

## ‘COME DOWN, O LORD!’

### MUSIC, PROTEST AND RELIGION IN ZIMBABWE

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#### Abstract

*Electronically recorded Christian music, popularly known as gospel music, has attracted a lot of followers in countries like Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Commentators from the scholarly and journalistic fraternities have approached gospel music as a distinctive genre, one totally removed from “secular” or “profane” popular music. This article questions such a rigid dichotomy by analysing the Zimbabwean music scene from the colonial period, and between 1980 and 2000. It probes the relationship between music performance and the social context. The disillusionment with the postcolonial black government receives attention in the examination of the protest song. Gospel music as an avenue of protest is highlighted; while the various categories of performing artists who have derived benefits from gospel music are discussed. The article concludes with a call to scholars in Religious Studies to extend the frontiers by paying attention to developments in popular culture.*

**Key words:** Gospel music, Protest songs, Religion, Zimbabwe

#### Introduction

While the identity of “Religious Studies” remains ambiguous and contested, this has not been a result of lack of trying on the part of scholars. Boundary distinctions, axiological principles and distinctive features have all received scholarly attention. Alongside the perennial problem of definition (Comstock 1971:18-21), the academic study of religion has been engrossed in handling phenomena that are patently “religious”. A respected practitioner, Robert D. Baird (1971:17) demonstrates this preoccupation when he observes that the “category of religion is probably the most basic for the historian of religion.” By dwelling on phenomena that are manifestly religious, the discipline has not extended its outlook in any appreciable manner. While this has the advantage of ensuring that the character of Religious Studies is puritanically preserved, avoiding “infection” from outside (Wiebe 1999:155), it vitiates efforts to break down invented disciplinary configurations.

Ninian Smart’s repeated call for Religious Studies to include secular ideologies has also not been adequately addressed. Smart (1991:168 and 1996:2) maintains that since religions and ideologies are similar and that they compete, they ought to be studied together. This article builds upon Smart’s vision of refusing to approach the discipline in a parochial and trammelling fashion. It argues that a study of popular culture – the milieu within which religious facts are embedded (Turner 1981:1) – allows Religious Studies to become contextually sensitive. Music in Zimbabwe is selected, with special emphasis on gospel music. While gospel music represents an effort to Christianise popular culture (Hackett 1998:258), it has to be understood

in the larger context of social, political and economic processes.

The first part of the article provides an outline of the protest song in Zimbabwe prior to independence in 1980 and captures the celebratory nature of the immediate postcolonial period. The second section examines the protest song from the mid 1980s to the year 2000. It notes reasons for disillusionment with the policies of the black nationalist government. Gospel music as a mode of protest constitutes the third section of this article. An analysis of the different social groups that have used opportunities provided by gospel music to assert themselves is provided. The concluding section revisits the question of how the academic study of religion could continue to make itself socially relevant, particularly in an African context.

## 1. The Protest Song in Zimbabwe Prior to the Attainment of Independence in 1980

Caught in the euphoria of independence, the Zimbabwean cultural nationalist and academic, George P Kahari (1981:98) prematurely declared that “the protest song proper ended with independence for Zimbabwe on 18 April 1980.” One can understand his optimism: A bloody and costly war had just ended and black majority rule had been ushered in. It appeared that the ancestral spirits were firmly behind the new dispensation, while the Church thanked God for His guidance. If the protest song had been directed at an oppressive white minority and its surrogates, what space would be left for it when the fruits of independence were to be enjoyed? To put Kahari’s comment into perspective, it is necessary to highlight the nature of the protest song among the Shona in the period before 1980.

Music has played an important role in human social and religious history. Across the world’s religious traditions, music has had multiple functions as in communicating with the sacred, reinforcing identity and as an avenue for articulating group sentiments.

In Africa, music has largely been associated with the institutional life of the community. One of the leading African researchers, JH Kwabena Nketia, notes that the performance could take place in any spot. His observation is applicable to Shona music performance:

It may be a public place, a private area to which only those intimately concerned with the event are admitted; a regular place of worship, such as a shrine, a sacred spot, a grove, a mausoleum; the courtyard of the house where a ceremony is taking place, or the area behind it, the scene of communal labour, the corner of a street habitually used by social groups for music and dancing, a market place, or a dance plaza (Nketia 1992:31).

