

# **Standing at the crossroads: An overview of reflections on paradigms of African women's inclusion and exclusion in the religion and gender relations discourse in Zimbabwe**

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## **Abstract**

*Although the traditional image of women in religion portrays them as passive and docile, women have not been mere victims of subordinate religious and gender roles but active agents in the construction of their religious identity and belief. The study explores the historical and psychosocial dimensions of African traditional religious beliefs and practices which have exacerbated the subordination of women. A revelation is made that; while Christianity challenged the hegemony of the local eco-religion-cum-royal ancestor cults, within both traditional and Christian religion, women have fought for and continue to fight for their own free space in which they can develop a sense of solidarity and autonomy.*

**Key words: religious identity, ancestor cults, gender roles, spirit possession, subordination.**

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## **Introduction**

From pre-colonial times, discourses whether historical or cultural have often articulated the role of men and their experiences while consigning female experience to the margins. The devaluation of women in Shona's traditional religious practices to a muted group meant that women were considered less important than men. This has been due to the socialisation process by the society whereby women are socialized to be feminine. Basically, historical accounts of pre-colonial and colonial Zimbabwe have been produced by male authors. The lamentable consequence of this situation has been an almost total absence of women's voices and experiences because women's lives were filtered through and interpreted by men. Therefore, in addressing the question of women's relationship to a hegemonically masculine social order, there is a need to tackle such issues as the identity of the producers of the dominant knowledge as well as their perspectival orientation.

Long after women are sexually, politically and economically subordinated to men, in African traditional religion, they continue to play active and respected roles in mediating between humans and gods as priestesses, diviners and healers. Although images of women in religious texts reflect and create stereotypical gender roles and tend to legitimate social inequality between men and women, this study critically analyses the patterns of women's inclusion, exclusion and compromise within traditional and Christian religious practices. The study brings to light the struggle by women to restore their waning integrity through religious garb. Some effort has been made to show that the creation of symbols, myths and rituals centred on women's experiences were indeed linked to attempts by women to release anger and fear and to increase a sense of power.

## **African Traditional Religion and Displays of female empowerment and disempowerment**

African traditional religion affirms that women's and men's relationships are fundamentally different. Resultantly, these differences have had deep consequences for women's status, standard of living and survival. In the pre-colonial political economy, household based matrilineal ancestors were venerated to secure family well-being and functioned as legitimate male heirship. Among the most popular works on the pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe, the few women who are mentioned are the wives of the chiefs. These women are mentioned in passing and are included not as representatives of women in history, but as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2005:5) puts it, 'it is largely because they were exceptional and different from their sisters, thus reinforcing the notion that most women's roles in the past were inconsequential'. On the political front, Zimbabwean nationalists constantly invoked the role of Nehanda's spirit during the second war of liberation in the country.

The Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and its military wing the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) claimed that the spirit of Nehanda inspired them to fight the war. Similarly, in the novels, liberation war songs, poems and related literature, Nehanda has been eulogized and presented as a heroine of African primary resistance to colonial rule. Ngoshi (2009:452) notes how Zimbabwean writers like Chenjerai Hove and Yvonne Vera have utilized the 'myth' of Nehanda in their novels *Bones* (1988) and *Nehanda* (1993) respectively. Also, in his novel *Mweya waNehanda* (1988), Solomon Mutsvairo chronicles the rise of Nehanda from her birth to her hanging in 1898. Schmidt(1992) demonstrates the significant role played by the mbonga (women who were responsible for the security and maintenance of clan charms and could also be heads of households). In the same category, with the mbonga are rain princesses whose spiritual role in rain-making ceremonies cannot be over-emphasized. These were not simply exceptional women, but significant players in the

