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# THE BIBLE AND WOMEN IN THE AFRICAN APOSTOLIC CHURCH OF JOHANE MARANGE IN ZIMBABWE

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## Background

African women are the backbone of the family; they are the ones who give birth, raise and care for the children when sick and in some cases, they are the sole providers. There is truth in the Shona saying; “*Musha mukadzi*,” (home is wife!), for without her there is no future for the family. However, central as they are, women are usually relegated to the margins when it comes to decision making. It is here that the family now belongs to men. The justification for women’s subjugated position is often sought in the Bible and within ‘culture’. Women are thus, dispossessed of their worth by these two forces against the reality that they literally run the family. It is from this context that this chapter investigates the impact of the Bible and culture in the industry of impoverishment of women in the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange (AACJM), not only in real economic terms, but also in decision making. I argue that their deprivation of voice in many spheres, including marriage, sex and in the general running of the family, contributes to poverty, and puts the girl child at great risk of HIV because she is usually deprived of formal education and, as per church tradition with ‘biblical and cultural’ blessings, is married off at an early age. Thus, I argue that unless we target the African woman for empowerment through suggesting a biblical reading of the Queen Mother motif, not as a source of evil, but of life, the future of Africa is in limbo.

## Introduction

In Africa, the Bible plays a central role, not only in the religious sphere, but also in every aspect of life: social, economic and political. It is read and interpreted as a manual for daily living. What is claimed to be the meaning of the Bible is often taken without question. There is no intention on the part of the adherents to ask contextual questions such as; who is the

reader and what is the intention of the interpreter? These questions are central since the reader, depending on their gender, social class, and economic status among others, determines the meaning of the Bible passage. It is this dimension that has caused a queer scenario that while women command the majority in every church, the reading and interpretation of scripture is controlled by the minority - men. In this regard, women have always been side-lined when it comes to Bible reading and interpretation. This has contributed to their low status, both in church and in the society. They are lower than second class citizens.

This is especially true in African Initiated Churches where the African traditional family structure must be maintained. Therefore, on top of the Bible, 'African culture' has also become a yardstick to determine how women should present themselves in almost every facet of life. In fact, the Bible and culture are commonly appealed to by men to control women. Unfortunately, several women have conformed to the socially prescribed status as divinely appointed. As a result, many women and young girls have no voice in all matters of life, including matters that concern their own bodies, such as sex and marriage. This sad reality is a common sight in the AACJM of Zimbabwe. In the name of the Bible and culture, women are deprived of nearly all important rights of selfhood. Because of such loss of voice, young girls who are often married off even before the legal age of consent to sex have become victims of poverty and, sometimes, HIV.

In this chapter, I argue that the same Bible and culture which are used to subjugate women can also be used to liberate them. Reading and interpreting the Bible from women experiences and reading and understanding African cultural heritage on gender prescriptions is key to emancipating women, especially those in the AACJM, where the same apparatus are used to dominate and deprive women of their voice. This is the basis upon which I call for the use of the Queen Mother Motif, not as a source of evil, but as a source of life, since women in this church are thought to be impure and less than men because they are the conduits through which sin came into the world. Sadly, the ideology is believed by several women I have so far interacted with. To that end, the chapter briefly traces the background of AACJM so as to unravel its biblical and African cultural claims, which it has always used as weapons against women. To dislodge the claims by male members of this church, the chapter exposes the colonial roots of strict and notoriously hierarchical society and church where women are slavishly subordinated to men. In conclusion, I suggest that

the biblical impression of the Queen Mother as a source of evil is a myth created to oppress women. Read differently, the Queen Mothers become an inspiration for African women to be involved in all spheres of authority and decision making, that is, religious, economic, social, and political. In order to uphold confidentiality, I used pseudonyms for the study participants.

## **The Background of the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange**

The AACJM is one of the leading Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe. As the church was formed in the 1930s as a protest movement against white missionary Christianity, it does not depend on foreigners (missionaries) for funding, leadership and control (Hayes 2000: 3; Daneel 1971). The founder of the church, Muchabaya Momberume, now popularly known as Johane Marange, formed the church to address African problems in an African way. Missionaries were not fully equipped to address African problems, not only because they did not know, but simply because they did not want to appreciate African culture. Unlike in missionary churches, Marange made sure his followers used their own languages during prayers and worship. Since the missionaries also operated hospitals, whose major role was to aid the missionary work of converting Africans to Christianity, the church of Marange prohibited its followers to use Western medicine and to visit hospitals. Instead, believers were to rely on faith-healing through prayer, fasting and prophecy (Isichei 1995: 254).

