

MAI CHAZA: AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN STORY OF GENDER, HEALING AND POWER

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Abstract

Mai Chaza's story is one of evolution from wife, mother and "bloused" member of the Methodist Church's women's union to elder, faith healer and founder of the Guta RaJehovah Church. Chaza's healing ministry to women unable to have children offers African perspectives of gender, healing and cultural gerontology. As a healer, she emerges as a prominent woman who transcends the socio-cultural hierarchy, defying the imposed status of "perpetual minor" to become an elder, commanding respect and occupying a position of power and prestige in the very community that shamed, humiliated and ostracised her as an ordinary wife and mother of six, and by whom she was labelled a witch. The correlation of gender, healing and power is crucial for women surviving HIV/AIDS in Africa today; recasting Chaza's story permits an exploration of what it means currently to be an African, a woman and a Christian.

1 INTRODUCTION

This article was inspired primarily by a desire to retrieve the hitherto obscured stories of women in African church history and explore their influence on gender issues in Africa today. Of particular interest in this context is the influence of the African Initiated Churches (also known as the African Independent Churches), and specifically the rise of the Guta RaJehovah Church, founded by Mai (Mother) Chaza. No virgin prophetess, but a divorced mother of sons, Mai Chaza exemplifies those Christian women who refuse to remain second-class citizens and peripheral to Christian development in Southern Africa. Not content merely to sit at their husbands' feet reading the Bible, nor to stand behind the priests as servers, catechists or teachers telling their rosaries, nor to act merely as leaders and organisers in the *Ruwadzanos* or *Manyanos*, the women's unions, through the Holy Spirit, like eagles, these women soar to social and religious heights. They have pastured the flock, healed the sick and exorcised evil spirits, bridging the gap between the known and the unknown, the powerful and the powerless, the simple and the mystical. Mai Chaza's spirituality sheds light on the suffering, silence, and

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resistance of many African women struggling with the question of the church's mission in Africa today.

In terms of most African religious worldviews, traditional healing is perceived as an expression of power and an avenue towards becoming an elder. Thus, the second objective of this article is to clarify the religious ambiguities that surround becoming a woman elder in a context in which the social location of women is ordinarily that of perpetual minor. The article focuses on a woman elder in a society crushed by illness and lack of wellbeing who rose to the position of healer and prophetess. In the article, as a counterpoint to the controversial messianism that has dominated narratives about her call and mission, and in order to locate the historic value of her role and its relevance to a society broken down by HIV/AIDS, Mai Chaza will be considered as a healer first and foremost, a focus that will take precedence over her role as a messianic church leader. As Daneel observes, renowned missiologists such as Sundkler, Oosthuizen, Martin and Beyerhaus created the impression that "Messianism" was a radical distortion of prophetically oriented Christianity, as a result of which the Christ of the Bible was superseded," and therefore, in Oosthuizen's view, the movements forfeited claims to being Churches of Christ (Daneel 1987:93). Daneel studies patterns of authority, distribution of power and group control exercised by African Initiated Church leaders in mediating spiritual or mystical power between God and their followers, and questions "Black Messianism" with great erudition (Daneel 1988:87). However, the andocentric bias that filters through Daneel's detailed research on the Shona Independent Churches does not escape Scarnecchia, who expresses regret at the superficial treatment that Mai Chaza receives at his hands (Scarnecchia 1997:87) Herein, then, lies the justification for the present article, which intends to re-investigate Chaza's therapeutic praxis in order to illustrate gender dynamics of healing as trajectories of power at a time when gender power balances mean hope for surviving in the HIV/AIDS-battered andocentric societies in Africa and beyond.

Mai Chaza's story reflects a social and spiritual journey and traces her evolution from wife, mother and "bloused" or "uniformed" member of the Methodist Church's Mothers' Union to faith healer and founder of the Guta RaJehovah Church. Mai Chaza has created and recreated expressions of faith in a new situation, resulting in multiple changes, dangers and possibilities. The possibilities, however, have been neglected by many scholars, who have dismissed Guta RaJehovah as a dangerous messianic sect. The present article has been written in the hope of salvaging the possibilities that Mai Chaza offers to contemporary African Christian mission work at a time when the church is in stasis concerning HIV/AIDS prevention and therapy, and it therefore encourages a revision of the history of women leadership roles in the African Initiated Churches. It is within this context that Chaza's healing ministry to women unable to have children offers African perspectives on gender, healing and cultural gerontology. As a healer, Mai Chaza emerges as a prominent African woman who transcends the socio-cultural hierarchy that would normally restrict her to the status of perpetual minor, to become an elder, commanding respect and occupying a position of power and prestige in the very community that shamed, humiliated and ostracised her as an ordinary

wife and mother of six, and by whom she was labelled a witch following her divorce and expulsion from her home.

This article acknowledges a variety of healing dynamics and approaches in the African Initiated Churches, making this study one among many. It relies on findings and information from books and archival material, as well as from interviews conducted as part of my doctoral research with members of the Guta RaJehovah Church.

