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9 Ezra Chitando's Advocacy and the Contribution of African Women Theologians

Thandi Soko-de Jong

Abstract

Ezra Chitando plays a vital role in advocating for greater recognition of the academic contributions of African women theologians. This chapter has employed the methodology of document analysis to highlight and examine Chitando's advocacy, particularly his critique of male dominance in academic theology and church leadership. Thus, this chapter has discussed, for example, his support of the concept of *her-stories*, which places a strong emphasis on the perspectives, experiences, and agency of women in scholarly writing and research. The findings of this chapter show that Chitando's commitment extends to both the content of his scholarly work and his practical approach, wherein he positions himself as an ally of African women theologians rather than an advocate on their behalf. It follows, therefore, that his literature cited in this chapter has been co-authored with African women theologians. The chapter has demonstrated Chitando's leadership in advocating for increased engagement with the accomplishments and contribution of African women theologians.

Keywords: African women theologians, theologies in Africa, Ezra Chitando

Introduction

Ezra Chitando (Zimbabwe) has made a significant contribution to advocacy for wider recognition of the academic contributions of African women theologians. The present chapter does not claim to exhaust all his advocacy on the topic. However, it seeks instead to draw out some of the key observations that have emanated from his discussion of the scholarly contributions of African women theologians. To accomplish this, the chapter has employed the methodology of document analysis. Document analysis is a qualitative research technique that entails the systematic interpretation and understanding of documents to develop empirical knowledge based on the information they provide (Bowen, 2009). Various forms of documents, such as books and journal articles, can be utilized

for systematic evaluation. In the context of this chapter, document analysis proves beneficial as it provides the necessary data through quotations, excerpts, or entire passages. These can then be organized thematically or into categories and case examples through content analysis (Labuschagne 2003 in Bowen 2009:27-28).

Before delving into the themes that emerged from the literature using this methodology, I will begin by defining the term, 'African women theologians' as offered in a selection of Chitando's publications that will be highlighted below. This will serve as an opening for the discussion of his observation that there is a larger focus on the theologies and practices of male African male theologians and church-based women's movements such as prayer unions¹ than there is on the contributions of African women theologians.

In the context of this chapter, African women theologians are defined in three interrelated ways. First, the term 'African' refers to women theologians of African heritage that theologically engage and/or address issues affecting communities in Africa and its diaspora. There are 'many Africas' (Oduyoye in Phiri, 2008:67). Therefore, this chapter does not define the African women theologians' community as monolithic but as representing many social locations and lived realities. Second, the term 'women' is inclusive and has been opted for in this chapter in line with Black womanist theologians that aim to interpret the Bible from the perspective that it is concerned with Black women's liberation (Cannon, 1988). This is a significant position held by African women theologians, particularly those whose approach critiques the influence of *kyriarchy*² on Christianity in African communities and beyond.

Finally, the term 'theologians' is narrowed down for this discussion to refer to the Christian academics that Chitando discusses in his contributions. Christianity is among the many religions that have a socio-cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political bearing on African communities.

¹ These prayer unions include movements such as the *manyano*'s that are covered extensively in the work of Beverley Haddad (2004).

² *Kyriarchy* is a term that was coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza from the ancient Greek word for 'lord/master' κύριος (*kyrios*). *Kyriarchy* is a term that extends patriarchy to encompass and connect to other structures of oppression and privilege, such as racism, ableism, homophobia, capitalism, and other social markers, in recognition of the intersectionality of oppression into overlapping, transversing and complicated power dynamics. See Schüssler (1992).

Thus, there has been a growing interest in how gender plays a role in its influence. Chitando seems to concur with the Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye who advocates for the two-winged bird analogy. The analogy argues that just as a bird with one wing/weakened wing cannot fly very high, similarly, African theology fails to adequately respond to the concerns of its diverse communities when it ignores or refuses to dialogue with African women's theological reflections.³ Finally, this chapter recognizes that African women scholars' contribution to theology is not limited to bookcase seminary theology (formal academic theology), rather, it also encompasses other modes such as theology of the open air (grassroots) (Namusoke, 1993). Before exploring Chitando's contribution to the topic, it is important to begin with a brief overview of African women theologians and their socio-religious context.

