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Intersectional dynamics: African Traditional Religion and Christianity in the face of women in Zimbabwe, Africa

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Abstract

This study explores the intersectional dynamics between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity in relation to women in Zimbabwe. In precolonial African societies, women held significant leadership roles as custodians of tradition, community welfare, and social cohesion within both ATR and early Christian expressions. Colonialism and missionary evangelisation contributed to the marginalisation of indigenous religious systems, resulting in the erosion of certain cultural practices. This weakened African cultural identity and reduced the participation and empowerment of women and girls in community and spiritual activities. As a result, many Zimbabwean Christians feel ATR values and practices and other traditional elements are missing from contemporary Christianity. In response to perceived gaps in Christian worship practices, some believers seek to reconnect ATR and Christian traditions, creating a hybrid religious experience shaped by cultural memory, spiritual identity, and historical legacy. This study examines how norms, beliefs, and practices within ATR and Christianity intersect, particularly focusing on women's positions within this hybrid religious space and its implications for social and spiritual justice in Zimbabwe. Using critical documentary analysis and phenomenological methods, the study incorporates insights from ten key informant interviews, analysed through thematic analysis. It investigates how colonial

history, cultural identity, evangelisation, and conversion dynamics continue to shape the relationship between ATR and Christianity. Findings indicate limited formal integration between ATR and Christianity, alongside ongoing tensions, misunderstandings, and cultural discontinuities. The study also highlights emerging possibilities for coexistence and contextual theology that incorporate indigenous African spiritual values into Christian worship. It concludes that ATR and Christianity in Zimbabwe exist in a complex, evolving relationship shaped by historical, cultural, and spiritual factors. It argues that constructive engagement through interfaith dialogue, contextual theology, and cultural reconciliation can enhance inclusive worship practices, promote cultural preservation, and strengthen women's roles in religious and community life.

Introduction

This study explores the intersection between African traditional religion (ATR) and Christianity in Zimbabwe, focusing on women's roles, cultural identity, and sustainable development. Zimbabwean Christianity is broadly divided into Western-oriented churches, such as the United Methodist, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran churches, introduced by missionaries, and African Independent Churches (AICs), which incorporate African spiritual beliefs and practices.[1]

Historically, African women served as spiritual mediators, healers, priestesses, and custodians of sacred knowledge within their communities.[2] However, Western missionaries in the nineteenth century introduced Christianity alongside European cultural values, rejecting African customs and portraying African spirituality negatively. This weakened women's traditional authority and disconnected Christianity from African cultural identity. Although women became the majority of converts, they experienced oppression from colonialism and patriarchal Christianity and cultural marginalisation simultaneously. Women healers and midwives were excluded from church

[1] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life*, 15.
[2] Yoknyam, "Women as Healers".

leadership despite their continued importance in community health and spiritual care.[3]

Missionaries introduced severe patterns of culture and distorted cultural practices and customary institutions that women could use to challenge Christianity patriarchal systems.[4] Hence, women's intervention was disqualified in both, but needed in both. But religion remains a powerful space for women's participation in community development and cultural preservation. African proverbs and oral traditions affirm women's value, such as the Shona proverb *musha mukadzi* ("a woman is the pillar of the home").[5] Despite missionary condemnation of ATR practices in countries like Zimbabwe and South Africa, many Christians still practice ATR secretly. Moreover, ATR and Christianity intersect with the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDGs 3, 4, and 5, which focus on health, education, gender equality, and women's empowerment. [6] This preserves Zimbabwean customary identity. Christianity alone fails to acknowledge the roles of African women as cultural counsellors, healers, prophetesses and spiritual ancestors.[7] As a result, many Zimbabwean converts fail to express their faith, experience their total Zimbabwean human devoutness, and defend their culture, religious worship and traditional community services. They prefer to maintain Western culture and worship.

In essence, Christian liturgy and traditional rites coexist.[8] These were not connected during the inception of Christianity in Africa to develop a contextual Christianity. As a result, religion has become a double-edged sword for women in community development.[9] Psalms 68:31 promotes the African identity and spirituality that were undermined. It teaches that Africans have a responsibility to preach Christ in ways that address the needs of their own people.[10] It argues that women have a respected role that balances religion, culture, and gender,

[3] Phiri and Nadar, "What's in a name?"
[4] Manyonganise, "Oppressive and Liberative".
[5] Chirongoma, "Utilizing Indigenous Cultural Resources".
[6] Ringson,"Gender Equality".
[7] Yoknyam, "Women as Healers".
[8] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life,* 17.
[9] Chireshe, E. "Intersections".
[10] Dube, Shoko, and Hayes, *African Initiatives.*

but African women's status was weakened and separated from ATR and Christian practices in an effort to dilute Africa's cultural identity. For Christ to be relevant to Africa, Africans must develop a theology that speaks to the masses.[11]

Zimbabwean traditional religion is rooted in spirituality, morality, culture, and indigenous knowledge systems. This shapes social, moral, political, and economic life, which are essential resources that need to be integrated into modern Christian practice, particularly within the United Methodist Church, to achieve sustainable culturally and spiritually relevant development.