2 CONFLICTING VIEWS ON HEALING

A number of conflicting views on healing have dominated theological discourse in African church history. Igenoza, for instance, highlights the importance of the ministry of exorcism or deliverance when he argues that exorcism ensures a more dynamic contextualisation of Christianity in Africa, particularly in the mainline churches. He claims that exorcism brings relief to burdened people, making it a more effective missionary device than others (Igenoza 1985:179). However, Miller rejects the practice of deliverance ministry, arguing:

There must be more wholesome ways, more tender ways, more biblical ways, more nurturing ways for the group to up-date its ethics, to sensitize the conscience against wrong, to rally the support of the group, and to stand together against the devil than the exorcism rituals now being used by so many “deliverance ministers”. The congregational life pictured in Ephesians 6:11-20 shows an emphasis upon the teaching of the truth; a concern for discerning God's right way (righteousness); an active ministry of spreading peace; a total response to Christ as Saviour and Lord (faith) experiencing God's saving action from time to time in the group (salvation); and hearing God's word (scripture) preached and taught so that it divides asunder the thoughts and interests of hearts; all the while carrying one another in intense mutual intercessory prayer (Miller 1975:55).

Shorter is sceptical about the way “exorcists” in the African contexts present the phenomena of the African spirit world, which accounts for his misunderstanding of Father Emanuel Milingo of Zambia. He also finds a close correlation between exorcism in Africa by African healing prophets and prophetesses and the European witch-hunts of the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and on this basis feels that the Church of Christ could offer suffering humanity something more worthwhile and more enduring than exorcism and deliverance ministry, arguing that:

The Church should offer its own characteristic forms of healing and that these should not in any way prejudice the work that goes on in our hospitals, dispensaries and clinics. Not only that, we should discourage interest in the spectacle of exorcism and dissociated personality in the normal contexts of healing and prayer over the sick. For the Christian African, the world must be “alive” in a new sense,

not with the self-oriented personalizing theories of African tradition, but with the knowledge that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God” and that all natural human realities are communications of divine love and salvation in Jesus Christ (Shorter 1980:31).

Yet, in this, Shorter does not take account of the exorcisms performed by Jesus Christ, who healed people with epilepsy and others whose complaints were thought by the Jews of his day to be caused by evil spirits. If he effected cures inexplicable in terms of modern medical science, what ground is there for forbidding priests or priestesses from practising exorcism, or for identifying African Christian exorcisms with medieval European demonological theory?

Exorcism speaks of power to the exorcist, in this case, to the female exorcist. In the whole context of prayer for healing, exorcism is something of a special case. It is not a plea directed to God or his saints, but is a command delivered in the name and power of God demanding an evil spirit to depart (Lagerwerf 1987:57). This has created a significant problem for scholars, whom Daneel challenges to reconsider the mediatory role of the spiritual and mystical leader in the context of the African Initiated Churches. He asks, “Is his mediation of such a nature that one can rightly speak of Black Messianic leadership? Does he in fact usurp the position of a white Christ?” (Daneel 1988:87). It is impossible to fully appreciate the validity of these arguments outside their historical timework. In the section that follows, the debate on healing and exorcism as expressions of the African Christian story unfolds within the general history of the Church in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe.

3 THE COLONIAL CHURCH LEGACY IN ZIMBABWE

Oh! for liberty and freedom and a power to break the cords of this savage monarch! This done then our mission will begin. It was so in Zululand it is so here and will continue to be so until new government is formed and just laws administered to the people (Bhebhe 1979:65).

The prayer quoted above was uttered by Carnegie, a missionary of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1889, asking for God’s speedy help in the colonisation of Zimbabwe. Christianity was officially introduced to what was to become Rhodesia a few years before colonisation by Rhodes’s British South Africa Company in 1890.

The first Christian mission in what is now Zimbabwe in the nineteenth century was an LMS mission established in 1859. Robert Moffat of Kuruman, whose son-in-law, David Livingstone, had visited Zimbabwe some years previously, established the mission at Inyati, with the permission of Umzilikazi, the leader of the Ndebele, who had made his headquarters at Bulawayo (King 1959:12-13).

A Dutch Reformed Church mission followed in 1872, working among the Shona in the south and staffed by African evangelists from the Soutpansberg.

At that time most of the country was under the rule of the Ndebele king (King 1959:20).

A Roman Catholic mission, led by Jesuits, opened in 1880, and was granted land at Empandeni by King Lobengula, who had succeeded Umzilikazi (King 1959:24). An Anglican mission, led by Bishop Knight-Bruce, was established in 1888 (King 1959:26).

A Methodist mission from the United Kingdom followed in 1891, after the “pioneer column” of the British South Africa Company had already entered the country. By 1957, 80% of the Christians belonging to “mainline” churches were affiliated to these five missions, the Roman Catholic mission having attracted 43%, and the others a little fewer than 10% each (King 1959:81).

Although the LMS had had a mission in the country for 30 years before the commencement of the colonial era, in the first 25 years of its existence it made not a single convert (King 1959:11). The effort made by the LMS missionaries from their arrival in 1859 until the advent of the colonists 1889 did not match the results achieved, and by 1889, the missionaries were frustrated by their wasted effort. Many reasons were advanced for the missionaries’ failure to make converts in Zimbabwe, but most of them, with the exception of JS Moffat, identified Lobengula, king of the Ndebele, as the chief obstacle to the missionary enterprise (Bhebhe 1979:65). They believed it was in Lobengula’s power to order his people to accept Christianity or to prohibit them from doing so. Having failed to persuade him, missionaries prayed for the fall of his regime to the British imperialists, for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

By the 1880s, many missionaries were thus convinced that the Ndebele political system had to be overthrown to pave the way for Christianity. God’s vengeance was pronounced upon this “heathen” people for their insubordination to the Christian gospel. The missionaries would not actively overthrow the Ndebele kingdom, but would simply be interested spectators of the barbaric subjugation of the indigenous people. Thus Lobengula was deceived by the misleading advice of Helm and other missionaries into signing the Rudd Concession, which jeopardised his political independence (Bhebhe 1979:83).

