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## Becoming ‘members of a new race’ : Redefining Rastafari Alternative African Masculinities in Zimbabwe

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## 28 Becoming ‘members of a new race’

### Redefining Rastafari Alternative African Masculinities in Zimbabwe

*Fortune Sibanda*

#### Abstract

Often identified as a minority new religious movement (NRM) in society, Rastafari has been misunderstood, misinterpreted and underplayed in scholarship as compared to other religious traditions. This chapter seeks to critically engage selected works of Ezra Chitando in the context of Rastafari perspectives on gender, health and human sexuality in Zimbabwe against the backdrop of the ‘one love’ principle in the movement. The study posits that Rastafari presents an ambivalent case on issues of gender, climate change, health and human sexuality. The study grappled with the question: Is there a disparity between Rastafari philosophy and practice of ‘one love’ pertaining to gender, climate change, health and human sexuality? The research used Afrocentricity as a theoretical framework and a combination of a critical review of published works and documentary analysis of print and electronic media for data collection. The study established that on the one hand, Rastafari is making a steady progress towards promoting gender equality by carving Alternative African Masculinities in the family and the public sphere. On the other hand, the challenges that remain pertain to Rastafari views on human sexuality and sexual and reproductive health. In particular, the anti-homosexuality stance and skepticism towards the use of contraceptives, catapult the ambivalence of the sacred in Rastafari. The study concludes that just as the works of Chitando seek to ensure that ‘all may live’ by any means necessary, promoting transformative African Masculinities would be the best way forward for Rastafarians to ‘become members of a new race’, thereby reliving the legacy of Emperor Haile Selassie I in 21<sup>st</sup> century Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** Alternative African Masculinities, Gender, Health, Human sexuality, Rastafari, Zimbabwe

## Introduction

The paradoxes associated with religion are well documented in scholarship with the conclusion that it is ambivalent (see for example, Davie 1990; Beckford 1998; Diener et al., 2011). Appleby (2000) neatly captures this sense of paradox as “the ambivalence of the sacred”. The ambivalent effects of religion in the social, economic, political and human rights arenas have resulted in complex contextual realities and variations in society (Carrette 2014). Indeed, religion is a double-edged sword that can be a boon or bane depending on a variety of perspectives reflecting differences of gender, race, class, sexuality, among other variables. Within religions, there is a dichotomy of hatred and dehumanization, on the one hand, and love and humanization, on the other hand, which are as old as religion itself (Schweiker 2023). A typical case of hatred can be instanced by the biblical story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, where out of jealous Cain murdered Abel, because his sacrifice was not accepted as his brother’s. Cain refused to be his “brother’s keeper”, which could have been a loving and humanizing role consistent with a moral universe that promoted social justice and human flourishing. The ‘sightings and sorrows of religion’ (Schweiker 2023) show religious hypocrisy. For instance, the Judeo-Christian declaration of equality between sexes on the pretext that all were born in the image of God or the Pauline injunction that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28) or the Rastafarian principle of ‘One Love’, hardly match the treatment of women in many of these religious traditions and within the global social realities where patriarchy was predominant (Schweiker 2023). The United Nations Development Programme (2023) reported that almost nine in ten people around the world have “a basic bias against women”. Religion is implicated in these toxic and unbalanced relations. The need to interrogate and reverse this lopsided picture, which has kept women subjugated to the horrific alliance of religion, culture and patriarchy, is a clarion call evident in the majority of Ezra Chitando’s works and the element of applied theology for human flourishing. This chapter seeks to critically engage selected works of Ezra Chitando, which I contextualise within Rastafari perspectives on gender, health and human sexuality in Zimbabwe against the backdrop of the ‘one love’ principle in the movement. Often identified as a minority new religious movement (NRM) in society, Rastafari has been misunderstood, misinterpreted and underplayed in scholarship as compared to other religious traditions (Afari 2007; Sibanda 2017). The study posits that Rastafari pre-

sents an ambivalent case on issues of gender, reproductive health and human sexuality. The study grappled with the question: Is there a disparity between Rastafari philosophy and practice of 'one love' pertaining to gender, health and human sexuality? The study established that on the one hand, Rastafari is making a steady progress towards promoting gender equality by carving Alternative African Masculinities in the family and the public sphere. On the other hand, the challenges that remain pertain to Rastafari views on human sexuality and the sexual and reproductive health. In particular, the anti-homosexuality stance and skepticism towards the use of contraceptives, catapult 'the ambivalence of the sacred' in Rastafari. The study concludes that just as the works of Chitando seek to ensure that 'all may live' by any means necessary, promoting transformative African Masculinities would be the best way forward for Rastafarians to "become members of a new race", thereby reliving the legacy of His Imperial Majesty (H.I.M.) Emperor Haile Selassie I in 21<sup>st</sup> century Zimbabwe. We now turn to the theoretical framework and research methodology that guided the study.

