

Dialectics and Dynamics of Religion in Theatre: Reflections on Gender and Sexuality in Selected Zimbabwean Theatrical Performances

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Abstract

This article problematises, contextualises and interprets the complex and dynamic relationship between Christianity and the African traditional religion as it is reflected in Zimbabwean theatre. The focus lies on the construction of images and symbols relating to gender and sexuality in two selected theatrical performances from Innocent Dube and Daniel Maphosa respectively. The analysis proceeds from the position that a performance is an ideological transaction between the performers and the audience. Three major observations emerge from the investigation. First, religious symbols, rituals and values seem to influence the construction of images of masculinities and femininities, even in plays which appear “hostile” to religion. Second, these theatrical performances are characterized by a religious dialectic in the sense that they are a hybrid of traditional African worship systems and Christian doctrines and practices. Third, such theatrical constructions of gender and sexuality reflect the apparent tension between social-political liberation and moral principles and practices which are rooted in religious doctrines and ideologies such as patriarchy. Consequently, the major question pursued in this study is: What are the implications of such theatrical constructions in feminist and other liberatory or transformational discourses? In the final analysis, it is submitted that theatrical practices can be a strategic arena to explore the complexity and dynamism of religious thought and practices in the historical context under study.

Introduction

The relationship between theatre and religion, particularly Christianity, has always been fluctuating, although it is usually characterized by prejudice and negative attitudes (Bruch 2004). This unsympathetic stance often derives from ignorance of the other. In Zimbabwe, this relationship still prevails although it is characterised by dynamic and dialectical aspects (Chivandikwa 2010: 3). The relation between religious epistemologies and theatrical constructions deserve special recognition and focus. This article examines the way theatrical images of gender and sexuality reflect (and reflect on) the tensions, paradoxes and contradictions, but also the possibilities of convergence and enrichment, between Christianity and the traditional African theological epistemologies and practices. The investigation is based on the argument that theatre is a “terrain where the haphazard fragments of events are given a formal coherence that invests them with ideological significance...” (Peterson 2000: 1). Zimbabwean theatre is an interesting vantage point from which to investigate the religio-ideological perspectives of the society in which it functions because theatre seems to be generally associated with "secular" discourses (Chivandikwa 2010). Innocent Dube’s “Africano-Americano” (2002) and Daniel Maphosa’s “Heaven’s Diary” (2004) are used as typical case studies in this investigation.

“Africano-Americano” – Cultural Identity and Awareness

Background and Synopsis

“Africano-Americano” was produced by Nkululeko Innocent Dube (39), the current producer and director of Iyasa Theatre Company. Dube is a former teacher of Mpopoma High School who is a talented poet, director and choreographer. He is one of the many fortunate artists who benefited from training programmes that are offered by the popular Amakhosi Theatre Productions in Bulawayo. While Innocent Dube was still teaching at Mpopoma High School (where he taught for about five years), he identified artistic talent from the school which he sought to develop further. After he left the school in 2002, Dube established Iyasa Theatre Company which has since achieved international success (Sibanda, 2004). Apart from “Africano-Americano”, the company has produced other productions that include “African Dreamland” (2001), “Ngavela Ngatso” (I said it) (2000) and several dance productions. While initially Iyasa held its rehearsals at Mpopoma High School, it has since moved to occupy the Mpopoma Youth Centre as well as Entumbane Hall. All the activities that have made Iyasa popular are sponsored by different international and local institutions and agencies. These include European Embassies and their agencies such as HIVOS (Netherlands), British Council (Britain) and SIDA (Sweden). Local financiers include private companies and government departments such as the Ministry of

Information and Publicity which provided financial and technical support for the recording of “Africano-Americano” on national television by the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) in 2004. Iyasa has always been a dream of Mpopoma High School whose aim is to tap talent from the school which could go astray if not properly harnessed. The group also accommodates school leavers in its productions. However, Iyasa is now independent from Mpopoma High School although it continues to recruit performers from this school and other secondary schools in Bulawayo. “Africano-Americano” is thus a result of the desire to engage school children in cultural work and to train them for future artistic careers.

“Africano-Americano” is a dance drama which was produced in 2002. Dube wrote the original script which was subsequently collectively developed by the students though Dube played a prominent role in this. In the play, an African teenage girl called Africano marries Americano, a rich, young American man. Although she had been betrothed to a young man in her own homeland, Africano rejects him in favour of the white man who gives her parents money and modern gadgets such as a radio. She moves to America where life, however, proves to be extremely difficult. Her husband, Americano, engages in endless extramarital relationships which cause serious conflict and tension in their marriage. It leads to her tragic death as Americano stabs Africano.