spiritual fraternity. Horton (1962)'s study of the Ijo-speaking Kalabari of the Niger Delta revealed that women possessed by water spirits 'husbands' were partly released from their normal social roles of wife and mother, to form part of the healing cult. Buttressing Maxwell's (1999) observations that the domain existed in which women could exercise some autonomy from men and challenge their patriarchy is religion, Ngoshi (2009) argues that spirit possession is a way in which women could fracture the traditional boundaries that militated against their recognition. Boddy's (1989) more functional analysis of the Zar of Sudan links spirit possession to the female sense of self-hood. She notes that possession by Zar spirits enabled women to ameliorate problems associated with biological reproduction or marriage in ways antithetical to the harmony-preserving tactics of everyday discourse. In the sociology of possession, Lewis (in Maxwell 1999:58) argues that the host may use the authority of her spirit to manipulate superiors with impunity, temporarily attract attention or escape the ceaseless toil of everyday life. The above observations have relevance to Zimbabwe's Shona society where possession cults have been interpreted as an indirect attack on male authority and male-dominated religion. Maxwell (1999) succinctly states that within the same traditional system, women found room to contest the elder male authority legitimated by the Mhondoro cults. Fundamentally, possession provided women with an alternative language with which they expressed female solidarity and autonomy, challenging the expectations placed upon them as wives and mothers.

Almost all African traditional people believe in life after death. However, there is no sharp distinction between this life and the next. The deceased, also referred to as the 'living dead' are believed to maintain an active presence in their earthly families. Their progenies observe ritual services in their honour and they reciprocate by protecting, healing and prospering their endeavours. Thus, in African cosmology, death is conceived as an

attainment of a high status and a rite of passage. The dead, especially their spirits, are raised to pedestal levels such that during their lifetimes, the same persons could have been voiceless. Muchemwa (2005) posits that in black tradition, spirit possession is used as a strategy of recovery of the tongue, and to recover the tongue, according to Ngoshi (2009:455) is 'to reclaim verbal space long denied and suppressed in cultural and historical memory'.

Muchemwa (2005) further argues that while spirit possession is largely conceived in terms of passivity, it does in principle allow for the coming to life of suppressed discourses and identities. These postulations are not being taken to obliterate glaring traces of women's marginalization both in life and in death but indicate that the voices of the subalterns can also be recovered through the religious garb. Bourdillon (1982) conceded that although women could always acquire a position of standing with some authority, the traditional position of women had deficiencies relative to that of men, deficiencies which found clear expression on formal legal and ritual occasions. Lan's (1983) anthropological research on ancestor cults of the Korekore people in the Dande area of Zimbabwe established that the relationship between sexes which is displayed during these rituals outrightly negates women to be passive spectators. Lan describes how, at a possession ritual, the important and individualized actions were performed by men and observed by a crowd of de-individualized women who participated only as brewers of beer, singers and dancers. This masculinity of the Mhondoro cult is confirmed by Maxwell (1999:104) who contends that among the Hwesa and Korekore people of Zimbabwe, women are reduced to an inferior form of life creation where their spiritual dispensability means that they can be reduced to ritual objects. Bourdillon (1982:42) has also shown how among the Shona, the ritual to bring home the spirit of a dead person and install it among the spirit guardians of the family is not

performed for a deceased woman. This again suggests that women do not always acquire in life the full adult status necessary to be influential as spirit elders after death. What becomes clear from the above observations is that societies have always strived to realise some balance whereby male spirits and male mediums conduct central cults (*Mhondoros*) for upholding and refracting mainstream social morality and political authority against peripheral spirits which normally possess women and deprived groups in a wide range of societies.

### **Cosmological unity or societal gender balance?**

As alluded to earlier, African traditional religion affirms that women's and men's relationships are fundamentally different. That women were associated with peripheral spirits, sounds like outright rejection and relegation into the abyss of subalternism. However, it is interesting to note that it is within the same traditional religious system that women found room to contest the elder male authority legitimated by the Mhondoro cults. Women, like other subaltern social groups, were not passive in the face of male power and oppression but devised methods to mock and ridicule male power. Even through folktales, old women would boldly and indirectly confront their social superiors. From the numerous stories he collected, Kriel (1971:21) found that old women, who are largely the narrators, associated themselves with victory as a protest against all the powers they lacked. Heroes were seldom honoured people in a folktale. Henri Junod (1927:224) the great pioneer in the field of African ethnography had this to say about the baThonga:

From the top to the bottom of the social ladder, the strong dominate over the weak and combine in a wonderful way to ensure the submission of the inferior. In the evening, round the fire, the women and children take their revenge in the Black man's usual way, that is by saying what they think in a roundabout manner...Mr. Hare represents the little ones,

the subject, the ordinary private individual, who...gets the better of the great ones of the community and even of the chiefs.

