From the arguments presented above, it is evident that the interface of Zezuru marriage custom with modernity had both negative and positive impacts. Modernity led to a cultural dualism that often presents itself as a dilemma in real-life situations of the Zezuru people. In other words, the African experience of modernity is fraught with tension at every level of communal and individual apprehension. Reyes (2010: 5) explains that the original culture of Africa has changed over the years, due to the influences of modernisation, which was initiated by contact by the Global South with the outside world. For Reyes (2001: 4), 'the interface of Shona culture with modernity is the Europeanization or Americanisation process which is irreversible'. This acculturation process led to changes in the originality of African culture. Given that, once started, modernisation cannot be stopped, Zezuru marriage custom continues to assimilate modernity, thereby losing its original meaning. Reyes (2001: 4) takes the interface of African culture with modernity further, by claiming that, once third-world countries come into contact with the West, they will not be able to resist the impetus toward modernisation. This claim cements this discourse, given that Zezuru marriage custom is now more aligned with a Western ethos. A case in point is the phenomenon of some Zezuru women refusing to marry as mentioned by Taso. Mawere and Mawere (2010: 229) argue that,

it is worth noting that this option of avoiding formal marriage is only open to those women who have sufficient resources outside of marriage such as professionals, better educated, urbanites, and wealthy women. Rather than contracting a formal marriage, these women prefer unmarried cohabitation or prefer to have lovers who do not live permanently with them because this allows them to maintain their sexual liberty.

On a positive note, the interface of Zezuru marriage custom with modernity brought freedom of choice, which had been suppressed for a long time in Africa.

Mujinga (2014) explained that, in addition to freedom of choice and expression, modernity has led many Zimbabweans to migrate to other parts of the world, South Africa in particular. In any Zezuru marriage process, the role of the father's sister, *atete*, is critical. She represents the strong bargaining position of the maternal or paternal side for a boy or girl respectively, as Tunga explained. *Atete* represents the family genealogies, and has an influencing role when it comes to marriage customs (Kileff & Kileff 1970:25; Stewart 1998:223). The position of *atete* among the Zezuru has lost its value, because of migration, which has been necessitated by socioeconomic conditions in Zimbabwe, and made possible by technology. Doro explained that the place of the aunt has left a vacuum and, in some families, the mother is playing this role, sometimes out of desperation. An example is a family that finds itself alone in another part of the world, or where they face social differences (for instance, witchcraft) or wealth and poverty of the aunt and her brother's family necessitates hatred among family members. Furthermore, the Zezuru communication system has been compromised by technology, as people now use social platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

Christianity has also had a negative impact on marriage custom in Africa, in general. According to Murphree (1969: 89ff), 'when the Catholic Church transmitted the Eurocentric position of a godmother in Zimbabwe in order to substitute the influence of *atete* in marriage the role was weakened'. For every female baby, the priest nominated a young Christian woman, according to Christian concepts of purity and respectability, to act as godmother for the baby. She was responsible for the religious education of her godchild, and she had the same right to prohibit an undesirable marriage, as the maternal *atete* (Murphree 1969: 89ff). Christianity challenges traditional belief systems and promotes the diffusion of new ideas and modes of life; it seeks to impose monogamy and the nuclear family as the norm, according to Macheya. The emergence of missionary / mainline churches like Anglican, Methodist, Roman Catholic in the early years of colonisation, and later, the Pentecostal churches in the twentieth century, also negatively influenced the role of *atete* in both paternal and maternal families. Chikokoro explained this is because the godmothers and godfathers went as far as arranging weddings for their godchildren. According to Kyalo (2012: 11), 'the marriage institution

is dwindling and losing its value due to a variety of challenges that include; divorce, separations, rape, prostitution, poverty, unemployment, equality and modernity'. In addition, some families demand exorbitant *roora*, as they seek to destroy relationships rather than build them (Dodo 2014:194). Three critical examples, of Chiwenga, Tsvangirai and Mugabe, serve as the blueprints of extortion of Shona marriage customs.

Modernity has led to a discontinuity between the past and the present life. Through a process of social and cultural change, life in the present is fundamentally different from life in the past (Hooker 1996 :228). Hooker's understanding of modernity corresponds with some contemporary Zezuru marriage practices, which have replaced some marriage customary practices, such as *kukumbira*, which is now seen as outdated, whereas *kukumbira* used to be the most valued type of marriage, even after colonisation (Mawere & Mawere 2010).

When it comes to gender issues, just like other contemporary matters, a truth that is not discussed or exposed, is that today's Zezuru man is a product of two traditions and two worlds, namely, the African and Western worldviews. Fanon (1986), describes the contemporary African being as a 'Black skin in a white mask'. The black man possesses two dimensions: one with his fellow black people, the other with white people. A black person behaves differently with a white person than he does with another black person. There is no doubt that this behaviour is a direct consequence of the colonial undertaking this challenge is not unknown in marriage. The behaviour of some married Zezuru couples has been compromised by interfacing with other cultures in the global world. Contemporary Africans have adopted the values, tastes and behaviour of the coloniser, to the extent that they only appear black, according to skin colour, but think and behave like their teacher and role model, the white man (Makaudze 2015: 141). Consequently, there is a need to verify which of the two traditions has had an impact on the Zezuru marriage custom today.

In Zimbabwe, in general, Zuka explained, migration to other parts of the world, mostly to South Africa, and the fast-track Land Reform Programme of 2000, have dispersed people to the extent that the proverb, *rooranai vematongo* [marry the neighbour] has lost its meaning. In these circumstances, most marriages in Zimbabwe are now cross-cultural as Zuka view the situation. Given this understanding, the Zezuru marriage procedure is no longer consistent. Another problem, in addition to hefty *roora*, is the need for what

Chiso called ‘a sexual space’. Most Zezuru women no longer need attachment to an individual man – they consider that as an abuse of privacy, Guri explained. This attitude has resulted in many fatherless children and single mothers, and as Taso, a participant who was a single mother, explained, some women claim *ndirimurume pachangu* [I am a man in my own right]. In the interviews, however, some married women like Doro rejected this statement as a view borrowed from modernity, given that, among the Shona, a man is treated as a king and a Shona woman is trained to call her husband *shewe* (my lord). Muchatuta reported, some men do not refrain from having sex with other women, which has caused many deaths from HIV and AIDS, and leaving child-headed families which do not have a future, according to Mapu.

To conclude this research; it has been argued that the Zezuru people’s pride in their marriage custom has gone through different phases, and its existence and stability continue being challenged. It is possible that the Zezuru people are likely to lose their identity because of modernity. The acculturation of African culture, in general, and that of the Shona people, in particular, is an indication that the revival of the African identity is essential, and that Africa has been Europeanised. The paper argues that, if the Zezuru people are to retain their identity in a globalised community, it is important to redefine their marriage custom. They should resist the pressures of modernity and, instead, aim to maintain their culture or produce a hybrid Shona marriage custom for generations to come. It cannot be doubted that the crux of the Zezuru marriage custom has changed its face, because of the impact of modernity.

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# Until He Releases Me from His Ancestors: An African Spirituality Pastoral Response to Wife Abuse

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## Abstract

Marriage, for the Ndebele of Matetsi in Zimbabwe, is a spiritual practice, and they believe it is ordained by God and the ancestors. The process of marriage among the people of Matetsi is conducted according to patriarchal spiritual systems, which require a woman to be introduced to her husband's ancestors through certain rituals. This paper explores the traditional marriage rituals of the Ndebele of Matetsi that connect the bride to her husband's ancestors, and the role this practice plays in the way a wife makes decisions in the context of abuse. Written from the perspective of African feminist cultural hermeneutics, this paper seeks to explain how marriage rituals that connect a bride to her husband's ancestors imprison her in the context of abuse, and obliges her to remain married to her husband through 'thick and thin'. In addition, the paper offers a pastoral response that addresses the African spiritual nature of marriage in the context of abuse of women, with particular reference to the Ndebele of Matetsi, and suggests pastoral interventions in an attempt to liberate wives who are imprisoned by these rituals. This was an empirical study that followed a qualitative participant observation approach, which allowed the researcher to observe the customs and practices of the traditional marriage process in Matetsi, which she participated in her marriage process as a young woman.

**Keywords:** African spirituality, ancestors, Ndebele, pastoral care, traditional marriage, wife abuse, Zimbabwe

## Introduction and Background

African spirituality is an all-inclusive process, which covers the historical, cultural, traditional, political, economic and religious heritage of Africa, including belief systems, symbols, rituals, festivals, folktales, songs, dance and culture. Masango (2006: 942) asserts the holistic nature of African spirituality and explains that it is expressed at all levels of society. Marriage, for the Nguni, particularly the traditional Ndebele of Matetsi in Zimbabwe, is a sacred spiritual convention. Once a woman has undergone marital rituals, they believe that she is connected to the ancestors of her husband and, therefore, is obliged to remain faithful to them (ancestors) till death, or, as they believe, till she crosses to the other side. This spiritual connection to the husband's ancestors is both exciting and, at times, scary – the latter because of fear of the unknown – for the wife. For the Ndebele in Matetsi, traditional marriage connects the bride spiritually and emotionally to her matrimonial ancestors.

The Ndebele of Matetsi have two forms of marriage celebrations. First, the traditional spiritual wedding legalises the marriage through rituals meant to introduce the bride to the husband's ancestors. Secondly, a Western 'white wedding' legalises the marriage through the signing of marital agreements in the presence of a licenced marriage officer. Both ceremonies are significant for the community of Matetsi, although the former holds more significance because of its spiritual nature. According to Dreyer (2011:np),

spirituality forms the core meaning in a person's life (what is important to me). This core of meaning is connected with self-perception (how I see myself). Self-perception has to do with life orientation (where I am in the world), which, in turn, is connected with a person's identity (who am I in the world).

Spiritualisation, according to Fotos (1994), is a process whereby humanity displays inherent qualities and attributes identified by the world's religions as characteristic of intrinsically spiritual human nature. In this paper, spiritualisation refers to the manifestation of spiritual virtues and attributes, where the spiritual (soul and spirit) element takes precedence over the physical (material) element. The spiritual element of African marriage includes *lobola* or bride price payment, and marriage rites and rituals, which is a lengthy process among the Ndebele of Zimbabwe. It starts with the sending of a messenger/go-between (*Umkhongi* or *idombo*) by the man's family to the

woman's family, proceeds with the process of marriage negotiations, up to the rituals/rites of marriage.

There is limited research on the spirituality of marriage among the Ndebele of Zimbabwe. The aim of this paper is to discuss the spirituality of marriage rituals performed by a bride in the process of marriage among the Ndebele of Matetsi, and to provide a pastoral response to the 'spiritualisation' of marriage in the context of wife abuse. This paper is divided into five sections. First, I will describe the feminist cultural hermeneutics and pastoral care approach, as the theories that guided the paper. Second, I will discuss the traditional marriage rituals of the Ndebele of Matetsi, from the payment of *isivula mlomo* (open mouth), to the welcoming of the bride by the groom's family, through to *ukuthelwa inyongo* (pouring bile from the gall bladder over the bride) after the traditional wedding ceremony. Third, I will discuss the methodological considerations of this article, which was the participatory observation method. Fourth, I discuss the process of the 'spiritualisation' of marriage and its consequences, which may, sometimes lead to wife abuse. Finally, I will discuss possible pastoral interventions that can be used to liberate wives, husbands and communities who are imprisoned by these rituals. I will also present concluding remarks.

## **Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics and the Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care**

Feminist cultural hermeneutics emerged from African women's theologies. The theory was conceptualised by Kanyoro (2001; 2002) and Oduyoye (2001). Oduyoye (2001:12) states that,

Cultural hermeneutics directs that we take nothing for granted, that we do not follow tradition and ritual and norms as unchangeable givens, and that cultural relativism does not become covert racism and ethnocentrism. Life is to be lived deliberately, intentionally and consciously, and where this practice has been lost, we have to create awareness of life experiences and their implications. Experiences are to be analysed, not only for their historical, social and ethical implications, but also for their capacity to create what grows to become cultural norms.

This approach aims to liberate women from hermeneutics of culture and scripture that are oppressive. It begins with a hermeneutic of suspicion: women are suspicious of certain cultural and religious teachings that appear to dehumanise them. Phiri and Nadar (2011:83) highlight the significance of being critical about these practices, and remind us that feminist cultural hermeneutics affirms the life-giving nature of religion and culture, and rejects those elements that are life-threatening. This approach provides a critical lens for challenging women's internalised oppression. According to Oduyoye (2001:20), 'the hermeneutics and fundamental principles of our interpretation of Scripture and culture are related to distinguishing the 'good' – that is, the liberation from the evil that is oppressive and domesticating and which puts limitations where none is necessary'. This approach is a decolonial theory, which posits that women reject the colonial views of culture and religion and reinterpret them in a liberating way. The approach, therefore, appropriate for strengthening pastoral care in a context of internalised religio-cultural oppression and wife abuse. The 'spiritualisation' of African traditional marriage imprisons wives, who cannot escape through divorce the abuse they suffer, because they are said to be spiritually connected to their husband's ancestors. Pastoral care, in this context, draws from feminist cultural hermeneutics, which emphasises analysing cultural and religious variables that influence African women's experiences of marriage.

In this paper, feminist cultural hermeneutics is integrated with Emmanuel Lartey's intercultural approach to pastoral care. This approach is useful for reflecting on African women's experiences of wife abuse in the context of African traditional marriage, and understanding the spirituality of this marriage. According to Lartey (2003:33-34), the intercultural approach to pastoral care takes into consideration three basic principles. The first is *contextuality*, which requires the pastoral caregiver to consider every piece of behaviour and every belief within the framework in which it takes place, whether social, cultural or spiritual, because every belief or perception creates reality. Second, it considers *multiple perspectives*, such as the diversity of answers to a problem, by acknowledging that people understand reality and the world in diverse ways and, therefore, different understandings should be taken seriously by a process of listening and dialogue, because all perspectives could prove suitable for solving or dealing within a particular situation. Third, it prioritises *authentic participation*. This principle involves mutual concern for the integrity of other people and gives all people concerned the right to participate

and engage on their own terms in a discussion intended to find a solution. The liberation and empowerment functions of pastoral care emphasise the participation of pastoral care seekers in finding an answer for their challenges. Msomi (2008:40) argues that, for the healing process to take place, the worldview of the pastoral care recipient plays a vital role in the intervention. In a context of the spiritualisation of African marriage, and wife abuse, pastoral care should be relevant and contextual. Thus, Msomi (1992:12) argues that,

concern has to do with a quest for liberation of the person ... as well as passionate zeal that others be liberated in Christ in their own context, instead of being enslaved in a Christianity that is not their own.

The integration of the three principles of the intercultural approach to pastoral care and feminist cultural hermeneutics is critical for negotiating and discussing pastoral care interventions in the context of the spiritualisation of African marriage and wife abuse. Feminist cultural hermeneutics and the intercultural approach to pastoral care acknowledge that culture has a strong influence on the way African traditional women conduct themselves.

The key theme of feminist cultural hermeneutics is liberating women from life-threatening cultural traditions, by sifting through and reconstructing those traditions that have the potential to be life-affirming. Thus, integrating an intercultural approach to pastoral care and feminist cultural hermeneutics in the context of spiritualisation of traditional marriage and wife abuse helps the pastoral caregiver to negotiate for the institution of life-affirming cultural traditions, by reconstituting those that are life-threatening, with Christian values and symbols.

## **Methodological Considerations**

This study followed the method of participant observation. Participant observation is a qualitative method, because the data collected through this technique is mainly qualitative (Iacono, Brown & Holtham 2009). Participant observation involves active participation and observation of a defined community within a particular physical and social environment by the researcher. This method allowed me to observe the customs and practices of the traditional marriage process in Matetsi, while participating in it as a young woman.

Participant observation allows the researcher to observe the group

while participating in their day-to-day activities (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007). I am a woman who is a member of the Matetsi community. I managed to observe and participate in the traditional marriage process as a young bride, aunt, sister and mother. Therefore, I share my own lived experiences, and observations of the spiritualisation of traditional marriage by the Ndebele of Matetsi. Participant observation is a valuable method for enabling a researcher to produce ethnographic accounts that are focused on specific aspects of a society (Hammer, Fletcher & Hibbert 2017).

To narrate the lived experiences involved in the spiritualisation of African traditional marriage and wife abuse, as experienced by the women of Matetsi, I employed a feminist research approach, because it acknowledges the contributions of women to knowledge creation, and new ways of learning about the worlds of women, their subjective interpretations of their worlds, and experiences in society (Harding 1993). This approach legitimises subjective knowledge and allows for complexity and contradictions (Harding 1993). In feminist research, researchers are gendered, and their gender shapes their experiences of reality in a gendered cultural context (Fanow & Cook 1991). The significance of this approach is that it allows me to position and locate myself as a Ndebele woman and member of the Matetsi community. When I was a young woman in this community, I underwent some of the traditional marriage rites. Over the years, I have observed young women going through the same marriage rites. As an ordained minister of religion, I have heard women in pastoral care sessions lamenting that the African traditional marriage rites that were performed when they got married hinder them from leaving their abusive husbands. Feminist research emphasises the significance of reflexivity, which involves a process of self-awareness and self-consciousness, to research one's own position in the research process, and to reflect on one's interaction with the process (Fanow & Cook 1991).

Reflexivity and the positioning of the self in this research approach is a resource that allowed me to achieve a more vigorous form of objectivity (Harding 1987). Accordingly, my socio-cultural position and identity as a Ndebele woman from Matetsi, and a female pastor journeying with women experiencing the 'Catch-22' of the spirituality of African traditional marriage and, at times, wife abuse, shaped my research agenda, as well as the research process of this paper. Advocates for feminist research argue that the significance of its use lies in the fact that theorising begins with the researcher's own experience (Gelsthorpe & Morris 1990:88). The feminist dictum, 'the

personal is political', is significant for this article, because my personal qualities, experiences and political perspectives not only influenced the title of the article, but also the outcome and the very knowledge obtained (Hammersley 1992). As a result, this research is political and pastoral, because feminist research requires the fusion of knowledge and practice.

## **The Process of African Traditional Marriage among the Ndebele of Matetsi**

Marriage is a significant transition among the Ndebele, because it is a symbol of adulthood and independence from the parents of both the man and the woman. This is confirmed by Mbiti (1969:133), who asserts that marriage in Africa is existential, a drama, a duty, a requirement, and a rhythm, in which, under normal circumstances, all must participate, or face exclusion and rejection by society.

The peak of marriage among the Ndebele is the payment of *ukangazizwe* (know me) (Chisale 2016a: 60). *Ukangaziwe* is paid after the payment of *isivulamlomo* (open mouth). The *isivulamlomo* is required by the bride's family, which charges the *umkhongi* or *idombo* (groom's messenger or go-between) before he or she states the purpose of the visit to the bride's family (to request their daughter's hand in marriage). After the payment of *isivulamlomo*, which, among the Ndebele of Matetsi, is money, formal marriage negotiations start and, if the request is accepted, the groom is charged *ukangaziwe*. These arrangements should be settled before all other *lobola* (dowry) requirements.

The Ndebele of Matetsi do not prioritise the full payment of *lobola* before a marriage can be finalised through a wedding or before the birth of children (Amanze, Sibanda, Madembo & Mahlanga 2015). As long as a part of *lobola* and other marriage requirements, such as *isivula mlomo* (open mouth), *ukangaziwe* (know me), clothes for the parents (both mother and father), and *inkomo yeqolo* or *kamama* (mother's cow) and other cultural commodities or funds are paid, the wedding ceremony can take place and the bride is allowed to join her husband and they can start their life together. Settlement of part of *lobola* qualifies marriages to be recognised and respected by the family, the clan and the entire community (Gunga 2009:172). For the Ndebele of Matetsi, the remainder of *lobola*, which, in most cases, are cows, is expected to be paid once the couple has children (Amanze *et al.* 2015). The

cows are said to express appreciation, by the groom to his in-laws, for the offspring that came through their daughter, and are a sign of commitment to the marriage (Mangena & Ndlovu 2013).

After paying part of the *lobola* and other marriage requirements, the marriage rituals are performed to approve the marriage. Traditional Ndebele marriage rituals are used to gain approval for the union from the ancestors. These rituals start with a farewell ritual, which includes *isithundu* (the head of the family performs a ritual at the family's kraal, informing ancestors that their daughter is now married and is leaving the family, hence, the family is soliciting their blessings and protection). In this ritual, traditional herbs are prepared, placed in a traditional calabash and put on the bride's head. The family head uses a traditional cooking stick, known as *uphehlo*, to stir the herbs while chanting words of success, fertility and prosperity for their daughter. Personally, I did not go through the *isithundu* process, because, firstly, no one knew which herbs to use and, secondly, because I come from a Christian family. At that time, I was a vicar or student pastor, so many rituals were ignored and avoided to accommodate my faith. After performing *isithundu*, the bride goes through a process of *Ukufohliswa isibaya* (leaving her home via the back of the family kraal). This means saying goodbye to the family and her ancestors, though this goodbye is not permanent, because it is believed that her ancestors will continue to protect her, even if she has joined other ancestors. Thus, marriage signifies a transition from one life to another, making it a life crisis, because transition brings crisis (Terian 2004:230). I only went through the traditional ritual process of *Ukufohliswa isibaya*, and it made me belong and appreciate my identity as a Ndebele woman in the presence of my in-laws.

When a bride reaches her husband's homestead, marriage rituals continue. A cow or goat is slaughtered for her, and then an elder of the family takes her to the family kraal, where the process of *ukuthelwa inyongo* (pouring bile from the slaughtered animal's gall bladder on the bride) takes place. I did not go through the process *ukuthelwa inyongo*, because I married into a Malawian family with a matrilineal tradition. However, I have observed other young women getting married in this community and going through this process to be introduced to their husband's ancestors. The empty gall bladder is put around the neck of *isanyongwana* (bridesmaid), to show the bride's family that the bride has been introduced to the ancestors of her husband's family. As soon as this has been done, the bride is spiritually connected to her husbands' ancestors, and she can participate in any rituals that are performed

by the groom's family, because she is now one of them.

Performing these rituals confirms that marriage is a life-and-death relationship between the bride and the groom and his ancestors. I have observed that, in the Matetsi community, some couples choose to skip the traditional rituals and only go through the Christian part of the marriage ceremony. For such couples, their spiritual connection to the husband's ancestors is unknown to them since they were not properly introduced to the family's ancestry. Though the Christian marriage connects the bride and the groom spiritually, it emphasises their relationship as two people, rather than two families, including the ancestors. This connection is taken from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, where it declares that a husband and wife become one flesh upon marriage (Genesis 2:24; Mark 10:8; Matthew 19:5-6). From a Biblical perspective, the spiritual and physical connection is between the two (husband and wife), compared to the traditional Ndebele marriage, where two clans are connected by the bride spiritually and physically migrating from her biological family and joining the husband's family and ancestors.

## **The Spiritualisation of African Traditional Marriage, and Wife Abuse**

Marriage is a rite of passage among the Ndebele of Matetsi, and represents different stages of life for men and women. In heterosexual marriages, which is the only accepted form of marriage in Matetsi, a woman leaves her family and ancestors and joins her husband's family and ancestors. She also migrates from her family church and joins her husband's church. Thus, marriage requires a strong spiritual adjustment for the wife.

Once all *lobola* has been paid, the husband takes the full title of fatherhood of his children (Gunga 2009), and the wife joins the husband's ancestry permanently. Thus, if she dies after all the *lobola* has been paid, she is buried with her husband's family and her husband's ancestors. She becomes an ancestor of her husband's family. Among the Ndebele, ancestors do not have gender and age: Both men and women can be ancestors. I have observed and witnessed families where ancestors choose as an ancestor a child over adults. Ancestors are referred to as *abadala* (elders). Sometimes there are children who are said to have *abadala*, meaning the child is used by ancestors. Thus, when that child dies, at any age, she or he qualifies to be an ancestor, while most adults, particularly those who have good character and conduct,

qualify to be ancestors because of age. Rituals that are performed when someone who qualifies to be an ancestor dies. In emphasising the significance of rituals for Africans, Oduyoye (2004:79) argues that,

African religion gives a major role to rites of passage. An individual's path through life is monitored, marked, and celebrated from even before birth to death and thereafter, and the events in the life of a community echo this same cycle. Throughout a person's life, several rituals may be celebrated.

Marriage is a significant ritual for African people, because marriage increases the pool of ancestors (Oduyoye 2004). A wife who joins her husband's family increases the pool of ancestors when she gives birth to sons, thereby she guarantees the return of ancestors through reincarnation, since sons will marry and have children in turn. This belief makes the African worldview a cycle of life and death (Kalu 1991).

Marriage rituals have consequences when a woman is abused by her husband, because she does not have the power to dissolve the marriage without inviting the ancestors and the extended families back to the drawing board. In contexts of domestic violence or wife abuse, the spiritual meaning of the traditional marriage rituals forces women to stay in their marriages through thick and thin. Leaving is in vain, because they are spiritually tied to this family. The traditional marriage rituals symbolise that marriage can never be dissolved. Even in death, the deceased remains part of the family, as she has become part of the husband's ancestors. Even if she chooses to leave the marriage when her husband dies, her husband's family calls her back to return to mourn the death of her husband; she is the one who sits on the mattress and the one who covers herself with a blanket, even in scorching heat. This confirms that, in Matetsi, marriage is an everlasting union between a husband and wife. Some people argue that certain rituals can be performed to break this union if a couple wants to divorce. However, attempts to break the connection with a husband's ancestors will be in vain, especially when there are offspring involved, and when a woman is married through traditional marriage. Children will always link the wife to her husband's ancestors.

Observations and congregants who have confided in me confirm that the majority of women of Matetsi experience emotional abuse – physical battering is condemned and a punishable act by the kraal head (*sabhuku*) and

the chief (*induna*) of the community. Emotional violence is not considered a form of abuse in Matetsi. This is confirmed by Chisale (2016b), who argues that, in some African marriages, emotional violence is informed by patriarchal definitions of marriage, which demand that a wife honours and submits to her husband. Dreyer (2011:2) argues that patriarchy teaches ‘women to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others and, in doing so, they disappear into the background’. Emotional abuse that was reported by women who confided in me as their pastor includes derogatory name-calling, infidelity, failing to provide for the family and the upkeep of the wife, controlling behaviour, stalking, surveillance of behaviour, physically abusing children, withholding benefits from the wife, failing to have sexual intercourse with the wife and lack of commitment to marriage. None of these abuses are punishable acts in the Matetsi community. Some women experience physical abuse, but are afraid to report it, because they fear humiliating the husband. The marriage oath ‘for better or worse, in sickness and in health’ (Chisale 2016a) has a strong influence in how the women of Matetsi make decisions relating to their marriages. This oath often forces them to ‘suffer in silence’. The spiritualisation of marriage makes it difficult to fight wife abuse. Some women choose to conceal their suffering and only share their experiences as a third party. Below I recount the case of a female congregant in Matetsi, which highlights the spiritualisation of marriage in the context of wife abuse.

Several women who have experienced abuse in their marriages have come to me and said: *‘Revered, I have a friend experiencing abuse by her husband, how should she deal with this?’* Some will say, *‘My sister is abused by her husband, I don’t know how to help her’*. As I probe further, I realise that the friend or sister that is being referred to, is actually the person talking to me and seeking pastoral advice. This paper was conceptualised and motivated by a congregant who came to me, seeking pastoral advice. She approached me after a church service, saying she sought pastoral advice for her friend, who was experiencing seriously wife abuse. In her words: *‘Reverend, my friend is afraid that her husband will end up killing her because he keeps on scolding and promising to kill her for disapproving of his infidelity and the way he wastes money whilst neglecting his family’*. After a long dialogue and listening attentively and actively, it became clear that the ‘friend’ was in danger, because the congregant described various forms of physical, emotional and sexual domestic violence that her friend was being subjected to. I asked whether the friend has considered leaving the marriage, but she responded by saying, *‘No! She*

*says, she is waiting for him to release her from his ancestors, then she will go back to her family'. When I questioned her about how he will release her from his ancestors, I wanted to know if the couple had performed some ritualistic covenant that could endanger the wife if she left without breaking it. In her answer, the woman took me through the process of African traditional marriage in Matetsi and all the rituals that are performed when a woman marries. She explained why release by the husband's ancestors is important to her friend.*

I surprised to learn that some women would rather die in abusive marriages, while waiting for the husband to release them from their ancestors, than to leave without being released. I was also bewildered to learn that some women are too embarrassed to narrate their experience of violence perpetrated by the husband to a pastor; they would rather narrate their story of abuse as a third party. I wondered if, perhaps, some people consider a pastor and ancestors to be irreconcilable, which forces them to conceal their identity when seeking pastoral intervention by a pastor.

## **Spiritualisation of African Traditional Marriage and Wife Abuse: Pastoral Interventions**

The spiritualisation of African traditional marriage among the Ndebele people of Matetsi may sound like fiction, but it is a reality experienced by women in that area. The problem is not the spiritualisation of marriage, but the consequences of that spiritualisation. Integrating feminist cultural hermeneutics and the intercultural approach to pastoral care, as conceptualised by Lartey (2003) is helpful in journeying with women who are trapped in abusive marriages because of the spirituality of African traditional marriage. Feminist cultural hermeneutics and Lartey's three principles of an intercultural approach to pastoral care should be used in the process of guiding the pastoral-care seeker towards liberation. I have been helpless in observing women in Matetsi who are imprisoned in abusive marriages because of the spiritualisation of marriage. Some are infected with HIV by their husbands<sup>1</sup>. In pastoral care, responding to a situation of spirituality and abuse should involve sensitivity to and knowledge of the care-seeker's worldview, particularly culture and religion. It emerges from this article that, since rituals and marriage in Matetsi are

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<sup>1</sup> This is a confidential issue, but women have confided in me, as clergy, about their HIV status, and that their husbands infected them.

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connected, the pastoral caregiver should understand and respect their significance, while negotiating for the community's protection and liberation. According to Moyo (2014:216), 'from a pastoral perspective, in situations of pain and suffering, rituals are coping mechanisms for various rites of passage. They give comfort to individuals and the community who cast their cases on a transcended and almighty God'.

Some women in Matetsi seem to be trapped in loveless and abusive marriages, because, for them to leave the marriage, the husband and his family have to perform rituals to release her from his ancestors. There are no rituals for divorce among the traditional Ndebele of Matetsi, because marriage is a lifetime union between two families. If a husband is not satisfied with his wife, who may fail to give him heirs (male children), because the woman is barren, or because the husband no longer loves the wife, which are the reasons that usually causes couples to separate, the traditional Ndebele culture in Zimbabwe allows the husband to have a polygamous marriage.

In instances of impotency or sterility on the part of the husband, the wife is expected to stay in the marriage. Occasionally, the younger or older brother is encouraged to help his brother with some of the roles he is struggling to perform and, in the process, keep his brother's wife happy and preserve the family name. It is significant that impotence is prevented in African Ndebele men, particularly those of Matetsi. Traditional Ndebele from Matetsi, men are physically, sexually and psychologically prepared for marriage through different rites of passage and rituals. A man who experiences symptoms of impotence is given *imbiza* (traditional herbs) by a village traditional healer as part of his preparation for marriage. The herbs are meant to boost the man's sexual strength and fertility and to satisfy his wife or wives. The motivation for this practice is that Ndebele of Matetsi believe that traditional marriage is a covenant that is not meant to be broken by anyone or anything in this world, except God and the ancestors. Two themes should be considered in negotiating pastoral interventions in the context of the spiritualisation of African marriage and wife abuse in an African context, in particular, among the Matetsi. These are authenticity (honesty) and gender sensitivity.

## **Authenticity**

It is difficult to escape the internalisation of spirituality, since people create reality from spiritual beliefs and perceptions. However, spirituality is flexible,

and people, particularly women in abusive marriages, should be guided in their spiritual journeys and encouraged to reject life-denying spiritual beliefs. God and ancestors are life-affirming forces, as a result, imprisoning the self in an abusive marriage while believing that it is the wish of God and ancestors, is hyperbole. Feminist cultural hermeneutics agitates for the extraction of what is liberating from culture, religion and the Bible (Dreyer 2011). Kanyoro (2002: 9) argues that religion or 'culture is a two-edged sword that gives women their identity, integrity, and way of life yet reinforces its patriarchal forms of domination on every woman and girl'. Authenticity or truth opens up dialogue, as the community is able to comprehend the 'binarism' of culture and sift life-affirming cultural teachings from life-denying ones. In the Matetsi community, the community authorities charge a man who physically beats his wife two cows or goats, which he gives to his wife as a form of compensation and apology to her and the ancestors. One goat or cow is given to the wife as an apology, and the other goat or cow is meant for the ancestors and community, and is slaughtered and cooked at the homestead of the kraal's head. Community members are invited to participate in a feast. Emotional abuse, which is very common in this community, is not accounted for in traditional interventions.

An intercultural approach to pastoral care recommends that contextuality is considered. Pastoral interventions should consider every form of behaviour and belief within the framework in which it takes place (Lartey 2003). The social, cultural, economic, political and environmental contexts of the pastoral care-seeker should, thus, be taken seriously, because each context has a strong influence on how the pastoral care-seeker interprets her life experiences and reality (Lartey 2003:33). As a result, in negotiating pastoral interventions, the pastoral care-seeker's worldview is very important. In this case, the pastoral caregiver should apply the pastoral cycle to probe the what, who, why and how questions, before interacting and extending intervention to the pastoral care seeker. Questions such as the following should be asked: What is the community's view or worldview of marriage and wife abuse? Who are the gatekeepers of this worldview? Why are they protecting this worldview? What should be done to engage them and how should a pastoral caregiver/clergy negotiate for respectful healing and liberation in this community?

A pastoral caregiver can be innovative and authentic in extending pastoral care to a community that is spiritually conservative. Wife abuse happens where relationships are broken down in a couple and, in African

contexts, broken relationships include the community, due to the communality of Africans (Kanyoro 2001). The role of a pastoral caregiver in this context is to advocate for reconciliation, forgiveness and healing. Reconciliation can be done by providing alternative rituals that are just and psychologically fulfilling, in order to help the couple, as well as the community, to work through their differences.

Certain rituals that are performed among the Ndebele for reconciliation, forgiveness and healing. Reconciliation and forgiveness are significant for healing a broken relationship between a husband and wife; and between the couple and the community at large. Since divorce is forbidden among the traditional Ndebele of Matetsi; a pastoral caregiver or clergy should consider context in providing pastoral care, and look for life-affirming rituals performed by the Ndebele to promote forgiveness, reconciliation and healing, and substitute some traditional elements with Christian elements. In theological terms, this is known as enculturation. The most life-affirming ritual for forgiveness and reconciliation among the Ndebele is *ukukhumisana umlotha*, (share in the licking of ashes from each other's hand). This is a ritual that reconciles broken relationships and leads to forgiveness and healing. If the other party does not want to forgive, then she or he abstains from the ritual. Intensive counselling and various interventions are used to reconcile the two parties before the process of *ukukhumisana umlotha*. This resonates with the principle of authentic participation proposed by the intercultural approach to pastoral care. Everyone participates in the healing process of the victim – the perpetrator and the community.

From an intercultural approach and in an Christian context, a pastoral caregiver can implement the contextuality and authentic participation principles by, for instance, encouraging the couple and the community to use ashes to mark a cross on each person's forehead as a symbol of forgiveness. Ashes are traditionally used as a symbol of forgiveness and reconciliation after a bad relationship or fight between people or communities. For the Ndebele of Matetsi, ashes symbolise the end of fire, something that is dangerous and harmful, and as a result, *ukukhumisana umlotha* confirms the end of a harmful and damaging relationship. In a theological sense, ashes symbolise mourning, mortality, and penance (Esther 4:1ff and Job 42:6). Using ashes to mark a cross on each other's foreheads reminds the disintegrated people that the cross reconciles the world to God through Jesus Christ and enables them to live in love and harmony (Romans 5:8). The cross is a sign of forgiveness of sins and

a gift of peace, hope and justice (Louw 2008:184).

Another ritual for forgiveness and reconciliation amongst the Ndebele of Matetsi is *ukudlelana emganwini* (eating from one plate). This ritual also takes place after intensive counselling and interventions by the elders. It leads to reconciliation and healing of broken relationships. Significantly and alternatively, the clergy can serve the warring parties Holy Communion, through sharing in eating the 'body of Christ from the same plate' and drinking the 'blood of Christ from the same cup', which is considered to be a true symbol of forgiveness. This ritual promotes gender equality between a husband and wife, as well as between a husband, wife and community. By sharing in Holy Communion, the couple and community are reminded what Jesus had done for the world, by forgiving sins through death on the cross and resurrection from the dead (1 Peter 3:18; 1 Corinthians 27-31). Louw (2008:185) argues that, 'when a ritual, for example Holy Communion, is celebrated, it communicates support, grace, love, reconciliation, and sense of belonging'. It helps the victim or the perpetrator to experience forgiveness that facilitates healing. Christian symbols, such as Holy Communion and the cross, break down the hierarchical order of marriage, where men are all-powerful and patriarchy is internalised, routinised and naturalised. These symbols promote a communal life in which women and men are equal and are encouraged to live in peace with each other, other creation, and God. Africans live in a community of relationships and, as a result, healing and liberating a single person is not viable. This is impossible, because, if the community remains corrupt and oppressive, the healed and liberated person will be re-contaminated and corrupted, requiring pastoral interventions to be repeated (Chisale 2018). Thus, to escape this cycle, the whole community should be included in the rituals to achieve reconciliation and healing. Extending pastoral care to one person is hopeless in African communities, since Africans are communal, therefore, I propose that communal pastoral care should be inclusive of everyone.

Louw (2008:180) argues that pastoral care scholars agree unanimously that pastoral care in an African context must be a social and community issue – the community and the network of relationships are the intervention. Chisale (2018) asserts that 'the interaction of women with the community challenges pastoral care initiatives against domestic violence not to isolate the broader community. The brokenness of a community member means the brokenness of the entire community'. Lartey (2018) calls this pastoral intervention 'communio-pathy', which according to him, 'is entry into the pain and passion

of a whole community'. He argues, furthermore, that targeting the whole community is significant, because,

Healthy communities produce healthy people. Just as hurt people hurt people so whole people heal people. Individuals who receive excellent therapy and whose inner lives are repaired only to return into unwholesome social circumstances will soon be re-infected and need to return for individual therapy. The goal of pastoral care is always the creation of healthy communities in which ALL persons can live humane lives (2018).

In many traditional African communities, a woman is not married to her husband only, but into her husband's community. Thus, the abuse she experiencea may seem separated from the community she married into (because it happens in private spaces), yet, in real African traditional life, it is connected to the community, because her ordeal is spiritually unhealthy, and fragments her from the broader community.

It emerged from this article that a woman married through an traditional African marriage ceremony deals with abuse differently from someone married only through the civil marriage. For a woman who was introduced to her husband's ancestors, marriage is not a contract, but sacred and ordained by ancestors and God. As a result, walking out of the marriage is not an option, because there are spiritual forces involved. A wife's connection to her husband's ancestors is a fragile ground to walk on, thus sensitivity and empathy by the pastoral care giver and those around her are important, particularly if that connection is hurting the woman A pastoral caregiver should be sensitive, clear, compassionate and careful when journeying with an emotionally abused woman, who is trapped in her marriage because she fears the wrath of the ancestors. It is important to conscientise the victim that ancestors and God are not evil, but rather protect life – thus, they do not approve of the abuse she is experiencing. A pastoral caregiver should include the community into which this woman married, as well as her biological family community in the caregiving, because the two communities can influence how the woman responds to the abuses in her marriage. By doing this, the caregiver will be authentic to the African worldview. Bible study can be conducted to conscientise the community about the true challenges caused by some of their cultural worldviews. From the perspective of feminist cultural hermeneutics,

this will help community members to authentically sift, deconstruct and reconstruct cultural worldviews that are oppressive and dehumanising, and protect those that are life-affirming. Jesus is the best model a pastoral caregiver can use, particularly, scriptures that were used by Jesus to empower and liberate marginalised and oppressed members of communities, such as women, children, orphans, widows and the disabled. Authenticity should guide the pastoral caregiver to be faithful to gender dynamics in pastoral care.

## **Gender Sensitivity**

Feminist cultural hermeneutics emphasises that culture is not static, but transforms as time progresses and, as a result, culture should be re-examined and be re-interpreted in a way that embraces the dignity of women (Kanyoro 2002). Thus, being conscious of gender dynamics in pastoral care is critical and can augment women's dignity, because women or victims are sometimes silenced by the gender of a pastoral caregiver. Women of the Ndebele of Matetsi community are socialised to respect and set boundaries regarding the sharing of private or marital issues with men. It is considered taboo for a woman to share her marital problems with a man, including her father, uncles and brothers. A male clergy is no different from other men, according to the Ndebele cultural worldview. Lartey (2003) emphasises the significance of cultural sensitivity when extending pastoral care to a care seeker. Moreover, Louw (2008:153) confirms that, 'within an African perspective the human being cannot be understood separate from cultural issues and values'. In African contexts, not all women are comfortable sharing their lived experience of abuse with a person of a different gender, because of cultural beliefs and socialisation. Chisale (2018) argues that, in a context of wife or domestic abuse, 'the clergy and pastoral caregivers, who are often men, should be aware of the role they play in silencing female voices'. Male clergy should not deny that some victims of abuse could see them as accomplices in their abuse, because of their gender, and may expect biased interpretations of gender in the Bible and culture.

Common sayings in the Matetsi community are *amadoda wonke ayafanana* (all men are the same) and *amadoda yizinja* (men are dogs). Although these sayings are generalisations, communities build their lived realities on these generalisations and myths. This challenges clergy and pastoral caregivers to be sensitive to communities' gender generalisations and

myths. An intercultural approach to pastoral care encourages using multiple perspectives in extending authentic pastoral care. Understanding the community's gender generalisations and myths will speed up the healing process of the victim, perpetrator and community. If the clergy is married, his spouse could help to shepherd the flock and, in particular, extend pastoral care and counselling to congregants.

This collaboration of the clergy and their spouses addresses the so-called gender gap that exist in pastoral care and counselling, due to diverse cultural worldviews. Ma Mpolo (1990:12) argues that contextual pastoral care to African communities should focus on the importance of understanding parishioners' or clients' worldviews. The participation of clergy's spouses may help to extend the intercultural approach to pastoral care; the clergy may find themselves in a culturally different environment. Pastoral care scholars such as Mucherera (2000), uses the term *half-breed*, while Augsburg (1986) proposes *interpathy* for extending pastoral care to a community that has a different culture than that of the pastoral caregiver.

In spiritually and culturally conservative communities such as the Ndebele in Matetsi, women confide in women and men confide in men, particularly about sensitive issues such as the wellbeing of their marriages. Unmarried clergy should partner with clergy of the opposite sex, so that they are spiritually and culturally relevant in their pastoral interventions. It is important to note that the motives of unmarried clergy when they extend pastoral care to care seekers of the opposite sex could be looked at with suspicion. Some care seekers may misinterpret the empathy of an unmarried clergy, and interpret it as affection – holistic healing cannot take place in the midst of such misunderstandings. Instead, it may lead to a build-up of multiple crises, female clergy may be sexually abused by male care seekers who misinterpret her empathy, or female clergy could be accused by wives who feel insecure, of having an extramarital affair with their husbands. Similarly, single male clergy's empathy for women may be misinterpreted as seeking sexual relationships with women who seek pastoral interventions.

## **Conclusion**

The spiritualisation of African marriages challenges the church's pastoral care ministry to be authentic to the Gospel by being flexible to the cultural worldviews of congregants. The church in Africa cannot separate people from

their cultural beliefs. Rather, it is necessary to consider context in ministry and to inculcate the Gospel to the worldview of traditional Africans, so that they can experience love and liberation of 'Christ in their own context, instead of being enslaved in a Christianity that is not their own' (Msomi 1992: 12). As a result, integrating an intercultural approach to pastoral care and feminist cultural hermeneutics can be significant for guiding pastoral caregivers' journey with victims of abuse, who cannot escape the abuse due to the spiritualisation of African traditional marriage. Pastoral care is an important ministry of the church, which can liberate and empower congregants from the chaos of life. If pastoral care is not relevant, it is likely to destroy rather than build, reconcile and heal African communities. Wife abuse is a scourge that destroys the fabric of life, by causing chaos in women, men, children and the community at large. The church should, therefore, empower every human through word, creed and deed, while being sensitive and relevant to every person's cultural and spiritual worldview.

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# A Feminist Perspective on Religion in Polygynous Families in KwaZulu-Natal

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## Abstract

According to statistics, Christianity is the religion with the highest following in South Africa. It is known that religion plays a significant role in culture and society as a whole. Polygyny has been extensively researched from many vantage points, however, these studies have mainly been from a Middle Eastern perspective, not from a Zulu cultural perspective. In the Middle East, culture and tradition are based on the religion of Islam and, in turn, Islamic religion informs culture. In contrast, in the Zulu culture, someone can be a Christian while continuing to adhere to beliefs in *amadlozi* (ancestors), in spite of the latter being against Christian teaching. For some Zulu people, religion and culture are deeply intertwined – their culture is their religion and vice versa. Using an interpretivist paradigm within a qualitative methodology, this study interviewed 10 female adults who had been raised in polygynous families, to determine how their religion impacted their identity. This study was carried out in Hammarsdale, KwaZulu-Natal, all the participants had been formally educated, and the study was underpinned by social constructionism and African feminism theories. The finding is that religion and culture are two sides of the same coin in relation to their position on women's subordination. This paper aims to foreground how the Christian religion impacts on women raised in polygynous families.

**Keywords:** Gender, identity, KwaZulu-Natal, polygyny, religion

## **Introduction**

Religion and its position on family, gendered division of labour and culture has remain unchanged through space and time. Polygyny<sup>1</sup> is referred to in the Holy Books of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the Christian bible, the practice of polygyny is not outright sanctioned because the old testament speaks of certain men who practised polygyny, instead, it is absolutely condemned in the new testament, which makes the relationship between polygyny and Christianity an uneasy one. Polygyny has been extensively researched from many different vantage points, among which polygyny's impact on children, women and men, but this research has mainly been from a Middle Eastern perspective. Furthermore, research has largely overlooked the role of religion in forging identities for individuals and groups who were raised in polygynous families. Scholars, such as; (Al-Krenawi & Graham 1999; Al-Krenawi & Lightman 2000; Al-Krenawi & Slonim-Nevo 2008; Peek 2005), researched how certain influences, such as polygyny and religion have a direct impact on children raised in polygynous families. In Peek's (2005) study, younger children often identified according to their parents' national and ethnic backgrounds. Individuals absorbed and internalised norms, values and behaviours they observed being exemplified by their parents, peers and others, long before they understood these norms, values and behaviours intellectually.

Religion in this study refers to the Christian religion, including its beliefs. Religion and Christian will be used interchangeably. Religion itself is gendered, because of the differences in the roles of men and women within the Christian religion (Madge, Hemming & Stenson 2014). This research sought to understand how this inherently gendered bias contributes to the identity of women who were raised in polygynous families. Literature is silent on the impact religion, specifically Christianity, has on women who were raised in polygynous families and how this upbringing, in turn, affects their identity. Therefore, this study aimed to understand how women raised in polygynous families constructed their identities within their Christian faith as

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<sup>1</sup> In principle, there are three forms of polygamy: polygyny, in which one man is married to several wives; polyandry, where one woman is married to several husbands; and group marriage, in which several husbands are married to several wives – the latter is a combination of polygyny and polyandry (Zietzen 2008:3).

well as their Zulu culture. This research was qualitative in nature and was located in Hammarsdale in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. This study was underpinned by two theoretical frameworks: Social constructionism and African feminism. This paper begins by referring to the literature, after which the theoretical leanings and the methodology will be discussed, followed by the discussion of the data and conclusion.

## Literature Review

Scholars, such as Bernal (1994), attest that, while gender has been historically and socially constructed based on local realities, religious systems have remained timeless, monolithic and rigid. Religious doctrine and practices, however, continue to be renegotiated under changing historical circumstances (Bernal 1994:37). According to Al-Krenawi and Graham (1999), Islamic law and traditional culture is one and the same thing. In the Middle East, culture and tradition are based on the religion of Islam and, in turn, the Islamic religion informs the culture. There is no clear distinction between Islamic culture and religion, as there is in the Zulu culture, where one can be a Christian as well as follow the beliefs in *amadlozi* (ancestors), which goes against the teachings of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, for some Zulu people – not all – religion and culture are deeply intertwined: their culture is their religion and vice versa.

Religion is an intriguing topic, because it is usually imposed on the child by the parents at the child's birth; as the child matures, they may become more and more indoctrinated into that religion. According to Madge *et al.* (2014), if individuals break away from the religion they were raised in, it could have disastrous consequences, and result in the child being ostracised from family, culture and, ultimately, the society in which they live.