This study employs a qualitative research methodology using three major approaches: critical documentary analysis, phenomenological analysis, and key informant interviews, with thematic analysis serving as the conceptual framework for interpreting data. Critical documentary analysis involves examining written materials, extracting relevant information, and synthesising findings to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between ATR and Christianity. This method evaluates the authenticity, credibility, and representativeness of documents while comparing findings from interviews, observations, and other sources to minimise bias and strengthen reliability.[12]

Key informant interviews were conducted with ten participants, including five pastors and five chiefs, selected for their extensive knowledge of culture, religion, and community practices. These interviews provided in-depth insights into the interaction between ATR and Christianity in Zimbabwean society. Physical evidence and personal documents were also used to enrich the analysis and clarify meanings within the collected data.

Phenomenological analysis was applied to understand participants' lived experiences and perspectives concerning religion, culture, and women's roles. This approach focuses on how individuals interpret and experience their social and spiritual realities, enabling the researcher to contextualise the study within contemporary Zimbabwean religious life.

[11] Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology*, 9.
[12] Kridel, "An Introduction to Documentary Research".

Thematic analysis guided data interpretation through a six-phase process. First, the researcher familiarised herself with the data through repeated reading and transcription. Second, initial codes were generated to capture significant meanings in the text. Third, related codes were grouped into broader themes. Fourth, themes were reviewed, refined, merged, or removed based on their relevance and consistency with the data. Fifth, themes were clearly defined and labeled to reflect their significance accurately. Finally, the findings were compiled into the study while maintaining reflexivity and objectivity.[13]

Overall, the methodology enabled the collection of rich, detailed data and provided a structured framework for examining how ATR and Christianity intersect in shaping Zimbabwean Christian identity, worship, culture, and women's participation in community life.

The study is grounded in contextual indigenous theologies, which are theological reflections shaped by African lived experiences, cultural traditions, struggles, and Christian faith within the Zimbabwean context.[14] These theologies seek to make Christianity meaningful to African communities by integrating biblical teachings with African cosmologies and cultural realities. African cosmologies include religious, philosophical, scientific, and cultural understandings of the universe that influence spirituality and daily life.[15] Through these indigenous theologies, Zimbabwean Christians are encouraged to express their faith in ways that reflect both their Christian beliefs and African cultural identity.

The framework argues that Christianity should not remain confined to the Western interpretations introduced by missionaries during the colonial era.[16] Instead, theology must speak directly to the Zimbabwean soul by recognising women's perspectives and experiences. The study draws on John 1:14 ("The Word became flesh and dwelt among us", NIV) to emphasise incarnational theology. Just as Jesus was born in a specific cultural and social setting as a

[13] Rosairo, "Thematic Analysis".
[14] White, *Faith, Spirituality, and Praxis*, 2.
[15] White, *Faith, Spiritualty, and Praxis*, 1
[16] Kapolyo, *The Human Condition*, 110.

Jewish man from a humble woman, Zimbabwean Christians should develop an incarnational theology rooted in their own culture, experiences, and spirituality.[17] This means God's word can work through all cultures. Therefore, African Christians should freely express worship, healing practices, and spirituality using their own cultural forms, without feeling inferior.

The study emphasises inclusivity, unity, and diversity within Christian worship and ecumenical communities. It supports integrating African cultural practices, health beliefs, and spiritual resources into Christianity to create a more authentic Zimbabwean Christian identity. Such integration allows believers to maintain their cultural uniqueness while participating fully in Christian faith and community life.

A key concept in the framework is the dual allegiance alliance, which is the coexistence of ATR and Christianity in the lives of many Zimbabweans. This alliance recognises that many Africans, particularly women, remain devoted to both systems because each addresses important spiritual, cultural, and social needs. Rather than viewing ATR and Christianity as opposing forces, the study sees them as interconnected sources of meaning and identity.

The framework further critiques colonial missionaries for condemning African traditions and imposing Western interpretations of Christianity as the only valid form of faith. Missionary Christianity often portrayed African customs and beliefs negatively, leading many Africans to lose confidence in their cultural identity. Drawing on scholars such as Kiboko and Roy, the study argues that biblical interpretation is always influenced by culture.[18] Therefore, Africans should interpret Christianity through their own cultural lens instead of relying solely on colonial perspectives.

Ultimately, the theoretical framework seeks to empower Zimbabwean women to reclaim their cultural heritage, affirm their spirituality, and develop an authentic African Christian identity that harmonises ATR and Christianity within the Zimbabwean context.