In traditional Shona society, prior to 1890 when the Pioneer Column entered the country, various types of music could be encountered. Music associated with ancestral spirit possession was widespread. The *mbira* instrument was revered as it was associated with the ancestral cult. Alongside the drums, rattles, trumpets and horns, the *mbira* was employed to facilitate the arrival of spirits from *nyikadzimu* (abode of the ancestors). The spirits would then communicate to the living through their designated medium (Maraire 1990). Music could also be celebratory, as in that accompanying joyous rites of passage. There were also songs associated with war, herding cattle, and lullabies. It is within this variegation that the protest song could be located.

While many contemporary political scientists portray traditional African societies as having been autocratic and privilege multi-partyism as having brought “democracy”, the situation was not as gloomy. Although it may be conceded that in most African Kingdoms there were professional state praise singers (Dube 1996:100), the very same institution could be subversive. Praise singers would extol the military prowess of the ruler and amuse the court

only to the extent that the subjects were happy with the performance of their leader. In situations where there was abuse of power, greed and cronyism, the singers and jesters would manipulate the richness of language to put across their misgivings. The protest song, albeit in a veiled manner, has its background in this encounter with political power.

Apart from being present in the corridors of power, the protest song was also found on the margins. Since the chief was ideologically seen as having been enthroned by the ancestors and Mwari, oppressed commoners could appeal to these higher spiritual forces. Such a protest song revolved on the solo-chorus axis. According to Kahari (1986:83), "central to its theme is Mwari, the Supreme Being, and it would appear that it is only in desperate situations that reference is made directly to Mwari, otherwise all appeals are made to one's immediate ancestors who will, in turn, re-direct the supplication." This was an effective way of reminding a wayward ruler that his power was only temporal. Although it is not convincing to argue that religion determines everything in African communities (Chitando 1997:86), here one can appreciate the close connection between religion, politics and music. This traditional type of religious song is important to bear in mind since it is important for an interpretation of gospel music in Zimbabwe from the 1990s.

The protest song also found expression in events associated with the struggles of married life, the demands and intrigue accompanying polygynous unions, as well as other social occasions experienced as being oppressive. A daughter-in-law could express her frustration with a nagging mother-in-law through song, while a junior wife could also articulate her concerns about the domineering attitude of her seniors through the protest song. A family head unhappy with the size of his field could also appropriate this socially sanctioned technique to register his complaint. The song therefore was a powerful medium which facilitated the expression of feelings to avoid militant confrontation. The targeted individual or social group was expected to decipher the message and work towards accommodating the complainant.

#### *Music Performance during Colonialism*

Although things did not dramatically "fall apart" in Africa's encounter with an invading foreign culture, colonialism and Christianity had a profound effect on Shona music performance. Western Christian hymns became popular, and between 1890 and 1950 uninspired translations were widespread (Lenherr 1977:109). The acceptance of hymns was not a surprising development given the importance of music to the traditional setting outlined above. Traditional chanting and refrains found resonance in the new harmonic singing. With the passage of time, Africans began to develop a peculiar style, one that no longer imitated the western one (Axelsson 1974:101).

A music researcher in Zimbabwe, Fred Zindi, captures the changes that occurred in connection with instruments. He writes:

As Westernization became entrenched in Zimbabwe, in the late 1930s Western instruments such as the guitar, the banjo, the harmonica and accordion began to replace the traditional instruments such as the mouth bow (*chipendani*), the hand piano (*mbira*), the earth bow (a metal sheet with wire or string attached), the flute (*chigufe*), the horn (*hwamanda*), hand gourd rattles (*hosho*), leg rattles (*magavhu*) and xylophone (*marimba*). To a large extent, even the traditional drums (*ngoma*) were replaced by modern Western drum kits and cymbals (Zindi 1997:1).