## **Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology**

The research used Afrocentricity as a theoretical framework and a qualitative research methodology. Among the key proponents of the Afrocentric theory are Molefi Kete Asante, Ama Mazama, and Maulana Karenga. Afrocentricity examines phenomena through the lens of Africans as subjects rather than objects of study (Asante 1998, 2007). Therefore, Afrocentricity is a locus for cultural, ethnic, social and religious identity of the African people through which they come face to face with reality and the understanding of the world. On this basis, Afrocentricity helps to open new doors to African heritage and rediscovery of African culture. It promotes the agency of Africans and challenges white 'racial superiority' that placed Western culture at the centre whilst African heritages were peripherised (Asante 2007; Coltri 2015).

Also, known as Africology, Afrocentricity "employs a radical and progressive African perspective or Afrocentric interpretation which regards African people and non-African people to establish a new vision of Africa that will transform the way we think of science, history, religion, fashion, architecture, music, and ethics" (Coltri 2015:117). In addition, Coltri (2015:119) cites Asante asserting that "Afrocentricity is a social, cultural

and spiritual practice for people who want to determine or re-build the self of the person and of the community, giving dignity with new African – ‘black’ criteria and perceptions.” The lessons that emerge from Afrocentricity fit well into Rastafari experiences. Rastafari is a pan-African movement built around the thesis of Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity is helpful to the study as it gives agency and evokes a process of transformation and self-determination to the marginalized and oppressed groups in society as well as their views on issues of human sexuality, masculinity, gender and health. On this basis, Afrocentricity can be useful to understand Ezra Chitando’s works on transformative African masculinities, the call for gender balance and liberating theologies against the backdrop of Rastafari views on gender relations, human sexuality and the sexual and reproductive health issues, which trigger ‘the ambivalence of the sacred’ in the movement. The chapter employed a qualitative research methodology that combined a critical review of Ezra Chitando’s selected published works. In other words, through an in-depth analysis of Chitando’s key scholarly publications that address the intersection of religion, HIV & AIDS, and alternative masculinities in Africa, the study brings his contribution to the fore. In addition, through a documentary analysis of selected scholarly articles, books, and book chapters authored by Ezra Chitando, the chapter extracted significant themes, arguments, and insights.

## **Understanding Rastafari, Philosophy of One Love and Existential Realities**

This section provides an overview of Rastafari, the philosophy of ‘One Love’ and their existential realities in the context of this study. To avoid repetition, I take advantage of the fact that I have explored this kind of Rastafari background in my earlier works some of which will be referred to in this section. As a religion of Jamaican origin, Rastafari sticks out as one of the most significant new religious movements to emerge in the last century, which has influenced the world in varied ways. In this way, Rastafarians often claim that they have been grossly misunderstood, misrepresented, stigmatized, discriminated and misused in various contexts (Afari 2007; Sibanda 2017). The main factors attributed to the evolution of Rastafari include the three ideological pillars of Garveyism, Pan-Africanism and Ethiopianism. Marcus Garvey inspired Rastafari through the

“Back to Africa” movement prophetic messages on the coming of a redeemer black leader, which was fulfilled through the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie I as the Negus of Ethiopia on 2 November 1930 (Sibanda 2017:413; Sibanda 2022:217). Among the central beliefs of Rastafari is the divinity of Haile Selassie I, whom they regard as the head creator and black messiah, Jah Rastafari.