[17] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life,* 48.
[18] Kiboko, *Divining the Woman of Endor*, 175–76.

Ancestral Veneration and Cultural Identity

Zimbabwean traditional religion is an indigenous African belief system that combines spirituality, morality, culture in community life.[19] The religion developed from African social and cultural experiences and promotes human welfare, justice, and self-determination. It is centred on belief in God, ancestors, mysterious powers, and life after death.[20] Ancestors are believed to influence the lives of the living, strengthening community unity, love, and continuity between life and death. They give individuals a sense of responsibility and provide communities with guidance and purpose. Each generation adapts beliefs and practices to new experiences through sacred specialists, holy places, objects, works of art, and alcohol rituals.[21] This communal lifestyle encourages Zimbabweans women to care for the social and spiritual well-being of others in their society.

Zimbabwean culture underscores rituals connected to important stages of life such as birth, growth, marriage, death, burial, and rebirth. These rituals shape cultural identity and reinforce social relationships within communities. Therefore, ATR is viewed as a living and self-motivated religion expressed through ancestors, who connect humans with God through sacred history and spiritual guidance.[22]

According to traditional leaders such as Chief Rwizi, ancestors established the spiritual foundation of Zimbabwean society. Hence, African traditional ethics consisting of social norms, duties, and moral values, guide people's behaviour and maintain harmony within communities.[23] These ethical principles encourage respect, responsibility, and the collective well-being of society. Zimbabwean Christian spirituality, traditional customs, rituals, and values, therefore, continue to influence worship, morality, and community life.

[19] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life*, 48.
[20] Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s)".
[21] Husien and Kebede, "The Conception of Morality".
[22] Mudzimu, Religious and cultural encounters.
[23] Husien and Kebede, "The Conception of Morality".

Human Birth and Rites of Passage in Zimbabwe

Women in Zimbabwe are viewed as symbols of fertility, creation, and the nurturing of life in many African indigenous religions.[24] Their responsibilities as mothers and caregivers are connected to reproduction, morality, and cosmological beliefs. As a result, many Zimbabwean women are custodians of human birth and rites of passage. Zimbabwean societies recognise human life as marked by important rituals and rites of passage from birth to death.[25] Pregnancy, childbirth, puberty, marriage, and postnatal rituals are deeply rooted in ATR. These rituals grant women authority within families and communities, particularly in confirming the social and spiritual status of a newborn child.[26] They reflect intergenerational knowledge, communal responsibility, and women's central role in preserving cultural identity and moral values in ways that Christianity alone may not fully provide.

According to Reverend Tsito, childbirth rituals include cutting and burying the baby's umbilical cord and placenta beneath the family kitchen by elderly spiritual women. The placenta is believed to connect the child to ancestors and family lineage, while elders are responsible for naming the child. These practices offer counselling and protect the mother's fertility, and restore and ensure her health and spiritual well-being. Ignoring such rituals brings misfortune to the mother and child.

The rituals emphasise that a child belongs not only to parents, but to the entire community. Elder women act as custodians of family ethics, and social teachings. Although some cultural systems, such as lobola, reinforce male authority over women, women continue to negotiate their survival and identity within both ATR and Christianity.[27] The study therefore argues for a hybrid relationship between ATR and Christianity to preserve valuable cultural

[24] Aboekwe, M. E. The Role of Women in African Indigenous Religion and the Early Christian Church,
[25] Ohaja and Anyim, "Rituals and Embodied Cultural Practices".
[26] Aboekwe, M. E. The Role of Women in African Indigenous Religion and the Early Christian Church,
[27] Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*.

practices while addressing women's needs through African-centred spirituality and counselling.

Human Growth, Rites of Reincarnation, and Circumcision in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwean culture, during early stages of life, children undergo rites associated with reincarnation and circumcision, which introduce them to cultural identity, social values, and communal belonging.[28] Families and communities, especially elderly women such as mothers-in-law, play a central role in caring for both mother and child after birth. Raising a child is viewed as a communal responsibility rather than the parents' duties alone.

According to Chief Dombo, traditional rites of passage prepared young people for adulthood. At around fifteen years old, boys receive training that emphasises responsibility, discipline, and manhood, while girls attend *Chinamwari*, a month-long premarital counselling program conducted in the bush. These teachings equipped young people with practical life skills, moral values, and knowledge necessary for building strong and accountable marriages. The study argues that such cultural practices contributed to stable family systems and social responsibility, unlike many modern marriages that lack traditional guidance.

Zimbabwean cultural traditions, teachings from uncles and aunties, along with practical training in grooming, deportment, and marriage counselling, complement church revival activities. The United Methodist Church's Emmaus retreats for boys and girls are acknowledged, but the study recommends that they become more practical and culturally grounded, similar to the *Chinamwari* concept.