African Women Theologians and their Contexts

Background

The study of theology and religion on the continent has historically been male dominated. Like in other fields that study religion after the colonial era, "one could note that in many African countries there was a transfer of power from European males to African males" (Maguje & Muchena, 2016:2). Male scholars whose work dominated theological discourse include John S. Mbiti (Kenya, 1931-2019) and E. Bolaji Idowu (Nigeria, 1913-1995). While they ably critiqued theologies imposed by colonial influences, low female representation weakened the ability to provide equal attention to critically interrogating patriarchal beliefs and practices in their contexts (Headley, 2022).

Changes began with the arrival of African women theologians that elected to challenge this status quo. The status quo was influenced by Victorian notions of morality spread by several mission churches that promoted women's domesticity. These notions included encouraging women to be homemakers with limited access to the outside world. The domestic and marital roles promoted by such interpretations of Christianity can be

³ According to Musimbi Kanyoro, Mercy Amba Oduyoye first discussed the two-winged bird analogy in her opening address at the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians' inaugural meeting in Ghana, 1989. See Kanyoro (2002).

summed up as preparing African girls for the role of being “future spouses of Christian men, mothers of Christian children, makers of Christian homes” (Gaitskell, 1990:255). This emphasis on domesticity clashed with indigenous approaches (in Africa) that allowed women greater access to decision-making (Juwayeyi, 2020) and the outside world (Chitando & Mateveke, 2012:44). The appeal of an emphasis on domesticity was particularly strong among men and male church leaders who favored it (Chitando & Mateveke, 2012:44).

Thus, using women’s (embodied) experiences, a significant number of African women theologians introduced approaches that are, among others, “depatriarchalizing and decolonizing” (Dube, 2005). Some early examples of literature that brought these themes to the fore include *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (1992), *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (1995), and *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* (2006).

African women theologians are not a monolith. They do not all espouse definitions that group them together. Additionally, they have different aims and methods that range from (but are not limited to):

- the study of religions in Africa using gender analysis tools and frameworks;
- the study of the impact of religion on society and women’s agency using gender analysis tools and frameworks;
- research and praxis from the perspective of theologies of liberation that advocate for inclusivity and the empowerment of women and other marginalized communities;
- advocacy for women’s representation in theological discourses;
- advocacy for equitable representation in church leadership;
- and the examination and interrogation of traditions and socio-cultural, socio-political, and socio-religious practices that harm women and other marginalized groups.

In summary, women scholars employ their aims and goals to promote the well-being of their communities and societies, where everyone’s voice is valued. Having established this background, the next section will define ‘African women theologians’ within the context of this chapter.

African Women Theologians

African women theologians are often part of church-based Christian women movements within their communities such as church women's prayer unions. However, they fall under a community of their own, because they are specifically professional theologians. From examples from her South African context, Beverley Haddad seems to place the two (inter-connected) groups side-by-side and thereby notes their distinctive roles by stating that:

Indigenous African Christian women in South Africa responded to the missionary endeavor through subversive action! They formed their own movement known as the manyano (or prayer union) movement. For academic women engaged in theological discourse, it is imperative that the survival theologies of marginalized women be recognized. These, I argue, are most clearly expressed in the manyano groups that meet each Thursday across the country (2004:4).

Although some women's unions can be subversive and explicitly oppose, challenge, and/or address gender injustice, others take a more conservative stance. The latter group includes women's unions that have their roots in Puritanism, which was spread by the missionary movements of the colonial era (Soko, 2013). Women's unions like these tend to uphold gender norms that restrict or hinder a critical approach to ideals surrounding gender. Among the ideals are women's submissiveness to their husbands in marriage, the emphasis on motherhood roles, and submission to male authority in religious institutions.

