

## **AICs as a gendered space in Harare, Zimbabwe: revisiting the role and place of women**

*Tapiwa Praise Mapuranga*

Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy,  
University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe

### *Abstract*

This article examines the politics of space with particular reference to African Independent Churches (AICs) in the city of Harare. This stems from the notion that AICs in the city tend to occupy the margins and outer spaces. On the one hand, this article argues that this location of the periphery compounds the marginality of women in these churches as they also occupy the margins within the hierarchies of the church in terms of leadership. This article's assumptions are that, in AICs, men dominate most of the religious space. Women tend to fill in the less important spheres and, at times, are mere followers. On the other hand, despite this male dominance, women have begun to reclaim some power that they had earlier on enjoyed in traditional religions.

### **Introduction**

African Independent Churches (AICs) are a group of Christian churches independently formed in Africa. They comprise a wide range of religious movements or organisations such as *Masowe* or *Mapostori*, as will be unpacked as the discussion unfolds. This article argues that, to some extent, these churches can be regarded as “a gendered space”. This is so because there is an apparent inclusion and exclusion of both female and male participants. However, there is a noticeable imbalance on this inclusion and exclusion in the sense that women in these churches have limited roles. Women are subjected to patriarchy which then relegates them to the lowest rungs on the ladder within and outside these religious institutions. Even so, this issue is highly debatable, seeing that it is noticeable in contemporary churches that some AICs include women at the apex of the social ladder since women are allowed greater leadership positions. This contributes to the emancipation of women within these churches. In this regard, the assertion that AICs are “a gendered space” cannot be wholly acceptable. This article thus argues that AICs, on the one hand, may be labelled as “gendered space”, but on the other hand, this assertion may not be easily justifiable. The article is built on the realisation that the position and status of women in AICs are ambivalent. While on the one hand women are marginalised, on the other hand, they exercise their agency to take up leadership positions. Researchers who are looking for “formal leadership” on the part of women in AICs are likely to be disappointed. This is because women's leadership is best seen in terms of their capacity to subvert patriarchy. Despite the official stance that women are “only followers”, women in AICs have strategically ensured that they move themselves from the centre to the periphery through prophetic utterances, singing and testifying.

### **Methodology**

The focus of this article is to critically examine how AICs in the city of Harare can be labelled as a gendered space. In this quest, it adopts an emerging approach known as “African cultural hermeneutics”. This is a specific approach that has been developed by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians to address the issue of women's marginalisation in organised religions in Africa. Cultural hermeneutics has been gaining ground in the study of religion and gender in Africa. According to Kanyoro (2002:9), cultural hermeneutics is “... an analysis and interpretation of how culture conditions people's understanding of reality at a particular time and location”. She also defines this method as “the choice of combining an affirmation of culture and a critique of it that will have the potential to sustain the modern Africa” (Kanyoro 2002:26). This method enables this article to critically analyse the notion whether culture is conditioning the perceptions of patriarchy in AICs in the urban setting of Harare to an extent that the women occupy the margins of a phenomenon already located in the margins of the city. Apart from cultural hermeneutics, this article will use participant observation and interactions in AICs.

### **Gendered space: a definition**

Thus far, this article has used the term “gendered space” without defining it. It is helpful to break down the concept by separating the key operational words, namely, gender and space. Gender has generally been referred to as the social construction of what it means to be male or female. According to Massey (1994:91), space refers

to a complex construction and production of an environment – both real and imagined – influenced by socio-political processes, cultural norms and institutionalised arrangements which provoke different ways of being, belonging and inhabiting. A gendered space is, therefore, a place where only members of one gender have got an upper hand. This situation may be so in AICs due to the effects of androcentricism and patriarchy that dominate most religious traditions. This supports the argument that the production of space at spatial patterns is not absolute, but is shaped by social and governing systems dominated by institutions and individuals who wield political power. According to Massey (1994:15):

...‘gendered space’ refers to the socially constructed, geographical, and also architectural arrangements and space which regulate and restrict women’s access to spaces which are also connected to the production of power and privileges in a given context.

