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A Therapy for Trauma among Widows in Malawi

Mwawi N. Chilongozi & Mercy Chilapula

Abstract

Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma is a renowned woman theologian and an ordained minister in the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), Blantyre Synod in Malawi. She is also a writer who has written several articles. Kapuma's theology can be described as a narrative theology of pastoral care. This chapter narrates the life, writings and theology of Kapuma. It shows that Kapuma was a fearless crusader of women's rights in the Church as she has fought for the ordination of women in the Church and championed the cause of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. She has also contributed to theological education as a Senior Lecturer in Practical Theology at the Zomba Theological University of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in Malawi. As a member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Kapuma has written on pastoral care of widows as women who are marginalised in most communities in Africa. Kapuma's theology is a narrative theology as she is committed to the theological significance of storytelling and the power of storytelling that brings healing to the traumatised and especially widows. The chapter also demonstrates that through her writing, Kapuma narrates the challenges that widows face from property grabbing to widow cleansing rituals and argues that the church has an important role of pastoral care to the widows as they are denied their human dignity and most of them suffer in silence. The influence of her theology was far reaching as the Blantyre Synod had taken on board the narrative theology of pastoral care for widows while some congregations/churches were creating support networks for widows.

Keywords: Theology, pastoral care, therapy, trauma, widows, Malawi, Getrude Kapuma

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the life of Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma and her work as a woman theologian and as one of the matriarchs of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Malawi. Kapuma played a leading role in the struggle for emancipation and ordination within Blantyre Synod, and fought for women's ordination until it was accepted by the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), Blantyre Synod. She fought for the recognition of women's gifts, leadership and ordination of women not only in her Synod but in all the Synods of the CCAP church. Kapuma advocates for women empowerment in church and society, women's rights and respect for women's dignity. She has not only done this through activism but also through her writing.

Kapuma's theology is narrative theology of pastoral care (2012:70; 2018:96). In addition to the fight for women's rights and dignity, Kapuma is passionate about pastoral care of widows in the society and church. Most widows go through dehumanising experiences that are perpetuated by cultural beliefs and practices that deny widows their rights. Kapuma, a widow¹ herself understands the trauma that women go through when they lose the husbands in death. Thus, she advocates for pastoral care of widows in the church through storytelling that allows the widow to narrate their stories and experiences. She argues that storytelling helps to bring healing from grief and the trauma that widows go through after death of their husbands. This is similar to what the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and African Women Theologies advocate for – storytelling as a source for theology and that storytelling brings healing (Mwaura 2015:96). Kapuma is one of the longstanding members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Although she did not attend the convocation of the Circle in 1989, she has attended all the Circles Conferences since 1996 and has written and published several articles. Currently, she is the Country Coordinator of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Malawi. She was elected to this position at the 5th Pan-African Conference in Gaborone, Botswana. The chapter proceeds with outlining the methodology and Kapuma's biography before focusing on her contributions to liberative theologies.

¹ Kapuma's husband died in a road accident in South Africa in 1998 whilst she was studying at University of Fort Hare (Kapuma 2012:62).

Methodology

This chapter focuses on the life, work, writings and theology of Gertrude Kapuma as one of the matriarchs of the Circle. Therefore, qualitative research methodology is employed. The qualitative methodology approach is employed to analyse Kapuma's narrative theology of pastoral care in order to have an in-depth understanding of her theology. The chapter used document analysis in which data analysed was from secondary sources (Babbie 2010:288; Best 2012:87). In this regard, document analysis was conducted on the articles, newspapers and Kapuma's PhD Thesis. Document analysis approach was chosen because it was hoped to provide insight of the narrative theology of pastoral care. However, this method has limitations as each document that researchers analyse has a specific context and identity that might be selective and sometimes biased (Silva 2012:141). Similarly, authors of documents may leave out some information in accordance to their assumptions (Silva 2012:141). Nonetheless, we have tried to overcome these limitations by analysing a number of documents including those written by Kapuma herself and others.

