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A Critical Reflection of Isabel Mukonyora's Theological Works on the Masowe Concept of Liberation

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5 | A Critical Reflection of Isabel Mukonyora's Theological Works on the Masowe Concept of Liberation

Faith Matumbu

Abstract

Historically, in 1989, 69 African women gathered at Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Ghana. It was a launch of a transformative African female intelligentsia space with a quest to generate a theology that embraces and empowers all genders. Thus, the women from all religions and cultures were invited to enter the space of researching, reading, interpreting the cultural, scriptural texts with the purpose of interrogating and exposing oppressive aspects, as well as to generate liberating interpretations that affirm all members of the Earth Community. It is in this regard, that this chapter explores theological works, ideas, and perspectives produced by one of the female theologians namely; Isabel Mukonyora. The chapter demonstrates that Mukonyora's theological works exposes the oppression during the colonial and post-colonial period in Zimbabwe. It further provides the theology of liberation embedded in Mukonyora theological ideas, which is a theology that provides hope for redemption and one that tries to liberate the Shona people from the colonial hegemony and patriarchal thinking.

Keywords: Critique, impact, hope, theology of liberation, liberation, masowe, oppression, patriarchal thinking and women

Introduction

The theme of liberation among the Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe is the central theme in Mukonyora's theological work. Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe is an African Initiated Church founded by Johane Masowe, whose members wear white garments, and they do not use church buildings for worship, but congregate in open spaces (Mukonyora 2000; Mu-

soni and Gundani 2019). Liberation entails setting someone free. According to Gustavo (1973:9), “...the notion of liberation is more exact and all embracing: it emphasizes that human beings transform themselves by conquering their liberty throughout their existence and their history.” Given the above view, the term liberation in the context of Johane Masowe sect entails setting the Zimbabwean, mainly black people, free from oppression imposed by colonialists.

According to Mukonyora (2020:272):

Masowe Apostles are theologians of liberation whose understanding of God is thus lived, dramatized, and embodied, rather like liberation theologians draw attention to concrete social problems of oppression and climate change. Masowe Apostles draw attention to the serious problems of colonial and postcolonial oppression, industrialization, and urbanization as the historic roots of the ecological destruction of human and other forms of planetary life.

It is therefore critical in this chapter to explore in-depth the theological works or ideas of Isabel Mukonyora in relation to the hermeneutics generated and Christology and missiology/ ecclesiology proposed. The chapter draws on Mukonyora’s theological work whose theology can be grouped as philosophical hermeneutics. The chapter focusses on Mukonyora because she has provided a detailed and systematic examination of human understanding within the Masowe apostles of Zimbabwe. As such, her theological work has been used by scholars such as Musoni, Gundani, Mapuranga and Mapisangana in the academic space to broaden the Masowe concept of liberation.

The theological works or ideas

Mukonyora’s theological work focuses much on liberation or emancipation of the oppressed as situated in Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe. Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe is an African Initiated Church which belongs to the African Diaspora within. Mukonyora takes a religious dimension of the term diaspora to mean the oppression (suppression) of aspirations for emancipation that are profoundly religious. According to Mukonyora (2006:60):

...the religious interpretation of experience of displacement in colonial and post-colonial Africa expands the term diaspora to encompass the

quest for redemption through journeying and enacting rituals in peripheral places...Diaspora means more than being scattered abroad, it suggests a human condition marked by fragmentation, displacement, marginality and oppression.

Thus, African Diaspora is translated into an African spiritual quest or discourse of redemption. Mukonyora argues that Masowe Apostles imagine themselves in Diaspora. The Western Scholar (2006) notes that Masowe means wilderness, these African Apostles can be seen anywhere in the fringe places by the roadside, behind factories, on the edge of fields, on hilltops, near lakes, on rock surfaces, in grasslands, and underneath trees. The wilderness is a powerful symbol used by Masowe Apostles to express their own marginality, and, the quest for a more peaceful world. Many of its congregants are women, considered central participants in this religious group. According to Mukonyora (1999:65), "Women form an overwhelming majority of Masowe Apostles despite the norm of choosing only men as official leaders."

Masowe Apostles intentionally locate themselves in less visible parts of the physical as well as institutional landscape. For Mukonyora, the question is what experiences of suffering and longing for redemption draw so many women to the sacred wilderness again and again? In response, Mukonyora (2006:59) argues that redemption is the quest in which individual hopes rise above trauma and misfortune. According to Mukonyora (2006:59), Masowe Apostles interpret their marginality and dispersion as exile, which they associate with journeying from place to place seeking out the periphery for worship and practicing rituals focused on a longing for redemption. Thus, Masowe Apostles accommodate those who suffer from oppression and marginality, journeying from place to place within Africa and translate their experience into quest for redemption they dramatize as part of prayer (Mukonyora, 2006:62).

Women's sense of marginality, their experience of rejection by and ejection from home and their hope for healing from wounds that rise from physical and social ailments are central to the rituals the Johane Masowe Apostles group conducts its rituals in the wilderness. Women's quest for emancipation from patriarchal oppression in society drives them to participate in church ritual practices to articulate their sense of social marginality and to enact their centrality to the redeemed worlds as they envision. Women in Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe express their sense of social marginality through prayers for healing and redemption.

