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## Human Sexuality Conversations in Africa : An African Christian Women's Ethical and Missiological Perspective

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## 20 Human Sexuality Conversations in Africa

### An African Christian Women's Ethical and Missiological Perspective

*Isabel Apawo Phiri*

#### Abstract

This article is a response to the African church leaders' strong response against homosexuality without considering the weakness of their response in addressing issues of human sexuality in Africa in general. It begins by saluting Ezra Chitando for being one of the bold African theologians who have shown that homosexuality has been in Africa before Christianity. It traces how other African theologians have responded to the conversation on homosexuality in Africa. It uses the World Council of Churches 'Conversations on the Pilgrim Way Invitation to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality A Resource for Reflection and Action document', which was approved by the WCC Central Committee in February 2022 as a guide on how the churches can create safe spaces for broad conversations on human sexuality. It promotes an interdisciplinary approach to the conversation but leans more to Practical Pastoral care discipline. In conclusion, it argues forbearance to be the grounding spirituality for conversation on the pilgrimage way on matters of human sexuality so that the bond of unity is maintained throughout the conversation.

**Keywords:** Africa, African church leaders, African theologians, human sexuality, Pastoral care, World Council of Churches

#### Introduction

It gives me much pleasure to be part of a publication that is honouring Ezra Chitando, one of Africa's great scholars in the field of theology and religion of our times. My connection with Ezra Chitando goes back to the early 1990s when we interacted through the Association of Theological Institutions in Southern and Central Africa (ATISCA). Chitando had contributed an article entitled 'What is in a Name? Naming Practices among

African Christians in Zimbabwe<sup>1</sup> I liked this article because it problematised the naming of children during the colonial period and also during the long struggle for freedom in what was then known as Southern Rhodesia. My interest in his publications increased when he sent me an article on religion and gender to publish in the then *Journal of Constructive Theology* hosted by the University of Natal (later, University of KwaZulu Natal). I liked the article very much and wondered what would make a male African theologian write so sensitively on the concerns of African women. Thank you, Ezra Chitando for broadening my mind to embrace male theologians to be in dialogue with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. HIV & AIDS became a central issue which brought African women theologians to dialogue with male African theologians. Since then, Chitando has published extensively on gender and human sexuality. My relationship with Ezra Chitando went beyond dialogue through publications to becoming colleagues and co-authors at the World Council of Churches<sup>2</sup> (WCC). The nature of the work of the WCC- Ecumenical HIV & AIDS Initiative and Advocacy (EHAIA) required the creation of safer spaces for research and intergenerational consultations on human sexuality. The work of the WCC Reference Group on Human Sexuality led to a document entitled: *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way Invitation to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality A Resource for Reflection and Action*, which was approved by the WCC's Central Committee in February 2022. It also became a background document to the WCC ecumenical conversation with the same title at the WCC's 11th assembly which took place in Karlsruhe Germany 31 August to 8 September 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> It was published in Fiedler, K., Gundani, P., & Mijoga, H., (ed) 1996/1997 *Theology Cooked in an African Pot*, ATISCA Bulletin nos. 5 & 6.

<sup>2</sup> A World Council of Churches is the broadest, most inclusive Christian organization in the world with 352 members who represent more than 560 million Christians in over 120 countries. Its membership consists of most of the world's Orthodox churches (Eastern and Oriental), as well as African Instituted, Anglican, Assyrian, Baptist, Evangelical, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Moravian, Old-Catholic, Pentecostal, Reformed, United/Uniting and Free/Independent churches, Disciples of Christ and Friends (Quakers). All of them have diverse positions on human sexuality in the context where 'the primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the WCC is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe' (WCC Constitution, Article III).

The aim of this chapter then is to highlight why the Conversations on the Pilgrim Way Invitation to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality A Resource for Reflection and Action document is important for the African scholars of theology and religion and churches in Africa. First, the chapter will provide a brief review of the responses of the African scholars of theology and religion and churches in Africa to human sexuality over deferent periods in the history of Christianity in Africa. Second, it will engage the WCC's proposal of creation of safer spaces for conversations on matters of human sexuality and lastly, it will chart the way forward for inter-disciplinary approaches to conversations on human sexuality in Africa.