The play begins with a prologue which is a “flashback” into a typical Ndebele home where children, fathers and mothers engage in domestic chores and recreational activities. The birth of Americano is also included in the epilogue.

Scene One opens with Africano as a teenage girl going to the river with other girls to fetch water. She is attractive and boys come to propose to her (Scene Two). Africano’s boyfriend is making progress towards marrying her. At the river, Africano is socialising with other girls (Scene Three) when a white man, Americano, comes to propose love to her which she accepts. In Scene Four which takes place in Africano’s homestead, Americano hands over *lobola*, made up of American dollars and modern gadgets, to Africano’s parents in the presence of relatives, friends and well-wishers and celebrations ensue. These continue into Scene Five, during which the traditional marriage rituals are performed. In Scene Six, Africano, in the company of her husband Americano, bids farewell to her relatives and parents. Once they have arrived in America, Africano and Americano have a white wedding where a priest officiates. In this wedding, while Americano’s parents are present, Africano’s parents and relatives are conspicuous by their absence. The scene ends with a celebration after the ceremony (Scene Seven). In Scene Eight, Africano’s fate turns. She catches Americano with a girlfriend and fights and overpowers both her husband and his girlfriend whom she mercilessly knocks down. Scene Nine depicts Africano in her matrimonial home looking miserable and lonely. It is apparent that her

husband is not at home. When he comes home late, he tries to apologise. In Scene Ten, Africano finally rejects America. She physically throws all American clothes and accessories at Americano. A fight ensues between Africano and Americano during which Americano stabs Africano to death. American “soldiers” come to “shoot” all human figures representing African cultures. In Scene Eleven there is a funeral ritual through which a narrator contextualises the narrative. The play ends with an epilogue in which two old men and an old woman sing traditional songs that exhort African marriages. Some of the above scene are interpreted and contextualized by a narrator who is also an actress in the production.

Religious and Cultural Message in “Africano-Americano”

This play interrogates issues relating to cultural identity and awareness. It was produced in the context in Zimbabwe of a perceived deculturation of young people who are said to be unaware of their roots, including religious beliefs, morality and customs (Mashiri 1996). Such a conception would by extension imply that Christianity is the spiritual dimension of cultural imperialism (Chivandikwa 2004). This loss is attributed to American and Western cultural domination. “Africano-Americano” seeks to warn the youth of the dangers inherent in abandoning one’s cultural beliefs and practices in favour of the foreign. Specifically, the play seems to discourage interracial marriages. Africano’s marriage to Americano is presented as a serious socio-cultural disaster. The values and beliefs which these two young people represent are too diametrically opposed to allow a decent and harmonious “marriage” between them. However, the creators of the play wanted this personal marriage to symbolize the “marriage” of cultures.

The play posits that African young people are victims of what is considered insidious American cultural domination. At the beginning, Americano’s presence in Africa attracts attention and admiration. He entices Africano to the extent that she rejects her African boyfriend. There is a sense that what attract Africano to Americano are the material things that he possesses. He has numerous technological gadgets such as a camera, a good radio, and expensive, flashy clothes. These materials also entice her parents, friends and relatives, making them lose traditional values of marriage such as the one that encourages Zimbabweans to marry from among their own people who understand and share their cultural practices. By going to a foreign land, Africano risks losing contact with the symbols and rituals that are used in paying homage to her ancestors. This loss is clearly alluded to in Scene Six where her departure to America evokes crying and weeping from among her people. The song that dominates this scene, *Khumbula emuva wentombi* (Remember where you came from, my daughter), sums up the theme of the loss of cultural identity which this performance text pursues.

Indeed, when she arrives in America, Africano tragically realises that material goods alone cannot sustain a lasting loving relationship. She discovers that she has been uprooted from her religious values, relationships and spirituality. Yet, in realizing that America is not as sweet as she had anticipated, Africano rediscovers herself. She undergoes a cultural awakening when she vows to reclaim her identity by discarding all forms and expressions of American life.

In this manner the play seeks to encourage young people to value their traditional and indigenous spiritual values and religious customs. Most songs in the play explicitly express regret that traditional cultural values and norms are being marginalized in favour of foreign life-styles and values. The play makes it clear that this causes both personal and societal disaster. Africano's death is a direct result of her choice to abandon Africa which is her spiritual and physical home.

"Africano-Americano" suggests that imperialism uses not only material resources to subjugate African culture but puts forward that where enticement or ideology fails, force is used to destroy African values. In the last scene, when Africans artistically join Africano in throwing away symbols of American culture, soldiers come to shoot all the Africans. This suggests that imperialism is "violence" against a given society's social, cultural and spiritual identities. To some extent, "Africano-Americano" resonates with African discourses and scholarship which view Christianity in terms of cultural and religious imperialism (Abbey 2001; Hagar 2009).