Kapuma's Biography

Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma is a Malawian woman theologian and scholar who hails from Blantyre District in Malawi. She was born to Mr. Fallen and Mrs. Iris Sulumba of Tradition Authority Kapeni in Blantyre (Kapuma, interview, 11.1.2017). Her mother comes from Mafa village while her father comes from Kafupa Village both under Tradition Authority Kapeni. She did her primary school at Chigumula Primary School. She did her secondary education in three secondary schools. She started Form 1 at Chichiri Secondary School in Blantyre. When her parents moved from Blantyre to Lilongwe, she transferred from Chichiri to Bwaila Secondary School. She did her Forms 3 and 4 at Stella Maris Secondary School in Blantyre. After finishing her secondary education, she went straight to theological training which was very strange at that time to see a young woman after secondary school to go for theological training. Although women were not allowed to study theology, CCAP Blantyre Synod had opened up for women to study theology with the intention of having women theologians to work within the church but not as ordained ministers. Upon completion of her secondary education, Kapuma was

encouraged to go for theological training because of the opportunity that had opened up. Kapuma studied theology at a time when in Malawi it was unheard of that women could study theology. In 1975, with the support of Rev. Cheleuka of Chigumula Congregation, she was accepted for theological training as the first woman to study theology in the history of Blantyre Synod.

She was enrolled at Kapeni College in 1976 where she studied for one year. When Zomba Theological College (ZTC) (an ecumenical theological college that was training only men for ministry at the time Kapuma enrolled at the College) was opened in 1977, she went to complete her theological studies from 1977 to 1980 and graduated with a licentiate in theology. During her studies at Zomba Theological College, Kapuma faced hardships and she had to endure intimidation. For example, in an interview (11.1.2017), she revealed that she endured insults and intimidating behaviours from male students. In addition, she notes that at Zomba Theological College being the only woman student enrolled to study theology at the college, male students regarded her as an outsider, as their thinking was theology is a discipline for men only (Kapuma, interview, 11.1.2017). As such she was usually segregated and often harassed, just because she is a woman (Kapuma, interview, 11.1.2017). She recalled that this segregation and isolation led her to work hard and to perform very well in class just to prove to the men that women can do better than some of them (Kapuma, interview, 11.1.2017). The treatment she got at college was unbelievable for she considered this as a calling from God. She spent the three years of college life in struggles attempting to prove to the male folk that she was called by God and that she must be treated equally like everybody else. Nevertheless, for Kapuma, this turned out to be a good and positive experience in many ways and she simply had to persevere well, knowing that she was called by God to His service. After graduating with a licentiate in Theology, she was not ordained because she had been trained for a different purpose. In this case, the CCAP Blantyre Synod had drawn up a ten years strategic plan in 1976 whereby one of the items was to train a woman theologian to coordinate the programmes at Chigodi Women's Centre. She therefore became influential in the running of the women's organization and became well known as a pioneer among others who fought for ordination of women in CCAP, Blantyre Synod.

Gertrude Aopesyaga Sulumba was married to Paul Kapuma and they had two children before she was ordained as a minister of word and sacrament. Unfortunately, her husband died before she ordained as a minister.

Kapuma's Role in Empowering Women in the Church

As alluded to earlier on, after graduating from Zomba Theological College, Kapuma was not ordained as a minister. However, she was posted to Chigodi Women's Centre as the Director of women's programs where she worked from 1980 to 1995. As the Director for the Chigodi Women's Centre, she worked tirelessly to ensure that the work of women had an impact in her Synod. To her, working at the Women's Centre was the positive thing she experienced as the refusal to ordination did not alter the fact that she was called by God (Kapuma, interview 11.1.2017). She remained committed to empowering women in the church through teaching the basic knowledge of the Bible and Bible studies. She introduced new programs at the centre and these included Women and Law, Women Empowerment, Human Rights and Child-Survival. Kapuma organized different workshops such as *The Role of women in the Church* to improve the status of women within the Synod. This made a huge difference at the centre because previously the only programs that were offered were Adult Literacy, Bible Studies, Food Security and Health and Nutrition. Furthermore, she helped the Women's Centre to excel financially since at first, the centre heavily relied on overseas grants (Kapuma, interview 11.1.2017). Nonetheless, she was not allowed to perform certain functions because she is a woman. These included doing committal services as well as preparing Holy Communion. This is because tradition and male dominated hierarchy made it difficult for Kapuma to perform well because of some barriers.