Children are regarded as a divine heritage. Psalm 127:3–5 identifies them as blessings from God. Hence, Zimbabwean rites of passage serve as a cultural

[28] Ohaja and Anyim, "Rituals and Embodied Cultural Practices".

legacy that teach social responsibility and communal accountability.[29] These indigenous practices are valuable resources to be preserved.

Women are important in maintaining these traditions because they are believed to have a close connection to ancestors through childbirth and the continuation of life.[30] Consequently, the study proposes that Zimbabwean children be raised through African cultural values and biblical teachings, allowing them to live faithfully within spiritual worlds, while preserving truth and identity.

Marriage as family-centred institution in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe marriage is a family-centred institution that combines cultural and religious values. It is recognised once the bridegroom's family gives the bride's family dowry (*roora/lobola*). According to Reverend Goche, presenting appreciation gifts to the bride's mother, strengthening family relationships, and upholding the mother's cultural commitments are noteworthy practices. In order to enhance the meaning of both traditional and Christian ceremonies, the study encourages integrating traditional marriage customs in marriage worship serves, community gatherings, and recognising chiefs as marriage officers. This gives equal importance to both traditional and Christian marriage ceremonies.

The participation of pastors, chiefs, *tete/sekuru* (aunts and uncles), and marriage counsellors helps maintain cultural values surrounding marriage while strengthening the relationship between ATR and Christianity.[31] This hybrid approach promotes undivided loyalty to both traditions.

Premarital counselling offers practical tools that equip couples with communication skills, conflict resolution techniques, and marital guidance, but

[29] Lagerwerf, L. (2002). [Review of the book *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation*, by N. J. Njoroge]. ***Exchange***, *31*(4), 397–398. doi.org

[30] Aboekwe, M. E. The Role of Women in African Indigenous Religion and the Early Christian Church,

[31] Chitando, "Religion and Masculinities".

roora/lobola provides cultural legitimacy and accountability.[32] Together, these systems help address challenges such as gender-based violence and strengthen family stability. The study argues combining Christian and traditional marriage practices fills gaps left by either system alone.

Ultimately, integrating ATR and Christianity in marriage practices empowers women and supports the SDGs, especially gender equality and women's participation in leadership, decision-making, spiritual life, and community development.[33] Successively, marriage and motherhood would be valued in the hybrid approach making traditional and Christian practices essential for preserving Zimbabwean cultural identity.

Death, Burial, and Rebirth in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwean culture, death, burial, and rebirth are key spiritual events that involve a fusion of ATR and Christian beliefs, emphasising communal identity and respect for the deceased. Reverend Gumbo notes that Genesis 1:26–28 draws humanity to God and influences burial practices, such as the confirmation of dowry(*roora/lobola*) payment for married women before burial. Ritual objects like reed mats and log trays are used to honour the deceased and signify humanity's connection to creation.

According to Reverend Mhishu, special rituals for infant death and mourning involve elderly women guiding grieving mothers through symbolic practices with towels, water, and prayers at the grave. These rituals facilitate emotional detachment, promote healing, and affirm hope in God amid suffering, with mothers-in law playing a key role in comforting families and maintaining cultural significance during mourning.

Burial rituals express the African understanding of life as a cycle from birth to rebirth.[34] During adult funerals, acts like tying strings around relatives and throwing them into the grave represent spiritual protection and communal healing. Family members return the next morning to confirm the death, pray,

[32] Hilukiluah, "A pastoral care and counselling approach".
[33] Chireshe, E. "Intersections".
[34] Idang, "African culture and values".

and mourn together, showcasing ATR traditions and biblical practices, like Mary Magdalene's visit to Jesus' tomb.

After burial, memorial rituals continue. The *svitsa* ceremony, held after one year, invites the spirit of the deceased back into the family, while *kurava guva* reconnects the deceased with ancestors.[35] In Christianity, these resemble memorial services and tomb unveiling ceremonies. The study argues that many Zimbabwean Christians secretly continue ATR rituals because they provide cultural identity, emotional security, and communal belonging that Christianity alone may not fully address.[36]

The article proposes ATR and Christianity should not be opposing systems but be interconnected spiritual traditions. Africans honour ancestors not as gods, but as mediators, guardians, and life-givers who maintain harmony between the living and the spiritual world. Christ is the proto-ancestor, the supreme mediator who fulfils and unites ancestral hopes. [37] Through Jesus Christ, ancestors, the living, and future generations are gathered into one spiritual community under God.

African Ubuntu: God and the Human Community

Zimbabwean spirituality is strongly shaped by belief in the God of action and a deep sense of communal life expressed through the Ubuntu African philosophy.[38] Ubuntu emphasises that a person becomes fully human through relationships with others, highlighting shared family responsibilities, cultural values, and communal duties.

