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When Researching among Women in Selected African Initiated Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe: The Case of Johanne Marange Apostolic Church

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Abstract

Several scholars in the global north and global south have been advocating for the decolonisation of social research methods. Western hegemony has often conquered methods of social inquiry used in Africa. This is even though such methods of inquiry may not be appropriate in African contexts. The way researchers interact with the researched must respect the cultures of the later. This article suggests a contextual approach to social research among women in

the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe. Generally, women in most African cultural contexts and certain apostolic churches have a low social status compared to their male counterparts. They lack the freedom to make certain decisions, including the decision to participate in research without approval from their partners or other male authority figures in their lives. It is often not easy to target a woman as a unit of social inquiry as some men may not be at liberty to have their wives interviewed without their involvement, especially when the interviewer is a man. This study employed narrative review as its methodology, and the data was analysed using content analysis. The article explored the social and spiritual position of women in the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church and demonstrated how these may influence research processes. It proposes strategies for gaining access to research areas, how to best collect data, and seeking informed consent when collecting data from subordinated women in the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church. We also encourage researchers to try to understand apostolic beliefs and worldviews as they have a bearing on the vulnerability of women who partake in research studies.

Keywords: *African initiated apostolic churches, Research, Women, Johanne Marange Apostolic Church, Zimbabwe, Informed consent*

Introduction

Churches of African origin are found in many parts of the continent, and Zimbabwe is not an exception. Most of these churches now have footprints across the globe due to migration. Many such churches started during the colonial period and were influenced by traditional western churches. Several scholars (Machingura, 2014; Madziyire, 2013; Musevenzi, 2017) converge on the view that these churches borrow from both Christianity and African traditional religions. Some of these churches just use Christian vocabulary, but their practices are like those of African traditional religions (Madziyire, 2013). They emerged as Africans sought spiritual independence from foreign churches. Some of these churches emerged as locals rebelled against the white settlers; hence, some did not allow their members to work for whites, attend the white education system, or seek medical attention from hospitals. Though there are many such churches in Zimbabwe of particular interest is the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church (JMAC), as it has predominantly large following and some beliefs that may confound traditional research methods, especially when working with women. This was corroborated by Musevenzi (2017), who opines that the Johanne

Marange Apostolic Church has a large following and blends African indigenous beliefs and Christianity. The focus of the church is mainly, among other things healing. The paper seeks to explore issues that social science researchers should consider when collecting data from women in JMAC in Zimbabwe. It forms a piece in the decolonisation of research methods and methodologies jig-saw fit. The paper proceeds by first looking at the history, beliefs, and practice of JMAC, how these position women as subordinates, and the impact therefore on data collection among them. The radical feminist theory informed the study. Lewis (2024) argues that radical feminism is a philosophy that believes that patriarchal roots of society promote inequality and women's subordination to men. This theory is relevant as women in JMAC suffer perpetual inequality that is sanctioned by the religious beliefs of the church.

Methodology

The study followed a narrative review. Unlike systematic reviews, narrative reviews are usually qualitative in nature, and their sources of information are often not specified (Gregory & Denniss, 2018). Siddharti and Sayatri (2021) noted that narrative reviews review available literature with a latitude to criticise it and stimulate further debate. The study followed narrative review steps by Siddharti and Sayatri (2021) as follows; identify the questions that would be answered in the review, decide on methodology of conducting the literature search and appraisal, conduct the literature search, synthesise the evidence that has been gathered, and lastly, write the draft. Content analysis method was employed to analyse the data.

Johanne Marange Apostolic Church

Before proceeding, it is imperative to give a brief account of the historical background of the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church. JMAC was formed in 1932 by Muchabaya Momberume through deep spiritual experience in which God had assigned him to preach His Gospel (Kutsira, 2013). Muchabaya Momberume later assumed the name Johanne Marange. He was born in 1912 in the Bocha area of Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe. He hailed from the Marange royal family. Johanne Marange claimed to assume the role of Biblical John the Baptist. According to Machingura (2014), Johanne Marange is considered the second John the Baptist sent to redeem the world. It was during his call

in 1932 that Johanne Marange received power to fulfil his ministry (Dodo, Banda, and Dodo, 2010). He is believed among his followers as a messianic figure who would lead the church into liberation (Kutsira, 2013).

