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8 Troubling African Masculinities

In Conversation with Ezra Chitando

Paul Leshota

Abstract

Ezra Chitando is one of the most prolific and erudite African scholars of our generation. He has to his credit, well-researched chapters, articles, and books on a wide range of topics in history, religion, and theology. Originally located within the African Traditional Religious Studies domain, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and his call to serve as Theology Consultant for the Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA) connived to catapult Ezra into serious reflection on emerging issues and the signs of the times. Africa in general and Southern Africa, in particular, were the epicenter of HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS constituted the sign of the time and presented the most formidable challenges to the entire human family as well as the Church in Africa. EHAIA cut a niche for itself by stirring up the Churches through building pastoral and formal theological education competencies for HIV/AIDS responses, amongst other things. It is in this context that “EHAIA series” under the auspices of the World Council of Churches was produced to build HIV/AIDS-competent Churches. That men were also drivers of the pandemic was not a secret anymore. Their participation had become indispensable if HIV/AIDS were to be nipped in the bud. To that end, Ezra Chitando identified masculinities as one area for attention and exploration. This chapter investigates the contribution to scholarship that Ezra Chitando made, particularly in the realm of gender in general and masculinities in particular, their contexts, practical aspects and what came out as Ezra’s signature in his troubling of African masculinities in the many articles, chapters, and books he wrote on the theme.

Keywords: Ezra Chitando, HIV/AIDS

Introduction

Since the wrestling of the concept of African Traditional Religion from Geoffrey Parrinder (1954) by Bolaji Idowu (1962) and John Mbiti (1975), first generation doyens of Africa in the field of African Traditional Religion, scholarship in the field of Religion in Africa has never looked back.

Generations of African scholars schooled under the in-vogue phenomenological approach to religion took up the baton. While the agenda of the first generation of African scholars of religion was a protest against the long history of derogation of Africa and its cultures by both Christian missionaries and European colonisers, subsequent generations have expanded the horizons of the study of African religion in African universities in terms of scope, content and theoretical basis. This marked an important shift from the phenomenological study of religion to a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of religion. A convergence of factors catapulted Chitando into a new strand in Religion Studies known as applied Religion Studies with a focus on the challenges confronting modern globalized society. It is the scourge of HIV/AIDS that set the stage for a new multi-disciplinary trajectory. The role of Applied Religion Studies is to respond to these issues in a practical and clinical manner, based on the study of diverse religious cultures and traditions of ethics and thought.

The advent of HIV/AIDS in the late 80s and the beginning of the 90s brought with it a lot of challenges that required serious reflection and engagement. Having attended some of the workshops organized by Musa Dube, the Theological Consultant on HIV/AIDS for the World Council of Churches, Chitando felt engulfed by the need to contribute to the struggle for the survival of humanity that was being decimated by AIDS. He sprung in and went to the heart of the problem. There was no denying that women were more susceptible, physically, and biologically, to violence and HIV, than their male counterparts. Worse still, men happened to be drivers of the infection with culture and the Bible fanning the flames of gender-based violence and HIV. This constituted a moment of Kairos¹ for Chitando to immerse himself in research and advocacy on replacing dominant masculinities with life-giving masculinities. This chapter is a conversation with Ezra Chitando's scholarly works on masculinities. The idea is to investigate the contribution he has made in the realm of gender in general and masculinities in particular. The contexts, the practical aspects and what emerged as Chitando's signature as he troubles the troubled and troubling African masculinities will be explored and exposed.

¹ Kairos is a Greek word representing a critical, special or opportune moment. It has been used in Liberation/Black theological circles to refer to a moment of discernment or truth which is critical at a particular time in which we live. It has been applied within the context of South Africa at a period between the exit of the apartheid dispensation and its horrors and the onset of the New South Africa and the hope it promised.