Drawing on African theologian Bujo, African life is communal: "I am because we are."[39] Salvation, therefore, is a communal reality involving ancestors, the living community, and the unborn in a constant moral system.[40] African culture

[35] Idang, "African culture and values".
[36] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 3.
[37] Mapfumo, "Theology Matters".
[38] Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s)", 3.
[39] Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 23.
[40] Bujo, "African Theology".

is thus a partner in Christian faith, helping Zimbabwean Christians negotiate identity, morality, justice, and spirituality within both ATR and Christianity.

ATR Ubuntu's strong emphasis on healing is its central characteristic.[41] Health and illness are understood in physical terms and in relation to the spiritual world. Traditional healers (*n'angas*) play an important role in diagnosing causes of illness and guiding rituals to restore harmony. Herbal medicine is part of therapeutic system. Neglecting ancestral duties may withdraw protection, exposing individuals to spiritual attacks.[42] Ubuntu therefore, places corporate existence at the centre of life, where individuals, families, ancestors, and God are interconnected.[43] Mbiti concurs with Bujo on the principle, "I am because we are, since we are therefore I am," which expresses the inseparable bond between the individual and the community.[44] This interconnectedness builds unity, promotes responsibility, and redefines moral accountability across generations and ancestors.

This African worldview presents a holistic system where spirituality, health, and morality are unified. Integrating ATR with Christianity creates a meaningful dialogue that helps Africans understand the gospel within their own cultural context.[45] In this hybrid approach, Christ is the living bond, the ultimate mediator of life who does not erase African ancestral connection, but fulfils them. This approach promotes faith that is culturally grounded, inclusive, and connected to community life.[46]

[41] Shoko, *Karanga Indigenous Religion*, 172.
[42] Shoko, *Karanga Indigenous Religion*, 172.
[43] Manyonganise, "Oppressive and Liberative".
[44] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108-109.
[45] Mapfumo, "Theology Matters".
[46] Mapfumo, "Theology Matters".

Cultural Norms, Human Relationship and Moral Order in Societies

Zimbabwean traditional spirituality consists of beliefs and practices rooted in African understandings of creation, God, divinities, spiritual forces, good and evil.[47] It is deeply connected to moral responsibility within the community.

Morality is shame-based, focusing on human welfare, coordination, and collective responsibility.[48] As such, ethical behaviour is based not only on rules, but grounded in faith in God and ancestors and expressed through values of communion, justice, care, and solidarity. In many cases, society expects individuals to conform to communal responsibility. Failure to embrace solidarity is corrected through social pressure, reinforcing the importance of shared life.

According to Chief Jasi, when a child violates maternal cultural norms, the child is forced to undergo a fugitive or transient journey (*kutanda botso*) that requires the child to leave home temporarily, seek forgiveness within the community. The child later undergoes reconciliation rituals. This process emphasises discipline, humility, and restoration of family unity.[49] Elders play a central role in guiding and reintegrating the child through counselling and communal support. Thus preserving the seeds of the Zimbabwean traditional religion, moral values and culture remain whole**.**

The community occupies a central place in ATR in which ancestors provide social order, moral direction, spiritual identity, wisdom, and guidance.[50] Consequently, caring for vulnerable and marginalised groups, especially women and children, is considered a moral obligation. This aligns with Isaiah 58:6–7, Leviticus 19:34, Matthew 25:35–36, and Hebrews 13:2–3, which encourage compassion, justice, and hospitality. In addition, Genesis 19:1-13; 38:1–30; and 2 Samuel 13:1–22 illustrate moral failures, injustice, sexual violence, and disobedience that bring suffering and separation from God. They

[47] Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s)", 3.
[48] Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s)", 3.
[49] Mugumbate and Nyanguru, "Exploring African philosophy".
[50] Adeate, "Mbiti on Community".

highlight situations that disadvantage women, showing struggles related to gender, power and morality. Behaviours like sexual exploitation and irresponsible sexual relationships violate the commitment, dignity, and trust necessary for healthy human relationships and spiritual life.

However, Zimbabwean culture enhances women wellbeing and strengthens social cohesion and cultural identity. The study argues that Christianity highlights Jesus himself engaged with culture, showing faith can exist within cultural systems without destroying them. Bujo emphasises responsibility in African life as embedded within shared cultural and spiritual contexts where individuals are accountable to themselves, others, ancestors, and God.[51]

A good example of the importance of women and cultural practice happened at Mufusire United Methodist Campsite in 2023. The women's fellowship drilled a borehole without performing traditional rituals associated with ancestors and the borehole failed to produce water. After consulting Chief Makoni and performing appropriate rituals, water flowed. This event illustrates the belief that neglecting traditional practices can disrupt harmony between the physical and spiritual worlds. It also demonstrates how indigenous knowledge systems remain influential in contemporary Zimbabwean life.