I have cited Zindi at length because he provides a comprehensive list of traditional instruments that had been marginalised by the process of Westernisation. However, Zindi does not pursue

the underlying ideological reasons for such a development. There was a general tendency to write off the African past as one grand story of backwardness and lack of sophistication. Within Christian circles, African music performance was banished, being perceived as the “old” that had to pass away before the cleansing power of the gospel. However, with the nationalism of the late 1950s and 1960s, many educated African Christians began to call upon Christianity to be sensitive to its context. Thus questions were asked; “Why should African art forms be forever condemned as unworthy or incapable of being recreated and made a fitting vehicle of worship in the African’s own country? Why should the African be forever condemned to worship only in the Western idiom?” (Nketia 1958:60).

The church has been an important institution for nurturing musical talent in many societies across the world. Research in African countries has shown that Africanised churches provided a fertile context for the construction of syncretic music forms, and that “the Africanisation of christian musical performance functioned as a training ground for musicians blending elements from African, African-American and European musical traditions” (Dube 1996:107). Many prominent musicians in Zimbabwe like Oliver Mtukudzi had their initiation into music performance in the church.

The colonial period is also significant for the limited space it granted to female cultural workers. Although a social history of Zimbabwean women requires a larger narrative (Schmidt 1992), it is important to note that women were marginalised in terms of music performance. The coalescence of African and European patriarchy further pushed female cultural workers to the periphery. In the traditional context, women had roles to play, such as participating in religious songs, handling instruments and dancing. The reconfiguring of space during colonialism negatively affected their visibility. Thus:

Women artists, be they singers or actresses, are often perceived as “women of the night” or “women of the streets”; perhaps this is because they exist in these roles in the unmarked territory outside domesticity and also in urban space which for historic reasons relating both to colonial and indigenous patriarchy has been officially defined as the territory of men (Chitauro 1994:111).

After the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965, the oppression of blacks in Zimbabwe became more systematic and acute. Armed resistance became a pronounced option characterising the African response. Between 1970 and 1979, the liberation struggle was a defining feature of the Zimbabwean reality. The protest song found a new outlet and there were numerous compositions by home artists and those in Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania which appealed to God and the ancestors. Alex Pongweni argues that these songs “won the liberation war” and that the songs made the listeners and singers angry and combative (Pongweni 1982:VI).

Tight censorship laws were enacted by the settler government to stem the tide of growing dissent. Literally the day after the announcement of UDI, censorship was introduced (Veit-Wild 1993:71). Home artists could not afford directly ridiculing the racist regime. They had to master the art of subterfuge and used culture-specific proverbs, metaphors, idiomatic expressions, war and hunting songs to encode their protest. Artists like Thomas Mapfumo, Oliver Mtukudzi, Zacks Manatsa and others complained about the land issue, racism, exploitation, and urged black youths to join the struggle. Lacking hermeneutical keys with which to unlock the symbols and innuendo, “the settlers could afford to sing the same songs which were in fact deriding them” (Kwaramba 1997:67).

Many protest songs during the colonial period called upon the sacred realm to intervene and

set blacks free. Manatsa referred to the freedom fighters as *hangaiwa dzemudzimu* (sacred guinea fowls of the ancestors) that had to be protected. In his song, "Suffering" that was penned in 1974, Mapfumo wondered where the guardian spirits had gone since their guidance was now needed. When it is remembered that in the Shona religious ideology ancestors are the guardians for the land, the appeal to the sacred becomes clear. Many other performing artists questioned the level of suffering, asking God and the ancestral spirits to have mercy on the persecuted people.

Musical compositions within the church also adopted the African nationalist vision in some instances. On the whole, the church offered comparatively safe space within which liberationist sentiments could be expressed. Hymns and choruses that were inculcated to instil pride in the Zimbabwean cultural heritage became popular and these expressed the values of the war of liberation. "Unfortunately", O Axelsson observes, "the attempts of the Christian movements to advance this view have been veiled in favour of the aspirations of the liberation forces and popular secular activities" (Axelsson 1993:42). This is not surprising since the history of the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe has been largely monopolised by the ruling ZANU (PF) party. In the current historiography, only the exiles and their armed combatants liberated Zimbabwe, while the rest were either onlookers or sell-outs (Raftopoulos 1999).