According to Ojong and Muthuki (2010:14), religion is a major determinant of people's personal choices and attitudes, and it influences believers to choose certain forms of behaviour and conduct over others. The authors assert that people practice a particular religion because all members of their society have been socialised to believe in that religion. Religion and culture put forth similar views regarding gender inequality and female submission. The scholars Ojong and Muthuki (2010:15) emphasise that culture is viewed as a collective phenomenon that shapes people's social environment. Culture influences the environment in which a person is raised,

and this reinforces their dominant patterns of thinking, feeling and acting in other spheres. Culture also involves collective socialising of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group from people of another (Ojong & Muthuki 2010:15). This collective socialising encompasses both the social and the cultural, which articulates itself by influencing members of a family, their lineage, their village and their community (Ojong & Muthuki 2010:15).

Many scholars (Butler 1993; Connell 1987; Lacan 1982; Stoller 1986; West & Zimmerman 1987) who studied issues of identity, focused on social and cultural influences only; rarely did they pay attention to the relationship between religion and identity. Religion is a key determinant of personal choices and attitudes of people; and it shapes identity. Muthuki (2010) states that religion affects us privately, in terms of our personal attitudes and views of life, which, in turn, has a bearing on the way we live our outward lives. Some people construct part of their identity by drawing on their religion, and their religious beliefs have a great impact on the lives they chose to live. This paper seeks to explore the role religion played in the lives of women raised in polygynous families.

## **Research Methodology and Methods**

This article emerged from two larger studies conducted by the researcher, titled *Polygyny and Gender: The Gendered Narratives of Adults Raised in Polygynous Families* (Mkhize 2016), and *Polygyny and Gender: Narratives of Professional Zulu Women in Peri-Urban Areas of Contemporary KwaZulu-Natal* (Mkhize 2011). This study employed a qualitative research methodology within an interpretivist framework. A qualitative methodology was best suited for this study, because of the emphasis on rich description, understanding and explanation of complex phenomena (Creswell 2009). An interpretivist framework was utilised, because it is a communal process involving the presentation of the participants' realities from their own viewpoints (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smith 2004).

The study was located in Hammarsdale, a peri-urban area in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (Adam 2001; Adell 1999; Lawn, Bekker, Middelkoop, Myer and Wood 2006; Mkhize 2011). For this qualitative study, non-probability, purposive sampling was used. Purposive sampling allowed for the selection of participants whose qualities or experiences would contribute to understanding the phenomena in question

and, therefore, were valuable (Marshall 1996). The study employed in-depth interviews over a period of one year, from July 2013 to July 2014, to elicit rich qualitative data. In conducting in-depth interviews, the researcher used open-ended questions to enable participants to reflect on and give detailed accounts of their polygynous family experiences that pertaining to their religious upbringing, and how it influenced their identities. The researcher made use of particular ethnographic tools, such as repeated in-depth interviews.

A sample of ten adult women, ranging in age from 18 to 56 years old and who had been raised in polygynous families was used in this study, to enable an in-depth investigation and to elicit rich qualitative data. The lowest educational qualification was Matric, and the highest a Master's degree. Educational level was important in the study, because the researcher wanted to separate the study from related studies done on polygynous families. The researcher decided to focus on adults rather than children of polygynous families, because adults are mature enough to be able to reflect on their experiences and how their gendered identities were challenged, reaffirmed and reconfigured over time. The participants in this study were all Christian and they worshiped in different denominations.

The consent of the participants was sought at every level once the purpose of the research had been explained to them. The informants were assured of confidentiality and that they had the right to choose whether to participate or not at any time. Participants' names and identities were replaced by pseudonyms, and any distinguishing characteristics were removed for the purposes of anonymity. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviews were then transcribed manually,<sup>2</sup> and responses were analysed for content and discourse. Transcriptions were done in tandem with the data generation process.

Thematic and narrative analyses were used in this study. This form of analysis fit in with essentialist and constructionist paradigms, and has the

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<sup>2</sup> This process involves the researcher taking voluminous amounts of information and reducing it to certain patterns, categories or themes and, then, interpreting this information by using some schema. Creswell calls this decontextualization and recontextualization. This process results in a 'higher level' analysis, and 'while much work in the analysis process consists of 'taking apart' (for instance, into smaller pieces) the final goal is the emergence of a larger, consolidated picture' (Creswell 1994:154).

potential to provide rich, detailed and complex accounts of data (Aronson 1995:4; Braun & Clarke 2006:5). Narrative analysis was also used to refer to accounts of personal experiences or the experiences of others (Smith 2000:328). The functions of narratives, such as reflecting back on events and talking about them, can provide meaning and coherence to and perspective on personal experience and social traditions; construct a person's knowledge, including a person's sense of self or identity; and bring about emotional adjustment and healing.

As resourceful as in-depth interviews can be, they can also be limiting in the sense that the respondents' verbal answers to questions may actually differ from what they practiced in reality. The researcher attempted to overcome this limitation by engaging with participants and probing further into their answers to elicit hidden meanings and to ascertain if their answers truly reflected what they had meant, or if it was implied.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study was underpinned by two theoretical frameworks: Social constructionism and African feminism. The social constructionist theory advances the notion that gender is socially constructed, and depends on location, context and time. African feminism was applicable to this study because it aims to expose the difference in the way gender is conceptualised in Africa as opposed to the West.

### ***Social Constructionism***

In attempting to make sense of the social world, social constructionists view knowledge as constructed as opposed to created. Society is viewed as existing as both a subjective and an objective reality (Andrews 2012). Feminists claim that gender is a social construction, which means that people's dispositions and ideas about gender are not predetermined by their biological sex differences. Ideas about gender and the social practices that gender institutionalises are alterable, indicating that gender is variable from culture to culture and is, therefore, socially constructed (Conrad & Barker 2010). Gender is achieved and constructed through psychological, cultural and social means (West & Zimmerman 1987). According to West and Zimmerman (1987), socialising gender means creating differences between girls and boys,

women and men. These differences are not natural, essential or biological, but once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the 'essentialness' of gender.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1991), socialisation is defined as the comprehensive and consistent induction of an individual into the objective world of a society or a sector of it. Primary socialisation is the first socialisation an individual undergoes in childhood, through which they become a member of society. Secondary socialisation is any subsequent process that inducts an already socialised individual into new sectors of the objective world of their society. It is evident that primary socialisation is the most important one for an individual, and forms the basic structure of all secondary socialisation, which has to resemble that of primary socialisation. This is where cultural practice of patriarchy, and religion, would be introduced to the child.

Lacan (1982) provides a key for understanding the socialisation and symbolisation processes that have shaped women's specificity through the ages. For Lacan, identity does not derive from genetic predispositions or from an unfolding of neuro-psychological developmental sequences, nor is it the product of a war between biological and cultural forces or the reflection of collective archetypes. Identity, in Lacan's understanding, is built up as a composite of images and effects, i.e., mental representations, taken in from the outside world from the start of life, which are developed in relation to the desire for recognition and, later, social requirements for submission to an arbitrary law, which illustrates that identity is constructed and not biological or inherent (Lacan 1982:7).

### ***African Feminism***

Western feminism fails to effectively represent and cater for African women, because Western feminism does not acknowledge the agency and potential of African women. The African feminist, Obioma Nnaemeka (2005), states that the issue of balance is neglected in the one-dimensional Western constructions of African women, who are usually viewed as poor and powerless. African women are depicted as confined, powerless and unable to 'control their lives'. African intellectual feminism, in turn, is criticised for being elitist and pro-Western, whilst popular African feminism is rooted in the lived experiences and cultural beliefs of African women, but fails to

mobilise against cultural practices that are oppressive. It is difficult to reduce all strands of feminism into a single theoretical context, because of their inherent differences (Nnaemeka 2005).

African feminism offers a different theorisation around family and gender relations than that of the West. Unlike in the West, where power lies with the male gender only, in African society, the principle of seniority is paramount and whomever is the most senior in the room, wields the most power, regardless of gender (Oyewumi 2000; 2002). According to Nnaemeka (2005), African feminism is about negotiating with the male gender. *Nego-feminism*, a term coined by Nnaemeka, is a feminism of negotiation; a feminism that knows when, where and how to negotiate around patriarchy, or go around it in different contexts. It is a 'no ego' feminism, a feminism that calls on African women to find creative ways to combat gender inequality within their cultures. Nnaemeka (2005) argues that African women understand that the African man is not the enemy, but a potential ally that one needs to constantly negotiate with in order to enact gender equality. *Nego-feminism* is a type of African feminism aims to highlight the differences between how gender is conceptualised in Africa and the West, and how Africans have learnt to negotiate their gendered positions. These two theories were best suited for this research and complemented each other.

## **Zulu Culture and Gender Identity**

In every culture, the individual internalises a culturally shaped gender polarity that directs them to develop, in some measure, qualities attributed to their own sex, and to suppress qualities of the other sex. Culture plays a pivotal role in interfacing with the psychodynamics of gender identity (Diamond 2006:1104). Hammarsdale in KwaZulu-Natal is a predominantly isiZulu-speaking area. It is a peri-urban area, meaning it represents a mixture of rural and township life. As a result of this environment, traditional roles are reinforced, but since it also has a township quality, modern, progressive roles are also accepted. Zulu culture is patriarchal and rooted in deep traditional customs. In a traditional Zulu home, the father is the head of the household, and boys enjoy more privileges than girls in the family, because boys will continue the family name.

In the past, men have held the belief that Zulu culture does not permit women to be active in the public space, or to be equal to men. Zulu men have

argued that, in Zulu culture, women are inferior to men and should never challenge men when it comes to issues of politics, because politics is culturally a man's domain. Thus, Zulu culture, both implicitly and explicitly, promotes the idea that men are superior, which makes it gendered in nature (Mkhize 2011).

## **Religion Married to Culture**

In Zulu culture, religion and culture, at times, appear to be two distinct spheres. Religion is revered and culture is respected. Religion is viewed as working simultaneously with culture. Zulu people believe there is a God, *uNkulunkulu* (The Great Ancestor). According to Ntshangase (2018: 238) ancestors are people who are not lifeless, but people whose spiritual bodies have moved from the world of the living to the world of the dead, hence they are called 'living dead'. Their passing to the spiritual world does not sever the tie with the living (Ngidi 2012:2). In pre-colonial times, the Zulu people believed that, when a person died, they became an ancestor who becomes a spokesperson or representative for them with a higher power (God). The ancestor would be the representative for the living to this higher power. There is a misconception that Zulus worship their ancestors; in actuality, Zulu people venerate their ancestors, because they believe that their ancestors speak to God directly on their behalf, therefore, angering or displeasing an ancestor in any way would have negative consequences.

This unique way Zulus understand God and religion, and the role their ancestors play in it, exposes how religion and culture is intertwined as one entity. However, Christian religion emphasises a patriarchal system, in which men are superior of women. Zulu culture never organically practiced such a ridged gender divide. According to African feminists (Muthuki 2010; Nnaemeka 2005; Oyewumi 2002), African culture before colonisation had a more egalitarian system, in which genders had their specific roles and no one role was superior to the other. One could argue that the female gender had significant power within the family, especially in a polygynous family; however, the power was dependent on the ranking of the wife (first, second, etc.) and their seniority within the family (Mkhize 2016). Colonisation and the introduction of the colonisers' religion violently enforced a rigid and static patriarchal system that oppressed and continues to oppress women.

**Sineke**

*My church promotes culture and tradition and therefore I am happy about my polygynous marriage.*

In the quote above, one can see that religion and culture are one and the same thing. Religion promotes culture and culture promotes religiosity. This finding indicates how religion and culture are deeply intertwined. One participant stated her religion played a significant part in her remaining in her unhappy polygynous marriage, because her faith compelled her to be a peaceful person and to avoid having enemies. Another participant said she believes nothing happens without God having sanctioned it and, therefore, her marriage, regardless of her happiness, was a gift from God.

**Religious Control and Resistance**

According to Cruz (2015), African women conform to their religion and culture whilst simultaneously resisting it. African women resist in various ways, of which silence is one. African culture socialises women to be silent, and not to be vocal. A good African woman in African culture is a woman who is quiet and pious. However, silence can also be viewed as a hidden voice. Cruz (2015:21) states that silence is an effective resistance strategy. Silence is also a strategy used by African feminists, especially in nego-feminism. Nnaemka (2005) describes nego-feminism as a feminism that negotiates with the African man. Negotiating means understanding when to be silent on certain issues, and when to be vocal on others. In African society married women are socialized to be respectful and reverent. In Zulu culture the extended family plays a significant role in the marriage of two people and if issues arise, the married woman has multiple individuals she can seek help from with her marital issues. Therefore, silence is encouraged as an effective resistance strategy, because one is silent not because they condone certain actions, but because they know other family members will voice their objections on their behalf whilst they remain respectable. African women also resist the oppression they face in their religious or cultural settings through solitary prayer, prayer gatherings with other women and senior family members, in their own, unique ways. Another way they resist is through being educated. Education offers African women opportunities for emancipation through being exposed to various forms of knowledge,

knowledge communities and communities in practice that support women and aid in resistance.

**Duduzela**

*I was unhappy in my marriage and I wanted to leave. The church threatened to remove me from the congregation if I left my polygynous husband. Shembe promotes this type of union.*

The quote above shows vividly the explicit threat her church used to instil fear and enact control over the participant. Duduzela was unhappy in her marriage because it became polygynous without her consent. Her husband did not follow the correct cultural procedures to take a second wife. The second wife was imposed on Duduzela, and that made her unhappy. Her church used her religion and fear of God to prevent her from leaving an unhappy marriage; one could argue that this type of threat was cult-like.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the type of negotiation nego-feminism refers to is not possible in the case of these types of threats against women. How can women who oppose the church's wishes, such as on divorce, negotiate in the face of overt threats of excommunication? This threat goes against African feminism's assertion that the African man is not the enemy, but an ally in the fight for gender equality and women's well-being. The African man is the leader of the Shembe church, and is complicit in keeping women oppressed within the church.

**Anele**

*I was told by my grandmother that getting married is a gift from the ancestors and no matter how difficult it gets I must persevere because it was a blessing from God to find a husband.*

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<sup>3</sup> The term cult comes from Latin, *Cultus*, meaning worship. The term can be extended to the worship of secular objects and also implies an excessive, unbalanced belief in or craze for anything. When applied to a religious context, the term refers to any set of people bound together by devotion to a particular sacred person/object/ideology. It also means any religion considered false, unorthodox or spurious (Ellwood 1986:1). Today, the term has negative connotations, including controlling, abusive and threatening to a congregation.

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One participant said, regardless of how hard she tried to leave her polygynous marriage, the church always warned her that she would be going against God, and that the Bible says she must love her husband through good and bad times. Another participant said she was told that, once married in a polygynous marriage, that she would never ever be allowed to leave, because she was bound by church regulations to stay in the marriage and respect the husband no matter what he does; if she leaves the marriage, she will also be leaving the church. Quotes by other women in the study explain how religion and the church, specifically, has operated in their lives. Women were overtly oppressed by being told explicitly that leaving the marriage, means, in essence, leaving the church. This type of church system is, in effect, using religion to control women and prevent them from exercising their agency or free will to leave unhappy unions. Anele's quote is telling, and shows how religion and culture are intertwined, because her grandmother reiterated that being married is a gift from God and the ancestors. This exhortation would make it difficult for a woman to leave an unhappy union, because she would not only be angering God, but her ancestors too. The fear instilled in women makes them reluctant to divorce, and their religion and culture conspire to keep them in the union. Anele's quote also shows how women appear to be complicit in their own oppression. Anele's grandmother is perpetuating a certain type of socialisation that imprisons women in unhappy marriages. African women and African feminists have been criticised by Western feminists for being compliant to patriarchal oppressions they face, and not taking radical steps to reconfigure and resist. Western feminists do not acknowledge that the way African feminists resist involve a different type of activism, which does not make it any less effective in the long term.

However, religion was not viewed as oppressive by all participants. One participant stated that she used religion as a coping mechanism – in difficult times, she found solace in prayer. Some women used religion as a refuge in their hardship – they did not see it as an oppressive system. Cruz (2015) states that women could resist by organising gatherings in church and having prayer groups. By doing so, women used the church and their religion, a structure of their oppression, to enact their agency and resistance to it.

## **How Religion is Engaged**

Sullins (2006) states that women tend to be more religious than men on every

measure of religiosity. Sullins (2006) argues that religious behaviour is encouraged because it relates to obtaining women's commitment or relegation to the domestic sphere. The prevailing assumption among sociologists is that gender differences in both religiousness and social location as adults are underpinned by broad cultural mechanisms of differential socialisation processes that pattern men and women into different sets of values, roles and norms for behaviour. The findings of Sullins' (2006) study are in contrast to what the research results of this study found.

### **Qondeni**

*My mother was a religious woman and she always made us go to church even when we did not want to. We worshiped in a Zion church and I hated religion because it justified polygyny in that it was practised in the Bible. I would always debate with my mother that yes polygyny was practised in the Bible but it was in the Old Testament and that even God changed his mind and realised the detriment that polygyny caused on women and their children in the New Testament. I think Islam has it correct in that it does not support polygyny per se but states that a man cannot take on additional wives if he cannot treat them equitably. That in itself was a veiled protest against polygyny because no one can treat more than one person equally at the same time, it is impossible. I think my mother used religion as a shield or comfort for her in her marriage. Religion has been used to justify inequality of the genders and I have a hard time reconciling that with my individual rights as a free woman in a free country.*

The participants explained that their religious denominations had different stances about the practice of polygyny. The Catholic, Anglican and Protestant denominations were opposed to polygyny, while the Shembe and Zionist denominations were proponents of polygyny; still other churches were ambivalent about the practice. The respondents stated that it was difficult to reconcile the their church's opposition to polygyny while they lived a polygynous lifestyle. One participant stated she felt like a hypocrite. The participants were aware of the contradictions of religious doctrine and gender equality, in the same way as they highlighted the contradiction between the country's constitution, which refers to equal rights, and their culture, which

does not necessarily espouse equal rights for women. They stated that religion and culture are two sides of the same coin in relation to their position on women's subordination. One respondent stated that religion is less criticised for its stance on gender inequality, because it is considered to be holy and the word of God, but culture is man-made, and should be criticised more for its sexism.

Many of the participants credited religion as the 'saviour' of their 'unusual family lifestyle', and many had turned to religion when their lives had become particularly difficult. Some even said that their identity would have been different if they did not have religion in their lives. Their religion was a large part of their lives and, therefore, part of their identity as women. Although some did claim that religion was initially forced upon them when they were young children, these participants said that, when they became adults, they chose to continue with it. It is important to emphasise that these women are highly educated and, therefore, could be critical of both religion and culture. However, in spite of criticism, they continued to uphold religious and cultural traditions. This behaviour goes against what liberal feminists believe, namely, that if women are educated they will be emancipated and empowered in their lives. Liberal feminists, however, fail to acknowledge that African women, in spite of being educated and empowered, may still be oppressed in their cultures and religion.

## **The Impact of Religion on the Negotiation of the Female Identity**

The sociology of gender and religion first emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, with feminist critiques of religion, on the one hand, and studies of issues such as women's ordination and goddess worship, on the other. Reflecting on the history of gender scholarship more generally, much of this work was produced by women sociologists who were politicised by the women's movement and who turned a critical eye to women's experiences within various religious traditions (Avishai, Afshan & Rinaldo 2015).

According to Avishai *et al.* (2015), religion is used to reinforce patriarchal norms. The authors explain that orthodox Jewish women in Israel express agency as they 'do religion', living up to rather than challenging strict religious norms. This shows that religious masculinity, like religious femininity, is being restructured in response to contemporary political, econo-

mic and cultural realities (Avishai *et al.* 2015).

### **Thuleleni**

*I believe the one way to combat this 'resistance' to religion and its many rules which are usually forced or expected of females [and not males] is to live up to them. I think if a woman is a God fearing, pious woman she is living up to and more to what is expected of her faith and that in a way could be a form of agency. I think patriarchy is designed for women to fail. Women are expected to be 'perfect' and no one can achieve that so if you come close you are respected and revered.*

Thuleleni chooses to enact her African feminism in a unique way, by using conformity as a form of resistance. Her way of combating religion is by living up to the high standards imposed on her. Thuleleni's identity is tied to being a good, Christian, Zulu woman. She confirms the issues raised in the literature, namely, that, in some orthodox religious societies, women are not 'oppressed' to the extent that Western feminists believe, because these women use their religion to enact their agency; doing so enables them to find freedom in this and not oppression. Thuleleni believes if she lives up to what is expected of her as a Zulu woman, and she is empowered through education and financial security, she will be enacting agency within her culture. Thuleleni also believes that, if she does not conform to her traditional gender role, she will be fighting a losing battle, because the patriarchal system is designed to place women on such an impossibly high pedestal that it is actually impossible to meet the expectations of perfection. However, the more a woman behaves in accordance with religious gender ideals, the greater reverence and respect she is accorded within her culture.

Thuleleni's quote is fascinating because it is contradictory. She completely understands how oppressive religion and her culture are, and that they impossibly high standards are set for women. Thuleleni has realised that going against the standards would be more detrimental to her than working to attain and maintain the standard expected of her. She is grappling with religious expectations, and even though she is educated and empowered, she still feels powerless. Her experience is the opposite of what liberal feminist believe, namely that, if women are educated they will be empowered. Liberal feminists fail to realise that African women, even if they are educated, are

still oppressed by their religions and culture. One could argue that Thuleleni's failure to criticise the impossibly high standards set for women, instead doing everything expected of her, so that she is considered to be a good, Christian, Zulu woman, she is, in effect, sanctioning the expectations. Her silence could be understood as either shouting complicity in her oppression, or resisting it.

Without assuming a deterministic framework, it may be productive to consider how gender and religion constitute each other. For example, to understand orthodox Jewish women's agency, or Muslim femininity, it is necessary to examine how these categories are created and operate within certain historical and cultural contexts. The suggestion that scholars (Avishai *et al.* 2015) put forward is that scholarship on gender and religion would benefit from theoretical perspectives that build on current theories in the sociology of gender, including conceptualising gender and sexuality as constituted through practice and interaction, informed by cultural narratives and institutional contexts, and as profoundly relational and intersecting with other categories, such as race and class. This proposal was confirmed by the participants, because some participants stated that they had agency and were able to exercise it within their religion as well as within their culture.

Thuleleni's quote also incorporates that part of African feminism that acknowledges constant negotiation as a form of resistance to patriarchy. If women live up to the ideal of women, they are, in effect, exercising their agency, because they can never be faulted. Thuleleni's quote is in agreement with the social constructionist theory, in that gendered identity is constructed, therefore, the female identity is constructed according to its environment.

## **Religion Used for Finding a Life Partner**

Religious boundaries and meaning are constructed both from within and without, in response to internal conflicts and choices and external pressures and rewards that drive identity formation (Peek 2005:236). The participants stated that they wanted their future spouses to follow some sort of religion, because this would indicate that they had had a good upbringing, and also had respect.

### **Shongani**

*My fiancé is not very religious but he does attend church with me sometimes. He says he was raised in a household where everything*

*was about church and he got tired of it so as an adult he did not care too much about the church. He says he attends church for me because religion is important to me. I am OK with that at least he is respectful of religion and hopefully if we have children they too will be religious. My religion is against polygyny but they would never state that publicly because members of the congregation are polygynous and they would be offended. I would choose my religion if I had to decide between cultural traditional practices and Catholicism because Jesus came to save us and show us the true correct way of life and not follow archaic and arbitrary practices.*

### **Phakimpi**

*Religion is like culture if you do not observe or respect it you are not an intelligent person. Yes there are parts of religion I do not like or disagree with just like there are traditional customs I am vehemently against but it is God and it is bigger than me so I will respect it. If it was good enough for my parents it is good enough for me. I am torn because I want to respect my culture because my ancestors did but I want to worship God because I am Anglican and I believe.*

The participants combined their Christian religion with their Zulu culture, though some placed religion above culture and others believed culture came before religion. It was important for the participants that their spouses or future spouses respect religion. Even if their potential spouse was not as religious as they were, the participants wanted the future spouse to believe in some sort of religion. Therefore, participants' religious beliefs impacted on the participants' choice of partner, current or future. Participants understand that religion is sometimes contradictory, and some indicated that they do not know what they would choose if they had to choose between their culture and their religion. Some respondents stated that they would choose their Zulu traditional practices, others would choose their Christian belief system, and others wished to be able to practice both. Religion is an important facet of their lives. Some participants' religion had been forced upon them growing up, and when they became adults, they made the decision to either continue with their religious practice, or to abandon it. Some who left the church mentioned that now, later in life, they have returned to their religion. Therefore, it can be argued that age and maturity have a bearing on a person's religious

beliefs. The women in this study still viewed religion as a vital component of the way they constructed their identities as Zulu women, as well the way they chose their future partners. These women, despite their education, chose to find partners who are religious and, in theory, would oppress them. Since religion promotes a patriarchal system in which women must submit to their husbands, these women actively sought out religious partners who would perpetuate their oppression within their religion. So, religion continues to be an invisible force, even when women chose their partners.

## **Discussion**

The women who participated in this study are all highly educated – some even had postgraduate degrees. Despite their education and qualifications, religion had a significant hold over their lives. Education was an important element of the study, because the author wanted to emphasise that, despite being educated, women were still bound within their socio-cultural environments and influences, such as religion. These women had been raised in polygynous families, and were aware of how inherently discriminatory the practice of polygyny was, but they never overtly criticised it. They just stated it was a traditional cultural practice that the either church sanctioned or ignored, depending on their denomination. Religion and culture directly influenced their decisions, including choosing their life partners. The remarkable part is that these women wanted partners that were also religious. They wanted partners who, according to the requirements of their religion and culture, they would have to submit to. These women, although critical of religion and culture in relation to how religion and culture are deeply intertwined and complicit in controlling women, still adhered to the expectations their religion and culture had of them. Interestingly, these women found unique ways of enacting their agency and opposing patriarchy. Some women chose to be silent as a way of resisting. Thuleleni chose to maintain the high expectations expected of her as a Christian Zulu woman. These strategies are in line with the African feminist theory of negot-feminism, according to which African women understand the need to be creative to fight their oppression. African women understand that the African man is not the enemy, and that they need to work together to achieve a more gender-equitable society.

Foucault's (1972) theory on power was useful in informing the

author's own understanding of power. Foucault views power as constantly moving systems of unequal force relations. It was interesting to see how some female participants moved from the one system of control (culture) to another (religion). The participants, although highly educated, understood what their religion was actually promoting. They knew they should not appear to criticise their religion or culture, though they did voice their dissatisfaction with certain aspects. It was curious to note that, because the participants followed the Christian religion as well as their traditional cultural practices, they wanted their spouses or future spouses to also adhere to these practices. There was, thus, a sort of contradiction: They followed a religion they deemed, at times, to be oppressive to women, but they were wary of partners who did not follow any religion at all. This contradiction has not been explored in literature, except to state that patriarchy is so salient to these women that even the idea of going against a patriarchal system, such as the church, makes them fearful.

## **Conclusion**

Christianity has the highest following in South Africa, making its influence amongst the Zulu people significant. The participants in this study believed that, even though religion is gendered, it is justified, because it is the word of God, therefore, it is holy and cannot be criticised. In contrast, the Zulu culture can be criticised, because it is man-made. Participants believed that gender differences as espoused by religion cannot be changed because it is Holy, but culture is not divine and, therefore, it can be changed. It can be argued that religion is socially constructed to encapsulate socio-cultural meanings and practices. Religion is used as a way to keep women in submissive positions, whilst the patriarchal Zulu culture reiterates that submissiveness. So, religion and culture are deeply intertwined in societal culture. Some participants viewed religion as a 'saviour', and others had negative conceptions of religion, because it was a 'partner' of culture in attempts to keep women in subservient positions. Some respondents stated that they were opposed to polygyny and sometimes religion was used by the participants to justify this sentiment; nevertheless, they acknowledged that their traditional practices had been entrenched before the missionaries came to Africa, and for this reason, they supported the practice of polygyny. Historical analysis has shown that, although culture is dynamic and has evolved over time to allow

more gendered freedoms within the Zulu culture, the role of women has remained consistently static. Certain aspects of religion have been used to advocate for a more egalitarian gender system within the Christian church, but change has moved at a glacial pace. Some of the women in this study found comfort in their religion, and other women found confirmation of what it means to be a good Christian woman. Religion and culture seemed to blend well in affirming traditional, gendered Zulu roles.

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# Women's Leadership and Participation in Recent Christian Formations in Swaziland: Reshaping the Patriarchal Agenda?

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## Abstract

Swaziland<sup>1</sup> is experiencing a proliferation of new religious bodies, as elsewhere in Africa, including emerging expressions of Christianity established by women. In this strongly patriarchal context, women, through recent Christian formations, go against the grain, and become pastors, evangelists, prophets and healers. The questions are, how do women appear to blend in when they take the lead in creating ecumenical associations? How do they constitute their own spaces within patriarchy, whilst accomplishing ecumenically inclusive Christian fellowship among themselves? The answers are provided through a case study of Mhlabuhlangene Prayer Group (MPG). It is argued that Christian women engage, not in resistance, but in negotiation, which keeps a model of their relationships and their spirituality in conformity with the patriarchal agenda. The case demonstrates in detail the occasions and activities through which women create their own spaces of Christian devotion whilst they simultaneously affirm patriarchal values. My data was generated from a particularly significant sample and through participant observation, which provide evidence that MPG is an ecumenical movement that 'builds on the indigenous'. However, the paper argues that the women's compliant approach to expressing their spirituality requires certain modifications, which are meant to lead to full inward empowerment.

**Keywords:** feminism, leadership, participation, Christian formations, patriarchy

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<sup>1</sup> In April 2018, King Mswati III changed the name of the country from Swaziland to Kingdom of Eswatini. The initial rendition is retained in this article.

## Introduction

Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity in Africa has been characterised by rapid expansion. Its expansion since the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been so dramatic that Hollenweger (1972) claims that ‘the center of gravity’ of the Christian faith has shifted from the northern to the southern continents. This assertion has been reiterated by scholars like Sanneh (2003); Jenkins (2002); and Walls (2002), who are interested in theological and historical developments of Christianity in developing countries. There is no doubt that this phenomenal growth of Christianity has been unfolding even faster than had originally been anticipated by scholars. In addition to the traditional forms of Christianity established by missionaries, Africa hosts African independent churches that emerged from the initial interaction between Africa and the West, and which are a product of the revival of Christianity all over the world. This manifestation of Christian presence in Africa has generated renewal and a proliferation of Pentecostal and charismatic ministries that have gained significance in every country in Africa. The new development in Pentecostal Christianity is what scholars have labelled as neo-Pentecostalism (Anderson 1995) and charismatic ministries or churches (Asamoah-Gyadu 2000). These new Christian groups have a strong belief in the baptism of the Holy Spirit and related gifts of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*), healing, and prophecy (Hollenweger 1997).

Like the rest of Africa, Swaziland has experienced a proliferation of new religious bodies, leading to new, emerging expressions of Christianity established by women. These women-led Christian formations, known as prayer groups, assume the typically Pentecostal enthusiasm and experiential approach to religious practice. As members of ecumenically inclusive fellowships, the members view society as being in a state of crisis, to which spiritual activities, such as prayer and worship, are the appropriate response. *Mhlabuhlangene* (meaning united nations) Prayer Group (MPG) is one of these groups that exhibits neo-Pentecostal traits in its expressions of spirituality.

Premised on this background, data generation for the article employed a qualitative research paradigm, framed within an exploratory and critical research design. The article sought to ascertain ways through which Christian Swazi women create their spaces within a patriarchal context through the establishment of prayer groups. MPG serves as a case study to illustrate the less resistant approach women employ in ecumenically inclusive women-led

Christian fellowships, whilst they conform to patriarchy. Employing qualitative techniques, therefore, enabled me to engage the participants in intensive interviews, which sought to ascertain how they negotiate with patriarchy while expressing their spiritualities in self-crafted spaces within a patriarchal context.

## **Locating the Social Context**

The Kingdom of Swaziland is the second-smallest country and last absolute monarchy in Africa. It is located on the eastern edge of the African plateau, and is bordered by the Republic of South Africa and the Republic of Mozambique. Estimates based on the most recent population census data (Kingdom of Swaziland 2007) put Swaziland's total population at slightly over 1 million. About 53% of this population are women. Swazis share a common language and a common set of traditional values, in a society that is both modern and traditional. The power of tradition is so pervasive in Swaziland that the modern and traditional forms of practice are, more often than not, collapsed into one. The cultural traditions are preserved as cultural heritage by the institution of the monarch and male figures of society.

Swazi society is patriarchal<sup>2</sup>. Abundant evidence from literature shows how masculine and feminine gender roles and perceptions are socially constructed in Swazi families, with the bulk of the responsibility for reproduction being placed on women. *A Baseline Study of the Socio-economic Impact of HIV and AIDS and the Responsiveness of Policy Framework Swaziland* (AWEAPON 2005) describes culture as the conduit for the institutionalisation of inequalities and discriminatory practices against women. Mpofu (1983) traces the start of a woman's subservience to her birth as a girl in a family. He argues that it is not marriage that changes the status of a woman; a woman has always been and remains minor, attached to a male figure

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<sup>2</sup> Patriarchy is a social system in which the role of the male as the primary authority figure is central to social organisation, and where fathers hold authority over women and children, and property. There have been controversies about the term patriarchy, but in recent years most forms of feminism tend to agree that patriarchy is a general descriptor of male dominance. See *Malti-Douglas, Fedwa (2007). Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender. Detroit: Macmillan.*

throughout her life – this is what Oduyoye (1995) calls a compulsory attachment to men. Zigira (1998), in a study entitled, *Role of NGOs in Economic Empowerment of Women in Swaziland*, notes that unequal gender relations exist in marriages, and they impede women's potential to achieve sustainable development. He states, 'it is within the family that social construction of womanhood is engineered and perpetuated, and in which process women become unwilling partners to even critique culture'. Women and the Law in Southern Africa Swaziland Chapter (WLSA 2001) also asserts that the interest and position of a family member are compromised by being born female. From birth, the female child is perceived to be a temporary member of the family, and when she marries, she occupies an inferior position as a newcomer, an outsider and a non-blood member of her new family, until she produces children, who become the family heritage (Ngcobo 2007).

Swazi society is patriarchal by nature, and it has a unique history regarding the transmission and growth of Christianity. It is believed that Christianity was introduced in Swaziland in 1844, at the initiative of a cultural figure, King Somhlolo<sup>3</sup>, and it spread after his death through missionary expansion. As a result, Swaziland's socioeconomic and political ideology is built upon its culture and the Bible; thus, culture and religion form an intricate and intertwined web. If asked about religion, almost every Swazi would claim to be a Christian. According to US Department of State (2018) Report on international Religious Freedom most of Swaziland's population is Christian, with about 40% of the population affiliated with Zionist churches, who profess a blend of Christianity and traditional religion. About 20% of the population is Roman Catholic, and other Christian denominations (30% of the population) include Anglicans, Methodists, Evangelicals and Charismatics; the latter is also known as Ministries. Less than 10% of the population are Muslim and members of other small groups, including Jewish, The Church of the Latter-day Saints and Bahai communities. These statistics confirm those of the Swazi

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<sup>3</sup> It is believed that King Somhlolo had a vision whilst performing national rituals; he saw white men coming from the east, carrying a book (the Bible) in the right hand and a coin (money) in the left hand. God instructed him to advise the Swazi to 'eat' the book and reject the money. See Mzizi (2003). Church-state tensions in the Kingdom of Swaziland: Honest dishonesty or dishonest honesty? BOLESWA Journal of Occasional Papers in Theology & Religion 1: 7-22.

2007 Census (Kingdom of Swaziland, 2007), which reports that about 90% of Swazis are adherents of the Christian religion.

## **Gender, Power and Leadership in Swaziland**

In the broader international literature, feminists have long analysed familial relations that favour men in the intrafamilial distribution of power and resources. Moghadam (2005) and other scholars have linked this power to the way families are constructed in patriarchal systems, where family is conceptualised as an essential social unit. Men assume exalted positions within the family structure, whilst women are relegated to a minority status. This power differential is clearly evident in Swazi social organisation. Studies undertaken in Swaziland (Nyawo & Nsibande, 2014; WLSA 2001; Zigira, 1998) show that, although there are more women in Swaziland than men, women's power is far less than that of men; women continue to inhabit a subordinate segment of society. Representation of women in many sectors of society is still unequal, with most women occupying no more than middle management or low-status professions, with little or no decision-making power; boardrooms are still dominated by men. It is argued in the training manual of CEDAW, *Gender, Leadership and Advocacy for Members of Parliament* (2011:16), that,

negative stereotyping, systematic and institutionalized oppression of women as well as training women to settle for less instead of wanting the best for themselves and their lives are some of the blockages that society uses to deny women opportunities in areas such as leadership.

A scenario describing the lack of representation of women in leadership positions is reported by Nyawo and Nsibande (2014), who conducted a study with 21 female school leaders to ascertain the extent to which sociocultural factors impact on gender equality in accessing leadership positions at schools in Swaziland. The study reveals that longstanding patriarchal heritage persists and continues to define gender relationships in all subsystems in Swaziland. The authors conclude that social institutions can never be neutral, because they are active supporters and faithful reflectors of the status quo. Hence, this article recommends that women, instead of fighting against the norm, should adjust

within the patriarchal space to make sense of their Christian expressions. MPG is a classic example, as revealed by data generated from members' experiences and narratives.

### **Do Women 'Feel at Home' in Neo-Pentecostal Churches?**

Neo-Pentecostal churches (NPCs) are active in public spaces and hostels, bars, schools, social halls and cinema, all of which have been turned into churches (Hollenweger 1997). In the northern hemisphere, churches have been closing down and church buildings have been turned into social halls or museums. In contrast, in Africa, there is evidence of a revival of Christianity (Asamoah-Gyadu 2000). Though there is little if any statistical evidence of this growth in Christianity, what is clear is that it has found fertile ground among women who feel alienated in mainstream Christianity. High membership numbers in NPC is confirmed by Anderson (1995:284), who observes,

It shares the generally fissiparous nature of the Pentecostal movement. In a context where people's choice of religion is determined by its ability to produce results and deal with their existential questions, this can hardly be otherwise. Just as the traditional gods are followed as long as they produce expected results, so is the Neo-Pentecostal movement able to attract people as long as they can discern the anointing of God upon a particular church or fellowship and its leadership.

As reported by Asamoah-Gyadu (2000) and other scholars, women are the majority in NPCs in Africa, and that is overwhelming evidence that 'they feel at home' as active participants in God's ministry. Their congregations offer fellowship and support in prayer, particularly to people who feel marginalised. Women also attain a new identity in these new Christian expressions. They receive affirmation, as the churches provide them with mechanisms to cope with the stress of extended family life, family conflicts and social disintegration created by a rapidly changing society. They share a caring support network outside the formal structures of society, which present opportunities for personal achievement. They are also accorded recognition through assuming significant roles as pastors, prophetesses and bishops, hence mediators of God's grace and spirit over humanity.

An example of a female leader, who founded one of the fastest growing NPCs, is Bishop Margaret Wanjira of Jesus Is Alive Ministries in Kenya. According to Mwaura (2005) members of the church accepted Bishop Wanjira's leadership, despite that she was an unmarried single mother. They held her in high esteem as a person with God's anointing. To the church, her gender and status were irrelevant because she had been 'renewed in Christ'. However, Bishop Wanjira confessed that she had been subjected to insults because of her personal status. She derived fulfilment in being a woman, and this had endeared her to her followers, particularly single mothers. Her deliverance ministry was particularly appealing to those who perceived themselves to be victims of witchcraft, misfortune and afflictions of life attributed to the devil and his demons. She presented to them a comprehensive theology of salvation that encompassed new life and victory over all evil. Members could identify with her easily, since she was delivered from the forces of evil, she understood affliction, poverty, prostitution, hunger and all wants.

Not only are women's needs, both spiritual and otherwise, met in these NPCs, they are also made to feel important. Usually, single mothers, unmarried women, and divorced or separated women have no roles in some mainstream churches and may be barred from holding office in church leadership. However, NPCs in Africa welcome and affirm them. Since power is charismatic, they, too, can be channels of divine power (Asamoah-Gyadu 2000). However, despite empowerment of women in some NPCs by the liberating hermeneutic of their reading of scripture, some societies demonstrate ambivalent attitudes towards women. Hackett (1998:216) explains:

At one level women may enjoy greater participation and leadership opportunities in God's army, whilst at another level they are frequently stigmatized and demonized, notably those of the unmarried and 'liberated variety'.

Despite these diffident attitudes towards women as leaders, there are women who are so empowered that they are able to swim against the tide, and they experience what Mwaura (2005:47) calls 'ministerial freedom'; they are able to preach, heal, prophesy and exorcise demons. MPG, also classified as an NPC, is an example of a charismatic religious body that enjoys 'ministerial freedom' to practise its spiritual gifts, though within patriarchal frameworks.

### **Theoretical Considerations: African Women's Anthropology**

Reflections in this article are drawn on African women's anthropology, which advances that patriarchal structures were created by one gender in time immemorial to institutionalise the alleged inferiority of women before men (Oduyoye 2001). Stereotypical generalisations on genders are passed down through generations and are reinforced through religio-cultural and Christian institutions. The African women's anthropology approach takes cognisance of culture as an indispensable variable within gender discourse in Africa, and argues that culture shapes and influences the experiences of African women (Kwok 2001). As noted by Phiri (2004), culture is a social construct that assigns roles to women and men based on how society understands the identities of women and men. Whilst Phiri acknowledges that culture is important, because it gives people their identities, she also asserts that, 'unfortunately African cultures have viewed women as less important than men, thereby making it difficult for women to have valid relationships with self, others, creation and God' (Phiri 2004:17). Hence, culture can provide women with communal identity and a sense of belonging. At the same time, culture can be manipulated and used as a tool of domination. Kanyoro (2001), Oduyoye (2001), Phiri (2004) and Nadar (2009) have theorised about the humanity of African women and how it is intricately tied with religio-cultural and social expectations of women's subordinate status. Moyo (2004) perceives these societal expectations as being bred in religio-cultural and Christian institutions, which socialise women to believe that they are custodians of acceptable beliefs and behaviours in a patriarchal space.

At the heart of this paper is the argument that Swazi women can, using the example of MPG, take the lead in forming ecumenical associations through establishing women-led prayer groups. However, as they create their own spaces of Christian devotion, they will practice their spirituality within the poles of patriarchy; by doing so, they intentionally and mostly unintentionally affirm the patriarchal agenda.

Related to the African women's anthropology approach on which the article draws, is African feminist pneumatology, a perspective which, according to Kaunda and Phiri (2016), emphasises the intersectionality of African cultures, women's experiences, spiritual empowerment and the Holy Spirit. In their insightful comment about women's experiences with the Holy Spirit, Kaunda and Phiri (2016) assert that it empowers women to resist unjust relations of power in the church, by enabling them to practice their spiritual

gifts on equal ground with their male counterparts, whilst the women are empowered to deal with multiple oppressions (Asamoah-Gyadu 1998). For Asamoah-Gyadu, this confirms that God's call to women is real and active, rather than passive. He refers to women-led ministries, which, he says, are legitimised by their leaders having had encounters with God through conversion experiences, who were subsequently endowed with divine powers, which manifest in their ability to heal and deliver people from demons.

The gist of the argument in this paper is that women at MPG do have experiences with the Holy Spirit, and they exercise their gifts of leadership, prophesy and healing. However, patriarchy is a deeply rooted social construct that manages to exert pressure on them to conform, instead of challenging it.

## **Feminist Research Methodologies**

The article is located within a qualitative critical feminist paradigm. Nadar (2014:20) lists the key characteristics of feminist methods of research as embracing a 'suspicion of master narratives of knowledge', encouraging creative use of tools for knowledge gathering and dissemination, promoting subjectivity and reflexivity within the research process and, most importantly, empowering participants during the process. Put simply, feminist methods affirm that the process of research is as important as the product. Mama (2011:13) emphasises that, in feminist research,

it is clear that despite the pressure to remain within positivist conventions, feminist researchers in the region have sought to give voice to women through methods that allow and encourage the articulation of previously unavailable narratives – story telling, oral histories, biographies and life stories reflect growing awareness of the limits of the androcentric archive and the colonial and postcolonial information systems that have silenced women and suppressed their perspectives.

This article, therefore, has a section on data presented in the form of narratives. I report narratives shared by four participants in their testimonies on how they experience God at MPG. Nadar, in her article, *Her-stories and Her-Theologies: Charting Feminist Theologies in Africa* (2009), identifies storytelling, specifically, as a key method used by African women to make theological sense of their experiences in patriarchal societies.

## Location of the Interviews

**Table 1 Profiles of participants**

Name	Age	Level of education	Marital status	Church affiliation	Location
Mrs A	60	Secondary	Married	Former Zionist	Rural
Miss B	45	Primary	Single parent	Zionist	Rural
Mrs C	56	Primary	Divorced	Charismatic	Rural
Mrs D	51	No formal education	Married	Charismatic	Semi-urban
Mrs E	62	Primary	Married	Charismatic	Rural
Mrs F	50	Secondary	Married, but single	Zionist	Rural
Mrs G	48	Secondary	Married	Charismatic	Semi-urban
Miss H	38	Tertiary	Single	Zionist	Urban
Miss I	45	Secondary	Single parent	Charismatic	Rural
Mrs J	65	No formal education	Married	Methodist	Rural

A key characteristic of feminist research is creating a safe and welcoming space for women to share their experiences and narratives (Nadar 2014). Primary data was produced through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 10 female participants who were active members of the MPG group. I awarded participants alphabetical code names, as given in Table 1. The interviews were conducted in places where these participants felt relaxed. Some preferred their homes, whilst others chose to meet at their respective churches. Permitting them to choose their own spaces, where they would be comfortable and more inclined to speak, was important, because the place where an interview is carried out has an impact on the responses participants provide (Patton & Cochran 2002). Establishing good rapport with the participants yielded good results. Prior to the interviews I had initiated open communication, even on other gender issues that were not directly related to

this particular research investigation. My position as a feminist researcher was made clear to the participants from the outset.

Furthermore, as far as possible, distractions and interruptions were eliminated during interviews (Creswell 2003). Employing attentive listening skills allowed me to probe participants' responses further through prompts and interjections, to allow for personal reflections. I was also a participant observer in some of the church services, where I had an opportunity to listen to the testimonies that members of the prayer group, amongst them the women profiled in Table 1, shared. Other people like the praise singer and song leaders were interviewed when I attended the church services. Since there was no documented history of the group, I relied on primary sources to learn about its history, development and ethos, which will be discussed in following sections.

### **Establishment of Mhlabuhlangene Prayer Group**

In Swaziland, there are a number of prayer groups that are Pentecostal in character and they are under the leadership of women. They include Bafati Bentsaba (Women of the Mountain), Bafati Bendwayimane (Women of the Catapult), Bafati Bazwelonke (Women of all Nations) and Women of the Well. Affiliation to these groups is also open to youth and men. Although it is mostly women who are at the forefront of initiating interdenominational Christian formations of this nature, there are some that are established by men, among which are *Umkhobo* (Zombie), Restoration International and Amatshe Evangeli (Stones of the Gospel).

The establishment of MPG illustrates the African women's pneumatological perspective which emphasises women's experiences of the Holy Spirit in their important roles as active participants in women-led churches. Data collected from the participants of the study reveal that the origin of MPG is attributed to a revelation that the founder, Make Shongwe, had in the late 1990s. The group's name, Mhlabuhlangene, refers to the nature of its membership, namely, women of different denominations and social classes. MPG is led by Make Shongwe of Etiyeni in Swaziland, who is popularly known as *Make* (Mother). This designation is in the nature of a title that represents her authority over every member of the group.

Participants Mrs A, Mrs C and Miss I shared the narrative of how Make Shongwe formed the group. She lived an ordinary life, but was a daughter of a traditional healer. She was her father's helper in healing, known as

*nyankwabi*. A certain Christian preacher who wanted to settle down in marriage went out to the mountains to pray to God for a wife. God revealed Make Shongwe to him, and said that she would be his future wife. The preacher then approached Make Shongwe's family and asked for her hand in marriage. At first, she was reluctant, because the man was advanced in years. She later accepted the proposal and they were married. Then, she was saved and, according to four of the participants, Mrs A, Miss B, Mrs G and Mrs J God called her to form an interdenominational women's prayer group that would be an alternative to the 'civilised' Christianity practiced in churches. The definition of 'civilised' Christianity given by the participants is the type that critically questions cultural norms and values, and whose practitioners are insensitive to God's voice, which is meant to direct them, even in mundane affairs.

It is clear from the data that Make Shongwe, after her experience with the Holy Spirit, was more inclined to founding a spiritual movement that would condone and cushion patriarchy, than to dismantle its mechanisms. This is incongruent with the tenets of African feminist pneumatology, which, at its core, seeks to empower women to resist unjust structures, and to liberate them from oppressions endorsed by patriarchally-oriented societies. Kaunda and Phiri (2016) and Mwaura (2005) agree in this regard, and claim, furthermore, that the Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts equally, so that women can function in equality with their male counterparts. Women at MPG seem to take the opposite view; they are content and protective of religio-cultural constructions, which, when viewed with feminist lenses, can be considered oppressive to women.