Grassroots theology references historical heritage, like Great Zimbabwe, which reflects indigenous religious-cultural systems that integrated worship, community, and governance.[52] This encourages Zimbabweans to preserve their cultural identity, drawing on Daniel 1:6–11, which emphasises maintaining faith and identity.

Material and Non-Material Culture

Shared cultural practices distinguish one group from another.[53] They embrace both material culture (tools, art, objects) and non-material culture (beliefs, customs, values) that help people respond to challenges and meet their needs.

[51] Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 30–35.
[52] Idang, "African culture and values".
[53] Idang, "African culture and values".

Cultural objects like *mbira* and *bhosvo* are significant as they influence spiritual and social life within communities. Rites of passage, traditional occupations, and moral teachings play an essential role in sustaining society.[54] Communal feasts and coordinated seasonal practices in societies strengthen unity and social responsibility, as mentioned by Chief Miti.

However, orphanages and institutional care systems introduced through Christianity weaken traditional family-based care systems that emphasise extended family responsibility, unity, and cultural identity. This creates a gap between traditional and Christian systems that the study suggests should be bridged through cultural integration. It should incorporate cultural material and non-material expressions to become more relevant to lived experiences.[55] This supports a dual allegiance alliance where individuals maintain both Christian faith and cultural identity. By preserving culture, Zimbabweans can ensure future generations inherit a strong sense of identity. An ATR and Christianity hybrid becomes a pathway toward social harmony, spiritual fulfilment, and sustainable community development.

Chiefs as Custodians of Accustomed and Political Institutions

Zimbabwean traditional society links political authority, spirituality, and community ethics through ancestral shrines and leadership structures led by chiefs including women. These institutions uphold moral codes, justice, and truth, similar to Christian teachings found in Exodus 20 and Ephesians 6:1–3. These chiefs serve as custodians of social order and ensure ethical conduct. In this system, loyalty to chiefs is loyalty to ancestors and God, showing the close relationship between governance and spirituality. This worldview reflects a strong sense of family lineage, dual allegiance where individuals are connected to ancestors and God.

However, the study argues, some Christian traditions influenced by Western practices separate religious worship from cultural expressions. These traditions limit the participation of Zimbabweans in integrated cultural-religious experiences and the expression of indigenous identity within

[54] Aziza, "Relationship", 13.
[55] Aziza, "Relationship", 13.

Christian services. This highlights the need for greater cultural inclusion and contextualisation of Christianity in Zimbabwean society.

Cultural and Moral Tension within ATR and Christianity

The discussion about ATR and Christianity present Christian morality as sharing the justice, communal harmony, and responsible conduct concerns of ATR. However, tensions emerge when interpreting issues related to gender and cultural identity and where Christian teachings condemn certain cultural-spiritual practices accepted within ATR. The study therefore, displays how some Zimbabwean Christians negotiate these moral teachings within their cultural and spiritual contexts.

Bishop Gift Kudakwashe Machinga of the United Methodist Church says, "As United Methodists in Zimbabwe, we hold firmly that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, a position rooted in our understanding of Scripiture—the infallible and authoritative word of God. The conviction is embedded in African cultural and spiritual values. The United Methodist Church develops its theology on the foundation of scripture, illuminated by tradition, refined by reason, and expressed in experience to God's saving acts in the lives of people and in the cosmos."[56]

The statement by Bishop Gift Kudakwashe Machinga reflects the position of the UMC regarding homosexuality and Christian morality. For the bishop, Christian teaching is based on its interpretation of Scripture that homosexuality is unsuited among Christians. The church views Scripture as the authoritative foundation for its theological teachings and moral guidance.[57] It understands morality as shared and linked to traditional beliefs about family, marriage, and social order. The church uses its four interconnected sources of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience to interpret God's will and guide Christian life within African contexts. While maintaining what it considers faithful Christian doctrine and spiritual responsibility, balancing biblical teachings with African cultural realities is essential.

[56] Machinga, Communique, 31 May 2025.
[57] Machinga, Communique, 31 May 2025.

The argument is that Zimbabwean law and church leadership should uphold cultural and theological positions regarding morality and worship. Both African cultural values and Christian teachings disapprove the acceptance of same-sex marriages, emphasise women's traditional role in childbearing and family life, and identify domination, injustice, and exploitation as moral evils condemned in Micah 6:8. Both ATR and Christianity promote truth, ethical living, humility, love, care for others, and communal responsibility. John 17:21 further emphasises the importance of overcoming division and fostering harmony among people. Thus, good in ATR and Christianity is interactive and shared ethical knowledge that creates important connections between the two religions. Overall, both Zimbabwean tradition and Christianity affirm that human life involves a continuous struggle between good and evil, requiring moral responsibility, spiritual awareness, and actions that promote peace and justice.