Methodology: Desk Research

Within psychological circles the perception of threat, resulting from an impending danger, would normally activate the sympathetic nervous system which in turn triggers a stress response associated with, fight, flight and freeze. The HIV/AIDS pandemic was indeed a menace whose onset troubled everyone who cared about human life. With the suffering and loss of life that had engulfed human existence, almost all people were overwhelmed. While some froze, others went into denial and others chose to wage a war in varied ways. It became clear that a multi-sectoral approach was the best way under the circumstances (Dube, 2004:12). Chitando, in the field of theology and religion, is counted among those who chose to wage war by empowering pastors and theologians through training, writing and research on what the Churches can, should, and must do to prevent the spread of HIV and to mollify suffering that resulted from the spread of the disease. This chapter, therefore, adopting a desk research method, has done a review of Chitando's published works as well as some conversations that the author had with him on different occasions. The aim is to underscore his contribution in the identification of the main factors around gender-based violence and the spread of HIV. In his reckoning, dangerous masculinity (ies) was one of the major drivers of the pandemic. It is to the operations of these masculinities, as discussed by Chitando in several of his works, that the author focuses his attention.

The tree does not move unless there is a wind

I first met Ezra Chitando in an HIV/AIDS workshop at the Lutheran Conference Centre in Kempton Park, South Africa in 2005. He struck me as a humble but knowledgeable and inspiring man. He was an Associate Professor at the time who always introduced himself as Ezra Chitando and preferred to be called as such. One of the stories that he told me on that occasion was about how his lackluster and complacent attitude nearly ended his budding career as an academic. His two years of probation were coming to an end, and he was showing no signs of passion for scholarly productivity as expected. He had hardly published any articles and was not driven or motivated by anything to want to follow in the footsteps of those who came before him in terms of publishing. Around that time, he attended a workshop in South Africa where Tinyiko Maluleke was also present. In one of the brief interactions they had, Maluleke asked him about

how much he had published. He had very little to show with Maluleke already boasting more than twenty publications at the time. That happened to be the wind that moved and catapulted Ezra Chitando into the scholarly stage/space where he belonged. Chitando was moved not only to enter the scholarly space but to critically engage it, how masculinities was at the centre of the HIV pandemic. His engagement with HIV/AIDS was therefore motivated by the pandemic with a gendered face where women's vulnerabilities were intricately intertwined with the behaviours of men.

HIV/AIDS and GBV as a context for Transformative Masculinities

When HIV/AIDS came onto the scene around 1986 it caught everybody by surprise. No sector was adequately prepared for it. Unique about it was that it affected all aspects of our lives (Dube, 2003:7). Africa received it with mixed feelings and attitudes. While some saw a human hand in it, others opined that it was God's punishment for a wayward world. These theories did little to placate the intensity of the spread. It spread like wild-fire as it wrote itself on the bodies and souls of Africans (Dube 2013). As Chitando observes, "Within a short time, HIV had become Africa's worst nightmare. It decimated communities; brought economies to their knees, and deepened levels of poverty". It is not as if the Christian Church was better prepared for it. As Maluleke (2003:61) observes, the Church and the theological fraternity were caught off-guard by the HIV pandemic.

Though the African Church boasted human resources, infrastructure, and presence even in the remotest of areas, all of this could not translate into tangible benefits particularly because of the ignorance of the pastors about the disease (Parry, 2013:14). For the Church, HIV had become a disease of sinners and AIDS had become a punishment for their sinfulness. What had become clear though was that HIV was mostly transmitted through sexual intercourse. The vulnerability of both women and girls to infection had become too conspicuous to ignore. They were more susceptible to violence with men mostly as perpetrators. Culture and the Bible connived to reinforce and justify violence against women and girls and therefore to infection against HIV. Unfortunately, the resounding message coming from the Church smacked off condemnation and not compassion; death and not life; despair and not hope. Chitando was, therefore,

not new to the challenges associated with HIV/AIDS as he participated in a number of HIV/AIDS workshops that were organized by his predecessor in the office of a Theological Consultant on HIV/AIDS with EHAIA Musa Dube.