Likewise, gendered space is shaped by the dominant social and cultural institutions that reinforce traditional gender roles (Lefebvre 1991:22). It has also been argued that the term “gendered space” presents an approach which implies that women’s presence in particular privileged spaces, which are usually public, may threaten the sanctity of space (Lefebvre 1991:22). As such, one may argue that in most instances, the participation of women may be controlled in public spaces by the powers in control and these powers are usually influenced by male dominance. Males in patriarchal societies feel that power belongs to them and that they are the owners and controllers of public space. According to Goheen (1998:494):

The will to command public urban space expresses the desire of many urban groups and institutions to be acknowledged, to convey messages forcefully, to promote the legitimacy of one’s cause. The range of such expression is great, and the contest for visibility and influence is lively.

It is noted that public spaces in AICs have been understood historically to be the actual preserve of men: a position that reinforces male control and authority over women. In this context, the question is: Are African Independent Churches promoting oppression of one sex by creating gendered spaces in their various churches? In order to appreciate the dynamics and politics of space in AICs, it is important to characterise this particular movement. The next section provides an overview of AICs.

### **AICs: unpacking the term**

As Verstraelen (1998) has argued, Zimbabwean Christianity is hugely diverse. One finds the Catholic churches, Protestant churches, African Instituted/Independent/Initiated churches (AICs) and Pentecostal churches. This article focuses on AICs in Zimbabwe. Despite the unfolding diversity of what can be termed as AICs, this article focuses on a particular category. For this article, the churches that are referred to as AICs are churches that include the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), Johane Marange, Johane Masowe WeChishanu, African Apostolic Church, Independent African Church, Guta RaJehova and many other “mushrooming African congregations” (Daneel 1974:56). They are generally referred to as *Mapostori* or *Masowe* in the local language in Zimbabwe. Unlike other categories of AICs as highlighted in the upcoming discussion, these particular churches selected for this article can be commonly known as “garment type” churches. This is because the adherents wear long garments, and depending on the type of *Masowe* or *Mapostori*, they can be white, yellow, red, green, purple or blue long robes. The variety of these churches means that they have different beliefs, doctrines and forms of governance, but what makes them all AICs is that they have a common thread running through them in terms of beliefs and practice. Such a common kernel includes the fact that they were formed out of a desire to be independent in organisation, leadership and religious experiences from the mainline churches.

The abbreviation AICs stands for different meanings, depending on a given writer. It stands for a variety of overlapping terms such as African Independent churches (Turner 1979:92), African Indigenous churches, African Instituted churches (Chitando 2004), African Initiated churches, and more recently, African International churches (Ter Haar 1998). The abbreviation AICs covers all of them. Whatever the “I” stands for, this article considers that the essence and meaning of this subject matter is the same. Generally, these are churches founded in Africa by Africans for them to worship in African ways. This kind of a definition was earlier propounded by Turner (1979:92) who argues that:

An African Independent Church is a church which has been founded primarily in Africa by Africans for Africans ... they are bodies that have originated in African and not dependent on any religious group outside African for funding leadership or control.

The AICs are categorised into three churches, namely, Ethiopian churches, Zionist churches and Apostolic churches. The Ethiopian churches are those which have no claim to manifestations of the Holy Spirit. They reject European leadership. Their leadership hierarchy is similar to that found in mainline churches. They are inspired by Psalms 68:31b, which says: "Let Ethiopia hasten to stretch her hands to God." Examples of such churches include the African Congregational Church by Rev Sengwayo, First Ethiopian churches (*Topia*) by Bishop Gavure and the African Reformed Church by Rev Sibambo.

The Zionist type churches are those related to the Zionist movement in South Africa and Zion City, Illinois, in the United States of America (Anderson 2001:16). They emphasise the activity of the Holy Spirit, healing, prophecy and abstention from pork. Examples of the Zionist movement in Zimbabwe are Zion Christian churches by Bishop Samuel Mutendi, the Zion Apostolic Church by Bishop David Masuka and the Zion Apostolic Faith Mission by Bishop Andreas Shoko.