As Rastafari spread across the world, partly through reggae music and other forms of art and culture, the adherents regarded themselves as a “Movement of Jah People” (Edmonds 2012:6). Indeed, the Rastafari movement adopted the personal name of Haile Selassie I, which is ‘Ras Tafari’. The Rastafarians were united by a common cause of resistance to ‘Babylon’ systems, which refer to the unjust and hegemonic structures of the Westerners as well as any forms of *downpression* (oppression), whether black or white. This would create a system that respected the philosophies described through an alliteration of related concepts such ‘One Love’, ‘One Earth’, ‘One Aim’, ‘One Heart’, ‘One Destiny’ and ‘One God/JAH’ (Sibanda 2016:192). Though these concepts are closely related and feed into each other, the study is mainly interested in the philosophy of ‘One Love’ and to critique it in the context of Ezra Chitando’s works and the self-understanding of Rastafarians as a Movement of Jah People. The philosophy of ‘One Love’ in Rastafari is best illustrated by the famous Speech of His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie I to the United Nations in 1963, which I quote at length, where he said:

We must become something we have never been and for which our education and experience and environment have ill-prepared us. We must become bigger than we have ever been: more courageous, greater in spirit, larger in outlook. We must become members of a new race, overcoming petty prejudice, owing our ultimate allegiance not to nations but to our fellowmen within the human community (Selassie 1963).

The above quotation is a quest for a transformed humanity that defies the widespread experiences of racism, unjustified wars, gender-based violence and all that is toxic to human relatedness and human rights. Haile Selassie encouraged all the people to express ‘One Love’ by becoming “members of a new race” (see also, Manning n.d.), which is a caption that I adopt in the title of this chapter. The advice is foundational and prophetic as it can be applied towards the promotion of peace, love, harmony, gender equality, social justice and human rights in contemporary times. At the time when the speech was delivered, what was sticking out were the

racial innuendoes perpetrated by the Western nations on the prevalently weaker nations, including those in Africa. Picking up the stitches from the legacy of Haile Selassie I, Bob Marley, who was declared as “the most influential musician of the second half of the century” (Steffens 2000:60), and whom Rastas accept as a prophet, used reggae music to spread the message of love, peace, unity and togetherness. The lyrics of Marley’s song entitled “War” (1976) were based on the “War” Speech of H.I.M. delivered at the UN General Assembly, where Selassie appealed for transformation to become “members of a new race”, which would create a new global family that promoted healthy human relationships.

The “War” song in Rastafari understanding implies that it is necessary to fight for basic human rights and declare war everywhere oppressive “Babylon” systems are manifest as they believed that good would triumph over evil (Hagerman 2012). Therefore, reggae music is a narrative that denounces oppression and identifies with the oppressed and the pauperised. More significant to the understanding of Rastafari philosophy of ‘One Love’ from Marley is the album, “One Love” (1977), which was declared by the BBC as a “Song of the Millennium” (Steffens 2000). Marley’s “One Love” song is central to Rastafari call for peace, social justice, one love and one heart (Sibanda 2023a), which dovetails with Selassie’s exhortation to become “members of a new race” across the gender, class and racial divides. This implies that Rastafari can serve as a resource for resisting inequality, marginalization and exploitation.

The question of gender justice is one area that has attracted criticism against the predominant Rastafari masculine existential reality. Some researchers noted women’s subordination amidst liberation theology as characteristic to the movement (see Lake 1998). In addition, it is said that the biblical teachings, particularly the Levitical codes, were utilized to explain an ideology of female impurity during the menstrual cycle (Edmonds 2012:95). On the whole, this resulted in the exclusion and marginalization of women Rastas from some rituals and social interactions. However, despite the alleged reality of gender inequality that Rastafarians are faced with in their lived religion, it is important to explore how the Kingmen strive to uphold the dignity of their Queens on the basis of an Afrocentric model they term the “Omega Balance”. In Rastafari circles, Selassie I and Empress Menen are also known as “King Alpha” and “Queen Omega”, respectively (Sibanda 2023b:10). These titles are significant in understanding the Rastafari perceptions on gender relations, which can propel women agency in the movement. The ‘Omega balance’

is a critical way of also re-imagining the restoration the Kemetic principle of MAAT within the Rastafari movement. In other words, the 'Omega balance' expresses the gender equity relationship of HIM Emperor Hail Selassie I and his wife Empress Menen Asfaw who got married in July 1911. Following a golden wedding anniversary in 1961, the two were only separated by the untimely death of Empress Menen in 1962, but the Rastas believe that this marriage was a union of hearts and souls, which constantly reminded them of true love on this planet. This resonates with the "One Love" philosophy, which can transform the Rastafari gender relations in Zimbabwe. For instance, from documentary analysis of the messages shared in some Rastafari social media groups a standard greeting goes as follows: "Greetings in the name of HIM Emperor Hail Selassie I and Empress Menen – One perfect balance. Peace, Love and Inity to all." From the same platform one Rasta Elder posted the statement that further entrenched the hope for balancing the scales in the Rastafari movement, thus: "A man is not above a woman and a woman is not above a man. Our ancestors dealt with balance." Though it would be misleading to consider Rastafari as a homogenous group on the issue of gender relations, it can be asserted that it is an organic movement that can transform toxic masculinities.