It was under these circumstances that he rolled up his sleeves and joined the fray with a two-fold mission cut out for him, namely 1) to promote HIV competence among Church leaders and like-minded organisations and 2) to empower theological institutions to address the root causes of the pandemic. To achieve these, Chitando (2007) appealed to the Churches to put on friendly feet, warm hearts, and anointed hands in order to journey with, be compassionate to, and heal people living with HIV, and the affected and to break the barriers between 'us' and 'them' that had characterized the Christian Church. In addition, the Christian Church had to engage in the sharpening of the minds to produce a critical mass that will transform the thinking, attitudes, and actions of the people (Chitando, 2007a: 55).

Masculinity posed as a trouble that needed to be troubled by anyone who was concerned about the deleterious effects of HIV/AIDS. The urgency of the pandemic called upon Chitando to evoke the African proverb, "The speed with which you run depends on what is chasing you." Behind the pervasive spread of HIV infection was, amongst other factors, death-dealing masculinities that required special attention. The pace at which the pandemic was moving required the Church and anyone engaged in the work of empowering Churches and communities to increase the speed to match the rapid spread of the pandemic.

Ubuntu-fied Solidarity and Compassion for Gender Justice

In his *Living with Hope: African Churches and HIV/AIDS 1*, Chitando (2007a:51-62) harvests his thoughts, puts them together, and lays bare the driving force behind such passion for transforming masculinities from being a problem to being a solution to gendered structural inequalities which are at the centre of the HIV pandemic. This passion cannot be separated from Chitando's association with African Women Theologians in general and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (henceforth referred to as "the Circle) (Chitando,2007b:43) in particular, as well as his social location in the African context.

The notion of Ubuntu has been popularized by a number of African scholars of Religion and Theology and it remains central to their accounts on gender and HIV. Chitando, the Circle matriarchs, and other African scholars (Setiloane, 1986:56; Kaunda, 2010:39) conceive of Ubuntu as humanity living in a community with others. At the heart of Ubuntu is the belief that humans, as Setiloane (1986:24) puts it, possess some quality of divinity that can only be lived in community with others (Setiloane, 1986:56; Kaunda, 2010:39). As such it expresses itself in harmonious relations as well as respect for others.

Though almost all African scholars attach value to Ubuntu, they do so with caution. Musa Dube suggests that Ubuntu requires men to rethink their understanding of masculinity, especially in its relationship with women and girls, as it is not a given, but it has to be earned. Fulata Moyo (2005:135-136) contrasts Ubuntu with *agape*. While marking the limitations of Ubuntu especially in its leanings towards patriarchy, she embraces *agape* for its associations with companionship. Chitando (2008:56) proposes the concept of solidarity as a component of the concept of Ubuntu. In his view, it is more apt especially because of its features of the willingness of men to self-empty; stand for and with women; and its inclination toward self-reflection on men's contribution to the oppression of women. Chitando (2008:58-60) therefore models his notion of solidarity on Jesus who not only identified with the marginalized but also spared his life for their sake.

It is with the above in mind that we coined *Ubuntu-fied solidarity and compassion for gender justice* to capture the ethical ideal of masculinity as a relational solidarity that expresses itself through compassion. For Chitando, gender justice becomes, at the same time, both the end result and the catalyst of this relational solidarity which is founded on human dignity applicable in equal measure to both men and women. Chitando's masculinity project, therefore, has as its driving force the divine aspect in every human which calls for compassion and respect for all irrespective of their gender. It reverberates with all his efforts to trouble the troubled and troubling masculinities.

Troubling Masculinities

Chitando's interest in the men–violence nexus within the context of HIV led him to widen his scope of research to earlier reflections on the subject.

Morrell's *Changing Men in Southern Africa* (2001); Lindsay & Miescher's *Men and Masculinities in Africa* (2003) as well as Ouzgane & Morrell's, *African Masculinities* (2005) and their location within the context of Africa, provided an impetus to deepen Chitando's gaze into the background provided by these volumes. What emerged clearly from this search was a significant focus on masculinities within the African context. This observation coincided with the onset of HIV in Africa which became an occasion for serious reflection with men at the centre of this reflection.