Witchcraft Perceptions and Accusations in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwean culture, witchcraft (*uroi*) refers to beliefs and practices associated with witches and wizards who are believed to possess supernatural powers that can harm or help people.[58] Some witchcraft is associated with malevolent acts causing illness, suffering, or social conflict. Some traditional practices are benevolent and protective, forming part of broader cultural understandings of spirituality, healing and protection. This distinguishes between harmful witchcraft and forms of healing practices used to cleanse families and communities, seek guidance, and protect people from life challenges. As such, spiritual practitioners use ancestral knowledge to restore harmony and address socio-spiritual problems.

King Saul's story in 1 Samuel 19:10 of consulting a medium to summon the spirit of Samuel suggests that spiritual mediation has historical and religious parallels within biblical traditions. This comparison questions whether all African witchcraft practices should automatically be condemned by Christianity.

[58] Senokoane. 'Witchcraft".

The study argues that the blanket condemnation of all forms of witchcraft by missionaries contributed to the suppression of African healing traditions. As a result, cultural education and open dialogue about witchcraft within Zimbabwean communities are called for. Such education can help people distinguish harmful practices from cultural healing systems while addressing accusations and fears on witchcraft. This promotes healing and justice, and avoids misuse of Christianity as a tool for rejecting all indigenous spiritual knowledge.

The Influence of African Traditional Religion (ATR) on Christianity

The relationship between ATR and Christianity in Zimbabwe demonstrates the need for interfaith dialogue, contextual theology, and reconciliation between the two belief systems. The study argues Christianity introduced during the colonial era often failed to fully address African cultural realities and spiritual needs. Therefore, many Zimbabwean Christians continue to rely on ATR practices, especially during emergencies, illness, and fertility challenges. This continued reliance reveals that ATR remains spiritually meaningful and culturally relevant despite missionary efforts to suppress it.[59] Ancestral reverence, rituals, divination, healing, and communal ceremonies continue to influence African Christian communities.

Traditional leaders in Zimbabwe identified as Christians while simultaneously practicing cultural rituals to maintain community harmony. Ceremonies such as *mukweerera* (rain-making rituals), a women's duty that involves both Christians and non-Christians, demonstrates how ATR and Christianity coexist in community life. Chiefs' courts also involve church leaders in addressing women's social issues such as gender-based violence, showing cooperation between traditional and Christian systems.

The study argues that tensions arise when churches, legal institutions, and traditional leaders fail to integrate ATR and Christian values in public life. This separation creates conflicts among Zimbabweans who practice both traditions

[59] D. T. Adamo, "Christianity and the African Traditional Religion(s)".

privately. These tensions continue to shape struggles for a distinct Zimbabwean Christian identity.[60] Therefore, the necessity to promote peaceful coexistence, cultural education, spiritual growth in ATR and Christianity. Because the African worldview does not separate life into religious and secular categories, but integrates spirituality into all aspects of community life,[61] ATR and Christianity should be viewed as belonging to one communal reality that strengthen unity, kinship, and cultural identity.

Colonial Legacy and African Traditional Religion (ATR)

Colonialism introduced Christian teachings into Zimbabwe that created divisions within families and communities and disrupted traditional social structures.[62] As a result, some members of the same family now belong to different Christian denominations and avoid open discussions about faith, spirituality, and cultural experiences. This separation weakens communal unity, cultural identity, and shared values that traditionally held Zimbabwean communities together. Many people continue to experience emotional and spiritual pain caused by this disconnect between Christianity and African identity.

The study questions how Zimbabwean Christians can become genuine Christians while maintaining a true Zimbabwean spirituality and cultural identity. It suggests that achieving this requires Zimbabweans to rediscover and nurture their indigenous cultural values, ethics, and spiritual traditions rather than rejecting them. Communities must rethink the mission and methods of Christianity within the Zimbabwean context so that faith becomes culturally meaningful and inclusive.[63]

The study further emphasises the importance of preserving the dignity and the church as a nurturing community that values culture, identity, and communal wellbeing. By adapting and integrating positive African cultural values with

[60] African Thought: A journal of Afro-Centric Knowledge, Vol.1. No. se3
[61] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life.*
[62] White, *Faith, Spiritualty, and Praxis*, 1.
[63] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life,* 17.

Christian teachings, Zimbabweans can develop a contextualised Christianity that strengthens both faith and cultural belonging.