Considering such realities and the ongoing challenges facing church communities and their societies, which include religiously based gender inequality and economic inequality, it is critical to learn from the significant contribution of African women theologians. Their contribution impacts theological approaches to societal challenges from a better-informed place of understanding as many African women theologians have a lived experience and/or memory of the social issues that they are addressing through their work. For instance, instead of being limited by theory and/or literature-based approaches of knowing, they critically reflect on how hermeneutics and church traditions impact their contemporary realities. Thus, their work plays a crucial role in (a) interrogating issues and

systems that disproportionately affect women and various social minorities, and (b) promoting more inclusive and just communities of theological scholarship.

It is worth noting here that African women theologians encounter numerous obstacles in their pursuits. In *Major Challenges for African Women Theologians in Theological Education (1989-2008)*, Isabel Apawo Phiri (Malawi) identifies four examples of obstacles as follows:

- (1) re-defining the identity of African women theologians
- (2) encouraging more women to study theology and be on permanent staff
- (3) inclusion of African women's theology in the theological curriculum
- (4) collaborating with male theologians (2008: 66-67)

This chapter will discuss Chitando's response to some of these realities. More broadly, the chapter will highlight how Chitando's responses, in solidarity, delves into the struggle with limited resources, fewer opportunities for academic training and publication, cultural stereotypes, and patriarchal systems that undermine the contribution of African women theologians. Against this background, the next section will delve into some of Chitando's views regarding the contribution of African women theologians.

Chitando's Views Regarding the Contribution of African Women Theologians

Her-stories

In several publications Chitando outlines some of the challenges facing communities today to highlight how African women theologians have and continue to tackle these challenges from a research, teaching, and advocacy perspective. Additionally, he calls attention to how in many cases, their research contribution continues to be marginalised in the theological landscape.

In *Other Ways of Being a Diviner-healer: Musa W. Dube and the African Church's Response to HIV and AIDS*, Rosinah Gabaitse (Botswana) and Ezra Chitando reiterate that the study of African Christianity has tended to focus on men's achievements within the church (2008:29). They add

that this has prompted African women theologians to call for a turning towards her-stories (Chitando & Gabaitse, 2008:30).

Whereas Haddad notes that there is a focus on indigenous church women's movements, Gabaitse and Chitando observe that in the shift towards her-stories, there has also been a tendency towards focusing on charismatic women founders of African Independent/Indigenous/Initiated/Instituted Churches (AICs) (2008:29). However, they observe that:

While this is a positive development, as it brings the achievements of such women to the fore, it runs the risk of overlooking the progress that African Christian women scholars have made in the academic arena. Rarely have young African Christian women been acknowledged for their academic achievements and leadership in addressing contemporary issues that affect the continent (Chitando and Gabaitse, 2008:29).

A first reason they provide for documenting and analyzing the contribution of African women theologians is their work significantly contributes "to the growth and vitality of the faith on the continent" (Chitando & Gabaitse, 2008:51). This is often through women theologians' commitment to providing a *her-story* approach to praxis – that is, writing and researching from "the point of view of women, and giving importance to their experiences" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023) and agency. This approach underpins the active involvement and direct impact many African women theologians have within their church communities.

Furthermore, in the quote above Gabaitse and Chitando highlight young African Christian women academics. This chapter - as previously stated - focuses on African women theologians generally. However, their focus sheds light on the reality that although women have long played critical roles in African church communities, their recognition in theological scholarship remains hampered by gender-based opposition. Therefore, it is of particular importance to nurture emerging young women scholars in this field. In the article, Gabaitse and Chitando highlight Musa W. Dube (Botswana), an African woman theologian who has addressed a range of issues of impact both at a personal level and those involving the Southern African community.