According to Mrs A and Mrs C, at the establishment of the group, there were six women, but membership in 2019 had swelled to 400 members all over the country, especially in remote areas. Participants' demographic details in the profile table illustrate this claim, with eight of the 10 participants residing in rural areas. However, participants were quick to clarify that the members of the group were affiliated with their own churches, and that MPG was only an interdenominational prayer group that met on the fifth and seventeenth days of each month to pray. On the fifth day, they fasted and prayed specifically for all Swazi children, whilst on the seventeenth, during all night prayers, they pleaded for God's interminable protection over their lives and the entire Swazi nation. They also prayed for *Make*, asking God to grant her the wisdom to teach members the authentic 'old-time religion'. The group does not have a specific gathering place for their prayers; they meet at any homestead where they are

invited. Every Monday, the founder hosts deliverance sessions at her home-  
stead, where she prays for the sick and demon-possessed. Mrs D listed the  
demon-related ailments that *Make* heals, which include women's barrenness  
and infertility, and broken marriages. Jules-Rosette (1985:93) refers to these  
ailments as 'culturally perceived illnesses'. Jules-Rosette adds another  
dimension, explaining that female healers provide alternative medical care,  
spiritual healing and services equivalent to psychotherapy and group therapy,  
especially for those who cannot afford the high cost of professional services.  
Women living in a society where power relations are skewed, where they are  
socialised to accept their inferior status, and to feel responsible for any social  
ill, therefore, escape to Christian formations such as MPG, where they find  
solace and therapy.

### **The Ethos of Mhlabuhlangene Prayer Group**

As is the case with most NPCs that are led by women, in which women play  
prominent roles, and which elevate the uniqueness of women, MPG is led by  
a female founder. Make Shongwe serves as pastor, evangelist, healer, mother,  
prophetess, and overseer. Women, who make up the majority of the prayer  
group, are given leadership titles, though they are subordinate to those of the  
founder. According to the participants, MPG is not a splinter group of any  
existing church or foundation, but unites women from diverse Christian  
backgrounds at grassroots level. Members remain active in their congregations,  
even though their involvement in the prayer group is sometimes not approved  
by their church leaders<sup>4</sup>. The group has a strong spiritual identity, and it does  
not claim to be a church; hence, the group does not hold activities on Sunday  
mornings. After the group's weekend all-night prayer meetings, members  
return to their homes so that they would attend their usual church services the  
next day. As stated earlier, MPG is neo-Pentecostal in outlook. Whilst it is not  
a church in a formal sense, it draws its worldview from Pentecostalism, by  
emphasising the receiving of certain gifts of the Spirit, such as speaking in  
tongues, prophesying and healing, as signs of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.  
Members of the prayer group rely largely on revelations that involve the Holy

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<sup>4</sup> Mrs. D. explained in interviews conducted at Ticantfwini in the outskirts of  
Manzini on 5 February 2018 that members still remain active at the local  
churches.

Spirit, through an inner voice, speaking to them, and abiding by these revelations. Whilst much depends on the ingenuity of the group's female leader in interpreting the revelations, members acknowledge the Holy Spirit as the source of their gifts of vision, prophetic utterances and healing. The founder is extremely important to the members, and she has surrounded herself are a small group of women that forms a nucleus; hence, she is referred to as *Make*.

MPG is growing fast because it emphasises the good things in life that an indigenous Swazi appreciates: good health, a long life, children and titles. As noted by historian David Maxwell (1998), any brand of religious formation that fails to take cognisance of these needs is bound to lose its hold on its members. MPG's African ethos is also evident in the members' consciousness of malevolent spirits, which the mission churches scarcely acknowledge as being real. The messages members receive through revelations address the fears and trials facing a Swazi, and provide protection against such evil forces. Hence, Swazis see evil spirits everywhere, which, they believe, should be exorcised through fasting and prayer. Coupled with this belief is the ministry of faith healing, which forms a central part of the life of many NPCs. Members of MPG and their leader, discern the causes of illnesses or diseases through prophecies, visions and dreams. They proclaim that ailments are caused by demons, and that people should defy Western medical care to be cured. This is the reason why the prayer group attracts mostly underprivileged people, who cannot afford nor have access to Western medicine. It is plausible that members' perspective on cosmic forces resonates with what African feminist pneumatology identifies as a basic tenet of African spirituality, which upholds the importance of maintaining harmony or balance between spiritual forces and human beings, whilst sustaining social relationships between God and human beings (Magesa 1972).

## **Beliefs and Practices of MPG**

The beliefs and practices of MPG reveal the core of the African feminist pneumatological perspective, which is based on the women's experience of the Holy Spirit. For women of MPG, the Holy Spirit communicates as a voice. According to the participants, honouring God's authority, and allegiance to his voice, is the core of MPG. Thus, members start their prayer services by giving praise to God through special people designated *timbongi* (praise singers). These praise singers wear a special black-and-white uniform, which,

participants claimed, the Holy Spirit indicated to the founder committed members of the group should wear. This item on their programme is done in the traditional Swazi style: usually, *timbongi* sing praises to the king before he addresses the nation. At the prayer meeting, praise singers are accompanied by vibrant singing; the group sings songs that represent their diverse church backgrounds. When I had attended one of the services in Matsapha I interviewed the praise singer who equated the singing of praises to usual Swazi practice. In her words she said;

*Sicala ngekubongelela Nkulunkulu, sisho tibongelelo takheletimfanele kuze kutsi naye abone kutsi sinenhlonipho lenkhulu kuye. Njengoba nemaSwati nawo abongelela inkhosi yawo, natsi senta njalo [we start every service with the singing of praises to our God, because we want to show Him that we love and respect Him, just like the Swazis do to their king, we also do the same]<sup>5</sup>.*

The vibrant worship at MPG confirm Hackett's assertion in *Women and New Religious Movements* (1987), that worship provides women with an opportunity to achieve spiritual rejuvenation and escape from the drudgery of life, as the service is participatory. Furthermore, the singing creates a sense of community, because women are able to express themselves freely through singing, dancing, prayer, sharing testimonies, and ecstatic experiences, such as falling into trances, speaking in tongues and prophesying (Hackett 1987).

Participants revealed that MPG does not have structured theological beliefs, as churches do; instead, members embrace any belief that the Holy Spirit reveals, especially to the founder and the prophetesses who work closely with her. Mrs E cited a revelation that she had received from God, which opposed them visiting hospitals to seek medical attention. In a dream, God instructed her to relay to the group that He was disappointed to see Christians queuing with others in hospitals and clinics for medication. According to God, these Christians had little faith, because they failed to trust in God's power to heal all ailments. Since that encounter with God, the participant claims to have avoided hospitals. Taking their cue from that revelation, members of the prayer group are taught to fast and pray to God to be delivered from diseases.

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<sup>5</sup> Personal interview conducted in June 5 2016 with one of the praise singers, whom I requested to interview when I attended a prayer session in Matsapha.

As the group engages in deep prayer, more members typically receive revelations that continue to shape their spiritualities. Mrs C, Mrs J and Miss I cited another revelation that stopped members from using hair products. Miss I in particular, claimed to have heard a voice that instructed her to go to Manzini (Swaziland's second-largest city) bus station and look on people's heads. While she was at that busy place, she saw mucus covering people's heads, and a voice told her that this was how disgusting it was in God's eyes when women apply hair products to their heads. The voice also told her that the chemicals used in the hair products originated from a snake called *Oliyovo*.

It also transpired from the discussions with participants that members of the group do not use contraceptives for family planning. God had revealed to one of the members that He opposed family planning. Further information on revelations and how members of the prayer group experience God was shared as testimonies.

## **The Women's Experiences of God**

As stated earlier, the article is premised on storytelling, as a key method used by African women to make theological sense of their experiences in patriarchal societies. The following stories are drawn from testimonies of four women I listened to when I was a participant observer in one of the group's prayer meetings. The four participants are those I coded in the profile table as Miss B, Miss C, Mrs D and Mrs F. These testimonies depict the group's beliefs and practices.

### ***Mrs. F.***

Mrs F testified about the importance of children in the family, thereby discrediting the use of contraceptives. She claimed that, whilst in a trance, she heard a voice instructing her to go to a certain secluded room, where she found new-born babies, singing a hymn with sweet voices. Fascinated, she asked who these babies were. The voice said that all these were babies that had been deprived of their divine right to be born in the physical world because their parents chose to use contraceptives. According to the voice, every woman was created by God to give birth to a certain number of children that would populate the physical world; failing which, the children would be born and live in the spirit world. On judgment day, mothers would meet these babies and the

mothers would face God's punishment. The voice declared, furthermore, that Mrs F should not concern herself about contracting sexually transmitted diseases (including the deadly HIV/AIDS), because, as a prayerful woman, she was immune; even if her husband contracted diseases from someone else, the virus would burn into ashes whenever Mrs F was sexually intimate with her husband.

***Miss B.***

Miss B testified against seeking medical attention. She cited an incident, of a young girl who claimed to have been once a Satanist residing in spirit in the underworld. The girl revealed that there were nurses in the underworld who worked as agents of Satan in hospitals. These nurses were informed when a Christian would visit the hospital for medical attention. They would then be instructed to kill that person because he/she is a threat to Satan's kingdom; hence, mysterious deaths at hospitals. The girl also claimed that Satanists kept record of powerful Christians on their computers; thus, it was important for members to pray for God to protect them against evil spirits.

***Mrs. C.***

Mrs C heard a voice while she was pregnant, which communicated that she should not seek medical care for the whole duration of the pregnancy, because God would take care of the baby. She was instructed that a hospital was a place for people who did not trust in God's power to protect them. Consequently, she did not visit the hospital, and when her labour started, she locked herself inside her house and waited for the baby's arrival. As the pains intensified, the voice reassured her that she would have a normal delivery. Unfortunately, the baby died because of the lengthy labour. Nevertheless, she claimed to have derived strength from the fact that she, at least, had obeyed God's voice by not going to hospital.

***Mrs. D.***

Mrs D spoke strongly against divorce, reporting that God hated it. She invited all those who were struggling in their marriages to attend prayers on deliverance at *Make's* homestead. She told the group that marriages were

destroyed by evil spirits in the form of snakes. These snakes were responsible for divorces in families. The snake takes the place of the man of the house, leaving the husband no choice but to leave, opening a space for the snakes (evil spirits). Adamant men who refuse to leave, would be killed by the snakes. Mrs D cited evil products that are associated with snakes, which members should not use, including Tupperware kitchen items, mayonnaise, eggs and broiler chickens. Regarding Tupperware, she claimed that there was no physical address of the factory where the items are produced, which was proof that the products were manufactured in the underworld, therefore,

*Wonkhe umuntfu lona Tupperware kakhe akati kutsi ufuye tinyoka, ngoba uma unetikhfthini litilishumi, kusho kutsi unetinyoka letilishumi* [Everyone who owns Tupperware items should know that she has domesticated snakes; if you have 10 Tupperware dishes, you own 10 snakes].

What sense do we make of the data above in relation to what the paper seeks to unearth? The following section addresses this question in thematic forms.

## Discussion

### *Women's Leadership in a Patriarchal Space*

As alluded to in the theory section, one of the frameworks premising this paper is the African feminist pneumatological perspective. This perspective emphasises women's experiences of the Holy Spirit, and recognises their leadership roles in religious spaces. Equally, African women's anthropology critically engages patriarchal structures that institutionalise women's inferiority and promotes gender disparities. The core purpose of this article is to demonstrate how women, as members of MPG, conform with patriarchy through their practice of spirituality. Their constructions of themselves and their leadership are shaped by sociocultural nuances, the very fabric that has been woven by men, for males and to support men; hence, women's continued cooperation with the patriarchy (Lerner 1986). Even when women operate within their own leadership spaces, they are conditioned by patriarchal perspectives and power structures to maintain the status quo. They operate within the parameters of dominant patriarchal ideologies, which inform expressions of their spirituality, and their rational choices. As shown by the

data, the women's thought patterns on authority and leadership duplicate those defined by the men-dominated society, and they practice their leadership roles within the boundaries marked by patriarchy.

Mackenzie (1996:95) identifies four female leadership style categories amongst women clergy, namely, sister, girlfriend, the queen *mama* and wise woman. She explains each as follows:

The sister/girlfriend is usually an active member of any group. The queen *mama*/leader reigns supreme over the organization or church ... as *mama* she has everyone organised from the youngest to the oldest, everyone has responsibility in the church, tasks are assigned and *mama* lovingly sees them through ... no one can refuse *mama* anything... you can be fifty years old and still be one of *mama*'s children ..., the wise woman is the sage... she is not always buddy-buddy with everyone and she does not act as a mother figure. This leader is able to apply social knowledge and experiences. Her wisdom can be legendary and everyone seeks her advice and counsel.

This categorisation applies to MPG, where *Make* Shongwe exhibits a queen *mama* leadership style. She sees the church as her family and she assumes the role of nurturer, by taking care of the personal and existential needs of followers. She empowers women at grassroots level by providing them with a forum where they can freely express prophecies and revelations, and they act on what the voice they hear instructs. Women also find liberation from the ever-present fear of evil spirits and other oppressive forces, through deliverance and prayer. These Christian formations, therefore, serve as a vehicle of empowerment that raises the women's status within their self-crafted sphere of influence.

However, this type of leadership can also be construed as paternalistic, with roots in patriarchy. Paternalistic structures, according to McKenzie (1996), do not question the status quo or the legality of power; instead, leadership is built around the authoritative idea that the leader is the one who has the final say in decision-making. Consultation may not even be necessary, as the leader is expected to make choices that will benefit subordinates. It is assumed that the leader puts the wellbeing of the subordinates at the centre of decision making. As shown by data, *Make* shares a paternalistic relationship with the members of MPG, and she is admired and celebrated as an ordained woman of God.

Practices and beliefs of the group also provide evidence that its formulations of power are based on patriarchal frameworks. There is a divinely ordained hierarchy – God and the Holy Spirit in the form of a voice and *Make* – which may not be challenged. This is reflected in the worship procedure, during which members sing praises to the leader, as it is done for leaders such as kings; praises are sung as acknowledgement of authority, and as a sign of allegiance to his or her leadership.

### ***Family as an Institutional Space***

Family is an important institutional location in patriarchy; Moyo (2004) identifies it as one of cultural structures used by older women to socialise girls and younger women into being acceptable women and custodians of acceptable societal norms and values. Family is, in fact, the first environment where girls are socialised in cultural norms and values. Both girls and boys are oriented in gender roles, which are accompanied by a rigid labour distribution. Duties and responsibilities, as defined by gender roles, are perceived to be ‘natural, divine and unchangeable’, and anyone who transgresses the gender limits is labelled as socially deviant (Lerner 1986:16). In the Swazi context, the family is an institution that produces, reinforces, and reproduces social relations, rendering it the breeding ground for patriarchy. Patriarchy emphasises a hierarchical family order, which it regards as the natural command ordained by God. The kernel of patriarchy, as discussed by feminist theologians, is that someone has to be in charge in any given situation, and that a person’s authority demands unquestioning obedience (Ngcobo 2007). This mindset permeates to people’s subconsciousness, such that they find it natural to be subservient to leadership. Religious people even promote a biblical hermeneutics that bargains with patriarchy, that it be internalised as legitimate by women (Kanyoro 2001). What we, therefore, observe in MPG is a strong belief in leadership, where the designation *Make* goes beyond its biological function to define the founder’s leadership position and authority. She commands a great deal of respect from followers, who would not challenge her on anything, lest they offend God.

### ***Women and their Natural Beauty***

As shown by the data, women at MPG do not relax their hair, so as to maintain their natural appearance. Swazi society defines beauty and good character in

terms of a woman's appearance, therefore, women feel obliged to abide by societal standards. This is another way women negotiate with patriarchy, as they act to confirm that the female body is a cultural artefact, defined in response to sociocultural perceptions. In a patriarchal society, a woman's appearance is determined by a plethora of external forces, the core belief being that the woman should have a certain body type (Tshegofa 2004). However, what is attractive varies from one culture to another. A woman's beauty involves people's perceptions, imagination, emotions and physical sensations about a woman's body in relation to values that are not necessarily innate, but learned or expected culturally. Women tend to internalise these beauty ideals through social enforcement, whose agents are social, institutionalised locations, such as family, church and school (Tshegofa 2004). Even women who create leadership spaces within their territory, are stereotypically expected to have a certain appearance, in order to conform to a certain ideal. Thus, a woman's body can never be a neutral entity; someone has to have some kind of control (Tshegofa 2004).

Members of MPG perceive adorning the feminine body as an evil act that is intended to, indecorously, attract people's attention, especially that of men; thus, a sign of a woman's sexual immorality. This belief is not different from imposing beauty ideals on women, which is part of a patriarchal discourse. African women's anthropology critiques the stereotype that women are Eve's incarnates and bearers of sin (Oduyoye 2001). For Acolatse (2001), such dehumanising stereotypes have pushed women to a fatal resignation to the status that is prescribed by men in patriarchal societies.

### **The 'Child Factor Syndrome'**

African feminist scholars identify woman's fertility as being crucial in patriarchal societies for the survival of the family or clan names, and for the incarnation of family ancestors, which Oduyoye (1999) calls the 'child factor syndrome', which is prevalent in African families. Swazi society attaches high value to motherhood, which entails the woman's capability to bear children for her marital lineage, and nurturing. As a result of societal beliefs and norms, children enable women to view themselves as 'full' women who perpetuate the family name through their male children (Nyawo 2013). In other words, women themselves construct their personhood around their ability to procreate. They internalise the dynamics of the male-dominated social hierarchy, which

subsequently shapes their self-conceptualisation that they can only be appropriately defined by childbearing (Kwok 2004). A woman's fertility accords her 'high quality' status in her family, especially if she produces an 'heir' (Nyawo, Nadar & Reddy 2013). The family is assured of its continuity and its permanence in its ancestral residence. Motherhood is, therefore, a highly valued role that is open only to women, but desired by both men and women, indeed, the entire society (Oduyoye 1999).

The cited testimonies illustrate the women's beliefs on threats to their reproduction assignment, which renders them relevant in the patriarchal space. Thus, they need to create cautionary stories about contraceptives, so as to discourage women from using contraceptives for family planning, as captured in the data.

Feminist theologians criticise cultural undercurrents that relegate women to a second class in the social hierarchy, which indoctrinate women to think first and more about the next person than themselves (Mate 2002). In relation to their role as child-bearers, for instance, they are concerned that the man's name will be forgotten after he dies if a woman fails to give him a child. She is even willing to sacrifice her dignity and happiness to rescue the man from shame. So, having children is not about *her*, it is about *him* (Nyawo 2013). Nadar and Potgieter (2010) are, therefore, right when they observe that women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that they are to sacrifice their happiness and live for others, and to have no life except one based on giving affection. In childhood, a girl is made aware of her destiny, that she is a wife-in-waiting who is being prepared for the role of motherhood, which she will fulfil elsewhere, away from her parental home and for the purpose of the community Ngcobo (2007). In MPG, therefore, women's perceptions of themselves and their social roles are shaped by traditional thought patterns on motherhood that reinforce patriarchy.

## **Conclusion**

MPG, as an ecumenically inclusive Christian fellowship, thrives in a context that is patriarchal in its institutions, ideology and distribution of power. In Christian spaces, patriarchy is not viewed as merely a social phenomenon, but a God-given directive and order for society to function properly, and this directive inspires unquestioned commitment. Women in new Christian formations, like MPG, therefore, conform, and lead and function within

patriarchy, instead of challenging it; thus, expressing their spirituality in between the poles of patriarchy. One challenge posed by patriarchy is that, as Lerner (1993) observes, it is not a one-day event; it has developed over a period of many years, at different times and places. As a deeply rooted social construct, patriarchy manages to exert pressure on Christian women to internalise its ideologies, thereby, knowingly or unknowingly, recreating patriarchy every day. Patriarchy derives strength from managing to adapt and find expression in ever-changing sociopolitical and religious spaces. However, this does not repudiate the argument that there has to be more productive ways to empower Christian women to fight against the injustices of patriarchy.

As women-led Christian expressions such as MPG continue to grow with vibrancy and enthusiasm, is the patriarchal agenda being ripped to shreds or reshaped? Evidence presented throughout the paper reveals a desperate need for a prophetic voice that will critically engage patriarchy through the feminist lens, to realise complete empowerment for women.

This voice should justly and deservedly reprove the injurious hermeneutics that patriarchy has imposed on both culture and religion, whilst advocating for a liberating hermeneutics. Liberating hermeneutics is referred to by African feminist scholars as cultural hermeneutics. They motivate that it is key to the liberation of women in Africa, because it opens the eyes of African women, so that they do not succumb blindly to patriarchal sociocultural and religious agendas: 'it is meant not only to counteract the oppressive impact of the Bible, but to create hope and a will to change oppressive situations and structures' (Hinga 1990:34), thus, affirming women's human dignity personhood.

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# Spiritual Goods and Services as Means of Legitimation by a Pentecostal-Charismatic Female Church Leader in Tanzania

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## Abstract

Although men continue to dominate leadership positions, descriptions of Pentecost-Charismatic (PC) churches indicate that, gradually, more women are initiating and acquiring top leadership positions. Using interviews, participant observation, and review of church materials, this paper explores the way a female PC leader, Gertrude Rwakatare of Mountain of Fire Mikocheni B Assemblies of God church in Tanzania, is able to maintain legitimacy through deployment of various spiritual goods and services. The meaning of legitimacy generally describe sources of legitimacy and modes of domination. This article describes various spiritual goods and services that Rwakatare established to suggest and maintain legitimacy. The resources she provides and connections she makes are portrayed using Hero's (2014) categories of services offered. Rwakatare employs symbolic capital of naming and institutional arrangements, and generates trust by performative actions. This female PC leader enhances her popularity by providing solutions that are spiritual, social, and economic. Rwakatare's position is practically explained through the views of congregants, visitors, subordinates and neighbours of her church.

**Keywords:** Female Pentecostal-Charismatic leaders, Pentecostalism, spiritual services, legitimation, Tanzania

## **Introduction**

This paper investigates how Gertrude Rwakatare<sup>1</sup>, a female church leader and founder of Mountain of Fire Mikocheni B Assemblies of God, popularly called *Mlima wa Moto* (Mountain of Fire), legitimises her position. The church is located in urban Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania. Rwakatare achieves legitimation by offering spiritual goods and services with social, spiritual and economic benefits through testimonies of followers and intermediaries, by prophesying achievement of wealth, by using a biography of private enterprise showing her success, by demonstrating special difference in a particular way, using subordinate male church leaders to circumvent gender equality, and doing community outreach. Legitimacy,<sup>2</sup> as used here, does not necessarily mean only the internal means by which an individual actor believes that the action he or she is performing is ‘acceptable and justifiable’ to themselves, it also considers external need, met by supporting people in the environment (Boulding 1967: 299), in this case, Gertrude Rwakatare’s followers and the community the church serves.

In this article, I first present background information, which is followed by methods used to conduct the study. I provide a theoretical explanation of the way religious entrepreneurs market spiritual services as a way of legitimising their positions. Following this section, I use Hero’s (2014) categorisation of marketing concepts to delineate issues pertaining to the supply side of the various spiritual services Rwakatare offers. In conclusion, I highlight the strategies Rwakatare is using to maintain legitimacy.

## **Background**

This article relates to findings of a case study on Gertrude Rwakatare, a female church leader of Mountain of Fire Mikocheni B Assemblies of God. The church was chosen because of its wide influence in Dar es Salaam, and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is being published in honour of the memory of Bishop Gertrude Rwakatare who died on 20 April, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of ‘legitimacy’ used here is derived from Max Weber’s ‘types of legitimate authority’ (1962:75-80), Kenneth Boulding’s ‘sources of legitimacy’ (1967) and Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘modes of domination’ (1990:122-134). See also Mhando *et al.* (2018) with the same perspective.

The church, which was established and is run by a woman, is located in the main urban area of Tanzania. I carried out ethnographic fieldwork for six months, from October 2016 to March 2017. My attempts to arrange a one-to-one session with Rwakatare, the top leader of the church, failed. As I will explain below, my failure to meet her demonstrate her use of institutional arrangements to establish and maintain her legitimacy. To gather data, the researcher resorted to conversations and interviews with other administrators, congregants, and small-business owners neighbouring the church. Furthermore, I attended church services and workshops, reviewed materials about or by/of the church, and used social media to obtain more information about the church. I employed Hero's (2014) categorisation of spiritual goods and services offered by religious entrepreneurs, to illustrate how Gertrude Rwakatare legitimises her position as a leader. The information I collected was analysed in view of what the supply side informs us about the spiritual goods and services marketed, and the self-legitimation of the leader in question.

Therefore, this article intends to answer the following questions: How does Gertrude Rwakatare legitimise her position at Mountain of Fire Mikocheni B Assemblies church? What spiritual services does she deploy? What goods, and what kinds of solutions are offered by the church?

## **Theoretical Framework**

Depending on the requirements of her church members, a religious leader can dispense goods and services that satisfy followers' needs (Bourdieu 1999: 22). Bourdieu (1987) positions 'religious entrepreneurs' in the social-structural context of the 'new petty bourgeoisie', by considering both supply side and demand side arrangements. This article considers the supply side. Weber's theory of charisma (1978) differentiates between the institutionalised and the spiritual aspects of Christianity (Fabian 1971: 4). In response to Weber's definition of religious legitimacy, Bourdieu (1987) divides it into personal charisma and that which arises from institutional or office charisma. Bourdieu's work (1991) on the way religious specialists use symbolic power through the 'esoteric market', with new types of 'treatment for body and soul' (1992:223) links well with how church leaders provide various spiritual services, goods, and solutions in an attempt to ensure legitimacy. Religious authority 'depends on the ability of the institutions that possess it to make known (legitimacy) to those who are excluded from it' (Bourdieu 1991: 25).

In this study, Rwakatare, through her church, circumvents the dominant patriarchal hierarchy, which is fundamental to religious pursuit in Tanzania. If couples take leadership roles in Pentecostal-Charismatic (PC) churches, the husband is usually the senior pastor, while the wife fills a junior pastoral position, or assists with other activities in the church, for instance, as a member of the choir, teaching Sunday school and/or acting as women's group leader. Nevertheless, it has been noted that, gradually, women are establishing churches and filling the most senior positions (Mhando, Maseno, Mtata & Senga 2018).

In order to legitimise her position, the leader has to strive to achieve a degree of monopoly and be competitive in offering services, to distinguish yourself from other religious providers (Redden 2016: 232). This view sees church affiliation as a matter of choice for followers, who choose the various services they wish to receive. Religion is viewed as market-like (Stark & Finke 2000), the 'exposure of multiple consumption options between participants and providers' (Redden 2016: 232). Therefore, people who wish to satisfy their religious needs search for options among various innovative, competitive churches that provide a variety of spiritual goods and services. Religious leaders in any given context have to deploy these goods and services in competing for and in order to monopolise followers and gain legitimacy. This article will contribute to the view that understands the market as involving the 'production of spiritual goods and services as processes intimately tied up with contextual relations and cultural contingencies' (Redden 2016: 236). Individuals give meaning to life in ways shaped by the 'social, cultural, and economic environment in which they live' (Wood & Bunn 2009: 299).

It is important to determine how spiritual goods and services have succeeded in providing religious entrepreneurs with increasing or lasting popularity (Hero 2014). I refer to Hero's work to provide an explanation of how a religious leader deploys religious goods and services, which enables her to acquire a distinct identity, to stand out from the competing mass of suppliers. Although Hero writes about religious leaders from a mainly conceptual point of view, this article utilises ethnographic research data on a female church leader to analyse some of the marketing concepts Hero proposes. Hero proposes three categories of spiritual goods and services: symbolic capital of naming, institutional arrangements, and generating trust by performative actions.

To start with, the symbolic capital of naming places symbolic strat-

strategies at the forefront. Therefore, it involves things that a spiritual entrepreneur who wants to stand out uses to attract consumers' attention (Hero 2014: 79). The brand name needs to be catchy, and must indicate the special service that is being offered in a meaningful way. Moreover, the suppliers and business name must relay positive associations/cognitive identification and differentiation. Religious leaders opt to use concepts 'which hint at their proximity to the social institutions that are recognised as legitimate' (Hero 2014: 79). Thereby, religious leaders reinforce their credibility or integrity to followers, to achieve legitimacy.

Institutional arrangements refer to the structure between religious leaders and their followers. Under institutional arrangements, relationships and regulations assist followers to collaborate, and transform situations of inadequate trust into ones of adequate trust, so that followers are willing to cooperate with the institution. Arrangements include normative rules, which have the potential to impose sanctions. Institutional arrangements also accommodate intermediaries and brokers, such as forums, communal events, and internet platforms. Within the institutional arrangements, long-term relations may develop, leading to a 'reciprocal expectation structure' between religious leaders and followers (Hero 2014: 79).

Finally, regarding generating trust through performative actions, religious leaders communicate directly with followers in order to create an impression of trustworthiness. Performative implies 'the creation of an appearance of trustworthiness, through acts of self-presentation with which the trust-giver tries to persuade the trust-taker of the sincerity of his intention to cooperate' (Beckert 2006: 319). Marketing spiritual services (credence goods) requires sophisticated processes of assuring clients of the trustworthiness of services (Jafari 2014). Trust is 'the expectation of the trust-giver that his one-sided advance concession in the exchange relationship is not exploited by the trust-taker, even though the latter could achieve a higher utility by choosing to defect' (Beckert 2005: 5). Trust can either be fulfilled or violated by a trust-taker; it is identifiable as a social expectation and trust is placed in the trust-taker (Beckert 2006: 319). Religious leaders create trust and loyalty by fitting the portrayal of their own religious biographies with followers' expectations.

Hero's (2014) first and second strategies explained above are observable, non-religious, and service economies. The last strategy, generating of trust by performative trustworthiness, links directly to religion. I agree with Bourdieu (1999), and Boulding (1967), that the process by which religious

leaders seek legitimacy is often a subconscious pursuit. However, in agreement with Mhando *et al.* (2018), I am not suggesting that the female religious leader discussed here, Rwakatare, is cynical, cunning, scheming and unscrupulous actor in the religious field.

## **Deployment of Spiritual Goods and Services**

### ***Biography of a Religious Entrepreneur***

Gertrude Rwakatare was born in 1950, and received her calling in the early 1990s. By 1995, she had founded her church, Mountain of Fire Mikocheni B Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal church. After initially using a classroom, the church moved to a building in Mikocheni B, a residential area in the Kinondoni district of the city of Dar es Salaam. In addition to the main church and head office in Mikocheni B, there are five other branches in Dar es Salaam. By 2009, the church had grown, from an estimated of 7 000, to 10,000 members (Dilger 2009: 98). Her followers increased further at her main church and its branches, and followers attended special workshops held at her church grounds. Rwakatare's ministry emphasises material wealth, community development, and spiritual and bodily healing. Dilger (2009) notes that, although the church is identified as a 'church of the rich', members are mainly female, and come from poorer social backgrounds.

Rwakatare owns a group of schools, from nursery to high school, she founded in 2009, and a teachers' college. Initially, the schools were constructed with the support of Christian Working Woman, a United States-based organisation (Dilger 2009). Rwakatare was nominated by the ruling party, Chama cha Mapinduzi (CCM) through special-seat in parliament for women for the period 2007-2015 and 2017–2020. By entering politics, she is able to interact and mingle with political dignitaries, and to access state resources and other associated benefits. Moreover, being a politician enhances her recognition among followers, and beyond – it promotes her status.

Rwakatare manages and administers the church, schools, and college, which makes her a difficult person to access. Currently, the church provides French and English-language training, and members, especially women, benefit from Rotating and Savings Credit Associations (ROSCAs). One of the church choirs owns *bajajs* (three-wheeler vehicles), which are used to generate income for the church.

At the top on the church's hierarchy is Gertrude Rwakatare herself,

who is referred to as honourable, reverend, doctor, mother, bishop, and senior pastor. Six pastors, four men and two women, assist her. Next down the hierarchy are nine evangelists, followed by six senior elders, and then 29 church elders. In its administration, the church has one male and two female secretaries (one of the latter works for the church, and the other the personal assistant to the bishop, and a female administrator. Pastors and ministers from Tanzania and beyond are invited to preach or teach at main services and other events at the main church, or at other venues in Dar es Salaam.

In addition to her role as a church leader, Rwakatare's accomplishments in entrepreneurship activities are exceptional. Her biography is that of an entrepreneur. She generally spends time in her church office during weekends and, on weekdays, she manages her properties and businesses outside the church in and around Dar es Salaam. One of her male assistants described Rwakatare as a very hard-working leader, a successful entrepreneur, and a model to her subordinates and followers. He explained:

*You know that today mother is sick, but she does not want the followers to know. She pretends to be okay, attending the service as usual. The truth is that these two weeks have been challenging for her. How can any follower be lazy while you see her manage business and the church events when she is sick? That is why she has successful business and many followers are working hard hoping to be like her.*

Her successful entrepreneurship, and commitment to her church leadership position, is implicit in her physical display of affluence, through her dress. Her display of status is vivid, as she is always dressed expensively, in striking, colourful clothes. As she enters and leaves church, she is escorted by some of her well-off church members (also dressed in dazzling clothes), subordinate pastors, church elders, and male bodyguards (dressed in formal suits and wearing dark glasses), carrying belongings for her.

At the end of the church service, she is escorted out to her office, which is big, and furnished expensively. She takes up her seat, located in the front centre of her office, with guests sitting closer to the door and to the side. One guest after the next approaches her, kneeling or sitting on a chair facing her, as she listens to each of them. Close to the door are her assistants, who receive guests as they enter, and serve them with soft drinks. Her bodyguards stand outside the front door of her office. This arrangement displays her high

representational status in the leadership of the church symbolically. Not everyone can visit her office, as only privileged followers and guests are welcome here. One day, as I was talking to a female follower whom I had met several times during my attendance of church events, she informed me tiredly that she was waiting for the assistant pastor, as she could not see the bishop at her office. She said,

*I have to wait for pastor Johnson [pseudonym]. He promised to meet me today and pray for me. I cannot leave the church vicinity before he comes. I have no transport allowance to return home. He will give me money after prayers. I cannot see the bishop, she has power and has to deal with bigger issues for the church. I have tried several times to see her, unsuccessfully. The mother is powerful and I get her blessings while in church service. When I have issues during the week there are pastors to assist.*

Upon hearing her narrative, I compared it to mine: After several endeavours to meet the bishop I had still not had success. I ended up with audiences with the church secretary, and with other assistants and followers. I realised then that my failure to secure a meeting was not just because I was an outsider – a researcher, as I always presented myself to her and others. Furthermore, I realised that many followers spent their time in the church vicinity, waiting for an audience of the assistant pastors, and hoping that, one day, they would get an audience with the bishop. I succeeded in seeing her only once, and we spoke briefly on the phone, but I was not granted an audience for an interview. I was informed she is very busy with business, political and church work in Dar es Salaam and Dodoma regions. This inaccessibility portrays Rwakatare's high position relative to the other pastors and church elders, which gives her legitimacy as the top leader of Mountain of Fire Mikocheni B Assemblies of God church.

Furthermore, the property and businesses that she manages privately, known by her followers, provide her with a symbolic advantage, and gives her the respect of her followers. A subordinate pastor justified Rwakatare's wealth while preaching from the pulpit; he said, 'The Almighty Lord will save people from cheap mentality, people will build houses as if they are not going to move out of this world'. The networks she maintains, the size of her office, church and house, and her outfits project the religiosity she 'propagates with strong

connections to self-referential, subjective patterns of interpretations' (Hero 2014: 86).

Her privileged position is also seen in the position she takes up at the pulpit, and the display of material comfort. During the main service, she occupies the front platform. When infants are brought to her for blessing during church services, she remains seated, holds infants, prays, blesses, and openly presents them with money, which is placed on the babies' foreheads. Usually, she presents at least TZS 10,000 (Tanzanian shillings, equivalent to USD 4.4) (this is the largest note in Tanzania). Congregants often offer her gifts in kind and/or money while she is seated in front of the congregation, as a sign of appreciation for prayers and blessings. Such symbols display her power and affluence.

Rwakatare is a PC preacher who insists that God intervenes, and requires immediate action through community service, speaking in tongues, performing spiritual warfare, and healing miracles, and provides economic prosperity. When she takes the stand to preach in church, she does not need hours of preaching and prophesying, as her subordinate or visiting pastors usually do. She uses her time to introduce visiting pastors and guests, and then uses the remaining time for preaching and prophesying. During Sunday services, she preaches that believers can only gain wealth through God, work, and inheritance. In a sermon, she stated that, 'God answers from the things we proclaim for ourselves. He [Jesus] took on the human body so that we may be rich. Greet your neighbour and say 'meet a millionaire'. Congregants then walked around shaking hands, while repeatedly saying to each other, 'Meet a millionaire'. She continued, 'From now, there is no poverty. Be ready to receive blessing. Rich people sit with rich people, those who are spiritual sit with spiritual people'. In another sermon, she explained, 'Repeat out the words I say, for I see the future, for you believers, you will live a financially prosperous life'. The congregants repeated the words she said. Her sermons are accessible on YouTube, Facebook and radio, through online television show, in newsletters, and through digital television.

From the above narratives it emerges that Rwakatare challenges the legitimacy of other leaders who do not accept that thriving is at the core of the Christian gospel (Anderson 2013; Jones & Woodbridge 2011; Koch 2009) – this is a tenet emphasised by the teaching at Mountain of Fire church. However, the aim of this paper is not to support or criticise the prosperity gospel, but to explain that, through Rwakatare's entrepreneurship biography, she deploys

followers' needs for prosperity, linking them to the gospel. Hence, her biography is a means of legitimation.

Her ministry is directed at vulnerable people, of which women are the majority, though her ministry also embraces wealthy people. She asserts her beliefs in eschatology, often preferring to juxtapose 'the already' and 'not yet' wealthy believers. This is demonstrated by 'the already' wealthy taking up the front places in church, receiving special treatment, and being given status and admiration; while those 'not yet' prosperous illustrate the opposite. Rwakatare deploys strategies that sell herself, along with her spiritual goods and services, as model for her products. The religiousness she propagates, with its 'strong connections to self-referential, subjective patterns of interpretation', is her own (Hero 2014: 86). Therefore, mobilising willingness, so that followers cooperate (Beckert 2002), is communicated through a religious narrative of Rwakatare's personal biographical representation.

### ***Institutional Arrangements***

Rwakatare's position as an exemplary and model leader of the church is also endorsed by institutional arrangements that structure her relationships with her followers. The structural seating arrangement during church services at Mountain of Fire Mikocheni B Assemblies of God confirms the emphasis given to 'the already' and 'not yet' prosperous believers. When you enter her church for prayers, the way you are received depends on your physical appearance, which projects success or lack of it. Those who have already succeeded economically occupy the front seats, close to the front stage, followed by the less affluent, and, next, poor people, who are the majority and occupy the back seats. When congregants enter the church hallway, those who appear affluent, as perceived by their outfits, offerings, and support of church activities, are received by church elders, who assist by carrying these congregants' bags and other belongings. Church elders escort these people as they walk to the front seats, while those who appear less successful do not receive this reception. Thus, what the prosperity message say about the 'here and now and Christian's immediate future or hope' (Anderson 2013), is confirmed at Mountain of Fire.

When it is time for prayers, wealthy congregants are called up first. Congregants are called to make a prayer offering, popularly called *kupanda mbegu* in Swahili, meaning sowing seeds according to your monetary capacity;

offerings start with those who can give TZS 100 000, then 50 000, then 30 000, then 20 000 to 10 000, then last are those who give less than TZS 10 000 (one USD is equal to about TZS 2 300). In return, prayers for success are given in hierarchical order, with the highest seed sowers receiving more prayers for more blessings and forthcoming success than the next group of seed sowers, who contribute less. The structural seating arrangement indicates congregants' responsibility for seed planting, and communicates a message to followers. Followers who are wealthy, have a greater responsibility to return benefits to the church and community. There is no alternative route to becoming prosperous. Followers have to climb the ladder step by step. Being wealthy does not guarantee that a follower will fulfil a top leadership position, though it does bring a follower closer to benefits obtained through spiritual goods and services.

Due to a long-term affiliation between the church arrangements and followers, members at Mountain of Fire church have various responsibilities bestowed on them. Church members have church cards, they pay tithes, participate in community zone prayers, attend various church services and workshops, and participate in ministries and charitable services to the community. This reciprocal expectation structure is maintained between Rwakatare, her assistants (intermediaries, including singers, followers, visitors, pastors, church elders, evangelistic and the like) and Mountain of Fire church (as an institution). This reciprocal expectation structure does not guarantee elimination of all doubts on trustworthiness by some followers who leave the church unsatisfied by the institutional arrangement. What is important, is the way Rwakatare generates trust through the strategies communicated by her actions, and connected directly to religion (Hero 2014).

Another means of legitimation is through intermediaries who acknowledge Rwakatare's authority by praising her and the church at events. The entertaining sermons include Sunday main service, morning glory, and bible study, Monday bible study, Wednesday revival service and fire prayers, Friday night prayer service, and other special events held within and outside the church grounds. Followers remark how the bishop has 'power', and justify the claim through stories of healing, obtaining property, and conquering witches. PC services promote the achievement of material success, positive possibilities in life, prosperity and healing (Asamoah-Gyadu 2000; Tazanu 2016), hence, representing a shift, from saving the soul for the afterlife, to

redeeming this worldly body (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007). Followers are attracted to Rwakatare's aspiration for 'immediate solutions to their problems' (Daswani 2011). As a female singer explained before a performance,

*Bishop Rwakatare is a powerful healer, and defeater of poverty. She conquers witches, defeats poverty, and awakens talents among us. Lets sing to praise the Lord Almighty for the blessings given to us through Bishop. We will all receive prosperity.*

A female follower testified to have given birth to a baby after a long struggle to fall pregnant. She explained that the 'bishop is power, she is powerful, she is fire. Through her prayers my womb opened and I now have a baby boy after many years of moving from one medical doctor to another, one traditional healer to another, without success'. A male follower testified during a revival workshop that he had received a revelation regarding the powers of Rwakatare. He said,

*I was struggling for my shop business to flourish and decided to go see a witch doctor for help. That night, as I was sleeping, I found myself climbing a mountain. As I reached the top of mountain I saw Bishop Rwakatare with Juliana [pseudonym for a famous gospel singer] and someone who I could not recognise in white clothes. The one wearing a white cloth, an angel of God, instructed me to come to Mountain of Fire church and see the Bishop and all my problems will be solved.*

A male pastor from Kenya told the congregants during a bible study session, 'When you have money, you will be a leader and gain respect. You will sit among those highly respected people in office, government, and community'. Another male pastor from central Tanzania confirmed Rwakatare's position, by explaining three means of acquiring wealth: work, inheritance, and God. The pastor continued by saying,

*It is important for people of God to work hard. Laziness is not going to bear any fruit in your life. By prophesy one may become rich. You need to believe and miracles will happen. We all have to work hard so the prophesy for ending poverty in our lives become reality. It is upon*

*working hard that we can have property to pass on to others. I declare the grace following the bishop to also follow you. Mountain of Fire is highest above all other places. When you are up the mountain the whole of Dar es Salaam is visible. You will receive property, a higher position in office, and your business will expand.*

The above narrative is similar to earlier explanation by Rwakatare's assistant about her being a hard-working leader. Despite being sick, she continued carrying out her church responsibilities, without letting followers notice that she is not well. Moreover, we note narratives validating her legitimacy through an ability to do spiritual and physical healing, enable people to gain wealth, gain leadership and respect, and end poverty.

Rwakatare's legitimation is also achieved through the church's administrative arrangements, which are dominated by male assistants who affirm her link to her followers. Most of her immediate assistants are male pastors (one woman and four men), evangelists (nine men), and senior elders (six men). Usually, Rwakatare manages the most important services, with key backup being provided by male pastors. The female pastor working in the church headquarters mainly leads praise and worship sessions, with some preaching responsibilities. Pastors who visit the church again and again refer to Rwakatare, which reminds congregants that Rwakatare is their leader and pastors are there to support her. These pastors are from within and outside the country, and have outstanding preaching abilities that address the hearts and needs of congregants.

Most of the Assemblies of God churches in Tanzania are administered by men, but the Mountain of Fire church, which is a subdivision of this denomination, is led by a woman. As noted by Mwaura (2008:279) women can be mediums of the Spirit and obtain spiritual presents, just like men can. Mwaura (2008) refers to Asamoah-Gyadu (2000:21) and observes, 'the charismatic ministries do not impose any Levitical or traditional taboos on women. They regard these as being inconsistent with New Testament teaching, particularly with the missionary experiences that followed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts'. Rwakatare being a single mother does not disqualify her from God's anointing, since she has been reformed in Christ. She is pleasing to those who are vulnerable to witchcraft, misfortune, suffering, and economic difficulties. Therefore, one may argue here that there is element of gender in ministry (Mwambura 2008: 280).

### ***The Symbolic Capital of Naming***

Another legitimacy of Rwakatare is located in the church's brand name, Mountain of Fire. The brand name links with the church's mission, 'to bring fire of the mission of power of God in people's lives', and to a range of services and revival ministries that are marketed. These services and revival ministries attract guest speakers from within and outside the country, and play a vital role in attracting many followers. The 'Encouragement Hour' is a service aired weekly on television, and 'Shiloh' is a conference conducted annually; furthermore, there are mid- and year-end Cross Over Seminars, and Women Economy Conferences. Usually, attendees of the various events are provided with free transport on buses stationed at various pickup points within Dar es Salaam city. The church's radio station (Praise Power Radio) attracts followers through discussion of topical issues and repeated advertisements for Mountain of Fire Church, which distinguishes it from other Assemblies of God churches. For example, in 2016, Shiloh was held from 4 to 11 December. In 2017, 22-29 January, a seminar was conducted for renewal and blessings for wealth creation. Such events are characterised by instant healing, public exorcisms, performance of miracles, and prophetic promises.

The church has a Facebook page, blog spot, and online television and YouTube channels, with information on workshops, church services, special events, and community development work. Followers are supplied with flyers and brochures, and buy blessed items, such as handkerchiefs, badges, water and oil. One of the advertisements for a Sunday service read, 'Come and receive a car, house, health, plot, trip, permit, job, children, healing, etc. Believe and take action. The storm you experience will end, Jesus will defend you'.

Moreover, the church has different ministries targeting particular members, whether male, female, married, single, youth, and teenagers. There is a group called Women for Christ Alliance, who conduct outreach services to families and communities. These ministries support and facilitate followers and non-followers with specific issues relating to marriage and relationships, provide guidance and solve problems. The ministries also tap into other expertise, beyond religious specialists, to cover topical issues on leadership and management, entrepreneurship development, and language training. Some of the services that are offered generate income for the church. Other social services are for the needy and sick, which establish legitimacy beyond Rwakatare's congregation.

## Conclusion

This article described Rwakatare, the leader of Mountain of Fire Mikocheni B Assemblies of God church, who, through supplying spiritual goods and services, legitimises her position. The resources she deploys were analysed using Hero's (2014) categorisation of spiritual goods and services. The first category is generating trust by performative actions, which are communicated through Rwakatare's biographical self-portrayal. Secondly, she provides institutional arrangements that structure the relationship between her and her followers. Lastly, she deploys the symbolic capital of naming through an outstanding brand and concepts that create positive associations. Thus, Rwakatare's legitimacy is achieved through adopting and patenting suitable names, to construct and maintain her reputation. By embracing credible intermediaries, she presents herself to doubtful followers. Moreover, she maintains a strong autobiography, as proof of her capability, legitimacy, authenticity, and conviction regarding what she offers.

Therefore, Rwakatare communicates a religious and entrepreneurial biography that guarantees followers products on the basis of her own, personal career history. Her designation (bishop, honourable, doctor, reverend, and mother) and political and economic positions, generate trust and loyalty from the interface of system and person (Beckert 2002:37).

Rwakatare provides social and economic solutions to her followers and non-followers. These solutions consist of promoting entrepreneurial action, especially among poor women; bailing prisoners; offering employment; and supporting youth and the underprivileged. In particular, she uses her experience as a woman entrepreneur and mother to support and offer solutions. This shows gender difference in her position as the leader of the church, to win acceptance, hence, affecting gender relations in the religious field and community at large.

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# Women's Guild Collective Spirituality: Inaccessible Space for Bereaved Elderly Women

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## Abstract

This study defines collective spirituality as the coming together of individual Christian women to worship God in one accord, despite their status or cultural differences. The women of the Women's Guild form a community of believers in a communal environment of Christians, where care, connectedness, inclusiveness or acceptance is practiced by all members. Individuals are seen to be connected to self, to others and to God. Through collective spirituality, the Women's Guild has managed to be a church within a church in a predominantly patriarchal structure. This study shows that, while the Women's Guild's collective spirituality has been an integral part of the church in Africa; it has received little attention as a space that is inaccessible for certain women, such as those who can be defined as bereaved, elderly women (BEW). The framework of the accessible God was used to address the question of how the collective spirituality group of the Women's Guild is an inaccessible space for BEW. This case study refers to data gathered from in-depth interviews with 10 members of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Dzenza congregation in Lilongwe, Central Region, Malawi. The findings confirm that the Women's Guild's collective spirituality group is an inaccessible space for BEW. It concludes that BEW have been restricted to accessing God in their private spaces only.