Following the signing of the Rudd Concession, the British South Africa Company used force to occupy the land and bring in settlers to exploit it. In 1923 company rule ended, and the country was ruled as a British colony. Through the Land Apportionment Act of 1930 the best land was reserved for white settlers. Institutions of coercion such as the army, the police force and a colonial judiciary were put in place to suppress resistance. The conquered people were kept at the bottom of the economic ladder by laws such as the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1920, which barred black people from certain skilled jobs. Deliberate efforts to obliterate the indigenous cultural and religious heritage were made by denigrating African languages, crafts, customs, music, dance and religion. Racism, tribalism, clannism, ethnocentrism, class status and regionalism were encouraged as divisive tactics. A Eurocentric approach was adopted in teaching history in schools in

an effort to erase the past of the indigenous people, and thus create a hazy future for them. All of these were devices used by the white settlers to consolidate their political, economic and social power while dehumanising and exploiting the black people (Patsanza 1988:9-10).

These developments boosted missionary endeavour in various ways. Missionaries were co-opted by Rhodes in his occupation policies, and were granted vast tracts of land. The Chishawasha settlement, 24 kilometres from Harare, is an example. This extensive area was part of a process that dispossessed Africans and reduced them to a state of dependence. European interference also reduced the authority of chiefs and traditional spirit mediums, leaving the African people with little choice but to transfer their loyalties and commitments to Christianity (Hallencreutz & Moyo 1988:8).

4 CHURCH WOMEN'S UNIONS (*RUWADZANOS/MANYANOS*)

The establishment of church women's unions, or *Ruwadzanos*, was a white missionary attempt to shape the lives of black African women and girls in Zimbabwe. These organisations were modelled on the Methodist women's prayer unions, known in South Africa as *Manyanos*, and which gained prominence as an expression of female reaction to male dominance, lay reaction to clerical dominance, and the reaction of black people to white dominance (Hastings 1979:115). (*Manyano* is the isiXhosa word for prayer union, with *Ruwadzano* being the Shona equivalent.) Brandel-Syrier (1962:29) describes these South African organisations as follows:

The *Manyanos* are the strongholds of the older African women – the mothers and grandmothers, and their independence is strongly guarded against three different forms of intrusion; by the younger women, the European Church authorities, and the male.

South African *Manyanos* are not only independent of the mother church, but run themselves, hence the following comment from a missionary:

In actual fact there is no relationship between the Church and our *Manyanos*. Up till now I have not managed to incorporate them into the Church. They are independent and want to be independent. They do not allow a European. My wife is probably the titular head of the *Manyano* here, but in fact they resent her presence. Even at their annual conventions, the Europeans are not invited. The local missionary attends, but if he is white, it is made clear to him after the official opening, that he had better go (Brandel-Syrier 1962:32).

By 1919 the *Ruwadzano* movement was established in Southern Rhodesia (Zvobgo 1991:98), although the *Ruwadzanos* did not take exactly the same form as the South African *Manyanos*.

The *Ruwadzano* movement was highly influential in bringing African women to the forefront of Methodist evangelism (Zvobgo 1991:98). Although women were afforded the opportunity to display their capabilities and initiatives in church development, it was only as late as 1963 that black African women were officially accepted into influential leadership positions. Hence Mrs Musa

was elected in 1963 as the first African president of the all-black *Ruwadzano* movement of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (Zvobgo 1991:51). Alongside the black women's *Ruwadzano* movement, there was also a Methodist Church Women's Association for Europeans, whose leadership has always been white.

Ruwadzanos had two main aims, namely evangelism, teaching the love of God to African women, and promoting "civilisation" and "welfare" work. An environment conducive to the spread of Christianity in homes had to be created through cleanliness and care for the home and children, which of course was measured by European standards.

5 POWER POLITICS IN *RUWADZANOS*

While some women have founded and led their own independent churches, other Christian women in both older and independent churches have also enjoyed fuller leadership opportunities in recent years. In older or mainstream churches, *Manyanos* or *Ruwadzanos* have provided a distinctive outlet for Christian women's spirituality in Southern Africa. This may be viewed as a remarkable effort by indigenous Christian women to appropriate the Christian message.

The movement was not run exclusively by black women. White women dominated the leadership hierarchy, and largely controlled and organised the movement. On this topic, Banana (1996:94) states:

The problem of racism within the Methodist Church with its Double Mandate also affected the role and contribution of women to the mission of the Church. This concerned both the place of the *Ruwadzano/Manyano* movement in the Church and the space within which elevated African women could also take independent initiative.

The Methodist Church not only influenced the African Initiated Church's efficient church organisation in Africa (Sundkler 1962:164); it also stimulated the spiritual potential of women's associations such as the *Ruwadzanos* and *Manyanos*. Hastings (1979:115) equates the spirit of the *Manyanos* with the spirit of the independent churches. He argues that:

To a large extent the spirit of the *Manyanos* with their concentration upon the small praying community, the confession of problems and failings, their emotional even ecstatic prayer was the spirit of the independent churches.

Ruwadzanos were organised hierarchically. At the top would be found the wife of the chairman of the mission district, a white woman, who occupied the position of district president of the *Ruwadzano*. Next came the wives of the eleven circuit superintendents, all of whom were also white, and who held the position of circuit president. The only black women eligible for the position of circuit president were the wives of African ministers. However, even if they underwent training, their suitability remained forever questionable in the eyes

of their fellow white circuit presidents. In a letter to Mrs Bradford, her superior in London, Muriel Pratten expressed her disquiet about the African church women's leadership aspirations. She complained that the *Ruwadzano* movement had been going through a very difficult phase because the African women were seeking more and more power when, in her view, they were not sufficiently educated or Christianised to use correctly the little power that they already possessed (Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Archives 5 February 1928).