To the contrary, African culture, especially in its traditional forms, is presented as peaceful, communal, exciting and largely harmonious. The prologue and the first and second scenes project images of a beautiful, peaceful and humane community. The narrator makes this clear, especially in the prologue when she urges the audience to relax as "we take you back in the African village" at a time when the young and the old used to perform their duties and spend their leisure activities in the most peaceful and exciting manners. She ends up by saying "*Kwaze kwaba mnandi*" (It was so beautiful and exciting). In essence, the play reflects an unbridled nostalgia for an idealized past. It roots this past in African spirituality in which it sees African society to be anchored.

In the play, the traditional past and the contemporary African socio-cultural lives are romanticised to the extent that what appears in the production does not have a direct relationship with the reality of socio-cultural challenges facing Africans. Marriage ceremonies and the ensuing celebrations and family relationships as they are presented in the play are hardly performed anymore in the rural villages of contemporary Zimbabwe, let alone in the urban townships. Sexual rituals as they are performed in this scene, such as virginity tests and the preparation of the "bed" upon which the couple are to have their first sexual encounter, are no longer prevalent among the Ndebele and Shona people of

Zimbabwe. What is far more likely to be witnessed in the Zimbabwe of today is, ironically, the same type of wedding as the white church wedding shown in Scene Seven as the characteristically American wedding. There are many elements in the American wedding scene which can be easily found in contemporary African wedding ceremonies in Zimbabwe. These include the type of music that is played, the presence and functions of the priest, wedding rings, and the clothes worn by the wedding couple. Indeed, to some degree contemporary African marriages have been Christianised and Westernised. This means that to most Zimbabwean viewers of the play, the American wedding in Scene Seven would be far more familiar than the African or traditional ceremony presented in Scene Three. Yet, this does not mean that contemporary wedding celebrations have been completely Westernized: there are indeed fundamental differences. Thus, the wedding in America is characterised by a short Bible reading and a prayer and the exchange of vows is done very quickly with minimum excitement. A typical African wedding in contemporary Zimbabwe, however, would include not only prayers and Bible readings, but other aspects such as dancing, music and in some instances drama to make it “complete” with spiritual, social, cultural and aesthetic elements.

In short, the desire to promote traditional cultural values and customs informs the wish by the writers of “Africano-Americano” to idealise the past. The producer and student writers perhaps hoped that the play would function to entice the youth to abandon “evil” foreign cultures in favour of the “beautiful” African culture. In this section we now move to look at the way in which women and their agency are reflected in the play.

Rituals and the Empowerment of Women

In this section we examine the construction of religious rituals and the extent to which they relate to the cultural and spiritual liberation of African women general and Zimbabwean women in particular.

The function of African traditional religion – here defined as “the diverse culture, customs and practices of the local people that have been passed on from one generation to another of responding to the existence of God though ancestor veneration ...” (Mapuranga 2009:33) – within the contemporary context has become an interesting subject of focus. In the African context among people who follow traditional religious practices, it has been noted that African women’s religious rituals¹ have both negative and positive aspects and that there are possibilities of appropriating and “improving” these rituals in order to liberate women from gender and sexual oppression and abuse (Edet 2006).

It is difficult to be definitive as to whether or not traditional religious rituals give prominence and agency to women. African “protest” theologians argue that African religious rituals are at variance with most “world” religions which are characterised by excluding women from the spiritual and religious domains

(Mokwena 2004: 88; Osman 2009: 28-32). For example, in Nigeria among the Igbo, indigenous spiritual practices empower women in the person of the goddess Idemili (Abbenyi 2005: 266). In Zimbabwe, Chinyowa (2002) argues that theatrical performances that are rooted in African religious rituals empower women by giving them central functions in religious rituals. The authority that African women derive from these religious rituals is not a transient phenomenon and therefore ritual authority is part of the women's lived experience (Chinyowa 2002: 60). This is, however, contested by some scholars who view African traditional rituals in negative terms when it comes to the liberation of women (Kamaara 2005; Edet 2006).

Yet, while it is apparent in "Africano-Americano" that female agency or subjectivity in general is limited (Chivandikwa 2009:186), one can still argue that religious ritual spaces give more visibility and prominence to women than that which they are accorded in "secular" spaces such as in social and cultural arenas, decision-making and other domestic spaces. It is clear that "Africano-Americano" depicts female agency or subjectivity in everyday life situations as limited (Chivandikwa 2009: 186). For example, at the *lobola* ceremony, the men are visible, dominant and clearly direct proceedings. Africano's father and uncle receive the money and goods that are handed over by Americano for *lobola*. In Scene Six, at the departure of the couple to America, Africano's father humiliates and chides her mother for crying over the loss of her daughter. This is done for no apparent reason except the demonstration of "raw" patriarchal power, a domination that is not, in contrast, found in the religious rituals portrayed in "Africano-Americano". This can give credence to the assertion that, to some extent at least, the authority of women in religious rituals does not necessarily translate into their everyday lived experience.