**Keywords:** Women's Guild, collective spirituality, inaccessible space, bereaved elderly women

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

According to Wainaina (2015:71), most churches have powerful Women's Guild groups, which were founded by women in the church. These organisations serve the purpose of conducting various activities that strengthen the ministry of women in the church. Mombo (2002:73) point out that establishing these organisations is a positive accomplishment for women, because these organisations create a space for women to be active in the church; it is within this space that women realise a new status. Phiri (2007:80-81, 99) explains that women achieve a sense of belonging and authority to spread the gospel within a male-dominated space. Haddad (2002:292) calls this as a 'space within the structures of power', because Women's Guild members use this space for 'praying, dancing and singing' (Haddad 2002:102-104). In other words, these scholars say that this space is precious for women, because they are able to participate in spiritual activities freely and collectively. Even though Haddad's research concerning the Women's Guild was in the context of South Africa, in the Vulindlela area, her work is relevant to this study, because both refer to the Women's Guild as involving collective spirituality.

Spirituality is both broad and complex, as argued by Tanyi when she says that, 'spirituality is a broad concept with many perspectives and there is no consensus on the definition of this concept' (2002:50). Even though the word, spirituality, has a broad and complex meaning, Schneider (1989) notes that the word is not limited to Christianity, and can be approached from an atheistic or non-atheistic perception. The point is expanded by Pretorius, when he says, '[i]n Western tradition, spirituality mostly makes reference to something greater than us, such as God, or a Higher Power, or the Divine' (2008:150). However, in this study, the term spirituality will be used in the context of Christianity and will refer to collective spirituality. Although individual spirituality is an important issue for discussion, the focus of this study is on the collective spirituality of the Women's Guild, particularly the Dzenza Women's Guild group. Note that the terms group and organisation are used interchangeably in this study.

Bereaved elderly women (BEW), in the context of this study, are defined as women who are members of the Dzenza congregation in Malawi at

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<sup>1</sup> The study is part of my thesis, which investigated bereaved, elderly women via a case study.

the time interviews were conducted to collect data for this study. These are women whose adult children had died due to AIDS-related illnesses and, consequently, they are caring for their orphaned grandchildren in their old age. It is significant for this study that some of these deceased adult children had been the main breadwinners of the family and, as a result, the BEW are caring for orphaned grandchildren with few or no resources. The BEW are, therefore, a financially stressed group, who shoulder enormous responsibilities at this late stage of their lives, often with no help.

In this study, the author examined the Women's Guild's method of recruiting new members and how membership of the group is retained. It is argued that the Women's Guild's method of recruiting and retaining membership should not receive more attention than the marginalisation of BEW. The central question posed, is how is the Women's Guild's collective spirituality an inaccessible space for BEW? To address it, the study utilised research methodology and methods of individual interviews that will be explained in detail in the section of research methodology and methods. The study refers to the accessible God theory in the literature review, followed by a brief background on the Women's Guild's collective spirituality, after which the findings of the study and the discussion is presented, followed by the conclusion.

## **Research Methodology and Methods**

The location of the study is the Dzenza congregation of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), in Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi. Dzenza is a semi-rural area about about 15 kilometres from the Lilongwe city centre, and this congregation of the CCAP was chosen as the location of this study because of its accessibility. It can be reached by public or private transport, though parts of Dzenza are accessible only by foot.

The present study used purposive sampling to select participants from the Dzenza congregation. Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006:49) state that sampling refers to the choice of participants, settings or events that are to be studied. Bearing this in mind, the criterion used to select participants for this study was that they should be able to contribute to an understanding of the Women's Guild's collective spirituality as an inaccessible space for BEW. An explanation was given to the participants concerning the purpose of the study, who the intended participants would be, the methods of gathering data and the importance of the participants giving consent to be interviewed.

In this study 10 BEW participated, four of the participants were caring for maternal grandchildren and six of them were caring for paternal grandchildren. Caring for grandchildren was a purposive criterion, rather than requiring BEW to have lost adult children to AIDS-related illnesses. At the time of the interviews, in 2012, the BEW were at least 60 years of age. Six of them were widows and four were still married; however, none of the BEW was employed. All the BEW were struggling financially, so, they struggled for food to feed themselves and the orphaned grandchildren they were taking care of.

### **Brief Background on Women's Guild Collective Spirituality**

The Women's Guild in Malawi is one of the branches of the CCAP. The Women's Guild members who were interviewed explained that they play various roles in the Dzenza congregation, including activities such as visiting the sick, the bereaved and the lonely, taking care of the poor, orphans and the elderly, and preaching the Word of God. As confirmed by Bam (2005:13), the Women's Guild refers to a group of women organised around prayer and pastoral activities.

The success of the Women's Guild collective spirituality group can be traced to female members of congregations in Scotland. As explained by Pauw (1980), the origin of the CCAP's Women's Guild can be traced to the leadership of female missionaries who started the Women's Guild in 1940. The spiritual maturity of Malawian women is attributed to the teachings of Mrs Elizabeth Murray. As pointed by Retief (1958:80), working with women was Mrs Murray 's heart and soul, and this commitment had a fruitful outcome, in the founding of the Women's Guild.

Phiri (1997) explains that Mrs Murray's success in establishing the Women's Guild was the result of eager responses by Malawian women to the Christian gospel and other Christian faith teachings. In other words, Phiri suggests that, the success achieved by Mrs Murray, while commendable, was only possible with the help of Malawian women who were open to following the gospel and Mrs Murray's teaching. Essentially, without the commitment of Malawian women, no success would have been possible.

According to Phiri (2007:81), the Women's Guild practice of collective spirituality lead members to realise that all women are one body in Christ, and that each member has a different gift (Romans 12:4-8); women are encouraged to use the gifts they have received to serve others. In this study

most BEW were aware of the various roles fulfilled by members of the Women's Guild, and they were aware that support was available to persons who belong to the Dzenza congregation, and outsiders, who were in need of assistance. This is why, when they did not receive the spiritual and physical care they expected from the Women's Guild group, the BEW were disappointed, because 'caring is preventive or sustaining as well as curative', (Ndossi 1994:35). Kinoti (1994:184) argues, the elderly generation deserves pastoral care as much as other people do. This is what Kando, one of the BEW who participated in this study, had to say concerning care:

*I would love the Women's Guild to visit me at home and preach the Word of God to me and visit the lonely. When you are in a group where the word of God is preached, life is easy, but when you are alone, you think of a lot of things (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

Most of the BEW who were interviewed claimed to receive little or no pastoral care from the Guild. This was confirmed by Sofiya, who stated,

*The only help I received from Women's Guild is when they visited me once in the hospital, maybe this relationship will go on (fieldwork interview 2012).*

Sofiya expected more care from the Women's Guild, not just one visit in hospital. On the same topic of care, Feliya said,

*On this point I should not lie. I have never heard that the church came to a certain area to help the grandmothers (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

By church, Feliya meant the Women's Guild collective spirituality group, because they are a branch of the church. Firida had this to say, which implies that she does not receive material help from the Women's Guild:

*Women's Guild... oh... spiritually, they encourage us. They tell us that now that we are Christians we need to join the Women's Guild. This is how Women's Guild helps us (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

From the female perspective, Ndossi points out that, 'caring should include all services which contribute to the total well-being of a person as a spiritual,

psychological, and physiological whole' (1994:35). Since the Guild consists of a group of women, BEW expected the Women's Guild spirituality group to understand the plight of BEW. As Hislop remarks, 'Women always need other women to come alongside and speak their language: the language of the heart and of feelings' (2003:26). In Hislop's view, no-one understands a woman's experience better than another woman. BEW were obviously of the same opinion, and expected effective pastoral care from the Women's Guild spirituality collective group. The information gathered from this set of interviewees indicates that the pastoral care provided to them was deemed insufficient. They also wished that the Guild's caregiving would cover the physical and spiritual aspects of their lives.

Collective spirituality is at the core of the Women's Guild, and it is an integral part of most Women's Guild organisations in Malawi. Therefore, collective spirituality is taken seriously by Women's Guild members, because it is one of the aspects of their spiritual growth as pastoral care providers. People are both individual and collective beings – Louw affirms 'that a human being is a person through other persons' (2008:41). The individual participants in this study practiced their spirituality in their own individual time and space, for instance, reading the Bible and meditating upon the word of God, praying and singing. However, these individuals long to practice these spiritual aspects collectively with others too, as members of the body of Christ. By doing so, collective spirituality becomes a space in which people are able to connect with each other. As noted by Saha and Safri, 'all people need both connection with others and differentiation from others' (2016:121).

The connectedness of women in a strategically created space is most clearly defined by the Women's Guild's Thursday meetings. 'It is on this day that women have the opportunity to preach and pray with authority and dignity' (Haddad 2000:288). However, in reality, not all the Women's Guild members meet on Thursdays. Furthermore, there are certain requirements that need to be fulfilled in order for one to be accepted as a member of the Women's Guild collective spirituality group. These requirements for access to this group will be expanded upon in the next paragraph.

## **Membership and Requirements**

Fundamentally, Women's Guild collective spirituality acknowledges that all women who are in Christ, and that everyone has a gift that she can use for the

glory of God (Phiri 1997:81). Therefore, membership of the Guild is free and open to Christian women who share in the body of Christ and who are fervent about spreading the gospel of Christ (Munyenyebe 2015:121). In spite of being founded on the Christian ideal of inclusivity and having open membership, due to other requirements of the organisation it was and is not easy to become a member of Women's Guild. Phiri (1997:77) explains that, before 1978, if a woman wanted to become a member of the Women's Guild collective spirituality group, she had to inform Women's Guild leaders of her intention to join. Then, the prospective member was asked to attend Women's Guild meetings for a month, under the observation of the leadership of Women's Guild. In 1978 the membership rules changed. Instead of merely informing the Women's Guild leadership of an intention to join, the prospective member had to present a letter from church elders, stating that she fulfilled requirements such as church attendance and monthly pledges. This change was significant.

### ***Financial Contributions***

Phiri (1997) explains that, when the observation period was over, the new member was asked to donate three pence. At the moment, the required contribution is K1 000<sup>2</sup> for *mafuta* – money the Women's Guild collective spirituality uses to run the organisation. In addition to the *mafuta* contribution, women are supposed to make two other contributions as part of membership of the group; Gondwe (2009:20) refers to as *zachifundo* and *zachitukuto*. Phiri (1992:168; 1997:87) explains that, in 1978, the Women's Guild introduced *zachifundo*, which means compassion; and another contribution for *zachitukuto*, which means development. The requirement to contribute financially contradicts the claim made by Phiri that membership of the Women's Guild collective spirituality is free and open to any woman who is a Christian and who partakes in Holy Communion. In reality, membership is not free, because a woman who wants to join the Women's Guild collective spirituality can only do so after presenting a letter provided by church elders, and after paying monthly pledges. Failure to meet the indicated requirements will lead to the person's membership being terminated (Malongosoledwe a

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<sup>2</sup> K stands for Kwacha in Malawian currency, so K1000 is equal to R50 South African currency.

Chigwirizano 2000:18). This is why Kanyoro states that what oppresses women must be ‘transformed or destroyed’ (2001:162).

## ***Uniform***

In addition to making the three contributions, the new member is also supposed to acquire a uniform. According to Phiri (1997), since the organisation was founded, a uniform has been an integral part of the Women’s Guild collective spirituality group. This is confirmed by Haddad (2000:282-283), who explains that, when members of the Mothers Union in Vulindlela wear their Mothers Union or Women’s Guild uniform, they feel powerful and they have status and hope. The following discussion is on the challenges faced by BEW.

## ***Challenges Faced by Bereaved Elderly Women***

BEW are people who, at one time, had parents, siblings and children. They lived in a community where *Ubuntu* principles of unity, oneness, and connectedness were encouraged. The lives of people who were connected to BEW were like a spider-web that connected parents, siblings, and children to the community at large. However, due to death of the parents, siblings and children of the BEW, the web of life of BEW became disconnected. As a result, this left BEW lives hanging in limbo. as indicated by Kando, who said:

*My daughter was a breadwinner. She used to help my grandchildren and I financially. Her death makes me feel sad, because now even if I find money, it is not enough for the needs of the children. I have to pay school fees and use it for other things; this makes me to cry in the night (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

Other participants agreed with Kando; Feliya, Msekaimfa, Firida, Mopheje, Edinesi all stated that they cannot afford to buy food and clothes for their grandchildren, because they do not have the money to do so. Consequently, their grandchildren are suffering, and some of them cannot attend school as there is no money for school fees. Gormally (1998) indicates that the socioeconomic situation of BEW worsened as they increased in number, while the income-producing generation was shrinking in size. This is why BEW want to be connected to the Women’s Guild collective spirituality group, so that they

can be cared for both spiritually and physically. As argued by Lopatta (1979) and Ackermann (2001:27), grieving people such as BEW experience their burdens being reduced and their grieving validated when they realise that the community is supporting them by acting as a pillar of strength for them. When the Women's Guild collective spirituality group or community does not act as a pillar of strength for BEW, or provide an accessible space for BEW, most of these women end up living in isolation. Kinoti (1994:184) believes that pastoral care is owed to the elderly generation, because of the huge challenges they face. In this case, the Dzenza Women's Guild members are supposed to provide pastoral care to BEW, because, in this instance, the group members are seen to be the custodians of pastoral care.

Mopheje stated in a fieldwork interview that she stopped attending church, because there was 'no good relationship' between herself and Women's Guild members. As a result, Mopheje isolated herself from the community of the Women's Guild collective spirituality group. Msekaimfa is another participant who pointed out that the Women's Guild collective spirituality group did not help BEW. For this reason, Msekaimfa felt that she was being left out, discriminated against and marginalised by the Women's Guild collective spirituality group. Similarly, Sofiya did not hide her sentiments about the way she was treated by some of the Women's Guild collective spirituality members. This is what she had to say:

*My desire is for the Women's Guild members not to discriminate against me, as if I do not exist in the church, I really want them not to forget me (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

In other words, BEW were saying that they had found, through experience, that the Women's Guild space is inaccessible, spiritually and physically, to them. BEW want to be a part of the Women's Guild collective spirituality group in order to receive pastoral care and support. When they did not receive this support, it caused great emotional strain in their lives. This is why Hislop argues that, 'women in pain are in every congregation' (2003:15). Droege (1967:6) notes that, 'the lonely crowd is found in the church pew', and in this study, the women in pain and the lonely crowd were the women who are described as BEW.

In seeking refuge, the only hope of BEW is the church, especially the Women's Guild collective spirituality group. As stated by Edinesi,

Lucy T. Chibambo

*I am poor. My wish is for the Women's Guild to buy me the Women's Guild uniform or give me money to buy it myself (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

This was echoed by Firida, who said,

*My desire is to join the Women's Guild so that when I die they should sing at my funeral. That is my desire (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

Firida seemed to imply that she wants to be a member of the Women's Guild collective spirituality group so that, when she dies, the women, in their uniforms, would give her a dignified send-off by singing at her funeral. People who follow African cultural traditions believe that when they die, they will meet family ancestors (Mbiti 1969:49). This is why, in some cultures, dead people are buried with food, tools or weapons of war because they believe that, 'their world is invisible but very close to that of the living' (Mbiti 1975:116-117). Some Christians, on the other hand, believe that they are going to meet with the saints in heaven. This is why a dignified send-off, as desired by Firida, is so important, because some Christians view it as a ticket for a safe space in the life that comes after death. Both sides of Christians and African cultural traditions have their own safe spaces, according to their beliefs. This is why spirituality is an important aspect of the lives of BEW. Their faith in God helps them to hold on to the hope that, when they die, they will meet with their loved ones who predeceased them, again.

In grieving for their deceased adult children, BEW adopted spirituality as a coping mechanism. This is one of the major themes that emerged during the fieldwork interviews. For example, Kando said,

*I am mostly encouraged by prayer. Sometimes when I am hurt, I just read the Bible and then sing (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

This was echoed by Aluni, who said that,

*Spirituality helps me to realise my shortcomings. This encourages me to even take my grandchildren to church with me (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

Prayer, reading the Bible and other spiritual literature, singing or listening to Christian songs and church attendance were tools that they used as coping mechanisms, to cope with their inner pain (Koskela 2011) Sofiya indicated that,

*Spirituality is important to my life so that I should not be weak in my faith. This is why I continue coming to church (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

Kando coped with her pain by praying, singing Christian songs and reading the Bible. She found it important that the same spiritual mechanisms are used in group gatherings as well as by individuals; as she indicated by saying,

*I would love the Women's Guild to visit me at home and preach the word of God to me.*

Women's Guild collective spirituality group is like one big family for BEW. While Kando expressed the desire to have the Women's Guild collective spirituality group visit her at her home, some of BEW said they would like to be part of the Women's Guild Collective spirituality group. Edinesi said,

*I am poor but my desire is for the Women's Guild to buy me uniform or give me the money to buy it myself (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

Most BEW, despite being spiritually active as individuals, seemed to long to be part of the Women's Guild collective spirituality group. The weekly Women's Guild collective spiritual gathering is significant for some of the BEW, because some of them could not read or write. The readings at weekly gatherings by other women are, therefore, important to their spiritual lives. This is why Schüssler says, what is 'life giving must be treasured' (2001: 169).

## **Findings and Discussion**

The accessible God theory is a theory proposed by Jennie Weiss Block (2000). She uses it to recognise people with disabilities within the Christian community. Block calls people with disabilities a unique group of people, not because they are considered to be inferior to those who are perceived as 'normal', but because they are oppressed or marginalised. In this study, the

unique people who are marginalised are BEW. The findings of this study indicate that there is lack of care for BEW by members of the Women's Guild collective spirituality group. The three financial contributions members have to make in order to join the Women's Guild, and buying a uniform are burdens to BEW, who are struggling financially, coping with the loss of adult children and supporting their orphaned grandchildren, all at the same time. The Women's Guild collective spirituality group is, therefore, an inaccessible spiritual space for BEW.

Block (2000) states that there the unique group of people, like the BEW, find collective spirituality to be very important to them, because it gives them hope that they will be cared for in their last years and that, when they eventually die, they will meet their loved ones who died before them. The Women's Guild collective spirituality group is organised around prayer and pastoral care activities. The BEW of this study expressed that they are not being cared for spiritually and physically. Ndossi (1994) points out that care should be holistic, meaning that people should be cared for spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, physiologically and financially. Apart from seeking physical care from the Women's Guild collective spirituality group, the BEW also seek collective spiritual care. Kando reported that prayer encouraged her, and that collective prayer eases her life and helps her to avoid thinking of the many things that could trouble her mind. Therefore, BEW use spirituality as a coping mechanism. This is why some of the BEW requested extra prayers to be conducted at their homes by the Women's Guild collective spirituality group, in addition to the usual prayers at church, because collective spirituality through prayer is a powerful tool that helps these women transcend the inner pain they experience due to their difficult circumstances. Therefore, being part of the Women's Guild collective spirituality group gives BEW their identity, dignity, connectedness and belonging, which makes them feel complete.

However, BEW face significant barriers. BEW feel that the collective spiritual space is inaccessible due to various barriers set up by the Women's Guild collective spirituality group. For example, there are three types of financial contributions required of members (Gondwe 2009), namely, *mafuta*, *zachifundo* and *zachitukuto*. These contributions have to be made before a woman can join the Women's Guild collective spirituality. In addition to these financial contributions, members need to purchase uniforms, consisting of a headscarf, white blouse, black skirt and black shoes. Having a uniform is not a bad thing, as explained by Haddad (2000). When members of the Mothers

Union in Vulindlela wear their Mothers Union or Women's Guild uniforms, they feel powerful and the uniform imparts status, hope and a sense of dignity to the wearer. However, buying the uniform is an additional financial burden for BEW who can barely afford to buy food for themselves and the orphaned grandchildren they are caring for. On this topic, Edinesi said,

*I am poor. My wish is for the Women's Guild to buy me the Women's Guild uniform or give me money to buy it myself.*

The core issue of poverty was echoed by other participants, who asked how they could be expected to find money for uniforms if they were unable to buy food and clothes for their grandchildren. The result is that BEW were excluded from the Women's Guild because they are unable to meet the financial obligations that provide access to Guild membership.

In this study, BEW are women whose adult children have died, and some of these deceased adult children had been the breadwinners of the family. These elderly women, therefore, care for their orphaned grandchildren with little or no resources. Their already difficult situation worsens when they become isolated because they cannot afford to pay the three types of financial contributions required, or to buy the uniform. This core problem concerning the BEW is indicated by Block when she says, 'some of the people of God have been systematically denied access to the structures of the community' (2002). This claim was confirmed by Sofiya, who said,

*My desire is for the Women's Guild members not to discriminate against me, as if I do not exist in the church (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

Kinoti (1994:184) affirms that pastoral care owes the older generation as much care as other organisations do. Ndossi says, 'caring is preventive or sustaining as well as curative' (1994:35). Without access to the Women's Guild collective spirituality group, most BEW end up isolated and living as lonely, isolated people who receive little or no pastoral care, and burdened by the responsibility of looking after their orphaned grandchildren. This is why Droege (1967:6) points out that the lonely crowd is found in the church's pews.

The information gleaned from this study indicates that the role of the Women's Guild collective spirituality group is to develop the physical and spiritual lives of people in general. The Guild serves to gather women together and to guide them in their spiritual growth. Yet, there is a group of women who

are not able to be part of the collective spirituality group, due to barriers to membership of the Guild. These requirements have effectively blocked BEW from gaining access to and being a part of the Women's Guild collective spirituality group.

Phiri (2007:81) indicates that the Women's Guild recognizes that all women are one in Christ and form one body. If BEW are, indeed, part of the body of Christ, then they should be able to be a part of the collective spirituality group too. The question is, then, what can be done to make the space accessible to them? The participants of this study experienced this problem of accessibility, as have others who long to join the Women's Guild collective spirituality group to receive pastoral care benefits, and dignified funerals upon their deaths.

For the BEW, a dignified funeral is seen as a ticket to heaven, which provides them with hope to meet their loved ones who died before them, again. This hope gives them peace of mind in their last days. This is what Msekaimfa said about seeing her predeceased children after death:

*Where my children went, I will also go there (Fieldwork interview 2012).*

Msekaimfa, like many other BEW, hopes to see her children in heaven – this belief is based on their Christian faith. The doctrine of her church teaches that death involves returning to where the person came from. As Christians, they believe that people come from God, so, when they die as church members, they return to God.

These are the reasons why Block (2000) urges the Christian community, of which the Women's Guild collective spirituality group is part, to challenge oppressive structures or barriers that exclude BEW from the Women's Guild collective spirituality group. Block states that the oppressive structures or barriers can be destroyed or transformed – this possibility is confirmed by Schüssler (2001:169), who says, what is 'life giving must be treasured'. In concurring with Schüssler (2001), Kanyoro (2001:162) states that, what oppresses women, must be 'transformed or destroyed'. Despite some of the negative elements of the Women's Guild collective spirituality organisation, the organisation itself should not be destroyed; rather, it should be transformed, so that it can be made more accessible to BEW who are in dire need support and pastoral care.

According to Block (2000), it is important for the Women's Guild collective spirituality to use the lens of access and inclusion in order to learn from a God who is unfailingly committed to inclusion, access and love. As Jesus says, all are welcome into the kingdom of God and all have a place (John 14). Block (2000) points out that Jesus did not exclude people according to their nationality, gender, background or physical condition, therefore, there is gospel and pastoral command for the Women's Guild collective spirituality group to apply a theology of access because, 'the gospel of Jesus is a gospel of access, creating access for those in the margin in a Christian mandate' (Block 2002:120). This instruction is confirmed by Swinton (2011), who articulates that, through open access, outsiders become insiders. It is a valid cry by the BEW, who are perceived as outsiders, to become insiders of the Women's Guild collective spirituality group.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, the author has showed that the Women's Guild collective spirituality group of the Dzenza CCAP is an inaccessible space for BEW, because of barriers that have been put in place that the BEW cannot overcome. These barriers come in the form of demands for financial contributions and to buy a Women's Guild uniform. It was found that BEW were often unable to join the Women's Guild; nevertheless, being excluded from the group has not discouraged BEW from having an individual spiritual space. This space results from intuitive knowledge that God is everywhere, and is able to hear their prayers as individuals. It is important that the Women's Guild collective spirituality group revise their current way of recruiting members, and the requirements specified for new members. It should consider that BEW do not routinely have the financial resources to make the contributions that are prerequisites for joining the Guild, and that their inability to meet this obligation means they are excluded. This situation of exclusion runs contrary to the doctrine of the church, which is that it is meant for all people, and that all people include BEW. In order for Women's Guild collective spirituality group to be more accessible for this marginalised group, the Guild should act as a safe space for BEW and find ways of alleviating the financial requirements placed on BEW. When women have access to spaces for themselves as an extension of the church, they realise their status, their identity and their connection with each other, and they develop a sense of belonging that makes

them feel complete. Therefore, there is a need to solve this financial dilemma and make this space accessible to BEW, so that they can experience and benefit from the support and pastoral care provided for by Women's Guild collective spirituality group.

## Oral Interviews

Respondent	Location	Date	Interviewer
Kando	Lilongwe	13/07/2012	Lucy Chibambo
Firida	Lilongwe	13/07/2012	Lucy Chibambo
Mopheje	Lilongwe	13/07/2012	Lucy Chibambo
Msekaimfa	Lilongwe	13/07/2012	Lucy Chibambo
Aluni	Lilongwe	13/07/2012	Lucy Chibambo
Sofiya	Lilongwe	13/07/2012	Lucy Chibambo
Feliya	Lilongwe	13/07/2012	Lucy Chibambo
Edinesi	Lilongwe	13/07/2012	Lucy Chibambo

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# **‘*Handisi Mvana*’ (‘I am not a disgraced but honourable single lady’): Pentecostalism, Tradition and Re-imagining Singlehood in Zimbabwe**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the discourse of singlehood in Zimbabwe, particularly the traditional perception of women called ‘*mvana*’, referring to someone who has been divorced by her husband and sent to her parents, or alternatively, impregnated and deserted by a man. Shame and denigration accompanies the act of being divorced, and is inflicted on both a divorced woman, as well as her parents. The traditional designation ‘*mvana*’ and all the attendant implications appear to be inherited under Pentecostalism. The paper probes the traditional understanding of *mvana* and its applicability in post-colonial Zimbabwe, where colonialism and other auxiliary forces have opened spaces for women leading to an emergence of new identities for so-called ‘single ladies’. Furthermore, it probes whether conversion to Pentecostalism has brought any positive changes, in terms of challenging negative stereotypes and stigma. The paper argues that the use of the term warrants a fresh look at tradition, while at once requiring a probing of Pentecostalism.

**Keywords:** *handisi mvana*, Pentecostalism, Tradition, Single Women, Zimbabwe

## **Introduction**

The study on singlehood is an under-researched area and thus remains at the periphery of gender studies. Post-colonial studies on singlehood have for the most part been spearheaded by institutions and organisations with specific agendas, for instance, the World Health Organisation and the United Nations, among others. Such studies are largely politically or economically motivated. This paper uses the term ‘single ladies’ as a popular moniker, and uses the term women for married women (i.e. not ladies) to reflect the popular designation. All the interviews are part of the on-going research on discourses on singlehood as forwarded in different Pentecostal churches Zimbabwe. However, interviews based on the selection of single ladies in different Pentecostal churches (on the label ‘*mvana*’) were focused on Harare, as the capital city where Pentecostalism is very vibrant, and where certain women will have climbed the socio-economic ladder. The aim was to gather information on how these single ladies responded to the popular derogatory label ‘*mvana*’.

The interaction between traditional religions and Christianity is not a closed chapter. Several issues continue to arise, despite the claims of Africa being a predominantly Christian continent, and Zimbabwe described ‘unofficially’ as a Christian nation. Pentecostalism is regarded as radical movement that emphasises a ‘complete break from the past’ (Meyer 1998:316). However, this paper argues that the theme of resilience runs strong in Pentecostalism, in particular, within the gender discourses. The paper argues that Pentecostalism perpetuates and nurtures traditional stereotypes and stigma against ‘single ladies’. It examines the cumulative and long-term implications of ‘*mvana*’ in Shona traditional religion and how Pentecostal churches have inherited the negative cultural socialisations as they continue to operate under the ‘African map of the universe’ (Kalu 2008:8). Methodologically, the paper utilises gender politics as a tool for examining the underlying politics in the pejorative association of single ladies with ‘*mvana*’ and patriarchy, as the categories of order of hierarchical operations in gender politics. I argue that the tension between married women and so-called single ladies should be understood within the framework of patriarchy, where women are brought to the service of oppressing other women by patriarchal structures. Single ladies from different Pentecostal churches were interviewed. The rationale for random interviews of single

ladies from different Pentecostal churches was the quest to establish the general theology on singlehood in Pentecostalism. In addition, it was necessary to establish how single ladies in different Pentecostal churches understand themselves, and responds to the traditional label. Through an insider perspective and available literature on Shona traditional religion and Pentecostalism, the paper argues that there are complex hierarchical and interwoven beliefs and practices that relegate single ladies to the periphery, both in Shona tradition and in Pentecostalism. The unanimous protest from single ladies in Harare can be summed up in the words: '*handisi mvana* [I am not a single lady], but I am a single lady'. This calls for an analysis of what they are vehemently rejecting, investigating the implications of rejecting the label '*mvana*' and accepting the English label 'single lady' (which appears at face value to be a contradiction).

An interrogation of the beliefs and attitudes towards single ladies necessitates probing questions to understand the shifting complex dynamics of singlehood:

- Does entry into singlehood reduce a woman's socio-economic status and predispose her to poverty and suffering?
- Does singlehood render her sexually immoral and unworthy in society?
- What are the perceptions about single women in Shona tradition and does Pentecostalism offer alternative symbols for them?
- Does Pentecostalism defend and uphold the denigrated image of these '*mvana*' and accord them a dignified status?
- How do women in Pentecostalism understand their experiential realities and do critics of single women share the same understanding?
- How different are single ladies' understanding of themselves from the general or traditional perceptions about a single lady in society?

## **Single Women among the Shona**

There are different categories of single women, as detailed by Biri (2013). These categories and criteria have been used by society to denigrate women. Among these, widows seem to differ, as they have some respect that emanates from the knowledge that their husbands passed on. However, it seems that the dignity afforded these women is based on age, as widows who are advanced in years are treated with respect, to the exception of younger

widows (Dorsey 2017). It is beyond the scope of this paper to give the categories of single ladies as Biri (2013) has done so and therefore, it will be duplication. The image of a single lady (*mvana*) can be gleaned from what the broader literature. According to Mbiti (1991:67), a person who is the single is understood to have nothing to contribute to society. He has this to say:

Already at birth the woman is destined to be married. As a result, people believe a woman who is not married has practically no role in society, as far as the traditional worldview goes.

While a woman is generally regarded as a ‘flower’, *mvana* does not fit to be a flower because she has nothing to beautify society with since she is viewed as a disgraced woman. This emanates from the fact that among Africans, a woman is destined from birth to be married. Failure to fulfil such an obligation invites negative perceptions, where singlehood is deemed aberrant.

However, circumstances such as divorce or being abandoned by a partner during pregnancy have placed some women in circumstances beyond their control. A woman in such a situation may be referred to as *mvana*, and may experience respect and dignity withdrawn by the society in which they live, where they become a symbol of failure. Assumptions abound, such as that a woman has failed to fight for her marriage, or failed to receive sex education requisite to maintaining a marriage. Therefore, she is viewed as a desperate person, who is economically at the receiving end. That renders her vulnerable and at the receiving end if ever her ex-husband returns for sexual favours, where she would likely have no option but to accept.<sup>1</sup> She may also be taken advantage of by other men. Biri (2016) noted the several cases where single women were blamed when they reported sexual abuse; hence, it discourages many women to report cases of rape. In other words, a single lady is likely, according to social norm, to be seen as a sexual object by men because she is viewed as *nzenza* (loose character), or one who

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<sup>1</sup> The state newspaper, *The Herald*, has reported several cases of men who refuse or stop to support the children of the woman they divorced when she refuses sexual relations. This forces the women without options for caring for the kids to give in to such sexual demands.

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has *chitsinha/ ngozi* (evil spirits) that prevent her from staying in marriage. If she is raped, why was she raped? These questions are often accompanied by reference to either improper dress and/or character. Thus, she becomes a victim of blame through speculation.

Outside marriage, there is no social sense of dignity afforded her (Oduyoye 1995) and she can only escape this social opprobrium if she remarries. Thus, there is loss of identity and dignity in divorce. Oduyoye (ibid.) adds that the African mind revolts against a woman who manage her own affairs where it is assumed that she spells disaster, because she is understood to be ‘under’ a man, who should manage her affairs. The idea of according a man the absolute role of headship and leadership in the home is the norm among the Shona people. It explains why single women who are successful are viewed with suspicion of establishing sexual relations with multiple men to get material benefits for success. But how does this view stand in post-colonial Zimbabwe, where we find single ladies empowered by academic education and acquiring jobs that place them on a higher societal status? Does the label *mvana* capture their reality, or does it fully define who they are in relation to the identities they acquire? Mbiti (1991) points out that those termed *mvana* were regarded as non-participants in society. Tradition asks, what might they contribute after such a dismal ‘failure’ to handle their matrimonial homes? However, does this traditional point of view withstand developments in post-colonial Zimbabwe?

Single ladies that were interviewed in Harare continuously echo the need to challenge tradition, and re-claim their identity. In so doing, they had to draw a line between *mvana* and modern single woman.

### **Contesting the Traditional Label ‘*mvana*’**

The single ladies participating in the study drew a distinction between the concept of *mvana* and the concept of a single lady. One of them from Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa Church (ZAOGA) re-iterated what was circulated on single ladies’ forums, and delivered a comprehensive explanation, as follows:

...*mvana* is dirty for she did not own the means of production or anything except the children that she bore. She therefore toils for nothing in the fields as she stays with parents. Under the

guardianship of parents or brothers she was prone to continued abuse either from the ex-husband, because she did not initiate divorce, but was divorced by the husband. She is at the receiving end, an object of sympathy. She was not capable of helping anyone because she was economically powerless and socially vulnerable and stigmatised. A single lady does not stay with parents. If she does she goes to work, she is a bread winner, she takes care of her children, parents and even other relatives rely on her therefore, *handisi mvana* (interview 02-23-2018).

The above differentiation between *mvana* and single lady, although in translation means the same description is meant to draw attention to the shifting roles of the divorced woman in Shona indigenous cultures and the new avenues of self-reliance created by colonialism and continue to be availed by post-colonial modernity. It draws attention to the shifting paradigms in society. The use of the description *mvana* has derogatory connotations that allude to uselessness and loose sexual morals. Single lady as opposed to *mvana* seems to accord some dignity because she is self-reliant, although she is divorced and has something to contribute to society. Further to this, it challenges the more sympathetic perception that sees the life of a single lady as that of always suffering, with her children and needs support. Sympathy for a single woman is based on the view that she is economically disadvantaged when her marriage fails, and therefore, that she requires certain sympathy and support. Dorsey (2017:2) writes, ‘... we hypothesised that relative to never-married single mothers, formerly married single mothers (widowed and divorced) would garner sympathy and people would be willing to support [them] ...’.

Most single lady participants expressed that society seems to ignore the narratives of women whenever it engages singlehood, or addresses derogatory comments about single ladies. These include women who have divorced their husbands because they could not tolerate oppressive patriarchal behaviour or injustice. A Family of God Church (FOG) lady asked, ‘do our people understand that things have changed and most women are divorcing men because they cannot endure suffering?’ (10-01-2018) In such case, the single lady manages to challenge not only the husband but also structures of patriarchy that underpin Shona gender relations. This lady understood her divorce as having twofold significance. She challenged both

the husband and society, sending the message that she cannot tolerate oppression in her marriage. Most Pentecostal women's forums teach the need to pray and be resilient to safeguard marriages at all cost.

There are different forms of singlehood. While some single ladies are dependant, there are many breadwinners. Shona tradition is therefore pointed to by most participant single ladies as the chief source of the negative stereotyping that marginalises single ladies. The single ladies are also radical in approach, as they question the role of the man in matters of divorce and sexual purity, which both the church and society often ignore. Traditionally, a Shona man is like a bull, which can prey over as many cows as he can without any problem (Shoko 2007), but a woman's adultery is tantamount to the destruction of an entire village (Bourdillon 1976). They critique the way in which male sexual prowess is condoned, because men are identified as the culprits behind the suffering of women, and rendering them '*mvana*'. They abuse women until they leave, or divorce women who mostly take the burden of childcare on alone thereafter. Yet, there is no meaningful criticism or derogatory label attached to men who divorce their wives. In fact, it is a widely accepted belief among the Shona that there is no such thing as a male prostitute, and even within the confines of marriage, he can still pursue other women, where they may have uncontrolled sexual appetites (Biri 2014; Chitando & Biri 2014).

While there is pressure to hold men accountable in rendering women *mvana*, the role of other women deserves attention, in particular where married women fuel the stigma against single ladies. This calls for a critique of how other women in Pentecostalism relate within the discourse of singlehood. The paper takes a point of departure from the general norm that sees men as the sole oppressors of women. While it is true that men oppress women, I argue that there are hierarchies of oppression in Pentecostalism, whether exerted consciously or unconsciously. An example of this is in ZAOGA, where women's forums use Guti's books and teachings to emphasise how women must not question their husbands, and ought to submit at all times. In turn, married women dominate single ladies within the web of patriarchal dictates, by virtue of assigning marital status as a higher moral ground that cannot be matched, or which ought to be contested by single ladies. Some leaders condemn single ladies as 'husband snatchers', which as a generalised view of many single ladies, fuels stigma in the Church. It leads to an imbalance between married women and single women,

consequently cultivating an image of morally loose single ladies and dignified married women.

Pentecostalism has been regarded as a liberating movement promoting the welfare of women through creating spaces that they can fully participate in church (see Amanze 1976; Kalu 2008). In the light of these claims, what positions have been accorded to single ladies in Pentecostalism, for instance, is there space for them and if any, is it safe space? The section below engages Pentecostalism to establish how they have dealt with single ladies in relation to their status in traditional terms.

### **Pentecostalism and Single Ladies: Wounding the Wounded?**

Pentecostal churches continue to preach submission and endurance in marriage, and that a foolish woman destroys her own marriage (Mate 2002). Also, the understanding of marriage as a symbol of God's church has negative implications for singlehood, as it appears to fuel stigma against single ladies. While it is noble to teach that marriage is a symbol of God's church, it has reinforced the view that singlehood is inferior to marriage. Also, it gives the impression that singlehood should be transitory. As a result, deliverance sessions for single ladies are designed to break the forces that are perceived to hinder marriages. Yet, the single ladies are different and not many or all will find marriage partners, if ever they want to re-marry. This paper argues that the theology in Pentecostalism continues the traditional stereotyping and stigmatisation in the interpretation of the Bible, especially when singlehood is viewed as transitory and marriage as mandatory for every woman.

Single ladies are viewed as 'Jezebels', who should not be allowed to be alone or close to the man of God, for fear that she may tempt or seduce him (Kalu 2008). Attention is not given to the actions of the man of God, but the single lady who has the 'Jezebel spirit'. They are considered 'gold diggers', with a 'smell'<sup>2</sup> for the material wealth of married men (Biri 2016). In 2016, a Pentecostal female leader in Midlands Province organised a

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<sup>2</sup> In 2013, pastor Petunia Chiriseri taught at an Inter-denominational women's fellowship that the single women who take other people's husbands are not small houses but 'smell houses' because that act of taking other people's husbands stinks (2-02-2013)!

women's inter-denominational that was dubbed 'Anti-small house campaign'.<sup>3</sup> Most single ladies are regarded as husband snatchers, who establish sexual relations that are known as 'small houses' which are not officially legalised by the families. 'Small house' is a popular designation for single women who have sexual relationship with married men. It is important to note how married women organise this campaign against the reputation of the single woman. Critics of such campaigns have questioned the morality of castigating fellow women, particularly in women's fora in the Church. The spirit behind the criticism was that, if the female leaders were determined to deal with adultery, they ought to have done so in fora where both men and women are present. This campaign was publicly criticised as an unfair bullying of single ladies on the part of female pastors and pastors' wives, who mobilised female congregants who were protective of their husbands. The traditional view of single women as *mvana* who present a serious threat to tempt or steal husbands appears to motivate such campaigns. In the midst of this female-led, it appears, no attention is given to married women who are not faithful to their husbands, but focus was placed on single ladies only.

In order to escape victimisation and rumours from married women, single ladies need to re-marry. Thus, the Daughters of Virtue Ministry (DOV) (07-08-18) call for all night prayer vigils for deliverance of single ladies from spirits that deter them to be married. This based on an interpretation of Genesis 2:18, which reads: 'And Jehovah God said. It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him'. Most female leaders teach that singlehood is not God's original plan, for God has designed every woman to be married and be a helper to a man. This can be interpreted to mean that if a single lady has no husband, then she cannot expect divine intervention. Something amiss in the life of this single lady, for instance, spirits that need to be cast out or lack of faith, have led to her fate, and hence every single lady must be strong to denounce her single status by engaging in vigilant prayers for marriage. This understanding leads to all-night deliverance sessions, to deliver the woman from satanic bondage. Therefore, with all the efforts by different churches, and calls to deal with the problem of singlehood, the simple mention of being a single lady in gatherings and church is unwelcome in some instances.

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<sup>3</sup> The campaign against 'small houses' was widely condemned as many people argued that churches cannot carry out campaigns like political parties.

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Below is an insertion of the researcher's conversation as she visited a new ZAOGA Church (she is a member of ZAOGA), where, at the entrance, she met a female usher:

Usher: Hello, you are... Mrs. ... who?

Researcher: I am Kudzi Biri (own name).

Usher: Not your name.

Researcher: ...or *mai* Tawana (the name of my son, since it is Shona custom to be called by the name of your first-born child).

Usher: Not that one...

Researcher: I am Prof. Biri.

Usher: I mean the name of your husband!

Researcher: (infuriated) I do not have a husband, am I supposed to have one when I don't have? I think I told you who I am and is it always that all women have a husband?

Usher: Oh, ok, I saw you with these three children, that is why I asked about Mrs. ...?

The above experience of the researcher shows how difficult it can be at times for single ladies who do not have the title of a married woman. The above conversation also shows the 'alleged' disparity between having children, while at the same time not being identified as someone's wife. Already, the judgemental axe falls on the single mother's head. It appears, as noted above, that the church has similar questions, such as: where did you get the children? Why don't you have a husband? Why did you divorce? All these questions accrue to the bottom line: you are '*mvana*', and somehow failed to preserve marriage, otherwise known as God's perfect plan. For this reason, the single lady is not whole. As one single lady from the United Families International Church (UFIC) exclaimed: 'our churches are not different from the society, they wound the wounded, we have scars and wounds, we have been victims and we continue to be victims' (7-01-2018).

There is a need to note that almost all Pentecostal churches such as ZAOGA, the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in Zimbabwe, UFIC and Prophetic Healing and Deliverance ministries are leading popular examples of Pentecostal churches among the many that have ministries for single ladies. While these ministries exist, this research questions the social space afforded single ladies in the light of abundant theologies that seem to militate

against their status and well-being. It is notable that whilst this is the case, there are no active single men's ministries and single men who require deliverance. Walter Magaya of Prophetic Healing and Deliverance (PHD) Ministries organises and facilitates single all night sessions for women, but not for single men, although in theory men's ministries do exist. This research interprets this as an example of Shona patriarchy that has been inherited by Pentecostalism. The stereotyping finds affirmation in the interpretation of Genesis 2, which seems to present a dilemma to most single ladies, in particular those who aspire to be married (see below on statistics on gender differences). While the paper has documented some examples of perceived injustices to single ladies through theology, name-calling and cultural attitudes, it is important to establish how single ladies respond to such circumstances.

### **Coping Strategies: Protest, Re-definition and Re-naming**

The politics documented here shows pervasive gender prejudice, and a veritable societal 'war' based on marital status. An FOG single lady protested: 'if marriage is God's perfect plan for all women as they interpret Genesis 2, why did God create few men than women' (interview 3-02-2018)? This response points to facts that are often ignored or avoided by Pentecostal leaders where they insist on the marriage of single ladies. The single lady seems to have drawn her response from a well-known 2015 survey that points out that woman numbered half a million more than men in Zimbabwe. It becomes logical in this light for a single lady who aspires to get married to ask the question.

A UFIC lady had this to say:

If I do everything, feed my children, dress them, send them to school, sometimes even continuing to take care of the in laws which I have a bond with because of the children and the father of these children is somewhere, then am I useless, I am not '*mvana*', I am a single mother! (interview 6-02-2018)

Also, at a Ten Days prayer conference, a ZAOGA single lady had this to say:

A *mvana* is better if she is a prostitute. She is not married, what about married women who commit adultery? Yet in church, couples forums do not call for repentance at the altar. In single ladies forum, there is always an altar call to confess adultery, what does it mean? It is single ladies who are sinning and the married are not... (interview 3-01-2018)

Many single ladies feel they have been unjustly accused of sexual immorality, while churches do not give much attention to married women who commit adultery. In 2017, it was reported by the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation that there has been increasing cases of adultery of married women, in particular those with husbands outside the country. The bone of contention single ladies raise with married women is that married female leaders tend to turn a blind eye to the evils of married women. Yet, when only one single lady does an evil thing, all single or most single ladies are branded accordingly. They accuse married women of protecting their husbands unreasonably, through taking political aim at single ladies as a group. While certain married women may worry about their husbands' infidelity, certain single ladies may desire sexual relationships, and without options choose to have relations with the married men. This may be the case in particular when these single ladies are of advanced age, and want either to re-marry, or pursue relationships outside marriage. The contestation that governs attitudes and perceptions between married women and single ladies should therefore be understood within the politics of 'survival' and contesting marital spaces.

The researcher interacted with single ladies at a singles' end of year party on 17 December 2017. One of the ladies had a song which appears to have been composed at the event as she proudly bragged about her status:

I am not defined by marriage. It is the man who failed not me. I was not divorced, but I divorced. There my sister was not divorced, but they chose to divorce [...] So who am I? We are not *mvana* but powerful single ladies, smart and beautiful single ladies, organised single ladies, rich single ladies...

This song is important, as the single lady spoke on her behalf, but also on behalf of other single ladies, 'there my sister was not divorced ...'. Outside

the churches are places invented to celebrate being single ladies and not *mvana*. As pointed to by Bakare (1997), songs in Africa are a way of communication, thus the single lady conveys a message through the medium of song as a powerful form of protest. More important is that she composed the song herself, which evidences her sense of conviction regarding who she is, as she protests against the imposed label '*mvana*'. Sanneh (2003:58) writes of a 'deeper engagement with issues of personal and social identity in Scripture and with questions of individual transformation and cultural fulfilment'. Much of that has taken place in the context of awareness of the African religious worldview. But to whom is the protest '*handisi mvana*' directed?

The protest is directed to ex-husbands are recipients of the protest, because there is general hostility that exists between most single ladies and their ex-husbands. The Church is another target, because she has inherited tradition that continues to stigmatise the single ladies in new ways. Society also needs to be addressed, in terms of the outworking and efficacy of traditional concepts and their applicability in modern times. The 'war' between single ladies and married women leads one to reasonably assume that the protest is directed to married women too.

Above all, it seems to be a self-affirmation, to emphasise self-worth as defence mechanism, in the midst of challenges. Thus, Zulu (1998:38) observes the significance of voices of single ladies, what they say, and what their silence means. These women are not silent, but protest loudly. In these voices is a single lady's reality of her linguistic world, as they experience the effects of being single in their lives. They call for a re-reading of Genesis 2 in their churches, and for a challenge to be mounted against Shona traditional nomenclature that strips them of dignity in the ways discussed above.

Their significant contributions to the economic welfare of their churches are cited as a testament to the significance of single ladies. While men are identified as oppressors of women, married women in turn assume single ladies are in some sense subordinate, by virtue of having their identity tied to that of a man (husband). They choose to ignore the significance of the presence of single ladies in the churches, and view them with suspicion. As noted, in this way, certain married women become co-oppressors of single ladies, together with men, which include husbands, both in society and in the churches, whether consciously, unconsciously, or just remaining silent when this continues to happen.

## **Analysis**

There are shifting paradigms that have been necessitated by colonialism and the emergence of new identities in post-colonial Zimbabwe that warrant a fresh look at single ladies. The identities are not static, and when the single women protest and say: '*handisi mvana*, but am a single lady', they send a particular message. They seem to point to the problematics of applying the label in post-colonial Zimbabwe, when many single women's socio-economic status has changed. *Handisi mvana* involves a plurality of voices protesting. The single ladies refuse their denigration. They show the complexities of identities, for instance, some identities can be acquired, and some can be lost with time. They lose an identity that they had acquired at marriage. To be called 'Mrs...' was, and remains, an honour cherished by most Shona women, for at birth a woman is destined to be married. However, they have another identity if they have children. 'I am *mai* (name of child) [...] or Mrs...' are common designations among the Shona. This seems to afford women higher moral standing, and make them more respectable. This development constitutes an expansion of identities, as women incorporate increasingly more identities as society transforms over time.

In spite of the protest, Kalu (1998:30) has made a significant observation that is applicable to many single ladies:

Admittedly, sensitivity to feminist issues has not clicked in Africa. The women themselves do not subscribe to the type of re-reading the Scriptures, which is common in the Western world, although they object to patriarchal dominating system (sic).

