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Theologising with Lilian Dube in Zimbabwe and the Diaspora

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9 | Theologising with Lilian Dube in Zimbabwe and the Diaspora

Anniegrace Mapangisana Hlatywayo

Abstract

Hailed as the first Black woman to earn a Doctor of Theology Degree from Stellenbosch University, South Africa, Lilian Dube is a history maker and undoubtedly one of the leading matriarchs in the academia, championing the cause for gender justice and the emancipation and empowerment of African women. By 2023, she was an associate professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at San Francisco University, United States of America. Dube's academic prowess spans over decades of research in African Theology and Religion, Gender and Sexuality and the devastating gendered HIV and AIDS. A recipient of numerous accolades inclusive of international fellowships and awards, Dube also holds several professional positions within the international arena. Drawing from selected writings, this chapter highlights Dube's quest for sensitive theologies that seek to negate and transform patriarchal bias that predisposes women of their spiritual and leadership capabilities. It brings to the fore, Dube's engagement with African perspectives on gender, healing and spirituality and cultural gerontology as well as highlighting the agency of women as spiritual leaders and change makers in the context of African Independent Churches.

Keywords: Lilian Dube, African Theology, Gender Justice, Gender and Sexuality, Patriarchy, African Independent Churches

Introduction

Hailed as the first Black woman to earn a Doctor of Theology Degree from Stellenbosch University, South Africa, Lilian Dube is a history maker and undoubtedly one of the leading matriarchs in the academia, championing the cause for gender justice and the emancipation and empowerment of African women. True to the mandate of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter referred to as the

CIRCLE) and through her academic research and publications, Dube has stood as the voice for the voiceless African women at grassroots level in Zimbabwe and globally. Her works have focused on addressing gender inequalities in both church and society as well as bringing forth African women leaders who have worked tirelessly to break the glass ceiling as they assume prominent leadership positions in both church and society. Using a review of Dube's publications, this chapter interrogates the matriarch's engagement with religio-cultural constructs and their impact on grassroots women. The chapter discusses the matriarch's contribution to the Circle mandate of re-interpreting religions for the empowerment of women. Hence, the chapter begins by profiling Lilian Dube's biography, highlighting her academic and professional achievements. The writer acknowledges Dube as an accomplished author with numerous publications, however, attention is made to selected publications which focus on Dube's recognition and acknowledgement of fellow African women who transcended the boundaries of religio-cultural constraints but rose to become prominent leaders in church and society. The selected writings, *Mission and Deliverance in the Zvikomborero Apostolic Faith Church (2000)* and *Mai Chaza: An African Christian Story of Gender, Healing and Power (2008)* reflect how Dube seeks to negate the patriarchal bias that predisposes women of their spiritual and leadership capabilities. These selected writings reflect Dube's theological underpinnings, which seek to challenge and transform patriarchal bias and the discrimination of African women leaders in leadership positions. Whilst these two articles engage with various thematic areas inclusive of African spirituality, faith healing, the colonial church legacy in Zimbabwe, spiritual exorcism and the politics and power in *Manyano* movements, I chose to focus on the prominent women featured in the articles, Mrs Agnes Majeche and Mai Chaza. These women rose from the lowest societal levels to the highest leadership positions and they are an embodiment of women's resilience and tenacity in defying socio-cultural and patriarchal contests to attain affluent positions in church and society. Furthermore, the chapter offers a discussion on how the matriarch responds to the Circle mandate and concludes with a glance through the theological underpinning of Dube's work.

Biography of Lilian Dube

At the time of writing this chapter, Lillian Dube was an associate professor and former chair of the Theology and Religious Studies Department at the University of San Francisco, which she joined in 2006. Prior to her appointment at the University of San Francisco, Dube had been teaching, for over a decade, at universities in her home country of Zimbabwe, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. She has taught courses that include Feminist Theology from the Third World, African Theology and Religious Cosmologies, and Theology in the HIV/AIDS Context. In 2009, she developed a month-long Service Learning program in Zambia and became its sole faculty of record for five years (2010-2014). Dube has been a speaker at Harvard and Stanford Universities. She has also served as a visiting associate professor at Columbia University, visiting associate professor at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia, and a visiting lecturer and visiting scholar at Selly Oak College and Garret-Evangelical Theological Seminary, respectively. Dube further held the position of Academic Associate Research Fellow with the University of South Africa (UNISA) under the Research Institute for Theology and Religion and Associate Fellow with the Centre for World Catholicism and Inter-cultural Theology (CWCIT). She holds several awards and distinctions, including the Jesuit Foundation Pedagogical Grant, USF and the Dorothy Cadbury Fellowship from Birmingham University.