Despite this positive and promising orientation, other paradoxes and criticisms leveled against Rastafari include their perceptions on sexual and reproductive health and human sexuality. In exploring issues of sexual and reproductive health, it is vital to situate the Rastafari community perceptions within the global, continental and national experiences to some diseases such as HIV & AIDS. This will pave way for invoking Ezra Chitando's alternative masculinities doctrine to be covered in the forthcoming sections of the study. The general statistics on how sub-Saharan Africa has been impacted by HIV & AIDS is well known (see for example, UNAIDS 2023), but what is lacking is its effects on Rastafarians in Zimbabwe. One reason why the statistics are scarce is because Rastafari tend to regard issues of access to facilities on sexual and reproductive health as an individual choice. However, as a movement of resistance to "Babylon" systems, Rastas are generally suspicious of the use of Western contraceptive methods for family planning such as Jadelle (levonorgestral implants), family planning tablets and even condoms. This is because on one hand, some of these methods have side effects that upsets the natural body functions, whilst on the other hand, it goes against God's plan for humanity to be fruitful and multiply. What emerges from the study is that



some members of the Rastafari communities have been infected and affected by the effects of HIV & AIDS pandemic in Zimbabwe. In addition, some members have also succumbed to the deadly disease, partly because they never opted to undergo HIV & AIDS Counselling and Testing, which could also lead to adoption of antiretroviral therapy. Thus, the Rastafari ideology that promotes suspicion of Western medical interventions is detrimental to human flourishing and has the potential of increasing the risk of spreading HIV & AIDS in Zimbabwe.

Finally, the existential realities of Rastas are also manifest through their views on human sexuality. The heterosexual stance is the most dominant position on the basis of Afrocentricity. In this way, anti-homosexuality is the main principle followed in the Rastafari movement in Zimbabwe. This is regarded as a theology of exclusion that perpetrates 'petty prejudice' and douses the 'One Love' principle that Rastas advocate. From documentary analysis on ideal human sexual relations posted on one of the Rastafari social media groups, one message was captured as follows: "Yes I, King and Queen ... the balance. No King and King, nor Queen and Queen ... No sodomite ... even the lie-ble [Bible] burns the buttybwai inna Sodom and Gomorrah." Through non-violent actions, Rastafari communities in Zimbabwe perpetrated 'structural violence' in the context of same sex relations, thereby promoting hegemonic masculinities and existential inequalities on the basis of queer sexual identities. This is useful in providing a closer analysis in the light of the works of Ezra Chitando, to which we now turn.

## **Ezra Chitando: An Eminent Academic of the 21st Century**

This section provides an overview of the background of Ezra Chitando focusing on a brief history of how I came to know him, before delving into some of the themes, which pre-occupy his works. Ezra Chitando is a distinguished and brilliant but an unassuming African scholar renowned for his works, which mainly focus on method and theory in the study of religion, theology, gender studies, HIV/AIDS studies, African masculinities, religion and development. Educated in Zimbabwe from primary, secondary and tertiary institution level, Chitando was well grounded to the extent that upon the completion of his Master of Arts degree in Religious Studies he was recruited by the then Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy of the University of Zimbabwe as a Lecturer, ahead of his

peers. It was during these years when he was a Lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe that I had the privilege of being one of his students when I was doing a Special Honours programme in 1996. I can testify that his skyrocketing brilliance during lectures was later to bear fruit since I was inspired by his approach. I still remember that through the topic on New Religious Movements under Studies in World Religions, I came to appreciate research on marginalized communities such as Rastafari. Rastafari is a research area, which I later pursued under his mentorship for my DPhil programme at the University of Zimbabwe. Indeed, from among a cohort of countless students that passed through his hands as one who was “Equipped and ready to serve” (Chitando 2010) I can testify that Ezra Chitando was our ‘Gamaliel’, then and now as he continues to churn out socially-engaged scholarship on different cutting-edge themes.