Johanne Marange's church started among his kith and kin. Consequently, his family members assumed key offices in the church. JMAC started in the Marange communal land spread to other parts of Zimbabwe and ultimately Africa and the African diaspora. The church was greatly influenced by the teachings of the Old Testament Bible. According to Madziyire (2013), Johanne Marange preached repentance and encouraged baptism in rivers he referred to as Jordans. He preached to people in many parts of Africa: Southern Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Tanzania, and some parts of Central Africa and even the United Kingdom. The church relies on Bible guidance. It has a large following in Zimbabwe, which has made it a lucrative ground for politicians. Polygamy and inheritance of wives are acceptable in JMAC. According to Madziyire (2013), JMAC is closely knit and secretive, and members are suspicious of outsiders. Although members of JMAC use the Bible, they also use a book called Humbowo Hutsva HweVaPostori (New Witness of the Apostles), which was authored by their founder. The book is considered a canonical addition to the Bible (Mazambara, 1998). For Machingura (2014), it remains to be a referral document, a theological point of reference, and a pillar for the church members' accounts of spiritual experiences. Members believe that light and truth are only in their denomination and nowhere else (Machingura, 2014). They are thus extremists who believe that only their church is correct.

Madziyire (2013) notes that it is easy to join the church but leaving is difficult as defectors are regarded as possessed by evil spirits. Women in the church are not allowed to assume leadership positions. They are taught to be submissive to men in both the church and at home. They are prohibited from preaching during church services. Despite this, they can perform prophetic and healing duties and are allowed to lead songs during church services (Chitando, 2003; Farhadian, 2007). Women must wear long white dresses and headscarves when attending church services. Certain beliefs in the church compound women's marginality. Men from the church marry as many wives as they wish. Johanne Marange himself had 13 wives (Musevenzi, 2017). According to Anderson (2001), young girls have no say in who they marry. Arranged marriages remain an order of the day (Madziyire, 2013). Girls who do not comply with arranged

marriages may be disowned by their relatives. The church practices virginity testing, and girls who are found defiled must marry forthwith.

Marriage is considered for a lifetime and to that effect, divorce is not permissible. In worse situations where divorce is inevitable, the woman only takes her children as all property is considered to belong to men. The use of contraceptives is strictly prohibited. Women are not allowed to use contraceptives whatsoever, as this is considered tantamount to murder (Bishau, 2010). Only withdrawal methods and abstinence are allowed. Madziyire (2013) notes that complications during childbirth are considered pointers to sin. The expecting mother must confess failure of which she and the baby may die. Since members of JMAC do not seek medical care from hospitals, their children are not immunised. Childbirth is handled by birth attendants from the church. The church has a radical stance against western education, employment, and medicine. According to Kutsira (2013), members of apostolic sects have poor health outcomes as they have poor health-seeking behaviour. JMAC has been criticised for being a haven of diseases and working government's efforts to fight communicable diseases such as HIV and AIDS (Kutsira, 2013).

Religious Sexism in Johanne Marange Apostolic Church

The teachings and beliefs of JMAC feed into masculinity. According to Machingura (2014:177), members of the church are not allowed to question the authoritative spiritual experiences of their founder. This has propelled the marginalisation of women in the church. This situation exists even though most JMAC are women with Mukonyora (1998) putting the figure at 60%. Women in JMAC have a very low social status compared to their men. Age at sexual debut is very low, as child marriages are a common practice. As mentioned earlier, girls who fail virginity testing are married off immediately and any man can offer to marry such girls who are stigmatised and are considered “damaged goods” (Madziyire, 2013). Such girls cannot sit with other young girls during church service but should sit with married women. Boys are not tested for any sexual conduct, and there is no punishment for boys who have premarital sex. Girls in JMAC rarely attend post-primary education. Their education is usually disrupted by early marriages.

The subjugation of women in JMAC not only comes from men but from other women. Married women are encouraged to recruit more wives for their husbands. It is common for such women to even recruit their young sisters or their brothers' children to join them as co-wives. Junior wives in polygamous marriages are expected to respect senior

wives and take orders from them. Women in this church seem to be “comfortable” sharing a husband compared to other women outside their church who may not tolerate such a practice due to jealousy and other factors. The church beliefs and practices have managed to manipulate women to accept polygamy as something normal and to envy. It is common to find JMAC men with wives younger than their own children. Women in JMAC have accepted that they are inferior to men, and this is difficult to untangle as it is religiously sanctioned. For Madziyire (2013:72), the church “...instils in women the view that husbands are supreme rulers with absolute power in the households”. Kutsira (2013) argues that men in JMAC use polygamy as a sign of real manhood and religious uniqueness. Women generally lack decision-making power. The women do not easily access information as it must be censored by their husbands or church leaders. In a study by Madziyire (2013), the participants reported that they cannot do anything about it as it is a church rule. Widows of childbearing ages must be inherited by their late husbands’ relatives. Refusal to do so, they must march back to their parents’ homes. If a widow decides to go back to her parents, she is stripped of all the assets she co-owned with her deceased husband.