In addition, while both men and women are active participants in the process of culture, women are viewed as being more rooted in or as having more direct contact with nature. This is echoed by the eco-feminists when they say that there is a deep connection between the earth and women, hence the terms 'mother nature or mother earth' (Shiva, 1999). This is because a woman's physiology, with its role in childbearing and the social consequence arising from this, means that she spends more of her life engaged in natural processes than is true of men. Stories and myths are told of men who became destitute after beating up or killing their mothers. Among the Shona, even folktales testify to the fact that the Ngozi or avenging spirits from the mother's lineage cannot be appeased. The brewing of beer for rain-making ceremonies is considered as a preserve for the old women in their menopause. This calls for the need to systematically interpret the myths of origins and legends as a way of further confirming the close relationship between myths, legends and gender roles.

### **New Departures: Christianity as an epitome of female power?**

To a considerable extent, Christianity has replaced African religious tradition among Christians, but the latter tradition has not been eliminated. An effort is made to indicate the extent to which the two traditions have remained constant or changed, to what extent they have remained separate or have been synthesized or adapted to each other, and how these trends are functionally related to the social structure, particularly gender relations. Images of women in religious texts reflect and create stereotypical gender roles and legitimate social inequality between men and women. The Biblical story of Adam and Eve is a classic example of how women are depicted as 'spare ribs and mothers of sin'. That the Lord created Eve from Adam's rib. Acker (1987) argues that it

appears as if women came as an afterthought and that women were created for the benefit of men. The bible texts also suggest the subordinate position of women for example Genesis 3v16 says “Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (The Holy Bible; King James Version,2007). In the same vein, Genesis 2v18 says “ *It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him* ” (The Holy Bible: King James Version,) Andersen (1997) argues, making her inferior and dependent. Again, the New Testament of the Bible, for example, urges women to submit to husbands, thereby fulfilling the assumed proper hierarchy of women as subordinate to men as men are subordinate to God. Women, however, more regularly attend church than men and express higher degrees of religiosity. As Pauw (1974:422) avers, ‘Christianity attracts women to a greater degree than men since they [women] have little to lose and much to gain by embracing it’. Surprisingly though, as feminists have argued, despite the quantitative superiority of women in religious faith and attendance at worship services, it is men regardless of religious denomination who maintain religious authority. In mainstream Christian churches for example, Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Baptist and some African Independent Churches [largely Zionist and Apostolic], it is clearly observable that, for the most part, it is men who are the priests and clergy, and are typically backed up in the institution by men as deacons, elders and vestry of the church. This is due to the patriarchal set-up of the society whereby men derive their power from the patriarchal system that supports and favours men.

Patriarchy is a social system that propagates male superiority, power and control over women as natural. Meena (1992) says that Patriarchy draws a clear demarcation line between males and females, it creates a social stratification with males always on top. In patriarchy, women are perceived as perpetual minors who cannot make independent decisions whilst it institutionalizes male physical, social, religious and economic power over women.



Women have to pray and obey. What it means is that despite the greater participation of women, the organizational structure, beliefs, ritual expressions and prescribed norms are patriarchal. These patterns of gender inequality have raised the question of the extent to which both African traditional and Christian religions contribute to the subjugation of women.

Contrary to the observations that women have been excluded from positions of religious leadership in Christian institutions, Maxwell (1999:105) argues that the challenges to the hegemony of the local eco-religion-cum-royal ancestor cult came in the form of Christianity which 'threw up new religious options for Shona women to reinvent their identity by other means than joining shave possession'. Conversion to Christianity entailed a more radical dislocation of men, fostering a persisting male attitude that the Christian religion is a female concern. Maxwell (1999:106) gives accounts of how the Katerere women in Zimbabwe indigenised Christianity by constructing a local demonology whereby they banded together, exorcising other women, and instigating rituals in which charms, bracelets and other polluting substances were burnt. The church thus offered women a domain where they were relatively free from the tutelage of elder males.

The practice of demonizing ancestor religion and destruction of sacred sites undermined traditional legitimacy which was anchored upon male heir-ship. This further explains why traditional leaders regarded Pentecostalism in particular as an alternative and threatening source of authority in the same way that they regarded predominantly female possession cults. Pentecostal churches, charismatic movements, evangelical and other forms of Christian faith healing churches, appear to have created a new facet of experience for African healing ideals in that the Christian faith espouses spiritual healing which has parallels in the African traditional practices. African tradition and Christian healing, for example, admit that illness has possible spiritual dimensions.