While the church condemns any association with traditional practices, the church has much in common with traditional religion. The church has adapted the traditional institutions to fit its new religious outlook (Bourdillon 1997: 193). The church finds from the Old Testament prescriptions, for example with regard to food, dress code and practices such as polygamy (Hastings 1971: 200), an institution which is quite normal within the church. It literally applies the Old Testament commands and attitudes, especially the book of Leviticus, which are very closely related to African (Shona) religious practices.

## Women in the African Apostolic Church of Johane Marange: Dispossession through ‘Bible’ and ‘Culture’

Women in AACJM are a sad example of people who have been deprived of their worth through Bible reading and claims of cultural heritage. In the church, as well as in their homes, the world is defined by males. Even though in church they hold positions such as being prophetesses, their participation cannot be equated to that of their male counterparts. It is surprising that even the young girls and women, whom one would think may have a different worldview from that of their older mothers and male leaders of the church, still uphold the teachings of the church. They are almost quite comfortable with their position. One of the legitimisation myths for the subordination of women in this church, is the doctrine of original sin. Women are condemned as people who brought sin into the world; hence they are deemed inferior to men.

The story of Genesis 3 where Adam and Eve are said to have sinned before God is believed as true and prescriptive of our social and religious roles in this day and age. As God pronounced to Eve after the fall that ‘your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you’, so should the women in this church hold themselves. Men are, therefore, divinely ordained as rulers over women because women are naturally sinners. This story is very much believed by the adherents of the AACJM. One day, on my way home from work, in a commuter omnibus, a conversation began about ‘small houses’ in Harare (a practice whereby a man would have a mistress). Women blamed men and men blamed women. What was striking about the conversation was one man’s argument. He said that sexual sins are caused by women in this world and, “that is why in Genesis 2 God called the first woman *Mutadzi* (sinner). It was only man who made a mistake when he named her *Mukadzi* (woman), instead of *mutadzi* as was originally said by God in the Garden of Eden.’ He performed a play on words, “*mutadzi*” (sinner) and “*mukadzi*” (woman). As the argument continued, I later realised that this man was a member of the AACJM. I became keenly interested in knowing their female counterparts’ perspectives on this issue.

Before I even carried interviews with the AACJM women, I was surprised to realise that probably, I was one of the few people who had never heard about this perspective. It is actually popular talk in Zimbabwe that the word *mukadzi* (woman) is a corruption of *mutadzi* (sinner). The man in the commuter bus only said what was considered ‘common knowledge’,

and gave it a biblical basis. This ideology does not seem to come from anywhere among the Shona and Ndebele themselves since there is no historical myth in Zimbabwe where sin was brought by women. There have been suggestions that African societies had myths of creation of humanity that are similar to the creation story in blaming women for the original sin (Frobenius 1930, 35; Kahari 1986, 1995, 137; Banana 1991), but I do not believe that. Rather, I see such stories as coming from African Christians who desperately wanted to show similarities between African religion and the Bible so as to convince Africans to convert to Christianity by a false assertion that everything in the African past was similar to the world of the Bible.

Nevertheless, in Zimbabwe the notion of woman as a sinner was popularised through music and preaching in the missionary churches. The late Paul Matavire, who was a renowned Zimbabwean musician, composed a song that became an instant hit and the song is titled '*Dhiyabhurosi Nyoka* (Devil the Snake). The song is based upon Genesis 3 scripture. Initially, Matavire blames both Adam and Eve, but later blames the woman, as one who brought sin into the world. Matavire argues that before Eve was created Adam did not sin. He only sinned after Eve was created, therefore, Eve brought sin to the world. Matavire even sings that 'If I were Adam, I would ask God one or two questions in self-defence: For how long have I been in this orchard as a bachelor? How many sins did I commit before this woman was created?' Clearly, from Matavire's perspective, the story is true that women cause men to sin. It is this general perception that has seen women having to play second fiddle in all matters of life, even in church.

Curious to see how prevalent this perception of women is, in Zimbabwe, especially the *Marange* church, I irregularly interviewed some women who attend this church. I was surprised by how this story is reflected by these women. Among the twenty-two women I interviewed in a period of about two months, whose ages range from 15 to 60, eighteen of them confirmed that it is true, sin was brought into the world through women and even now they still cause men to sin especially sexually. As such, they supported the fact that women in their church do not have to sit next to or rather close to men. Because of the general belief that women are a source of corruption and cause men to sin, men and women sit separately in church. Also, part of the explanation is that women are unclean because of menstrual blood (Crumbley 2006: 81). The idea of menstrual uncleanness also exists in parts of the Bible, especially the book of Leviticus

(Wegner 1992: 36). As a result of this 'biblical' teaching, women in this church observe these taboos by staying away from church or by attending church, but not performing any duties (Sackey 2006: 6).