Women in JMAC have low levels of education, which disadvantages them from seeking formal employment. There is very high level of illiteracy among them. Due to this low level of education, few members of JMAC occupy senior or high-ranking posts in the corporate world. They have many children, and this burdens them to consider other economic opportunities outside their homes. However, Machingura (2014) argued that members of JMAC self-employ, and it is common to find their women and children on the streets of urban residential areas selling their products. The church founder encouraged self-employing and discouraged his members to work for whites.

Men in JMAC do not actively participate in child rearing as women take full responsibility. Machingura (2014) argued that some men are not even aware of their number of children. Magede and Mbwirire (2020) note that girls in JMAC may not choose to marry outside the church unless the person is willing to join. A woman who chooses to marry a non-church member can be expelled from the church and be disowned by their families. Musevenzi (2017) argues that men are allowed to marry outside the church, provided the wives are prepared to join it. Just like their male counterparts, women shave their heads as a sign of purity and are expected to dress in white during church services. Members of JMAC strongly believe that demons find refuge in the hair; hence, all members of the church need to have bald heads (Machingura, 2014). For

Musevenzi (2017), women actively drive the church's belief system, as most of the beliefs are directed at them. Gender inequality has so far not been raised in the church (Musevenzi, 2017). The women seem comfortable with the status quo.

Call For the Contextualisation of Research Methods and Procedures when Researching among Women in JMAC.

Several authors have challenged the universalism of western-orientated research methods (Mabvurira & Makhubele, 2018; Konadu-Osei, Boros & Bosch, 2022), and there is a lot of scholarship on decolonisation and contextualisation of research methodologies (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021; Khoo, 2024). Despite the presence of existing literature on African-initiated apostolic churches in Zimbabwe, no study has interrogated research methods used among these churches. Research ought to benefit participating communities. This can only be achieved if their value systems and ethics shape the methods of extracting knowledge (Chigevenga, 2022). The knowledge generated from research among members of JMAC has for years failed to liberate women in the church. Social scientists, theologians and health practitioners have failed to break the barrier into the so-called harmful practices of JMAC. One contributing factor is that methods of enquiry used in research have failed to consider key issues. There are a lot of negativities written about JMAC, and despite that, the church has stood the test of time by remaining intact and influential. We argue that to emancipate women in JMAC, researchers should consider the position of women in JMAC, put themselves in the shoes of such women, and immerse themselves in their situation. We consider women in JMAC to be a vulnerable population group. A vulnerable participant is someone who, because of some characteristics or existing circumstances, is prone to exploitation and harm during research (Horn, Sleem & Ndebele, 2014). Religious beliefs and practices compound the vulnerability of women in JMAC. Women in JMAC cannot protect their own interests due to their religiously sanctioned submissiveness.

Though international research ethics guidelines do not usually consider women in general to be vulnerable, we strongly argue that women in certain apostolic churches in Zimbabwe, like JMAC should be considered vulnerable as research participants. Macklin (2003) supported this notion and argues that though women in general cannot be considered a vulnerable group, women in many developing countries are

vulnerable to exploitation due to patriarchal family structures or other cultural practices. There seems to be a serious laxity concerning ethics reviews in Zimbabwe. Most universities do not have functioning Research Ethics Committees (REC). Most reviews are done by the Medical Research Council of Zimbabwe, which is an independent council established through an act of parliament. Non-health researchers may therefore not opt to send their proposals for review at the medical research council. It is possible to find students, academics, and researchers to proceed with data collection without ethics clearance especially when they are Zimbabwean citizens. Therefore, there may be no ethical reviews even if someone is collecting data from at risk participants such as women members of JMAC. Though there are many aspects that need attention, we will focus on three, namely: entering the research area, seeking consent of the women, and using relevant data collection methods.

Entering Research Areas

Gaining access to research participants is usually done by contacting one authority figure, and it may be complex in some cases. The negotiations between gatekeepers and researchers become complex when researching among vulnerable groups (Kay, 2019). A gatekeeper is someone who controls access to a research community or organisation (Clark, 2011). In most cases, wherever data collection is done in communities, administrative leaders become gatekeepers. In Zimbabwe, these usually include traditional leaders, ward councillors, and district and provincial administrators. As noted by Singh and Wassenaar (2016), obtaining entry from a higher office does not guarantee cooperation from the participants. As alluded to earlier on, members of JMAC are suspicious of outsiders, and the men are very protective of their women. They fear that they may be contaminated with wrong information from outsiders. Having access granted by an administrative authority may therefore not guarantee the cooperation of JMAC women during data collection. When collecting data among women in JMAC, it may be prudent to identify gatekeepers and intermediate gatekeepers. The intermediate gatekeeper should be an authority figure within the church. Given the leadership hierarchy of the church, such a person is a man or a panel of males. The intermediate gatekeepers might want to know the social value of the study. The social value for women in JMAC may be complex, as it should not ultimately empower them. Providing such

women with critical information may be against the intermediate gatekeeper's view.

