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## 13 Leadership struggles of Women in Topia Sungano Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

The chapter builds up from an interview conducted on the history and origin of the apostolic churches under my PhD study on women, education, and sexual and reproductive health rights in African Apostolic Indigenous Churches (AAICs) of Tangwena area of Nyanga District (Manicaland province), Zimbabwe. During an interview, the general secretary of Topia Sungano Apostolic Church (TSAC), after narrating the history and origin of the church as founded by Bishop Chakonza as known by the whole church, he confidently revealed that the owner of the church was Mbuya Chakonza (the wife of Chakonza), but because of culture, “She could not lead the church because she was only a woman”. This statement became one of the leading factors that motivated this research although there are several factors, which include my previous experience as a member of TSAC where I observed that despite women being the majority in terms of TSAC membership, they are not included in church leadership. The thrust of this chapter is to analyze the leadership status of women in TSAC based on the general secretary’s words quoted above. This empirical study uses African feminist cultural hermeneutics to raise awareness of the oppressive tendencies of missionary and African cultural education. Although women are the majority members in TSAC they are mostly found where labour is needed and not where important decisions that affect them are made. This chapter envisages that gender awareness can be provided to this church to show the capability of women to hold leadership positions just like men do. The chapter concludes by noting that women are marginalized in the name of culture and the colonial education syndrome that does not seem to promote women in terms of education and leadership roles.

**Keywords:** Apostolic Indigenous church, leadership, struggles, women, Zimbabwe

## Introduction

Although women constitute most of the membership in TSAC, they are mainly associated with the provision of labor rather than anything else. The study delineates the leadership status of women in TSAC. It is based on what the African cultural system of education in general and the Manyika culture in particular and missionary education have taught the girl child in as far as the status of women in leadership positions is concerned. The study critically looks at TSAC's teachings and practices pertaining to the status of men and women to find out if they are equal in terms of creation, religiosity, and level of spirituality. The study uses African cultural feminist theory to analyze the leadership status of women in TSAC who seem to treat women as second-class citizens in society. The study emanates from qualitative empirical research where interviews were contacted purposively among the members of TSAC in Tangwena.

## Background and motivation to the study

As I conducted interviews during my PhD research, after narrating the history and origin of the church. The general secretary confidently uttered that despite Mbuya Chakonza being the founder of the church as you know our culture, "she could not lead the church because she was only a woman" (Interview with Mr. P, 12 January 2018). This statement became one of the leading factors that motivated this research although there are other factors which include personal experience as a member of TSAC where I observed that despite women being the majority in terms of TSAC membership, they are not included in church leadership. The TSAC has a strong African cultural background which seems to have shaped some of its teachings, particularly on women's education and leadership status in society and the church.

In relation to this, Chitando & Chirongoma (2012) acknowledge that religion plays a major role in promoting male dominance in society. Their vision is that faith communities become institutions that nurture and support gender equality. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the educational and leadership status of women in TSAC paying particular attention to the church's general secretary's words quoted above.

## Theoretical Framework

This study uses African cultural feminist theory which addresses the specific situations and experiences of women in Africa (Oduyoye and Kanyoro 2001) alongside the theory of intersectionality (Gunda 2023) that seeks to address the oppression of women from multiple angles of race, gender, ethnicity, and patriarchy. Some of the specific issues that African women's theologies address, and which are also of vital importance to this study include, women's struggle with African patriarchal culture, their participation in colonialism, missionary Christianity, and the aftermaths. Because of these struggles, African feminist cultural hermeneutics have been developed as a theory by Oduyoye (2001) and Kanyoro (2002). This theory has been used as a tool to analyse culture and the Bible as these operate in the lives of a woman in the African context. This theory is used to expose and criticise those aspects of African and biblical cultures which are life-denying for women and to reclaim life-giving aspects. It is the concern of the theory to expose and analyse the life-denying aspects of such teachings as that of TSAC on women which include the marginalization of women in taking leadership positions in the church and their teachings that seem to let women receive limited education, they are subjected to a certain dress code, they are not allowed to attend important meetings held annually that govern the path to be followed by the church. Furthermore, women are treated as second class citizens to their male counterparts.