Mukonyora further explores colonial modernity- where women from rural areas without formal education were seen as backward or immoral. For Mukonyora, women in Masowe Apostles lay their hope in the promise of deliverance. As a result, the experiences of women among Masowe Apostles have inspired a set of religious responses that make women agents of knowledge about the Diaspora within.

In addition, “in Masowe spirituality, women can be said to find marginal places that are transformed into school of deliverance and attractive haven for peace” (Mukonyora, 2006:71). Johanne Masowe called himself Mbonga and accommodated women as special agents of knowledge about God. Mbonga designates a virgin or post-menopausal woman/an elder and ascetic woman or man all of whom are called wives of God in the Mwari cult. For Mukonyora, Masowe symbolizes the experience of marginality but also creates safe place where women can express their anxiety through shaking and tears. Masowe women are often seen selling homemade crafts, vegetables, other small goods they carry to open air markets in different town to earn a living. They are recognized for pioneering the money changing business in Zimbabwe.

A Critical Reflection

Having noted the above theological ideas, it is therefore critical to establish whether women among the Masowe Apostles have surpassed oppression and gained their liberation. On a positive note, Masowe Apostles still have a lived theology of liberation for *vanhuvatema* (black people) (Mukonyora, 2020:275). Up to the present date, this theology is owned through schism of white robes and outdoor worship in the *masowe* or sacred wilderness. The continued existence of Masowe Apostles might be attributed to the fact that, “girls and women in Africa face unequal chances for education, less inheritance and ownership of assets, discrimination in employment and occupations, violence at home and in public spaces, and limited political representation” (Kevane, 2004:2). Therefore, they remain attached to the theology of hope which is entranced in Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe.

There is also a growing percentage of women in Masowe Apostles. Just like what Mukonyora observed, women are considered central participants in this religious group and form an overwhelming majority of Masowe congregants (Musoni, 2020). The impact of this religious group

can be witnessed by African expansion to other African countries (particularly southern, central and eastern regions) and Western countries at large. Musoni (2021) observes that Johane Masowe branches have been established in South Africa. According to Mukonyora (2020:272), victims of oppression who wandered in the wilderness in Exodus – explains the ritual behaviour of Masowe Apostles and migration from Zimbabwe to Botswana, South Africa, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, and beyond.

The positive impact of women among the Masowe Apostles influenced Mai Chaza to found an exclusively Black Zimbabwean Church named *GutaRaJehovha* Church in 1954 which later split into two denominations namely; *GutaRaMwari* and *GutaRaJehovha* (Dube, 2008). Sibanda (2017) notes that, although throughout history, the church leadership has been predominantly male, the tables have been turned. Cases of female leadership, such as Mai Chaza (1914–1960) who founded the GutaraJehovah in 1954, and TespyNyanhete (born in 1992) who became the leader of the MudzimuUnoera Church in Guruve in Zimbabwe reflects that women are independent, liberated and overcome patriarchal dominance. For example, the split of the Johane Masowe Church into various JMC Churches in Zimbabwe (*JohaneMasoweChishanuVadzidzi*; *JohaneMasoweChishanuJerusarema*; *JohaneMasoweChishanuMudzimuUnoera*; *JohaneMasoweChishanu ye kwaJacobo*; *JohaneMasoweChishanu ye Nyenyedzi* and many other branches of this church in Zimbabwe (Musoni, 2022:3-4) is evidence of the growth and positive impact of the Masowe Apostles to the nation.

Socially, the women in Masowe Apostles have managed to gain their liberation as they are able to cater for their family welfare. For example, Masowe women in Zimbabwe are not limited to selling homemade crafts, they are now drivers of the economy in the informal sector with some as runners and others as business entrepreneurs. Mukonyora (2020) points out that women find refuge in Masowe apostles, because the level of education of an individual does not matter and the bible does not have a place in this religion. Given that Masowe apostles are not discriminatory and oppressive as missionary churches, they received an overwhelming welcome from the discriminated and oppressed people within.

The theology of hope portrayed in Masowe Apostles has made it a hub, not for only women, but also for all those suffering either from fever, witchcraft, hunger, natural disasters, unemployment and rejection. For

example, Banda and Dodo (2014:9) established that over 80% of the interviewees and 140 questionnaire respondents indicated that the majority of people (non-members) who frequent *masowe* seek advice and help in securing jobs. During the advent of COVID-19, the majority of the population in Zimbabwe sought spiritual help and guidance from Masowe Apostles. The presence of prophets in Masowe symbolizes the theology of hope as congregants are given hope through prophecy.

On a negative note, despite the efforts made by Isabel Mukanyoro in exploring a theology of hope and liberation among the Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe, women still suffer from the patriarchal thinking that shapes this religion. For example, only male congregants occupy almost all the liturgical spaces in the church (Musoni, 2020). Only men perform duties such as: “being directors of ceremonies; officiating the key theological speeches; laying on of hands for prospective members for conversion; cleaning and preparing the *sowef* or services (before and after church services); and, lastly, lighting the ritual fire during all-night vigils.