The third category is the Apostolic type churches. There are some similarities and links with the Zionist churches. The two are usually referred to as Spirit type churches because of their reference to the Holy Spirit. The Apostolic churches emphasise the phenomenon of speaking in tongues, basing on the Acts account of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13). Though this Pentecostal movement has historical and theological roots in the Pentecostal movement, it deviated from western Pentecostalism in many ways (Anderson 2001:16). Most of these include evangelical churches, the Pentecostal movements and Charismatic movements. The local examples include Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Church (ZAOGA), Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM), Family of God (FOG), and the United Family International Church (UFIC). Most Pentecostal churches trace their historical impetus generated by the Azusa Street Revival in the United States of America (Onyinah 2007:307). These Pentecostal churches do not form the focus of this article. However, their approach to women's leadership has begun to receive scholarly attention in Zimbabwe (Mapuranga 2012; Mapuranga 2013).

As highlighted in the foregoing discussion, there are various types of AICs. Despite their variety, it has been argued that one of their reasons for emergence and growth is the need for liberation. This aspect becomes critical in this article as the question of the liberation of women comes up. It is the thrust of the next section to assess whether women have been given space in AICs as they sought liberation together with African men when they formed AICs. Have they not remained in the margins in terms of leadership and general participation?

### **AICs as gendered space: an overview**

It seems plausible in this article to argue that AICs are spaces within the margins of the city in Harare (Mukonyora 2007). Whereas other churches such as Roman Catholic, Methodist and Anglican are located right within the central business district, AICs are never located within the centre of the city. The inner part of the city (where other churches apart from AICs are located) is usually associated with wealth, education, prosperity and sophistication. AICs are usually found at the boundaries or peripheries of the city. As such, one could argue that they are located at the margins of the city. As illustrated by Goheen (1998:479):

Public space is often seen as problem space in the modern city: it is now as it has always been a space of contention. It is the visible and accessible venue wherein the public – comprising institutions and citizens acting in concert – enact rituals and make claims designed to win recognition ... Public space in the modern city is charged with meaning and with controversy. The space in question is that which the public collectively values – space to which it attributes symbolic significance and asserts claims. The values attaching to public space are those with which the generality of the citizenry endows it.

What, therefore, is the meaning of the location of AICs on the periphery of the city? One could ask if there is a parallel with the way that AICs are located within the margins of the city with women in these congregations. If this is the case, are women, therefore, not located in the margins of that which is located in the margins of the city? If this is the case, women become the periphery of the periphery.

This becomes crucial in this write-up because, not only have AICs been located at the periphery, but the study of women in these churches has been in the margins too. According to Mabhunu, with particular reference to prophetesses in AICs, "The study of women ... in African initiated churches (AICs) has remained a second thought, if not a peripheral issue both to seasoned and budding scholars" (Mabhunu 2010:63). This is also supported by Ndeda (2005:50) who argues that:

The predominance of women in these churches is significant and yet ... there is little information in the way in which gender shapes religious ideology and the experience of conversion has not been central to the analysis of these studies.

This article thus highlights the importance of the gendered dimension of AICs in Harare. In the following section, it argues that AICs emerged within the context of the struggle for liberation. However, in that process, women's full liberation might not have been fully realised.

### **AICs and the Missionary Gospel: a quest for liberation**

A variety of reasons have been given for the formation of AICs. One of the major reasons was the need for Africans to seek liberation from the Missionary Gospel. So too did women seek liberation from the patriarchal nature of mainline Christianity. As argued by Lagerwerf (1990:17), "the Christian message as introduced by the missionaries has affected the lives of many African women in various ways". As such, the influence of Christianity on Zimbabwean women was felt early on. Writing on the churches in Nigeria, Bateye (2008:114) makes the following submission:

It was also observed that just as colonialism came to offset the equilibrium in the socio-cultural setup of some African societies ... patriarchal religions of the West came in the cloak of colonialism ... The Bible was used authoritatively by the Western Orthodox Churches to silence women and prevent them from assuming administrative pastoral roles in the church hierarchy. There was therefore ambivalence in the stance of Western Christian mission pertaining to women. On the one hand, they claimed to liberate and empower women, while on the other hand, there was a rigid rejection of women from taking up leadership roles in the church, and in some cases even the larger secular Western Society.