Yet, as the following sections will show, there are several instances in the religious rituals where the positive functions of women have the potential to influence their everyday reality. The birth of Africano is dubbed the birth of a star. It is an unusual birth which seems to draw parallels with the birth of Jesus in the Christian faith. At her birth, a human figure dressed in white clothes comes to hover and dance around the place of Africano's birth. The figure resembles angels as reflected in various Christian books. Here we have an interesting artistic reconstruction of the nativity which finds parallels in the work of Gladys Casely-Hayford, a West African poet, who "reinvented" the birth narrative of Jesus to suit the African context (particularly that of women):

Telling of things a baby needs to do,
When first he opens his eyes on wonder new;
Telling Him that sleep was sweetest rest,
All comfort came from His black mother's breast.

Their gift was Love, caught from the springing sod,
 Whilst tears and laughter were the gifts of God.
 Then all the Wise Men of the past stood forth,
 Filling the air, East, West, and South and North.

(Nwoga 1967: 7-8)

The poem reconstructs the birth of Jesus in order to imbue it with traditional African elements of identity. “Jesus” is born in a native hut, a “symbol of the concept of communalism: that of being one” (Mapuranga 2009: 101). In the first instance, the hut is a space that is dominated by women in the African context in general. Furthermore, the above poem makes several very positive references to “black” womanhood and motherhood. Indeed, both are ascribed heroic attributes.

Similarly in “Africano-Americano”, Africano’s birth is celebrated as a communal ritual in the community. The whole community anticipates her birth in a collective tension. As soon as she is born, the community erupts into a frenzy of celebration. Children, elders, mothers, dancers and singers ululate to celebrate the birth of what they call a “star”. This construction of the ritual resonates with the observation that in Africa child birth rituals are:

[o]ccasions of thanksgiving, joy, and celebration, as the prayers during the rites indicate. This aspect of the ritual gives the mother a sense of accomplishment and inclusiveness. The mystery of giving birth is the woman’s discovery that she is on that plane of life which amounts to a religious experience untranslatable in terms of masculine experience. It is not the natural phenomenon of giving birth that constitutes the mystery, but the revelation of the feminine sacredness that is the mystic unity between life, woman, nature, and the divinity. This revelation is of a transpersonal order and is therefore expressed in symbols and actualised in rites. (Edet 2006: 32-33)

In “Africano-Americano,” women in the birth ritual offer prayers, give medicine for the benefit of both the mother and the baby, and perform other life-enhancing rituals such as the presentation of the child to the ancestors and the giving of names. The experience of motherhood and womanhood is celebrated as a profound spiritual experience in a ritual during which most men are mere spectators. In this regard, child birth rituals are occasions which provide women with a deeply sacred and spiritual experience as well as a sense of personal achievement. In this way, they are a source of spiritual and personal empowerment.

Following Africano’s birth, a male traditional healer comes to perform

specific spiritual rituals to welcome and protect the child from possible evils and misfortune. He pours beer on the ground in honour of the ancestors who are expected to protect their “star”. After performing his rituals, the traditional healer leads Africano’s mother to jump over the newly born baby. It is crucial to recognise that while the ritual may be guided by a man (namely, the healer), the entire proceedings centre around women. It is a ritual that recognises, celebrates and reveres motherhood and womanhood. This is a traditional Ndebele ritual according to which the new born baby should inherit the “good qualities of her mother” (Chivandikwa 2004: 243). Crucially, this part of the ritual recognises the centrality of the mother in the social and moral shaping of the child. Thus the birth of Africano is one example of an event that expresses the nature of the “good and beautiful” days when Africa was true to herself. Of course, some of the rituals enacted in the play are no longer performed the way they were performed in the Zimbabwean past. It is, however, the values underlying these rituals that the creators of the play wanted to emphasise by drawing on them. This is an interesting dimension of the dynamics of religious practices.