Given her ordeals, it is not surprising that Kapuma played a leading role in the struggle for emancipation and ordination within Blantyre Synod. She managed to organize her fellow women to request the Blantyre Synod to consider women's ordination as a priority (Phiri 1996: 70-73). When Blantyre Synod denied their request at the General Administrators' Committee at Chilema in 1995, Kapuma and other women marched to call the church to consider ordination of women as ministers of word and sacrament (Phiri 1996:65). After the march, which is narrated by Prof. Isabel Phiri in her article "*Marching, stoned and Suspended: Christian women in Malawi 1995*" Kapuma and others were suspended from the

church. Because of this incidence, she left the Women's Centre and became a Hospital chaplain at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital in Blantyre and served for 6 months only.

Despite the challenges she faced as a woman theologian, Kapuma was recognized internationally because of her achievements such that she was invited to attend different workshops across Africa. Thus, in 1995 she served as a missionary at Amarillo, Texas for three months where she dwelt much on issues of the role of women. Later in the same year, she was awarded a Dorothy Cadbury Fellowship (because of her commitment in the fight for gender justice in CCAP Blantyre Synod) to go to Selly Oak College in Birmingham to internalize the African perspective of gender and culture there. Whilst in the UK, Kapuma was equipped on the issues of violence against women and how the church could help women become independent. She incessantly fought for women's ordination until it was accepted by the Synod in 2001.

In 1996 she went to University of Fort Hare in South Africa to do further studies (NyaGondwe Fiedler 2017:108). There she did her bachelor's and master's degrees. In South Africa she pioneered the establishment of the Gender and Theology Centre at the University of Fort Hare which was funded by the World Council of Churches (WCC).² She also served as a lecturer of Gender and Theology courses up to March 2003. In the same year, she came back to Malawi and continued her work with CCAP Blantyre Synod.

Kapuma's Contribution to the CCAP Blantyre Synod

The history of ordination of women in CCAP Blantyre cannot be narrated without the mention of Rev. Dr Gertrude Kapuma. She was at the centre of the struggle for ordination of women in CCAP Blantyre Synod. Although Kapuma is the pioneer woman theologian in the CCAP Blantyre Synod, she was not the first ordained female minister. Kapuma was ordained as a minister of Word and Sacrament in 2003 at a colourful ceremony that took place at St Columba's CCAP in Blantyre. As a minister, Kapuma served at Nthemba, Chilumba and Mulanje Mission Congregations in CCAP Blantyre Synod. At these congregations, she initiated a lot of projects including church structures and building a manse. Later she

² Letter from World Council of Churches by Rev Dr. Silas Chiphangwi to Mercy Chilapula.

was elected as the Presbytery Clerk of Blantyre City Presbytery where she worked as an Administrator mediating between the Presbytery and the congregations. She liaised with the Synod on issues which the congregations wanted to be assisted with. During her tenure of office, she managed to revive the partnership that existed between the Congregations of the Blantyre City Presbytery in Malawi and the Aberdeen Presbytery in Scotland. However, Kapuma was misunderstood by some members of her congregation, her office was blocked and the Synod decided to transfer her to settle the matter.

With all these achievements, people tended to liken her to any other ordinary woman but not as an achiever and a minister. For instance, when she was interviewed on how she perceives the role of women clergy within the Synod, Kapuma (interview, 11.1.2017) responded by saying, "The role of women clergy is very important to the Church only that many people have preconceived ideas on the role of women clergy in the Church." She also added that women clergy are still looked down upon as incapable. Women clergy are less encouraged by the people they work with when they hold some key positions. Instead, they are simply given assistant roles within the Church set up. She further said, "For a woman clergy to be appreciated, she has to work twice as hard as a male clergy to prove to the world that she is capable (Kapuma, interview, 11.1.2017). Kapuma suggests that women ministers lack support as colleagues do not accord them the much needed support. Beyond this, the role of women ministers lack scriptural affirmation that would compel men and women accept them as partners in the service. Relative to this, Kapuma noted that although women ministers and male clergy may have some differences, still they need to support each other. The authors' interviews with Kapuma further indicated that wherever Woman Clergy have served, the people will usually see their achievements because of their hard-working spirit.

In addition to her service in the church as a minister, Kapuma also served a board member of National AIDS Commission (NAC) in Malawi.

Kapuma's Contribution to the Ecumenical Movement and Church

Kapuma has served in different positions both at regional and international ecumenical bodies. At the 7th General Assembly of the All -Africa

Conference of Churches (AACC) held in 1997 in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, Kapuma was elected executive member of the General Committee of AACC and held that position from 1997 to 2003. In 2003 at the 8th Assembly of the AACC held in Yaounde, Cameroon, she was also elected as a Vice President for the Southern Africa Region and her tenure of office was 5 years up to the 9th Assembly of AACC held in Maputo, Mozambique in 2008. As the Vice President, she was the overall regional coordinator of the ten Southern Region countries. This helped her to understand fully the significance of the Ecumenical Church, and the challenges and achievements and weaknesses of the church.