While women and men alike in this church, and in the society, see the practice of relegating women and women's subjugation in church and in society, as having divine origin, the reality is that this perspective about women developed over the centuries of Judaism until Christianity was born. But it has always been strongly contested. Women have been part of the community playing equally important roles as males. To the effect that although the written history has the male voice, there are some examples in the Bible that show women as equally powerful individuals in society, who refused to be defined and subordinated as slaves.

In the formative years of Christianity for example, although some gospels, like that of Matthew purposefully, decide to highlight the maleness or patriarchal nature of the story of Jesus by having the angel speak to Joseph and not Mary, (Matt 1:20ff), Luke gives us another version where the angel spoke to Mary and not to Joseph, (Luke 1:26ff) (Schaberg 1992: 275). If we want to harmonise the disparity, we will come up with the image that the angel appeared to both Joseph and Mary, suggesting that men and women are equal. God knew this and that is the reason he spoke to both. More so, Jesus had female disciples, which is an indication that women were significant as well (Luke 8:2-3). At the death of Jesus, women could not leave him, even as the men, including the most trusted ones such as Simon Peter, deserted him. Women, however, were there until the end, including Mary, the mother of Jesus (John 19:25-26) (O'day 1992: 300). Where was Joseph? It serves to show us the reality of life, especially as African women; 'when the going gets tough, women hold on!' They are not just incubators, but that process of carrying the future of humanity in the womb for nine months is a miracle that bonds women to the life of the whole society. Leaving such important people in the history, politics and economic, religious and social spheres of life is to do injustice to oneself.

When the missionaries introduced Christianity to the Africans, they dispossessed them culturally. Women and men, who previously had almost the same proportion of power and value, were now being ranked according to the gender dictates of the colonial system. It is common knowledge that African cultures were not as rigidly hierarchical as they became with

the introduction of missionary Christianity (Mate 2002: 2). Colonial interventions changed people's mind-sets and made this the accepted ideal, even though lived realities showed otherwise. Men were placed higher than the African women, but they (missionaries) were sure to make the same African men subordinate to white women (Schmidt 1992: 1). This was meant to ideologically dispossess people by condemning all they did and believed to give them a new identity: an identity that pleases not the one given it but the one who prescribes it. For example, they made sure that men left their rural homes to work for them in towns. Women were left behind with nothing else but an increasing burden of agricultural labour falling on their shoulders (Schmidt 1992: 82). Today, it seems a Zimbabwean 'culture' for a husband to leave his rural home and look for work in towns while the wife remains at home. Yet, women were very economically active before colonisation.

According to European missionary teachings, a Christian woman was to be as passive, soft spoken and as subordinate as possible. This process was resisted by both men and women of Africa. In Zimbabwe, for example, the settler establishment together with Christianity were fought by both men and women. In 1896, Mbuya Nehanda led a rebellion against the colonial government (Nhongo-Simbanegavi 2000: 16; Ranchod-Nilson 2006: 57). She was accused of inciting men to kill one white settler in her territory. After she was arrested and tortured, she even refused to be converted even as men, afraid of death, converted to Christianity. She even inspired the spirit of resistance by saying, "*Mapfupa angu achamuka*: my bones will rise again." She is an example in our culture, of a woman role model, a liberator, a woman of courage, a woman of virtue, a woman for men and women alike.

In the name of culture and the Bible, the church practices polygamy, which mostly benefits men and not women. Philemon Matunya, a member of the church in Murambinda, aged thirty-two, noted that, 'having one wife (within their church) happens occasionally, as a mistake'. Passmore Gondo, another church member had this to say:

Variety is the spice of life, and that is true for one's sexual life, and polygamy was the best platform to experience that variety. "You need a variety in a diet to keep your (body) network strong. Today, you have *sadza* with lacto, tomorrow, you have vegetables, and on another day, a diet with beef" (Chidavaenzi 2010).



There have been debates from organisations such as the Girl Child Network that polygamous marriages practiced by apostolic churches increase the spread of HIV and other related illnesses. However, an AACJM church member and Headman, Pedzisai Gondo Murambinda of Murambinda, said their church is structured in such a way that the spread of HIV is limited as those caught cheating on their wives also risk ex-communication from the church, and that was the last thing anybody wanted to happen to them (Chidavaenzi 2010). From Gondo's analysis, it implies that within the church some men can cheat on their wives even if they have many wives, but cheating is not expected of women. The Old Testament and Shona culture are the sources of the practice of polygamy in the church and the attached ways of marriage.