### **African Faith based Responses to Human Sexuality**

In the Conversations on the Pilgrim Way Invitation to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality A Resource for Reflection and Action, the definition of human sexuality is rights based and faith based. From a Human Rights perspective, the World Health Organization (WHO) has defined sexuality in a manner that shows their inter-relatedness. It says:

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious, and spiritual factors.

From a faith-based perspective, the document also defines sexuality as part of God's good creation and is integral to human identity and integrity. It is considered a divine gift, intrinsically good, intended by God for humanity to celebrate this divine gift in life-giving, consensual, faithful, and loving relationships. In dealing with such an approach to sexuality, human persons can grow into the fullness of their humanity and divinity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Manoj Kurian, "Critical Analysis of Churches' Stand on Human Sexuality and a Way Forward," in R. Gaikward and T. Ninan, eds., *A Theological Reader on Human Sexuality and Gender Diversities: Envisioning Inclusivities* (CSA Kerk in Actie, NCCI, 2017), 152-168.

When it comes to the topic of homosexuality, which is one aspect of human sexuality, churches from Africa tend to break relationships with their ‘mother churches’ who have taken a stand to *either accept gay people as members, or as church leaders or take a stand to bless same sex unions*. The churches in Africa have rejected same sex relationships on the basis that it is unAfrican and unChristian. This has been echoed by African politicians in Zimbabwe, Malawi, Uganda and Nigeria where they have maintained old British laws against homosexuality, which have already been repealed in modern day British laws. In fact, most of the African countries still have colonial laws against same sex unions. These decisions have generated publications coming from scholars of religion, theology and biblical studies in Africa and abroad who question the statements of religious and political leaders about homosexuality being unChristian and unAfrican. The section that follows is an example of some of the publications on sexuality in Africa.

## **The influence of the early and modern missionaries in shaping the discourse on human sexuality in Africa**

Ezra Chitando has rightly argued that:

The theme of human sexuality has been a consistently problematic one since the arrival of the Christian faith in Africa. It has generated considerable debate, creativity and controversy. At stake has been whether churches in Africa have been realistic in their engagement with African understandings of human sexuality. Although the more recent debates over homosexuality threaten to dominate the discussion of it in Africa, it is only a fraction of the larger issue. Human sexuality has been an integral part of the story of African Christianity. Across different epochs and geographical contexts, churches have sought to address human sexuality in Africa (2016, 993).

Based on the quotation above, I attempt to categorise the human sexuality debate in African Christianity into four phases.

**The first phase** is during the early missionary and colonial period. In most parts of Africa this is during the 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary enterprise, when the gospel was brought to sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa and Angola are different because the gospel reached them in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. The writings of the missionaries from this period indicate that they did

not accept African ways of expressing sexuality and aimed to transform them to be like the West. One example is of initiation ceremonies for Chewa girls and women of Central Malawi. Although it did not involve any cutting of female sexual parts, it was banned by the missionaries of the various denominations who worked among the Chewa of Malawi. This resulted in resistance to the ban coming from the African Christian women because initiation ceremonies were viewed as platform for sexual education, which the Chewa valued very much. As a result, the missionaries negotiated a Christian version which was accepted by the Chewa churches among the Presbyterians, Anglicans, Catholics and Baptists (Phiri, 1997). Similar stories of resistance on issues that concern missionaries and African women are also recorded by Nyambura J Njoroge (2000), Esther Mombo (2002) and Rachel Nyagondwe-Fiedler (2005). What was at stake here was missionary definition of an African Christian woman which was resisted by the African women who wanted to define oneself through cultural appropriation.

**The second phase** is the post-colonial period when the discussion on human sexuality was framed within the African theological strand of inculturation /indigenization to achieve African selfhood and identity as both Christian and African. This was the period of regaining the African identity within the Christian faith by reclaiming African culture and African traditional religions added sources for theologising. Adriaan Van Klinken, & Masiwa Ragies Gunda (2012) have argued that it is the theologians of this phase who have influenced the current African church leaders on their views about what is African culture and what is acceptable Christian views about African sexuality. Examples given include the work of John Mbiti (1973 and 1990) and Laurent Magesa (1997, 2004, 2005). Their central argument is that in African culture and Christianity sex is for procreation. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1993) in 'A critique of Mbiti's view on love and marriage in Africa' has argued against this narrow understanding of sex in African culture and Christianity. She has criticized Mbiti's uncritical use of African culture and religions as tools for creating an African identity. This criticism applies to all the scholars who are in the same category with Mbiti. She has called for respect of the dignity of all God's people as God's creation. Oduyoye's appeal to cultural hermeneutics takes the conversation to the third phase.