Well before Chitando had risen through the ranks to be a Professor of Religious Studies in the areas of History and Phenomenology of Religion, it was clear from his earliest publications in the aspects of method and theory that he was closely following the footsteps of some of his mentors such as James L. Cox. Apparently, during his stint at the University of Zimbabwe, Cox popularized the application of the phenomenology of religion in the study of religion, a legacy which Chitando managed to uphold through his works. Besides breaking new ground as a prolific writer and a lecturer whose sessions were appetizing to one and all, Chitando was and is still actively involved in a number of academic and ecumenical bodies. As such, Chitando’s influence goes beyond the four walls of the classroom to the engagement of communities particularly through his former portfolio as a Theology Consultant on HIV & AIDS and a regional coordinator for southern Africa for the World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical HIV & AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy (EHAIA). In addition, because of his works on applied theology on HIV & AIDS, Chitando has had close partnership and active participation with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle), where he has collaborated to produce extensive literature on health, gender and development.

The importance of the collaboration of EHAIA and the Circle to the career of Ezra Chitando cannot be minimized. In the words of Chitando (2008:114) EHAIA “recognized the strategic importance of the Circle to African theology. Consequently, it has formed a viable partnership with the Circle. EHAIA and the Circle have collaborated in organizing workshops, conferences and publications.” All these are platforms that Chitando utilized effectively as an academic and theology consultant at

EHAIA by ensuring the mainstreaming of HIV and gender issues in theological education in Africa. As a deliberate move, both EHAIA and the Circle sought to promote the active and meaningful participation of women at conferences, workshops and seminars, which they organized as a way of engendering African theology (Chitando 2008:115). In other words, through collaborations of EHAIA and the Circle, there was greater openness on themes regarding sex and sexuality, which affected many African women who had greater vulnerability to the HIV pandemic. This was part of a long academic and community engagement that coloured his scholarly works. Tackling the intricate relationship between religion, HIV & AIDS, and alternative masculinities in Africa emerged as crucial subjects of Chitando's contributions to the academy. As will be explored in greater detail, in the next section, it can be argued that his research straddles across the multifaceted dynamics of methodological matters in the study of religion, religious beliefs, practices, human sexuality, development and gender identities in relation to the spread and management of HIV & AIDS across the continent.

### **Selected Themes from the Works of Ezra Chitando**

Building up on the foregoing, this section proceeds to explore selected themes from Chitando's works in order to uncover key insights and contributions to the broader discourse on religion. The selected themes include gender-based violence, human sexuality, reproductive health, and African Masculinities in the African context. It can be argued that all these themes have a common link to the problems created by African Masculinities. Therefore, by examining his research, publications, and academic engagements through these themes, this sheds light on the innovative perspectives Chitando has brought to religious studies and how these insights have shaped the discourse in this discipline. The problem of gender-based violence has been tackled in various works. One of these works is a co-edited volume entitled: *Justice not Silence: Churches Facing Sexual and Gender-based Violence* (2013), where Ezra Chitando pointed out that sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) was a widespread and debilitating theological challenge that bedeviled churches and contributed to the spread of HIV & AIDS in contemporary society. The argument posited is that on the whole, men would be "expressing their power, control and dominance" (Chitando & Chirongoma 2013:9). In that way, gender-based

violence seems to be taken as a right by the perpetrators who are mainly men. The church and theological institutions are challenged to respond to SGBV in a liberating way to enforce justice and not to remain silent. Women were noted to be in the majority of victims of SGBV as compared to the male counterparts because it is largely anchored on the structures of patriarchy, which results in the cultural, sexual and the economic vulnerability of women (Pillay 2009). Therefore, for Chitando (2008:174), it is a “public secret” that poverty fuels the spread of HIV & AIDS in Africa and exacerbates women’s chances to be exposed not only to the disease but to SGBV from which they suffer in silence and secrecy.