Music performance during the colonial period was therefore characterised by the forthright denunciation of the settler regime in choruses and adapted hymns by combatants in exile, alongside the subtle protest by home based artists. Artists on both sides however appealed to the sacred realm to ameliorate the suffering that was being experienced by the black majority. In line with the traditional type of religious song, sorrowful strains appealing to God and the ancestral spirits were composed. Both traditional religions and Christianity were utilised during the armed liberation struggle, although it is important to acknowledge that the former experienced a revival. The denial of space to female performing artists also becomes a noteworthy feature of the colonial period in Zimbabwe. If, as I have argued, mourning and lamentation marked the armed struggle in Zimbabwe, how was the attainment of political independence in 1980 to be received?

## 2. 'Songs of Freedom': Celebrating the Birth of a New Nation

Robert Nesta Marley, the inimitable reggae artist, provided entertainment at the Independence Day celebrations on 18 April 1980. It was appropriate for a revolutionary government to invite the paragon of resistance to oppression to be the main attraction. Bob Marley penned the song "Zimbabwe" as a dedication to the triumph of the black struggle. Sacred reggae music; "a music of blood, black-reared, pain-rooted, heart-gear'd" (Bancroft 1992:16) welcomed the dawn of a new era. Numerous artists also recorded music in which the ancestors were heartily thanked for leading their sons and daughters to victory. The ZANU (PF) choir composed "Mbuya Nehanda vakareva" (Grandmother Nehanda prophesied) where the attainment of political independence was portrayed as the fulfilment of a long standing prophecy by a venerable territorial spirit.

Optimism characterised the arrival of political independence and most blacks looked forward to ideals such as equality, land redistribution, education and employment. Many combatants had promised the peasants nothing short of a dramatic turnaround during the nightly meetings (*pungwe*) held for mobilisation purposes. Songs such as *Tirikupemberera Zimbabwe* (We are celebrating the arrival of Zimbabwe) by Mapfumo, *Makorokoto* (Congratulations) by

the Four Brothers, and others captured the collective elation. The ancestral spirits were eulogised, while Robert Gabriel Mugabe, with his eloquence and outstanding academic achievements, was apotheosised. While songs composed during the struggle had contained references to other revolutionaries like Herbert Chitepo, Leopold Takawira, Alfred Mangena and others, celebratory songs in the immediate post independence period dwelt solely on Mugabe. Having gained international stature through his policy of national reconciliation and being accorded standing ovations after addressing the United Nations, Mugabe became a cult figure in Zimbabwe. In the song *Nzwananai* (Understand Each other), Mapfumo invited the local populace, “Whatever you want, just ask Mr Mugabe” (Kwaramba 1997:92).

Although the church had played her part in the struggle for Zimbabwe, gospel music was on the margins in the early phase of the attainment of independence. ZANU (PF), with its Growth with Equity policy statement, appeared capable of delivering national salvation. Fired by a socialist vision, the new government attained remarkable successes in the provision of free education and health care. Zimbabwe became a success story and global bodies tended to cite it as the example to be followed by other developing countries. Amidst celebration and merrymaking, gospel music was restricted to the church and funerals, while the music industry was dominated by songs that extolled the freedom fighters, promoted nation building and castigated all those who did not want to pull together with others.

As a reminder of the fact that religion is affected by shifts in policy, it is important to note that although Zimbabwe had been re-admitted into the international community, the new black government exercised a tight control on the flow of ideas. The socialist dogma, fear of apartheid South Africa and her destabilisation trends, as well as the need to preserve a “Zimbabwean identity” were put forward as explanations. Female beauty contests were banned, with Dr Naomi Nhwaiwa, a deputy minister declaring Zimbabwe to be a sacred country wherein “Miss Zimbabwe” should be “an inspiration to everybody through sweat and hard work and not by an accident of nature” (Ngwira 1982: 23). The state had arrogated the right to define female sexuality and this perpetuated the marginalisation of women as performing artists. In addition, the Pentecostal/Charismatic mode of Christianity, with its heavy American background and backing, could not find a niche in a “socialist” state.