When Mai Chaza came to prominence in 1949, seven years after this declaration of the "unworthiness" of African women belonging to *Ruwadzanos*, her dismissal from the church as an advocate of heathen power is not surprising, in light of the "Church" thinking of the time. As the number of African women in the Women's Prayer Union escalated, missionaries hoped that they would be converted mind, body, and spirit. It was hoped that, having been thus converted, these women, filled with evangelistic zeal, would preach and teach Christian ethics and convert their peers still groping in the darkness and indulging in objectionable practices such as ancestor worship. However, an unprecedented power struggle erupted in the *Ruwadzano* movement over leadership issues. This was recorded in the Co-ordinated Report of Women's Work in Southern Rhodesia District 1941, which was presented to the Women's Work Committee at the 1942 Synod. Tension stemmed from the fact that African ministers' wives wished to exercise power in the movement, while their white sisters were of the opinion that they lacked the capability, reliability and trustworthiness to assume any responsibility of consequence. The African sisters were regarded by their white sisters as unworthy of leadership positions, and treated as perpetual minors in accordance with the colonial and customary legacies of a patriarchal society.

A critique of white missionary women's construction of African women and a re-evaluation of the interrelation between gender and oppression in colonial societies thus becomes necessary. A fresh look at the rise of Mai Chaza from the ranks of the Methodist *Ruwadzano* therefore inspires postcolonial criticism that overturns colonial assumptions. A study of this important figure unravels the gendered colonialism that is the reality of domination and resistance (Ringe 1998:141). When Mai Chaza founded her own church, she reshaped history in an unprecedented manner. A study of her work in mission has the capacity to inspire the process Kwok Pui-lan articulates as having arisen from her own painful experiences as an Asian woman, a process of rethinking feminist theology from a postcolonial perspective (Kwok Pui-lan 2005:20). Musa Dube's work solidly illustrates the unholy alliance of patriarchy and imperialism in an African context (Dube 2000), making the revisiting of the racial power dynamics surrounding Mai Chaza's founding of the Guta RaJehovah Church in colonial Rhodesia a critical historical imperative. Thus, the experiences of the colonising and colonised women should be considered together and read contrapuntally as part of a single process (Kwok Pui-lan 2005:20).

The theology of the African Initiated Churches regarding the status of women in the church has something to offer to mission churches. Although women are marginalised in some Initiated Churches, many do recognise the spiritual dynamic in women touched by the Holy Spirit. There is an obvious parallel between the spiritual role of women in the African Initiated Churches and in traditional spirituality, where women are active as mediums, healers and midwives. Hence, although most women do not hold office in the formal hierarchy of the Initiated Churches, they nevertheless exercise considerable influence on their churches as prophetesses. The Initiated Churches draw from both Christianity and traditional spirituality, with particular emphasis on the work of the prophet or prophetess, whose primary task it is to eliminate evil of all sorts. Martin cites Bryan R Wilson, who, on the subject of prophetism, acknowledges that:

At one time, administrators and even historians were disposed to regard prophets as little more than an indication of the abundance of psychopathic personalities in particular cultures or periods, and of the gullibility of illiterate populations. But in recent years, in the study of European history as well as African studies, there has been growing recognition of the social importance of a range of phenomena associated with prophetism (Wilson in Martin 1975:xiii).

In his detailed study of African Independent Churches in Soweto, West describes the prophet as:

a healer who is found mainly in the Zionist and Apostolic Churches, who has the ability to predict, heal, and divine and who draws power to do this from God, although in many cases this power may come from God through the more direct agency of certain guiding shades (West 1975:98).

By shades, Martin refers to ancestors, a fact that illustrates the relationship between traditional spirituality and Christian spirituality in African Initiated Churches. Some African Initiated Churches openly acknowledge their reliance on traditional spirituality, while those who make an “unconscious” appeal to it claim to have been saved from such “heathen” practices.

West observes that prophets are often women who do not hold office in the formal hierarchy of most African Initiated Churches, except in a very few cases in which men are only nominal leaders. In South Africa, Mrs C Nku’s St John Apostolic Faith Mission Church is an example: Mrs Nku founded the church and led it as a prophet, yet her husband held the formal title of Archbishop. Women prophets are therefore not a threat to the established male hierarchy that prevails in these churches (West 1975:50).

Although excluded from authority in the formal hierarchy, the prophetess nevertheless commands considerable power: “Women do not hold office in the formal hierarchy of the churches” (West 1975:50), and “are rarely in positions of direct authority except in their *Manyano* groups” (West 1975:51). Prophetesses, therefore, “usurp” power by virtue of the authority vested in them by the Holy Spirit:

While Manyano groups provide leadership opportunities for many women members, women have some opportunities to influence the churches more directly, particularly as prophets ... A message from the prophets, as it is believed to come from the Holy Spirit, would not be ignored by church leaders whatever their view on its content might be, and prophets are generally consulted on most important matters pertaining to the church ... Thus, the prophet, either as "messenger" or "oracle", will often wield more influence in church affairs than many men in the formal hierarchy (West 1975:52).