However, in the last scene, when Africano has been murdered, we see an apparent negation of female empowerment: the death ritual in Scene Eleven is dominated by masculine symbols. Traditional male leaders perform a libation. Two old men bring traditional clay pots that contain beer which is poured on Africano’s coffin. This is a ritual that prepares her to meet her ancestors. Immediately after the libation, dancers, singers and major characters in the play burst into the song “*Mhlobo wokoko bethu*” (the type that belongs to our ancestors) in which they remark that in Africa people pay homage to their ancestors. However, the main interest for us is the total absence of women in this ritual. This may be what has prompted some theologians to call for radical reforms of some traditional rituals:

In a religious celebration in which women are observers rather than active participants, female voicelessness continues to encourage the perpetuation of rites and rituals that foster female oppression. (Nwakuchi 2006: 65)

To some extent, “Africano-Americano” mirrors the ambiguous function of rituals in the context of female empowerment. While some rituals are clearly liberatory, some still reflect the tendency of marginalising women. However, in a context where generally “negative” effects of African traditional rituals on women are over-emphasised (Mapuranga 2009: 106), the construction of the rituals in “Africano-Americano” is, arguably, “progressive” as it shows possibilities of positive functions. For instance, while it is true that men dominate the death ritual, it should be noted that this is a ritual of a female “star” or heroine who is being “elevated” to join ancestors who are venerated.

This is also unusual because generally in African culture young people are not elevated to be ancestors. It could be that this is one of the artistic innovations in the production or that in some specific cultural groups in Zimbabwe, there are exceptional cases where youth can become ancestors after their death. In this particular artistic construction this could be possible given the unusual circumstances surrounding Africano's birth. The song that is sung in this scene, *Mhlobo wokoko bethu* (the type that belongs to our ancestors) communicates that Africano's spirit is of the same status as those of other departed spirits. In fact, the men who perform the rituals are playing subordinate roles to the spirit of the "star": they are paying homage to a "heroine" whose "elevation" to join the ancestors will guarantee them protection.

This construction in the play is both an "accurate" reflection of African religious ritual as well as an "invention" of what the creators of the narrative aspire to see in their society. In this manner theatre acts as a "mirror": it does not merely reflect life, but can mirror "heightened" versions of reality and suggest how social reality ought to be (Brown 1997). These qualities can make a theatrical event a thought-provoking experience. In "Africano-Americano", the play holds the potential to foster critical thinking on the need for religio-spiritual empowerment of women. The next section critically examines some ambiguous aspects of the empowerment of women in the context of the religious dialectics of "Africano-Americano."

Religious Dialectics in "Africano-Americano"

Above we noted that "Africano-Americano" is ideologically potent in that it imagines some agency for a female character in various cultural aspects outside of religious and spiritual elements:

The mere fact these heroic attributes are attributed to a female character is a real progressive development considering the fact in most cases in the Zimbabwean imagination, passivity is a female attributes while activity is a male one. Africano's ability to confront Americano's delinquency and promiscuity in his "own" turf in America, is admirable indeed. She is depicted as a great fighter both physically and ideologically. (Chivandikwa 2009: 187)

At the same time, closer analysis shows some limits of that agency. The play does not totally transcend the gender stereotypes and prejudices of the society in which it is constructed. This observation parallels the chasm between religio-ideological consciousness and the practical experiences in most religious communities with regard to the liberation of women. For example, most Christian organisations seem to profess articulately the need for the spiritual and religious liberation

of women, yet in reality, masculine theology dominates church practices. In a similar vein, there are still many aspects of African traditional religious practices that are problematic and contradictory within the context of the desire to liberate women from social and spiritual marginalisation (Nwakuchi 2006).

“Africano-Americano” is characterized by a religious dialectic in that it is full of both traditional and Christian symbolism. First, a figure dressed in white hovers around when Africano is born. The stature and physical appearance of this figure can be likened to the Christian visual representation of angels. Consequently, Africano’s birth could be equated to the birth of Jesus as recorded in the gospels where the Angel Gabriel comes to herald his birth. The birth of Jesus is understood to be the birth of a messianic hero. In the same way, the narrator hails the birth of Africano as the birth of a star. In the context of the play, reference to a star seems to symbolize social and spiritual excellence and enlightenment. The significance of the fact that these attributes are ascribed to a female character has already been highlighted. This construction is both radical and subversive in both African traditional religious and Christian gender discourses.

However, there could be several ways of interpreting this narrative. Three possible interpretations are proffered here. First, it is both an acknowledgement of, and a “suggestion” for, the hybridisation of the two religious narratives. The hybrid product in this case would be the merging of ancestor-veneration with the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. This would be an example of inculturation, a process “of cross-fertilization, in which different cultures enrich one another while preserving the characteristics that make up their original identity ...” (Haar 2009: 32). Second, this scene could be seen as a direct challenge to conventional Christology which is understood by some to be rooted in spiritual imperialism (Beya 2006; Haar 2009). Here the implication is that the narrative attempts to place a dominated spiritual discourse at the same level as the dominant one. Lastly, the birth of Africano can be interpreted in terms of its contrast with the “masculine” Christology that is associated with conservative Christian theologies (Beya 2006). This means that if the formulation that “Africano-Americano” appropriates images from the birth of Jesus Christ is valid, then this scene is a deliberate attempt to de-emphasise the masculine in Christology and invest some of the images associated with Jesus Christ into a feminine African spiritual protagonist.