Apart from armed resurgence in Matabeleland, which the government ruthlessly put down with the exterminating Fifth Brigade, the first decade of independence (1980-1990) is properly seen as Zimbabwe’s honeymoon. Reconciliation, reconstruction and development were key words in the national vocabulary. While the Catholic Church clashed with the government over excesses in pursuit of “dissidents”, church-state relations were generally healthy (Hallencrutz and Moyo 1988). Mainline churches continued to participate in education and health, while African Independent/Instituted Churches (AICs) were dominant in the informal sector. In enjoying the fruits of the promised land, the majority did not have any sense of a spiritual crisis and songs about love, joy and happiness soothed the national conscience.

*‘The Country you Yearned for is now in Tatters’:*

*The Resurfacing of the Protest Song in Post Independence Zimbabwe*

As the ZANU (PF) government consolidated its grip on power, civil society in Zimbabwe woke from a deep slumber in the 1990s (Moyo 1993). In 1988 University of Zimbabwe students staged a massive anti-corruption demonstration. The following year Mapfumo released a chart-buster, *Corruption* in which he charged that “everyone” was corrupt. The church protested against the drive towards a one party state, while the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade

Unions, formerly a socialist ally of the government, started making militant demands on behalf of the workers. The euphoria associated with independence had died, and national events like the Heroes and Independence days experienced low turnouts.

Perhaps two factors coalesced to make the period 1990-2000 a trying one in the history of the country. The government dropped its socialist philosophy and began implementing the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in 1991, resulting in increased economic hardships as subsidies were removed. Poverty levels in Zimbabwe increased as many workers were retrenched. Secondly, the HIV/AIDS pandemic took its toll, resulting in death becoming a common event. Stories of celebration and elation became those of death and despair.

The opening up of the economy under ESAP also led to the liberalisation of the spiritual market. Many religions found their way into Zimbabwe with the loosening of control on ideologies by the state. After 1990, one can speak of Zimbabwe's "rainbow of religions" (Platvoet 1996:47). It is also during this period that Evangelical/Pentecostal Churches firmly established themselves in the country. Promising to deliver Africans from the spirit of poverty (Maxwell 1998:358), these churches provide spiritual succour amidst economic turmoil. Through powerful preaching by charismatic pastors and inspired gospel music, they also promise to "stop suffering" (Chitando 2000c:59).

"In the late eighties and nineties", Maurice Vambe notes of Zimbabwean artists, "younger African singers were more strident in their criticism of the failure of the government's economic policies" (Vambe 2000:84). Against the background of a high tax rate that robbed the worker of his/her earnings, Leonard Dembo composed *Chinyemu* (False giving) in which he complained that what the government gave with one hand, it took with another. In 1994, Leonard Zhakata's *Mugove* (Share) appropriated the biblical story of the prodigal son and topped the charts for a long time. Like the prodigal son, Zhakata appealed for his due share, so that at least he could enjoy it while alive. Simon Chimbetu also called upon the black ruling elite to allow the majority to live in his track "Survival".

As in the traditional protest song, the post independence protest song conceals the sting by posing as a plea to either God or the ancestors. In *Ndipeiwo Zano* (Give me advice), Mtukudzi asks, "what sin did I commit, O Lord?" Once the protest is directed towards the spiritual realm, politicians would find it difficult to harass the artist since he or she would be communicating with the Sacred. Mapfumo however, has been forthright and scathing in his criticism of the black ruling elite. In his *Mamvemve* (Tatters), released in 1999, he bluntly says that the country people yearned for is now in tatters. In "Disaster" Mapfumo bemoans the break down in the rule of law in Zimbabwe and poignantly declares, "there is a disaster in our country".

Other artists have also utilised the power of language and divine appeal to provide a social and political commentary on Zimbabwean affairs. In his *Nyika yematsotsi* (A country of crooks), Andy Brown wonders how he can honestly survive in a country teeming with crooks and he concludes that he has to become one! In sharp contrast, Mechanic Manyeruke, a pioneer gospel musician, counsels people to believe and trust in God if corruption and other vices are to be overcome. Indeed, this observation takes our narrative to a discussion of gospel music and its impact on social restructuring in Zimbabwe.