Dube was also the executive director of the film, *USF in Zambia: HIV/AIDS and Social Justice*. She is the co-author of *African Initiatives in Healing Ministry* as well as the co-editor of *Theology in the Context of Globalization: African Women's Responses*. Dube is an accomplished publisher with numerous journal articles and book chapters. Her research centres on African Theology and Religion, Gender and Sexuality and the gendered pandemic of HIV and AIDS. In addition to her academic prowess, Dube is a recipient of various international fellowships and awards. These include the acclaimed American Association of University Women Fellowship and she now serves on the AAUW Research and Grants Awards Selection Panel. She has also held several professional positions including being the Research Consultant for Luce foundation Research Project and the Regional Contact Person for the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT).

Dube made history in 1999 through being the first Black woman to attain a Doctor of Theology degree from Stellenbosch University in South Africa. This landmark achievement, attained during an epoch where very few women, and particularly Black women were visible in the academia, is a true reflection of the resilience of a woman determined to transcend the boundaries of patriarchal bias as well as cultural and religious prejudices that bind the African woman to an inferior position in all spheres of life. Labeodan (2016) pointed out that it has been noted that prior to 1980, African theology was largely articulated by male voices. However, beginning from 1980, the absent voice of female theologians arose. Dube also stands among the matriarchs who represented the missing but pertinent voice of female Black theologians who brought authenticity and relevance to the majority of voiceless women in church and society. Within the Zimbabwean context, Dube is a revered matriarch who is among the founding members of the Zimbabwean Chapter of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. She stood at the helm of the Circle Zimbabwean Chapter during its formative years between 1998 and 2002.

Dube and African Women Leadership in African Independent Churches (AICs)

Within the context of Zimbabwe, African Independent churches have been lauded for fostering a conducive environment for the active participation of women (Mapuranga 2013) as prominent figures such as founders and prophetesses (Chitando 2004). As such, the AIC are commended for enhancing gender relations by permitting women to assume influential leadership positions. Dube's numerous publications include engagement with African spirituality; genital modification and expressions of troubling masculinities, and African healing initiatives. Her publications have also extensively engaged with the HIV and AIDS pandemic and have focused on the interface between HIV and AIDS and migration, a reflection on Catholic sex taboos and HIV and AIDS, and the articulation of a 'Theology of HIV and AIDS'. This is not by far exhaustive of Dube's publications.

Mission and Deliverance in the Zvikomborero Faith Church (2000)

In this particular publication, Dube (2000) pays attention to women's Christian spirituality. She fittingly makes reference to the Jesus Movement and its representation of women hence bringing to the fore how Jesus engaged and challenged the prevailing patriarchal order that relegated women to the periphery in both the religious and social sphere. The early Christian movement and the spiritual solidarity with women initiated by Jesus resulted in women attaining influential public positions within the realm of the church. In this writing, Dube (2000) sought to highlight the agency of women who she describes as not mere followers, manipulated and restricted in their religious ethics by the authoritative voice of the clerics, but were leaders and change-makers. Making use of scripture to show the agency of women, Dube (2000) makes reference to Nympha of Laodicea (Colossians 4:15) and Prisca (2 Corinthians 16:19 and Romans 16:5). These two women are clear examples of women who transcended over patriarchal barriers and assumed leadership roles.

Similarly, Dube (2000) draws attention to the position of African women in the church. Centring on the African Independent Church (AIC), Dube (2000) advances that the theology of this denomination reverses the status of women in the church. Without romanticising the AICS and how some women are marginalised, recognition is given to those women with spiritual gifts, and as such, these women are accorded respect as well as a safe space to exercise their spiritual gifts. A parallel juxtaposition is paid to women in AICs with those practising traditional spirituality, and their role as mediums, healers and midwives is duly honoured. Dube (2000) further asserts that despite the fact that the majority of women under the AIC do not hold office in the formal hierarchy of the church, those who are gifted with prophecy command considerable influence within the church.

Hence, in *Mission and Deliverance in the Zvikomborero Apostolic Faith Church* (2000), Dube pays attention to women's Christian spirituality. She makes allusion to the Jesus Movement and its representation of women, and in particular, Dube (2000) reflects how the movement challenged the prevailing patriarchal order that disparaged women and pushed them to the periphery. Nevertheless, the early Christian movement informed by the spiritual solidarity of women activated by Jesus resulted in women attaining public positions within the context of the church. Dube draws from the Jesus Movement and its response to the status of

women as a reflection on how the contemporary church can equally accord women a safe space to actively participate and assume leadership positions in both church and society.