Musoni (2020:6) established that, “women’s full participation in the liturgical spaces in most African Initiated Churches is hampered and restricted by taboos surrounding menstruation.” In African Traditional Religion, particularly Shona traditional religions, menstrual blood is considered as particularly polluting (Chitando, 2002). This is so because, in African Traditional Religions, only older women are permitted to brew beer for ancestral veneration (Chitando, 2002, 19). Thus, the non-occupancy of women of this liturgical space within the Masowe apostles could be due to the ideology of ritual purity. Referring to the same concept of women being regarded as ritually unclean, Siwila (2015:90) observes that Africans, like Jews, have taboos associated with menstrual blood. Given the above example, one can argue that this is the kind of scenario that Mukanyoro was concerned with in her theological work. The above example also exemplifies the marginality and disempowerment of women. In order to empower women and emancipate women, Isabel Mukanyoro has focused on the theology of liberation (liberation of women from all forms of oppression).

There are also reported cases of abuses among young girls in these African Initiated Churches. For example, a midwife who is a member of the Johane Masowe Shonhiwa apostolic church told Human Rights Watch that church doctrine requires girls to marry between ages 12 and 16 to prevent sexual relations outside marriage. “As soon as a girl reaches puberty, any man in the church can claim her for his wife,” Country Policy

and Information Note Zimbabwe: Women fearing gender-based harm or violence (2017:20). In Zimbabwe the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act makes it a criminal offense for anyone to promise a girl under 18 in marriage or to force a girl or woman to enter into a marriage against her will. It also makes it a criminal offense to use cultural or customary rites or practices to force a woman to marry. A court ruled that as of January 20 2016 no one in Zimbabwe may enter into any marriage, including customary law unions, before the age of 18 Country Policy and Information Note Zimbabwe: Women fearing gender-based harm or violence (2017:22). Given this, one question remains; Can we say women are liberated in Masowe apostles when young girls are forced into marriage against their will, let alone consent? The above instance calls for absolute liberation of women as advocated by Mukanyora. Given such instances, Mukanyora suggested that the Masowe church should be regarded as an attractive haven for deliverance, emancipation and peace rather than an instrument for oppression.

Despite the noted instances where women in Masowe apostles are still suffering dominance by men, women are not passive recipients of knowledge about God during prayer (Mukonyora, 2020:285). According to Dodo, Banda and Dodo (2014:3), “Women at *masowe* serve as mothers, advisors, and singers; there are also female prophets, dreamers, and visionaries (*vaporofiti*, *varoti*, and *varatidzwi*, respectively).” For Mukonyora (2020), Women sing the verses as a medium of communicating a perception of God inspired by a much more radical quest for liberation for all children of God. As the majority members of the Masowe Apostles, without whom there would be no vibrant wilderness, church. Women and children should be viewed as important agents of knowledge, especially when it comes to rituals at which men are mostly, if not always, outnumbered by women and the children they bring to the wilderness. Masowe ritual activities are not the same without large numbers of women and children, whom were many women, the latter sought liberation from poverty, disease, and general misfortunes that came with oppression in the patriarchal world.

Sources used

To construct her theological work on Masowe Apostles of Zimbabwe, Mukonyora used the following articles and books as sources. These include *Where are the Ancestors? Changing Culture in Zimbabwe* by Michael

F C Bourdillion. *Independent Churches Among the Shona*, A Thesis by Isabel G Antonio. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* by Gutiérrez Gustavo. *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches* (1970) by Daneel Martinus. "The dramatization of Life and Death by Johane Masowe." *Zambezia* (1998) by Isabel Mukonyora. *Traders and Wives: Shona women in the History of Zimbabwe* (1992) by Elizabeth Schmidt. "The argument of Images: From Zion to the Wilderness in African churches" by Richard Werbner In *Theoretical Exploration in African Religion*, edited by W van Binsbergen and M. Schoffeleers. *The Korsten Basketmakers: A study of the Masowe Apostles, an indigenous African Religious Movement* (1978) by Clive Dillion-Malone. *The complementarity of male and female imagery in Masowe Theological language*, A Doctoral Thesis by Isabel Mukonyora.

The above sources were used by Mukonyora in constructing her liberation theology. They became the primary sources or basis for her theological work for example, a book by Gustavo enables her to understand the concept of liberation and this enabled her to critically engage on the masowe concept of liberation the meaning of the phrase theology of liberation.

CONCLUSION

Mukonyora observes that Masowe Apostles continue to turn human suffering into the reason for prayer as a way of expressing their hope. Masowe Apostles provide a hub to those who are oppressed, marginalized, suffering, sick, unemployed even those who face rejection. The main aim is to liberate and provide a theology of redemption to the Zimbabweans and Africans at large. However, the concept of liberation in Masowe attracts scepticism given that women and girls are treated as inferior and at the same time there are reported instances of abuse of underage girls, this defeats the Masowe concept of liberation.

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