

Of Women's Leadership in African Indigenous Spirituality: A Focus on the Ndau of South Eastern Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Religion in general and indigenous religions in particular are often criticized for denying women access to leadership or decision-making positions. From a gender perspective, this has been so because world-over, societies are predominantly patriarchal in nature, and religions emerge from such socio-religio and cultural settings. Men place themselves in influential positions where they employ strict gatekeeping strategies that cripple women's efforts to rise above their circumstances. To talk about women's leadership in African Indigenous Spiritualities (AISs) against this background, therefore, appears to be to talk about the unimaginable. In this chapter, we intend to revisit this subject of women's leadership in AISs through the Africana womanist lenses, a theory propounded by (Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanist Literary Theory: A Sequel to Africana Womanism-Reclaiming Ourselves*, Africa World Press, 2004). Our argument is that women's leadership in AISs has not been critically explored. It is our submission that even though women in AISs would rarely occupy public leadership positions themselves, the brains behind the decision-making processes often emanate from them. So, what this means is that women in African societies rule by pulling strings behind the curtains, but when called upon or when circumstances dictated they would rise to the occasion and perform public leadership roles. In this regard, men are leaders by proxy as they execute ideas from women. Women wield power and influence that direct the course of events presided over by men. In this chapter, we explore the covert and overt means of women's exercising of leadership in AISs. We cast this discourse in the context of the ethos behind Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 in line with the SDG Goal Number 5 that emphasizes gender equality and the inclusion of women in all leadership structures. Our chapter is both theoretical and empirical, as such we did some fieldwork and also engaged with available literature on women, power, and leadership in AISs. We will make reference to some African communities in sub-Saharan Africa, but special reference will be made to the Ndau people of south eastern Zimbabwe. The rationale for this approach lies in the understanding that AISs are not monolithic but they evince a cacophony of variations.

Keywords: African Indigenous Spirituality, Africana womanism, Leadership, Ndau, Women, Zimbabwe