### 3. Gospel Music as an Avenue of Protest in Zimbabwe

While providing a history of the development of gospel music in Zimbabwe lies outside the purview of this article (Chitando 2000b:298; Chitando 2002), it is important to note that gospel artists are cultural workers. Although the label is contested, music with Christian themes has

attracted enthusiastic followers elsewhere in the region, particularly in Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa. Having a fast, danceable tempo and employing Christian redemptive themes, it has often been classified as a distinctive genre. In Zimbabwe, gospel musicians are put in a class of their own, while special times, particularly on Sundays, are set aside for gospel music performance. This popular trend would no doubt please religionist and phenomenological scholars who have persistently argued that religious phenomena are *sui generis*, unique and irreducible (Studstill 2000:180).

Gospel music in Zimbabwe has been understood as music that articulates Christian values. Artists who appropriate Christian themes, biblical ideas and teachings are classified as gospel musicians. They regard their musical performances as being directly linked to their task to spread the Christian faith. While in other contexts such as in the United States of America gospel music is understood as a specific musical genre, in Zimbabwe it is the content (lyrics) that determines whether a specific song is classified under the label gospel music. Consequently, gospel music is an umbrella term for various music types. What appears to provide some justification for the application of the term is the focus on Christian themes.

The elasticity of the gospel music concept has therefore allowed artists who play reggae, mbira, rhythm and blues, and other types of music to be classified together. Although the denominational affiliation of gospel musicians is not always clear, most of the artists belong to Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches in Zimbabwe. However, independent gospel musicians also exist. Furthermore, some artists have converted from popular music to gospel music in pursuit of greater sales. In the minds of the consumers, there is a sharp distinction between gospel music and popular music. For them, gospel music deals with spiritual matters, while popular music is essentially for entertainment. In this study, I seek to problematise this sharp demarcation between the different music types.

The tendency to isolate gospel music from the larger social context is however problematic, at least in the Zimbabwean context. Although there were a few gospel artists in the early 1980s, such as Jordan Chataika, Shuvai Wutawunashe and Freedom Sengwayo, gospel music blossomed between 1990 and 2000. As the historical survey in this essay illustrates, the immediate post independence period was characterised by celebratory songs. Ancestral spirits, and to a lesser extent the Christian God, were lauded in musical performances. The social context, marked by national optimism, had no room for mournful and eschatological songs. Leaders like Robert Mugabe were portrayed as having all the solutions.

It is striking to note that gospel music became popular at a time when the protest song was finding its way back. Alice Kwaramba (1997:140) rightly observes a cycle of protest-celebration-protest in musical performance in Zimbabwe. National political events are the focal point, while religion is always in attendance. In this presentation, I am arguing that gospel music is itself also a mode of political protest. While it is a vehicle of identity – formation, aspiring to foster a distinctive Christian identity (Chitando 2000a), gospel music provides ideal space for artists to be “subversive”. In the paragraphs below, I seek to illustrate the convergence between popular protest songs and the subterranean protest in gospel music. An expanded definition of “protest” is applied, while the various interest groups that are deriving some mileage from gospel music are identified.

#### *'The Rulers of this Country are Fools': Political Protest in Gospel Music*

Since gospel music passes off as sacred sound, it is easy to miss the direct and latent political



messages that it contains. To begin with, the Christocentric outlook of recorded gospel music draws attention away from political functionaries towards Jesus Christ. If "only Jesus is the answer", the rulers of this world pale into insignificance in comparison with him. In Zimbabwe's political history, President Mugabe has been accorded a lofty status, with one politician, Tony Gara, describing him as "the other son of God." Mugabe's resolute stance on the land question in the late 1990s has seen many parallels being drawn between him and the biblical Moses who led his people to the promised land. When gospel musicians insist that only the name of Jesus should be lifted up, they effect a radical de-sacralisation of political authority (Bediako 1996:15). Although the message is couched in spiritual terms, the net effect has been to emphasise that it is better to place one's trust in God, than in mortal politicians.

Some gospel musicians have also protested against what they see as the misplaced priorities of the ruling party. Indeed, *Vabati vaJehova* (God's workers), have charged that "*vatungamiri venyika ino marema*" (the rulers of this country are fools) since they are bent on the accumulation of wealth. Many other artists intercede on behalf of the nation, calling upon God not to focus on its rottenness but to have mercy. The group Mahendere Brothers warned in 1999 that the country was tumbling down a steep slope and called upon the faithful to stand firm.