**The third phase** is characterised by intersectional approach to resist racism, sexism and homophobia. One could say African women's theologies is another response from Africa to reject missionary definitions of what it

means to be truly African and Christian. What the African women theologians who are members of the Circle stand for and the tools they use for analysis is well articulated in the publications of Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001) and Musimbi Kanyoro (2002). In “What’s in a Name? – Forging a Theoretical Framework for African Women’s Theologies” (2006), Phiri & Nadar have argued that:

Feminist cultural hermeneutics has therefore been used as a tool to analyse a variety of issues within African culture, including that of sexuality. Although sexuality has been widely engaged in feminist discourse in the West, it is usually discussed in the context of sexual orientation and reproductive rights. In contrast, amongst African women theologians, such issues are discussed in the context of rites of passage, including childbirth (women’s sexuality in the context of giving birth), menstruation (purity and impurity laws), circumcision (male and female), marriage (the patriarchal constraints within marriage and the different forms of marriage), and even death (practices such as widow-cleansing (2006:6).

An examination of the Circle’s first publication, *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa* (1992) shows a whole section with five articles that address African women and sexual practices, using a broad definition of human sexuality. The articles represent an African feminist critic of sexual practices in Africa by giving concrete examples from specific African cultures and African religions (including Christianity). Since then, the work of African women theologians avoids generalisation and shows an appreciation of diversity of peoples and their practices in Africa. After the 1989 Circle conference and especially because of choosing to take seriously the growing experience of HIV among African adolescents and African women, African women theologians, as individuals through masters’ dissertations, PhD theses, individual researched articles or books, have explored in more depth the issue of sexuality. The list of these publications is too numerous to list here.

Van Klinken & Gunda (2012:119) have pointed out that the work of African women theologians on “gender and sexuality are discussed in relation to the HIV & AIDS epidemic, and they have developed into progressive theologies of gender justice” but have not fully explored the issue of same sex relationships. While this is true, Van Klinken & Gunda in the same article have acknowledged that the Circle work is based on lived experiences of women which is prioritised. Therefore, some Circle members have highlighted that working on the non-medical determinates of HIV

has revealed that practises of same sex relationships in traditional Africa are more common than previously thought (Phiri & Nadar, 2009).

Musa Dube has paved the way by being explicit in inviting church leaders to be inclusive of sexual minorities in their sermons (2003). Esther Mombo (2006) has challenged the church to be inclusive of sexual minorities. These calls for inclusivity are based on research showing that it is not true that homosexuality is unAfrican. It is also an affirmation of the solidarity of all the excluded in the church and society. Justice of God is for all people: women, children, people living with disabilities, people living with HIV and sexual minorities. This leads to the next phase to which I now turn.

**The fourth phase** focuses on the influence of conservative and progressive Christianity from the States of America and Europe on African theologians, churches and governments. Kapyr Kaoma's (2016) article on 'Unmasking the Colonial Silence: sexuality in Africa in the Post-Colonial Context' digs deep into this subject, where he argues that huge sums of money are invested in Africa by the conservative evangelicals to influence the African churches and politicians on the question of homosexuality. Following the example of the early missionaries, most of the money is invested in schools, seminaries and universities where formation of the African youth is done. At the time, Kaoma has pointed out that there is also influence coming from European and American politicians who withheld aid to some African countries who refuse to change their laws to accommodate the human rights of sexual minorities. This is supported by the research of van Klinken, Adriaan, & Gunda Masiwa Ragies, (2012:1), and van Klinken, Adriaan, & Chitando, Ezra. (2021:8). These scholars of religion, theology and the bible have rightly concluded that the issue of homosexuality in Africa has become a site of struggle in modern day missionary enterprise.

Desmond Tutu, from the Anglican Church in Southern Africa was the initial voice of a senior African church leader who drew from Black theology against racism and linked it with resistance against homophobia. This is well documented in his 1997 forward to (P. Germond & S. de Gruchy (eds.) publication. Nine articles in *Ecumenical Encounters with Desmond Tutu: Visions for Justice, Dignity and Peace* (2021) affirm his influence in the development of intersection of race, gender, and homosexuality discourse.