The article, *Mission and Deliverance in the Zvikomborero Apostolic Faith Church*, also profiles the leadership role of Agnes Majecha, the principal leader of the Zvikomborero Apostolic Faith Church (ZAFC). This profiled phenomenal woman is the Archbishop's wife who presided over the church's healing centre at the denomination's headquarters and actively engaged in healing, exorcism and spiritual counselling. According to Dube (2000), Majecha's healing powers traversed over many boundaries hence commanding a considerable number of clientele within and outside Zimbabwe. Dube's profiling of Majecha reflects how she stands as a liberated woman in church and society. It stands true to the Circle's mandate of making the African woman visible and according her due recognition and dignity (Ayanga 2016).

In *Mission and deliverance in the Zvikomborero Apostolic Faith Church*, Mrs Agnes Majecha is profiled as a Christian spiritualist endowed with the gift of exorcising *zvikwambo* (goblins), *ngozi* (avenging spirits) and *kuhaka* (invocation of the spirits of the living and the dead) (Dube 2008). As a faith healer, Mrs Majecha attended to her clientele's challenges related to physical healing, infertility and marital challenges (Dube 2008). She catered for patients from within Zimbabwe and regionally from South Africa, Mozambique, Botswana and Malawi. The consultation services sought by her patients were equated with those sought from a biomedical doctor. Majecha's diagnosis was followed by appropriate therapy (Dube 2008). Even though Majecha is profiled as a Christian prophetess, she consequently espoused traditional tenets which were enshrined in her healing ministry therefore representing enculturated Christianity. According to Dube (2008), Majecha's story exemplifies the inimitable contribution of African women to church growth and development. It also stands for the fulfilment and liberating representations of the Jesus Movement where women were also accorded a safe space to enact their ministerial gifts. In her own words, Dube articulates that "Agnes Majecha's case rekindles the spirit of the women saints, prophetesses and mystics of the late middle ages" and "it also defies the discouraging pronouncements made on the subservience of women in the church, particularly as far as leadership and power are concerned" (2008:310). Hence Dube's profiling of Agnes Majecha personifies the aptitude of African women in breaking the glass ceiling in terms of religious power and leadership.

Mai Chaza:

An African Christian Story of Gender, Healing and Power

In this writing, Dube explores Mai Chaza's therapeutic praxis in order to illustrate "gender dynamics of healing as trajectories of power at a time when gender balances mean hope for surviving in the HIV/AIDS battered androcentric societies in Africa and beyond" (2000:2). The article forecasts Mai Chaza's social and spiritual journey, it tracks her transition from a mere wife, mother, and uniformed member of the mother's union, commonly referred to as *Ruwadzano* or *Manyano*, of the Methodist church in Zimbabwe, to a faith healer and founder of the Guta RaJehovah Church, one of the largest African Independent Churches in Zimbabwe. In describing the tenacious persona of Mai Chaza as a role model, Dube positions her as representing those women who are:

Not content merely to sit at their husband's feet reading the Bible, nor to stand behind the priests as servers, catechists or teachers telling their rosaries, nor to act merely as leaders and organisers in the *Ruwadzanos* or *Manyanos*, the women's unions, through the Holy Spirit, like eagles, these women soar to social and religious heights (2008:1).

These women refute being assigned secondary roles such as ordinary actors and organisers in the *Ruwadzano*/mother's union to more prominent roles including the pastoral, healing and exorcism (Dube 2008). As such, Dube profiles Mai Chaza as a healer and a prominent woman who transcended the socio-cultural hierarchy that side-lines women. Mai Chaza defied the imposed status of 'perpetual minor' and rose to become an elder who commanded a position of power and prestige. Her prestige rose in the very community that had previously disparaged her as an ordinary wife and mother. Dube (2008) profiles Mai Chaza, who was a divorced mother of sons, but rose to become a prominent prophetess. Whilst divorced women are often shunned in many African communities, Mai Chaza is an embodiment of Christian women who negated the classification of second-class citizenry assigned to African women and peripheral to Christian development in Southern Africa (Dube 2008).

As a renowned healer, Dube (2008) further posits that Mai Chaza's healing ministry centred on women unable to have children is taken as a reflection of African perceptions of gender, healing and cultural gerontology. Dube describes that "Mai Chaza's spirituality sheds lights on the suffering, silence and resistance of many African women struggling with the question of the church's mission in Africa today" (2008:2).