These men–violence nexus led Chitando to a catchy and multivalent label of 'troubling masculinities.' The double meaning in the phrase is captured well by Chitando & Chirongoma (2012:2) who assert that the first meaning refers to masculinities that are troubling, toxic, and at the centre of gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS. The second is an expression of intent to challenge and trouble masculinities on a continual basis and render them accountable.

Troubling and toxic masculinities

The advent of HIV/AIDS in the late 90s plunged the whole world into panic mode. With infections rising, numbers of death doubling, and understanding of the disease evasive, the entire human family was thrown into a state of frenzy. Because of its association with sexual intercourse, it was shrouded in taboo and shame (Maluleke & Dube, 2001:120). While it cannot be denied that the virus infects and affects both men and women it has a predominantly female profile with gender inequalities and norms being its main drivers (van Klinken & Chitando, 2015). That notwithstanding, HIV had a male face and patriarchal oversight all of which had a hegemonic hold over female bodies. Man as father adopted a new reputation of being a child molester and girl predator; man as husband earned himself a new label of wife batterer. A man was identified more with aggression, exploitation, abuse, and violence. Studies on men and HIV all converged to communicate that there is a clear correlation between hegemonic masculinities and HIV/AIDS (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012: 3,15).

Men and boys, riding on the privilege of culture and the Bible, have unleashed violence on women and girls, infecting them in the process. It is no secret that the construction of men as more powerful than women has led them to behave in a domineering and sexually aggressive way to

women (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:6). Within the context of HIV & AIDS this meant more infections for women and girls as well as other men. Having said that, I pay heed to Chitando (2007a) and van Klinken (2013) that agitating for more responsible masculinities should not necessarily lead us into colonising discourses that always see only African men as coextensive with dangerous masculinities. It is, therefore, these kinds of masculinities that we call toxic and troubling masculinities. On the receiving end of these troubling masculinities are women and girls. Chitando believes that these troubling masculinities need to be isolated and challenged, for ‘men Can, Should and Must change’ (John et al. 2013).

Troubling troubled and troubling masculinities

Chitando & Chirongoma (2008) are adamant that toxic masculinities need to be challenged and troubled. The reasons for the need to challenge these dominant masculinities are spelled out as endangering women, children, and men themselves as well as preventing alternative masculinities from developing and women and children from thriving (Chitando, 2007b:45). Given the multipronged nature and complexity of the problem posed by hegemonic masculinities, Chitando proposed a similarly fitting approach(es). In his words, only holistic approaches have the potential to “bring about gender justice and roll back the tide of HIV/AIDS” (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:3). This holistic approach consists of various partnerships with all concerned parties and institutions. We discuss here below these partnerships as outlined by Chitando. One of the most powerful words by Chitando, was made on the occasion of the 16 Days of Activism in 2019. He said, “If men and women are locked in mortal combat there are basically no winners. What we need are boys and men who are secure. Who are not afraid of empowered women.”

Partnership with Men

At the basis of this approach is the need to mobilize and include men in all programs that are aimed at reversing the spread of HIV and stemming the tide of gender-based violence (Chitando, 2007:40). If men are the drivers of HIV, there is no way that they cannot participate in programs aimed

at ending gender-based violence (GBV) and HIV. In the earlier approaches, men, despite the critical role they played in the ensuing problem – were not involved in seeking solutions to the very same problem. Chitando’s “A New Man for a New Era” (2007); as well as John’s (2013) coinage, “Men can, should and must change” gleaned from thematic analysis of Chitando’s writings, are a clear articulation of his vision about masculinities within the context of HIV and gender-based violence.

Change forms the basis of Chitando’s optimism (John, 2013:38). Not only is there a need for men to change, but there should also be an equally aggressive and radical strategy to bring about that change. That radical change must and can only start with men. Their awareness of the benefits they enjoy, simply because they are men is a good starting point. Patriarchy, with the support from both the Bible and culture, has remained a foundation stone for hegemonic masculinities (Chitando, 2007:45). Men must be aware of this benefit and the damage it has caused to women, girls and men themselves. The same religion and culture must be tapped into in constructive ways to generate positive masculinities because they have the potential to achieve this.