Closely connected to polygamy, is a cultural form of marriage called *kuzvarira*. In traditional Shona culture and under extreme conditions, there was a custom where a girl, no matter how young she was, was given as a wife to a certain man. Even an unborn baby was given in marriage; that is where the term *kuzvarira* came from (Kabweza 1979, 60). The church takes its doctrine from both traditional religion and Old Testament codes. Child marriages are a reality from what we find in AACJM. Some girl children are forced to enter into marriages before they even reach marriageable age, which is now officially at 18. The Zimbabwean legal age of sexual consent is 16, but a lot of girls are being married off before they have reached that age. There is no consensual agreement between the child and her husband-to-be, but the agreement is between the parents and the man who intends to marry her. Usually, it is the father and not the mother who decides where to marry off his daughter. There was a case where a fourteen-year-old girl (AACJM member) was forced by her parents into marriage with a sixty-seven-year-old man, a man old enough to be her great grandfather. She had this to say:

I can't go against [the will of] my elders and leave my husband in order to attend school. Besides, where would I go if I leave? My parents will not welcome me (Kachere 2010).

This implies that even if the young girls are not willing to be married off to old men, they do not have any other alternative as their parents will not allow them to return home. This exposes young girls to problems such as miscarriages, sexual abuse and exploitation. Also, Madzibaba Desmond of the Johane Marange had this comment on child marriages:

Once a man identifies the girl he likes and her parents agree, the man usually keeps the girl at his home so that she gets accustomed to what goes on there. It is not all about sexual abuse as people may think. But, there are others who get tempted and end up becoming intimate with the girl before her body is ready (Sachiti 2011).

For some of the AACJM members, child marriages are advantageous to them in that young wives are easy to control. Gideon Mombeshora, an AACJM member, told Inter Press Service News Agency, (IPS) that most men in the church prefer to marry under-age girls because they are easy to control:

"Most men want to get married to docile women. The younger the bride the more chances for dominance for the man," he said. He further explained the sect strongly believes in the practice of under-age brides: "Although it is not in our church's statutes that old men should marry under-age girls, the practice is deeply entrenched in our belief system". (Kachere 2010).

She is not the only one who is a victim of this system from her parents since the report says a large number of girls are dropping out of school to get married. According to the Girl Child Network (GCN), an estimated 8 000 girls have been forced into early marriages or were held as sex slaves since 2008 (Moyo 2010). Also, Caroline Nyamayemombe, a gender officer at the United UNFPA country office in Harare, indicated that studies have confirmed that teenage pregnancies are on the increase in Zimbabwe and are the leading cause of maternal mortality. This is caused by older men who marry young girls, these girls are young enough to be their own daughters. This scenario has significantly contributed to pregnancy complications in teenage mothers. For Nyamayemombe, such harmful cultural practices affect the girl child. Poverty is one of the key reasons for early marriages as UNFPA data have shown that about 80% of pregnant teenagers come from poor families (Kachere 2010). In other words, the poor parents marry off their young daughters to old men to fight poverty. When girls from poverty-stricken homes become victims of sexual abuse from their husbands, they face the consequences of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases because of their powerless position (Kanyoro 2008: 219). The young girls extend their poverty in that after dropping from school they become uneducated and become unemployable and, in the process, remain stuck in impoverished conditions.

Also, while reliance on prayer may be adequate to believers, many times, women suffer the consequences of relying on prayer for everything. As

the church became independent of missionaries, it denied everything that was Western, including medical treatment. The church makes use of holy water or a wide variety of sanctified objects which symbolise God's protective powers (Daneel 1971: 348). It refuses to be identified with Shona traditional religion, hence it neither uses traditional nor European medicine (Bourdillon 1976, 300). However, this is very risky for pregnant women. Some would rather die than receive modern medical treatment. It is reported that the church built a maternity hospital in Mhowa Village in Chihota communal lands, Mashonaland East to cater exclusively for pregnant women of their faith (Murape 2010). They do not use any modern medication, but they strictly use holy water as per religious belief. The head midwife said that the church was against the idea of forcing people to take medication or vaccination against their religious belief (Murape 2010). However, many pregnant women and infants die due to lack of proper medical facilities and attention (The Zimdaily 2010). Also, lack of medication means that women will be the worst affected as they are also left with the burden of caring for sick children.