Responding to the Circle Mandate

Dube's profiling of women leaders as reflected in her selected writings allows for the exploration of what it entails to be an African, a woman and a Christian. Her writings seek to retrieve the obscured stories of women in the African church history. It also explores these women's influence on issues of gender in contemporary Africa. True to the mandate of the Circle, Dube's writings are a deep reflection of the concerns for the status of African women in church and society. Dube's writings mirror a concern for the re-interpretation of oppressive African culture that subjugates women. This matriarch demonstrates concern for the voiceless women of Africa and hence her quest to make the position of the African woman to be visible in church and society thereby according her rightful recognition and dignity. Njoroge (1997) expounds on the ramifications of what it entails to be concerned. She thus explains that:

By calling ourselves 'concerned', we are stating that we care deeply about the erosion and destruction of human dignity and life, all life, in Africa. We are concerned that much needs to be done in the areas of religion and culture to address the social evils that block the experience of abundant life for people and the environment. We are concerned that for too long women have been silenced and as a result many have suffered and others died because nothing was done. We are concerned that unless we name the sin of sexism and work for its elimination, our Africa religion institutions will continue and we care, we want to join with those who struggle for justice, peace, and reconciliation in our continent (Njoroge 1997:79).

Therefore, being concerned entails raising a voice against the injustices instituted against the African woman. Through research and documentation, prominent women are showcased by Dube. This showcasing of women who defied all odds and rose to leadership positions in church and society is a call to women in oppressive circumstances that socio-cultural, patriarchal and other restrictive boundaries can be broken. Such engagement also fulfils the Circle objectives, part of which was expounded by Kanyoro (1997:11) as follows:

The main objective of the Circle is to write and publish theological literature written by African women from their experience of religion and culture on this continent. Research and writing for publication is our target and sole reason for being. Thus, we are an academic group. We want to fill a gap in African women's profile as well as in theological writings from Africa.

Kanyoro's description of the Circle mandate was also pronounced by Togarasei (2016:2) who pointed out that the main objective of the Circle was/is to "bring the educated women in church leadership and in the academy to research and write on the experiences of women so that the story of women could be told by women themselves". Dube's writings reflect this mandate as, through her writings, she has been able to share the lived experiences of women leaders within the church and society, outlining the strides and setbacks these women encountered in their quest for due recognition in their leadership roles.

A Glance through the Theological Underpinning of Dube's Work

Dube draws from biblical scripture as theological resources for highlighting the tenacity of African women in challenging unjust and patriarchal contexts that continually draw women to the periphery. Examples of women who assumed leadership roles in the Bible are used by Dube as examples of female agency that defies the religious and culturally assigned roles of female subservience. Dube makes reference to prominent female leaders in biblical texts. These include Nymph of Laodicea (Colossians 4:15) who led a house church in a highly patriarchal context where women were expected to be under male guidance and leadership. Dube also quoted Prisca, (2 Corinthians 16:19; Romans 16:5) who together with her husband, also led a house church. These two women are just but a few examples of women who gained public positions, status and recognition in the church. In Dube's context and drawing from her selected writings, these biblical women are exemplified by Mrs Agnes Majecha and Mai Chaza, the prominent women who because church leaders, and founders and renounced prophetesses.

The Matriarch, Dube, also pays attention to biblical scriptures that reflect Jesus' contact with women in public, a trait that was regarded as culturally taboo. Dube refers to Mark 5:21-43 where Jesus raised Jairus' daughter. Jesus' failure to rebuke the haemorrhaging woman who touched him is a radical stance displayed by both this tenacious woman and by Jesus. Whilst a haemorrhaging woman was considered culturally and socially unclean, she was not expected to appear in public. However, the resilience and determination of this woman to seek healing from the Messiah prompted her to defy set boundaries. Not only did she appear in public with her condition, but she did the unthinkable, touching the hem of the

garment of a man! Such tenacity! Her quest and longing for healing far outweighed the religious and cultural taboos that relegated her to the private domain. Dube (2000) also makes reference to women disciples who stood by Jesus during his arrest, trial and crucifixion. These women were also the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus (Luke 23:50; Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; John 20:1-10). This reference therefore represents the agency and tenacity of women who aptly refused to be mere spectators but active participants in ministry.

