Eziko: Feasts of power, gender roles and sacred spaces in Luke 22:14–20

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This article explored the significance of the upper room where Jesus invited his 12 disciples for a meal, focussing on the specific selection of both the men and the space. It investigated the potential contributions of the *eziko* [fireplace] in terms of inclusivity and decentralising the power dynamics of the Lord's Supper. Asking how the *eziko*, as a site, can deconstruct gender biases and decentralise the power vested in the upper room. Using the indigenous storytelling methodology, nuancing the space of the *eziko* and juxtaposing it with the events described in Luke 22:14–20.

Contribution: Among its key contributions, this article presents an interdisciplinary approach that integrates indigenous storytelling methodology with African indigenous knowledge systems, while also bridging theology with these cultural frameworks. This approach enhances academic discussions on contextual theology and promotes meaningful dialogue between Christian traditions and African indigenous religious practices.

Keywords: *eziko*; indigenous storytelling methodology; Jesus; Luke 22:14–20; upper room.

Introduction

Chammah Kaunda's (2024:xiii) quote in the preface of the recently published work states: 'The crucial issue at stake in African scholarship is not merely reconstructing concepts, but gendering them, liberating them to liberate the future.' The concept of '*eziko*', or hearth, aims to infuse gender perspectives into the interpretation of biblical verses, specifically focussing on its central role within the home, as highlighted by Penxa-Matholeni and Dube (2024). This article will dig into the significance of *eziko*, theorise its implications and discuss its potential liberation in the context of the biblical text in question.

The article will examine the contrasting spaces of the upper room and the *eziko* concept, highlighting the power dynamics inherent in both settings. This exploration will be framed from a historical perspective, focussing on how Black women have experienced and related to God and Jesus. Specifically, it will consider how Black women were socialised in relation to Jesus, particularly reflecting on the image of Jesus that has historically been prominent in Black family homes.

The methodology section of this article will be succinctly outline the chosen approach and situate the author within this research. The findings will be thoroughly explained in the conclusion section.

Methodology

The process of amplifying voices that have long been suppressed by systems of oppression, patriarchy, religion and racism is transformative – it emancipates us from the dominance of singular truths, liberates us from the exclusive hearing of Western European perspectives and frees us from viewing the world through a monochromatic lens as shown by Guba and Lincoln (2005:212). These statements underscore the critical importance of adopting an indigenous storytelling methodology, providing a platform for articulating nuanced narratives rooted in the unique ontological experiences and philosophical perspectives of African communities grappling with the intersections of race, gender, Christianisation and colonisation.

In this article, the indigenous storytelling methodology is embodied through the poignant concept of *eziko*, which adds depth and authenticity to the shared stories. The indigeneity of these narratives is evident in various cultural expressions, including *iingoma* [songs], *imixhentso* [traditional dances], naming rituals, metaphors, proverbs, and *iintsomi* [folktales]. These stories are traditionally shared *eziko* [by the fire], as argued by Penxa-Matholeni (2022).

The use of the above-mentioned indigenous stories serves not only to provide philosophical and theoretical frameworks, but also to offer a comprehensive exploration of intricate cultural nuances, demonstrating various approaches to crafting an indigenous African oral tradition. Indigenous stories inherently reflect the values of a society and serve as educational tools *eziko* [by the fire], as noted by Penxa-Matholeni and Dube (2024), offering profound insights into various facets of society, family dynamics, knowledge transmission and social relations.

Therefore, employing indigenous storytelling as a methodology in this context signifies not only a deep respect for diverse ways of acquiring knowledge and local experiences, but also reveals similarities to the ways of being in the biblical world.

Self-location

It is increasingly imperative not only to position ourselves as researchers, but also to continuously articulate our positioning within indigenous perspectives. From the viewpoint of indigenous researchers, self-location serves to elucidate the intricate interplay between the phenomenon under investigation and the researcher themselves as seen in Chilisa's (2012) work. Moreover, the process of self-location is deeply influenced by the specific contextual dynamics of the research at hand. To exemplify this, as suggested by Chilisa (2012), the act of situating oneself within indigenous methodologies is not merely to acknowledge the relationship between the phenomena in question, but also to challenge the universalising framework of Western feminism.

Furthermore, Penxa-Matholeni (2024), in Okyere-Manu and Lushombo (2024), highlights the profound impact of a strong communal ethos on storytelling and narrative construction within black communities. Growing up in a cultural milieu where individual identity is inherently intertwined with community identity, I recognise how this shapes the telling and writing of stories.