Lehmann distinguishes three ways in which women participate in African Initiated Churches: there are those who are members of the church and affiliated organisations, those who are office bearers in churches led by men, and those who lead their own group of followers (Hayward 1963:165). Examples of women pioneers of church movements include Abiodun Akinsowon of the Cherubim and Seraphim in Nigeria (Hastings 1994:515); Christina Nku of the St John Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa (Anderson 1992:6-7); Alice Lenshina of the Lumpa Church in Zambia and Gaudencia Aoko of the Legion of Mary in Kenya (Hastings 1979:125-177); and Mai Chaza of the Guta RaJehovah Church in Zimbabwe (Hastings 1979:121).

7 MAI CHAZA'S CALLING AND MISSION

Mai Chaza emerged as a healer by faith of women's infertility in Southern Rhodesia in the early 1950s. The story of Mai Chaza, founder of the Guta RaJehovah Church, has been told from a variety of perspectives that emphasised different aspects of her calling and mission. Daneel categorises Chaza as messianic, a definition that has led to her being considered fairly peripheral in the major discourse on credible African Initiated Churches, as it discredits her as a "false prophet". Brief insights into Mai Chaza's positive initiatives are recorded in books, journal articles by Marie-Louise Martin, Bennetta Jules-Rosette and Andrew Roberts, and in unpublished dissertations, such as that by Dube-Chirairo. These works attempt to recover Chaza's image as a woman prophet whose vision and work made a relevant contribution to the Christian mission of a particular time and context.

As already mentioned, Mai Chaza is the woman founder of the Guta RaJehovah Church. Although women have advanced to senior positions in the ordinary leadership hierarchy as faith healers and particularly as prophetesses, it is unusual to find an entire church community led by a woman adopting the role of prophetess or faith healer.

Mai Chaza, whose life was characterised by a strong mystical emphasis, died on 25 December 1960. As leader of an organisation engaged in healing people suffering from a range of physical and mental illnesses by faith, she is hailed by her followers as an outstanding spiritualist. Sources of information about this extraordinary woman range from archival material in the form of church reports and newspapers to the oral accounts of believers; compiling a comprehensive life history of this legendary faith healer is rather like nego-

tiating a labyrinth, as, rather than dissipating, the mystery surrounding Mai Chaza continues to deepen.

Not much is known about Mai Chaza's early life beyond that she was born to the Nyamushanya family in Buhera, Chitsinge Division. She subsequently married Chiduzza Chaza of Wedza, by whom she had six children. Like many other founders of African Initiated Churches, Mai Chaza was originally a member of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. Setiloane states that:

There have been more schisms resulting in indigenous churches from the Methodist Church in South Africa, and indeed in the whole continent, than from any other single denomination (Setiloane in Oosthuizen 1986:186).

Mai Chaza was a full member of the Methodist Gunde Circuit in the Kwenda area of Wedza until she was accused of bewitching and killing her brother-in-law's son. She was driven from her home by her husband, and forced to seek alternative accommodation. In 1949 she went to live at the home of Thomas Kwenda, a member of the Methodist Church at Highfield, Harare. A quarrel over food arose and she is alleged to have "died", which could indicate a trance state or hysteria. Kwenda sent for a local *n'anga*, or traditional healer, by the name of Nyandere, who treated her. After some hours she "rose" from the dead, as reported in *The African Weekly* of 10 November 1954.

Tabex Encyclopedia Zimbabwe, however, reports Mai Chaza as having died in 1948. She alleged that while she was dead, God told her that her death was premature and that she ought, therefore, to return to earth and cease drinking alcohol, abstain from sexual intercourse and become a faith healer of women unable to have children, the sick, blind and physically disabled, and those possessed by *mashave* (the wandering spirits of strangers who have died away from home, and who seek a place of rest). Another theory, however, suggests that Mai Chaza was not yet ready for heaven, so, she "rose" to cleanse herself, since she had indulged in ancestor veneration and taken part in *majukwa*, alien spirit rituals (interview conducted with Margaret Hwesa, 13 June 1996, Mutare).

The latter version is supported by the report entitled "Woman claims power to heal by faith," featuring an interview in which Mai Chaza claimed to have gone to heaven after she "died". There, she met Mambo, or God, who ordered her to go back to the people and help them overcome their physical and spiritual ills. She was told not to live with her husband again and not to ask for any reward for her services (*African Weekly* Vol. II No. 23 of Wednesday, 3 November 1954).

Irrespective of which account one accepts, the common factor is Mai Chaza's resurrection with a new mission of healing God's people on earth. Following this alleged event, Mai Chaza was led by the Holy Spirit into mountains to receive heavenly powers to perform her divinely appointed duties. Thereafter, she was popularly known as Matenga, which means "Heavens".

Matenga's initiation into the exorcism ministry started after her divine encounter with God on Chivhako Mountain when she "died" and "rose" again (interview conducted with Mr Chirau, July 1995). Exorcism remains an important

phenomenon in the church, and the fact that Matenga made missionary contributions in Africa through exorcism is beyond question. This phenomenon was also a significant factor contributing to the growth of the Guta RaJehovah Church.

Mai Chaza began her healing work in Seke. In 1954, she built a healing centre, her first Guta RaJehovah (City of Jehovah), which drew people of all races. However, her activities met with opposition and persecution, and she finally found refuge in Seke Reserve. In June 1954, the Holy Spirit led Matenga to Seke Reserve at Kandava Village in Chihota, where she was welcomed by a certain Mr Chihota. Her popularity began to increase, and people from all over flocked to her, some from as far away as South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and Malawi, seeking healing (interview conducted with Chief Zimunya, 11 June 1995). They built huts around her hut, and the place where she and her followers stayed came to be known as the City of God, or Guta RaJehovah.