African traditional religion affirms that physical sickness could be caused by adversarial spirits as a result of the individual's moral flaws or witchcraft. Similarly, Christian charismatic healers espouse demonology in order to explain various types of illness, misfortune and negative human experiences. It is however important to note that the doctrine of the “Holy Spirit” has often been confused with African traditional religion-related spirit possession and its psychological ramifications. The Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA), a Zimbabwean Transnational Pentecostal movement has attributed its success to an emphasis on gifts of the Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit possession is open to all members. Women can also prophesy and so men cannot claim to have a monopoly on revelation.

By virtue of being possessed by the Holy Spirit, women are no longer cosmologically represented as strangers or aliens (as was the case with shave possession) but belong to a universal community. Maxwell (2006) strongly argues that the rapidity with which women adhered to the Pentecostal church suggests that possession by the Holy Spirit represented a credible alternative to traditional cults. In other words, Pentecostal women gained a sense of empowerment through possession by the Holy Spirit while men converted to Pentecostal Christianity were disempowered through their domestication. Pentecostalism has challenged patriarchal religion through confession and exorcism, further undermining male gerontocratic control. Pentecostals are not supposed to participate in possession rituals, rain-making ceremonies, funeral rites, sessions of divination and beer brewing for ancestral veneration. Displays of female power are manifested through varied tasks performed by women's ministries. The Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA)'s Gracious Women Fellowship and Go Quickly and Tell ministries have strengthened the basis for developing a sense of sisterhood among women. Women are trained to be industrious through Talents whereby women fund-raise for church activities by selling

foodstuffs, clothes and other wares; taught hygiene, family values and social relationships. Women also teach Bible Sunday Schools, join prayer circles and arrange and staff church social events. The entry of women into the clergy, though not entirely new, has had unprecedented magnitude. Again, Pentecostal denominations account for the largest share of all clergywomen. Andersen (1997:237) attributes this openness to women's participation to the Pentecostals' emphasis on prophetic ministry, rather than the more 'priestly' ministry of male-dominated religious institutions.

### **Radical Feminists and Religion**

The staunch adherents to the radical feminist theory have their roots in Marxism which they broke from after realizing that the Marxist theory was falling short of addressing gender disparities in the economic spectrum. They acknowledge that religion has played a very significant role in shaping women to be subordinate to their male counterparts throughout history. Be that as it may, it follows that the antagonistic giant they battle day and night is patriarchy. They define patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate oppression and exploit women (Walby in Smelser 1994:320). Religion is perceived to be part of this social structure. The feminists chronicle that religion has for long been about males for males and dominated by males.

However, there has been an advent of another dimension to the feminists which has attained the moniker Feminist theology. The critical principle fathoming the theory is the full realization of humanity in women (Ruether 1983:18). They frown at the use of biblical quotations that are singled out to concretize the superiority of males. Such use, they content, is archaic, retrogressive, redundant and has no place in the current social spectrum (Sherrie Steiner-Aeschliman and Armand L. Mauss: 1996) They argue that if males and females are both made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), then the human understanding of God requires the theological participation of both sexes. They also advocate for the

popularization of the greatness of women within the confines of the biblical arena. Hall (1996) proposes that to understand how religion can be both a source of emancipatory reinterpretations, there is need for a framework that acknowledges the fundamental role that women have in the nurturing of children within religious cycles. Within the current trends, women have actually taken the centre stage in religious cycles.

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown that religion is a powerful source for the subordination of women in society, yet across the years, it has also been an important source for the feminist movement and other social activities for the liberation of the women from male dominance. This is particularly evident where Christian religion in particular has been a powerful instrument for social change and where women's roles have provided them with opportunities for leadership and the development of organizational skills. The discussion which unfolded has shown that in both African traditional religion and Christianity, spirit possession and rituals are used to deconstruct, contest and subvert both the patriarchal and dominant discourses in religion and gender relations. In the Zimbabwean society where a dominant discourse of masculinity includes the superiority of men over women, it has been ascertained that within both traditions (African Traditional Religion and Christianity), women fought for their free space in which they could develop a sense of solidarity and autonomy.

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