This merging of apparently contrasting spiritual and religious symbols is very characteristic of “Africano-Americano” and occurs even in the manipulation of expressive forms such as stage properties and sound images. For example, some songs, especially those in the last scene, echo Christian beliefs. The song “*Tixo siphe amandla*” (God gives us power) pleads with God to give parents the power to bring up children in the best way they can. The lyrics are interspersed with the words

“Amen” and “Halleluiah” which are essentially Christian words of worship and reverence. The other song “*Sinje*” (As we are) equally appeals to God to hear the prayers of parents who are quite desperate to bring their children “back” to their culture. Again the song is also full of Christian terminology and expressions.

There is thus an apparent contradiction in the play which, on the one hand, urges the audience to return to its cultural practices, even in the religious setting, while, on the other hand, resorting to Christian symbolism and expression. Certainly it is a contradiction to urge people to worship the ancestors in the traditional ways while at the same time affirming fundamental Christian mythologies and religious forms of expressing reverence.

Yet this contradiction can be seen as a reflection of the socio-religious dialectic of post-colonial Zimbabwe. It is very common for Christians of independent African churches and evangelical movements to go to church while at the same time performing religious African rituals (Chivandikwa 2004). What could be required is a further critical interrogation of the extent to which such constructions are emancipatory within the gender, ethnic and human rights domains. The next section pursues this question on the basis of the play “*Heaven’s Diary*” which uses religious symbols within an apparently “secular” discourse.

“Heaven’s Diary”: Spirituality and Contemporary African Politics

“*Heaven’s Diary*” was written and directed by Daniel Maposa in 2005. It is a play that reflects on the socio-economic and socio-political crises of the post-2000 period in Zimbabwe. In raising critical questions on the moral and political standing of the nation, the play manipulates a number of religious symbols and images.

In the play two young men in a beer hall envy a man who appears very rich to them. They follow him, overpower him and rob him of his money. However, they are so violent that the man falls unconscious. Thinking that the man is dead, they try to run away to South Africa. They sleep at the border where they meet Laiza, a woman who seems drunk and mad. Laiza had picked up a souvenir which the young men had accidentally left at the “murder” scene. The ensuing quarrel between the drunk young men and Laiza is the vehicle through which the playwright engages with moral and political issues in Zimbabwe, such as corruption, political intolerance, democracy and religious morality.

The Woman as a Symbol of African Spirituality

On a superficial level, Laiza is presented as being mad. A close analysis reveals, however, that she presents a deep and complex philosophical outlook which

defies neat categorisation. Laiza can be described as an embodiment of a radical African religious and spiritual consciousness which challenges elements of conventional morality and mal-practices in socio-political arenas.

In the second scene of the play, Laiza boasts that she has slept with different men including businessmen, youths, thieves, pastors and many others. The reference to pastors is a clear rebuke and ridicule of what she perceives to be the moral hypocrisy of Christianity. The play takes a very satiric and irreverent view of Christian dogma. Thus, for example, Laiza mocks Jesus for dying a virgin without “even tasting the sweetness of a woman” (Maphosa 2005: 5):

Laiza: Do you mean to tell me that Jesus died a virgin, without even tasting the sweetness of a woman?

Zacks: And you wanted to sleep with him.

Laiza: ... he would have abandoned his mission in pursuit of me.

Tom: (angry) Don't play with the Lord. (Pause) That you don't believe, suppose you die, what will you say to God?

Laiza: I will tell him I have the right to remain silent until my lawyer comes.

Laiza is not afraid of God's judgement – a prominent theme in the Bible – because she thinks she can easily hire a lawyer to defend herself against God's judgement. While she is critical if not contemptuous of Christianity, Laiza is presented as the personification of the virtue of African spirituality. She tells Zacks and Tom about everything they did at the “murder” scene and reminds them that:

Laiza: Ah! So that is the same murder you are running away from?
But you cannot run away from a dead man. His spirit will haunt you ... (Maphosa 2005: 23)

Laiza also believes in the efficacy of African spiritual healing, especially for ailments such as stress and for HIV/AIDS-related diseases. She subscribes to the contention that HIV/AIDS can be prevented by resorting to traditional spiritual practices such as *runyoka*. *Runyoka* is believed to be a bad spell that is cast on a man who commits adultery with a married woman. Her words in this regard are (Maphosa 2005: 5-6):

Laiza: Are you okay? Suddenly you have turned Christian. Are you calling Jesus to redeem you or your praying that your girlfriend does not cheat you? Manje (for your own information), the most effective is the African way; Runyoka, the Mbare way ...