Furthermore, whilst she was serving as the Vice President of the AACC, she was elected as honorary president of Religions for Peace in 2005. Founded in 1970, Religions for Peace is an international coalition of representative from world religions based in New York in USA and has the aim of promoting peace among world religions (<https://www.rfp.org>). Kapuma has also served as vice board chairperson of Theological Education by Extension in Malawi (TEEM) and she is currently a member of the Theology Society of Malawi.

Furthermore, currently Kapuma is also the Deputy Secretary General of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) General Assembly. She is the first woman to hold this position since the establishment of CCAP in 1924. The CCAP General Assembly comprises of five Synods namely Blantyre, Nkhoma and Livingstonia Synods in Malawi, Zambia Synod in Zambia and Harare Synod in Zimbabwe.

Kapuma completed her Doctorate degree at the University of Pretoria in 2018 and was currently a senior lecturer at Zomba Theological University (ZTU). As alluded earlier on, Kapuma did her theological training at Zomba Theological College (ZTC) where she is now lecturing before it became a university in 2021. At ZTC, she was elected Dean of Students and she was not accepted as Dean of Students by both male lecturers and students because of her gender (Kapuma interview, 11.1.2017). Male students did not believe that a woman minister could be their lecturer. This is related to the case of Molly Longwe (NyaGondwe Fiedler 2002:195-96) and Isabel Apawo Phiri (Phiri 1996:89-91) whose roles as women lecturers met with fierce resistance from men within the Baptist Theological Seminary and Chancellor College Campuses respectively. However, with time, they were accommodated as part and parcel of the structures.

Gertrude Kapuma's Narrative Theology

Kapuma's work has influenced and impacted Malawian women and other women theologians in Africa. Her narrative theology is within the African women theologies in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. As a member of the Circle, her theology is contextual as it begins with the experiences of African women and particularly widow. Kapuma has written and published several articles and these include *Gender-based Violence and the Church? Malawian women speak out* (2015), *Widowhood: A story of pain, a need for healing* (2012), *Gender and Access to Land Ownership: The experiences of Malawian Widows and the Absence of the Church* (2019).

In her writings, Kapuma (2012:61) expresses her concern on the way women especially widows are treated in the communities. Kapuma (2012:61) argues that "women are created in the image of God", thus, they should be treated with dignity. Kapuma (2012:61; 2018:14) argues that the church is mandated to care for the underprivileged and marginalised of society. However, the church neglects its role of caring for the less privileged such as widows when they need help during the period of grief. At the same time, most widows are traumatised as they are heavily burdened by cultural beliefs and practices. Kapuma (2012:61) argues that "church leaders have tremendous potential for educating and empowering communities to treat women in general and widows specifically, with respect". Widows suffer psychologically, emotionally, physically, spiritually and face legal challenges when their husbands die. Kapuma (2018:27-29) notes that some dehumanising experiences that widows go through include "widow cleansing" where a widow has sexual intercourse with one of the relative of her late husband in order to cleanse her and wade off the spirit of death. Apart from widow cleansing, widows wear mourning attire usually black in colour and has to shave her hair as a sign of mourning. They eat from broken plates and sleeps on the mat on the floor not on her bed. Widows live in isolation within their community as they are regarded as unclean. These cultural practices rob a widow of her human dignity and they are perpetuated by cultural beliefs causing widows to suffer psychologically, emotionally and physically. Unfortunately, the custodians of such practices are women. It is these harmful practices that Kapuma is fighting against and that such practices should come to an end.

Kapuma (2018:34-35) further narrates that death of a husband has financial implications for the widow as she faces challenges of property inheritance. Most cultures in Africa believe that the man is the breadwinner and that all the property including land belongs to the man and after his death, the property has to be inherited by his relatives not his wife and children. In some cases, even children are taken away from her.

When men lose their wives they are treated differently. There are no issues of property inheritance or property grabbing. They don't expect them to mourn the way women are asked to mourn for their deceased husbands. Kapuma describes the inequality that exists in terms of the death of a husband and a wife. As an African Woman theologian, Kapuma critiques these patriarchal structures and systems that oppress women because of their gender and disregards their human dignity.