It is important to note that the expensive education of missionaries failed to bring the anticipated rapid advancement to women (Parratt 1997:14). This is one major reason why Africans sought to break away from the "white" gospel and re-create Christianity that met their own needs through what has become known as AICs. Thus, the likes of Mai Chaza rebelled from the Methodist Church to form Guta raJehovha (City of Jehovah). Chitando (2004:122) also notes the rise of Alice Mulenga Lenchina in Zambia. Such charismatic churches are numerous. In Malawi and Zambia, many of them have been founded by women and young people (Phiri 2000:267). The status of women in these AICs is unlike that found in the missionary founded churches where women were not permitted to hold leadership positions in the ministry or to be in the executive structures of the churches. Women faced substantiated barriers to inclusion (Christiano, Swatos & Kivisto 2002:193). Women were looked down upon and were considered as second-class Christians and citizens.

In this case, this article questions if the liberation sought through the formation of AICs has been applied to both males and females in the church. It is always important to note that there are a variety of reasons that have been put forward for the status of women in AICs. For Olajabu (2003:60), "gender dynamics in the African Independent churches are to a large extent accentuated by prohibitive rules concerning menstrual blood". However, for Sackey (2005:200), "gender relations also depend on the age in which a particular church evolves. Women's leadership in AICs is therefore a fluctuating feature". Basing on such arguments, the next discussion seeks to establish the relationship of gendered spaces and selected AICs. Apart from the leadership roles that indicate how women are central in AICs in Harare, there is a perspective that considers them as being in the margins. The next section illustrates the latter.

### **Women at the periphery of the periphery: a critical evaluation**

The question of space as gendered in AICs remains debatable. On the one hand, women are marginalised, and on the other, they are at the centre of activities and thus very significant. There are significant factors which label AICs as a gendered space. Amongst other reasons, one may identify the notion that this is all brought about by the fact that only men in these churches would acquire theological training. In addition, it is also noticeable that men in AICs attend annual synods and conferences where they get opportunities to venture into leadership. It is from these arguments that this article is of the opinion that women are not accorded the same freedom to participate meaningfully. This system makes it hard for women to speak in meetings or to address meetings. Power, strength and education are reserved for only a small number.

Generally, in AICs, the roles of women are those of the periphery and restricted leadership. There are some AICs where women are still regarded as subjects. There is a dominant male ideology that has ensured that women continue being abstract as leaders and more visible as clients in these churches. This ideology (patriarchy) that approves male headship has been highly influential in placing women at the fringes of AICs (in those situations when they do). Some of the AICs still marginalise females by insisting on a gendered space. This is so because, earlier on, Afro-centric AICs have insisted that "women are so delicate, frail and totally dependent upon their men" (Moila 2002:16). This perception is a major factor that contributes to the positioning of women in the margins of AICs. According to Sackey (2005:200), this is because women in AICs spatially

inhabit a society different from men and also perceive it differently. This is in agreement with the suggestion by Goheen (1998:480) who writes:

... the continuing significance of public space as the preferred arena where groups of every description can achieve public visibility, seek recognition and make demands ... urban public space reflects in a particularly creative way the changes and continuities that characterise a dynamic urban public life which reflects both celebration and contention.