Though known gatekeepers may have offered access to the research site, it is possible that men in JMAC may not allow their women to take part in the research study. In most cases, formal gatekeepers may not be members of their church, hence the need to consider intermediate gatekeepers from within the church. Support from intermediate gatekeepers is crucial, as it may help foster cooperation from the participants. Given the political volatility of Zimbabwe, it may pose challenges if administrative gatekeepers with political authority are skipped. However, it is also important to note that being granted authority by administrative gatekeepers does not guarantee success for data collection, as JMAC has its own religious values, beliefs, and authority structures. Seeking approval of gatekeepers may therefore involve multiple steps from administrative figures to religious authority figures. Notwithstanding that the religious authority figures are usually always males.

Seeking Consent of Research Participants

Informed consent is one of the fundamental principles of research ethics. Informed consent entails providing participants with all the information about the nature of the study as well as risks, and benefits associated with it (Nnebue, 2010). Informed consent is a continuous exercise that goes throughout the research process. Information regarding a study must be presented in a language and format that can be easily comprehended by the potential participant, and the potential participant should be competent enough to provide voluntary consent. Communication between the researcher and the researched should be effective. Sufficient information should be available to participants. Consent can either be verbal or written, depending on the circumstances of the participants. Participants may be provided with an information sheet detailing all the necessary information about the study.

Women in JMC have high illiteracy levels, which may complicate their ability to provide meaningful consent. They may struggle to understand the key elements of informed consent, among them the purpose of the research, research procedure and future information usage. This is so because girl child education is not prioritised in JMAC, and the male members of the church censor the information that get to their female members. If a researcher uses technical terms that are not translatable to vernacular languages, the female participants may not

understand the entire research study. They may lack competence and capacity to provide the consent. Usually, written consent is preferred and as a result of their low social status, the women are prone to undue influence during the process of negotiating for consent. Their own voluntariness may be difficult to ascertain if their husbands request them to participate in a research study.

The power dynamics within JMAC, where women are perpetual subordinates of their male counterparts, may influence them to agree to participate in a study. Since women in JMAC lack decision making capacity, it is important to know whether they therefore are voluntarily making the decision to or not to participate in research. The answer to this is not obviously simple. Given the authoritative nature of men in JMAC, women may have to consult with their male authority figures before they are able to consent. Male household heads may have to provide the consent with only women assenting. The decision to take part in a study must be made by an autonomous person, yet in the case of JMAC, women lack autonomy. As alluded to earlier on, informed consent involves the participant's understanding the purpose, procedure, and future use of information. We doubt that given the JMAC women's low level of education, they easily understand these three components.

Using Data Collection Methods

Social science research uses several data collection methods in both qualitative and quantitative studies. Men in JMAC are very protective and jealous when it comes to their women. They are generally uncomfortable to see their women interacting with other men, especially those who do not belong to their church. We therefore strongly encourage the use of female research field workers. This may help avoid clashes with male members of the church. Where male researchers would want to collect data, we recommend that they hire female research assistants to help them.

Certain data collection methods may not be conducive for women in the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church. Given their poverty levels, high level of illiteracy, and limited access to technology, collecting data remotely may not be feasible. These include all online surveys where the researcher is not present. General questionnaires, which must be completed by the respondents are not a good option as most women in JMAC have very low levels of education. Researcher administered questionnaires and interviews are good options. When a researcher decides to use Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) that involve male and

female members of JMAC, they must guard against males dominating the discussions. Otherwise, when recruiting for FGDs, it is advisable not to combine men and women. When time and resources permit, ethnographic studies may be a good option for qualitative studies. A researcher may join the church and collect data over a period. This allows the researcher to make participant observations that may provide rich information.

Conclusion

Knowledge should be liberating, as it should improve the welfare of people. Research studies therefore ought to generate knowledge that has a bearing on people. Data collection methods and procedures used should best suit the context in which they are used. Due to the nature of their social position and religious beliefs, women in JMAC deserve special methods and processes when collecting data from them. Getting access to research sites should consider the authority hierarchies of members of JMAC. Apart from administrative gate keepers, church authorities should serve as intermediary gatekeepers. To avoid harming participants, the processes of seeking the consent of participants should also consider the authority structures of the families of JMAC members. If need arises, researchers must also consult males, even if data collection is done with women. Data collection methods used should be suitable to the context of women in JMAC. Remote data collection methods such as online questionnaires should be avoided at all costs. Also, during focus group discussions, researchers should ensure there is no male dominance during discussions. Researchers must respect the dignity and worth of the participants even if they do not personally agree with the participants' belief systems. An important point to note is that we are not encouraging the continued suffering of women in JMAC but for knowledge generated by researchers to be liberating vulnerable populations. This we believe can be achieved when appropriate research methods and procedures are followed.

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