A broad overview of Dube's academic influence affirms Gabaitse and Chitando's assertion that African women theologians' contribution is on multiple fronts, yet under-recognized. Thus, in the example of Dube's schol-

arly work, her contribution ranges from responses to HIV & AIDS in Africa (see Dube, 2003) to introducing African, postcolonial⁴ feminist interpretations of the Bible (Dube, 2005:177-202). Her postcolonial feminist interpretations interrogate Western institutions and traditions that dominate African economies, scholarship, cultures and health sectors (Chitando & Gabaitse 2008:31). Gabaitse and Chitando observe that Dube's commitment to HIV & AIDS awareness and destigmatisation and her scholarly output and advocacy in relation to this topic enabled her to call on African church communities "to initiate a conspiracy of hope" (Dube, 2004). Her conspiracy of hope had several implications. According to the authors:

Dube became the most active African Christian woman scholar to challenge churches in Africa to provide an effective response to the epidemic. She combines womanist activism with penetrating social analysis to lay bare the church's paralysis in responding to the HIV epidemic. She has sought to challenge the complacency of the church by highlighting the extent to which it is implicated in fueling stigma and discrimination (Chitando and Gabaitse 2008:32).

Additionally, her leadership roles in Africa and beyond include activities within the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (the Circle) (Chitando & Gabaitse 2008:30), numerous academic bodies, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and editorial boards. This demonstration of a broad spectrum of academic, research and leadership input underscores Gabaitse and Chitando's position that the undermining of the progress that African Christian women scholars have made is counterproductive.

This position is further addressed by Anna Chitando and Ezra Chitando's chapter entitled, *Zimbabwean Women's Writings and Women's Theology: Supporting Women's Struggles for Full Rights and Dignity* (2022).⁵ In the chapter, they discuss how Zimbabwean women writers and women theologians have sought to uphold women's dignity and human rights (2022:51). Additionally, the writers and theologians interrogate coloniality

⁴ In terms of background, "choosing not to become "landless", Dube's parents migrated to Botswana and settled in the Borolong area, where Dube was born. Dube's life therefore represents a personal encounter with settler colonialism, which was to shape her analysis of globalisation and uneven power relations between Blacks and whites" (Chitando & Gabaitse 2008:30-31).

⁵ In *Gendered Spaces, Religion and Migrations in Zimbabwe* (2022).

and are united in their determination to ensure that Zimbabwean women enjoy total liberation (Chitando & Chitando, 2022:51).

These are similar motifs to that of other African women theologians such as those discussed above (Oduyoye, Dube). This seems then a second layer of Ezra Chitando's advocacy, that is, the acknowledgment of the liberatory potency of African women's contribution. They describe this as writings and theology that posit that the survival of Zimbabwean women is an assault on both patriarchy and colonialism (Chitando & Chitando, 2022:51). Thus, Anna Chitando and Ezra Chitando define the writers and scholars' liberatory aims and methodologies as focused on:

- women's economic empowerment, women's health, and women's leadership,
- the well-being of Zimbabwean women,
- shunning patriarchal and colonial nomenclature and placing emphasis on Zimbabwean women's autonomy and agency (2022:51).

Chihera Phenomenon

Finally, in another collaborative effort, Chitando focuses on a phenomenon that is helpful in summarizing his advocacy and why he thinks it is important. Thus, in *Introducing a Radical African Indigenous Feminist Principle: Chihera in Zimbabwe* (2023)⁶ Ezra Chitando, Sophia Chirongoma, and Munyaradzi Nyakudya draw attention to the *Chihera* phenomenon. According to the authors, the *Chihera* phenomenon cannot easily be pinned down to one dominant idea but deploys a number of terms or concepts interchangeably (2023:2). However, they do endeavor to capture its essence by describing it as a phenomenon that has been enhanced by social media. It is a code name for all women and girls who refuse to be treated as second class citizens by patriarchy (Chitando, Chirongoma and Nyakudya, 2023:3).

Chihera describes (a) "one who descends from the Mhofu totem" (the homeland of the legendary anti-colonial spiritual leader, Nehanda)⁷ and

⁶ Introductory chapter in *Chihera in Zimbabwe: A Radical African Feminist Principle* (2023).