In addition to the above, Chitando refuses to condone any form of violence across the gender divide. In a related work against SGBV, presented during a campaign on 16 days of activism against GBV, Chitando (2018) asseverates that “we cannot baptise violence.” Chitando’s observation was that religion was complicit in perpetrating SGBV, such that instead of pointing fingers to ‘bad people out there’, the ‘sacred canopy’ of religion had not done enough to prevent women from experiencing violence. In other words, it was urgent for the church and people of other religious and non-religious orientation to urgently address SGBV, whereby men would shun abusing sacred texts to justify and downplay violence against women. Through EHAIA and the Circle, Chitando further highlights the need for churches to uphold justice and women’s health in the face of SGBV and HIV (Chitando & Chirongoma 2013:10). This supports the idea that women are human and deserve equal rights and human rights, which must go beyond lip service and be reflected through the churches’ praxis and advocacy. Chitando’s work with particular reference to SGBV in the context of religion, shows his advocacy on the urgency of challenging “all the forces and processes that diminish health and well-being” (Chitando & Chirongoma 2013:11), especially among women and children. All in all, Chitando is candid on matters of SGBV and depicts religion in ambivalence as ‘dangerous’ and also ‘liberating’ to society.

Related to the above theme on SGBV, Chitando also contributed on the theme of human sexuality. In some of his works, Chitando traces the hostilities rendered to sexual minorities, including same-sex relationships and lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ). Challenging churches/religions to set their priorities right in promoting human flourishing, Chitando asks: “Why do male church leaders seem to have limitless energy when it comes to debates on homosexuality, but ap-

pear frozen when it comes to confronting SGBV?” (Chitando & Chirongoma 2013:10). This becomes a misplaced priority in his view. In another co-edited study on *Public religion, homophobia and the politics of homosexuality in Africa*, in which I also contributed a chapter, Chitando exposes the manifestation of political and state-sponsored homophobia on the African continent (van Klinken and Chitando 2016). The main challenge was the fact that Africa has been described as the most homophobic and most religious continent on Earth, but paradoxically religion and culture were registered as complicit, alongside political leaders, to the anti-homosexuality policies and actions. On this basis, Chitando contributes to the debate on the intersection of religion, homophobia and the politics of homosexuality in Africa from different perspectives and contexts, which are debates with implications on human rights violations. It is further observed that there are different understandings of sexuality, personhood, human rights and how ‘public religion’ and (homo)sexual politics interact (van Klinken and Chitando 2016:5,6). In this way, Chitando delved into the controversies over sexual orientation as something that is partly inspired by religious actors and beliefs to the detriment of sexual minority rights.

The issues of health, healing and well-being are tackled from various angles in the works of Chitando. One of the themes which was selected is that of reproductive health, which is explored here in the context of HIV & AIDS. Although HIV & AIDS are sometimes described as an “equal opportunity disease” (see Pillay 2009:103), the socio-cultural, economic and sexual vulnerability of many women and girls were behind the factors that increased the infection rate among women. Due to social, economic, cultural and spiritual factors, some women and girls cannot negotiate for safer sexual practices such as using condoms to avoid unplanned pregnancies or prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). Different religions have conspired to deny African women their health (Chitando 2008:172). Indeed, in some cultures and communities, women do not have control over their bodies and in turn cannot make responsible decisions and choices in their reproductive health. There is systematic structural violence and layers of secrecy surrounding women’s reproductive health that increased the vulnerability to HIV infection (Chitando 2008:173). Thus, a radical approach is required to stem the tide of the AIDS pandemic in the face of secrecy.

The theme of men and masculinities is another critical area of research that has held sway in the works of Chitando. The main challenge was that

religious and cultural ideologies have been used to promote toxic, dangerous and hegemonic masculinities in relation to gender and HIV & AIDS (Chitando & Chirongoma 2012:3). There are diverse forms of masculinities, which are socially constructed. In other words, masculinities are not fixed but malleable, fluid and dynamic. According to Van Klinken and Chitando (2015) the fact that masculinities are socially constructed, they can be deconstructed and transformed. On this basis, Chitando refers to the possibility of tapping from the agency of men in order to produce liberating and redemptive masculinities to downplay the “crises of masculinity.” It was established that in the African context, men have become targets for change since they were regarded as part of the problem and a solution towards addressing questions of masculinity in the context of religion and HIV. Apparently, religion was seen as a double-edged sword in relation to masculinities, gender-based violence and HIV & AIDS (Van Klinken and Chitando 2015). Chitando also refers to the problem that arises in the context of same-sex relations, which are a religious taboo and have attracted discrimination and violence as alternative human sexualities. Due to homophobia, homosexuality is a reality which has been affected by “four deadly Ss: silence, secrecy, shame and stigmatization” (Chitando & Chirongoma 2012:14), with implications on human rights and public health concerns, particularly in the context of HIV & AIDS interventions. Chitando’s involvement with EHAIA advances the need for involving the local churches to transform masculinities in the context of HIV & AIDS. Thus, there is a clarion call in the works of Chitando to urgently engage men and utilize their agency in order to reconfigure to factory settings and transform their intolerant masculinities to liberating alternative African masculinities.