While Kalu's observations are crucial to the study, I argue that over the past years, sensitivity has begun emerging as female scholars begin to call for re-reading of the scriptures that will fully emancipate women from a patriarchal grip (see works of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians). However, admittedly, most women still advance patriarchy, especially those in leadership positions, through the sermons that they teach (see Mate 2002; Soothill 2010). Also, dominant femininities are manifest in Pentecostalism. Married women appear hostile towards single ladies as they seek to protect their marriage. This hostility strengthens patriarchy because women are not united to dismantle the pillars of patriarchy. This shows the complex

interplay of religion, spirituality, masculinities, and dominant femininities inherent between women of different socio-cultural and economic status within the matrix of patriarchy in Pentecostalism.

The developments in Pentecostalism in relation to single ladies affirm a renewal and revival of tradition and its rehabilitation because the indigenous perception of a single woman is still manifest in the attitude of the church. Married women take up a monitoring role, and appear to ‘tame’ single ladies, who may have fallen out of marital union. Thus, social fora for single women become safe spaces to protest against tradition, as they do so holding men, ex-husbands, society and the church as institutions enmeshed in patriarchy to account as they re-define their identities. This form of protest sends a strong message, calling for justice in theology; preaching fidelity for all, responsibility, and accountability for men (Chitando & Biri 2014).

## **Conclusion**

The single ladies protest because they are aware of the supposed disgraced status of being a single or divorced within in their culture. They also experience the stigmatisation in their churches. Pentecostalism is, challenged to be critical of tradition, and to interpret the Bible in ways that do not discriminate against single ladies or fuel stigma. The failure of Pentecostalism lies in its failure to critique the negative aspects of tradition in relation to single ladies. Teachings in Pentecostalism seem to reiterate Shona tradition under the guise of the gospel, in ways that do not provide space for single ladies. Inheriting derogatory terms, sermons that fuel stigma, and the stereotyping of single ladies through attitudes and castigations in women’s fora, have discredited Pentecostalism as a self-proclaimed liberation movement. Thus, the protest, ‘*handisi mvana*’ constitutes a challenge, to reconsider and critique aspects of Shona tradition that are deficient in defining single ladies as Pentecostal Christians, who have acquired new identities that have emerged from novel socio-economic avenues.

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# Ambivalent Discourses in Pentecostal Deliverance Altar Calls: Masculinities and (in)Direct Perpetuation of Gender Bias

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## Abstract

Pentecostal Christianity is one of the most dynamic 21<sup>st</sup> century religions in Southern Africa. The practices enacted within Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe reflect ambivalence where empowerment of women is concerned. Subsequently, the interplay of religion, spirituality and masculinities in the subjugation of women is an enduring concern, hence, an opportunity for the church to redress the apparent gender injustices that compromise the well-being of women. The prevailing situation concerning Pentecostal deliverance altar calls in particular, illustrates gender prejudice, due to the pervasive nature of dominant masculinities and their manifestation in the deployment of the deliverance altar call. We argue that the nature and execution of spiritual rituals such as the Pentecostal deliverance altar call raises more questions than it solves problems. This paper problematises the ambivalent discourses that emanate from crowd-pulling deliverance altar calls that promise relief to individuals in all forms of turmoil, from disease to poverty, in two Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe: the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) and the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA). Findings established that the current deliverance altar calls inevitably relegated women to the periphery, where they are perpetually presumed to be in need of rescue. Furthermore, the altar calls targeted women through a gender-biased practice we have termed *feminisation of evil*, a practice driven by dominant masculinities in leadership.

We recommend a reconstruction of church rituals by a gender conscious leadership with a view to empower women.

**Keywords:** Pentecostalism, masculinities, altar call, gender bias

## **Introduction and Background**

Pentecostal Christianity has become one of the fastest growing Christian movements in Southern Africa (Machingura, Togarasei & Chitando 2018). Zimbabwe is one country in which Pentecostalism has flourished as a ‘quantum source of solace’ in response to a debilitating socio-economic and political environment. The practices enacted within Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe reflect ambivalence where empowerment of women is concerned. Gender injustice is an ongoing challenge in Zimbabwe, due to the colonial legacies of dominance and patriarchy. Subsequently, the interplay of religion, spirituality, masculinities and subjugation of women are an enduring concern. Given that women predominantly populate the 21<sup>st</sup> century church in postcolonial spaces, there is an opportunity for the church to redress the gender injustices that are rife in contemporary society. However, we argue that there are challenges in the manner with which the Pentecostal church deliverance altar call is conducted in AFM and ZAOGA churches in Zimbabwe. The deliverance altar call has drawn congregants from across denominational lines in Zimbabwe through promises of relief from all forms of turmoil such as unemployment (pegged above 90%), disease, and poverty (Magezi & Manzanga 2016).

This paper problematises the practice of altar calls in ZAOGA and AFM. It seeks to contribute to the emergence of literature on the ambivalent discourses of the deliverance altar call and the impact of this ambivalence on gender justice. It is important for researchers to attend to the micro-processes that feed into the stream of discourses on gender oppression and women disempowerment hence the focus of this paper. In taking the critical stance of questioning the deployment of the deliverance altar call, the argument here is not to categorically discredit the functionality of the altar call intrinsically. Rather, it is to suggest the need for careful examination of the patterning of the current deliverance altar call and its ramifications on, and implications for girls and women as well as men in the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFM) and Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA).

## **Literature Review**

The bulk of scholarly inquiry in the field of religion and gender has focused on what the church is doing or not doing in terms of inclusion and exclusion of women in church activities. However, there is a paucity of research on the deliverance altar call and its impact on gender justice and women empowerment. This paper attempts to fill this gap by considering how the deliverance altar call shapes discursive relations culminating in gender bias in the church. We are particularly preoccupied with the manner in which the deliverance altar call is deployed, and the ways in which this particular deployment shapes mind-sets, behaviours, and practices of both men and women thus intensifying the marginality of women and perpetuating gender bias.

Issues to do with the marginality of women and girls in religion and spirituality are as ancient as time itself. In the late seventies, Ruether & McLaughlin (1979:334) were concerned about the marginalisation of women in both Jewish and Christian society, in which male bias was rife. Much later, and with reference to Zimbabwe, Machingura (2012) observed worrying trends of the oppression of women and girls in African Independent Churches. The Pentecostal church consistently emerges as a gendered space (Mapuranga 2013) and a gendered wilderness (Mukonyora 2007) in scholarly research conducted so far. Consequently, the Pentecostal church falls within Massey's (1994:15) description of a gendered space as:

The socially constructed, geographical, and also architectural arrangements and space which regulate and restrict women's access to spaces which [sic] are also connected to the production of power and privileges in a given context.

The subjugation of women in the church is predominantly linked to the concept of dominant masculinities. Masculinities are 'understood as historical and cultural specific constructions of men's gender identities and men's position in gender relations' (Van Klinken & Smit 2013: 3). Of interest in this paper is that the impact of some of the internal rituals of Pentecostal Christianity, such as the deliverance altar call, are ambivalent and problematic.

Scholars such as Chitando & Biri (2013) problematise the subject of masculinities in ZAOGA as both contributing towards and driving gender bias

through a dual lens of culture and Christian spirituality. These scholars grapple with the question of whether the Jesus-figure offers a model of redemptive masculinities, or reinforces hegemonic notions of masculinity. The questions that Chitando and Biri ask are pertinent in this paper's attempt to expose the gender bias inherent in deliverance altar calls in AFM and ZAOGA. Our paper uses these scholars' considerations as points of departure to pinpoint the central problematic that continues to confound dominant masculinities *in the Christian fold*. We italicise to draw attention to the notion that once a Christian, the assumption is that of perfection, yet Chitando and Biri (2013) indicate challenges in the interpretation and implication of the Jesus-figure. In the same vein, Van Klinken & Smit (2013) interrogate what it means to men that Jesus exists in the gendered body of a man. Literature generally indicates the need for 'redemptive' masculinities (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012) and transformed masculinities (Morrell & Ouzgane, 2005a: 8-9). Of interest to our argument in this paper, therefore, is the acknowledgement that current masculinities in the church are problematic and can be transformed for the benefit of both men and women.

We are persuaded that the problem with the male-female dichotomy that is enacted in religious and spiritual spaces is a matter of individuals' standing in relation to one another. A relational conceptualisation of equality encourages a balanced view of male-female dynamics. The myths of feminine inferiority and of natural masculine superiority are precarious constructs that drive masculinities, leading to the violation of women through humiliating practices that result in them living in servitude, thus rendering them subjects without voice or choice. These myths and complexes can only be negotiated through subversive readings of, and critical engagement with, entrenched church practices such as the deliverance altar call.

This paper uses, as its point of departure, the call in Christian circles to view Pentecostalism as the wellspring of the good news of justice and love; virtues that, when put into practice and lived consistently, can transform the world in every facet, gender justice included. Pentecostal churches such as AFM and ZAOGA have the capacity to tackle big issues of the century including gender discrimination. Of note in the discussion is the understanding that women and girls represent the easiest to reach demographic for many brands, the church included. It is against this background that this paper interrogates prevailing practices surrounding the deployment of the altar call in spiritual deliverance sessions in the AFM and ZAOGA churches in

Zimbabwe, and the subsequent impact on congregants, particularly girls and women.

### **Tracing the History of the Altar Call**

Literature indicates that the Bible does not teach the altar call. The altar call is an evangelical invention that is less than 200 years old. Literature states that the altar call was invented by a Presbyterian evangelist named Charles G. Finney, who lived from 1792 to 1875. Finney juxtaposed altar calling with sinner-congregants coming forward to the anxious seat or to the inquiry room. He began using the altar call actively in his evangelistic services around 1820. The altar call has, since its invention, been modified and recreated by evangelists and televangelists such as the late Billy Graham.

The original altar call is an appeal for an immediate response to a sermon. In this context, the preacher appeals for a public act of commitment from the congregants who wish to forsake a sinful life; this involves raising of the hand then walking down the aisle to the front of a church audience to indicate willingness to repent or need for prayer assistance. It is on this repentance altar call that the deliverance altar call is built. In many sermons, congregants who need deliverance from the various challenges that the preacher articulates come after the repentance call. The practice of altar calls in the AFM and ZAOGA draws on a foundational belief in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit whenever believers meet, as evidenced in the famous 312 Azusa Street Revival, Los Angeles that happened in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Sipeyiye 2018).

### **Rituals in the AFM and ZAOGA**

Pentecostalism, like any other Christian movement, depends on ritual and practice to set itself apart from other movements. Sachikonye, in Machingura, Togarasei & Chitando (2018) cite the practices of '*matarendu*' (School of Talents) and '*magaba*' (Tin Mission Fund) as social and economic practices that reduce the burden of poverty on women. It, has therefore become a trending ritual for ZAOGA congregants, particularly women, to be fundraising for one cause or another. Following Musoni's (2013) perspective, it is through such practices that social transformation is achieved. While '*matarendu*' as an entrepreneurial venture has bridged the unemployment and poor income gap,

'*magaba*' has fundraised for vulnerable children. The list of engaging practices that ZAOGA offers includes the rehabilitation centre for the disabled and a hospital, the ZAOGA FIF Hospital in Harare, where medicine and spirituality interface (Musoni 2013). The existence of the outlined activities and practices serves as an indicator that the deliverance altar call, as a ritualised practice exists in a continuum of practices that the AFM and ZAOGA churches routinely engage in for sustaining the congregants and fulfilling the Pentecostal mandate. Similarly, the AFM runs a school for orphans in Masvingo. In addition, both churches have vibrant children's ministries, women's ministries and enriching couples' fellowships. The common ritual of the deliverance altar call to free congregants from all forms of oppression is one practice on which both churches rely for setting congregants free from bondage. It is the limitations and implications of the administration of this altar call that we interrogate in this paper.

## **Hermeneutics and the Deliverance Altar Call**

We are persuaded that the problematics of altar call administration emanate from general interpretation of texts and practices. Therefore, an understanding of the Pentecostal beliefs regarding the Holy Spirit and Biblical interpretation is important in shedding light on underlying issues that subsequently manifest as biased practices. Pentecostal congregants are confident in their belief in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is perceived as a living power, who speaks and influences the church in all its operations (Gabaitse 2015). Consequently, the Holy Spirit directs all activities in the church. It is from the point of view of the Holy Spirit that the Bible is interpreted in the Pentecostal church. There are two categories of Pentecostal hermeneutics, namely articulated Pentecostal hermeneutics and unarticulated Pentecostal hermeneutics (Thomas 1994).

Articulated Pentecostal hermeneutics refers to the academic exercise of applying rigour in the reading and interpretation of Biblical texts and related practices (Gabaitse 2015; Thomas 1994). Unarticulated hermeneutics, following Thomas' framework, manifests in the church through actions, practices and performances by members. Usually unconsciously, members shape, develop and perpetuate practices as they participate in church activities such as singing, worship, prayer, testimonies, preaching (Gabaitse 2015; Thomas 1994). We add deliverance altar calls to this list of activities in the understanding that altar calls are the climactic culmination of the spiritual

manifestation of God's power in every service in the Pentecostal churches under study. The unarticulated Pentecostal hermeneutic is uncritical, as it takes Biblical texts at face value without reference to contexts and prevailing situations at the time of writing of the stated texts. We concur with Gabaitse's (2015) view that the unarticulated Pentecostal hermeneutic is responsible for the marginalisation of women wherever it is practised, due to the absence of a critical approach.

## **Research Methodology**

This paper employed a qualitative approach. We utilised narrative methods and a hermeneutic phenomenology in the gathering of data. In addition, we engaged in a purposive sample of participants focusing on their age and gender. Eight participants were drawn from AFM and ZAOGA Bindura urban assemblies in Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe. Urban assemblies were chosen due to the urban socio-economic and political challenges in Zimbabwe. Gathering of narratives was done on a Monday after the Sunday service so as to ensure that participants had significantly fresh recollections of the deliverance altar call practice under analysis.

Our sample also included three men, which helped to avoid the provincialism that drives many current debates in post-colonial spaces. As argued by Long (2018: 25), the idea that only women may speak for women, or that only the oppressed may speak for the oppressed 'is surely one of the most dangerous ideas in circulation today. It denies the possibility of empathy-of a shared humanity'. Our focus was on individual congregants' narratives of experiences of the deliverance altar call. Narratives give room for in-depth data, therefore, a small number has the capacity to adequately elicit data and thematic issues that can sustain an argument and guide new trajectories. Therefore, we conducted semi-structured interviews that were conducted in the homes or offices of the eight selected participants. The interviews ranged from between 20 to 40 minutes. Participant interviews were made upon request so as to avoid audio recordings. Participants offered to write their responses on paper than have themselves recorded as they did not want to disrespect their church leaders by recording viewpoints that were not aligned to the current beliefs and practices in their assemblies. The subject of altar calls was a sensitive issue, as it required them to discuss church leadership, hence the reluctance to be recorded. We understood this limitation as a genuine

confidentiality concern. A discussion of participants' responses then followed whereby the researchers would follow up on issues that needed elucidation. Participant contributions were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

## **Phenomenological Analysis of Narratives**

This paper used a phenomenological perspective in the interpretation of participants' experiences of the deliverance altar call. Phenomenology is the study of human experience and the manner in which things are perceived through human consciousness (Langdridge 2007). What we found appropriate about phenomenological analysis in this particular enquiry was that the case at hand required a double hermeneutic in which as researchers we were attempting to make sense of participants' experiences while the participants themselves were in the process of making sense of their own experiences of the deliverance altar call. Consequently, the participants were still negotiating what the altar call had done and undone in their emotional, psycho-social, and spiritual lives. The process of interpreting an individual's lived experience or narrative is a complex one. It involves intricate exploration of the individual's past through reflection, languaging, intuiting, and imagining. It is an involving and consuming preoccupation that demands empathy in an attempt to ascribe meaning and measure impact of experiences on the participant (Willig 2009). An important aspect of phenomenological interpretation is that different individuals living in the same environment can experience the same event in utterly different ways. For example, while the women in the sample felt violated and somewhat unsure of their identities after an altar call, the men radiated confidence and a sense of still-resilience, which can either be interpreted as exaggerated for effect, or as real. Interpretive phenomenological analysis essentially makes use of purposive samples to gather comprehensive information about the targeted respondents (Willig 2009). All the eight participants in the sample had one aspect in common. Rather than making assumptions regarding the deliverance altar call in totality, this paper analyses each research participant's narrative as an insider's perspective of the issue under analysis. Such insider insights can then be used to formulate theorisations that can be incorporated into prevailing theories (Tamachi *et al.* 2018). Emerging themes were constructed from comprehensive analysis of narratives.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### ***Feminisation of Evil***

The prevailing notion emerging from the findings is that the altar call is a space of tacit contestation of power. Leadership, exhibiting characteristics of negative masculinities, whether deliberately or through force of habit, announce altar calls by outlining the common problems afflicting congregants or as the spirit leads, pinpointing individuals who need deliverance. Whether they are demonic manifestations of disease or social discord, it would seem that the majority of these calls targeted women.

Findings indicate that the ZAOGA and AFM churches may be led by different leaders, but they have similar altar call administration. Both churches seem to have aspects linking them to gender bias and perpetuation of oppressive tendencies towards women and girls. Evidence from female narratives indicated that altar calls seem to target females in the church. Below is *Mandipa's* (a pseudonym) narrative. *Mandipa* is a 35-year-old single mother with three children who attends ZAOGA. We chose this story particularly because of its representative nature. It outlines many of the issues narrated by the participants in the sample.

*I was born in a Pentecostal church environment and as I grew older, I naturally received Jesus Christ as my personal Saviour. I love Christ. My relationship with God is rewarding at many levels. It is the things that are done in church and the way they are done that make me uneasy. Do not get me wrong; I have benefitted from having a close relationship with Christ Jesus. The altar call that you are specifically asking about is one such thing that I have a problem with. Because it makes me feel as if something is wrong somehow. Altar calls are done every end of service in our assembly. The leader calls out for those who have been raped, abused and rejected. On many occasions, he can say something like 'There are barren women here, there are women who are yearning for marriage as I speak, there is a girl troubled by an aunt who is trying to bewitch her; You are troubled by jeko [menstrual cramps], Spiritual husbands have been haunting you for years and so on'. And of course, many women, just like me, will fit somewhere in the description, so we go to the altar for prayers and deliverance. Now, over the years, I find myself resentful of men.*

*For not being subject to the preacher's direct pin-pointing of faults, needs and problems. I am even resentful of myself for always being one of the many who needs help for such degrading and humiliating problems. Sometimes I wish I could just become a man, and go for altar calls that denounce poverty, promise anointing for promotion at work, salary increases, new cars, and blessings to build properties for those with stands or land awaiting development. Anyway, I am a single mother and I cannot change that, so I have to put up with it because I have faith that God will have mercy on me even though I am not happy with the way it is always us women who have problems that are announced in church.*

The above narrative was followed up by an interview to clarify on the assumptions of female poverty, curse of singlehood and curse of femininity that emerged from the emotional narrative. It should be stated at this point that \*Mandipa from ZAOGA explained that things were done this way since 'ndiwo maitiro edu' (it is our way of doing things). A sense of defeat and hopelessness was evident from one who believed they could not change the status quo. Another revealing narrative from \*Sinaye (a pseudonym) mentioned some key features of altar calls that we identified as problematic to the ideal of eradicating gender imbalances, oppression and bias. Sinaye, a 17-year-old girl from AFM commented thus:

*I love the church and everything we do here. My belief in God is firm. What I know for sure is that the men are here to pray for the women. Whether it is sickness, or seeking a marriage partner, only women are targeted. You see, if the preacher concludes their sermon by calling on women who have discordant relationships, women whose husbands are cheating on them and girls who want to secure life partners- it is obvious that only girls and women will go up front. I feel like women in this church are weak. Maybe I should say weakened. We are presented as helpless. Like we are desperate almost .... I am slowly dealing with these questions in my mind. In my own way. I do not want to be dependent even if it is for prayer. Why broadcast my weaknesses? The men and boys who remain rooted in their seats are not problem-free. I suspect they are embarrassed to come forward because the trend is that only women and girls need deliverance.*

The hierarchical nature of Pentecostalism and the central role of leaders in deliverance required us to have a participant leader, Takunda. Below is a narrative from one of the men in the sample, *Takunda* (pseudonym), a 35-year-old man who holds a leadership position in the AFM church:

*I have been a member of the church for ten years. I have been a leader for the past three years. I will give you my experiences on the altar call. Apart from the repentance altar call, most altar calls really relate to issues that affect women. If women do not get help in church, then why are they coming to church? Therefore, I can say that the altar call is designed to address problems faced by women, such as failure to get a marriage partner, demonic manifestations, cancer, barrenness, and so on- issues that rarely affect men. Well, I have also stood up to go for an altar call on those rare occasions when it's a big conference, and the preacher calls out to those who need anointing by the Holy Spirit, or those who need promotion, or riches or other male related issues. The truth is, not many men go forward anyway. I do not always go myself. I have just been accustomed to the fact that the calls are focused more on female problems, as opposed to male issues. In any case; the men are the ones praying for the women and children mostly. The men are the anointed leaders.*

\*Takunda from AFM stated that the church focuses on needs of women as they constitute the majority of congregants, yet he as a man is part of those congregants who feels neglected, this in itself is ambivalent. The implication is that oppressive tendencies enacted by leadership have become woven into the essence of patriarchy in a manner after Chitando & Biri's (2013) Jesus-figure, as well as Van Klinken & Smit's (2013) gendered male body of Jesus. As a result, masculinities are deployed even to their own disadvantage in the AFM church. Men get left out, even when they have need, because the general and dangerous assumption is that womanhood is synonymous with frailty.

The narratives in the sample demonstrated that altar calls could be grouped into three categories, namely: call to repentance, call for anointing, and call for deliverance from specific demonic strongholds. Apart from the altar call, the women in the sample indicated that there are other practices that are conducted in ways that buttress the belief that men are superior, while women's lives are riddled with problems that render them inferior and

incapable of contributing meaningfully to society; hence, the need for teaching and deliverance. Single women's groups, widows' meetings, kitchen tea parties, baby showers, baby welcome parties, as well as Thursday and Saturday meetings in which women are taught how to be productive, self-reliant, preserve their marriages through biblical submission. Participants indicated that only a few men's fellowship meetings were ever held, in which they held a *braai* and discussed mainly business ideas. The approach of the church, therefore, has as its point of departure the image of a female that is almost infantilised, with the boys and men holding a superior position in true patriarchal style.

One participant *Maita* (a pseudonym) from ZAOGA, indicated that when announcing the altar call for repentance, the preachers usually say, '*It does not matter what your past was like- maybe you were a witch, a prostitute or whatever, you can be saved if you give your life to Christ Jesus today*'. *Maita's* narrative was corroborated by our field notes from the participatory observation of four sermons, that is, two from ZAOGA and two from AFM. There seems to be a scripted announcement, such that even if the preacher on a given day is a woman (such as on Women's Big Sunday or Mother's Day), they also present a masculine and patriarchal authority, articulating femininity negatively. In this instance, they say things that relate to women as if they are the only ones who are targets for repentance and/or deliverance. These contradictions are inherent in practices in both ZAOGA and AFM, where there is a multiplicity of women's fora, such as women's weekly meetings (*chipiri, china, sabata*), (Women's Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays) while men's fora exist in name, but fail to be effective (Chitando & Biri 2013).

The various dimensions of practising religion in the Pentecostal church offer an opportunity for the church to integrate gender justice as a good practice. The findings of this study indicate that the manner in which the church executes its mission and the manner according to which practices gender is critical in achieving gender justice. Gender bias is a critical component of gender-based violence. Where there is bias, exploitation is fuelled. The dialogue about gender justice therefore centres on creating a safe space for women. However, given the ambivalence of the deliverance altar call, even when the women in the sample stated that they received healing from the deliverance altar calls, the manner in which the call was made left them feeling vulnerable and inferior.

The manner that deliverance altar calls are announced involve a

fundamental shift in the receiver's self-perception and self-esteem. The current deliverance altar call in both the AFM and ZAOGA churches is scripted along the lines of a dominant masculinities church leadership that seems to ritualise activities that present femininities in an ambivalent light. On the one hand, the practice seems to be loudly claiming that the girls and women are important, therefore, we incorporate them as special in our programme. Yet, on the other hand, a closer analysis of the calls speaks negatively about how women are perceived by the church. Participants indicated that the church leaders qualified to announce the deliverance altar call included, but were not limited to, the Assembly Pastor, an Elder chairing the day's ecclesiastical service, or an Elder with a prophetic word specifically targeting a group of congregants in need of deliverance on that particular day as the Holy Spirit leads. Findings indicate that church leaders follow internalised and ritualised scripts when announcing deliverance altar calls.

Our interpretative phenomenological analysis of the Pentecostal deliverance altar call showed how girls and women experience it. The call is an experience for women that shapes the manner in which they perceived themselves in relation to men, and also shapes the manner in which men perceive women, both in and out of church. The altar call discourse that was selected as the focus of this study is significant in its promise to expose the implications of a micro-discourse on social actors, as well as larger discourses, such as female empowerment and gender justice. In order for us to interpret the ascribed meaning in deliverance altar calls, we need to understand that discourse determines relationships. By closely analysing transcripts of deliverance altar calls characterised by appeals for individuals who needed prayers using the basic criteria of phenomenological analysis, we managed to extrapolate the salient characteristics of deliverance altar calls in a Pentecostal tradition, and the responses of women in the sample.

## **Leadership and Dominant Masculinities**

A successful discussion of the altar call practice is hinged on church leadership. Church leadership in the Pentecostal tradition are predominantly men, and they are key in the deployment and enactment of rituals in the church. An analysis of church leaders preoccupied with the task of executing missions reveals their ambivalent role in the history of human progress (Kaunda 2014). While church leaders have been positively instrumental in pursuing social change and

development, revelations from history, forwarded by feminist theologians, indicates the negative role of church leaders in endorsing gender discriminating practices under the realm of divine authority (Kaunda 2014). This observation suggests that the execution of missions is seldom neutral. Following Nadar (2009), the Christian mission can be viewed as the practical dissemination of the good news of justice and love. It is the exercise of justice and love that is then expected to transform all forms of injustice in the world such as gender injustice and the marginalisation of women. What we find problematic about the prevailing discourses on gender bias and oppression is that the church seems to be a replica of certain cultural stereotypes, as evinced by McFadden (1994) cited in Zhou and Landa (2013). According to McFadden (1994), certain cultures (and we observe that religions and spiritual institutions fit in this category) execute their work (we view these as rituals, ceremonies and services in the church) in ways that oppress women, due to the fertile discourses in these processes that support oppressive tendencies.

Women are usually the victims in instances of flawed interpretation of scripture. A consideration of the attitude displayed by Jesus during his interaction with women would indicate that rather than proving their weaknesses and relegating them to inferior positions, He sought to liberate them from various forms of bondage, of which inferiority was one. However, this notion of liberating women from bondage seems to be the dominant paradigm underpinning the current deliverance altar call practice in Pentecostal circles.

Scholars of missiological paradigms of gender justice such as Kaunda (2014) argue that a resourceful leadership style can transform traditions that encourage gender injustice in the church. We are particularly interested in the leadership of the church in our interrogation of the perpetuation of gender bias through the altar call, due to the notion that the methodologies of the execution of church rituals lie with the masculinities-motivated leadership. Pui-lan (1996) presents as a noteworthy characteristic of a gender conscious leader, in terms of the ability to proclaim the gospel with women in mind. Women in this instance are presented as victims of a myriad ills, from globalisation and the money economy, to the church itself.

## **The Deliverance Altar Call and Dominant Masculinities**

Characterised by a male leader, the anointed voice calling from the podium condescends women, who are taken to need spiritual deliverance from various

forms of bondage, the deliverance altar call invariably elevates masculinities. The elevation of men as invincible and all-powerful is not only problematic, but certainly harmful to the female psyche, and retrogressive to the intentions of female empowerment and gender justice. The notion of men as little gods is an idea worth challenging, where furthermore, men with a Messiah complex derail efforts to empower women (Chitando & Chirongoma 2012). This notwithstanding, the female pastor Eunor Guti has risen to a high position, conducting deliverance alongside her husband Ezekiel Guti in ZAOGA. The same is happening with ordained Pastors' wives in AFM, where the manner of deployment of the deliverance altar call, the choice of words, and the gender focus and gender bias inherent in the practice, nonetheless persist.

Given the nature of the altar call in ZAOGA and AFM in Zimbabwe, reflection on the altar call is equivalent to reflection on women's empowerment discourses. The deliverance altar call has gained popularity as a ritualised performance in Pentecostal spaces. We argue that deliverance altar calls are fundamentally discriminatory, and profoundly patriarchal in nature. The current deliverance altar calls in AFM and ZAOGA, therefore, represent an unstable zone that requires nuance and restructuring. The paper raises important missiological questions that merit a response. Can altar calls be transformed into sites of discourse over female empowerment? If so, how can this be done within the bigger picture of Christianity without entirely losing mission objectives? A variety of voices and perspectives come into play in the construction of altar calls, hence, it is important to acknowledge the power dialectics at play. There are male-female dichotomies that are created and sustained in the church in order to facilitate rituals such as altar calls. The altar call, as a speech act, originates from a position of power, directly addressing an audience that is vulnerable spiritually, economically, and physiologically. Altar calls are administered as a 'lifesaver' from a more powerful saved minority, characterised by masculinity, to an exposed (largely femininities) group that is presumed to be in need of saving.

Each altar call in the AFM and ZAOGA speaks directly to diverse women whose experiences in postcolonial spaces render them common recipients of the ills of a society that has normalised the mistreatment of women by euphemising and downplaying discourses of gender discrimination. Despite the differences between women's experiences and the complexities of each individual woman's case, the altar call is a uniting force that renders women as a collective true to the mission of Jesus Christ that negated difference and

advocated for oneness. However, the problem arises with the characteristics and nature of the collective. From the findings, women seek a renewed perspective of their gender, both in the home, and in the church. Women and girls endeavour to escape the stifling environment and enter spaces that nurture self-esteem, thereby facilitating engagement and dialogue between men and women on an equal plane of humanity.

Zimbabwe's religious space is unstable. We acknowledge that the issue of women in the Zimbabwean Pentecostal church is not a simple subject to discuss, where grappling with the role of women, or how they are perceived in the church, reveals complex narratives. Zimbabwe is particularly unique due to the triad of forces that are its colonial legacy, poverty, and economic inequality, in which there has been a mushrooming of charismatic movements promoting the prosperity gospel, prophecies, and miracles.

## **Problematics of Zimbabwean Pentecostal Churches as a Mannish Club**

Certain normative practices are in reality disempowering to women, who expect to live in society and be taken seriously as leaders, professionals, and entrepreneurs. The problem of the administration of altar calls is significant, since it influences the manner in which men and women relate both within and outside of the church, in the broader socioeconomic sphere. For instance, all the male participants in the sample expressed pity for women, who manifest demons during the deliverance sessions, that call on women who need to be set free from various forms of bondage. A question that appears extant is as to whether abuse, bondage, and disease can be understood to be synonymous with femininity. In order to promote gender justice in all sections of society, there ought not to be a particular section of society that is permitted to denigrate women, or presents them as victims of all sorts of ills.

The idea of the church being what Qualls (2017) calls a 'boy's club' is a reflection of the fundamental challenges that underpin processes such as the altar call in the church. While altar calls have healed the sick and delivered many from various forms of bondage in AFM and ZAOGA, they have also inevitably relegated women to the position of underdog and second-class citizen, due to the manner in which they are announced. Typically, altar calls in the denominations included in this sample largely target barren women, and women with various feminised problems, whose public announcement has

dented women's images, while elevating men as both resilient and untouchable. This is a practice, we argue, that is an indirect perpetuation of gender bias.

It is hardly a revelation when Pentecostal leaders, preachers or evangelists practice what we have termed the feminisation of evil in announcing altar calls that demonstrate female victimhood and target women in various states of psychological and spiritual oppression. This is due to what we conceptualise here as the cultural scandal whereby all misfortunes are blamed on women. A pertinent example of this phenomenon is where a marriage union fails to produce a child, or where a child with a disability is born, including the man committing adultery, the woman involved is summarily blamed (Mashangwa 2013). Such practices result in the woman being subjected to ridicule, while her husband basks in false innocence, with his pride and ego intact. A predominant feature of patriarchy is evidenced here, in which the man is revered, protected and '*godified*'; at all costs, while the woman is disempowered, infantilised, and commodified at every opportunity available.

## **Decolonising the AFM and ZAOGA Churches to Create Gender-friendly Spaces**

Given that findings indicate that the altar call discourse is driven by a patriarchal mindset that laces all Pentecostal church processes in ZAOGA and AFM; one way of subversion would be to reconstruct church practices with women in mind. The colonial legacies of oppression and subjugation of women are apparent in religious rituals such as the altar call in the Pentecostal church. Decolonising the female narrative, therefore, entails decolonising the church through a gender conscious leadership (Kaunda 2014). Any project preoccupied with reconstructing the gender discourse in Africa ought to include expanding the horizons of execution of religious practices in the church, telling the story of women through multiple, alternative pathways that do not compromise women's integrity or women's already prejudiced position in society.

Findings indicate that the deployment of the altar call in Pentecostal churches in the sample can be understood to be the result of unarticulated Pentecostal hermeneutics, as discussed earlier in the literature review section. The implication of continuous unconscious enactment of well-intended practices in an oppressive and discriminatory manner manifests as the continued subjugation of women. As long as the male leaders of the church

continue to announce the altar call using an approach, tone, and terminology that targets and denigrates women, the men and women in the congregations will unconsciously assimilate the misinformation and miseducation package of power as essentially masculine, and evil as essentially feminine, which is a message that perpetuates gender injustice. The way forward, therefore, is to raise the awareness of church leadership on the nuances and complexity of gender justice, and the role of the church in halting disempowering discourses towards creating empowered women who can participate fully in the church and in the community.

The conceptualisation of the deliverance altar call as a ritual is essential in elucidating the ritualised enactment and performance of the deliverance altar call. The distinct pattern of the deliverance altar call renders it a gender-biased practice, due to its specific, recurring and scripted references to girls and women as special cases that are in perpetual and desperate need of salvation. It is important not to take religious practices and experiences such as the altar call at face value, as they have the potential to entrench beliefs and transform social relations. The calls address congregants in a particularly formulaic manner, thus inducing certain emotional and psychological reactions. These reactions, while not visible or measurable, influence sensibilities, behaviours, and interpersonal relations.

Pentecostal church leaders depend on the rituals that are the embodiment of spiritual worship, for instance, the deliverance sessions that the leader of ZAOGA Ezekiel Handinawangu Guti conducts during conferences. However, as the broader literature indicates, the elevation of humans to the level of God is not just problematic, but both toxic, and risky (Chitando & Chirongoma 2012). For this reason, addressing those practices that promote a god complex in masculinities promises to raise the consciousness of church leaders regarding gender justice. Critically, questioning the current deliverance altar call practice can, therefore, prompt action and transformation. Yet, ignoring these findings may impoverish religious practice.

## **Contesting Religious Hegemonies**

A deliverance altar call is a discursive instance in which the church leader (usually representing masculinities) possesses credentials enacted as power, anointing, and knowledge that empower him to deploy commands in the form of altar calls. The concept of hegemony concerns power relations in social

practices, such as those staged in the church, and how they are perpetuated. The discourse of the church classifies and characterises individuals, and the literature indicates that this reinforces cultural and social differences. Against this background, it should be noted that exposure to a particular type of discourse has the capacity to shape mindsets. The nature of dominant conversations influences how individuals think about and establish interpersonal relations or relations of domination, as in the case of the deliverance altar call in question. For this reason, whether intentionally or unintentionally, directly or indirectly, the deliverance altar call is used as an instrument to establish the superiority of men, leading to gender bias.

## **Conclusion**

Pentecostal men and women in the sample from both AFM and ZAOGA acknowledged and affirmed the active work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Although participants were reluctant to label their churches negatively, church practices that are hostile to women were indicated as neither socially nor spiritually beneficial. Despite slight differences in administrative styles, narratives from both AFM and ZAOGA indicate that without proper planning, guided by a gender conscious spirit, a deliverance altar call can sound manipulative and psychologically damaging to an audience.

This paper challenges institutions of religion and spirituality to rethink deliverance practices, and to examine the current default enterprise of deliverance altar calls and the deep-seated ambivalent practices inherent in them. As indicated in earlier sections of our discussion, existing research on the ability and approach of the churches in the sample to transform women's negative realities in terms of discrimination and inequality is useful, but inadequate. There are limitations concerning methodology and latitude. In the same vein, there are worrying practices that seem to be naturally adopted and systematically executed without considering their consequences on fragile discourses, such as gender bias and gender violence. Of the worrying practices that exist in the AFM and ZAOGA Pentecostal churches, this paper provides a rich description of the characteristics of the deliverance altar call that make it problematic and worthy of reconstruction. While the multiplicity of possibilities for therapy that exist in Pentecostal worship cannot be denied, basic structural injustices are also worth challenging.

The feminisation of evil, which we posit in this paper, is concurrent

with the feminisation of HIV and Aids in Zimbabwe (Zhou & Landa 2013) and the feminisation of disease and trauma in women's literary works of art in Zimbabwe (Zhou & Ngoshi 2010). We conclude that the feminisation of evil carries with it an insidious sense of vulnerability and dependency. After analysing the narratives of women who have lived through decades of the feminised deliverance altar calls, we argue that if announced as such, the altar call becomes ambivalent as to be perceived as a masculinities instrument of cultural and religious blackmail, as well as patriarchal domination, with the consequence of further disempowering women. Raising the consciousness of the leadership in the AFM and ZAOGA churches is akin to what Burchardt (2017) terms the 'responsibilisation' of men, that is, raising masculine awareness of responsibility in moving self-reflexively away from hegemonic masculinity and working towards gender justice.

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# Commoditising Health? Of Guesthouses and Spiritual/ Faith Healing in Zimbabwe's New Pentecostal Movements

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## Abstract

The enjoyment of good health has always been central to the Pentecostal theology of prosperity. The lack thereof has been construed as a sign of being cursed, or that one is not in a good relationship with God. While it has been tradition in Pentecostal churches to lay hands on the sick, a new phenomenon has emerged in Zimbabwe where the sick have to visit guesthouses if they want to have a 'one-on-one' encounter with a 'Man of God'. This paper, proposes that this practice is tantamount to commoditising health by Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe, going further to argue that the exclusivity of this practice, excludes the poor, who cannot afford the price asked for when one is visiting the guesthouses. This is done from a background where spiritual healing in Pentecostal churches has been conceived as a free gift of the spirit. For this reason, this departure from a perceived 'norm' requires a closer analysis. The research is qualitative in nature, and structured interviews were used to gather data for the paper.

**Keywords:** commoditise, guesthouses, spiritual/faith healing, Pentecostalism, Zimbabwe

## Introduction

This article examines the intersections of religion and health, with a special focus on healing in the newly formed Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe. The paper agrees with most of the scholars on Pentecostalism that the enjoyment

of good health (in all its forms) has always been central in the Pentecostal theology of prosperity (see Biri 2018; Shanduka & Togarasei 2018). The focus of the paper, however, is to interrogate the guesthouses or healing centres that have been introduced by new Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe. These guesthouses are structured in the form of lodges or hotels, where those seeking healing or deliverance can book in so as to enjoy personal interaction with a 'Man of God'. This is a chance that they are not afforded during normal church meetings. While the concept of healing centres is not new within religious circles, the paper seeks to critically examine the way it has been restructured/recreated, such that we are able to see whether this new phenomenon is not tantamount to commoditising spiritual healing, thereby excluding the poor and vulnerable who may be in greater need of the service than those who can afford to pay so that they are accommodated at these guesthouses. Some who afford it have also frowned upon the move, and have deliberately chosen not to visit the guest houses. I do this cognisant of the fact that across the history of Christianity and other religions, centres of healing have emerged across space and time. Therefore, as alluded to earlier the current phenomenon in the new Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe is not a completely novel innovation. For example, traditional healers in African Indigenous Religion(s) established healing centres. Furthermore, after the establishment of African Initiated Churches in Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in particular, healing centres were created. A good example is those established by Mai Chaza, who was a faith healer (see Scarnecchia 1997; Dube 2008). In Pentecostalism, the phenomenon can be traced back to the Nigerian preacher T.B. Joshua, who leads the Synagogue Church of All Nations. Walter Magaya, who founded Prophetic, Healing and Deliverance (PHD) church, brought the practice to Zimbabwe, claiming to be T.B. Joshua's spiritual son (Chitamdo, Manyonganise & Mlambo 2013). What makes this study relevant is showing how this concept appears to have found new meaning in Zimbabwe's new Pentecostal churches. Biri (2012:42) takes note of the ability of Zimbabwean Pentecostalism to innovate by re-sacralising, re-interpreting, and re-defining traditional symbols. The same could be said of how they are able to do the same when it comes to African traditional beliefs and practices, which have a bearing on the concept of the guesthouses placed under scrutiny here.

The paper uses the theory of innovation from Harold Turner's study of typologies in Religious Movements (1979). The use of this theory in the study of Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe, especially in debating whether the use of

guesthouses in itself constitutes a commoditisation of health, enables us to see the transformations that have taken place in the healing and deliverance methods in the newly formed Pentecostal churches. For purposes of specificity, the paper focuses on the United Family International Church (UFIC). I have conveniently chosen this church because I am a member, and hence, an insider. As a result, I was able to get some of the data relevant for the paper from sermons, as well as informal discussions with fellow congregants. Since the paper is largely qualitative, a convenience sample was made of nine interviewees. Four of these were academics in the area of religion. Three were members of UFIC, who had visited the guesthouses and two were Pentecostal Christians, who do not belong to any of the new Pentecostal movements. An interview schedule with questions was sent via email to the academics, to which they responded via the same. To the other group, semi-structured interviews were carried out. For confidentiality purposes, codes were used to identify interviewees. In order for us to interrogate whether guesthouses/healing centres are in themselves a commoditisation of health, we need to first understand the interconnectedness of religion, health, and well-being.

### **Religion, Health and Well-being: Gleanings from Literature**

Though religions the world over differ in how they confront suffering (Lee & Newberg 2005:454), there are many signs that the role of religion in healthcare is increasing (Lee & Newberg 2005:445). Koenig (2012) explains the separation between religion and health that appears to have happened in developed nations as being a result of the studies by Sigmund Freud who argued that religion was an infantile neurosis. He notes that there has been no separation of religion, spirituality, and health in developing countries. Thus, Chamberlain's analysis of religion and health becomes relevant at this point. Chamberlain (2000:17) asks the following pertinent question: why is religion good for human health? He then argues that the answer to the question is multifaceted, and includes social and psychological aspects, as well as spiritual and theological ones. Chamberlain further avers that the various teachings within religions in most cases has the effect of promoting health physically, socially, interpersonally, and spiritually. He argues that 'it seems increasingly clear that a by-product of being religious is engaging in behaviour [sic] that leads to better health' (2000:18). From Chamberlain's perspective, religion also 'provides access to a divine force (God) who has the perceived power

(sovereignty) to influence human events (transcendence) and who hears requests (prayers) that are health promoting if not healing’ (2000:19). He then concluded that there is enough evidence to support the contention that religion is good for human health. However, ‘when individuals misunderstand religion or misuse religion in the service of their own emotional, psychological, or spiritual pathologies, it is not religion per se that is pathological, but rather the abuse of religion that is sick, harmful and sometimes evil’ (2000:19). On the other hand, Chamberlain is cognisant of the fact that religion can also be dangerous to one’s well-being when it is misunderstood and misused.

The positive aspects of religion for health, especially mental health, were discussed by Koenig (2012). Koenig argues that religions provide an optimistic worldview that may involve the existence of a personal transcendental force that loves and cares about humans, and is responsive to their needs (2012:7). This is crucial, since it gives believers a subjective sense over events (2012:7). He also examines the rules and regulations within religions, and shows how, when these are adhered to, they can shield adherents from stressful events. He further argues that ‘religions emphasize[sic] the love of others, compassion and altruistic acts as well as encourage meeting together during religious social events’ (2012:8). For him, pro-social behaviour has many consequences that buffer stress, and lead to human support, when support is needed in difficult times. He concludes that while religion and spirituality are not a panacea, it is generally associated with greater well-being, improved coping with stress and better mental health. Like Chamberlain, Koenig (2012) posits that religion may also be used to justify hatred, aggression, prejudice, and the exclusion of others, to gain power and control over vulnerable individuals, among others. Chamberlain and Koenig’s analyses are useful here, because they highlight both the positive and negative links between religion and health. I am particularly intrigued by Koenig’s analysis that religion can lead to exclusion. In this regard, Sered (n.d.) encourages scholars of religion to determine what they can learn from the healing practices of the faith tradition that [they] study. In dealing with the skepticism that surrounds religious healing, as she calls it, Sered argues that this has to be believed on the premise that religious communities say they have been healed. However, she brings to our attention the fact that religious healing almost always takes places in broader social and political contexts.

In his research of the Karanga people of Zimbabwe, Shoko (2016) discovered that religion is central in the traditional Karanga system of therapy

for illness and disease. In a review of Shoko's work, Van Klinken notes that a strong concern for healing is characteristic for African indigenous religions. In his analysis, Shoko shows how in traditional Karanga belief system, illness and disease depend on the relationship among and within the spiritual and human realms that characterise the religious cosmology. In this case, several rituals are used to maintain or to restore the relationship with the ancestors as a guarantee for personal and social health (2008:380). Critical in this book, from Van Klinken's point of view, is when Shoko shows how the traditional perceptions of illness, disease, healing, and well-being are still seen from a spiritual perspective, as well as how the belief in witchcraft as the major cause of illness is still prevalent. He shows that these beliefs still exist in one African Initiated church, Elijah Chikoro Chomweya in Mberengwa. Van Klinken criticises Shoko's study for failing to show the influence of Pentecostal or charismatic Christianity on the AIC he discusses. This criticism may not be justifiable, because Shoko focuses on African traditional beliefs and practices, while Van Klinken focuses on Pentecostals. For this study, Shoko's observations are crucial, because he reveals the importance of health and well-being among the Shona, and the quest for spiritual diagnosis.

Asamoah-Gyadu (2014) examines the use of herbal medicines within an African Christian context, focusing primarily on indigenous expressions of the faith. He argues that African concepts of illness call upon ideas about the importance of medicines used to protect oneself, and for the warding off of evil. For him, in African indigenous religion, herbs in the hands of a sacred practitioner are treated as sacramental substances for mediating spiritual healing, because health is perceived as a religious issue (2014:71). He argues that 'health, wholeness and well-being are integral to all forms of African religion including Christianity' (2014:80). He notes the negativity of missionary Christianity to traditional medicine, but highlights the changing attitudes of the Methodist Church in Ghana towards some traditional medicines. Critical for this study is Asamoah-Gyadu's contention that the use of herbs is being reinvented within the older denominations, including in Pentecostal healing camps in Ghana, which may be applicable to Pentecostalism in Zimbabwe as well. In discussing prophet-healing Christianity, he argues that healing is tied to the charisma of the leader with his or her charismatic abilities serving both as a source of diagnosis and intervention. This observation is important, because it ties the possibility of healing to the persona of the leader; something which is significant in UFIC.

The above provides relevant insights here. For example, the emphasis on healing in African indigenous religions, as expounded by Shoko and Asamoah-Gyadu, finds resonance in the Zimbabwean Pentecostal theology of healing. The next section analyses healing in Pentecostalism.

## **Healing in Pentecostalism**

As alluded to earlier, healing forms an important part of Pentecostal theology. Anderson (2002:523) notes that the majority of Pentecostal charismatics and members of Pentecostal-like indigenous churches believe in divine healing, and that divine healing has been an essential part of the Pentecostal evangelistic methodology (2002:525). He argues that the role of ‘signs and wonders’, particularly that of healing and miracles, has been prominent in Pentecostal praxis and reflection all over the world since its inception, and ‘one of the most important emphases of its mission and outreach’ (2002:525). From Anderson’s analysis, healing has been a major attraction for Pentecostalism. In concurrence, Brown (2015:2) avers that ‘testimonies of divine healing occupy privileged place in the identity of Pentecostal Christians ...’. In healing and deliverance teaching, it is believed that people become susceptible to the oppression of demons through personal sin, moral failure, or ancestral curses (Asamoah-Gyadu 2004:177). According to Anderson (2002:526), healing from sickness and deliverance from evil powers are seen as part of the essence of the gospel, where reference is made to Old Testament prophets, to Christ himself, and to the New Testament apostles who practiced healing. In reference to Isaiah 53:5 and 1 Peter 2:23, healing becomes a given in most, if not all Pentecostal churches.