⁷ Ibid.

relatedly, (b) “a symbolic reference to all women who are assertive, fearless and independent thinking, women who do not hesitate to subvert and subdue, trash and defy patriarchy in the quest for their emancipation, women who strive to exorcise the demon of patriarchy” (Chitando, Chirongoma & Nyakudya, 2023:3-4). In other words, *Chihera* is “a Black Zimbabwean/African woman with an attitude, who makes no apology for who she is, namely, a liberated woman and the nemesis of patriarchy” (Chitando, Chirongoma & Nyakudya, 2023:2). She is lionized by her supporters but loathed by her critics for daring to confront and deflate patriarchy (Chitando, Chirongoma & Nyakudya, 2023:2).

In the chapter, Chitando, Chirongoma and Nyakudya utilize the *Chihera* frame to reflect on Zimbabwean and African women’s quest for full liberation and the achievement of sustainable development (2023:3). They argue that from the perspective of the *Chihera* principle, African womanism and feminism relies on theories and categories that emerge locally, within the women’s social contexts.⁸ This seems to align with the ethos of groups such as the Circle and the work of African women theologians that have been discussed above. In this line, the authors recognize that women’s refusal to *carry the burdens spawned* (2023:7) by patriarchy and colonization is enacted by women in various spaces that include social media.

The chapter does not focus on African women theologians. However, it can be observed that apart from theological aims, the aims of *Chihera* and that of many African women theologians are identical. Both are disruptive of the status quo and are “creative of the next phase of egalitarian gender relations” (Chitando, Chirongoma & Nyakudya, 2023:8). Additionally, the authors view the role of (women) academics as part of the *Chihera* phenomenon, stating that the “patriarchal backlash against *Chihera* seeks to retain the status quo. However, gender justice activists, development practitioners and academics devoted to gender transformation should use the momentum created by *Chihera* to strategize further for women’s rights in Zimbabwe and Africa” (Chitando, Chirongoma & Nyakudya, 2023:18). Finally, it is noteworthy that the majority of contributors to the book introduced in the chapter are African women scholars. Now that Chitando’s

⁸ According to the authors, the dominant response within African womanism or feminism has been a resounding “no!” to using foreign/external theories and categories to achieve full liberation and flourishing.” (Chitando, Chirongoma and Nyakudya 2023:5).

support for the recognition of the contributions of African women theologians has been established, the next section will discuss his advocacy before concluding this chapter.

Chitando's Advocacy Regarding African Women Theologians: A Discussion

As indicated in the examples above, Ezra Chitando is among the leading voices advocating for the recognition of African women theologians' contributions to theological discourse on the continent and beyond. Ways in which this recognition can develop further include the prioritization of the scholars' theologies in academic institutions (curricula and research programmes) and in adopting their insights in the pursuit of just and equitable academic and church theology and praxis. Chitando's advocacy is founded on the premise that African women theologians have made invaluable contributions to the development of theology in Africa, and their work deserves to be recognized and valued.

A critical point may be to question whether Chitando, as a man, should be involved in the task of writing about women – instead of *listening* to African women theologians. In their aforementioned chapter, *Chihera in Zimbabwe: A Radical African Feminist Principle*, Ezra Chitando, Sophia Chirongoma and Munyaradzi Nyakudya acknowledge the concern many have about the role of men in women's resistance and liberatory efforts. They state that, "some critics wonder if the erstwhile oppressors and beneficiaries of the patriarchal dividend can suddenly become passionate advocates for women's liberation" (2023:7). In the case of Chitando, however, he has been consistent in identifying his positionality and thereby, choosing to write *with* as opposed to writing *about* African women. This is why it is possible to extensively cite his collaborative work with women scholars, as this chapter has attempted to do.