## **The Queen Mother Motif: Repossession through flipping pages of Culture and the Bible!**

To a people who are caught between two systems of power; 'Bible' and 'culture', we need to find cultural icons and Biblical stories that empower them to realise that these are not tools for men to do whatever they want. There is no other way except to attempt repossession of what was lost through the flipping of the pages of culture and the Bible. We need to turn weapons of oppression into weapons of liberation for the women and girl children. Since the Johane Marange group reads the Bible, we also must read the biblical passages such as the Queen Mothers as examples of women who controlled politics, and the economic, social and even religious affairs of their communities for entire nations. As such, women in these churches must not be intimidated into submission and accepting second or third-class roles, in church and society. In the context of HIV & AIDS, depriving women knowledge and appreciation of themselves as equal partners can only intensify the problems: social, political, economic and religious. Men in these churches as well as in the society have tended to appeal to the Bible and culture to sustain their privileged positions in politics, religion, society and economic power as well as to consolidate that

power. We need to revisit these two tools to empower ourselves and the girl child.

In the Old Testament, royal women were known as Queens or Queen mothers. Royal women influenced the politics of Israel and Judah through their strong personalities. So, the queen or queen mother had political influence in the royal court. The royal women in the Old Testament have been referred to as *gebira*, a title which includes women like Jezebel of Israel (2 Kings 10.13). Royal women were notable for their strong character, personal influence and ambitions (Cushman 2006, 327; cf, Mwandayi 2011). They were known as the source of evil, for instance, Jezebel, as the wife of Ahab and head of the royal household, got involved in the killing of the prophets of the Lord (1 Kings 18.4) and established priesthoods of Baal and Asherah at her royal table. She sends messengers to Elijah, threatening his life (1 Kings 19.2), (Cushman 2006, 335). Also, Bathsheba, David's wife, played a crucial role in the succession and establishment of Solomon on the throne of David. As a queen mother, she used her position to receive and pass on critical information and to ensure the accession of her own son and the elimination of a rival (Cushman 2006, 336).

These stories about particular royal women or Queen Mothers as sources of evil, were brought down to the village where the peasants had a totally different mentality altogether. In the village, women and men never had rigid hierarchies as was obtaining in the palace. It later became a stereotype for all women as sources of uncleanness, sources of evil and women became stigmatised as irredeemably evil by virtue of being women. These stories could have been produced after the exile when the issue of what was foreign and local was still real. So, there is an attempt to paint the foreign women as sources of evil, so that those who had foreign wives would let them go. This, we can suspect, was derived from the myths that were created by the society (see Genesis 3, for example). However, we can still trace the history of resistance to this stereotype among certain women heroes who refused to submit. They engaged in centuries old struggles. Today we are still in the battle and we stand in a long history of struggle, for reordering the society that was reordered by males to suppress women based upon foreign cultures.

Since the Johane Marange Church claims to be leaning towards African culture, we also must find women heroes to bring upon a different image. The death of 'Queen Mother' Nehanda represents two opposites: first, de-

feat of women from their previously advantageous social, economic, political and religious roles and the subjugation of not only women but also men by the colonial system. Second, and opposed to the above, she is a symbol of resistance, a symbol of an ongoing struggle; she represents a spirit of non-compromise. By her refusal to convert but choosing instead to die for her beliefs and ideals, women and girl children of Africa have valuable lessons for life. Women must be empowered to fight for their rights and their recognition. They must reclaim their status. Like Nehanda, they must fight and never to surrender the battle. Victory is certain! Women and girl children must take a stand in politics, economic, social and religious spheres, in academia, even in teaching courses that are thought to be masculine like theology, the same discipline that legitimised oppression of women over the years, must be filled with women waging the struggle. The struggle that women like Kimpa Vita fought for: 'through protesting against the Catholic Church and the colonial government' (Dube 2001, 134; 2000, 41). With all these rich examples that could be at the disposal of women, change within the church and in society is attainable.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown that before the introduction of Christianity to the Africans by missionaries, African culture was never hierarchical. Structures were put in place by missionaries, which oppressed women, hence, the use of both culture and the Bible as weapons of oppression. This is why most of the Johane Marange women and girl children are sidelined. As an African Initiated Church which protested against missionaries, in its formation, it considered practices such as polygamy and child marriages from both culture and the Bible. The Bible is read, interpreted and applied literally, hence the belief that women were the originators of sin. This justifies why women sit separately from men and are less active in the church. From a biblical position, we can use the Queen Mother motif, not in its negative sense as portrayed by some scholars, but as a positive step towards empowering women. Women still have power and control within themselves which can change the church and society. To the Zimbabwean women and men, 'Queen Mother' Nehanda became a role model who resisted dominance by the missionaries. Women within the church and society at large are encouraged to do the same.

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