Rakoczy (2004:34) further states that, "feminist cultural hermeneutics help women to read the biblical texts in dialogue with their own cultural understanding and become critical of the intersections between them". Kwok (2001:22) adds that, "feminist cultural hermeneutics is an important tool that African Women Theologians have developed to analyze their culture, religion, and Christian heritage". Kanyoro sees most African cultures as a double-edged sword which can be used both as a creed for the community's identity and as the justification for oppression and injustice especially towards women. Explaining further on women's experience of culture, Kanyoro (2002:21) contends that:

Women in Africa are custodians of cultural practices. For generations, women have guarded cultural prescriptions strictly governed by the fear of breaking taboos and harmful traditional practices that are passed on as cultural values and therefore are not to be discussed, challenged, or changed.

Following Kanyoro's argument, this study also asserts that in the name of cultural preservation, the marginalization of women in taking leadership positions has been perpetuated in TSAC as part of a cultural norm. Therefore, Kanyoro (2002:54) argues that issues such as women being custodians of culture illustrate the reality of women's vulnerability in the face of culture in Africa. The need for cultural hermeneutics in this sense cannot be over-emphasized. In another development, Kanyoro (2002:55) argues that in trying to analyze women's experience of traditional marriage practices, there is a need to deal with the historical and social context of the people involved in the culture coupled with factors that influence these cultures.

Kwok (2001:8) further argues that "since African women's cultural heritage is multi-layered, their cultural hermeneutics too must be multi-dimensional so that it can analyze different aspects of culture". This then calls for a need to address women's experience of culture holistically and contextually. In an endeavor to analyze culture, it is also important to guard against any form of stereotype that may lead to passing judgment on the culture without applying any form of cultural analysis. In this study, Kanyoro's feminist cultural hermeneutics has been used in three ways: Kanyoro (2002:4) postulates that, "feminist cultural hermeneutics is a tool which enables women's voices to be heard and that unless women's voices are heard, their oppression will continue through power imbalances". Phiri & Nadar (2006) agree with Oduyoye (2001) and Kanyoro (2002) that women's experiences stand as the cornerstone for women doing theology in most African communities. Further, Phiri & Nadar (2006) uphold feminist cultural hermeneutics for its current engagement with HIV & AIDS research within the Circle and its commitment to what they call "grassroots" women living in faith communities. Phiri (2006) argues that African women need to start to write their own stories that have for a long time been written by male African Theologians. To respond to Phiri's (2006) call, this study focused on the marginalization of women in leadership in TSAC which mainly affects women and seeks to bring these voices to the fore. This chapter argues that feminist cultural hermeneutics provide a platform for all women stakeholders in TSAC to have their voices heard.

Furthermore, this theory was helpful to this study particularly when analyzing the data obtained from the church's general secretary on the history and origin of TSAC. Kanyoro (2002:17) asserts that feminist cultural hermeneutics is an important theological tool of analysis because it takes

both culture and the gospel seriously. She further asserts that women's experience of the church comes with a contradiction between the sense of belonging and the silencing of women within the body of Christ. In the context of upholding leadership positions in the church, women opt to undergo oppressive practices secretly to protect the image of the church and culture even when it is done at the expense of their dignity and humanity. This study therefore engages in dialogue that will help these men and women understand what it means to be a church within the context of their culture. As will be shown later, men occupy leadership positions to uphold their cultural values. This is despite the consequences these practices have for women, hence, the need for a cultural analysis. Furthermore, in some cases, the Bible has also been used as a means for justifying oppressive cultural practices. Hence, feminist cultural hermeneutics is valuable as a tool for examining the Bible from a cultural perspective and for scrutinizing the multi-cultural layers embedded in biblical narratives.

Moreover, feminist cultural hermeneutics is also interested in how oppressive cultural practices can be transformed. Transformation in this case will mean doing away with the oppressive practices while retaining and affirming those practices that are life-giving. In this study, one aspect that we also had an interest in, is the church's teachings on girl child education. Feminist cultural hermeneutics contributed to the development of more gender-equitable teachings that could be incorporated into the education of both girls and boys. It does all of this while remaining critically faithful to African culture. It can be said that the use of feminist theories like feminist cultural hermeneutics acts as the key to African women's liberation. In this respect, this study aims at challenging TSAC to heed the silent screams of millions of women and young girls who suffer marginalization in leadership positions and oppression within the church in the name of culture - bearing in mind that women are very much concerned about church, but the church is not so concerned about women.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative method is appropriate for this study because it involves studying a particular group of people. Babbie & Mouton (2002:11) accentuate that, the qualitative research method is the most suitable methodology

when one wants to investigate a deeper understanding of a given community. This study develops from empirical research that uses several data collection instruments that include focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and participant observation along with secondary sources from both published and unpublished sources. The use of the qualitative method in this study aims at gaining vision and discovering the depth, richness, and complexity of the selected teachings of TSAC on leadership status of women. The research was conducted in Tangwena where we had a chance to purposively interview many church members and the general secretary of the church. We managed to obtain information from them through their testimonies on the history and background of the church. Again, for those who were in leadership positions, we had an opportunity to ask them about their experiences in the church and how they perceive women's leadership.