Firstly, my self-location encompasses not only the lenses I use to interpret the phenomenon in question, but also those I do not. I am not a Biblical scholar; I am a pastoral theologian and an indigenous researcher. Although I usually avoid categorising myself, I make an exception here to help the reader understand my interpretive perspective. The reader can trace the marks of my footprints, so to speak. I am a South African black woman, living with the legacies of apartheid and colonisation. These legacies, supposedly part of our past, continuously remind us of where we come from. It is our collective responsibility to continually revisit who we are and how our perspectives are tinted by the past, because we carry the past into the future to remember what we do not want to return to.

Secondly, in this article, I will speak in both the first person and the third person (we) because, as mentioned earlier, when one comes from a community that is inherently interconnected, this interconnectedness naturally appears in the telling or writing of stories. This approach encapsulates the lenses I will use to interpret this article.

Contentious spaces: Battlegrounds of dispute

Spaces denote roles and relationships. They signify privilege, underprivilege, authority, power and powerlessness. For example, in the theatre, space separates the actors from the audience; in the classroom, it separates teachers from pupils or students. In a church, space distinguishes the preacher from the congregants, while in a courtroom, it divides the prosecutors, the defence counsel, the accused, the witness box and the public gallery. The judge occupies a distinct, elevated space on the bench. These spatial divisions create 'ingroups' and push others to the margins, often leaving some with no space at all. This dynamic is equally evident in sacred spaces within churches, across various platforms, denominations and religions.

Power and authority are often masked by these spatial separations, making intolerable power seem tolerable by hiding it behind the structure of allocated spaces. Titles further conceal and legitimise this power, intricately linking authority to space. Similarly, language occupies its own metaphorical space. As Penxa-Matholeni and Abrokwaah (2023) argue, language holds power and authority, but for this power to be realised, language itself must claim its own space.

This understanding of space, power and authority extends beyond the metaphorical and into lived experiences. Black South Africans, for instance, were relegated to specific spaces that shaped their spirituality (Beinart & Dubow 1995; Penxa-Matholeni 2023; Steyn 2005). As a nation, South Africans are deeply familiar with how space confers power and authority. Historically, spaces such as white-only churches, residential areas, schools and universities embodied privilege and exclusion, with inherent power tied to these divisions, (Boshoff 1986; Wepener 2005). The space one originates from often determines whether they are trusted, regardless of the value or content of their message.

Let us explore how power was and is wielded within the *eziko*, in the heart of the crowd, and consider whether it differs from the upper room.

Eziko: In the heart of the crowd

The following passage captures the vibrant and insightful description of what transpires around *eziko* through the evocative words of Musa WenKosi Dube, as found in the afterword of Okyere-Manu and Lushombo (2024:259):

> The night sky twinkles with a billion stars. A choir of frogs sings in loud croaky tunes from the nearest river pond. From afar a jackal cries out and its sound pierces the night. Goats and sheep bleat and trust as their kids and lambs tug at the mother's breasts for milk in the kraal and snuggle safely from the jackal's cry. Occasionally, dog bucks, cat mews and fireflies flash their green

lights. The sky is a wide, huge and breathtaking igloo house, punctured with billions of twinkling stars flashing across the expansive roof. They twinkle with tenderness; beauty and the whole universe silently ululates. (Dube 2024:259–262)

Eziko is more than just a heart; it is the heart of the home and the centre of the community. Here, people gather to cook, eat and exchange stories, their voices weaving a tapestry of wisdom, laughter and memory under the expansive night sky. According to Penxa-Matholeni and Dube (2024), *eziko* serves as a site that deconstructs the narratives that black women belong to the kitchen and labels men as the custodian of power and knowledge, and dismantling the dichotomies that segregated black women's lives.

The *eziko* symbolises life and connection – its fire is not only for cooking meals, but providing warmth, sustenance and light in the darkness. It is a space where relationships are forged and renewed, where the communal spirit thrives and where silence and song coexist in perfect harmony, where nature, the environment and animals exist in a balanced relationship. Musa WenKosi Dube, in her afterword, further highlights the fact that the nature surrounding the participants around the *eziko* is not mere background or context, but an integral part of the community. The *iintsomi* [folktales] often utilise animal characters to communicate wisdom and ethics of life. For instance, when a story features a certain animal, its character usually reflects morals or values. The tortoise (*ufudo* in isiXhosa and *uhlwembu* in isiZulu) is frequently portrayed as wise, cunning and resourceful. These traits make it a symbol of resilience, strategic thinking and adaptability.