Chitando, Chirongoma and Nyakudya point out that in their volume, at least, most contributors – including Chitando himself, "consider men as having the capacity to make a meaningful contribution to the struggle for gender justice" (2023:7). It follows, therefore, that we can infer that Chitando as an ally upholds principles guided by objectives of the African women theologians discussed above and the *Chihera* ethos. Such principles may include:

- a radical feminist principle that counters the argument that African cultures are synonymous with patriarchy and that women's equality and their pursuit of an abundant life is a foreign idea (Chitando, Chirongoma and Nyakudya 2023:10-13);
- solidarity with African women theologians and other womanists and feminists in challenging the ideological deployment of culture and offering instead an alternative interpretation of African culture that promotes women's wholistic health and well-being (Chitando, Chirongoma and Nyakudya 2023:10-13).

The alternative interpretation is based on understanding that the spirit of gender justice is present within indigenous values and systems but “is muted or featuring less prominently than the version of gender inequality sponsored by patriarchy” (Chitando, Chirongoma & Nyakudya, 2023:10-13). The recognition – and advocacy for such principles helps ensure that theology in Africa and beyond can develop to be more diverse, inclusive, and responsive to the needs and experiences of African communities. Additionally, such principles help ensure transformed masculinities. In ‘*Nhai Varume, Tapindwa Nei?*’ (Men, What Has Entered into Us?): *Oliver Mtukudzi and the Complexities of Transformative Masculinities* (2022), Chitando and Munyaradzi Nyakudya advocate for transformed masculinities. In the chapter, the authors highlight the transformative masculinities promoted by the renowned Zimbabwean musician Oliver Mtukudzi. Mtukudzi urged men to take up “active opposition to men’s violence against women and girls” (2022:23). Ultimately, Chitando is fully in support of initiatives, scholarship, and activism that will help ensure that theology plays a significant role in transforming the lived experiences of women and girls positively.

It is useful to consider that some may argue that what Chitando is endorsing and advocating is unnecessary and a distraction from more pressing issues. Detractors may argue that academic achievement should be recognized based solely on merit, regardless of gender. In other words, it can be argued that the recognition of women scholars as a separate theological group may essentialize them as a homogenous group. This may perpetuate gender inequality by ignoring the particularities of individual scholarly contributions and the impact of intersectionality on individual women scholars of theology. This in turn may reinforce the idea that their worth and value must be measured against male counterparts. From such a per-

spective, Chitando's advocacy can be perceived as reinforcing gender divisions rather than promoting true equality in theological discourse or disrupting power imbalances.

Additionally, some may argue that women scholars of theology may opt to be complicit in the system of patriarchy – conforming to what some scholars have argued, namely that some women are “subtly and perhaps unwittingly manipulated to strengthen the patriarchal system” (Chitando, Chirongoma & Nyakudya, 2023:25). All these aspects, it can be argued, could potentially further marginalize African women theologians, relegating them to isolated spaces within academia, ecumenical and church communities and beyond. However, given the critical points made by Chitando and his collaborators, his advocacy seems to focus on a critical reflection of gender in theological discourse itself and its systems of impact (in academia, church communities, etc.). In doing so, he recognizes the work of women scholars who have already identified the key issues that concern them and their achievements. Therefore, in my view, his advocacy is in solidarity with work that is already created, articulated, and developed by women scholars of theology. He is simply adding his voice in the call for those who have failed to acknowledge it to turn and begin to pay serious attention if we are to successfully witness an inclusive theological discourse across the continent.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ezra Chitando's advocacy for the recognition of African women theologians is crucial for promoting gender equality in theological discourse and acknowledging the important contributions of these scholars to the field of theology. This chapter has highlighted his leadership in this area and the overarching message of the plea for greater and better engagement with African women's theological achievements. This chapter has discussed Chitando's advocacy and support for the diverse but interrelated contribution of African women theologians. Against this background, this chapter has also emphasized the significance of African women theologians in critiquing the influence of *kyriarchy* on Christianity in African communities and beyond. Their contribution has significantly influenced the theological discourse on the socio-cultural, socio-economic

and socio-political realities of African communities. This confirms Chitando's assertion that African women theologians ought to receive greater recognition for their ongoing contributions to the development of current African theology and its future.

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