Storytelling as a Process of Healing

Storytelling and narration of women's experiences is crucial in the liberation of women from oppression. This is also expressed by the mother of African women theologies Oduyoye (2001:21):

the stories we tell of our hurts and joys are sacred. Telling them makes us vulnerable, but without sharing we cannot build community and solidarity. Our stories are precious paths on which we have walked with God and struggled for a passage to full humanity. They are events through which we have received the blessings of life from the hand of God.

In this regard, Kapuma as an African woman theologian is concerned with the liberation of women from oppressive cultural practices such as widowhood rites. Widows in most societies in Africa experience dehumanising widowhood rites. Thus, Nyangweso (2017:369) concurs with Kapuma that widowhood experiences differ from one location to the other and from one culture to the other because of diversity of cultures in Africa. However, there are similarities with regards to widowhood rites and practices (Nyangweso 2017:369). One common cultural practice of widowhood rite is sexual cleansing. A widow is forced to have sex with a relative of her deceased husband as a way of wading off evil spirits (Kapuma 2018:261). African women theologies as contextual, communal and narrative theologies regard stories and experiences of women as a

source of its theology. Storytelling in African context is regarded as a medium of communication (Oduyoye 2001:10; Mwaura 2015:98). Thus, Phiri (2004:156) argues that “African women theologies take women’s experiences as its starting point, focusing on the oppressive areas of life caused by injustices such as patriarchy, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, capitalism, globalisation and sexism”. Equally, African women theologies have been developed to resist patriarchal, dehumanising and oppressive structures. Thus, African women theologies affirm the life-enhancing cultural beliefs and practices while critiquing the life-threatening and oppressive ones. In this regard, Kapuma (2018:64) argues that stories of the underprivileged such as widows need to be heard in the community of faith because in so doing churches can offer a supportive and empathetic environment. Such an environment is crucial for the healing of widows who through grief and trauma because of what they experience when the husband has died.

Theologising in the context of African women theologies, Kapuma advocates for narratives and storytelling as a healing process for widow and liberation from all oppression that they suffer. Sharing of their stories and experiences becomes a first step in the process of healing when given a platform where they can share their stories (Kapuma 2018). The challenge is that widows do not have a platform where they can share their stories not even in the church. Thus, Kapuma advocates for two pastoral care models to help heal widows from the grief and trauma they go through when lose their husbands. Kapuma (2018:274) argues that the church should take a leading role in promoting the two pastoral care models. The first model is to have workshops at Presbytery level where widows could come together and share their experiences and at the same time receive counselling that will assist in their healing process. The second model is to empower and equip older widows through trainings that they will be able to assist widows who have just lost their husbands. This could be done at a congregation level. Kapuma argues that through these practical pastoral care models the church may provide wholeness, healing and liberation to widows and become an instrument of justice for widows and those who are marginalised. Storytelling through the two models is crucial as brings healing.

CONCLUSION

Kapuma is the first woman theologian in Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) Blantyre Synod, an ordained minister, a senior lecturer in practical theology in pastoral care and counselling, a church leader and activist for women empowerment. She has played an important role in the struggle for the church to allow women to be ordained as ministers of Word and Sacrament. As a woman theologian and scholar, her activism and writings still impacts the rising stars of the Circle in Malawi.

Kapuma's theology is narrative theology of pastoral care. She is particularly concerned with pastoral care and counselling of widows in the church. Knowing the challenges that widows face emotionally, physically and financially Kapuma advocates for pastoral care that will help widows during grieving of the loss of their husbands. Kapuma as an African woman theologian, challenges the harmful cultural practices that disempower widows. As African women theologians' point of departure are stories and experiences of women, similarly Kapuma's theology of narrative of pastoral care begins with stories and experiences of women.

Kapuma's narrative theology of pastoral care as a therapy for the pain that widows experience is part of an ongoing conversation about the oppressive and traumatising experience of widows. It contributes to the call for liberation of widows from all beliefs, practices and rituals that deny widows their human dignity. It encourages widows to share their stories and experiences in order to be healed from trauma. The significance of narrative theology of pastoral care for widow encourages the churches to offer psychosocial support to widows and help the widows to have a social support network within the church. It has opened a ministry of widows in not only Blantyre Synod but other churches as well.

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