According to Musa WenKosi Dube, the animals in these stories are not just characters, but are woven into the fabric of the community, as families often identify their clan names with specific animals. For example, the *AmaMpondomise* clan belongs to the snake called *Majola*, while for the *Dube* it is zebras, for *Ndlovu* it is elephants, and for *Mfene* it is baboons. The environment becomes a mirror of the community, with families identifying with elements of nature such as *Mthimkhulu* [big tree], *Langa* [sun] and *Hlathi* [forest], among many others. In this way, the *eziko* is not just a physical space, but a reflection of the interconnectedness of people, animals and the environment.

In African indigenous traditions, the *eziko* is not merely a physical space, but a sacred one. It is the site of ritual, a portal to the ancestors and a symbol of continuity between the living and the spiritual realms. Around its flames, generations sit together, knowledge is cocreated respectfully, *eziko* serves as a participatory school where storytelling, proverbs, riddles involve all participants. The *eziko*, with its crackling fire and comforting glow, embodies the spirit of *ubuntu* – a reminder that we are because of others.

To fully understand the power of the *eziko*, one must consider the gendered layers it holds. It is here that Black women have not only cooked meals, but also cooked stories – stories of resistance, faith and identity. These stories were, and continue to be, a powerful tool for survival and transformation, often in response to oppressive systems that sought to silence them (Dube 1997).

As we delve deeper into the upper room, a hidden sanctuary, let us ask: How does the power wielded in the upper room differ from the power displayed in the *eziko*? What does the *eziko* reveal about the way power is shared, embodied and contested in spaces that nurture communal wisdom, storytelling, and intergenerational knowledge transfer?

The upper room: A hidden sanctuary

In the dim, hushed atmosphere of the upper room, Jesus and his disciples gathered around the table. The air was thick with anticipation as Jesus, knowing his time of suffering was near, spoke with profound earnestness:

> 'I have longed to share this Passover meal with you before my suffering begins. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the Kingdom of God'. As He lifted the cup of wine, giving thanks to God, He said, 'Take this and share it among yourselves. I will not drink wine again until the Kingdom of God has come'. Breaking the bread, He offered it to them, saying, 'This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me'. After the meal, He took another cup of wine and declared, 'This cup is the new covenant between God and His people, sealed with my blood, poured out as a sacrifice for you'. (Lk 22:14–20 [NLT])

While this moment is often remembered for its profound spiritual meaning, the historical and cultural context of the upper room adds further layers to its significance. This sacred moment, shrouded in the intimacy of the upper room, marked the institution of the Lord's Supper and the new covenant, a poignant symbol of Jesus' impending sacrifice. Yet, within this sanctified space, layers of power and exclusion subtly wove themselves into the narrative.

The choice of the upper room was intentional, providing a secluded and sanctified environment for this pivotal moment in Jesus' ministry. The upper room, central to the narrative of the Last Supper, was more than a physical space; it was a site rich in theological and historical significance. Located within a house in Jerusalem, upper rooms (*hyperōon* in Greek) were traditionally used for hosting guests or important gatherings. This elevated space provided privacy and an atmosphere conducive to intimate fellowship, away from the public eye.

New Testament scholars often emphasise the symbolism of the upper room. It served as a sanctuary where Jesus gathered his disciples, not only to celebrate the Passover, but also to prepare them for the transformative events that would follow. Craig Keener (2014) notes that during the 1st century, homes in Jerusalem had two levels: the ground floor was used for daily activities and the upper room was reserved for occasions of significance, symbolising elevation not only in physical space, but also in spiritual purposes.

The upper room, described in Luke 22:12 as 'a large furnished room upstairs', was likely prepared in accordance with Jewish Passover traditions, complete with reclining couches for dining – a sign of leisure and honour. Joachim Jeremias (1996) highlights the fact that sharing a meal in such a setting reflected deep communal bonds, reinforcing the sacred nature of the Passover meal. It was here, in this secluded and holy space, that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, embedding new meaning into the ancient ritual of breaking bread and sharing wine. The preparation of the upper room, with its reclining couches and sacred meal, mirrors the intimate and communal bonds central to the Passover tradition, which Jesus redefined in this sacred moment.