In this context, Laiza suggests a cure for all other non/physical "ailments" afflicting Africa such as corruption, prostitution, poverty and dictatorship. This echoes what appears to be an African epistemology of healing in which healing is understood as:

... a comprehensive concept that does not limit itself to a cure, but is concerned with all aspects of suffering, including those affecting people's moral and spiritual life, thus addressing the whole person ... when healing occurs, ... it does not limit itself to the individual but also affects the life of the community and of society at large. Healing, then, means taking away any disturbance in the life that prevents a person from being fully human; or, in other words, to help someone overcome a stumbling block on the road to human fulfilment ... (Haar 2009: 4-5)

It is in light of the above that one can interpret Laiza as an embodiment of an African spirituality which is inhabited by spiritual forces that have a direct link with the material world. Laiza is presented as a proponent of African liberation theologies, protest theologies that challenge spiritual imperialism and chauvinism, particularly those whose objective seems to be the need to obliterate African religious epistemologies (Phiri 2004: 16; Lazreg 2005: 70). Therefore, this construction of a "feminine" symbol which is a complex combination of a religio-spiritual consciousness, political ideology and cultural epistemologies is generally both a celebration and "suggestion" of the empowerment of women in African religious practices. However, this construction is also marked by contradictions and limits, which are explored in the following sections.

Stereotypical Masculinity

Zacks and Tom in "Heaven's Diary" are constructed to represent and project stereotypical masculinities. Stereotypical masculinity is associated with the strong male lust for power which seems to derive first and foremost from men's genitalia (Amin 2002: 27). In this association, men are constructed as "creatures" who want to rule, dominate in a brutal and ruthless manner. Masculinity is also closely linked to corruption. Consequently, Tom and Zacks are ruthless, competitive and hungry for power. Tom confesses to Laiza that they were in a nightclub when they were seized with jealousy upon seeing a man who was buying a lot of beer for women. They decided to ambush and attack him. The two are also portrayed as hopeless drunkards who are chauvinistic, macho and violent. In the end, these traits of masculinity have extremely negative consequences on the lives of the two characters.

From a purely aesthetic point of view, the construction of these images of

masculinity are problematic in that they are one dimensional instead of being multidimensional, where their physiological, sociological and psychological constructions would be more complex than being merely prescriptive (Hansen 1991). This is in sharp contrast to the construction of the character of Laiza who is complex and therefore has better chances of critically engaging the audience on ideological terms. Notwithstanding the above, it is still possible to make some religious interpretations of the images of masculinity as represented by Zacks and Tom. One possible reading is that Zacks and Tom typify the contention that men are no longer keen on attending church because, spiritually, they are more devoted to masculinity than to any conventional religion. In other words, masculinity has become a form of “secular” religion (David Murrow, cited by Chivandikwa 2010: 3). While Laiza’s spirituality can be easily linked to the African traditional religion, Zacks’s and Tom’s motivations do not seem to go beyond greed, love for women, material goods, competition and lust for power. It is this kind of construction, however problematic, which can give credence to the recognition that indeed, for some men, masculinity has become some form of religion.

What is interesting and ironic is that this negative African masculine behaviour and identity is neutralised by Christian dogma and morality. Tom suddenly transforms his consciousness by picking up a New Testament Bible which inspires him to confess his sins to God and to Laiza. This is a curious experience because the tone of the whole play appears to malign and ridicule Christianity. Whatever the intentions of the creator of “Heaven’s Diary”, this episode seems to confirm the observation that religion affects people even at the unconscious level:

Even when it [religion] is criticised and rejected, religion maintains its power, shaping social roles ... (Mokwena 2004: 86)

Tom’s transformation is informed by his fear of hell, but this is within the context of a critical view of Christian morality and dogma. Therefore, one might still argue that “Heaven’s Diary” is not entirely anti-Christianity.

Once again this play shows the complexity of religious experiences in Zimbabwe specifically and in Africa more widely. Critics, in fact, interpret religious experiences and influences from complex and diverse positions. For example, some African theologians can argue that negative, domineering patriarchal images emerge from Western Christianity and not from African epistemologies (see Lazreg 2005; Haar 2009; Osman 2009). At the same time there are scholars who contend that women are oppressed and marginalised in African traditional religious domains (Mokwena 2004; Nwakuchi 2006; Kamaara 2005). The next section further problematises the construction of a radical female sexuality and its religious or spiritual implications.