### **Ethical consideration**

This research followed the code of conduct of the research ethics as set by the KwaZulu-Natal University in line with the guidelines by Mouton (2001). The current study was subject to certain ethical issues as mentioned in the above statement; some participants submitted their written acceptance regarding their participation in the research by signing a briefing and consent form. Participants were not deceived or forced to participate. They were reassured at the beginning of the interviews that their participation in the research was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw from it at any point and for any reason if they felt like doing so. Due to the assurance guaranteed to participants, all participants agreed to participate. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality of their identities as all information in the data was disseminated anonymously using pseudonyms in reporting the findings. All data collected and records belonging to the research were seen only by myself and my supervisor. The works of other people were acknowledged accordingly to avoid plagiarism.

As a researcher, I was sensitive to the possible impact of the research on the society through information dissemination, publication or otherwise. I promise to be ethically responsible to the people whom I work with. Thus, as a researcher, I appreciate that people have a right to confidentiality, including the right to participate in the interviews. The people had right not to be harassed in any way be it physically, emotionally, psychologically or in

other ways. Likewise, the personal identities of the participants were anonymous. This research will be of benefit to the participants and society at large because it raised awareness on how culture deprived women the opportunity to lead even in circumstances where they are capable.

## History of Topia Sungano (TSAC)

There is not much literature that has been written about the historical background of Topia Sungano. This study relied heavily on the information from the general secretary of the church and other senior members of the church. The informants narrated the history as it is presented below, much of the information about the history and background of the church comes from the general secretary of the church who narrated the history and emergence of the church.

Topia Sungano was formed in 1956, as a breakaway church from the then African Methodist Episcopal church. The Chakonza family (Mr. Chakonza, Mrs Chakonza & Son) were discussing other prophets from Johane Marange in a maize field who practiced stepping on fire without getting any burns. During this discussion, the power of the Holy Spirit took Mrs Chakonza popularly known in the Church as mbuya Chakonza, into the fire three times before she disappeared whilst the husband and son were watching. It is believed that she went home and took her white headgear and went to a mountain. After her disappearance, the search in the house only revealed that a white piece of cloth was no longer at its usual place and could not be found. She claims she was instructed to spend 14 days in the mountain by the Holy Spirit and could see the search team, but she could not speak and later returned home after 7 days as her family was now using different means to search for her including consulting traditional healers. She told the family that she had been instructed to start a church which would put on white garments for men whilst women would put on white veils known as *girorias* (veils) and white garments as well with white belts. She also said that she had been told that they were not supposed to visit the hospitals and clinics (Interview with the general secretary of the Church, 17 February 2018).

He further elaborates that, a group led by Mbuya Chakonza rebelled against the prayer system of mainline churches which condemned the work of the Holy Spirit and went to the mountain with a small group of

congregants. Prophet Gora who was the bishop at the time of this interview also received the Holy Spirit. An interesting point to note from the general secretary was that prophet Gadza who was the provisional leader was denounced by the Holy Spirit in this mountain and they gave the leadership to Mr. Chakonza despite Mrs Chakonza being the founder of the church.

The narrative above is an indication of the influence of some African cultural practices on the oppression of women. Mbuya Chakonza was the founder of TSAC but because she was a woman, she was not permitted to lead the church. The use of an African feminist Lense in this research is ideally positioned to explain the patriarchal oppression of women during colonialism up to the present day and to analyze the statement uttered by the general secretary of the church that, “she could not lead the church because she was a woman”.

Discussion on the general secretary’s statement, “She could not lead the church because she was a woman.”