Interfaith Dialogue of ATR and Christianity in the Zimbabwean Context

This passage argues that Zimbabweans inherited a divided Christian church system from Western missionaries, which separated ATR from Christianity and weakened African cultural identity.[64] The historic churches in Africa should not remain silent about this division. They should instead promote ecumenical dialogue and unity between ATR and Christianity. Such dialogue would help Zimbabweans remove barriers created during colonialism: reclaim their lost values and develop a contextual theology that reflects their lived experiences, spirituality, and indigenous identity. Drawing from Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:18–19, Jesus is recognised as the incarnation of God and liberator who defends oppressed people and restore dignity to marginalised communities in all cultural contexts This theology allows Christians to worship God while remaining genuine Zimbabwean

The double agreement in commitments: Africanisation of Christian resources and worship

Zimbabwean ATR and Christianity share belief in one God and seek to address human suffering, morality, and spiritual wellbeing within community life.[65] At the same time, the UMC acknowledges that its theology is rooted in African cultural and spiritual values through scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Yet Christians undervalue the role of ancestors in African worldview, despite observing traditional rituals during death and burial ceremonies.[66] Examples include widow cleansing rituals, burial preparations, handwashing with ashes, bathing ceremonies, and burning clothes after burial as symbols for separation from the deceased and practical forms of pastoral

[64] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life*, 17
[65] Kunhiyop, "Christian Relevance".
[66] Mokhoathi, "Religious Intersections".

counselling rooted in African culture for women who perform mourning rituals.

The article therefore advocates for the Africanisation/culturalisation of Christian resources and worship practices surrounding life cycles from birth through death to rebirth. Cultural items such as umbilical cords, placentas, ritual strings, animal offerings, infant towels, and log trays may be openly acknowledged and blessed by pastors and chiefs during appropriate ceremonies. Integrating ATR and Christianity in this way might strengthen pastoral care, cultural identity, community unity, and spiritual healing among Zimbabwean Christians.

The study suggests meaningful agreement between ATR and Christian teachings to reflect Zimbabwean realities, authentic worship, spiritual expression, and community service. Such integration is essential for building responsible societies that transmit cultural and spiritual values to future generations.

Religion as the foundation of African life.[67] It functions as a unified system of beliefs with rituals that provides guidance, counselling, social support across different life situations, strengthening identity and communal solidarity and binding people into a moral community.[68] This helps believers express genuine faith rooted in their lived experiences rather than borrowed identity. It restructures worship and pastoral care systems that promotes the dual allegiance alliance. This integration fosters peace, justice, and resistance to social injustice while preventing violence and fragmentation in society. The synthesis is a pathway to cultural healing, stronger communal relationships, and more effective counselling practices within Zimbabwean societies.

The Impact of Religious Conversions and the Intersection of ATR and Christianity in Zimbabwe

The study explains that the introduction of Christianity in Zimbabwe created divisions within communities by separating people from their traditional

[67] Agbiji and Swart, "Religion and social transformation".
[68] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms,* 46.

religious practices. However, ATR remains deeply embedded in everyday life, meaning religion in African society is not optional but a communal reality where people participate through rituals, ceremonies, and cultural practices.[69] Strong communal orientation, moments of crisis like funerals, illness, and disasters often bring Christians and ATR practitioners together. In these situations, religious boundaries become less rigid, and people engage in shared cultural and spiritual practices that reflect kinship, solidarity, and communal responsibility.[70] This creates an informal union that transcends formal religious divisions. This argues that church leaders often struggle to prevent participation in traditional rituals because cultural identity and family bonds are stronger than religious separation. Instead, shared practices provide love, care, healing, and respect, functioning as a bridge between Christianity and ATR. This bridge allows different religious, traditional, and community-based leaders to offer collective support during difficult times.

John 17:11 and 21 offers Jesus prays for unity among His followers so others would believe in Him. The text teaches that unity, even across religious difference, reflects God's model for harmonious relationships.

Summary

The article examined the intersection between ATR and Christianity in Zimbabwe, arguing that both systems can be integrated to form an authentic Zimbabwean Christian identity and spirituality. It suggests that, when culturally aware Zimbabwean biblical readers reinterpret and restructure Christian teachings within African cultural systems, a more meaningful and relevant faith expression can emerge.

ATR and Christianity are presented as compatible and complementary belief systems that share moral values, communal ethics, and spiritual concerns. The article argues that their integration can transform Eurocentric forms of Christianity into a hybrid Zimbabwean Christianity shaped by socio-cultural exchange and indigenous knowledge systems. This hybrid faith is seen as more

[69] Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, 3.
[70] Bakare, *The Drumbeat of Life,* 47.

responsive to local realities and capable of addressing both spiritual and social needs.

Such integration is said to enhance worship, pastoral care, and community support during both joyful and difficult life events. It also strengthens counselling systems rooted in African cultural understanding, making them more accessible and effective for Zimbabwean communities.

A key emphasis of the article is the restoration of women's roles within religious and cultural life. By recognising and revitalising female spiritual authority, the hybrid system supports gender empowerment, cultural continuity, and community cohesion. Overall, the article advocates for a contextual theology that unites ATR and Christianity to promote authentic spirituality, social transformation, and inclusive community development in Zimbabwe.

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