In as much as some may identify some roles of women; this does not wholly show their centrality in AICs. Scholars such as Mabhunu have insisted that the roles that women are given only indicate some partial liberation as they are still not given space to participate in top positions. Such examples include the role of prophecy, which has allowed women to be heard in part in the church. Mabhunu (2010:82) argues:

Despite the inroads that women have had in AICs in Harare, consideration of personal testimonies and observations have indicated that they still have limited roles in leadership positions. Women are recognized as healers, midwives and prophetesses. But all women in AICs, even prophetesses, are excluded from the church hierarchy. The expression of equality in leadership is denied for women ... AICs forbid women from preaching in line with the Pauline Instruction ... 1 Timothy 2:11-14. Prophetesses are also excluded from positions of authority and influence such as occupying positions of secretary general or treasurer.

For Mukonyora (2007:18), AICs can be labelled as a “gendered space” because all of them emanated from the so-called patriarchal societies and space is actually extended towards women. For this article, in the African Apostolic Church of Paul Mwazha, there is clear evidence of gender discrimination against women. Women are not allowed to talk in church or to appear as the leaders of the congregation. This is because the church bases their argument on the Bible, that is, in the books of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34.

Apart from the African Apostolic Church, in the Johane Marange Church, women’s participation is curtailed even more because of the church’s appreciation of Levitical laws. These include, as highlighted by Oduyoye (1995:127), menstruation avoidances which exclude women who have just given birth and those undergoing their monthly flow of blood. The laws of the church were formulated by men who were very strict on women. As such, women are restricted in worship on natural and biological experiences.

Apart from the churches identified in the foregoing section, the Church of Marange is one other church that has been noted with some discriminatory characteristics in relation to space and gender. The subordination of women has been vivified by the church at large as normal and women are taught to be subordinate both in the church and at home. Consequently, there is no leadership space for women since they are not considered as participants in the leadership hierarchies as well as preaching.

With such cases where space becomes gendered in AICs, women develop a religious language expressive to their hopes. They end up having their own religious aspirations and theological opinions, apart from such leadership positions which they would have been denied by the systems in charge. The situation in Zimbabwe is similar to the AICs in Nigeria. As highlighted by Olajabu (2003:60):

The norm for the Yoruba woman is to seek fulfillment through group identities rather than as individuals. This norm finds expression in all spheres of human activities, including the political, economic and spiritual planes ... Some regard such group’s formation as a form of resistance to the status quo or as being compensatory, offering solace to women because of their exclusion from the source of power.

In this regard, it can be argued that AICs offer space for women to express their voices especially in group identities, and thus, the individual charisma tends to be overshadowed in these numbers. As such, it appears that spaces in AICs may be regarded as engendered only when the less important leadership roles and individual leadership capabilities are concerned. Patriarchal tendencies in the church tend to give the male more chances of accessing leadership, more so even as individuals, rather than in groups. This is argued by Oluwaniyi (2012:144) when she writes:

... efforts at getting out of the margins have only resulted in a narrow construction that does not tilt or expand the general male domain construction of leadership. It is perceived that their efforts have been to construct leadership in the church within the limited women space. This limited construction has the tendency of ignoring and sometimes, undermining women’s rights and needs.

Despite the fact that at times women may be regarded as peripheral in AICs as explained in this section, it is the thrust of the forthcoming discussion to highlight how central they can also be in these churches.

### **Space not gendered: women leaders as active participants in AICs?**

According to Sackey (2005:200), by drawing on African traditional male and female roles, AICs have enhanced gender relations by making space for female leadership. In traditional religions, women functioned as mediums, diviners, prophetesses, medicine persons, herbalists and priestesses. In West Africa, they owned deities, cults and shrines (Kemdirim 1995:2). Similarly, in AICs, women participate as important figures such as founders of the churches, prophetesses, priestesses, choristers, healers, and “itinerant preachers” (Chitando 2004:123), amongst a variety of other functions. According to Chitando (2004:122–123):

Women have played a significant role in the rapid spread of AICs in Southern Africa. Apostolic women in their distinctive white garments and Zionist women in colourful outfits have become an integral part of urban life in the region. It is women who constitute the majority of members within AICs, and they have been central in the emergence of transnational networks that have emerged. A number of reasons have been proffered in an effort to explain the dominance of women in AICs. One of the key attractions is the space that has been granted to women in these new religious movements. They are allowed to express themselves fully, and to occupy key offices as prophetesses.