To unpack the above statement and further elaborate the meaning of the statement, I extracted much of the information from the interviews where informants were questioned on what influenced the church’s position on women’s leadership status in the church. According to the informants, the church believed that “when girls are educated, they abandon their parents and move away from the church’s tradition (Interview with Mr. C, 24 January 2018). Informants also revealed that when girls are educated, they become more consumerist, and materialist.

Another reason that emerged was that parents fear that if girls are educated, they move away from their African traditional culture preferring Western culture. According to Mr. X, one of the informants:

Western education brought with it the destruction of African culture. Not sending their children to school, was a sign of resistance to Westerners and missionaries. According to TSAC, sending children to school would be as good as delivering their children to the hands of enemies (Interview with G. Motsi, 20 February 2018).

The above sentiments reflect that TSAC is more concerned with preserving African culture rather than adopting Western perceptions of living. One informant from a focus group discussion further argued that:

African culture must harness the young through its teachings. A woman or a girl has only these parameters to live on, dress this way, move this way, should take note of the men who are above

her. No woman is above the men in terms of reasoning, ruling even at home, they are some of the duties reserved for girls, in this case women are not entitled to leadership positions (Interview from a focus discussion, 10 February 2018).

In line with the above sentiments, Lawal (2005:24) highlights that the African traditional concept of education is aimed at character development, growth of intent and physical skills, inculcation of respect for elders and leaders, understanding, appreciating, and promoting the cultural heritage of society among others. He further elucidates that Western education was received with mixed feelings in most places among African cultures and very few people were willing to send their children to school. Those who did not consider it wise to send the girl child to school did so because girls were regarded as property and dependents of their fathers and husbands. Adebis (2009) and Adetunji (2001) also argue that some parents felt that if girls acquired formal education and had privilege to work, they would surrender all their money to their husbands and not to their parents. Instead, girls were encouraged to acquire functional education which prepared them for motherhood. This might also be what influenced the TSAC's position on the status of women since TSAC was influenced by African traditional culture in formulating their teachings which seem not to promote women's leadership.

The African traditional education system is greatly patriarchal because it favors boys over girls due to the claim made from the interview that boys maintain the family lineage (Interview with P, 10 January 2018). Additional reasons as to why girls do not have adequate access to Western formal education in Africa include that many are required to stay at home to nurse relatives with children and help parents to do household chores such as fetching water, cooking, gathering firewood and washing clothes among others. The fact that their mothers were not educated is another reason that makes them feel that their daughters do not need education too. In Zimbabwe, child brides face early pregnancy, responsibilities to their children and in-laws. Relating to this, Mwangi, (2004) suggests that a combination of poverty, disease and backward cultural practices denied the girl-child her right to education. Even with the introduction of free primary education, girl's access to education remains a dream for many in Zimbabwe.

Oduyoye (2001) explains African traditional culture and education as full of language that enables the community to reduce the humanity of

women. In line with this explanation, Akintunde (1999), suggests that African culture has been a long tale of discrimination and injustice to women as there has not been equity in opportunity, dignity and power between men and women. She further states that in African culture women and girls are often regarded as part of men's property. Although Oduyoye (2001) and Akintunde (1999) focus on Yoruba women, their insights are relevant to this research because African traditional culture in Zimbabwe, specifically observed at TSAC follows the same pattern.

Failure to send the girl child to school by traditional culture leaves the girl child at a disadvantage and in a vulnerable position in terms of development in society. Girls bear the heaviest burden for household responsibilities, including the care for sick parents and siblings, and are the first ones to drop out of school whenever there are challenges experienced at home be it lack of school fees or any other things that need attention. In African culture, sending girls to Western formal education was not important because girls were seen as commodities for the family that were sold and would bring wealth to the family. The main destiny for a girl in an African traditional set-up is marriage (Siwila 2011). Marriage is highly valued and if a girl is not married, that is regarded as a shame to the family, hence most parents prefer to arrange marriages for their children when they are very young.

As a result of these struggles, African theologians such as Oduyoye and Kanyoro (2001) developed a theory where they seek to analyze African culture for its patriarchal nature. It promotes the oppression of the girl child that includes denying a girl's access to an education and marginalizing her from taking leadership positions in the church. In African cultures a girl is delivered from the hands of the father to the hands of the husband (Oduyoye 2001). There is no room for a girl to have freedom, she is always under the custodianship of men. The same also happens to women in TSAC, they have no rights to take leadership positions. Most of them are well indoctrinated from birth and have accepted the African cultural teachings as a norm and they are oppressed by men who always want to occupy front seats in the leadership of the church (Russell 2011).