The manner in which healing has been administered on the sick in Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe has been diverse. In the old Pentecostal churches, laying on of hands on the sick, prayer and fasting, and in some rare cases, the anointing with oil, have been the major ways of administering healing and deliverance. However, the way it has been done in the new Pentecostal movements has drawn criticism. Interviewees for this paper have highlighted the following methods: prayers, healing and deliverance sessions, provision of healing objects (such as blessed cloths, anointing oil, holy water and wrist bands), availing documents that guide individuals, laying of hands, one-on-one guest house meetings with the prophet, exorcism, casting out of demons, therapeutic music, and many more. As such, Chitando and Biri

(2016:73) note that ‘the presence of these young prophets on the religious landscape, as well as their influence in the public space has heightened debate on prophecy, healing and deliverance’, because it has brought with it something ‘new’ and unusual. This has led me to categorise this as Prophetic Pentecostalism (Manyonganise 2016). In concurrence with Chitando and Biri, I posit in this paper that the ‘new’ being brought by Prophetic Pentecostalism is prophecy, which from the leaders’ perspective, requires a new paradigm of healing, slightly different from that practised in old Pentecostal churches. Chitando and Biri note that ‘each one of the (new) Pentecostal churches/ministries has sought to market and brand itself in order to set itself apart from the rest’ (2016:75). Thus, the introduction of guesthouses/healing centres in this type of Pentecostalism needs to be understood in the context of the leaders attempting to not only carve a unique identity for themselves, but to deal with the competition rife in the spiritual market. However, the introduction of guesthouses/healing centres has heightened negative perceptions towards the new Pentecostal movements. One of these guesthouses was introduced by UFIC.

### **Life Haven: UFIC’s Guest House**

The historical development of UFIC has been provided by a number of scholars (see Biri 2012; Manyonganise 2013; Chitando, Manyonganise & Mlambo 2013; Shanduka & Togarasei 2018). Apart from reiterating the socio-economic environment within which the majority of Prophetic Pentecostal churches emerged, this paper does not seek to repeat providing the historical background of UFIC. The above-mentioned scholars agree that UFIC emerged in 2008, which was a period of hyperinflation characterised by a deterioration of health facilities, as well as people’s living conditions. In such a scenario, where people failed to access health facilities, either due to their poor state, or for failure to raise the required cost, turning to faith/spiritual healing was the only option. In this case, UFIC came onto the religious scene at this opportune time. In this case, it did not take long before it had grown exponentially. This confirms Sered’s observation that religious healing always takes place in broader social and political contexts (n.d:2). Anderson (2002:525) opines that in Pentecostalism, the ‘full gospel’ is understood to contain good news for all of life’s problems, and to be particularly relevant in those societies where disease is rife and access to adequate health care is a luxury. As such,

Wahrisch-Oblau, cited in Anderson (2002:526), argues that ‘prayer for healing is an act of desperation in circumstances where they see few alternative options’. While Wahrisch-Oblau’s analysis is debatable, it could be to a larger extent true when one considers the Zimbabwean situation. In their analysis of Magaya’s Prophetic, Healing and Deliverance (PHD), Chitando and Biri (2016:74) contend that specific religious movements can be understood better if the larger socio-economic and political contexts are analysed. Due to Prophetic Pentecostalism’s emphasis on prophecy, healing, and deliverance, UFIC became very popular to people of all ages, classes and races, both in and beyond Zimbabwe. These include top cadres in politics and the arts (Chitando & Biri, 2016:75). The need to receive prophecy, healing and deliverance has led to UFIC gathering large crowds at each of its Tuesday and Sunday church services. As a result, it became difficult for ‘Prophet’ Emmanuel Makandiwa (the founder) to attend to every need. In this case, only selected cases were attended to during services. In order to provide opportunities for people’s needs to be met as well as one-on-one encounters with the ‘Man of God’, UFIC introduced the concept of guesthouses/healing centres.<sup>1</sup>

The first guesthouse was established between 2015 and 2016 in the leafy suburb of Glen Lorne and then later another one in Mt. Hampden (which is about 18 kilometres from Harare). The guesthouse in Mt. Hampden is called Life Haven, and the one in Glen Lorne is called Glenwood. One has to book for three days into the guesthouses, and there are two groups that book into these guesthouses every week. The first group gets into the guesthouse on Monday afternoon, and checks out on Thursday in the morning, while the second group gets in on Thursday in the afternoon, and checks out on Sunday in the morning. Individuals pay US\$350 and children (4-11 years) are required to pay US\$120, US\$500 is paid for the semi-executive accommodation, while children pay US\$125. Chitemba and Ncube (2016) found that at the Glen Lorne guesthouse, the minimum payment is US\$1200, while the maximum is US\$1500. These have since been revised upwards to US\$1500 and US\$2000, respectively. Children pay US\$150. Payments made for the Glenwood accommodation give a guarantee of a one-on-one meeting with the ‘Prophet’.

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<sup>1</sup> I have indicated elsewhere that the introduction of guesthouses in UFIC was a way of counteracting competition from PHD. PHD having introduced this concept first, most UFIC members were visiting PHD guesthouses to have one-on-one meetings with Magaya.

Payments are done at the church offices in Harare, and bookings can be made online. It is important to note that one cannot gain access to the premises of these guesthouses without proof of payment. Looking at these figures, one can see that they are huge, especially for the poor congregant in the church to pay so that they can have a one-on-one encounter with the 'Man of God', or to get healing or deliverance. It is in light of this that this paper was conceived, in order to provide a critique. The question that arises is as to whether health in new Pentecostal movements in Zimbabwe has been commoditised through the introduction of guesthouses/healing centres.

### **Guesthouses, for God's Service or for Money? Sentiments from the Public**

Spiritual faith healing has always been conceived as a free gift of the Spirit in most Pentecostal churches in general, and in Zimbabwe in particular. This has been one of the points of conflict between African Initiated Churches, some of whose 'prophets'/ faith-healers ask for payment when they offer services to patients seeking spiritual healing and Pentecostal Churches. In most cases, Pentecostal churches have labelled certain faith healers in AICs as fake, because they demanded payment. In her study of Pentecostalism and AICs in Mozambique, Pfeiffer (2005:276) notes that 'payment and what it represents is a defining evaluative criterion to determine whether a prophet healer is genuine'. In traditional/old Pentecostal churches, healing, according to Anderson (2004:493), is regarded as a grace of the Spirit that is given to believers in order to manifest the compassion of Christ for the suffering world. Matthew 10:8<sup>2</sup> has been used to justify the condemnation of demanding payment after praying for people in need of healing or deliverance. The only price that one had to pay was to bring with them their faith. Thus, Hebrews 11, which highlights the centrality of faith, is a key text for most Pentecostal believers. Basing on this, I sought to find out how interviewees for this paper react to the concept of guesthouses. While some members regard this concept positively, other UFIC members and non-members were apprehensive about it. RT (15 October 2018) one of my interviewees who is 31 years old and a female member of UFIC, says that the concept is good, because it gives an

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<sup>2</sup> 'Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give' (NIV).

individual time to concentrate on God (She, however, does not elaborate why this is not possible in other contexts where money is not required). She further argues that certain individuals prefer their concerns to be dealt with on a private basis. In addition, some individuals cannot afford to come to church on Sundays, and prefer flexible time schedules for them to be assisted. She was supported by another 40-year-old female member of UFIC, ZC (16 October 2018) who said:

Personally, these guest houses/healing centres have helped a number of people, both believers and non-believers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So, according to one's faith, if one is healed, then these centres serve the same purpose as clinics/hospitals or African traditional healing centres. To me, I take them as centres of faith.

Yet another 34-year-old member of UFIC, LM (19 October 2018) said that the guesthouses are important, because they ensure that there is order since the 'Prophet' cannot afford to deal with the multitudes of people who throng the church every Tuesday and Sunday. Others had mixed views. For example, ST (16 October 2018), a 55-year-old scholar of religion said:

Guest houses might have positive function to accommodate visitors and attend to their needs, but most of them are abused to extort money from unsuspecting believers. They also serve as hideouts for sexual harassment of victims. And in some cases, they are also hiding places for some magical concoctions used by Pentecostal prophets.

This was supported by MT (20 October 2018), a 46-year-old male scholar of religion who said:

These centres or guesthouses are meant to ensure that one gets a one-to-one exchange with the Man of God. The centres are paid for. One gets the impression that the centres are similar to an *n'anga's* place, where he/she performs her duties for the clients. It is usually a secluded place, meant to provide privacy, but looked at from another perspective, one may not be too speculative to suggest that the guesthouses, apart from being centres of syphoning clients of their cash, act as magical centres where 'miracles' are said to happen. In

some instances, the patient is shown his/her enemies, or rather witches. Unfortunately, Jesus, who is the healer par excellence, never used such centres during his time. One then wonders where this phenomenon originates.

There were yet those who were totally against the concept of guest houses and had some valid reasons for their opinions. BK (19 October 2018) a 42-year-old female scholar of religion said she does not subscribe to the concept of guesthouses, because they represent the rise of elitism in the church. She argues:

[I a]m totally against this as one who attempted to go to the guest house twice and was told to pay 300! I could afford but deliberately said no, because it revolted against my faith. It shuns the poor, its business Christianity enriching the founders, there is no basis for this! This is the rise of elitism in the church and also reaping from believers who are desperate. I totally discourage them and the man or woman of God should move to different places of his or her jurisdiction to reach out. These popular men of God are urban-centred, contrary to what Jesus did. It is a bone of contention, but I find most of the traits totally against the Biblical stipulations.

The issue of elitism was also raised by MA (15 October 2018), a 47-year-old female Pentecostal Christian who stated: ‘These are usually out of reach for the average man. So, they are elitist, targeting the well-to-do who can afford the fees and the lodgings’. In a show of division among Pentecostal prophets in Zimbabwe, Prophet Prince Wonderful, who was interviewed by Chitemba and Ncube (2016) is of the view that the issue of guesthouses is a form of merchandising, where for him, ‘this is what the Apostle Peter predicted as one of the signs of a rising generation of false prophets and teachers claiming to be servants of Christ’ (Chitemba & Ncube 2016). For this church leader, the whole concept smacks of greed. He argues:

It is clear the apostles did not sell the epistles they sent to different congregations yet God funded their activities through generous givers in the ministry. Today we have a crop of man of God who even after collecting tithes, offerings, all kinds of seeds and pastors’ apprecia-

tions (money and goods) still go ahead to sell oil, wrist bands, water among many other things. This shows how covetous our generation has become.

Interviewees were then asked to comment on whether they think the concept of guesthouses/healing centres ‘shuts out’ the poor and vulnerable, and whether the concept has turned spiritual healing into a commodity that can be sold. The majority of interviewees were of the opinion that the whole concept marginalises the poor, since they are expected to part with substantial amounts of money, thereby turning spiritual healing into a commodity that can be sold. In an attempt to undermine the whole concept, BK charges that it fundamentally shuns the poor. She denies the explanations that are put forward that the payments are for maintaining the guesthouses as pure hypocrisy to steal from believers, as most of these leaders live lavish lifestyles. She gives an example of how most properties accumulated are in the names of founders and their families. She further questions why the name of Makandiwa is listed on the London Stock Exchange and not the UFIC. She argues that the issue of guesthouses is a form of capitalism in the church, where the poor are neglected and shunned, while the rich access the so-called ‘Man of God’. AM notes that guesthouses lead to the commercialisation of spiritual healing, thereby perpetuating capitalist tendencies. In addition, MT says;

Indeed, in my view, the centres are commercial centres where God’s gifts of prophecy, deliverance and healing are sold at the altar. These gifts have become commodities that only those with the money can access them. This is contrarily to the biblical understanding of these gifts.

When BK alludes to the explanations given for the maintenance of the guesthouses, she is making reference to what Prime Kufa, the spokesperson for Makandiwa said when asked about the payments. He argued:

It is common knowledge that there are costs associated with running the place such as electricity, water, food, transport, etc for the pilgrims. It would be unthinkable that people could go to such places for free. How would the place remain functional, who would fund it if it’s not self-sustaining? It is, therefore, mischievous and misleading

to say people pay to see the prophet. People pay for their accommodation, transport and their food (*The Sunday Mail* 22 May 2016).

‘Prophet’ Tapiwa Freddy interviewed by Chitemba and Ncube (2016) acknowledged that the concept of guesthouses had no biblical foundation. While maintaining that the money paid by visitors goes towards the maintenance of the guesthouses, he said there was nothing wrong if leaders benefit financially from inviting congregants to visit them at guesthouses. The problem with explanations of maintenance, as raised by Prime Kufa and Tapiwa Freddy, is that per capita maintenance costs remain undisclosed. Commenting on the marginalisation of the poor, ECC, a 48-year-old scholar of religion is of the opinion that ‘there is need for balance, to ensure that these healing centres do not become exclusive, or that clients have to borrow money in order to afford “one on one” sessions with the wo/man of God’. Apart from failing to pay, ST was of the view that the guesthouses are also a haven for immoral acts, as women are often lured into sex. However, members of UFIC were quick to point out that those who cannot afford will always get ‘divine helpers’ to pay for the guesthouse fees. LM noted:

To some extent, yes, because people have to pay to check into these guesthouses, and for those who cannot afford the fees and so much willing to be there; they would not be in a position to do so. However, I believe that God always send divine helpers for them and I have come across so many testimonies of people who were assisted by others financially to visit the guesthouses.

In concurrence, RT says, ‘To a greater extent, yes it shuts out the vulnerable, because when one is poor they would not afford to pay for the transport and accommodation. However, it is by God’s grace that some individuals can get well-wishers’. Despite noting that the concept shuts out the poor and the vulnerable, RT does not think that health has been commoditised in the UFIC, or the new Pentecostal movements. She argues:

Healing is free, but it comes at a cost. From other spiritual groups, one is asked to bring a goat or any physical object for rituals to take place. More so, these guesthouses only require you to pay for your food and

accommodation, which is not for profit-making. Even in hotels, one cannot avoid paying for these expenses.

The final question that I sought the interviewees to answer was how the concept of guesthouses can be made more inclusive. Almost all interviewees suggested the creation of time and space for the poor, where they can meet with the ‘Man of God’ without paying. MT suggested that if there is need for payment, the charges need to be affordable to the wider constituency of congregants. ECC is of the opinion that one possible avenue would be for the prophets to have days that they dedicate to those who cannot afford to access the guesthouse. ESG (15 October 2018), a 44-year-old former Pentecostal Christian suggested that the ‘Man of God’ should provide free transport and accommodation to all those who wish to visit the guesthouses. With all the divergent views, can we then say that the new movements have departed from the promise of free healing and deliverance?

### **Commoditising Health? A Departure from the Promise**

A critical analysis of the above responses brings to the fore critical issues pertaining to the concept of guesthouses and the commoditisation of spiritual healing in new Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe. First and foremost, the majority of interviewees have pointed to the commercialisation of healing and deliverance. Essien, cited in Inheanacho and Ughaerumba (2016:290), shows the various ways in which the commercialization of the Christian religion and ministry is done, which include the commercialisation of prosperity, fertility, salvation, prophecy, healing, and deliverance, among others. BK has called this ‘selling salvation’. Kaunda (2016:67) notes that the movements also seem to function according to a paradigm of commodification of spirituality. In their study of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, Inheanacho and Ughaerumba (2016) have observed what they call ‘pastorpreneurship’, and ‘evangeconomics’. From their perspective, the former refers to the business of using the word of God or God’s name to make money, earn a living, and/or extort money or other material goods from unsuspecting admirers and adherents; while the latter refers to ‘business in religion’ and ‘business through religion’, which describes a situation where religion operates like a franchise (2016:290). In their observation, business adorns the cloak of religion, and proceeds to operate under business principles and strategies. It is important to note that in UFIC,

the concept of guesthouses has captured a market of foreigners, as well as citizens who wish to interact with the ‘Man of God’ for healing, deliverance, and direction. Instead of lodging in private hotels or guesthouses, UFIC constructed its own. In other words, this represents a case where the hotel business has been disguised as religion. Prime Kufa has vehemently asserted that their guesthouses are instead prayer centres (*The Sunday Mail*, 22 May 2016). However, congregants refer to these as guesthouses because there is no difference in experience with other private guesthouses, where there is no accountability for congregants to justify exorbitant fees. In an informal discussion, one elderly woman who was sent there by her children came back ecstatic, because for once she had gone to a hotel, where she had eaten so well. When I asked whether she had been healed, her reply was that when she was there it felt as if her pain had gone, but she had subsequently begun to feel the same pain again. It is therefore important to note that, while promises of healing are given, some pay but do not get healed.

Furthermore, what makes people flock to these guesthouses is because associating oneself with the ‘Man of God’, one who is favoured by God and therefore possesses ‘the anointing’ of God (Gifford & Nogueira-Godsey 2011: 12) has been presented in UFIC as an avenue to healing, deliverance, and economic success. I have explained elsewhere how Makandiwa is a subject of awe, and any close interaction with him is seen as a favour from God. Even when he passes close by, members would always claim that ‘*zvangu zvaita*’ (my issues have been solved). Due to this perception, there are some members with lots of money, who have made it a habit to frequent the guesthouses. A number who cannot afford these visits out of desperation often borrow to get this rare chance to be close to the ‘Man of God’ so that their problems are attended to.

The fact that the concept of guesthouses is elitist and capitalist and therefore, marginalises the poor and vulnerable, is clear from the interview responses. Maxwell, cited in Korsen (2015:59), contends that the prosperity gospel influences the economic attitudes of Pentecostals in a way that allows them to come to terms with modern capitalism. Meyer (2007) has called us in our analysis of Pentecostalism to cautiously consider Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which answered many questions about the relationship between religion and economics. She criticises Weber’s account for ‘being partial and incomplete because of its notable lack of attention paid to the symbiosis of consumption, desire and pleasure that seems

to characterize [sic] capitalist life worlds' (2007:9). For her, the success of capitalism depends as much on the consumers of commodities as on their producers. She then calls on scholars to be alert to the ways in which Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches may question established assumptions about the relation between Protestantism and capitalism, and more generally about religion (2007:6). In her analysis of Pentecostalism in Ghana, Pentecostalism appears entangled with the culture of neo-liberalism. In the context of this study, we can therefore say that by introducing the concept of guesthouses and healing centres, the New Pentecostal Movements in Zimbabwe, in this case, UFIC has packaged spiritual healing as a commodity to be sold. There are certain healing and deliverance products that can only be accessed at the guesthouses. For example, in early 2018, 'Prophet' Makandiwa introduced what he called oil of separation, which was deemed to be more powerful than all the other oils he had given out. This could only be accessed at the guesthouses. On June 18, 2018 (in a video posted on YouTube), Makandiwa said of the oil:

You can't be broke, you will recover everything that you lost. Allowing people to live in the future today. Imagine if you can live five hours ahead of time, how many things you can avoid. Coming here [at Life Haven], seeing is a must. You see it before it happens. There has never been such a gift – not just oil, but power. Once you use this, you are not going to guess whether the disease is gone or what. Doctors are supposed to confirm. The future is yours to see.

With such promises, people who can afford then rush to the guesthouses to get the oil for healing, deliverance, and to solve any other problem. Moreover, the price of being admitted into the guesthouses seems to encompass the charges of every activity that takes place at Life Haven, inclusive of the items that visitors receive as they depart from the place, that is, anointing oil or the oil of separation, wrist bands on which words like 'I was there' (this can be a form of advertising so that others can also desire to visit the place) are written. This confirms Meyer's observation that the way Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches are managed has strong similarities with corporate business (2007:14). See Kaunda's analysis that 'there is a general demand for spirituality in many African societies which makes it a viable commodity which can be bought and sold and consumed according to basic neoliberal-market principles' (2016: 67 - 68).

What is apparent though, from the above responses, is the gullibility of some of the members of the new Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe. For example, members of UFIC have taken it at face value that what they are paying for is food and accommodation, without making a comparative analysis with what is paid in private lodges. The responses from the members presents us with a simplified analysis of the issues at play. They fail to understand that the guesthouses are, in themselves, a business for the founder of the church. That is the reason why not any one gets in there at will. Apart from failing to question what they are exactly paying for, members are also at times abused sexually by the prophets at the guesthouses. ST has called them havens for immoral acts. Cheddie (2002:4) is of the view that this is often a result of Pentecostals believing that it is rebellious to question the teaching and practices of authority figures. He argues 'it is ironic that in a movement where the power of God is so emphasised, that laymen are so emasculated of the power to think for themselves and to rationally search truth for themselves'. This often leads members to defend the indefensible. In this case, members' defense using the issue of large numbers and the need for order cannot be accepted at face value.

A wholly negative presentation of guesthouses runs the risk of simplifying the practice of healing in Pentecostalism as a mere gimmick meant to benefit the prophets financially. While understanding the emotions that have been raised by the new practice, there is the need to also pay attention to the good that the adherents say has been brought by the guesthouses. The spokesperson of the UFIC founder, Prime Kufa has indicated that they have prominent business people and politicians frequenting the guesthouses, which calls for privacy and security. On 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2018, 'Prophet' Makandiwa revealed that there are some famous church leaders who visit the guesthouses, but do not want their congregants to know about it. The members of UFIC interviewed for this paper have indicated the need for order, since every church meeting has crowds attending. Chitando, Manyonganise and Mlambo (2013) have shown how the young prophets in these movements are polished and sophisticated. In other words, they have brought a sense of 'class' to Pentecostalism. Such sophistication defines the clear separation of the rich and the poor. However, we need to take note of the healing broadcast on Christ TV (a television station owned by UFIC) as another positive aspect taking place at guesthouses. Generally, we need to be aware of the fact that these movements seem to offer hope to many African Christians and non-Christians alike, due to

their ability to respond in an Africanised way to enormous existential challenges (Kaunda 2016:68).

## **Conclusion**

The point of departure for this paper was the proposition that guesthouses/healing centres introduced in new Pentecostal movements in Zimbabwe commoditise health. In this regard, several conclusions can be drawn from interviews conducted, informal discussions, as well as observations. First, we can conclude that the general public sentiment about guesthouses is that they have turned faith healing into a business for the founders of new Pentecostal movements in Zimbabwe. Second, if faith healing has become a business, health per se has been commoditised, and is ‘sold at the altar’ (to quote MT’s analysis) of these guesthouses. Third, the guesthouses have managed to put people into different social classes, thereby rubbing off the equality that Pentecostal Christians have long claimed to have. In other words, guesthouses have led to the exclusion of those who are poor and vulnerable. However, attributing the concept of guesthouses to the commoditisation of health needs to be done with caution. Siddiqui, Lacroix and Dhar (2014:295) have actually cautioned us to be wary of the tools of analysis that we bring to the field of faith healing, because this discursive area is complex. For them, at times, the tools to do so may lack efficacy, such that we may fail to do justice to the task at hand. What this calls for may be for scholars of religion to find more useful and effective tools of analysis so that we better understand some of the innovations that are being brought to bear on an analysis of religion by new Pentecostal movements in Zimbabwe in particular, and Pentecostalism in general, guesthouses included. ECC has brought to our attention the fact that the initial response and reaction to innovation and creativity by Zimbabwean Pentecostal leaders was marked by judgmental and dismissive attitudes, due to the different theological positions of many scholars. He suggests that may be now that the movements are more established, there could be the need for greater caution, fairness, and openness. This is something that, as scholars of religion, we may need to think of going forward. We will do this cognisant of Meyer’s observation that scrutinising Pentecostalism in its most articulate and extreme form leads us into notable paradoxes and ambivalences (2007:22).

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# **The Perceptions of Faith-based Healing among Public Health Practitioners and Pentecostal-Charismatic Believers in the Eastern Cape Province**

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyses the perceptions of public health practitioners and a Pentecostal-Charismatic community of faith-based healing in Eastern Cape. Data was collected through qualitative techniques, which included observations, questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The qualitative data was analyzed using an interpretive approach. The findings demonstrate a conflict between public health practitioners and Pentecostal-Charismatic believers on the issue of faith-based healing. While the public health practitioners argue for the medical model, which is a reductionist approach to health problems, Pentecostal-Charismatic believers argue for a purely religious model, which is another reductionist approach to health challenges in Eastern Cape. This article argues, as a way of bridging the knowledge gap, for a more systematic transformation of public health by acknowledging the role of faith in people's lives and consequently reconceptualizes relationships between faith and health problems in the province.

**Keywords:** Health Practitioners; health and healing; Pentecostal-Charismatic Believers; Holistic Approach; Perceptions; Eastern Cape.

## **Introduction**

The current studies on public health increasingly acknowledge that health and healing are not merely physiological pathology or medical issues, but rather issues that intersect with political, social, economic, cultural, and spiritual dimensions (Csordas & Kleinman 1990; Montgomery *et al.* 2005; Kaunda & Phiri 2016). The World Council of Churches (WCC 1990:2) affirms that 'Health is most often an issue of justice, peace, [the] integrity of creation, and spirituality'. Scholars are exploring health and healing within the context of wholeness, concerning aspects of the scientific and non-religious, unscientific and religious, technological and non-technological, and Western and non-Western (Csordas & Kleinman 1990). Healing is currently defined as 'the process of bringing together aspects of one's self, body-mind-spirit, at deeper levels of inner knowing, leading toward integration and balance with each aspect having equal importance and value' (Montgomery *et al.* 2005:4). Similarly, health is conceived of as 'the state or process in which the individual [community] experiences a sense of well-being, harmony, unity where subjective experiences about health, health beliefs, and values are honoured' (Montgomery *et al.* 2005:4).

This article employs holistic healthcare theory to explore the views and perceptions of public healthcare practitioners, as well as that of Pentecostal-Charismatic believers on faith-based healing in the Eastern Cape. Pentecostal-Charismatic faith is classified as the kind of faith that embraces the religious philosophy of spiritual gifts and healing (speaking in tongues, passionate worship and laying on of hands), and is independent and non-denominational (Sharpley 2013). The term Charismatic embraces Pentecostalism, and its belief in what is perceived as the leadership of the Holy Spirit (Sharpley 2013). The definitions seem to overlap, and to the general public, the division or difference is blurred. Drawing attention to public health practitioners and Pentecostal-Charismatic's believers' perceptions of faith-based healing is significant, where previous studies have not adequately demonstrated whether or not there is a possibility of collaboration on public health process between religious communities and public health institutions (Sharpley 2013). Besides this, little is known about whether or not faith-based healing has any significance in public health in South Africa.

The aim addressed here is to find a working solution through a holistic theoretical framework of health and wellness that can best support collabo-

ration of the medical and religious models of public health in the Eastern Cape. The holistic approach utilised in this article seeks to overcome the separation between the religious or spiritual and scientific understandings of health problems (Kolcaba 2003).

Here, spiritual and physical spheres of human life are blended combining the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. The application of this blending to faith-based healing, as perceived by the Pentecostal-Charismatics in the Eastern Cape, shows that the holistic framework embraces their sphere of wellness and healthcare in the psycho-spiritual approach. The holistic approach, therefore, encompasses a multidisciplinary approach to public health. It seeks to understand the human person as a unity where body, mind, spirit and environment are descriptors of the interrelated manifestations of the person. Such a framework does not ignore the social, political, behavioural, environmental and spiritual realities of a person, but emphasises the biomedical approach to health and healthcare (Kaunda & Phiri 2016). The question is: what are the perceptions of Pentecostal-Charismatic believers and health practitioners on faith-based health and healing practices? And how can a holistic framework of healthcare practice promote collaboration in public healthcare processes between Pentecostal-Charismatics and public health practitioners in the Eastern Cape?

## **Background and Literature Review**

The new public health ideology in South Africa presents health as a crossroads, where biological and social factors, the individual and the community, and social and economic policy all meet (Gilbert *et al.* 1996). Scholars argue that societies differ in their understanding of health and ways of seeking and organising explanations. They underscore that such differences are shaped by social and cultural factors as well as historical developments (Gilbert *et al.* 1996; Taylor & Field 1993; Pretorius *et al.* 2013). In the public health and epidemiology studies, religion is increasingly suggested as not only one of the key social determinants of health but also a frame people utilise to explain health and healing (Idler, Blevins, Kiser & Hogue 2017: 1-2). Religion functions as a powerful instrument that informs and shapes most people's notions of health and healing.

Holman (2015) writes that religion is a little of both, with pros and cons when it comes to health and the right to health, and the connection between is

seen in the social determinants of health. As the World Health Organisation (2008:2) states:

Avoidable health inequalities, arise because of the circumstances in which people grow, live, work, and age; and the systems put in place to deal with illness. The conditions in which people live and die are in turn shaped by political, social, and economic forces. Social and economic policies have a determining impact on whether a child can grow and develop to its full potential and live a flourishing life, or whether its life will be blighted.

Germane to this is the way in which an individual is socialised to understand how his or her health, wellness and illness influences health behaviours and beliefs.

Scholars stress that most external determinants of health lifestyle decisions (i.e. diet, exercise, and alcohol consumption), when and how a person will access health care, as well as internal mediators, such as the response to illness and illness behaviour patterns, are mostly informed by cultural factors; this includes religion for most religious people (Gross 2015). Short and Vissandjée (2017) conducted a study where religion was listed by participants as one of the key determinants of their health. Scholars caution that although religion can be of great benefit to increase social capital and specific healthy behaviour, certain religious beliefs can also preclude much-needed health benefits and interventions (Idler 2014).

The proliferation of Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in South Africa is evidenced by their influence on individuals and their health (Anofuechi 2015). Most people are attracted to Pentecostal-Charismatic churches because these churches provide spiritual, social, and physical support to their members, where health is one of the noted benefits (Lehohla 2004; Anofuechi 2015; Schoeman 2017). Thus, it is essential to understand how both Pentecostal-Charismatic believers and Public Health Practitioners perceive faith-based healing practices. The primary data was collected through a qualitative method, and thematic interpretive approach was used to explore these perceptions.

## **Methodological Approach**

The research presented in this article comes from a more extensive study on

Black Charismatic Churches (BCCMs) in the Eastern Cape, which are affiliated to the Pentecostal-Charismatic faith. The study explored the role of BCCMs on issues of welfare, community development and empowerment. It examined how BCCMs interact with communities in their jurisdiction, local government, civil society, and other faith-based organisations in the Eastern Cape on issues of community development and welfare.

In so doing, local government directorates on service delivery were interviewed, and the questionnaire data from congregants and community members was blended with in-depth interviews. A number of service delivery directorates were interviewed for the initial study, however, for this article, the public health practitioners in the directorate and believers in the BCCM are the focus. This directorate involves liaising with ward councillors on public health, health programmes, in-service training, patients' rights, servicing 26 fixed and four mobile clinics. Public health support services focus on the following: pharmacy services, district health care, health promotion and awareness campaigns. Environmental health is responsible for public health and safety, preventative health, water quality monitoring, food control for formal and informal business, chemical safety, disposal of the dead, pollution control, and pest control.

The total sample for the survey included 100 respondents, of which 50 were church members, and another 50 were community members who were not members of the congregation in the study. A simple random sample was done for the respondents from uMdantsane Township in Buffalo City Metro and as well for church members, and a semi-structured questionnaire was used for the community members and the church members. The in-depth interviews were done using a purposeful sampling of seven church pastors and five church elders. The same technique was utilised with local government directorate for public health. There were two respondents from the public health nursing section, which involves the following: liaising with ward councillors on public health, health programmes, in-service training, patients' rights, servicing 26 fixed, and four mobile clinics. There was one respondent for public health support services, which focuses on: pharmacy services, district health care, health promotion, and awareness campaigns. Data was then analysed through an open coding system and a blended narrative technique. The data presented is both a qualitative and quantitative study of Public Health Practitioners and Pentecostal-Charismatic believers' perceptions of faith-based healing in the Eastern Cape.

## **Findings**

The findings suggest that perceptions of health and healing are not only subject to a particular social setting but particular religious beliefs, and for some health practitioners to Western influence. The influence of society and external forces in defining health and illness on an individual was evident in the interviews. Even though other factors are at work, the most interesting one was the belief system based on the Pentecostal-Charismatic faith. Both health practitioners and Pentecostal-Charismatic congregants agreed that the Pentecostal-Charismatic faith has a lot of influence on most Christians' understanding of health and healing. The belief system of these congregations is a determinant of how their followers view and respond to illness and how they expected and encouraged help-seeking behaviour for better health management and prevention. The findings are divided into two key subthemes, as follows.

### ***Pentecostal-Charismatic Believers' Perceptions***

The Pentecostal-Charismatic respondents believed that 'these congregations are powerful churches'. They argued, 'all social evils like crime, teenage pregnancy, poverty, sickness, HIV and AIDS and such, emanate from spiritual causes, hence through prayer, these get addressed, and through spiritual practices, these get eliminated'. Some respondents stressed that all social problems, including sickness as mental issues with an 'evil spirit' as the source, and in case of sickness, being sick is a physical manifestation of such evil. They believe that the teaching of the power of the word of God transforms people from such mentality. The teachings and interpretations of such scriptures by their pastors is what they adhere to, as they believe it is given to them by God. It is not uncommon to hear congregants repeating the teachings of the pastor for themselves as statements of faith and as a way of life. One pastor explained:

*What do we do when sickness attacks us, or lack? We resist the devil by faith so we can benefit from the promises of God, for the just shall walk by faith not by sight. But some of you run to the doctors when sick and take doctor's prescription but not the word, that is doubt, not faith, and without faith, we cannot please God. You want to please God, have faith in His word, His promises.*

Another pastor argued:

*That if you go to the doctor, the doctor will tell you what the medical books say, if you go to the psychologists, they will tell you what psychology says; but if you come here at church, I will tell you about the word of God that will stir up your faith to please God so you can get your answers. But, if you replace faith in God's word with such human-derived knowledge, then you will die.*

During the interview, it was common to hear some congregants saying, 'I have a pain here, or I think I am coming down with something, but I trust God for we walk not by sight, utshilo uApostle [the Apostle has said so]'. Sometimes they would say:

*Ndiva... [I am feeling] something but I will not say it, ndivuyise usatana [to make Satan rejoice], the man of God said last Sunday, by the stripes of Jesus we are healed and if we confess that, it will then come to pass. Hayi [no] I will keep confessing.*

These findings confirm Barker's (2007:415) argument that:

The prosperity gospel interprets health and material prosperity as evidence of faith — that is, health and wealth are viewed as gifts of the Spirit and as central to charismatic worship. Based on the interpretation of certain passages of the Bible, the Word of Faith movement holds that health and material prosperity are the rightful rewards for the Christian faithful, but that these need to be claimed. Through faith and the naming of what is rightfully theirs, Pentecostals undertake a confession that becomes energizing [sic] and effective, resulting in receiving [what they have claimed] from God. When people do not receive what they have confessed, it is usually due to a negative confession, unbelief, or a failure to observe the divine laws.

The church members in this study perceive their pastors as 'custodians' of God's mandate of healing. Most of them do not question their pastors' instructions, but they do what they are told to do. The sentiment expressed in

the following statement was common amongst church members from such congregations: ‘Whatever our leaders in church tell us, we will obey it, because we know that they hear from God for us’. For instance, in one of the congregations in Buffalo City Metro, congregants led by the elders of the church, lifted their pastor on a chair and carried him on the shoulders of the four strongest men at the service. They celebrated him and stated: ‘God has raised him even above the angels’ and ‘he has the power to instruct the spirits even the angels what to do’. People with various existential needs ran to receive their miracles as the man of God was given the power to address all such spiritual evils like illness.

Congregants believe their pastors had been given the power by God to overcome evil spirits, and the illnesses they are believed to cause. It is usual for pastors to call for those who need healing and deliverance from evil spirits to come forward for the laying of hands on them, so that they can receive healing and good health. Various respondents noted that if their pastors told them to ‘condomise’, they would do so as they believe this to be the will of God. One believer said, ‘I tell you, we will all gladly do it [use condoms], because it is acceptable and right in the eyes of God, but if they say it’s wrong, no matter what the government says we will not do it, because we are not subjects to government but to God’s law when government conflict with that law’. This statement shows that not only does their faith shape their response to health issues, but also that their pastors determine their congregants’ response to government health promotion messages. Other scholars confirm the view that strong religious beliefs can preclude certain much-needed health benefits and interventions (Idler 2014).

According to the congregants in the study, the pastors present the spiritual aspects their followers observe, for example, the desire to know God; the belief that their leaders are custodians of God’s purpose and plan for mankind’ and ‘viewed as powerful churches with miracles such as healing of the sick people’. Some respondents added, ‘Sick people get there and come out healed, so most people go there with the hope of getting healed too’. Their spiritual aspect is seen as the reason for the growth of these ministries in these communities, where people who place their faith in religious-based healing practices are likely to be attracted by these BCCMs. There is a belief amongst most congregants that God has given Pentecostal-Charismatics a mandate to improve the standard of living for all and that they are empowered with ‘supernatural’ power to overcome social ills, and bring prosperity.

### ***Public Health Practitioners' Perceptions***

Most health practitioners express the concern that faith-healing churches interfere with Government's efforts to reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS, as they undermine the message put out by health promotion workers. They also claimed that these churches discourage people with chronic illnesses from taking their medication and following doctors' prescriptions. Some local government officials from the Department of Health in the health promotion directorate, expressed some misgivings about faith-healing churches. A female respondent lamented that,

These churches interfere with government activities in areas of health and health promotion, by discouraging people from taking medication when they are sick, as they [the churches] claim that they have healed them through [the] laying on of hands and that if they continue to take medication it is a sign of being faithless and they will not be cured by God's power.

The respondent gave examples of people with HIV and AIDS, TB, diabetics, people suffering from high blood pressure and asthma, noting that, 'Such people depend on continued treatment and these churches undermine government efforts in bringing awareness to people of how to manage such illnesses to reduce the prevalence of deaths related to such'. This issue was raised as a concern by public health practitioners, community, and some church members, as those not affiliated with the congregations in question. Pentecostal-Charismatics were seen to be providing services of exclusively spiritual value, and were not understood to be linked to social services other than burial rights, marriages and emotional support. The local government officials emphasised that whereas government cannot be seen to be promoting the faith-healing interests of any particular religious group, it is more responsive to a collective voice. In their eyes, the government has one mandate to bring quality and affordable health service to all.

A senior Government official on health promotion in Buffalo City Metro stated that she needed to understand the operations of these Charismatic congregations, referring to those in the study, and others in the same municipality as well. She attends all of the congregations around the city of East London as if she were a member, and is taken as such in instances where she stays longer. She wanted 'to understand what makes their members so

brainwashed to the point of risking their lives, to understand how they indoctrinate their members on things like health and prosperity'. She observed that,

Church members are like students in a class, if, as a teacher, you see that some are not getting what you are saying or do not have the desired results, you should as a genuine leader look closely to them as to see what is it that they are missing. This has to work equally for all, do not just be happy in taking their money and counting your income without seeing if what you teach is working for them.

She discovered some pastors were taking people with chronic diseases off their medication. She underscored that 'It is wrong to take people out of [sic] medication when you have not tested the results of your prayer, because what we see now is more people dying of something that can be managed medically'. The official noted the importance of educating the pastors about medical health to enrich their faith-healing practices. Her opinion was representative of other officials where she noted that only certified medical professionals should preside over the suspension of chronic medications, and that pastors should not interfere.

A community member from Nelson Mandela Metropol Municipality in Port Elizabeth argued that 'these churches have a tendency of selling what they term to be God's help to people by saying 'if you give, God will help you or heal you', that is, asking for money before they help or pray for you'. These statements speak to the question of how health professionals and the general public view the way in which these churches deal with illness. At the same time, the public acknowledges the critical welfare support these congregations give to people affected and infected with sicknesses like HIV and AIDS, even though they question the claims of their faith. However, public health practitioners have not yet acknowledged that they also require some religious and spiritual training to understand the spiritual needs of their patients.

The findings present a variety of interaction between health practitioners and Pentecostal-Charismatics on faith-based healing, and a need to find common ground in as far as illness management in the province. The discussion below presents a scholarly analysis of a proposed approach to illness management through health behaviour emanating from a holistic approach to medicine.

## Discussion

The question of faith-based healing was not just an issue pointed to by congregants, but they also drew attention to the way their faith socialises them and causes them to have a certain perception about themselves, their lives, their health, and their interaction with other people. Firstly, they view their churches as more powerful than all social evils including sickness, and their pastors as custodians of God's will for them. This shows that faith provides them a global point of reference, and the authority of their pastors as representatives of God's will for them. To obey their pastors is to obey God, and this they say with passionate conviction. This obedience shows that their understanding of health and illness lie at the intersection of different social and cultural perspectives that determine a given individual's response to their health concerns (Patterson 1998). It also suggests that health and illness management in the Eastern Cape and thus in South Africa, are not only in the domain of medically trained public health practitioners but also influenced by multiple social and cultural beliefs and practices. Health is not just a matter of medicine, but also a significant matter of people's understanding and interpretation of their spiritual reality. The Pentecostal-Charismatic congregants reveal that their faith influences their notion of health and healing. Thus, to them, health promotion is a strong spiral of spiritual, social, mental realities and values that display who they are and who they want to be (Pretorious *et al.* 2013: 109-111). This integrated view of health is based on the African holistic approach of reality, where health is not an objective affair in which medical science and research rules; but the people's belief systems also influence their health and wellness. On the other hand, the government's mandate of public health in South Africa is to have a healthy society through effective disease management and prevention based on medical science and research. The primary factor amongst Pentecostal-Charismatic members is their faith in God.

The members of Pentecostal-Charismatics view faith as pleasing to God, and good health as a consequence of their faith in God. As a respondent argued, 'I would rather die believing God for at least I know where I am going than lose my faith and end in hell'.

Since public health concerns the health of the public, it is more important for public health practices to be sensitive to their patients' religious practices, and to supply a sense of comfort, rather than conflict to their patients. It also implies the current need for an understanding of religion in medical practice through discussion with patients and the general public, especially the

Pentecostal-Charismatics. Secular organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) are increasingly embracing spirituality as one of the social determinants of health (WHO 2008). The WHO has gone so far as to actively propose that physicians ascertain the religious orientations of their patients, allowing religion and health to be fused, as is the case within African traditional societies. Rather than arguing that Pentecostal-Charismatics' spiritualisation of health and healing obscures systemic causes of oppression and injustice when seeking to assist their members in decision-making concerning their health and illness behaviours, there is a need to create a space for faith-based healing practices for patients who believe in such healing. In contexts such as Swaziland, the church works hand-in-hand with the health department, as well as chiefs and community members, especially in dealing with HIV and AIDS. The church does not per se ignore the relevance of modern medicine while bringing spiritual support and care to people. There is a mutual understanding between modern medicine and faith in assisting people affected by the pandemic. There seems to be an agreement of what each party can do or has to do to assist. For example, Wyngaard (2013:226) observes the following:

Researchers seem to agree that spirituality is an important component of the holistic care approach commonly found in palliative care. Shiselweni Home-Based Care (SHBC) is a Faith Based Organisation in Swaziland working amongst people with HIV and AIDS in the poorest and most affected areas of the country. They endeavour to restore and build up each clients' dignity through the way in which they are approached, not only when giving physical assistance, but also when they address their spiritual needs. This article emphasises the need for spiritual care as part of the caregiving program and then also illustrates the positive feelings of both the SHBC caregivers as well as their clients as they share some of the experiences encountered during spiritual care.

Similarly, Denis (2013:58) argues as follows:

As the HIV/AIDS epidemic enters its fourth decade, there is a growing recognition that HIV/AIDS is far more than a biomedical phenomenon. It affects politics, culture, social relations, material life

and also, of course, religion. This paper shows that the study of HIV/AIDS and religion, after a slow start, has shown a considerable development, not least in sub-Saharan Africa. The CHART Online Bibliographic Database, incomplete as it is, is a testimony to the importance of this new field of research. The good news is that social scientists and theologians, after ignoring each other, show signs of being prepared to learn from each other. HIV/AIDS and religion exercise on each other a mutual influence. We understand better the role of religious beliefs and practices in shaping the lives of people affected or infected by HIV. But this is not a one-way movement. The epidemic also changes the institutional structures, the beliefs, the moral codes and the forms of sociability of religious people. Even if HIV/AIDS enters a new phase, with fewer infections and more people having access to treatment, these new forms of religious life are likely to remain for a long time.

A report by Shabalala and Dlamini (2018:1-3) confirms that the Eastern Cape can learn from these selected cases mentioned above, where a holistic approach to health means coming together to offer a multidisciplinary approach that recognises a person holistically. To bridge a gap that even the medical training institutions in South Africa have acknowledged, an interdisciplinary approach to medicine would address a person in spiritual, social, mental, as well as physical terms. Indeed, the literature underscores that illness in contemporary society finds its expression in social, psychological, spiritual, and environmental ways.

Furthermore, the social context of an individual influences how a person understands and responds to symptoms. Such a social environment includes one's belief system, which cannot be ignored.

The holistic approach appreciates and recognises the significance of religion and spirituality in understanding public health and promoting effective approaches to health management and ill-health prevention. Such an approach is also crucial, as the integration of faith-based practices in public health has the potential to mitigate the problem of health that is compromised as a result of certain religious beliefs and practices. It may also promote a theology of illness behaviour and help-seeking, which integrates medical healthcare interventions and communications with religious practices in terms of embodied experiential of the divine upon

which most sacred beliefs and practices on which the Pentecostal-Charismatic faith, amongst others, are based.

## **Conclusion**

The study presented faith healing as the determining factor on illness management with the Pentecostal-Charismatic followers in the Eastern Cape, SA and the basis and success of this faith healing being congregants' adherence to Pentecostal-Charismatic faith. The Pentecostal-Charismatic congregation in BCCM is a strong determinant to adherence and non-adherence to health promotion messages given by the department of health. The strong confidence that congregants place on their leaders as the voice of God in their lives calls for an allegiance to the kind of faith they promote, insofar as healing is concerned. Collaboration in order to better realise the promotion of health and prevention could be the best approach between religion and government, seeing that people's strong allegiance to their Christian leaders and also their strong faith commitment influences how they deal with their health challenges. The study then calls for an approach of unified efforts between religious-based health and department of health through a holistic approach of faith and health in the Eastern Cape. Such an approach will present a better understanding of the realities of faith in illness, as well as the scientific explanations of the diseases. It will address the gap mentioned before, that is, of a lack of knowledge of the disease as one of the factors influencing the kind of health-seeking behaviour people project.

This understanding indicates better management of the illness to those in need, when empowered with relevant knowledge on chronic illnesses and how to best manage them through medical science and through the navigation of people's belief systems to align such with medicine basically. Also, the call for collaboration can help to bring a platform of awareness to the congregants when their leaders are equipped with a better understanding of illnesses like diabetes, by including the health promotion efforts of health. Faith expressed by the congregants speaks to the healing one receives in believing in the promises of God as true, whereas through its health promotion efforts, Government speaks to wellness through prevention and management by adhering to specific health rules in order to manage an existing illness. Clarity of engagement on these points of influence to an individual will determine one's empowerment to make informed decisions about their health. Also, an

understanding of the discourses of faith and health in our society would present a platform of engagement that incorporates both structures of faith and health in a community. The holistic approach in the scientific study of health-seeking behaviour of Pentecostal-Charismatic belief-adhering people and the recommendations presented here will help to bring a multidisciplinary approach to addressing their health-seeking behaviour. It has the potential to facilitate an inclusive social platform with a rich understanding of how to encourage a holistic approach with a multidisciplinary practice.

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# **The Catholic Church and Epidemics: Safeguarding People's Wellbeing in the Advent of the 2017/ 2018 Cholera Outbreak in Zambia**

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## **Abstract**

The 2017/18 Cholera epidemic sparked religious conversations that had not yet received scholarly engagement. Informed by the Catholic social theory, the article explored the Catholic Church's positionality in the face of an epidemic. The article's objectives were twofold: firstly, to describe the actions of the Catholic Church during the 2017/18 Cholera outbreak, and secondly, to understand the interconnectedness between public health and religion in contemporary Zambia, using the Catholic Church as an example. A descriptive case study design was employed to collect data through interviews (selected priests and parishioners), document review, and observations, which was inductively analysed (supplemented by social theory). The Church's role emanated from the Ministry of Health's and Local Government's calls for stakeholders' interventions. The Church responded by cancelling and shortening some services, programmes and rites. The Church also provided public health education and implemented safety measures. It was concluded that Cholera was not only a public health issue but also a social justice issue, and hence, the Church called for lasting interventions.

**Keywords:** Religion, public health, Catholic social theory, religious discourse and epidemic.

## Introduction

Although the first Cholera pandemic began in 1817 in Asia, Cholera soon spread to other parts of the world, with Africa being the new homeland for the pandemic (Gaffga *et al.* 2007). Since the 1970s, Cholera was endemic in many Sub-Saharan African countries, and periodically remained a major public health problem (Mintz and Tauxe 2013) with recent outbreaks occurring in Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Malawi, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zambia (WHO 2018). In Zambia, the first Cholera outbreak was reported in 1977/78 (Olu *et al.* 2013) and since then, the country had experienced outbreaks over the years. These Cholera outbreaks had, however, largely been studied from causal factors (Fernánde *et al.* 2009; Kabita 2010; Dubois 2006; Sasaki *et al.* 2008), preparedness and prevention strategies (Olu *et al.* 2013), and economic linkages and policy development (Sladoje 2018) perspectives, to the neglect of the religious dimension.

In this context (Zambia), religion manifested its presence in public health not only as provider of health care, but as part of emergency response team. Compared to the previous Cholera outbreaks, the 2017/18 outbreak brought the Church into the limelight in the public sphere in combating the disease. Despite such developments, there was limited scholarly engagement with how religion had been affected by epidemics, resulting in a lack of an in-depth understanding on how religion could become a tool for navigating through the epidemics.