Radical Female Sexuality

Sexuality embodies the total expression of being male and female. It has physical, hormonal, internal and external characteristics (Kamaara 2005). In Africa it is generally said that women are expected to be passive and conservative about their sexuality. They are usually objects of an aggressive male sexuality. In addition, certain Africanists have argued that traditionally in Africa sexual relationships are only discussed in a marriage context for procreation (see Fanusie 2006: 141). This could be a controversial submission. However, it appears such contentions are largely based on moral and spiritual ideals and not necessarily on dominant practices in everyday situations.

In the case of “Heaven’s Diary,” Laiza projects a radical image of female sexuality which transgresses both Christian morality and African cultural views on sexuality. She brazenly challenges both Tom and Zacks to have sex with her. She taunts men in general for being incompetent in bed and contends that female sexuality is a therapy for stress and male depression. Laiza anticipates that at her funeral, she will be celebrated as a national heroine who “... willingly and relentlessly gave herself to the cause of the majority ...” by “quenching” the sexual desires of men. Lastly, in Scene Six, Laiza quarrels with Zacks and grabs him by his “manhood.” This is a direct challenge to masculine virility and an apparent dismantling of the “myth” of an aggressive masculine sexuality.

However, this radical female sexuality seems to contradict the overall image of Laiza as a symbol of African religion and spirituality. Just like Christianity, African traditional religion reveres human sexuality and condemns prostitution, extra-marital affairs and homosexuality (Fanusie 2006: 141). In light of the above construction, Laiza’s character becomes complex and apparently contradictory. One possible route of explaining this apparent contradiction is to regard her reference to sex as a metaphor of the human need for interaction, spiritual union and philosophical engagement. In such a view, sex becomes a spiritual space or concept. Regardless of the tensions and contradictions, Laiza is clearly depicted as a complex female heroine who transcends the cultural and religious convictions of her society. At the same time, part of her own convictions and identity are informed by religious epistemologies. This could be a result of a complex combination of secular ideologies and different spiritual and religious experiences.

Concluding Remarks

The two recent Zimbabwean plays “Africano-Americano” and “Heaven’s Diary” reflect dynamic tensions, contradictions and convergences between Christianity and African spirituality. The main observation in this study is that theatre mirrors the dialectic, dynamic and spiritual aspects of the society in which it is constructed. Notwithstanding some problematic gender images in the two

plays, these plays demonstrate how theatre is engaged in the process of at least challenging myths, rituals and dogma which oppress women. There is an evident feminization of political, spiritual and ideological consciousness. This is a good omen pointing towards more active female agency and subjectivity. Laiza and Africano are arguably “heroines,” both physically and ideologically. In both plays, the spiritual realm is the context and motivator for the heroic attributes of these female protagonists. At the same time, there is tension between socio-religious ideological consciousness and the lived experiences of the characters in the two plays, which is a reflection of what is obtaining in the society in which the two plays function. This, it seems, is partly a function of the complexities and dynamics that come along when different forms of spiritual consciousness (the African traditional and the Christian) come into contact. The plays suggest that when this happens, there is potential for both growth and destruction. In spite of the apparent tension between Christianity and theatre, there are indications in these plays that both complement each other. Thus, the female interpretation of Jesus Christ which is being suggested in feminist theology and the dominant position of African women in African religious rituals resonate with current approaches in theatre where playwrights and directors ascribe significant agency and subjectivity to female characters.

If we accept the formulation that theatre is a mirror of society, the future of gender relations in Zimbabwe is promising because there is at least consciousness from the religious sphere and the theatre art form of the need to engage in gender-emancipatory discourses. There is potential for more forms of positive spiritual “hybridization” which can potentially enrich and deepen gender relations. The advantage of theatre is that it can “heighten,” structure and “invent” experience in a symbolic way which can have a progressive religio-ideological potency. This emanates from theatre’s potential to disrupt negative ideological positions rather than merely showing them as they are (Watson and Mckernie 1993; Cameroon and Gillespie 1992; Howard 1994). At the same time, if theatre is an ideological transaction between the audience and performers, one hopes there will be more plays which are sensitive to religio-ideological consciousness and spiritual realities in general. Zimbabwean theatrical constructions, therefore, remain essential “reservoirs” of religious epistemologies, practices and sensibilities.

Notes

- ¹ A religious ritual is here understood as “[a] repeated and symbolic dramatisation directing attention to a place [where] the sacred enters life thereby granting identity to participants in the drama, transforming them, communicating social meaning verbally and non verbally, and offering a paradigm for how the world ought to be ...” (Cox cited by Mapuranga 2009:98).

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