One of the leaders from TSAC made the following remarks when explaining what influenced the position on women's education and leadership in TSAC:

The main reason is that our forefathers grew up in African patriarchal societies whose laws deprived women in general. Our elders

used to have a system that women should not go to school but should be prepared for marriage. The major reason was that if she was empowered when she got married the family to which she has been married would benefit more than her family which supported her through education hence it was better to educate and support the boy child as they believed their hopes would be fulfilled by the boy child of up keeping them in times of need. Education was regarded as an external foreign culture hence the first founders and leaders of churches believed that encouraging education was also endorsing colonialism. That's why many other churches do not even read the bible because it came through the hands of the white man. Leaders and founders of churches brought the African culture into the churches they founded hence education was a foreign initiative which could not be embraced easily. The fact that many early schools in Zimbabwe were founded by white colonialists being Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Methodists meant the blacks resisted going to those schools because they said they wanted to teach us their (white) culture and we would lose our local culture (Interview with P. Nyamaropa, 15 February 2018).

The above remarks from TSAC leaders, clearly explain why it was easy for the general secretary of TSAC to utter the statement, "*She could not lead a church as she was only a woman*" (Interview with Mr. P, 10 January 2018). Even though, *Mbuya Chakonza* (Chakonza's wife) was the founder of TSAC, to the general secretary everything was normal since the church had adopted some African cultural practices in its teachings. *Mbuya Chakonza* saw nothing wrong with her husband leading the church *she had a direct calling* from God to start and for her husband to be recognized as a bishop of the church. African culture has already indoctrinated the girl child that they should always play a subsidiary role to their male counterparts in general and their husbands in particular. This study has used African cultural feminist hermeneutics to analyze the patriarchal tendencies of African culture that have led to the oppression of women in terms of the marginalization of women in taking leadership positions in TSAC and being denied an equal opportunity to education with their male counterparts.

## **Findings of the research**

This research has found that women in TSAC are marginalized when it comes to leadership positions and accessing Western formal education. The research revealed that this is because of the teachings of the African

cultural education system in general and Manyika culture in particular which seems to treat women as second-class citizens. The fact that TSAC borrowed much from the African culture made them marginalize women from occupying leadership positions because culture has taught that the best place for a woman to be is the home and women should always submit to their husbands. More so the research has found that although women are the majority members of TSAC they are mostly found where labour is needed and not where important decisions that affect them are made (Russell 1996). Women in TSAC do not attend annual conferences where the church's male leaders make the rules and regulations that govern the church in their day to day running.

Moreover, this research has found that TSAC does not promote girl child education through their teachings but rather encourages and prepares them for marriage. This has subjected women to a continuous cycle of poverty because when girls are not educated most of them will get married young and have poor sexual and reproductive health and rights. In most cases, they are married to older men who make all the decisions in the home. Because most girls are not educated to the extent of being able to support themselves, this has made them become more vulnerable since they will depend on their husbands for support and general upkeep for the rest of their lives. This condition makes it difficult for women to challenge their husbands and to take leadership positions in the church. The church is against Western formal education because it is afraid that when women are educated, they will begin to reject some of the teachings and practices of the church that seem to treat women as second-class citizens and that are patriarchal in nature from African culture. Again, it is believed that sending girl children to Western formal school is the same as delivering their children to the hands of the enemies since most of the schools were initially white owned.

Furthermore, the research has found that despite the general secretary's utterance that, "*she could not lead the church because she was only a woman*", in reality the church and society accepted, and no one is supposed to be offended because the church also emphasizes the use of the Bible that also urges women to be submissive to their husbands. Consequently, Mbuya Chakonza being the founder of TSAC, took leadership position of the church as something that was against the Bible and God himself, hence she allowed her husband to take the leadership position without being offended.

## Conclusion

Women are marginalized in the name of culture and the missionary education systems that seem to deprive women and promote men, enabling them to take leadership positions in society and the church. This research has also argued that despite women being the majority members in TSAC, their roles are undermined by patriarchy since they are indoctrinated from birth that the best place for a woman is the home, hence this becomes a challenge for them to occupy the leadership positions in the church. Although awareness can be raised on the issue that both men and women are equal before God, this is not the case with the women of TSAC, which makes it taboo for a woman to take a leadership position, hence making most of them content with the status quo.

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