Using the 2017/18 experiences of the epidemic (which received public debates for what was considered as extreme measures to combat the outbreak), the article explored how the Church (using the Catholic Church as a case in point) acted in the face of the epidemic, in order to safeguard the lives of the people and promote the common good. This inquiry not only documented the actions of the Church in the public sphere, but also pointed to the social ills, which the twenty-first century church was faced with, by linking Cholera a global threat to public health, to an indicator of inequality and lack of social development. We argue that the recent Cholera outbreak provided the opportunity for the Church to act as a tool for public health as informed by her social teachings.

## Research Design and Methods

This article was informed by a descriptive case study, which sought to

understand how the Catholic Church in Lusaka positioned herself during the 2017/18 Cholera outbreak. Owing to the explorative nature of the phenomenon, a descriptive case study was adopted based on Du Plooy's (2000:48) advice that exploratory research can be used to obtain new insights and familiarity with unknown situations, conditions, policies and behaviour. Following Yin (2003) and Creswell (2003)'s recommendations for data collection in case study research, the study utilised recorded interviews from two purposively sampled parishes of Lusaka, and document analysis.

The documents were sampled using availability sampling (Cohen *et al.* 2007). The Catholic Church and the selected parishes were purposively chosen for depth. By focusing on the Catholic Church, this did not suggest that other churches could not be tools in navigating through the epidemic, thus the referent was only chosen to illustrate the interconnectedness of public health and religion through her social teachings. The Catholic Church was also chosen because the government, through the Ministry of Health, had in the previous year declared the continued building of a relationship with the Catholic Church in order to strengthen the health systems and improve access to service delivery (Mbewe 2017). The central question that we sought to address was how and in what way the Catholic Church positioned herself during the Cholera outbreak. The collected data were analysed thematically by providing a description of the case and emerging themes (Creswell 2003), not for purposes of generality, but for understanding the complexity of the Catholic Church as a tool for navigating through the epidemic in public health. The overall aim of this study was to portray meaning that emerged from learning about what, how, and why the Church acted in the manner she did in the face of the Cholera outbreak.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The understanding of the actions and positionality of the Catholic Church as a tool for navigating through the epidemic (the 2017/18 Cholera outbreak) was informed by Catholic social theory. Catholic social teaching was used as a lens because it summarised the teachings of the Church on issues related to social justice. In addition, Catholic social teaching responded to the problems that people encountered in life and established a moral compass to determine direction, and thus provided a broader approach to issues (Brady 2007). Specifically, the social teachings consisted of different elements such as the

principles for reflection; criteria for judgement; and guidelines for action (Henriot 2014).

Henriot (2001: 2) defines Catholic social teaching as ‘the body of the social wisdom, about human individuals in society and about the structures of that society that enable humanity to come to its fullness, that can be found in scripture, writings of theologians, documents of churches and witness of just persons and communities’. Henriot’s definition points to the fact that Catholic social teachings were grounded in scripture, disciplined by philosophy, and informed by centuries of the Judeo-Christian tradition (Brady 2007).

Catholic social teaching is premised on key principles, such as human dignity, centred on the understanding that each person was created in the image and likeness of God, and so had an inalienable, transcendent God-given dignity (Himes 2005). Hence, Catholic tradition is opposed to anything that violated the integrity of the human person. Principles of Catholic social teachings also include the call to family, community, and participation underpinned by the idea that the human person was both sacred and social; and that when one person suffers, everyone suffers. Rights and responsibilities emphasise that people had a fundamental right to life, food, shelter, health care, education, and employment, and that options for the poor and vulnerable are anchored on the understanding that the moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members (Paul & Campbell 2017).

In addition, principles like the dignity of work and rights of workers stressed that the economy existed to serve people, while solidarity pointed to people being called to work globally for justice. Care for God’s creation underscored the idea that the earth was the Lord’s, and hence, it deserved to be loved, protected, and respected (Catholic Charities n.d.). It was in light of these principles that the article understood Catholic social teaching as not only a theory, but also a thread whose values and ideals were embodied in the tradition of social action through the 2017/18 Cholera epidemic.

## **Context of the 2017/ 2018 Cholera Epidemic**

Zambia has recorded Cholera outbreaks since the 1970s (WHO 2011:1). After the first outbreak in 1977/1978, new cases appeared again in 1982/1983. Outbreaks with approximately 11,000 cases occurred in 1991, 1992, and 1999 (WHO 2011). Since 2005, there was a progressive increase in the yearly incidence rate of the disease globally (WHO 2010), which was

explained by increasing poverty, retarded economic growth and development, and limited access to basic social services, such as health, clean water, and improved sanitation (Mintz & Guerrant 2009). True to these sentiments by WHO (2010) and Mintz and Guerrant (2009), most cases of Cholera outbreaks were recorded in the fishing camps of the rural areas and in the peri-urban areas of Lusaka and Copperbelt provinces.

In Lusaka, cases of Cholera and resulting deaths mostly appeared in the western suburbs of the city, where access to safe water and good sanitation was poor (Kabita 2010; Sasaki *et al.* 2008). Olu *et al.* (2013) argued that rural-urban migration induced by increased poverty and inadequate social services in the rural areas led to the creation of poorly planned peri-urban slums, where living conditions were dire and access to safe water and sanitation was limited.

Additionally, the western parts of Lusaka District, which recorded the majority of Cholera cases, had many unplanned settlements with poor access to safe water and good sanitation (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2017:2). For example, the areas had few water boreholes and subsequent limited access to potable water, the alternative were shallow wells located close to pit latrines that were flooded during the rainy season, threatening faecal contamination (Olu *et al.* 2013). The inadequate water supply in Lusaka Province was partly a result of non-expansion of water treatment facilities in Kafue, which was constructed over 50 years ago. Kabita (2010) also contends that the incidence of Cholera, which is accelerated by poor sanitation, contaminated foods and water owing to limited knowledge and unhygienic lifestyle habits, were all common in overcrowded environments.

Cholera epidemics typically occurred during the rainy season in Zambia, starting in October, and ending in May or June the following year, with the peak being reached between January and March (WHO 2011; Fernandez *et al.* 2009). This caused some critics like Hakainde Hichilema (leader of the Opposition political party) to refer to Cholera as an annual traditional ceremony (Chisenga 2018).

Furthermore, Cholera in Zambia was managed by both local and international pieces of legislation and other provisions. For example, since the 1977 Cholera outbreak in Mpulungu District, which resulted in the 1978 Statutory Instrument (SI) No.158 under the Public Health Act, Cap 295 of the laws of Zambia, Zambia instituted the Public Health (Cholera Infected Areas)

Regulation of 1978, which is still in force today. The SI stated that Cholera-infected areas were to be restricted areas, and that the State (Zambia) was responsible for the health of the people both in infected and non-infected areas (Kabita 2010). In the wake of the 2017/18 Cholera outbreak, SI number 79 of 2017 that banned public gatherings in Lusaka was issued.

The Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit (DMMU) under the Vice President's office mobilised human, financial, and medical resources towards the management, prevention and control of Cholera during an outbreak, while the Ministry of Health had a standing committee for any epidemic to combat the outbreak of infectious and communicable diseases in the country. As a member state of the WHO, Zambia took part in the prevention of Cholera as well as its management in all designated Cholera centres, which the Ministry of Health (MOH) set up during any outbreak (Chanda 2009).

As could be deduced from the context in which the Catholic Church acted in the wake of the Cholera outbreak, the 2017/18 outbreak of Cholera was not just an epidemic, but also a social justice issue, which both indirectly and directly affected the Church. What started as a public health issue at the onset of the Cholera outbreak of 2017, ended up highlighting the interconnectedness between religion and public health through the actions of the Church. This incident resulted in the Church acting as a tool in navigating through the epidemic as underpinned by the Catholic social teachings. Before discussing the actions of the Church, a brief description of the 2017/18 Cholera outbreak is given in the next section.

## **The 2017/ 2018 Cholera Epidemic**

The 2017/18 Cholera outbreak (the focus in this article) initially started in Lusaka Province<sup>1</sup> in the Chipata sub-district, later spreading to Kanyama sub-district around October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The outbreak soon spread from the peri-urban townships in the western part of Lusaka to the eastern part, with a new case reported in Chelstone sub-district. As of December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the

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<sup>1</sup> Lusaka Province has eight districts, with a projected population for 2018 standing at 3,118,190. The population comprises 50.6% female and 49.4% males. In terms of age distribution, 40.6% are aged 0-14 years, 57.8% are aged 15-64 years, while those above 65 years are only 1.6 percent.

affected sub-districts were Chipata, Kanyama, Chawama, Matero, Chilenje, Chelstone, and George compounds. By mid-January 2018, Ministry of Health statistics indicated that 3,260 cases had been reported, with 3,089 of these recorded in Lusaka (Ministerial Statement, 20 February 2018). These compounds, which were described as outbreak *epi-centres*, were not only densely populated, but also had inadequate water and sanitation infrastructure, which contributed to the spread of the disease.

The sources of infection were associated with contaminated water supplies, contaminated food, inadequate sanitation, and poor hygiene practices (Ministerial Statement, 12 October 2017). The Ministry of Local Government and Housing (2018) also noted that the outbreak was concentrated in peri-urban areas of Lusaka, which had limited access to municipal water supplies or sewer systems. This was because the low-income, high-density informal settlements, known as compounds, had a history of being unauthorised settlements, hence they were not connected to the sewer system and relied heavily on pit latrines. With no proper drainage system, and often located along unpaved roads, the rains often caused the pit latrines to overflow, and waste to drift away (Resnick 2018).

At its peak, the Cholera outbreak affected seven of Zambia's ten provinces including Lusaka, Central, Eastern, Southern, Copperbelt, North-Western and the Western Provinces, with a cumulative total of 4,202 cases and eighty-five deaths (Ministerial statement, 20 February 2018). To respond to the growing number of Cholera cases in the city, the Heroes Stadium in Lusaka and Chawama First Level Hospital were turned into Cholera treatment centres.

Other strategies put in place to curb the disease included: deployment of the military to enforce measures aimed at curbing Cholera transmission, which included bans on street vending and public gatherings; and the closure of marketplaces, schools, universities, and colleges. Curfews were also enforced in the worst-affected parts of the city. Over time, these actions placed severe restrictions on the economic and social lives of the city's residents, breeding discontent and culminating in riots and clashes between police and citizens (Sladoje 2018).

## **Catholic Church's Response**

The Church, as an entity that was affected by the Cholera outbreak, position-

ed herself as a tool in navigating through the epidemic in numerous ways. To begin with, the Church recognised that she had been hit by the pandemic, and as such, needed to act according to the dictates of public health. This recognition came through the Church's expression of sadness at the outbreak of Cholera in Lusaka City. The then Archbishop of Lusaka, Telesphore George Mpundu, announced that the clergy were saddened by the outbreak of Cholera in Lusaka and other parts of the country (Catholic Media Services, 8 January 2018; *Times of Zambia*, Monday, 9<sup>th</sup> January, 2018). The quest to act according to the dictates of public health were reflected in the pledge to collaborate with the Government in addressing the epidemic and supporting the efforts other stakeholders had put in place in order to fight against Cholera. This stance ignited the earlier declaration by government to continue building a relationship with the Catholic Church in the quest to improve and strengthen the health systems (Mbewe 2017).

On a practical note, the Church took up preventive measures, which included cancelling church services in the Cholera *epi-centres*. In this regard, Pastoral Coordinator Father (Fr.) Thomas Banda advised Catholics to stay away from funeral houses, where only Priests could go there for prayers (Becket 2018). Other church gatherings, such as meetings of more than six (6) people, especially in parishes situated in the areas where Cholera was reported, were also suspended, including Parish Council meetings, Catechism lessons, as well as lay movement and other related meetings. In fact, even group visits from parish to parish were halted (Phiri, Personal Communication, 15 July 2018).

The measures were not only tied to gatherings, but also to shortening the mass or church service and suspending some rites of mass (Phiri, Personal communication, 20 July 2018). For example, following the advice from the Pastoral office of the Archdiocese of Lusaka, there was no exchange of greetings through shaking of hands (sign of peace) during liturgical celebrations. Musonda noted, 'It was difficult because we were used to handshakes during mass' (2018).

Apart from re-orienting her operations, the Church had to adhere to safe public health practices in its premises. In this regard, the Parish executives ensured that there was clean water and soap in all water closets for washing hands at all times. Bwalya noted, 'Today at our Parish, we were greeted with soap and buckets of water and we all washed our hands before getting into [sic] church' (2018). Hand sanitisers were also installed on the

church doors in some parishes and these were maintained even after Cholera had been contained.

Over and above that, the Church continued to play her prophetic role within and outside the church. For example, the parishioners were advised to adhere to all Cholera prevention guidelines given by designated authorities, while at the same time, challenging the government to look for measures that would last in eliminating Cholera for good. This was premised on the fact that, Cholera had become a common occurrence in Lusaka, and the causes for the pandemic were well-known.

The Church also called for accountability of the donations, which were being made towards combating Cholera. For example, the Catholic Media Services of the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops called on journalists to follow and monitor how the donated resources for fighting Cholera were being used, because corrupt people could take advantage and benefit themselves instead of directing resources to the right course (Mupuchi 2018). This was in the wake of growing concerns that the donations from different stakeholders towards the Cholera outbreak were not disclosed by the relevant Ministry (Parliamentary debates, 20 February 2018).

## **Explaining the Actions of the Church through Catholic Social Teachings**

The 2017/18 Cholera out-break was not only viewed as a public health concern, but also as social justice issue in this article. As such, it affected and impacted on individuals and the society, and particularly more on the poor and vulnerable in the society in the high-density area of Lusaka. The actions of the Church mirrored three key fundamentals of Catholic social teachings (reflection, judgement, and action). To start with, the actions of the Church pointed to her reflections on the pandemic. This was evidenced by the collective voice of the Church on the epidemic through the pastoral letters and communication to the parishioners in the city.

The Church's reactions were also demonstrated by her judgement on the promotion of human life in the face of the epidemic. For example, the Church was willing to suspend public gatherings and certain rituals, which were at the centre of the liturgical celebration in the interest of safeguarding the lives of the people. Catholic social teaching emphasises that while every person has a right to share in the benefits of the common good, everyone also

has a right and duty to contribute one's share to the welfare of others, to the whole community, as well as to the global community of humankind, especially the least well-off and most vulnerable (Cahill 2007). This was reflected in the Church's recognition that Cholera was a public health issue that required compliance with the basics of public health for the common good. This was because Cholera thrives in social intercourse, for example, the practice of social gatherings, such as funerals, parties, washing of dead bodies before burial, as well as the purchase, and consumption of foodstuffs bought from street vendors that encouraged transmission of Cholera. The core value of sharing food in the advent of Cholera was taken as a likely avenue for the spread of the disease. Chanda (2004) illustrated this in his report of how sharing food items at the Paediatric ward of a hospital was responsible for the spread of Cholera in the ward, among mothers who were nursing their children.

The other actions of calling for accountability and lasting solutions to the pandemic pointed to the Church's siding with the poor and being a spokesperson for the masses. This dimension demonstrated that Cholera could not be detached from the socio-economic conditions of the majority of the people who were time-and-again affected by the outbreak of the disease.

The occurrence of Cholera in the same high-density populated areas of Lusaka on an annual basis was a reality that partly pointed to the inability of the Government to provide water and sanitation in peri-urban areas. The drivers of the pandemic in Lusaka were well known, even before the outbreak of the epidemic, as acknowledged by Chilufya (Ministerial statement, 20 February 2018). These drivers pointed to inadequate investment in water and sanitation infrastructure. At the same time, the outbreak of Cholera could not be detached from other factors such as residents' failure to maintain good standards of hygiene in their daily upkeep, and failure to care for water points (extent of vandalising).

As the Church called for lasting solutions to the pandemic, all government's interventions pointed to a long neglected aspect of delivering social services to the high density areas. Some of these measures included door-to-door distribution of household chlorine and chlorination of water sources and enhanced waste management, with more trucks mobilised to remove garbage in the affected areas (Ministerial Statement, 20 February 2018). Infected public areas were cleaned up, including markets and streets, through a multi-sectoral approach, while alternative sources of water (distri-

bution through water bowzers) were provided in affected areas.

The DMMU further provided 10, 000 litres water tanks to supply clean and safe water to affected areas while the Lusaka Water and Sewerage Company (LWSC) provided a waiver for the affected communities by supplying clean water at no cost to citizens at the point of collection. For the medium and long term, the Office of the Vice-President put measures in place to provide citizens in affected areas with clean and safe water by ensuring that the slums had piped water within the shortest period of time by mobilising contractors to ensure that issues of water reticulation were addressed (Ministerial statement, 20 February 2018). The Minister acknowledged that this was a historical problem and, for the first time, there was an Urbanisation programme that would look at improving services to the people in slums, howbeit after the outbreak of the epidemic. Hence, they had embarked on investing in freshwater reticulation systems in slums, improving trading places, building markets, ensuring that people trade only in designated places where there were sanitary facilities, and continuing with self-health promotion messages.

We argue that sensitisation campaigns were also regularly required, using means and languages understood by the locals so that the communities could be ready for the advent of epidemics. At the same time, public health required collective responsibility from both citizens and the government.

The underlined measures reflected how the poor in Lusaka's slums had been neglected in social service provision, however the Church stood on the side of the poor through the principles of human dignity, solidarity and option for the poor among others. As Hakainde Hichilema noted, Cholera demonstrated failure to allocate resources in most needy areas such as health, particularly public health, where sanitation ought to have reduced the possibilities of Cholera occurring, and leading to deaths (Chisenga, 7 January 2018). The actions of the Church in being the voice for the masses can be read as a form of social justice, where the roots of the problem were social (Sullins 2014).

The Church responded to the Cholera epidemic in the manner she did because she was not only affected but also part and parcel of the pandemic (by virtue of the church gathering community being a fertile ground for the spread of the disease through human contact and rituals). Furthermore, she was also a tool for navigating through the crisis. The actions of the Church during the epidemic were not detached from her overall mission in society.

As noted by the Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops Secretary General Fr. Cleophas Lungu, the Catholic Church had been a key partner of government in the delivery of health services in the country, due to the belief that the Church had a role to play in the promotion of the wellbeing of the nation:

When Jesus Christ commissioned his disciples, he told them go and proclaim the Gospel but within that proclamation of the gospel there is a commission to go and heal [...] need to constantly engage government in order to strengthen our partnership in order to improve the levels of collaboration at different levels in the system of delivery of health services (Lungu, cited in Mbewe 2017).

Thus, as individuals and the Catholic community, the Church stood in solidarity with others in order to navigate through the epidemic. Solidarity drove people to persevere, and to remain determined and committed to oneself for the common good; that is to say, ‘for the good of each and every individual, we are all responsible’ (Obrien & Shannon 1992: 421).

## **Conclusion**

The article explored the actions of the Church through the prism of Catholic social teaching in the wake of the 2017/18 Cholera outbreak in Zambia using Lusaka as a case in point. By demonstrating that the Cholera outbreak in Lusaka was closely linked to neglected social-economic conditions of the highly affected areas in the high densely populated areas or compounds, the outbreak was viewed not only as a public health risk, but also as a social justice issue.

The Church sided or collaborated with the poor and marginalised by considering the suspension of church gatherings and liturgical practices (such as exchanging the sign of peace, through handshakes), halting attending funeral gatherings, and calling for lasting solutions in the prevention of the outbreak of the disease in the quest to promote the wellbeing of the people.

All these reflections, decisions and actions undertaken were grounded in the Catholic social theory and thus the Church was a tool for navigating through the pandemic and a critical eye and voice for long term measures to address the perpetual outbreak of the disease in the same areas in

Lusaka. It was hoped that the water reticulation project in the compounds, which the government had since embarked on would contribute to providing lasting solutions in public health and improved social service delivery to the poor in the city.

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# Religion and Urban Life: Space and Patronage for Prophetic Ministry in Cities in Ghana

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## Abstract

This essay argues that prophetic ministry, which is a strand of Pentecostalism, has become popular and a preferred religious lifestyle in urban cities in Ghana. Religious urban lifestyle is characterized by centripetal and centrifugal effects. These ethos of cities in Ghana are systematically overshadowing the Traditional Historic Mission churches to become centrifugal while the newer churches (Charismatic) that are prophetic in nature are becoming centripetal. The changing trend has led to the review of the accolade: Mainline churches to Traditional Historic Mission churches because they ceased to command large patronage of their religious lifestyles and congregations. The essay seeks to explore the various reasons and phenomena that led to the change to the 'prophetic model of city lifestyle' raising the question as to whether the Prophetic churches can sustain their central position in the cities; and examining the comments of city dwellers (as captured in existing literatures) concerning the works of the Prophetic churches.

**Keywords:** City, Church, Charismatic, Prophetic Ministries, 'Prophetic model of city lifestyle'

## Introduction: Definitions and Literature Review

Cities play an important role in the social, cultural, economic, political, and religious development of nations. Many Church denominations compete for visibility and control of religious lifestyle in cities. It resonates with religious

lifestyle in rural communities. In Traditional African Religion (ATR), villages, towns, and cities have a particular deity and religious intermediary that superintend activities within its jurisdiction. In addition to city deities, many clans have a deity or spirit for protection and favor for members of the clan. Hence, the religious lifestyle of people living in villages, towns, and clans were determined by the deity that oversees it. Their names depict their function or specialty. Non-performing deities and religious lifestyle were discarded and new deities and lifestyle adopted (Quarcoo 1987: 72-75). Cities may have more than one dominant religious lifestyle based on its needs (Mbiti 1975:47). It indicates that cities identify the role of religion in their daily activities. In other words, religion is central to the survival and success of cities in Africa. It may be due to the belief of the citizens in spiritual causality and solution to physical happenings. In *Akan*<sup>1</sup> cosmology and religion, the earth is believed to be a deity – *Asaseyaa*, therefore, religion is fundamental to any city and its inhabitants. Subsequently, religion is a human response to the divine in a particular location and condition (Assimeng 2010: 8-11). It means that one's geographical location and economic, political, social, educational change may precipitate a change in religious adherence and lifestyle.

It has been generally accepted that the world began to experience cities about 5,550 years ago with the emergence of the ancient Mesopotamia, the Nile Valley, Hindus Valley, and the Hoang-ho Valley as cities (Frey & Zimmer 1998: 14-35). Cities can be defined from the perspective of function and space. According to Wirth (2001: 159), 'a city is a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals'. Cities in Africa are generally large, dense, and composed of heterogeneous persons. The definition of Wirth is based on space for human settlement. 'Everything about the city then becomes "too much", "too crowded", "too much noise", "too much stress"' (Conn & Ortiz 2001: 159). These 'too much' phenomenon could serve a dual purpose: (i) an opportunity; and (ii) a nuisance. Since religion is about people, it is an opportunity for religious leaders to campaign for adherents. The city, MacKenzie (1963: 60) argued, is 'essentially religious in establishment and character, inconceivable without its dedication to specific gods and its sacred history of foundation and establishment'. It also serves as

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<sup>1</sup> The *Akan* people are a major ethnic group in Ghana with many linguistic divisions, which includes Asante, Akim, Akwapim, Fante etc. In Ghana, the *Akan* language is spoken by 42% of the population as their first language.

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nuisance for religious ascetism. During the period of fasting by the *wulɔmoi* (*Gã*<sup>2</sup> traditional priests, the singular form is *wulɔmɔ*), Accra city dwellers were ordered by the traditional authorities to minimize noise. Hence, there was a ban on drumming and noise making for one calendar month so that the priests could concentrate and communicate with the deities. This ban, until recently, generated confusion between city dwellers and the traditional authorities (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005: 106-116). In Ghana, cities are not a permanent settlement for persons who migrate into it. Many city dwellers come from either rural or other cities. They may go back to their initial dwellings when the situation in the city is not favorable to them (Conn & Ortiz 2001: 177). In their old age, many city dwellers return to their ‘home towns’ because they are not able to cope with the ‘too much’ phenomenon of city religious lifestyle. In other words, the city rejects them or they reject the city.

Functionally, a city can be defined on its economic elements and its strategic location as a transit point to serve other cities, towns, and villages. According to King Abdullah Economic City Forum (2015) ‘they represent increased potential for addressing pressing societal and economic issues, from meeting soaring demand for housing to boosting economic development and expanding and modernizing infrastructure’. An example is Accra Central Business District (ACBD), where many Ghanaians go to work because of the concentrated location of government offices, ministries, and agencies. In addition, traders in perishable goods (food stuffs such as tomatoes, onions, pepper, cabbage, cassava etc.) go to the ACBD to buy goods at wholesale prices to other parts of the Greater Accra Region and even to other parts of Ghana to sell. Dealers in imperishable goods such as shoes, clothing, etc. go to ACBD to buy wares at wholesale prices to various locations to sell for profit. This is so because many of the food stuffs from the rural areas and goods

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<sup>2</sup>The *Gã* people are an ethnic group in Ghana. Many of them occupy the capital of Ghana – Greater Accra. Their territory shares a border to the North with the Akuapem Hills, to the South by the Gulf of Guinea (sea), to the West by Awutu, and to the East by Adamgme. The term *Gã* is derived from Gaga, a black invading and dangerous military ants, however, the natives of *Gã* refer to themselves as *Loeiabii* (descendants of *Loei*), a dark brown invading ants. The *Gã* language is a tonal language. It belongs to the Kwa group of Niger-Congo languages spoken along the coast of West Africa, which also includes Akan, and Ewe languages.

imported from other countries were taken to ACBD for retailers to come and buy. The enormous presence of businesses and people who travel to the ACBD daily create a lot of challenges of filth and vehicular traffic for the managers of the city.

In many ways, market women became the newspaper's archetypes of irresponsibility; individuals who prioritized personal profit above urban order, national progress, and the greater good. Articles frequently portrayed them as self-centered rogues who haphazardly 'settle[d] down anywhere', including sites along 'the sides of narrow streets and under the roof of dilapidated buildings', near 'public dust-bin[s]', and adjacent to 'public house[s] of convenience', in order to sell their goods. Market women threatened the nation's landscape of order and hygienic well-being by clogging the colony's new roads, roundabouts, and pedestrian walkways, drawing business away from the city's new commercial buildings and shopping centers (such as the 'new Kingsway Store', which was praised as 'the most up-to-date departmental store in West Africa'), and subjecting their customers to 'filth' and disease. Some pieces went so far as to insist that conditions at Makola Market, the city's largest trading center, were so 'deplorable' that the site needed to be razed and filled with 'more up-to-date trading houses', structures congruent with the nation's future (Plageman 2010: 137-159).

However, the traders do not live in the ACBD. They converge to the city daily or weekly to do business and return to their place of abode. Cities are not statically constant, but dynamically evolving with the trend of time. They have pull, push, and overshadow effects. Cities 'are an aggregate of accumulated traits and habits, shaped by time and history, constantly subject to change and modification' (Conn & Ortiz 2001: 193). In the process of change and modifications, cities reject, adapt, and adopt. It demonstrates the power of the city to choose what happens within its boundaries based on the fortunes of city dwellers.

The concept of centripetal and centrifugal is a Newtonian mechanics that was first applied to the study of geographic sciences by Charles C. Colby in the 1930s. Since then, it has been used to describe 'new science of cities' in the universal socio-economic system (Krzysztofik 2016: 429-442). The term centripetal is a compound word of the Latin *centrum*, which means 'center', 'and *petere*, meaning "tend towards" or "aim at"'. It is the acceleration of a body to draw others into its folds (Virágos 1996: 15-34). When used in relation to a city, it refers to unifying people from all social strata for support to advance

the vision of the city, a concept of centralization of people. Its religious use connotes attracting others to subscribe and rally for one religious faith or denomination (Robinson 2007: 3-28). Conversely, the term centrifugal is derived from the Latin words *centrum*, meaning 'center' and *fugere*, which means 'to Flee'. It connotes decentralization when it is used in the context of a city; a force or attitude that divides a city (Krzysztofik 2016: 433). Religiously, it connotes the breaking apart or non-adherent of a denomination as a result of a centripetal attitude of other denominations, or internal conflicts among its adherents (Robinson 2007: 3-28). It also implies the overshadowing of denominational teachings.

Centripetally, cities and religious groups use their magnetic attitudes to draw other denominations, and other territories into its orbit to adapt or adopt its lifestyle. Conversely, they engage their centrifugal approach to push or overshadow other denominations' lifestyles to the peripheral or to other cities, towns, and villages. The centripetal and centrifugal essentials lay in the religious lifestyle of city dwellers (Conn & Ortiz 2001: 194).

In this study, I use Traditional Historic Mission churches to encompass churches that were brought to Ghana through missionary activities of a mother church in the Euro-Americas. In other words, they began as a derivative of a church from a foreign land. They include the Roman Catholic church, the Anglican church, the Presbyterian church of Ghana, Methodist church Ghana, Evangelical Presbyterian church of Ghana among others. Charismatic churches are Christian denominations started by indigenous Ghanaians that vividly came to public attention in the 1980s. Urbanization is used as the process of making a city. City refers to a fully-fledged settlement with appreciable levels of social amenities and infrastructure. A town is a state between a city and a village; a settlement that is gradually receiving attention to become a city; whilst a village or rural community is a settlement composed of few houses, limited economic activities, and generally lacks adequate social amenities and infrastructures.

The study proceeds within the framework that the city is a provision by God to minister grace to its inhabitants (Conn & Ortiz 2001: 193); and religious lifestyle in cities is influenced by the dominant denomination in the city from time to time. It provides an opportunity for the expansion of Christianity. Religious lifestyles in cities are not static. They evolve and adapt according to the prevailing issues of great concern in city life. Charismatic churches, who seem to dominate in the cities, have not demonstrated their

capacity to influence the city cogently; the city pressures are forcing them to adopt some city ethos that, in the long run will not maintain their dominance in the cities for long. Historical narrative method is adopted for the study. It is a qualitative approach, which involves library and archival research as well as analysis and interpretation of findings. My procedure is to briefly discuss the ethos of contemporary prophetic ministry; examine the dynamics of urban cities; explore the impact of the Traditional Historic Mission churches in cities in Ghana; space, patronage, and ‘prophetic model of city lifestyle’ will be discussed; comments of city dwellers concerning contemporary prophetic ministry will be examined; and then draw conclusions.

### **Characteristics of Contemporary Prophetic Ministries**

Contemporary prophetic ministry in Ghana is a neo-prophetic ministry of the prophetic ministry that emerged in 1914 led by Prophet William Wade Harris (Opoku 1990: 11-21). The prophetic ministry in Ghana today is the sixth phase of neo-prophetism that began to gain critical media attention and the scrutiny by Ghanaians in the 2000s (Aryeh 2017: 1-20). Based on the complaints by members of earlier neo-prophetic ministries of not being able to effectively and in an urgent manner provide solutions to existential issues, contemporary prophetic ministry promised a better and improved prophetic services (Aryeh 2017: 7-8). At the center of contemporary prophetic ministry is the ‘prophet’ figure, who is the founder and general overseer around which almost everything in the ministry revolves. However, spiritual giftedness does not necessarily connote spiritual maturity or being endowed with leadership skills (Aryeh 2018: 52). The ministry is often built around the charisma of the prophet. The ‘prophet’ has overwhelming control over the finances of the ministry; hence, they were referred to as ‘one man churches’.

The charisma of the prophet to ‘see’ into the spiritual realm to diagnose the causes of misfortunes and prescribe solutions is central to the definition of ‘prophet’. Hence, the prophet is a spiritual consultant who can reveal the secret arts of one’s enemies and prescribe solution to totter their plans and a person who can predict a desirable future for his/her patrons. ‘[They] could prophesy, cure the sick, raise the dead, make the blind see and the crippled walk, and cast out evil spirits .... Know what was happening in other places and to know what was in a person’s heart’ (Kustenbauder 2008a: 261-270). The concept, to ‘see’ into the spiritual realm at will and perform miracles reflects the African

traditional view of religion as having diagnostic elements. Adherents of Akan traditional religion has the notion of *ebisa* (literally, to inquire), the process where one goes to a seer or diviner to inquire of one's fortunes and insight into pressing issues. It is similar to the work of the *babalawo* (diviner) in Nigeria where people may visit for information concerning a deal they were engaged in (Holbraad 2005: 231-254; Kustenbauder 2008b: 273-279). And the work of the *n'anga* (diviner-healer) in Zimbabwe, 'most *n'anga* have the power and the ability to forth tell, fore tell, heal, exorcize demons and protect their adherent....S/He utters prophetic oracles that may even influence the general socio-political structures of a given community' (Shoko & Chiwara 2013: 217-230). In that regard, Shoko & Chiwara (2013: 217-230) further argue that the work of contemporary prophetic ministry for the Christian community is the equivalent of the work of traditional diviners and seers. The followers of contemporary prophets refer to them as 'man of God'; it depicts the proximity of YHWH to the 'prophet'. The concept of 'the man of God is a specially set aside individual who is essentially a manifestation of the divine hence protected by the divine and in instances where such divinity is not respected, the divine reserves the right to avenge' (Gunda & Machingura 2013: 15-27).

Contemporary prophetic ministry is the most criticize neo-prophetic group due to the sale of ritual objects to their clients and extravagant lifestyles at the detriment of poor members of the church.

The process of diagnosing a problem, prescription and administration of the prescription is usually called *sunsum akwankyere* [spiritual direction], and a fee is mostly charged. Where there are no direct charges, clients were made to buy relics of the prophet, blessed water, oil, handkerchief, portraits, salt, etc. at exorbitant prices ranging between GhC 50.00 to GhC 300.00 [\$10 to \$60 USD] based on the needs that the client tables. Sometimes composite liquid and powdered substances made from herbs and tree roots are being sold to clients to be used at specific places and times at night with some declarations/ incantations. The sale of these substances to clients by prophets for protection and miracles have been named *Nyame Ahyiraso* ('Blessed by God'), 'charming oil', *sunsumu boafɔɔ* ('spiritual helper'), 'do what I say', 'marry me by force', *dadeɛ bi twa dadeɛmu* (some metals are subject to other metals) etc. to describe its potency to particular challenges (Aryeh 2015: 196-221).

Recently, the rate for one to receive the services of a prophet has gone up to between GhC 100.00 and GhC 500.00 (approximately \$20 and 100 USD). Without paying money or buying relics or prophylactics of a prophet, it is diffi-

cult to receive the services of a prophet. Money has become the prerequisite and access code to see a prophet during counseling sessions, which is also referred to as consultation. Paying money before seeing a prophet is tantamount to remunerating the prophet for his/her gift (Gifford 2004: 94). Mangena & Mhizha (2013: 133-152) refer to contemporary prophets as white collar ‘prophets who are motivated by the desire to professionalize the word of God through monetizing it. In other words, white collar prophets put emphasis on money and prosperity as pillars of deliverance and salvation .... One white collar prophet in Zimbabwe sells cloths for \$ 3(USD) to his congregants who use them as healing and protective charms’. This practice resonates with medieval Catholicism that necessitated the protest of Martin Luther (Gonzalez 1985: 22).

Gradually, they are migrating from the extensive use of local Ghanaian languages to the use of English language during major activities of the church. Although it is a strategy to reach a wider populace, it is likely to result in the decline of the ‘prophetic model of city lifestyle’ (which I discussed below); because the local Ghanaian languages easily make space for spiritual causalities and spiritual aid to success better than a foreign language. For example, Prophet Elisha Salifu Amoako of Alive Chapel International and Prophet Isaac Anto of Conquerors Chapel now use English language to preach, despite the fact that they started with the use of *Akan* (a popular local Ghanaian language). It may be due to the centripetal and centrifugal nature of cities and its dwellers, to demonstrate that the ‘prophets’ belong to the elite class of religious intermediaries in the cities.

New religious movements go through three (3) stages of religious experience (Vance 2002: 91-112): (i) Charismatic phase; (ii) consolidated phase; and (iii) instigation for social change phase. The Prophetic churches are at the Charismatic phase in the process of graduating into the consolidated phase. They mainly concentrated on the well-being of city dwellers. There was no need for one to necessarily register as a member; they were not baptizing converts; there was no welfare scheme system for members; and the leaders preferred the charismatic title (Prophet) to the conventional ecclesiastical titles (Reverend, Bishop, Archbishop). However, these have changed. They now either use the charismatic title together with the ecclesiastical title such as ‘Reverend Prophet’ or drop the charismatic title in favour of ecclesiastical title. Prophet Elisha Salifu Amoako is now Bishop Elisha Salifu Amoako. In addition, the charisma they exhibited during their formative period in the cities is gradually waning.

## **Urban City Dynamics in Ghana**

David N. A. Kpobi (2011: 18) defines urbanization ‘as the process of creating or developing cities. Urbanization is determined largely by the presence and concentration of people in a particular area and is therefore a response to, social, economic, political and demographic conditions’. Rural-urban migration is the main factor fuelling urbanization in Ghana (Ayertey 2002: 11). It is a situation where the work force in rural areas travels to cities in pursuit for employment, social amenities, education, and better social status. Rural-urban migration creates the challenges of unemployment, high cost of living, putting pressure on social amenities, the development of slum areas and conurbation for cities. Kpobi (2011: 17) asserted that: ‘urbanization is God’s way of teaching the world that ‘all things are lawful but all things are not helpful’ (1 Cor. 10:26). Urbanization can be formal or informal. Formal urbanization is a deliberate attempt by government or city and town authorities to modernize while informal urbanization depicts the quarantining of spatial area by citizens for activities for human survival without using conventional processes (Anyamba 2011: 58-60).

According to Nukunya (2003: 141), urbanization is viewed from three perspectives: (i) the size of the population living in a particular location; (ii) the process of growth of urban areas; and (iii) the principal features of an urban way of life. In Ghana, settlements of 5,000 inhabitants with basic social amenities such as post office, hospitals, shops, schools, banks etc. were considered as a city. It means that many Ghanaians are living in cities (Nukunya 2003: 142). However, it is significant to add that the criteria for cities in Ghana may not be the same in developed countries, and some cities in developed countries may be regarded as mega-cities in some parts of Africa (Conn & Ortiz 2001: 161), because conditions that mitigates social change are different.

City lifestyle is ‘characterized by disunity and hostility, rampant individualism and selfishness’ (Conn & Ortiz 2001: 158). City way of life is homogeneous such that the rich are found in one place and the poor are found in another place. Obviously, there is dichotomy between the rich and the poor. There are mansions and bungalows for the rich whilst the poor live in slums and ghettos. Conn and Ortiz (2001: 160) opine that, ‘urbanism as a way of life was ultimately an acid that will eat away traditional rural values and undermine meaningful relationships and institutions’. City dwellers adopt religious

lifestyles that are motivated by socio-economic ambitions; they can decide to belong to a particular religious denomination in order to succeed economically without considering socio-cultural values regarding others.

There is congestion in many cities in Ghana, and this has led to ghettos and slum settlements. There are no taboos nor strict adherents to cultural values as existed in rural areas and so new cultures could be adopted (Kpobi 2011: 17-27). City dwellers could live any kind of lifestyle without notice or it would take some time before it become known, due to the individualistic lifestyle as opposed to the rural communal life.

The continuous urbanization of Ghanaian towns is likely to have proportionate increase in religious behaviors. The United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA) as captioned in the work of Kpobi (2011: 20) pointed out that 'the challenge for the next few decades is learning to exploit the possibilities urbanization offers'. That notwithstanding, urbanization has some negative perceptions; crimes and social vices are prevalent and operate in an organized manner. In spite of all the negatives associated with urbanization, it offers outstanding opportunities for the Christian faith. Many urban dwellings have social amenities and infrastructures, which can be used to advance the gospel in cities and facilitate religion in cities in terms of communication, transportation, auditoria among others. Just as Paul took advantage of the *Pax Romana* to preach and spread the gospel across the Roman Empire. These amenities and infrastructures are scarce in the non-urban areas.

Alfred Kwasi Poku, general secretary of the Ghana Institute of Planners predicted that '... about 50% of the Ghanaian population will be living in urban areas by 2020 ...' (Cited in Kpobi 2011: 20). It implies that membership of churches in rural communities is likely to decline and churches in the urban areas will become centres for missionary activities. In addition, adherence to cultural beliefs may dwindle and new cultural beliefs emerged in the urban areas. The large number of urban dwellers is an essential element for religious adherence in urban cities. It suggests that religion in cities will be critical in understanding lifestyles in cities in Ghana. The religious group or denominations that control the city become very influential in determining religious urban way of life (2010 Population & Housing Census 2012:4).

## **The Traditional Historic Mission Churches in Cities in Ghana**

The Traditional Historic Mission churches started in cities in Ghana. Although

Christianity was reported in North Africa in the first century CE, there is no evidence to show that Christianity was brought to sub-Saharan African through the North. Christianity was first reported in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in January, 1471 by Portuguese traders and explorers (Obeng 1996: 95). It is significant to observe that although some of the Portuguese traders and explorers were Christians, the main religious activities to convert the indigenes of Elmina began in 1482 (Kpobi 2015: 21). However, Omenyo (2002: 14) argued that there is archeological evidence to show that Christianity was earlier brought to the Gold Coast by traders from the Mediterranean, but it did not survive.

Although the requirements for a city may defer from the missionary periods and today, adducing from the requirements for a town to become a city as posited by Nukunya above, it can be argued that Elmina was then a city. The Portuguese landed at Elmina due to the availability of commercial activities including slave trade, labor force, and the search for gold by other Europeans in the area (Omenyo 2002: 14; Debrunner 1967: 39-41; Wiltgen 1956: 11-25). In addition, the ancient Ghana Empire, which included Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal that collapsed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century had brought developments to the coastal towns of Ghana (Omenyo 2002: 14). This is not to argue that the Roman Catholic Mission did not bring any development to the people of Elmina, they built schools and trade centres, which benefited the indigenes greatly. The Roman Catholic Mission settled in the city of Elmina before making attempts to convert the people in the rural communities (Foli 2006: 29). Their presence in the city of Elmina was to also serve the spiritual needs and well-being of the traders of gold and their leaders (Omenyo 2002: 40).

The Roman Catholic Missionaries laid a good foundation for Christianity in cities in Ghana (Omenyo 2002: 48). Thereafter, the English, Dutch, French, Danes, Swedes and Germans missionaries settled in cities along the coast of Ghana (Omenyo 2002: 48). The Church of England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) had congregations in the cities of Accra, Cape Coast, Axim, and Kumasi. Their congregation in Kumasi, a city in the Ashanti Region was through the missionary efforts of Prophet John Swatson, an indigenous Ghanaian. The Basel Evangelical Mission Society had congregations in the cities of Kumasi, and Akropong Akwapim. 'Accra and Kumasi, at least, were already important population centres before effective colonial rule' (Nukunya 2003: 141). Debrunner (1967: 125-131) surveyed economic, social, and commercial activities in Akropong and showed that it

was a city. It is obvious that the Traditional Historic Mission churches had congregations in cities. The city served as their base to move to the rural communities of Ghana. Their presence and dominance in the cities along the coast of Ghana may be due to the sea way being the major travelling root to West Africa at the time. The climate of some coastal cities of Ghana may closely be related to some seasons of Europe. Many of the Christian groups or denominations serve as chaplains for European Christians in the cities and forts rather than missionaries.

The Euro-American Missionaries began to give autonomy and leadership of the churches to indigenous Ghanaians from the 1923s (Omenyo 2002: 63). The restructuring and renewal of the liturgy by the Traditional Historic Mission churches to incorporate African religious worldviews made them very popular and become dominant in the cities. Their agenda to incorporate African religious worldviews in Christianity coupled with the large number of members in the cities won them the accolade 'Mainline churches' used by Omenyo (2002:63-67), Bediako (2009: 95-115), Atiemo (1993) and others to describe them. Further, due to their established order and structure of administration, some refer to them as 'orthodox', 'mainstream churches' or 'established' churches (Foli 2006: 65). They have their headquarters in the city of Accra and regional headquarters at various regional capitals, which are cities. The Traditional Historic Mission churches built schools, trading centres for palm kernels, health centres, manufacturing companies, skills training centres, seminaries, and agri-businesses, which were in need in the cities (Debrunner 1967: 120-152).

In fact, the Traditional Historic Mission churches quest for independence from the Euro-American churches and their renewal policies fuelled the quest for political independence in Ghana (Larbi 2001: 55). Various religious and denominational censuses up until 2010 placed the Traditional Historic Mission churches as the largest group of Christians in cities and Ghana at large (Foli 2006: 196-202; Omenyo 2002: 35). Since their leaders were well trained, they were ably placed to comment on issues concerning religion in the city better than others. They influenced religious lifestyle in cities in Ghana. Religious lifestyle was characterized by an intellectual and philosophical 'basis for understanding the universe and developing the lot of human society' (Omenyo 2002: 43). It is based on the enlightenment of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries characterize by empiricism and rationalism of European culture. The intellectual and philosophical framework did not accommo-

date the African Traditional Religious view of the supernatural.

Religion in rural communities acknowledged the complementary role of the supernatural for successful living. Any issue that defies sociological and scientific prescriptions was considered for spiritual solution. The continued migration of rural dwellers into cities in Ghana precipitated a change of religious lifestyle of city dwellers. Population increase and spatial expansion have had an effect on religious lifestyle in cities in West Africa (Assimeng 2010: 74-76). It breeds new religious ideas in the cities to cope with economic and sociological issues. The newly arrived city dwellers come with the Africa idea that religion is at the root of human life; and one ought to travel, re-settle without neglecting his/her erstwhile religious ideas but could add to it. Mbiti (1975:10) stated that 'religion is found in all areas of human life. It has dominated the thinking of African peoples to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organization and economic activities'. Meanwhile, the Traditional Historic Mission churches dichotomize between natural and supernatural, physical and spiritual. This phenomenon gradually overshadowed the Traditional Historic Mission churches religious lifestyle of city dwellers to the peripheral (minority, marginal) and centripetally accepted a new form of religious lifestyle in cities in Ghana.

The inability of the Traditional Historic Mission churches to effectively respond to the demand of city dwellers for a religious lifestyle provided the platform for the emergence and receipt of new religious lifestyle by city dwellers. It is significant to state that the definition of spirituality vary from one religious denomination to the other. The Traditional Historic Mission churches consider the sacraments, and prayer as spiritual. But the Prophetic churches believe that every activity in the Church including the sacraments, prayer, and fasting must lead to a revelation (prophecy) concerning the solutions their members seek.

### **Space, Patronage, and 'Prophetic Model of City Lifestyle' in Ghana**

No single Christian denomination can claim ownership of the city perpetually. It evolves, based on the characteristic of cities and its dwellers at a specific period and what a denomination claims to offer. Religious lifestyles in cities in Ghana are bespoke according to the Prophetic model. The African Independent churches (AICs) also refer to as *Sunsum sorè* (spiritual churches) whose liturgy

and beliefs were similar to the Aladura churches in Nigeria, and the Zionist churches in South Africa began to experience the religious centripetal magnet of the cities and its dwellers since the 1920s. Vividly, they were the pioneers of prophetic ministry in Ghana (Aryeh 2017: 1-20). The AICs were initially dominant in the rural communities in Ghana and their members were mostly elderly women who trade in food stuffs (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005: 18-23). It was reported that '52 villages heeded the message' (Omenyo 2002: 68) of William Wade Harris, a key founder of the AICs in Ghana. Their presence in the villages may be due to 'the low level of education by their leaders or the desire to eradicate idol worship, which was more rampant in the rural areas' (Aryeh 2017: 4). According to Foli (2006: 47), 'Harris had immense successes for an estimated 100,000 people were baptized and whole villages and tribes did away with all of the old signs religion'. Baëta (1962: 6-7) observed that many of the leaders of the AICs could not read in English language. They could only read the Bible in local Ghanaian languages.

Consequently, the religious lifestyles of people in villages were determined by the ethos of the AICs' form of worship and belief. A prophet can be consulted just like medical doctors, and consultants in various fields of human endeavors for spiritual direction to existentially challenging issues that defies the solutions of other consultants. Therefore, to be successful in the city is dependent on one's relationship with a prophet. This phenomenon was engineered by economic pressures in the city and the lack of adequate social intervention programmes by successive governments.

Hence, a village religious lifestyle found expression in cities because of its emphasis on the Spirit. For the AICs, spirituality is not doctrinal formulation but an experiential exercise in daily activities that causes desired changes (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005: 22). It agrees with the components of salvation in African Traditional Religion (ATR). Salvation is not limited to life after death but also the provision of daily existential needs, which religious lifestyle must mediate (Mbiti 1975: 1-2). Apparently, the presence of the AICs in cities in Ghana affected the religious lifestyle of city dwellers. City dwellers have alternative Christian denominations, which emphasizes the role of the Spirit in successful living in the city. Although they converted many to the Christian faith in the villages, in the cities, they were primarily consultants for solutions for city problems. It is as a result of a city lifestyle that religious groups or denominations are forced to adapt and respond to the pressure of city dwellers' religious needs. Members of the Traditional Historic Mission

churches were often found participating in the services of the AICs, ‘Shopping for health’ (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005: 67) and spiritual solution to economic and social issues. Religious lifestyle of city dwellers became driven by one’s need rather than loyalty. It also generated multiple denominational allegiances. This religious lifestyle depicts the African polytheistic religious character where deities were consulted based on their specialties (Sarpong 1996: 1-5; Mbiti 1975: 70-81).