Tutu's thinking is echoed in the writing of other Anglican biblical and theological scholars like Gerald West, Beverley Haddad, Kapya Kaoma, and Masiwa Ragies Gunda. The PhD thesis of Gunda (2010) is the first one I am aware of which is completely focused on homosexuality from an African perspective. *The Bible and homosexuality in Zimbabwe: A socio-historical analysis of the political, cultural and Christian arguments in the homosexual public debate with special reference to the use of the Bible*. His boldness in writing this thesis has been at a cost with both the politicians and church leaders. Kaoma shares a similar story in his relationship with the Anglican church in Zambia. However, such experiences have not stopped the younger generation on focusing their research on homosexuality. I co supervised with Sarojini Nadar the master's dissertation of Lindiwe Mkasi (2013) on 'A Threat To Zulu Patriarchy And The Continuation Of Community: A Queer Analysis Of Same Sex Relationships Amongst Female Traditional Healers At Inanda And Kwangcolosi, KwaZulu-Natal'. Another youth researcher who followed the same tread is Ntobeko Dlamini, (2021). 'Unheard Voices: Stories of LGBTI+ Clergy in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa'.

## Conversations on the Pilgrim Way

The Busan assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) initiated the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace in 2013. The assembly message extended the invitation to join the pilgrimage of justice and peace to the WCC fellowship, other churches, people of other faiths and people of God. In the document entitled, "*An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*" (2014), being on a pilgrimage of justice and peace is described as participating in God's mission towards life.

Conversations on the Pilgrim Way is an invitation to engage in exploring together issues which lie at the heart of human living. The word conversation has a rich tapestry of meaning. Conversation is "the action of living or having one's being in or among others"; it is "the action of consorting with others: living together in an ethos of commerce, society, intimacy." It has been used to mean "sexual intimacy," and more commonly "the interchange of thought and words, familiar discourse or talk." (Conversations on the Pilgrim Way Invitation to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality A Resource for Reflection and Action (GEN PRO 03.1 Central Committee February 2022:8). Conversation is central to human

relationships. It enables individuals and communities to give thanks for the divine gifts of creation and life. It is also central to processes of reconciliation, as the expression and voicing of hurt and pain can begin the journey to healing and new life. Conversation enables individuals and communities to share and give at the deepest level and to bring to expression a commitment of bondedness, of living, having one's being in and among others.

For genuine conversations to happen, safe spaces of dialogue are needed. These are where one receives the other unconditionally, in the presence of God, with all their differences, gifts and joys, deficiencies, and strengths, as fellow sojourners in this life. Churches acknowledge that all fall short of the perfection of God, and do not merit God's grace. Hence, each person, as a child of God, is loved by God and sits around the same table, relating to others with humility and respect, recognizing mutual vulnerabilities and flaws. Because of these vulnerabilities and flaws, it is evident that there is no completely safe space – only safer spaces. “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Safer spaces of dialogue provide the opportunity for the discussion of issues of human sexuality, as a community, through bible studies, personal stories, and insights from tradition and contemporary understandings, so that the attitudes of many participants can be transformed and a more inclusive community formed, despite persistent differences of opinion.

The reference group on human sexuality drew from the mission identity of the WCC, whose foundations are rooted in the modern missionary enterprise of 1910. Over the years, the mission identity of the WCC has gone through transformation as it responds to the changing landscapes with its challenges and diverse contexts. In the context of ecumenical mission, *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way* builds on *Together Towards Life (TLL)*, with its emphasis on mission from the margins.

The reference group on human sexuality was also encouraged to use the Faith and Order study document *Moral Discernment in Churches*, which is a helpful tool to understand different approaches and mutual learning between churches from diverse confessional families as is the case with the WCC. The document on *Moral Discernment in Churches* argues that while there are different pathways that churches use to arrive at ethical and moral decisions, all churches base their discernment processes on the same sources: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. A significant contribution of African theologians to the *Conversation on Pilgrim Way*,

document, is the inclusion of some indigenous wisdom traditions, bearing in mind the challenge that comes from African women theologies that we should only draw from life affirming for all humanity wisdom. Thus, it is worth listening to the African women theologians that all sources for moral discernment should include a critique from the perspective of the stigmatised and discriminated against because the same sources have been used to traumatise the people who are on the margins.