Generally, it is noted that the 1950s and early 1960s was a decade of women prophetesses like Alice Lenshina of Lumpa Church of Zambia and Mai Chaza of the Guta raJehovah Church in Zimbabwe. They began the long road of tearing apart the curtain of patriarchy within the church. AICs cultivated a fertile ground for the participation of women. A good example and leader is Mai Chaza, who emerged as a prominent woman who transcends the socio-cultural hierarchy, defying the imposed status of a perpetual minor (Dube 2008). She throws into relief the question of the position and status of women in the church.

Women leadership status in AICs runs parallel to that of men (Sundkler 1960:66). AICs have no doubt made a paradigm shift. This substantiates the claim made by Massey (2005:9) that space “is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed”. As such, this article notes that the gendered dimension of AICs is always affected by change. Gradually, women are beginning to get space within these settings. For example, as Daneel (1979:29) maintains, in these churches are deep connections between the landscape and women. In the Masowe church, it is argued that women are closely tied to the land and its sacred places. In as much as the earth has healing powers, so do women in these churches play a paramount role in healing ceremonies. So the idea that AICs are a “gendered space” cannot be endorsed without qualification. According to Mwaura (2005:420):

AICs are said to particularly provide women with a chance to recover their traditional status and positions that had been undermined by the teachings of the mission churches ... AICs are also regarded as sites of women’s liberation. They have provided women with a forum where they find liberation from ever present fears of witchcraft and other forces that undermine their well-being.

This is also true of the Masowe Apostles, as documented by Mukonyora (2007:15). She argues:

... Besides attending the prayer meetings in large numbers, they were active participants in ritual activities, especially at healing ceremonies where woman- oriented matters of fertility and the protection of life, with their corresponding feminine religious symbols, took centre stage.

In the other Apostolic cult of Johane Masowe, there was an “arch” of sisters, a sort of covenant of praying nuns at the heart of the church (Hastings 1996:521). This shows a positive move of accommodating women. Women are well known for healing and prophesying.

Sundkler (1961:139) agrees with this notion that women have unquestionable status within AICs. Women in AICs are at times so adamant that they are rising to occupy leadership positions which are equivalent to those held by men in the churches. At the ecumenical conference of the AICs in 1995, it was stated clearly that the “church as the body of Christ consists of men and women created as responsible persons to glorify God and to do God’s will” (Paton 1976:107). As illustrated in the foregoing discussion, AICs are now transforming to become a space of dual leadership. In this way, the concept of gendered space in these churches is being changed.

The process of reversing male dominance to female leadership in AICs seems to have taken place gradually. Some AICs are implementing a shift from the view that patriarchal dominance of men is divinely oriented. It is from such positive developments that Hackett (1995:262) argues:

Africa's new religious movements provide a rich and varied spectrum of women's agency. Religious symbols and practices shape women's perceptions of themselves, their relations with others, their ability to act, and provide strategies for survival and empower and disempower them within the context of their religious and wider communities.

## Conclusion

This article has analysed the question of how AICs can be labelled as a "gendered space" due to designation of roles done by men and women which restrict women from leading. AICs can be clearly labelled as gendered space since they are controlled by certain socio-cultural and historical forces that are created by humans; and chief among them is patriarchy. However, some AICs are trying to change this through creating space for women as preachers, prophets and engaging in leadership activities as well as being prominent healers. As such, whereas some practices in AICs discriminate against women in terms of leadership, there are some practices which are against the creation of gendered spaces. Although AICs (and other types of churches) have defined space in patriarchal terms, women have remained in these churches because "[w]ithin the patriarchal structures of the church, women have carved spaces for themselves, which they feel are worth staying in the Church for" (Phiri 2012:264).

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