In the 1990s, there was a re-emergence of Prophetic churches in cities in Ghana. ‘Many Christian programmes and statements were linked with the word “prophetic” or “prophet” in order to attract and maintain members in the church. The word “prophetic” means that members would receive personal prophecies’ (Aryeh 2017: 6). It is a form of religious lifestyle in cities in Ghana that Paul Gifford partly referred to as *Ghana’s New Christianity* (2004: 90-112). Some of the leaders began ministry in the villages but were later welcomed in the cities while others left the Traditional Historic Mission churches to start their own Prophetic churches. Prophet Bernard Opoku Nsiah began ministry in Wamsambre, then a village in the Asante Region between 1979 and 1987 (Aryeh 2017: 12). Prophet Atsu Manasseh and Isaac Anto left the Traditional Historic Mission churches to start their own Prophetic churches (Aryeh 2015: 93). The re-emergence of the Prophetic churches in cities in Ghana was as the result of the deep rootedness of the AICs in African religious-cultural traditions (Omenyo & Atiemo 2006: 55-68), which many city dwellers were not comfortable with.

Gifford (1994: 23) observed that the Charismatic churches and the Newer Charismatic churches (Prophetic churches) have eclipsed the Traditional Historic Mission churches in the cities. They managed to present themselves on giant bill boards and in the media as ‘Prophets’, who have solutions for city dwellers’ economic, social, marriage, educational, and traveling abroad challenges. They influenced city dwellers with the notion of spiritual causality to anything that happens in one’s life. Religious lifestyle of city dwellers is mainly hinged on a third party as the cause of misery, disappointments, and failure (Omenyo & Atiemo 2006: 55-63). It placed more emphasis on individualistic lifestyle in cities (Kpobi 2011: 20) and the neglect of the extended family relatives in the villages. Sin and human limitations are hardly ever mentioned as the cause of one’s predicaments (Gifford 1994: 110).

As put forth in the work of Omenyo and Atiemo: ‘Claiming Religious Space: The Case of Neo-Prophetism in Ghana’, the Prophetic churches and

their Pentecostal and Charismatic churches began to take the centre stage of religious lifestyle and activities in cities in Ghana (Omenyo & Atiemo 2006). They set the agenda for religious lifestyle and theological discourse coupled with their mega church buildings where on Sundays, some of them had three to four services. In that regard, it can be argued that they have become ‘mainline’, ‘mainstream’ religious denomination in cities in Ghana. The Prophetic churches have grown into prominence, which deserve to be studied on its merits (Omenyo & Atiemo 2006: 68). In the 2010 Population and Housing Census, it was reported that the Pentecostal and Charismatic and Prophetic churches have large number of adherents in cities in seven (7) Regions that were fast becoming urbanized as indicated in figure 1 above. They had 701,540 in the Western Region; 655,298 in the Central Region; 1,786,519 in the Greater Accra Region; 563,560 in the Volta Region; 955,336 in the Eastern Region; 1,440,589 in the Ashanti Region; and 566,878 Brong Ahafo Region. At the national level, they are the largest Christian denomination with 28.3% adherents (2010 Population & Housing Census 2012: 40). Hence, religious lifestyles in urban cities in Ghana are tailored towards the beliefs and practices of the Prophetic churches and their predecessors, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.

Religious lifestyle in cities in Ghana has become what I call ‘prophetic model city lifestyle’. It is a lifestyle that the individual believes that his/her destiny had been established by God; and that he/she needs a prophet to reveal it to him/her. When the devil, who manifests through evil family relatives want to totter it, one needs a prophet who can ‘see’ into the spirit realm to resist it and bring restoration. The ‘prophet’ in the city is the one who interprets the challenges of the people like how he/she interprets the Bible (Kpobi 2011: 24). The ‘prophetic model city lifestyle’ is a lifestyle that has close proximity to a prophet/ prophetess (a man/ woman of God), who can diagnose present predicaments to offer solution(s), and for foresight into future happenings (Aryeh 2015: 214-215). Prophecy then becomes the order of religious lifestyle of city dwellers. It is the quest for knowledge concerning what happened, what is happening, and what must happen in every aspect of one’s life.

The ‘prophetic model of city lifestyle’ does not stress on an orthodox observation of biblical precepts that do not provide immediate economic and social solutions. Prayer is usually accompanied with ritual observations of using anointing oil, blessed water, powdered substances etc. to facilitate quick answer to prayer. It is the concept of taking what one wants by force and

immediately. However, practitioners of the ‘prophetic model of city lifestyle’ are not satisfied with the systems and modalities of the Prophetic churches concerning consultation of a prophet, their moral life styles, and biblical interpretations. This may keep the Prophetic churches at the charismatic phase for a long time. The lack of formal theological education by its leaders will hinder the consolidation phase and deny them moving to the instigation for social change phase.

### **Comments of City Dwellers Concerning Contemporary Prophetic Ministry**

Although city dwellers have welcome Prophetic ministry, it is not without complains. Politicians, religious leaders, and ordinary citizens have air their opinions. Their comments border on the claims of the prophets concerning miracles, sale of ritual objects, and their moral lifestyles. The former President, Jerry John Rawlings described Prophets Daniel Obinim (popularly known as angel), and Nicholas Osei (also known as Kumchacha) as false prophet. And that media houses must not give them airtime to speak because the miracles they claim to have performed in the name of Jesus is not true. Rawlings further explained that using the name of God falsely is corruption that must not be condoned by giving airtime to them (*Daily Guide* 12 November 2014: 2). There is no empirical evidence to show that media houses have heeded to the advice of Rawlings. However, many contemporary prophets began to own media networks to broadcast their programmes. Therefore there is no need for them to go and buy airtime at other media houses where they may be rejected. Examples include Prophet Daniel Obinim, who owns OB Television, Ice Television, and Soul Television; Rev. Obofour owns Sweet Television, Kiss Television, and Cash Television; Rev. Christian Kwabena Andrews owns Fire Television; Prophet Mafred Acheampong owns Rock Television; Prophet Gabriel Akwasi Sarpong owns Cross Television.

Citizens often complain about the level of noise that the Prophetic churches make during worship services. They do not observe the city bye laws of sound levels during the day to be 58 decibels maximum, and 48 decibels maximum during the night. Hence, city authorities were compelled to enforce the bye laws by giving them ultimatum to install sound proof devices in the place of worship (*The Ghanaian Times* 10 April 2014: 1 and 4). The city authorities could not force them to reduce the noise levels to comply with what is

contained in the bye laws but to advise them to install sound proof devices. This is an indication of the acceptance of Prophetic churches in the city, although some do not like their noisy worship services.

The financial demands by prophets and the sale of ritual objects for flamboyant lifestyle at the detriment of the poor adherents is a worrying issue for city dwellers. The Mirror newspaper (26 June 1990: 2) stated that ‘the recent talk of the nation is that churches are now becoming business entities since some pastors are seen extorting so much money from the congregation and riding in the most expensive vehicles which can build sizeable structures for them to use as their church buildings’. It is not strange to find a prophet, who rides in luxurious car while he/she uses a classroom or uncompleted residential building for worship service. This including non-maintenance of school properties force city authorities to sack some of them from the use of classrooms (*The Ghanaian Times* 21 Jan 2015: 4). In view of the exorbitant sale of ritual objects to adherents, K. B. Omane-Antwi, vice rector of Pentecost University College and Emmanuel Asante, former president of Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon and past presiding bishop of the Methodist church Ghana argue that government must consider taking tax from the sale of ritual objects by prophets (*The Ghanaian Times* 26 January 2015: 4; *The Ghanaian Times* 9 February 2015: 15).

The moral lifestyles and failed prophecies of contemporary prophets have also been a concern to city dwellers.

In Ghana, it is not uncommon to hear people point accusing fingers at the abuses prevalent in prophetic circles. They point to instances of failed prophecies and to certain self-styled prophets who engage in some abuses such as sleeping with women who come to them for assistance. They point to certain unbiblical practices among some so-called prophets and the use of occult powers for the purposes of performing miracles (*Daily Guide* 13 November 2014: 4).

In a research study in 2013, in the Ga South Municipal Area, out of 297 total respondents in which the Prophetic ministry constitutes the majority of respondents make up 46.12% or 137 persons; 68.18% of respondent who received prophecies said it did not come to pass. Meanwhile they pay money for the prophecies (Aryeh 2015: 210-217). These phenomena concerning contemporary prophetic ministry clearly show that although it is the norm of religious lifestyle in cities in Ghana, it is without challenges. These financial demands were some of the issues that influenced the protest of Martin Luther

against the medieval Catholicism (Gonzalez 1985: 22). Financial issues of making members to pay some money prior to communion (the Lord's Supper) and conflict over property were some of the issues that led to the breaking away of Christ Evangelical Mission from the Evangelical Presbyterian church in 1964 (Omenyo 2002: 177). These are internal and external signs for the quest for reformation (Opocensky 1993: 64-71) in contemporary prophetic ministry in Ghana. It is hoped that the reformation, which will be another phase of neo-prophetism will not mainly be hinged on the charisma of the 'prophet' but also the issues of financial demands, sale of ritual objects, flamboyant lifestyles, immoral issues, and unbiblical rituals that city dwellers have raise against contemporary prophets will be corrected.

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I attempted to discuss religion and religious lifestyle in cities in Ghana. It was done through the examination of dominant religious groups and denominations from the period of the Euro-American missionaries to the era of Prophetic churches in cities in Ghana. The cities along the coastal parts (sea ports) of Ghana served as the base for Christian activities for the pioneer missionaries. Clearly, it made the religious lifestyles of city dwellers conform to that of the beliefs and practices of the Traditional Historic Mission churches. Religious lifestyle was formal and sometimes described as 'bookish'. As time elapsed, the centrifugal power of the city gradually overshadowed the Traditional Historic Mission churches' dominance to the peripheral and centripetally pulled in the Pentecostal and Charismatic's Prophetic churches. The overshadowed was due to the notion that the Traditional Historic Mission churches did not effectively respond to the spiritual needs of city dwellers. The charismatic features of the Prophetic churches enabled them to receive insight into present happenings and foresight into the future, and offer solution for present predicaments and guidelines for a blissful future.

Religion in Africa is critical to one's survival and success in life. It determines one's social construct. The sacrifices and care that is given to a particular deity is motivated by its efficacy to effectively and urgently respond to the needs of its adherents. There is no perpetual allegiance or faithfulness to a non-performing deity. Hence, non-performing ancestral deities could be discarded and new highly performing deities installed. It calls for a change in religious lifestyle. This phenomenon is at the root of religious lifestyle in cities

in Ghana. Although there may be city dwellers that owe allegiance to a particular church denomination and may not attend any other church's service, many city dwellers are multi-denominational. They move from one denomination to the other in search of solutions for existential needs. City dwellers may register with a particular church, however, he/she chooses which church to attend and how religious lifestyle should be practiced based on present city economic, social, and political pressure.

Although the cities welcomed the 'prophetic model of city lifestyle' and the Prophetic churches, they have begun to dislike some of their practices and thereby describe them as unbiblical. The issue of payment of money before one could receive the services of a prophet has also been criticized. The moral lifestyle of the prophets had always been in doubt. Their extravagant and flamboyant living to the detriment of the poor has been questioned by city dwellers. These issues coupled with unfulfilled prophecies issues by these prophets, if it is not critically reviewed, are likely to change religious lifestyle in the cities of Ghana. The 'prophetic model of city lifestyle' will be centrifugated and another centripetated in the cities of Ghana. African towns are becoming urbanized at a fast rate. Religion is about people, therefore the effective and most populous religion or Christian denomination will be that which take cognizance of city dynamics, its evolving character, and factor it into its daily theologizing.

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# Transformative Ecumenical Economic Justice: Implications for the Church's Witness within the Southern African Context

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## Abstract

This article argues that sections of the religious community are no longer willing to stand aside and wait on government and international economic and financial organisations to decide when to act to bring about transformative economic justice that can benefit the poor of the earth. Through the initiatives of ecumenical organisations such as the World Council of Churches (WCC), World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), and The Council for World Mission (CWM). Tentative steps have been taken since 2012 that offer a critique of and solutions to issues in the global financial sector, public finance and debt, and the global economic governance. These religious communities argue that the global financial and economic system are not constructed or committed to principles for an Economy of Life for all earth's inhabitants but a select few. The article further argues that the peoples of the African continent, and especially those within the Southern African context that is dominated by the Christian religion, ought to engage in joint ecumenical action that can urgently address the gross inequality in wealth distribution and major fall-out in social cohesion.

**Keywords:** Economy, Transformative Ecumenism, Economic justice, Colonialism, Neo-liberalism, Empire

## Introduction

The World Council of Churches (WCC), World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and the Council for World Mission (CWM) are leading ecumenical institutions that have

engaged in theological enquiry into the global economy, financial architectural structure, and the mission of the Church over the past two decades. They called into question the Christian community's focus in offering fullness of life for all. Their ecumenical critique of the financial sector, public finance and debt, and the global economic governance exposed that they are not constructed on principles for an *Economy of Life* for all earth's inhabitants, but a select few (WCRC-WCC-CWM Sao Paulo Statement on International Financial Transformation for an Economy of Life). All of these ecumenical organisations have member churches within the Southern African context, and their work has major significance for the wellbeing of peoples in local communities. Fundamental changes in global policies and structures that affect the economy of African nations are urgently needed, and this necessitates joint ecumenical action at national and global levels. This reflection is limited in scope and as the title implies, where emphasis is placed on ecumenical discourses on economic justice, and the implications for Christians within the Southern African context. This article therefore examines ecumenical perspectives on economic justice in conversation with the Church's witness in facilitating the emergence of an 'economy of life'. The article draws upon the two-volume research on globalisation within the African context of Reformed theologians, Allan Boesak and Len Hansen, and their team of scholars (Boesak and Hansen, 2009). Their three-year project emerged out of the Reformed churches within the Southern African context, seeking to respond to the WCRC's Accra Confession that called on churches to 'Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and Earth'. This trans-disciplinary study explored the subject of globalisation from biblical perspectives, theological foundations, confessional traditions, and socio-ethical values (Boesak & Hansen 2010: ix). The limited scope of this article, therefore, draws on textual sources, rather than engaging in case study methodology, to gather and examine important data.

## **Blessings and Curses of Globalisation**

Any exploration on the challenges faced by ecumenical organisation in working for economic justice must face up to the reality that the politico-economic phenomenon of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism are ideologically driven forces by global financial powers that control global trade. This focus on the interconnectivity between the global economy and financial architectural structure and wealth, poverty, and ecology within the Southern

African region, constitutes an urgent agenda. Economic globalisation has accompanied imperial colonisation within Africa through European political conquest (Boesak & Hansen 2009: i; 2010: 1). The two-volume work on globalisation was published after the 2008 global financial crisis and recession that ruined many lives and called into question the underlying assumptions of the policies employed by global financial institutions in managing the global economy and trade. With governments having to bail out many of these institutions, international ecumenical organisations again called for serious re-thinking of how the global systems are designed to work, and whose interests they serve. This imperial system unleashed numerous catastrophes, such as wars and genocide in their insatiable appetite for wealth and domination over all life forms. Millions of Africans were conquered and enslaved to provide cheap and replaceable labour force in their new colonies in the Americas. As colonialism and globalisation mutated into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, other forms of expressions emerged, such as fascism, nationalism, communism, capitalism, as well as scientific and technological advancement. The International Order (Disorder?) created by the political and economically stronger nations has resulted in the weakening of sovereignty of many poorer nation states by trans-national economic and financial institutions. This loss of sovereignty by the poorer nations has caused their governments and economic system to become enslaved to serving the external powerful interests that demand from the poor and the environment endless sacrifices. The second volume on Globalisation by Boesak and Hansen offers in-depth reflections on world trade; development and justice; the future of the welfare state; patents on life forms; consumerism; gender traditions; democracy; human rights; militarisation; war and peace; religious and ethical education; food issues; water; ecological issues; human dignity; and theological foundations (2010: v-vi). Such diverse areas of impact by globalisation illustrate why it constitutes a serious challenge to how ecclesial institutions bear witness to fullness of life for humans, and the environment within the Southern African context.

## **The Rise of Liberal Democracies and the Neoliberal Economic Agenda**

There is much confusion over the understanding of the term *liberal democracy*. According to Helena Rosenblatt, the confusion and mistake over the terms are due to the mistake of conflating democracy with liberalism (Helena Rosenblatt

2018). These are not coterminous, nor do they have similar history or agenda. The founders of liberalism were no democrats (Helena Rosenblatt 2018). Western expressions of democracy is experiencing a crisis of confidence. Democracy in the contemporary neo-liberal model exists in a highly delicate liminal state, like a bubble ready to burst at any time, where people no longer have confidence in their leaders and the institutions to deliver the promises of democracy. Neoliberalism's agenda necessitates that powerful and wealthy elites that serve the interest of a free market control the democratic institutions and systems of governance. In the Accra confession of 2004, neo-liberalism is referred to as 'a political-economic philosophy that de-emphasizes [sic] or rejects government or other intervention in the economy; it would allow the market to operate without restraints or protections' (World Alliance of Reformed Churches 2004; *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and Earth*, Geneva, Switzerland). According to Evans (2005:197), 'liberalism preaches the false universalism of 'free trade' for all, while, in reality, the contemporary neoliberal trading system does not even offer the South a level playing field'. Christi Van der Westhuizen argues that neoliberal capitalism utilises the lexicon of liberty, liberalism and deregulation (Boesak & Hansen 2009:3), and although aspects of globalisation are unavoidable and inevitable, it is to a great extent, the policy decision made by powerful elites to defend their interest through the ideology of neoliberalism (Boesak & Hansen 2009:1). The policies, rules and political decisions made by the global institutions that promote neoliberalism and globalisation do not usually benefit the interest of Africa nations, who are considered weak and impoverished. This global model of economic development has resulted in winner and losers. It has produced immense wealth for a minority. According to Athena Peralta, 'for decades, poor and indebted nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America had suffered and continue to suffer the same appalling conditions following Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by international financial institutions' (Peralta & Athena 2013). The Market economy within the 21<sup>st</sup> century is undergoing great change in which global trade is being organised and transformed by the agenda of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4<sup>th</sup> IR) at a time when traditional models of democratic governance are being overturned by the rise of populist leaders and government that advocate neo-conservative/ nationalist ideology. Their rules and agenda shapes how the global economic and financial architecture operates in deciding who become winners and losers. The consumers in this Market are deceived into

believing that they are participating in ‘free trade’ but it is neither free nor fair because the policies that shape the Market are decided through conflict-of-interest relationships. Within the context of Southern Africa, the impact on people is made even worse by incompetence among national leaders, inefficiencies and corruption, mixed with externally driven financial capturing of the state through negative impact of globalisation on the economies that have destroyed millions of lives.

## **The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4<sup>th</sup> IR) and the Oppression of the Poor**

The agenda of global ecumenical organisations and the ecclesial community within the Sub-Saharan context have a most daunting task in this era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and attendant Artificial Intelligence, where the relationship between the economy and ecology has become even more dysfunctional. Imperial life-denying forces of militarism, capitalism, culturalism and technology are to blame. In this 4<sup>th</sup>IR era that determines economic advancement through cyber/physical interaction as well as scientific and technological development, systems are designed and utilised to benefit political and economic power of the privileged elite. For the African context, this model is fast-tracking unjust economic development that threatens sustainability of the earth and its resources, along with earth’s capacity to renew life. The rapid warming of the earth’s climate with consequential rising sea levels, flooding of coastal towns and villages, droughts affecting many farmlands, deforestation, and water pollution are impoverishing the most vulnerable people of Africa.

The underlying premise of the neo-liberal economic order practiced through capitalism is predicated on the philosophy that human beings as free moral agent have the right to control and organise the environment in which they live in ways that meet their needs. However, this anthropocentric hermeneutics with an agenda focused on meeting human needs has created great harm to wider biosphere. The fundamental challenge for religious within the African context that are serious about working with people in local communities for economic justice necessitate a critique of the economic system from which they benefit, and which at once degrades ecosystems.

This overview on the global economy seems to suggest that economic globalisation has served over the modern era to strength the economic systems

of powerful nations and advance the wealth of the minority wealthy at the expense of the global majority poor, many of who are within the Sub-Saharan context of Africa. This intentionally created system of inequality has produced failed states built on political and economic instability, insecurity and corruption that thrive on social conflict and poverty. Therefore, an inextricable link must be recognised between the unjust system of economic globalisation and the production of poverty. In this contemporary age of deep mistrust for politicians and political, economic and religious institutions, there is great urgency to transform the institutions and their leadership so that they can better serve the best interest for majority of society.

## **The Southern African Context**

Within the Sub-Saharan context where the Southern African region is located, it is claimed that 40 percent of the region's countries are at high risk of debt (Giles, Chris & Pillings 2018). These countries are unable to service their debts/loans and the private commercial banks do not normally practice forgiveness of debts and only under onerous terms agree to restructuring of debts. The Southern African region (SADEC) comprised of Angola, Botswana, Comores, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini (former Swaziland), Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.<sup>1</sup> According to the Southern Africa Economic Outlook for 2018,

Despite the improvement, economic performance remains subdued as the region's economic outlook continues to face major headwinds: high unemployment, weak commodity prices, fiscal strain, increasing debt, and high inflation. Real GDP is estimated to have grown at an average of 1.6 percent in 2017, before increasing to a projected 2.0 percent in 2018 and 2.4 percent in 2019 (SAEO 2018).

The usual response of the global financial regulators such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to the financial crisis in developing nations of the Global South is to demand a drastic cut to the national budgets

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.sadc.int/member-states/> for more information (Accessed 10/1/2019).

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that in turn affect spending in the social services sector of the economy. Therefore, those services that affect the wellbeing of the poor within the society, such as healthcare and education, are usually the first to be sacrificed. On the other hand, new taxes are raised, not by taxing the rich and those who can most afford to pay, but by taxing the poor, who are most vulnerable to the negative consequences of increased taxation. The increase of value added tax (VAT) on the basic food items such as bread, maize meal, and rice that the poor depend on for their daily living constitute a repressive tax that can make the poor even poorer (Kaisa Alavuotunki, Kaisa Alavau Mikka & Jukka Pirttila 2018). The example of Zambia serves as an important example of taxation policies within Sub-Saharan economies that are seeking to expand their tax base to include the informal sector:

The contribution of informal sectors to economic growth is significant in Zambia and other African countries, making taxation of SMEs, which form a significant part of the informal sector, an important issue for tax administrations. The vast number of SMEs and their economic nature (narrow taxable base, undocumented, cash-based business transactions, high mobility and activity in rural areas) in developing countries are the two reasons why tax administrations face difficulties in properly administering this group of taxpayers. This is even more pronounced in African countries where tax administrations encounter various capacity constraints in terms of skills and financial resources (Nhekairo 2014).

With the absence of effective progressive and functioning income tax policies and collection systems, Sub-Saharan governments, many of which are unaccountable to the people, opt for VAT as an expedient approach to increase revenue. In South Africa, for example, the recent VAT increase that increased it from 14% to 15% has triggered intense debate among economists (*The Conversation* 2018). VAT affects the poor disproportionately through the negative impact on price of goods and services, and inflation. The contemporary socio-economic landscape of Sub-Saharan African nations has resulted in a toxic mixture of poverty, extreme, isolated wealth, and ecological degradation. According to Hewitt (2017: 115-131), international market forces exploit Africa's vulnerable economy, while the local factors of corruption and inefficiencies have made many of the economies non-competitive at the global

market place. In certain African parliaments, members are ‘bought’ through campaign funding to pass and protect laws that ensure that every aspect of democratic politics, from the choices of voters, to the decisions of politicians, is submitted to the agenda of the market (Hewitt 2017:110).

The imperial weapons of militarism, capitalism, culturalism, and technology serve as strategic forces to enforce the agenda of the empire. The Accra confession statement reminds us that God’s work in the world is acted out in the midst of empire, defined as:

The convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic, and military imperial interests, systems, and networks for the purpose of amassing political power and economic wealth. Empire typically forces and facilitates the flow of wealth and power from vulnerable persons, communities, and countries to the more powerful .... Empire today crosses all boundaries, strips and reconstructs identities, subverts cultures, subordinates nation states, and can marginalize [sic] or co-opt religious communities (North American Covenanting for Justice Working Group 2007: 6).

This all-embracing definition has pushed the understanding of empire beyond the traditional and classical approach that makes it a uniquely western phenomenon because the forces of globalisation has made empire a truly global phenomenon.

CWM further describes empire as follows:

A coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power [...] that constitutes a reality and a spirit of ...domination... an all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while imperiously excluding even sacrificing humanity and exploiting creation ... (CWM Theology Statement 2010).

In the anti-imperial discourse of Rastafari ideology, this empire is embodied within the biblical concept of ‘Babylon’, that oppressive system (*Shitem*) which Bob Marley described as ‘vampire’ that is ‘suckin’ the children day by day’ and ‘suckin’ the blood of the sufferers (Bob Marley, Babylon System Lyrics). Bert Gerdenk argues that there is a direct correlation between the

uncontrolled market and the development of new military weapons and strategies, and the increasing militarisation of political action. The phenomenal increase in global military spending and the consequential decline in social security spending have helped to create structural violence that further creates impoverishment (Boesak & Hansen 2010:115-116).

## **Retrieving Indigenous Knowledge Systems to Enhance Mission in sub-Saharan Africa**

However, if Africans in Sub-Saharan contexts are to experience economic wellbeing, prosperity, and social and economic empowerment, then they need to reclaim their indigenous knowledge systems that possess resources for solutions to their problems, instead of being enslaved to western economic hegemony and cultural effacement (Prah 1998:69). This paper argues that Africans have, by sheer necessity, found a way of living in and with contradiction. Their African indigenous worldview, according to Masondo (Hewitt & Kaunda 2018:112), values personhood that is relational and lives in community for self-identification embraces an *ubuntu* world that invites all to participate in community life. Focus is placed on building healthy communities in which the physical and spiritual world work together for the common good of all.

However, with the embrace of western Christian religion that presented faith as a spiritual matter that prepares persons for the afterlife and economics as a 'worldly' matter, the institutional Church became by default an ally of the dominant neo-liberal economic order. These churches have not recognised the importance of how the global economy and its financial architecture impact on local communities and the lives of ordinary people. According to David Coates, 'Often times faith leaders tend to be focused on personal finance and financial literacy in the household, but they have not been drawn into the whole understanding of macroeconomics' (Camacho 2018).

## **Neoliberalism, Capitalism and Western Christianity**

Polanyi states that it was only during the last two centuries that the market rose above previous market demigods to become its self-proclaimed 'first cause' (Polanyi 2001). This strategic partnership of neoliberalism and capitalism, especially within western Christianity, with some notable economic successes

that have increased the wealth of some people, has also destroyed the lives of millions of people and the environment through rampant abuse of the earth's resources and climate. Neoliberalism constitutes an indispensable ideological construct for the 'free-Market' requirements of global capitalism. Westbrook argues that:

Modernization [sic], mostly along capitalist lines, became the Universalist creed that glorified the autonomous rights-bearing individual and hailed his rational choice-making capacity as freedom. Economic growth was posited as the end-all of political life and the chief marker of progress worldwide, not to mention the gateway to happiness (Westbrook 2017).

The current global neo-liberal economic paradigm that affects the Southern African context assumes that free market must function without state intervention in order to bring prosperity for all, promote growth and eradicate poverty. However, the high levels of poverty and inequality within Africa suggest that this economic model does not serve the best interest of the people.

According to Harvey Cox, the global marketplace functions as an alternative 'invisible god' that knows and controls how the world ought to do business and its theology focus upon:

Chronicles about the creation of wealth, the seductive temptations of statism, captivity to faceless economic cycles, and, ultimately, salvation through the advent of free markets, with a small dose of ascetic belt tightening along the way (Cox 1999).

Cox further claims that this market mimics the Old Testament deity Yahweh, communicating to the world that it is sovereign and superior to all other economic models of governance and therefore must have total control and be universally accepted, with no opposition, because there is no authentic alternative. Therefore, it can be argued that, it was this uncritical embrace and alliance of western Christianity with neoliberalism over the centuries of the modern era that has replaced faith in the God that Jesu bequeathed to the Church with the ideology of the capitalist's doctrine of 'market as god'. Cox best sums up the conundrum of this unholy relationship between western Christianity and the market in the following words:

The lexicon of The Wall Street Journal and the business sections of *Time* and *Newsweek* turned out to bear a striking resemblance to *Genesis*, the *Epistle to the Romans*, and Saint Augustine's *City of God*. Behind descriptions of market reforms, monetary policy, and the convolutions of the Dow .... Theologians call these myths of origin, legends of the fall, and doctrines of sin and redemption. But here they were again, and in only thin disguise ... (Cox 1999).

In conversation with Cox, the contemporary era has seen traditional mainline Protestant Christianity gone into retreat in Western postmodern societies. They have been dislodged and relegated from the centre of public life by new forms of religious faiths. Their uncritical alliance with neo-liberal economic order that promoted unbridled capitalism meant that they were no longer able to serve the interest of the poor and therefore became irrelevant to their lives. The Church's failure to connect its life and work with the felt needs of poor has led to an exodus from their community to new centres of spirituality to experience life-giving faith. According to Hewitt, (*Ecumenical Review* 2015: 549):

The vitality recession in some Western brands of Christianity is also accompanied by the impotence of many democratic political systems to facilitate genuine change that can better people's lives, especially of the poor and marginalized [sic]. This failure has influenced the disenchantment of many who are refusing to participate in the democratic process, and some have even turned to violent and destructive forms of protest to vent their anger without taking into account the consequences of their action.

The neo-conservative brand of populist religious expressions has taken their disillusionment with contemporary forms of democratic governance and institutional religions one step further in offering an alternative theological justification for the virtues of capitalism and the neoliberal economic disorder. This brand of western neo-conservative religious faith places controls over human freedom and individual choice. This perspective on human freedom thrives on blame, instead of exercising agency, and has become the new religious defender of neo-liberal economics that has struck global strategic alliance with despotic and nationalistic anti-democratic forms of governments. This schizophrenic expression of religious faith embraces neoliberal economy

that promotes rampant capitalism, yet on the other hand, it identifies neo-liberalism as an enemy of the nation state, that must be defeated. As a result, it promotes an anti-liberal, conservative governance that embraces life-denying attributes that restricts the human rights of people based on social, political, religious, sexual, gender and racial identity.

This populist religious discourse has further rooted itself in the new info-tech and bio-tech world order that is driven by the Fourth industrial Revolution (4<sup>th</sup>IR). In this new environment, human rights, according to Jung Mo Sung, are under grave threat from anti-humanism/post-humanism, neoliberalism and trans-humanism era, all of which are attacking notions of human rights, social justice, and justice in the marketplace (Sung 2018:124-130).

The WCC statement on, *Just Finance and an Economy of Life*, appealed for an ethical, just and democratic international financial regime that is,

grounded on a framework of common values of honesty, social justice, human dignity, mutual accountability and ecological sustainability,

and that,

account[s] for social and ecological risks in financial and economic calculation; reconnect[s] finance to the real economy; and set[s] clear limits to, as well as penalise[s], excessive and irresponsible actions based on greed (WCC Statement on Just Finance 2009: 1).

The paradox is that life-threatening issues of poverty, hunger; Aids, tuberculosis (TB), malaria; environment, soil fertility, pollution, water; industry, business, economy, unemployment impact on the daily lives of most Africans. However, this core economic dimension of their lives exist in a liminal space, living in contradiction and disconnected from the understanding and praxis of their faith. According to Morawski (1996:56),

Liminality points to the paradoxical and potentially transformative valences of being in a marginal time/space, but it does not reveal the specific kinds of work activities that transpire within nor does it tell how liminal agents are transformed and thus move out of liminality

and into newer social relations and practices.

Liminality participants are caught in an ‘already/not yet’ space of existence as they seek for meaning and purpose in their lives. According to Van Gennep (1960:40), the liminal process of detachment is highly ambiguous. This disconnectivity between their economic life and their life of faith creates a schizophrenic identity crisis characterised by confused belief systems. In view of the many Christians within the African ecclesial context, their pedagogical faith formation generally divorces their faith from matters of economic justice. The partnership of European colonialism and imperialism with the expansion of the Christian religion bequeathed a Euro-centric religio-cultural dualist worldview, in which two fundamental forces/realities that embody good and evil are in permanent contestation and struggle for the power to control humanity and the wider world. In a comment on racism and Eurocentric modernity, Vellem (2018: 37) argues that:

The ghost of colonial conquest, a Europeanized [sic] object, legitimized [sic] by a Christianizing [sic] spirit of the Europeanization [sic] of the world, comes back to haunt us and will continue to do so if its core remains untouched.

### **The Changing Landscape of Christianity within Africa**

The World Council of Churches document *‘Together Toward Life’* (TTL) (Keum, 2013, 13) states that the myth of the neo-liberal market ideology constitutes ‘a threat not only to economic life but also to the spiritual life of people, and not only to humanity but also to the whole creation’. The ecclesiastical community’s responsibility is to be an advocate on behalf of those who live on the margins and are denied fullness of life by the global market that serves the interest of the economic powerful. It is against this background that one ought to interrogate the Church’s response to the challenge of economic justice within the Southern African context. According to the Pew Report:

Christianity has grown enormously in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Asia/Pacific region, where there were relatively few Christians at the beginning of the 20th century. The share of the population that is

Christian in Sub-Saharan Africa climbed from 9% in 1910 to 63% in 2010, while in the Asia/Pacific region it rose from 3% to 7 percent<sup>2</sup>.

The Pentecostalisation of Christianity and the rise of other charismatic movements within Africa have embraced pneumatological paradigm of communicating the Christian faith that intentionally seeks to address what is prioritised as health, wealth, and prosperity of the people. Their enterprising pastoral leaders embraced this new Market ideology with a gospel message that celebrates and blesses the economic practices that grow their prosperity gospel and promise health, wealth, and success. According to the ecumenical evangelical network of the Lausanne Theology Working Group (2010: n.p.), prosperity gospel is defined as,

The teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the ‘sowing of seeds’ through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings.

This brand of Christianity has found welcoming accommodation in many African societies, with a culture and worldview that integrate the physical life with the spiritual life, and where the people are therefore open to miraculous intervention in their lives by means of which to deliver the blessings of health and wealth. Pastors claim to be filled with the spirit of God and are empowered to take back from the Devil, the Evil One, that which he has stolen from the people of God. However, in the practical expression of this prosperity gospel, money has become the magnet for acquiring quick wealth. These enterprising religious practitioners use ‘miraculous healing’ as a commodity that is sold to those who can ‘give/pay’ to access the benefits. Those with greater financial resources can access and receive priority rewards of healing and health benefits. The contemporary public debates in many of the Southern Africa

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<sup>2</sup> The study finds that more than 1.3 billion Christians live in the global South (61%), compared with about 860 million in the global North (39%) in 2010, see ‘Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population,’ Pew Research Centre, 19 December 2011, at: <http://pewforum.org/Christian/Global-Christianity-worlds-christian-population.aspx> (Accessed 30/11/2018)

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regional contexts focus on negative consequences of unaccountable ecclesiastical leaders who are caught in moral and ethical conundrum linked to sexual abuse and financial greed. Within the South African context in particular, both print and electronic media have regularly featured cases where such practitioners prey upon venerable people seeking quick solutions.

Both mainline churches and other religious groups linked to the neo-conservative/charismatic and populist traditions use different approaches to engage with the neo-liberal economic order and their financial institutions. However, these ecclesial traditions see unable to exercise critical distance from the infectious and addictive lure of the love of money, and are captured by the same economic ideology that has corrupted and discredited their public witness.

### **Ecumenical Praxis for Economic Transformation**

The use of ecumenical praxis for economic transformation constitutes an unused resource that is available to ecclesial communities within local communities. The economic transformation that is urgently needed to address injustice in many local communities requires participation from religious communities that are able to employ life-affirming theological reflections to deepen faith praxis within their contexts. Authentic life-giving faith must enter into solidarity with people who live on the margins of society and whose ‘cultures and systems which generate and sustain massive poverty, discrimination, and dehumanization [sic], and which exploit or destroy people and the earth’ (Keum 2013: 15). This model of theological reflection draws upon the ordinary peoples’ resources of faith, scripture, tradition, and experience to resist and overcome systemic threats to life. In order to break free from the magnetic lure of neoliberalism and neo-conservative socio-economic, political and theological systems of oppression, a process of radical re-reading of the bible from its state of capture by colonial and imperial institutional forces and Eurocentric missionary cultural bias that protected the interest of the powerful is imperative. The ecclesial community has a prophetic role to confront political and economic decisionmakers so as to promote life in dignity for all creation.

### ***Oikos*: Economy, Ecology and the Earth**

In order for local ecclesial communities to be faithful disciples and followers of Jesus, they too must arrive at an understanding of nature and purpose of the

Church, moving beyond agreeing to statements of faith and order to missiological praxis that embraces economic justice. The economy is predicated on sustaining life. A John 10:10 states, ‘God is the God of life’. The economy cannot be separated from the very mission of God in Christ (*Missio Dei*). Therefore, the historical Jesus of Nazareth, who is professed by Christians to be the Christ of their faith, stands as God’s affirmation to the world. This affirmation invites the Church that constitutes all of those who are disciples of Jesus to participate in God’s continuing work of salvation (fullness of life) for all that celebrates justice and peace. The World Council of Church and the Commission on Mission and Evangelism (WCC/ CWME ) document, ‘Together Towards Life’ affirms that ‘Life’ must be experienced as life in all its fullness, that is, as abundant life (Keum 2013:4-7), and it includes biological, human, social, and eternal, as well as economic well-being and ecological health. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is ‘the Breath of Life’ (Keum 2013:7). Therefore, a denial of life is a rejection of the God of life, and the Church that is the gathered community of the followers of Jesus is commissioned to celebrate life, and to resist and transform all life-denying forces in the power of the Holy Spirit. This missional understanding of the fullness of life is also referred to as ‘The Economy of Life’, because it places the whole *oikoumene* – that is, the household of God – at the centre of the Church’s mission and cares for the whole inhabited Earth, land and sea (World Council of Churches - World Communion of Reformed Churches - Council for World Mission - the Lutheran World Federation Statement on the occasion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> United Nations (UN) Financing for Development Forum New York, 23-26 April 2018).

The nature of the Church’s life and work in local communities has major implications for how it respond to threats to the future of the planet. The concepts of economy and ecology are both rooted in the Greek word, *oikos* that refers to the global home or household. Economy also refers to the Greek concept of *nomos*, or rules that govern the home or household. Ecology is integrally rooted in the concepts of *oikos* and *logos* pertinent to how the elements in the home or household work together for the common good. Human beings and other forms of life that inhabit this planet earth are all inter-related. The word ‘economy’ (*oikonomia*) refers to the management of a household. Economic justice is a concept that describes equitable sharing of resources and economic power as essential conditions for human development and ecological sustainability. *Economic justice* refers to how economic life is

organised in terms of production, distribution, and consumption of material goods and services. Therefore, economy and ecology must work together for the common good of all.

### **Making Economic Justice a Matter of Confession Faith**

At the Sao Paulo 2012 meeting of the WCC, WCRC, LWF and CWM, a declaration was issued that called for, 'urgent transformative liberation from unjust financial and economic structures are a direct response, then, to a call from God to join in God's freeing, healing, creating, sustaining activity in the world' (World Council of Churches - World Communion of Reformed Churches - Council for World Mission - the Lutheran World Federation Statement on the occasion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> United Nations (UN) Financing for Development Forum New York, 23 - 26 April 2018). They recognised that radical changes are needed at the global macro-level to transform the state of economic development of nations, because the forces that are in the world transcends national borders and interest and functions to serve the interest of a few very powerful interest groups. It is for this reason that ecumenical organisations recognise the urgency of networking in order to lobby and challenge global economic and financial structures and to recognise the urgency for changes that can transform the lives of millions of people in the global south.

At another ecumenical gathering of African women in Tanzania to discuss issues on poverty, wealth, and ecology, participants characterised the hybrid neo-liberal economic model that engages in strangle-hold of the nations and denies meaningful life to many of its peoples as one that has:

... damaged Africa's ecological fabric. The privatisation, commodification and commercialisation of land, water and seeds through large-scale mining projects, the construction of mega-dams and neoliberal trade policies have fragmented and displaced entire communities in Africa, blocking them off from their sources of sustenance. African people are forced to migrate as a survival mechanism; and many African women have fallen victim to trafficking (African Women's Statement on Poverty, Wealth and Ecology 2007).

Within the Sub-Saharan context, the important issues of economy and faith must be rooted in the value of justice and peace. African women employed a

contextual theological framework of liberation as an appropriate discourse to interrogate the relationship between the economy and faith. They argue that the economy that shapes how people live must be the subject of faith, because the Christian concept of justice is foundational to expression of faith. However, the quest for economic justice necessitates the mobilisation of joint ecumenical action at global and national levels, because local faith communities on their own will not be able to engage with the powerful forces unleashed by neoliberal economic disorder. Transformative ecumenical praxis equips the ecclesial community to resist all life-destroying values and systems in the political, social economic, and religious environment. Therefore, economics and economic justice must inevitably be treated as matters of faith, because they are important components in God's fullness of life for all creation (Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth (AGAPE) 2005:13).

It is significant that when the global ecumenical organisations of WCC, LWF, WCRC and CWM planned their ecumenical focus on economic justice, that it was the African continent, and in particular, the context of Ghana, that was chosen. This West African nation poignantly represents the wider African context, experiencing upheavals from the negative impact of global economic dis-order on the African environment, while affecting climate change and the wellbeing of humanity, plants and animals. Their definitive stand on the centrality of economic justice in the understanding and praxis of faith was articulated in the 2004 ecumenical conference document, '*The Accra Confession*' that affirmed that justice as matter of faith. It stated that:

*... matters of economic and environmental justice are not only social, political, and moral issues: they are integral to faith in Jesus Christ and affect the integrity of the Church. Being faithful to God's covenant requires that individual Christians and the churches take a stand* (World Alliance of Reformed Churches 2004: 10).

This ecumenical process that argued for Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth and the need for an alternative to globalisation to address the needs of peoples and the earth, was highly unpopular among many churches in the Global North. They viewed the process as a 'left wing' attack on their economic and financial systems that ensured them their wealth, and they were in no haste to dismantle or destroy that which made them an economically privileged people. It was the financial crisis of 2008 that resulted

in systemic failures in financial regulation and supervision by corporate governance and risk management of the ‘free market’ (*The Economist* 2013). Whereas some government sought to bail out the big banks that were considered ‘too big to fail’, many ordinary investors and nations paid dearly, and suffered severe loss. This global economic failure convinced some churches in the North to embrace the quest for economic justice as a missional priority. The effects of this financial failure are still being felt within the African context, and this has made the focus on the theme of economic justice as a confession of faith even more important in this contemporary era, due to the catastrophic fallout from economic globalisation on the wellbeing of people.

### **Economic Injustice and the Mission of Jesus**

Local churches within the African context must therefore rediscover the politics of Jesus within the context of the Roman imperial world. His witness embraced those who were most marginalised in society. Therefore, the ecclesial witness involves struggle and resistance in the quest for justice and inclusivity, healing and wholeness (Keum 2013: 15), and it includes the non-human dimension of creation. Since millions of Africans live on the margins of their society, the mission of their local church is to engage in radical diakonia (servant ministry as modelled by Jesus). This praxis ‘invites political engagement that involves taking strategic action to speak against injustice and fight for human dignity’ (Hewitt 2017: 110).

If the Church in the Southern African context is to incarnate the diakonial ministry of Jesus overcome economic injustice, then it must intentionally opt for solidarity with the people who are ‘the sinned against’ and are demonised by those at the centre of political economic and religious power. Failure to model the ministry of Jesus may discredit the Church’s authenticity, because through silence it risks becoming a legitimiser of person and systems of power and wealth that are built on greed, and designed to benefit the privileged few at the expense of the many. Jesus made economic justice issues central to the integrity and praxis of faith, and allowed no room for neutrality. Although Jesus was not a member of a political party, his message was revolutionary, because it advocated for individual and systemic comprehensive changes within his imperial and colonised society. His messages of liberation consistently identified and analysed all unjust systems of power, and demanded real change in the distribution of authority and power, goods and resources,

such that the people that lived on the margins might experience fullness of life (Luke 4:18ff). Throughout his ministry, Jesus offered a comprehensive approach to peoples' suffering by addressing not only the physical pain with which they were burdened, but also the systemic causes of their suffering. His political consciousness was shaped within an imperial, colonised context in which ordinary Jewish people were oppressed (Hendriks 2006). Jesus cites the political, religious and economic oppression of the Jews as the focus of his own ministry (Isaiah 61; Luke 4:18ff).

The quest for justice was therefore central to Jesus's ministry: 'blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice' (Matt 5:6), 'Seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice' (Matt 6:33). Jesus was conversant with the Hebrew Scriptures and familiar with admonitions regarding justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*sadiqah*) that advocated for the establishment or restoration of fair, equitable and harmonious relationship that leads to fulfil responsibilities of relationship: '*... do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*' (Micah 6:8). Justice and righteousness are thus based on social relationship.

Economic transformation is constructed on the understanding that justice is formative and foundational to the ethics and morality in relationships modelled on the worldview and social consciousness upon which Jesus carried out his ministry. The colonial rule of Roman imperial occupation, along with their local surrogates ensured that the local economy served the interest of the ruling class, and had far-reaching psycho-emotional consequences on the Empire's inhabitants. His alternative way of resisting economic hegemony of empire resulted in his critique of the Religious leaders, who compromised and succumbed to Roman colonial rule to protect their power base. They became spiritually impotent by failing to speak truth to power that was oppressing the poor through high taxes and indebtedness. Both political and religious institutions failed to treat the basic needs of the people as sacred. Therefore, the ministry of Jesus was centred upon empowering the dispossessed poor, while exposing and delegitimising their invincibility and deceptive control of political and religious system that thrived off their poverty.

## Conclusion

Transformative ecumenical praxis for economic justice invites churches to journey from privatised faith understanding to public engagement with the

oppressed. If the Church in the Southern African context is to be a faithful follower of Jesus and a servant of the poor, then its model of engagement necessitates transformative ecumenical praxis for economic justice that moves beyond inner-ecclesial institutional priorities. Transformative ecumenical praxis in local communities focuses on meeting the ordinary felt needs of the people. This cannot function as a private arrangement by individual churches competing against one another, because the threat to the lives of the poor are both deep and systemic. The ecclesial understanding of ecumenical engagement must therefore rise above the false life restricting barriers of denominationalism that is widespread within the African context. It requires an approach that emphasises oneness through diversity, which includes, accepts and works with the other. Transformative ecumenical relationships are, therefore, covenantal, and rooted in a commitment to justice. Justice in the economy and Market is based on principles of social and climate justice; serves the real economy that benefit the poor; accounts for social and environmental tasks; and sets clear limits to greed. With the presence of injustice, there must not be room for neutrality. The followers of Jesus are expected to take sides with justice, and act against the systems that stand in the way of justice. The global economy must be subjected to the life-affirming values of transformative justice for the common good of all including other life forms. In order to resist the life-denying works of empire, the Church's apostolic mandate is to bear authentic witness to the ongoing life-giving example of Jesus for all creation and this necessitate inseparability of justice with ecumenical misengagement.

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# **Alternation**

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Contributors must submit one computer-generated copy of the manuscript to the editor(s). The computer-generated copy must be in Word for Windows, and must have an Abstract and Keywords. It must also be submitted in the Alternation style.

Manuscripts should range between 5000-10000 and book reviews between 800-1200 words. However, longer articles may be considered for publication.

Attach a cover page containing the following information: The corresponding author's full name, address, e-mail address, position, department, university/ institution, and telephone/ fax numbers. A brief summary of the biode of all authors must be attached too.

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Use footnotes sparingly. In order to enhance the value of the interaction between notes and text, we use footnotes and not endnotes.

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#### **Journal article by two authors**

Mkhize, N. & N. Ndimande-Hlongwa 2014. African Languages, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), and the Transformation of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Higher Education. *Alternation* 21,2: 10 – 37. Available at: <http://alternation.ukzn.ac.za/Files/docs/21.2/02%20Mkh.pdf>. (Accessed on 08 May 2017.)

#### **Book by one author**

Moran, S. 2009. *Representing Bushmen: South Africa and the Origin of Language*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press. (Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora, Book 38.)

#### **Book by one editor**

Smit, J.A. (ed.) 1999. *Body, Identity, Sub-cultures and Repression in Texts from Africa*. Durban: CSSALL.

#### **Book by two editors**

Dhunpath, R. & R. Vithal (eds.) 2012. *Alternative Access to Higher Education: Underprepared Students or Underprepared Institutions?* Cape Town: Pearson Publishers.

#### **Chapter in an edited book**

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#### **Translated book**

Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and Punish*. Sheridan, A. (trans.). New York: Pantheon.

#### **Online resource**

Jansen, J. & P. Vale (Co-chairs.) 2011. *Consensus Study on the State of the Humanities in South Africa: Status, Prospects and Strategies*. Pretoria: Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf). Available at: <https://www.assaf.org.za/files/2011/09/2011-Humanity-final-proof-11-August-2011.pdf>. (Accessed on 08 May 2017.)

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