The example below demonstrates the importance of context in moral discernment.

In the case of human sexuality, for example, the various contexts of Christians affect how they respond to sexual ethics and norms. For instance, it is normal in Africa for a mother to breastfeed in public, but it is considered less acceptable in the global North. Similarly, an African man may marry more than two wives, but still oppose same-sex marriages. A Western Christian may accept same-sex marriage but oppose polygamy. The way moral discernment is contextual explains some of the disagreements associated with human sexuality in global Christianity. Morality is contextual in most cases (Conversation on the Pilgrim Way, 2022:19).

The above example also shows the importance of study to appreciate the dynamic nature of understanding culture. Culture should not be treated as static as interpretations shift as diverse cultures and religions encounter each other.

*Conversations on the Pilgrim Way* builds on years of conversations and advocacy at the WCC assembly on human sexuality since New Delhi WCC assembly in 1961 and the definition of human sexuality has been broad. Initially, the WCC response was to tackle a broad range of issues on human sexuality. The New Delhi Assembly, for example, indicated:

The churches have to discover what positions and actions to take in regard to sex relations before and after marriage; illegitimacy; in some cultures polygamy or concubinage as a social system sanctioned by law and customs; in some Western cultures short-term marriages, or liaisons, easy divorce; in all parts of the world mixed marriages (inter-faith, inter-confessional and inter-racial) with the diminishing of caste and class systems and of racial prejudice... All this, and much else, forces the churches to re-examine their teaching, preaching and pastoral care and their witness and service to society.

The Uppsala Assembly in 1968 continued addressing human sexuality by focusing on the debate on “birth control”, but continued to state:

Family patterns change in different social settings, and Christian marriage can find its expression in a variety of ways. We should write materials elaborating the problems of polygamy, marriage and celibacy, birth control, divorce, abortion and also of homosexuality to be made available for responsible study and action.

The broad approach to human sexuality by the WCC consultations and conferences continued up to the Canberra Assembly in 1991. Between Canberra and Harare (1998), more focus turned to sexual orientation as requested by some member churches of the WCC because in President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe’s speech of 1995, he openly referred to homosexuals as worse than dogs and pigs (Gunda, 2010:17). From Harare (1998) to Porto Alegre (2006), from Porto Alegre to Busan (2013) the conversation on human sexuality discussion was also greatly influenced by the sexuality surrounding HIV & AIDS and the human rights agenda of protecting the rights of every human being, which in religious language is the inherent dignity of all humanity.

Between Busan Assembly to Karlsruhe (2022) the definition of human sexuality followed the broad based one. Thus, while many issues are mentioned related to human sexuality, setting priorities is based on the signs of our times.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the African churches should refrain from a narrow definition of human sexuality. Church leaders marching against homosexuality while there is rampant unofficial polygamy and sexual violence against children, women and minorities in the churches and society makes a mockery of the message they espouse on these marches. *Conversation on Pilgrim Way* document encourages genuine and informed conversations on human sexuality that are broad and heal divisions within and with other churches. These conversations are not for WCC member churches only but for all churches. Creation of safe spaces where this conversation can happen in the churches in Africa is one step forward. The document explains how such safe spaces can be created.

The spirit in which the conversation happens in the safe spaces is equally important. Forbearance is critical as described in Ephesians 4:2, which says 'with all humility, and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.' Without taking that attitude, conversations cannot happen. The document also encourages that no matter our differences, we should not choose to separate ourselves from other churches or members of our own church. It is important to practise forbearance by staying together in love because Christ demands from the followers to remain united.

Finally, all churches are challenged to sharpen their approaches to issues in pastoral theology and counselling which might be answered in different ways. Most importantly they have to reflect an approach which implies careful listening and biblical and theological discernment by all concerned, since members of the church (and many people of good will) are wrestling with these issues and seek moral, ethical, and spiritual guidance from the churches.

The document has exposed that the field of pastoral theology is not equally advanced and developed yet within and between WCC member churches. This is true for Africa too. A detailed study on pastoral theology of human sexuality is needed to cover family life, human sexuality, and pastoral theology.

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