In jolting the national conscience, gospel musicians provide comprehensive dossiers of the perceived social ills. Official corruption, sexual immorality, nepotism, unbridled quests for material accumulation and numerous other vices are described. When the HIV/AIDS pandemic is factored in, a gloomy picture emerges. Artists contend that the situation is now ripe for divine intervention and they employ images of complete decay. Politicians, as policy makers and implementers are directly implicated, although it is clear that the situation is now beyond their competence. It is within such a context that Pastor Haisa implored, "Come down, O Lord and lighten this burden"; a plea we have adopted as the title of this presentation.

While some critics may contend that a preoccupation with a new Jerusalem, a new heaven and a new earth is escapist and unhealthy, a close examination of Zimbabwean gospel music shows that social analysis has been undertaken. In the song *Tibatsirei MuZimbabwe* (Help us in Zimbabwe), Ivy Kombo lays bare the economic and political roots of the crisis. She notes that the local currency has been devalued, that international financial houses are not going to save Zimbabwe, but that only earnest prayer to God would. Many other artists may simplistically reduce all the problems bedevilling the country to personal sin, but they do raise the agency of politicians and their supporters. "Protest" in such instances includes the refusal to accept the current situation as natural, normal and divinely ordained.

### *Querrying Male Dominance: The Role of Female Gospel Artists*

It requires a separate narrative to demonstrate how gospel music has allowed female performing artists space to express themselves (Mapuranga 2000; Chitando 2001). During the colonial period in particular, the convergence of Western and African patriarchy squeezed the space for female musical performance. Labels such as "loose woman", "prostitute" and others were freely applied in the urban context and African women "suffered a triple oppression of gender, class and race" (Makwenda 2000:15).

The attainment of political independence did not radically alter the fortunes of female artists. As shown earlier, the "socialist" government took it upon itself to define female sexuality and engaged in a number of nightly "swoops" in which unaccompanied urban females

were arrested. The contestation for urban space, coupled with inane appeals to Christian and traditional morality has perpetuated the exclusion of women. It is therefore not surprising that most of the leading musicians in Zimbabwe are male, while women have largely been relegated to providing backing vocals, as well as performing enticing gyrations.

Gospel music provides an avenue through which talented female artists protest against their marginalisation in a heavily patriarchal society. Under the “sacred canopy”, they are free to subvert patriarchal values in both Christianity and African culture. Unlike in pop music where negative stereotypes persist, “female gospel musicians continue to enjoy the respect of society and audiences, because they are seen to respect God, even though a significant number of them are just in it for the business side” (Manhando-Makore 2000:6).

In Zimbabwe, female gospel musicians have attacked domestic violence, the marginalisation of women, as well as insisting that both men and women are accountable before God. Many female artists like Wutawunashe, Kombo, Carol Chivengwa, Shingai Suluma and others, are professionals in their own right. Their very presence is a statement against the casting of women as less talented, dependent and uncreative. Through the texts of their songs, they protest against male oppression, as well as the general tendency by the church to conceptualize preachers as male. Seen in the larger context of musical performance in Zimbabwe, gospel music has provided alternative space for female music expression.

#### *Shattering Stereotypes: The Place of African Instituted Church Groups in Gospel Music*

AICs in Southern Africa and Zimbabwe have been well studied. Numerous reasons for their emergence have been forwarded (Daneel 1971), while their marginalisation of women, role in ecological preservation, and many other aspects have received scholarly attention. The literature available, at least in Zimbabwe, tends to portray these movements as nativistic and as appealing to the lower rungs of society. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Inus Daneel, the foremost researcher, has concentrated on the Zionist churches in rural Masvingo.

Although urban-based studies of contemporary AICs in Zimbabwe are still developing, it is worth noting that a number of groups have had their songs electronically recorded. As AICs are now attracting graduates and technocrats, the image of marginalised urban workers venting their emotions under a tree becomes questionable. Formerly banished from the main-stream, AIC groups like Vabati vaJehova, the Zion Christian Church Mbungu Stars, Vachemeri vaJehova and others now have a high level of visibility. The popular caricature of Zionists and Apostles as “unsophisticated” are exploded as their gospel tracks top the music chart shows.