Guta RaJehovah was a healing centre where Mai Chaza gathered together many people possessed by all kinds of evil spirits. She strongly rebuked them for heathen practices associated with ancestor veneration, and burned all medicines and medicine horns used as protective fetishes. She initiated a movement strongly oriented towards combating "heathen practices," which in this respect bears a certain resemblance to Simon Kimbangu's movement in the lower Congo (Daneel 1987: 252).

Mai Chaza commenced her work on 2 June 1954 by treating Kozina Mandaza, who had experienced persistent menstrual flow for eleven years. After four days of intensive prayer, the patient recovered. Another patient, Mrs Chengetai, who had been married for nine years without becoming pregnant, was also helped, as was Margaret Makamba, who was in similar circumstances: both women conceived and had children. Many others came, and by the end of June Mai Chaza had attended to about forty people. On 5 July 1954, five young women who had almost died while giving birth came and were helped, after which they experienced no further difficulties in childbirth. In August, Mai Chaza's fame was spreading, and by September people were coming in large numbers. A large service was held on 12 September, at which forty-eight men and women were converted. Numbers continued to increase. Mai Chaza's missionary activities and initiatives were positively reported in the *African Weekly* under the headline, "Thousands of people bring their sick" in an article that read in part:

About fifty miles from Salisbury in Seke Reserve sprawls a shanty town of grass huts that has sprung up over night. It is called "Guta RaJehovah" – the City of God. There are thousands of Africans from all parts of Southern Rhodesia, and the Federation have brought their sick to Mai Chaza the pivot of this Spiritual City, who claims she can cure people of their physical troubles by faith ... Last Saturday, we visited the place. The touching strains of Methodist hymns greeted us and we saw in a grass enclosure ... hundreds of women, swaying and clapping hands. In their midst was a long line of women, sitting on the ground ... from one end came Mai Chaza touching and praying. She touched and squeezed their bellies. These were barren women and the ceremony was intended to make them fruitful. Headman Chiota

told us that within the last few weeks no less than sixty-eight women who had not given birth to children for a very long time were now expecting (*African Weekly* Vol. II No. 23, Wednesday, 3 November 1954).

8 MAI CHAZA: FOUNDER OF THE GUTA RAJEHOVAH CHURCH

Although African women church founders are renowned, they are rare. Church founding by women is therefore the ultimate act of religious independence and self determination (Hackett 1995:262). Mai Chaza's spiritual power transcended the authority commanded by the superintendent's wife or the chairman's wife. Her power cut through infertility and evil spirits. She ministered with and without the *Ruwadzano* uniform. Her power went beyond the "authority" of the Women's Prayer Union, and ultimately beyond the Church - even if she had not intended to found a new church, but had instead hoped to carry out her preaching and healing activities within the framework of the Methodist Church, she was no longer accepted by its authorities. By 1955 it had become necessary to organise her own church, known among many Shona people as the Mai Chaza Church, and by others as the Guta RaJehovah Church. Fred Rea, the superintendent of the Methodist Church, Belvedere, Harare, describes Mai Chaza's mission in the following words:

Mrs Chaza is one of our members from Kwenda. She is a bloused Ruwadzano member. Last year she was in Salisbury for several months and worshipped at Harare church. On Thursday morning, 7 o'clock as I was reading the paragraph in the paper she arrived at my house with a relative. She had driven up from Seke, about 25 miles away. She came to me thinking I was the Chairman of the district ... She had come to explain what she had been doing and to ask if the church is not able to give its blessing to her work and to bless her and guide her in it. The work is now growing greatly almost like a snowball and I supposed she feels she needs guidance and even protection (*The African weekly*, 16 November 1954).

Neither blessing nor guidance was offered her by the church. Thus, Mai Chaza set out to create and recreate expressions of faith in a new situation. This resulted in multiple changes, dangers and possibilities. Her mechanisms for the adaptation of Christianity were various and mostly rooted in African situations.

It is not very clear as to why Mai Chaza moved from Seke to Zimunya in Mutare, the present-day headquarters of the church, but this move did indeed take place. Chief Zimunya gave Mai Chaza and her followers permission to select a site. This they did on 22 July 1956, which is recognised as the date of the founding of the Guta RaJehovah Church. As there were no nearby villages to provide labour, Mai Chaza and her followers began erecting buildings, some of which are still standing. Today, a mixture of modern and traditional buildings distinguishes Mai Chaza's City of God, Guta RaJehovah, from the mainline church's mission institutions, which consist predominantly of modern structures. As a gesture of appreciation for the land made available, Mai Chaza appointed Chief Zimunya overseer of the church, the highest office in the church structure, and one held to this day by a member of the chief's household.

Mai Chaza died on 25 December 1960 following a mysterious illness, her work having spanned a period of about six years.

9 TITLES CONFERRED ON MAI CHAZA

Mai Chaza became a famous miracle-worker who concerned herself with women unable to have children. Infertility is dreaded in African society, as the African woman who is unable to bear children does not pass on the vital forces to the descendants of her husband's clan. It is claimed that many childless women were healed by Mai Chaza. As her fame spread, she became known as Muponesi, "Redeemer", "Healer" or "Saviour", a title also used to refer to Jesus. Others called her Gwayana, "The Lamb". These are titles clearly borrowed from the New Testament. Did she herself approve of them? She appears to have preferred the name Mutumwa, which means "Messenger" or "Angel," and when referring to herself as Mutumwa used phrases attributed to Jesus, such as "I am doing the work of Him who sent me, I was sent by the Father." Although she regarded herself as subservient to Jesus, her enthusiastic followers attributed messianic qualities to her, which created certain expectations.