Drawing from the context of Zimbabwe, noticeable and pervasive gendered differences in church leadership are widespread. In Zimbabwe and elsewhere, church leadership is a highly contested terrain that is dominated by patriarchy. Hence it has been duly noted that despite women commanding a large populace in terms of membership in most religious contexts, leadership roles are commonly the domain of the males. This is augmented by prevalent dominant religious discourses in relation to the status of women in leadership positions. Within the Christian settings, the prevalent theological discourse centres on the headship of the males over all females. Ayanga (2016) also lamented the muted voice of women in decision making and leadership positions, a situation she ascribes to lack of training opportunities essential for equipping women with required knowledge and skills. Resultantly, Ayanga (2016) further posits that women end up filling the pews whilst men occupy the revered positions at the pulpit. As such, it has been observed that within the context of the church, women have, and continue to be recipients of theology instead of being creators of a theology that is informed by their own lived experiences (Ayanga 2016). The two women profiled by Dube, Mrs Majecha and Mai Chaza are an embodiment of the capabilities of African women to transcend beyond the religio-cultural delineations that subdue women. Dube's profiling of these women is an unabated indication that women can rise above socio-cultural inhibition and can also claim a position on the pulpit as well as serving in influential leadership positions similar to their male counterparts.

Furthermore, scholars writing from the context of Zimbabwe have attested to the subjugated role of women within church leadership (Chitando 2004; Kwaramba 2018; Mapuranga 2013). This subjugation of women is evidenced by their exclusion from leadership positions but instead, women are accorded ceremonial titles to masquerade their lack of leadership visibility.

Dube focuses on women from the African Independent Churches in the context of Zimbabwe. She profiles ordinary women who defied the cultural and religious biases and rose to conspicuous leadership positions within the church and society. While Dube's writings represent the voice of the voiceless through profiling the leadership roles assumed by the characters in her narratives, these profiled women leaders equally represent the voice of the majority of women struggling to break the glass ceiling within the realm of leadership in church and society. Profiling these women leaders is a reflection of the agency of the African woman and her ability to transcend the boundaries of patriarchal trajectories that otherwise relegate women to the periphery of leadership.

Dube's writings are therefore a lament, a cry for sensitive theologies that seek to negate and transform socio-cultural and patriarchal bias that denies women their spiritual and leadership capabilities. In recognition of Dube's work, I propose a new theology, one based on tenacity. A theology of tenacity, drawn from the biblical text from 2Kings 4: 8-37, reflects the tenacity of women in responding to challenging situations. Such tenacity of women is brought forth in the characters profiled by Dube, Mrs Majecha in *Mission and Deliverance in the Zvikomborero Faith Church* (2000) and Mai Chaza in *Mai Chaza: An African Christian Story of Gender, Healing and Power* (2008). While Mai Chaza was a divorcee, culturally shunned within the African context, she rose and became a prominent healer, a prophetess and the founder of a church. The very society that had previously shunned and denigrated her, was the same society that changed and accorded her respect and restored her dignity. Through her healing ministry, Mai Chaza gained respect and prominence from near and afar. The tenacity shown by the characters raised by Dube symbolizes a re-interpretation of an oppressive African culture, it embodies the liberation of African women from the shackles of oppressive religious and cultural norms marginalizing them from the purview of leadership. Additionally, Dube's profiling of these tenacious women unravels the interplay of gender, religion and culture and how these influence the status of women in church and society. Dube's engagement with the AICs reflects how they have cultivated a fertile ground for the active participation and inclusion of women in leadership positions. Hence women are accorded status and honoured as they partake several leadership roles inclusive of prophetesses, priestesses, choristers, healers and 'itinerant preachers' (Chitando 2004:123). As such, Dube's writings reflect that the AICs have improved gender relations by creating space for female leadership.

CONCLUSION

Whilst considerable strides have been made, the status of women in church and society remains highly contested. Literally, in most major religions, women still constitute the majority of members but the influential leadership positions are still monopolised by men. Sadly, Mapuranga (2013) rightfully noted that women are still abstract leaders and more visible as clients within most religious contexts. Socio-cultural, historical, economic and theological reinforcements continue to account for this biased anomaly. Through her selected writings discussed in this chapter, Dube seeks for a biblical hermeneutic that is liberative, one that accords women their rightful dignity and status in religious leadership. Therefore, this chapter sought to reflect how Dube, one of the Circle matriarchs and a founding member of the Zimbabwean chapter, contributes to the Circle mandate and the emancipation and liberative endeavour of all African women. In conclusion, the history of the Circle matriarchs would be incomplete without the invaluable contribution made by Lilian Dube, one of the African women theologians who, through her research and publications, has made significant contribution to the growth of the Christian faith on the African continent.

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