Chitando (2022) notes that the majority of organisations, the Church included, are led by men. He opines that the Church should use its resources, material, and personnel, to reach out to men in places that are called worldly, “to sacralize such spaces” in an effort to challenge toxic masculinities while promoting liberating masculinities (Chitando, 2001:49-50). In order to reach out to men and boys who are always available in these *worldly* spaces and are hidden in plain sight, the pre-existing Church structures, such as youth and male groups, could be tapped into in more positive ways (Chitando, 2019).

Within the Ubuntu axiology humans are fully human in relationships and partnership with others. Respect, harmonious relations, and compassion are but a few expressions of Ubuntu. Aberrant and hegemonic masculinity has no place in Ubuntu axiology. Partnership with men is therefore critical if patriarchy and its dangerous tributaries are to be mitigated and eventually throttled as they undermine the dignity and the divine inherent in every human.

Partnership with Women

The harrowing story of the brutal rape of a ten-month-old baby Tshepang in the Eastern Cape, South Africa (Phiri, 2003:3) provides a glimpse/snapshot of the problem that humanity is faced with as a result of HIV. According to Phiri (2003:4) this sad story is a convergence of culture, myth, violence against women, poverty, justice systems, morality, and religion. Unfortunately, they converged to hurt women and a girl child. It is such disturbing experiences, amongst others, that extremely disturbed the Circle, called them to arise, and showed them how not to stay dead (Dube, 2004:115). The demand for liberation and justice was at the heart of their mission and mandate. Given the urgency of the matter and the need to coalesce around it by both men and women, Chitando could not resist the call to arise and join the chorus.

In the face of these painful experiences, Chitando's scholarship (2012:2) completes the wings of Idowu's bird². He advocated for masculinities that are more accommodating and sensitive. In his view these are the masculinities that are opposed to death-dealing masculinities that set women as easy prey to men-induced injustices under the guise of maintaining the sacred order. Taking a cue from Mercy Amba Oduyoye who, despite the entrenched patriarchy of the time that saw men riding on a supremacy horse, regarded men as important partners in the quest for a just world (Oduyoye, 2001:242-243). Idowu's discerning words to Oduyoye (Oreidin, 2016:160) that a bird with one wing does not fly were not only far-reaching in scope and depth but they were also visionary. They did not only inspire the foundation of the Circle, which was Oduyoye's brainchild, but they also stimulated more reflection on the need for men to stand in solidarity with women if gender equality and justice were to be achieved. Building on Oduyoye (2001), Njoroge (2008), Moyo (2005), Dube (2003), Dibeela (2003), (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:18-21) and others, Chitando embraced the participation of men in the agenda of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians constituting as it were the second wing of Idowu's bird. Not only have men participated in conferences by African Women Theologians, but they also continue to collaborate with them in bringing about gender equality and gender justice. While there is need to

² It would seem that the metaphor of a two winged bird that Amba Oduyoye used to represent the relationship between men and women was used by Idowu in his conversation with Amba Oduyoye in one of their conversations.

do more in terms of healing of women in relationship with men, at least there is a will to move in that direction (Landman, 2022:16).

Gender Justice

Partnership with women is by nature intertwined with gender justice. It is at the centre of male-female relationships and as such it is grounded, as van Klinken (2011:288) suggests, in our being created in the image of God. That is the core aspect of our humanity, which gender justice is concerned with. The concept of gender justice within the context of HIV/AIDS goes back to two of the most outstanding Circle theologians, Musa Dube, and Isabel Phiri. Two articles that they published in 2001 and 2002 respectively reflect an ardent desire to see a world where men and women live in a space free from oppression and with the fullness of life as God's gift being mutually exchanged between them (Phiri, 2001:78). For Dube, justice is not only a special attribute of God which is embodied in Jesus through whom God takes flesh among us (John 1:18), it is something that must be embraced and put to use in people daily struggles. Van Klinken (2011:289) adds that, Dube (2007:92) presents Jesus as someone who fights for gender justice.