The condition for reaching the heavenly city of Jerusalem was understood by the followers to be faith in Gwayana, Mai Chaza, who would lead those who followed and knelt before her to the City of Jesus the King. She would stand at the gate of heaven and let in those who belonged to her flock. Her status in her church as Muponesi, "Saviour" and "Mediator," may have been determined by the fact that "in the old Shona religious rituals, women did in fact occupy important places" (Gelfand 1959:10), and of course also by her successful healing activities. A local paper reported as follows:

Some of her followers said she was later given the name *Matenga*, loosely translated as "Heavens", because they believed her healing powers were from God and that the "Holy Spirit" from heaven was within her (*Weekly Tribune*, 10 June 1995).

In an interview held with Chief Zimunya and the church committee on 20 January 1996 in Mutare, it was confirmed that Mai Chaza was known as Matenga ("Heavens"), Musiki ("Creator") and Mwari ("God"). During the interview, Chief Zimunya and the committee concurred that the divine titles attributed to Mai Chaza were inspired by the supernatural encounters she experienced on dying and prior to her purported resurrection. She is said to have received heavenly powers to perform divine duties, primarily preaching and healing, which implies that she was God's messenger, sent into this world with a special mission. As a famous miracle worker, she was viewed as a heavenly figure and accorded the name Vamatenga, meaning "Heavenly," which further confirmed the belief that God was the source of her power.

She began to be regarded as a messianic figure. Chief Zimunya made the following observation:

These titles have a basis in the Bible, that is, John 8 when Jesus said he was going to send the Holy Spirit to the World. This Holy Spirit

then came through Matenga Mai Chaza. In the Christian tradition the Spirit is one with God and that is why Mai Chaza is accorded these Godly titles (interview with Chief Zimunya, 20 January 1996).

This sheds some light on an otherwise unusual title for a person, either living or dead. Matenga is divine in so far as she mediates the Holy Spirit. A medium through whom an ancestor, such as Nehanda, who is a venerated national female tribal spirit or *mhondoro*, communicates, assumes the role and identity of Nehanda the heroine. It is understood that when a person (who could indeed be a woman) becomes possessed by powerful male or female spirits, that person is able to command the attention of large audiences.

Whatever the possessed person does is done with impunity, since he or she is considered to be acting as the unconscious and involuntary vehicle of the spirits. It is this understanding of "possession" that shapes the conception of Mai Chaza as Matenga. Possession relieves a person of normal day-to-day obligations in that he or she becomes the "other" by whom he or she is possessed.

Lan points out how possession becomes necessary when the ancestors feel the need to communicate directly with their descendants. The ancestor chooses whom it wills; it does not seek the consent of the medium, and seldom meets with resistance. The medium becomes the vessel and mouthpiece of the spirit, a passive recipient (Lan 1985:49). Hence, possession allows women, for example, to cast aside onerous duties and obligations and enjoy the respect they are given when possessed.

Writing on what possession offers to women, Bourdillon notes that, more commonly, a woman could and still can hold significant sway in the government of a chiefdom by becoming a medium to a senior spirit. While possessed, female mediums to lesser spirits have authority over small groups of neighbours or kin (Bourdillon 1976:51). One can imagine, then, how much authority and power a woman possessed by the Holy Spirit would command. A reflection on the unity of the Trinity leaves little room for prohibiting one who is possessed by the Holy Spirit from claiming possession by God and Jesus. Such an approach sheds some light on an understanding of Mai Chaza as Matenga, Musiki and Mwari: you are whom you mediate, especially during that particular period of possession.

10 HOLISTIC ALTERNATIVES

Mbiti argues that while magic, sorcery and witchcraft symbolise evil in the universe, medicine symbolises wholeness, goodness and health. Medicines cure and protect people from evil and promote health and welfare (Mbiti 1991:173). While traditional medicine provides treatment and a cure to people, animals and crops, its efficacy is judged on the hope it awakens in the sick, the confidence it creates in the hunter, the courage it instils in the sufferer and the security it offers those afraid of mystical and physical enemies (Mbiti 1991:172). Health as wholeness is derived from balancing physical, spiritual and social wellbeing. The fear of making spirits angry sanctions ethical behaviour and ensures social harmony (Bourdillon 1976:234).

In Mai Chaza's view, although in some instances women bear the responsibility for infertility, the social chaos that leads to women's infertility stems primarily from men's sinful lifestyles and unconfessed sins. Healing and fertility of wives therefore requires husbands to confess their sins and abstain from activities such as fornication, drinking and gambling. By shifting blame away from women as the accepted cultural scapegoat, Mai Chaza provoked intense male fury in a patriarchal society (Ranger 1995:245). Her radical departure from tradition in this regard reflects not only her independent creative approach to social ordering, but also her vision and initiative in shaping a new spirituality that bridged socialised gender distance. It reflects her power as a gifted healer who dared challenge the social norms governing gender relations in the new community constituted by Guta RaJehovah. Scarnecchia (1997:87) commends her for her ability to provide an alternative community for specific groups of women and men. A gender-balanced approach to sexuality that stresses shared responsibility has the potential to make a vital difference in communities where women are made the scapegoats for the spread and scourge of HIV/AIDS.