### **Becoming ‘Members of a New Race’: Juxtaposing the Works of Ezra Chitando and Rastafari Perspectives in Zimbabwe**

In order to appreciate the contribution of Ezra Chitando to the development of scholarship in the discipline of Religious Studies, this section juxtaposes the selected works of Chitando and Rastafari perspectives on sexual and gender-based violence, reproductive health, human sexuality, HIV & AIDS and masculinities in Zimbabwe. As has been alluded to in earlier sections of this chapter, Rastafari is a Pan-Africanist movement

built around the legacy and philosophy of 'One Love', which is best illustrated by the famous Speech of His Imperial Majesty at the United Nations General Assembly in 1963, where he, *inter alia*, urged people to "become members of a new race". The words of Selassie are foundational to the need to break down barriers anchored on religious and cultural ideologies that have been used to promote racial segregation, gender inequalities, homophobia and hegemonic masculinities. Therefore, the popular 'One Love' principle among Rastafari communities is a fertile ground for nurturing alternative African masculinities and agency to evoke a process of transformation in the gender relations and issues of human sexuality. Juxtaposing the Rastafari views on gender relations, human sexuality and the sexual and reproductive health issues, with Ezra Chitando's works trigger interesting dimensions that would show 'the ambivalence of the sacred' in the movement.

First, the call for gender balance and liberating theologies in Chitando's works can be a basis of comparison with the Rastafari experiences against the backdrop of 'becoming members of a new race'. Although the principle of 'One Love' is a persuasive, pervasive and persistent watch phrase in Rastafari, it can be argued that it is both liberating and oppressive at the same time. To a certain extent Rastafari can be regarded as 'an oppressive and gendered movement' to the detriment of its women counterparts (Sibanda 2023b). The gender stereotypes in the movement manifest through the role and status of women, subordination in marriage and spiritual matters, which evoke questions of gender justice and liberating masculinities, where words must be matched with action, particularly on the basis of the principle of 'One Love'. Apparently, biblical texts are used to support Rastafari gender standpoints and to give the Kingman leeway to express his patriarchal authority as head of the family. With this set up of gender imbalance, Rastawomen find it difficult to assert themselves in sexual relationships as they are weakened by male power. In previous research, I observed that "the use of contraceptives such as condoms and family planning tablets was discouraged as a Western ploy to suppress the growth of the black populace. This exposed the Rastawomen to the risk of contracting HIV and to have a lot of children, which earned them the superficial tag of an ideal Mother from Rastamen" (Sibanda 2023b:8). In addition, the same study established that "the ability to bear many children for the Kingman has not spared some of the women Rastas from abuses such as gender-based violence, neglect and lack of respect as an equal

partner” (Sibanda 2023b:8). Therefore, the Rastamen need to be reconfigured to exercise love, respect and care to the Rastafari women to match the vision of HIM Emperor Haile Selassie, whom they regard as a role model of gender balance in his relationship with Empress Menen. In turn, this echoes the works of Ezra Chitando that seek to enforce liberating and transformative masculinities in society in the context of SGBV and HIV & AIDS.