Manatsa, now a gospel musician, had further entrenched the negative view of the Apostles in the early 1980s with his song *Tea Hobvu* (Strong tea). He painted a picture of a white-robed, bearded, tea-loving and uneducated Apostle. Consequently, members of main-line churches often deride AICs for their simple outlook. Gospel music has provided a channel of communication through which AIC groups call for ecumenism, explain their beliefs and practices, as well as recast themselves as being an integral part of Zimbabwean Christianity.

Through electronically recorded cassettes and video tapes, AIC groups are protesting against their systematic exclusion. Christian broadcasting in Zimbabwe has tended to favour “main-line” and Evangelical churches (Lundby and Dayan 1999). Historically, these have had articulate and educated representatives. However, in gospel music AICs are asserting their right to be seen and to be heard. As members of the public consume artistic products emanating from AICs, they are likely to adjust their rating of this movement favourably.

*The Little Ones sing out: Children in Zimbabwean Gospel Music*

Unlike other countries where teenage music sensations have arisen, in Zimbabwe popular music is dominated by mature male artists. Parents tend to discourage their children from the music arena, maintaining that they need to attain a good education first. Gospel music has however facilitated the emergence of a number of talented young performers. The ideology of gospel music as a special type of music has played an important part in allowing children to take their rightful place as performing artists.

Some of the prominent young people in Zimbabwean gospel music include the blind teenager, Munyaradzi Munodawafa. Defying age and disability, Munodawafa has moved many by his lyrics on the need to use one's talents to the full. Another young female artist, Dzidzai, protests against the widespread abuse of the girl child. In her video, she weeps as she recounts the struggles that young people go through in a country where rape, incest, molestation and other vices are common. Love, Peace and Joy, dominated by primary school children, released an album, *Ndimi Mega* (No one is like you) in 2000 and it was warmly received. The group has been able to tour the United States of America, a feat many more established artists yearn for.

On the whole, gospel music has been a viable avenue for nurturing cultural workers in Zimbabwe. Different social groups that felt suffocated in the popular performing arts have fully utilised the alternative space that music related to Christianity offers. Since it is regarded as belonging to the sacred realm, gospel music has had a hidden "subversive" slant. Gaining popularity at a time when "secular" artists were reactivating the protest song, gospel music has offered a safe haven to those who want to criticise official corruption and warped economic policies. In addition, social groups that had been rendered invisible, such as women, children and AICs have protested against domination and have reasserted their right to public musical performance.

#### **4. Broadening the Scope: Religious Studies in Africa**

Elsewhere (Chitando 1999) I examined the methodological implications of studying gospel music in Zimbabwe. It was argued that approaching gospel music from historical, sociological and phenomenological perspectives would provide insights into their complementary nature. While such an exercise is clearly helpful, it perpetuates the notion that the study of a religious phenomenon can only proceed if it shuts out non-religious materials. This essay has challenged such a restrictive reading of religion by locating gospel music within the larger matrix of the protest song in Zimbabwe. By examining the protest song in the pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial periods, it was shown that a religious element has often been present in terms of either God or the ancestors as the focus of appeal. The need to create awareness of the impact of political developments upon religious expression in Zimbabwe was also noted.

Religious studies in Africa should not continue to have a blind spot for popular culture (Hackett 1998:259). It is in the performing arts, novels, music, graffiti, popular sayings and other alternative sources that we can recover notions of religiosity in Africa. The failure by the discipline to extend the boundaries by engaging popular culture has ensured that it remains elitist and abstruse. While such specialisation may be understood in terms of protecting careers, its value for the larger community is limited. It is when the academic study of religion encounters people in their moments of leisure, protest and militancy that it can become relevant in an African context.

## 5. Conclusion

The interface between religion and popular culture implies that the academic study of religion should transcend its inherited boundaries. By tracing the political protest in Zimbabwean pop and gospel music, this article has illustrated the close connection that exists between music, religion and politics. As the political fortunes of Zimbabwe have changed, religious conceptions have also undergone transmutation. With the attainment of independence in 1980, a feeling of national salvation dominated. As now economic hardships bite, and politicians fail to present the required vision, "secular" artists and gospel musicians have joined hands in beseeching, "come down, O Lord!"

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