Mai Chaza's bridge-building role stretches to motherhood values emphasised in ministry to women unable to have children. Thus, her church accentuates motherhood and fertility (Sheldon 2005:137). This demonstrates an appreciation of the value of motherhood in enhancing the socio-economic and political status of women in colonial Zimbabwe (Moss 2002:143) that differs from the Western viewpoint, which equates the empowerment of women with few or no children. As Chioma observes, women's power to give birth and their role as healers make them awe-inspiring figures in a sex-oriented culture (Chioma 1996:7). Thus, overcoming the infertility of women from within the Methodist *Ruwadzano*, Mai Chaza narrowed the gap between conflicting cultural and Christian notions of the empowerment of women in a colonial and imperial setting in which the inability to have children brought equal grief to Christian and non-Christian women. Mai Chaza offered both Christian and non-Christian women alternative therapy in a setting where mission healthcare was devoid of any mystical content, and traditional medicine was condemned by the colonial governments and the mission churches.

Mai Chaza's spiritual journey is a crossing over that took her to the other side of the power bridge. Beginning as a divorced woman, she climbed religious and social hierarchies to attain the status of preacher, healer and messiah, an African reappearance of Christ (Anderson 2001:119).

It should be noted, however, that although Mai Chaza claimed a complete separation between the "old" and the "new", she did not completely disconnect from the views and traditions governing gerontology, gender and power roles, and thus built yet another bridge. She chose celibacy later in her life, at a time when she became a fertility healer; thus her role as a mother and wife was recast as she served as a healer and church leader (Scarnecchia 1997:91). When reporting that God had instructed her not to live with her husband again, she interpreted her divorce in unconventional ways (Scarnecchia 1977:94). Without openly acknowledging it, Mai Chaza made an unconscious appeal to cultural understanding of gender, bodily fluids and power reflected in many

African communities whose religious leaders, elders, have the knowledge and skills to maintain and restore good health in the community. An example of this nature is found among the Giriama people of Kenya, where the notion of health includes the problem-free perpetuation of the fertility of Giriama women by post-menopausal women, who are the highest ranking members of fertility rituals (Udvardy 1992:290). They emerge as custodians of the fertility-awarding powers of the ancestress. This is a demonstration of the cultural construction of gender, life-course and ritual power.

There is a noteworthy correlation between changes in bodily fluids and power expressed in many ethno-medical cultural constructions of gender and aging. Udvardy (1992:292) identifies this phenomenon among the Melanesian people of New Guinea, and the Hua and the Beng of Ivory Coast. The potency of menstrual blood and its reproductive potential is responsible for the prohibitions observed by fertile women during menstruation. It offers opportunities to explore differential powers that are mediated through the gendered ageing process (Udvardy 1991:290). Udvardy's research findings reveal that the Giriama associate sacred shrines, ritual activities and objects as well as illness with heat, while dams, groves and the ideal state of human affairs are cool. Both menstruating women and semen-producing men are associated with heat, but menopausal women are associated with coolness (Udvardy 1991:300). While menstrual blood is not necessarily negative in most African communities, older, post-menopausal women (free from menstrual and sexual heat) feature more prominently to mediate the powers of medicines and other religious rituals among the Shona of Zimbabwe (Jacobson-Widding 1990:51-54), the Kaguru of Tanzania (Beidelman 1986:37-38), the Zulu of South Africa (Berglund 1989:227) as well as many southern Bantu people. Udvardy (1992:301-303) concludes that:

elderly female authority is as real to the Giriama as the kinds of power and authority that we in the West, guided by our own cultural conceptions, assume to be the most basic, such as public political power and economic control.

Founding a church headquartered in a village she named Guta RaJehovah, the City of God, was yet another significant bridge across rural-urban stereotyping. Mai Chaza shifted attention from the city to the village, giving it back its old fame and restoring the dignity of women, eroded by the city and all that it represents. Her action constitutes a re-examination of communal values and a return to basics to find God in the simple things of life, in each other and in nature.

11 CONCLUDING REMARKS

For a Christian "bloused" member of the women's union to claim faith healing ministry and call upon the sick to confess their sins and wrongs, advising them to pay a certain fine to the spirits, was a sure attempt to bring the old and the new healing praxis into harmony and to interpret the Bible, and indeed Christian spiritual power, in the African context. Mai Chaza's endeavour to address the challenges faced by African Christian women in church and society resonates

with the effort to meet the challenge of being black and Christian as articulated by Robert Alexander Young, David Walker, and James H Cone, who conclude:

What it means to be Black and Christian cannot be static or carved in stone; rather, out of necessity it must change over time. It is dynamic and responsive to the movement of God through history and open to the winds of the Holy Spirit (Cone & Wilmore 1993:167).

The discourse on religion, gender and healing in Africa at the apex of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, when an estimated 25.8 million people, over 60% of all people living with HIV, are in sub-Saharan Africa (The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS and World Health Organization 2006:10), dictates the tone and emphasis of the present article and challenges future research to explore hopeful metaphors and patterns that bring about holistic healing in stories that have brought life to vulnerable societies. Unless life-enhancing histories are revisited, they have no power to liberate the dying.

The concluding remarks to this article thus highlight the gender-power issues in matters of sexuality in Chaza's ministry that determined the survival of women in a society that venerated motherhood. Her courage and power to challenge the "curse" of infertility in a way that distributed responsibility equally between spouses deserves every recognition. Chaza's gender-balanced approach can be borrowed and applied to issues of sexuality extending to HIV/AIDS prevention and women's self-care. A gender-balanced approach will empower women to take the initiative in terms of HIV/AIDS prevention and self-care as they gain the power to negotiate safe sex, or make celibate choices when their lives are threatened.

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