However, this sanctuary of intimacy also carries historical echoes of exclusion and power dynamics. In a patriarchal society, women and other marginalised groups were often absent from such significant gatherings, a reality that theologians such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2014) critique as a missed opportunity to reflect inclusivity within the narrative of the early Christian community. Yet, while the upper room stands as a symbol of sacred fellowship, it also reflects the societal structures of its time, raising questions about power, privilege and exclusion

The upper room thus emerges as a place of paradox: a space of sacred fellowship, profound teaching and intimate vulnerability, yet one that reflects the societal structures of its time. Understanding this historical and cultural context adds depth to the scene and highlights the enduring complexity of power and exclusion in sacred spaces. In contrast, spaces like the *eziko*, central to African communal life, emphasise openness, accessibility and collective participation. The upper room is elevated – both physically and metaphorically – set apart as a space of privilege and power. It is a place where significant decisions are made, often by a select few, and where the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion come into sharp focus.

The issues of space and power, foundational to South Africa, resonate deeply with the story of the upper room. The secluded 'males only' space of the upper room re-traumatises black South African women, reflecting the inaccessibility and segregation experienced during apartheid. In the Old Testament, upper rooms, often found in the homes of kings and the wealthy, symbolised status and exclusivity (1 Ki 17:19). Similarly, a disciple offered his upper room to Jesus and his apostles for their private gathering (Mk 14:13–15).

Johan Cilliers (2013) posits that knowledge and power are interdependent, sustaining each other in a reciprocal dance. The upper room symbolises the distribution of power through exclusive knowledge, reserved for those deemed worthy. This sacred space, where men were entrusted with divine secrets, exemplifies how power and knowledge feed into each other. As Cilliers (2013) suggests, power creates knowledge, and the assertion that certain knowledge is 'truth' reinforces power. Consequently, African indigenous

religions were marginalised and exiled (Mndende 1998). When we speak of African indigenous religion, we speak of the beliefs and practices of the Africans (Setume 2024). Among those beliefs and practices are included those derived from the values of Mama Mercy Oduyoye (2001:66–670) who states that 'a solitary person does not make a community, and one tree does not make a forest'. In African contexts, the notions of individuality and hierarchies dissolve into the rich tapestry of communal existence. As Chilisa (2012) poignantly notes, dominant Western paradigms rest on the premise that knowledge is an individual possession, a treasure to be claimed and wielded as power. Yet, within the sacred embrace of *eziko*, knowledge blooms from the collective spirit, woven through relationships with all creation. Here, wisdom is a communal gift, nurtured and shared in harmony with the world.

The upper room, while central to the sacred narrative of the Last Supper, emerges as a complex symbol – a space of both spiritual elevation and societal exclusion. Its physical and metaphorical height underscores the paradox of sacred intimacy juxtaposed with power dynamics and systemic hierarchies. This sanctuary of knowledge and power contrasts sharply with African communal spaces like the *eziko*, which emphasise accessibility, inclusion and shared wisdom. By drawing connections between the exclusivity of the upper room and the historical wounds of segregation and marginalisation, this reflection invites us to reimagine sacred spaces as sites of radical openness and collective flourishing. In doing so, it challenges us to dismantle hierarchies of power and embody the communal ethos that Mama Mercy Oduyoye and African indigenous traditions so profoundly advocate.

Conclusion
Bridging sacred spaces

In exploring the upper room and *eziko*, I traverse two realms of sacred spaces, knowledge and power, each embodying a distinct spiritual paradigm. The upper room, a hidden sanctuary where Jesus shared his final meal with his disciples, symbolises a space of exclusivity and hierarchical knowledge. It is a setting where power is concentrated and closely guarded, mirroring the broader historical narratives of exclusion and segregation experienced by many, including black South Africans under apartheid. This space, filled with profound spiritual significance, also reveals the painful intersections of race, gender and power that have long shaped Western religious and societal structures.

Contrastingly, *eziko* represents an equitable hearth, [fireplace] where knowledge is communal and wisdom is co-created. In the heart of the crowd, *eziko* surrounded by nature's chorus, participants gather in a circle, embodying the African epistemology of interconnectedness. *Eziko* is a place where power is deconstructed, and the community, including nature, shares in the creation and transmission of knowledge. This space dismantles the binaries of gender and authority, offering a vision of learning and spirituality that is inclusive and harmonious.

By juxtaposing these two spaces, I uncover a rich dialogue between different ways of knowing and being. The upper room's narrative challenges us to confront the legacies of exclusion and to seek ways to make sacred spaces more inclusive. Meanwhile, *eziko* invites us to embrace a more communal and relational approach to knowledge, one that honours the contributions of all members of the community and the natural world.

Acknowledgements

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