Another source of criticisms levelled against Rastafari is anchored on their homophobic attacks towards same-sex relations, which are churned out through music and other communication avenues. As noted in some of my writings, Rastafarians openly declared a “war” against what they regarded as evil, including same-sex relations. Using an Afrocentric standpoint, they claim that ‘real men’ would not condone homosexuality, which is ‘un-African’, ‘unnatural’, ‘unrighteous’ and ‘evil’ imposed by the Western ‘Babylon’ systems to confuse and stall the population growth of Africans. In fact, JAH created male and female for procreation and must replenish the earth (See, Sibanda 2016; Sibanda 2021:137; Sibanda 2023a). They further assert that the body is a temple of the Most-High which must be kept pure and holy and homosexuality is a form of ‘witchcraft’ because it is counterproductive. It can be argued that Rastafari masculinities are intolerant to alternative sexualities through ‘structural violence’. The Rastafari position on homosexuality is incompatible with the advice of H.I.M. Emperor Haile Selassie I of shunning ‘petty prejudices’ and becoming members of a new race. In the context of HIV & AIDS, Chitando laments the dangers of “theological rigidity”, which is a driver and co-determinant of the epidemic arguing that the church must contend with the reality that “vulnerability to HIV infection goes far beyond individual morality” (Chitando 2007:24). The most vulnerable to HIV infection are those on the margins of society including women, men who have sex with men, children, among others. Behaving as if same-sex relations are non-existent has detrimental effects on public health concerns, including the spread of HIV & AIDS (Van Klinken and Chitando 2015). Because of the fear of reprimand, stigma and discrimination one cannot rule out the possibility of Rasta lesbians and gays operating in the closet (Sibanda 2021:138), dampened by silence, secrecy and shame, which creates a time-bomb of a health crisis in the context of the spread of HIV & AIDS. Lack of condom use and a low level of HIV testing are lingering loopholes exacerbated by toxic masculinities in some faith communities in Africa (Van



Klinken and Chitando 2015), and Rastafarians can be evaluated in the same light.

Despite the foregoing gloomy picture that surrounds the Rastafari African masculinities, it is detrimental to throw out the baby with the bathwater. There is a lot of potential that can be developed from the Rastafari principle of 'One Love'. This can be a source of hope for the Rastafari communities to be advocates of gender justice. Following the example of the 'Omega balance', which mirrors the gender-equitable relationship between H.I.M. Emperor Haile Selassie I and Empress Menen, it can be argued that Rastamen can readily customize and transform their aggressive masculinities to the extent of shunning gender-based violence by supporting, sharing and promoting sexual and reproductive health patterns that are life-giving with their partners. For instance, the playing of drums in Nyahbinghi Rastafari is a gendered practice only confined to Kingmen or Empresses in the menopause. As confirmed by one of the Empresses in Zimbabwe, "the playing of drums before menopause by women was detrimental to the fertility and reproductive health of women, which was critical in Rastafari" (Sibanda 2023b:9). Thus, the rule on the playing of drums in the *trod* was a progressive reproductive health precaution, which Rasta women acknowledged and appreciated. In addition, Rastafarians can utilize reggae music with its "universal message of one love" to promote the liberating masculinities and attain Selassie's vision to "become members of a new race". The works of Chitando encourage men to be liberated from patriarchy as a constructive step towards attaining gender justice through accompaniment and solidarity to show love and acceptance of the marginalized.

## Conclusion

This chapter sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of Chitando's intellectual journey, his individual and collaborative works with fellow scholars, and the lasting influence of his work on the study of religion in the contemporary world. As one of the leading African male scholars of religion, he addressed diverse themes, which were juxtaposed to the Rastafari perspectives on alternative African masculinities. By analyzing Chitando's insights, into diverse themes, the chapter demonstrated how religion shapes gender identities, influences HIV & AIDS outcomes, and offers potential avenues for addressing health disparities in the African

context. In addition, Rastafari has the potential to enforce liberating masculinities through unlearning “petty prejudice” that stultified gender justice, increased SGBV and increased the risk of spreading HIV & AIDS pandemic. Since the gender stereotypes and ‘theological rigidity’ was not God-given, but socially constructed in Rastafari, it was possible to deconstruct and transform the aggressive masculinities to “become members of a new race” in order to promote human flourishing. The principle of ‘One Love’ is a life-affirming attribute that needs to be fully exploited to address the existential realities and challenges. Through this principle, the Rastas would arguably begin to read the Bible in a liberating way, which reconfigures aggressive masculinities to create alternative African masculinities. By the same token, the writings of Chitando seek to produce men who are responsible in order to ensure that ‘all may live’ by any means necessary. Promoting transformative African Masculinities is critical for Rastafarians to balance the scales and “become members of a new race”, thereby reliving the legacy of Emperor Haile Selassie I in 21<sup>st</sup> century Zimbabwe. I conclude by evoking the caption of Sokfa John, Lilian Siwila and Federico Settler (2013) that says “Men Can, Should and Must Change!” The socially constructed masculinities are malleable to the extent that I-consciousness among Rastamen can produce liberating masculinities, the ‘Omega balance’ and the promotion of human flourishing and justice for all.

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