While Chitando builds on the foundation laid by both Dube and Phiri, he takes the narrative further by bringing the masculinity perspective founded on patriarchy under scrutiny. At the heart of his view of women's struggle for liberation from oppression is the recognition that they are full human beings with the same rights and privileges as their male counterparts (Chitando 2004: 157). The man versus woman nexus which sees the latter as only docile and domestic, finds no sympathy in Chitando's scholarship (Chitando, 2004: 157). It is this respect for the dignity of all human beings that undergirds gender justice.

Over and above the dignity that goes with all humans irrespective of gender, Chitando, taking a cue from the Circle, identifies dialogue, transformation, liberation, and collaboration as the key features characterizing, as it were, the relationship between men and women (2012:21). His subtitle; "Come Now Let Us Reason Together: African Women Theologians and Conversation with Men" (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:18) sums up the aspirations of the Circle in their cry for justice. In fact, in the context of gender justice empowerment of women should not constitute a scare for men. It should not lead to a decrease in stature for men (Chitando, 2019).

For him, empowerment for women should translate into empowerment for men and vice-versa.

Critical Appraisal of Chitando's contribution

HIV/AIDS constituted a stage/locus for the re-examination of masculinities. Taking cue from the works of Morrel (2001), Richter (2006), and others, it is patent that masculinity is not a monolithic but a dynamic phenomenon (Kaunda, 2014:4). The latter notwithstanding, there is a consensus that masculinities are constructed relationally and communally (Kaunda, 2014:4). Not only do they reflect the culture within which they are lived, they are also malleable and easily adapt to new circumstances of time and place. It is in this sense that we talk about masculinities in the plural instead of masculinity. Sadly, masculinities became the worst enemy for women and the girl child in the context of HIV. Alongside this trajectory was another important development of the Circle which was driving the collective solidarity agenda with men as important partners in the troubling of patriarchal masculinities (Kanyoro, 2001:106).

This was the cradle that stimulated and nurtured Chitando's intellectual, spiritual, and advocacy curiosity. His shift from Phenomenology of Religion to what one would call Applied Religion marked an important step in the vision of Fanon (1968:206) that "each generation must out of obscurity discover its mission, fulfil it or betray it." Chitando became one of our generation who took up his mission seriously. He wrestled with the problem of the role of men in the spread of HIV/AIDS. He exposed the fault lines and the cultural and religious ideas that reinforced hegemonic masculinities (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:3).

Inspired by his conviction in the sacredness of human life irrespective of gender, Chitando spared no effort to dethrone patriarchy. In his view, it was patriarchy that constituted the biggest stumbling block to gender equality and equity. To that end, he exploited the other side of the culture-religion nexus and their capacity to assist in the fight against gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS if tapped into positively. His involvement of men as partners with women is indispensable if gender justice is to be achieved. The Church with its moral authority has no choice but to be at the forefront of the radical gender transformation agenda. Words of Chitando (2017) strike the chord for radically transformed masculinities:

If raping a woman makes me a man, I refuse to be a man.... If beating up a woman is what would define me as a man, I would step back and refuse to endorse such a of masculinity. This is an urgent time for us as men. The time for the involvement of boys and men is yesterday tomorrow may already be too late.

Conclusion

Chitando has undoubtedly laid a solid foundation for the fight against gender-based violence by advocating for alternative masculinities that would not only respect women and other men but can sit with them and reason together. The Churches, in their pastors and theologies, became his prime targets. Through workshops, seminars, training, and writing, he has succeeded in reaching out to all levels of the Church, from the less educated to the most educated. His *Ubuntu-fied* solidarity and compassion for gender justice will forever remain the hallmark of his work on gender equality in general and alternative masculinities in Africa in particular. Thanks to Ezra Chitando for his selfless production of literature on masculinities as well as crisscrossing of the continent and beyond to preach the message of gender justice “after the example of Jesus, who embodied an alternative masculinity” (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:19). What remains is for the two wings of a bird, referred to above, to work together in bringing about gender justice in all our spheres of life. While much remains to be done in terms of preaching the message to the converted, the tools of the trade and the strategies have been prepared and laid out.

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