

ISSN 2319-2801

**Asian Academic
Research Journal of
Multidisciplinary**

Volume 1

Issue 7

March 2013



Journal By:-

Asian Academic Research Associates

ISSN 2278 – 859X (Online)

Asian Academic Research Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities
&
ISSN 2319-2801 (Online)

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A Peer Reviewed International Journal of Asian
Academic Research Associates

AARJMD

**ASIAN ACADEMIC RESEARCH
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MARCH OR DIE?: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE VIOLATION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN AFRICAN INITIATED CHURCHES, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

In general, the numerical strength of African Instituted Churches (AICs) makes them a force to reckon within the African context. AICs have influenced a number of people and challenged historical churches in Zimbabwe. However, the operations of some AICs have come under the spotlight for violating the rights of children especially concerning education, preventable and treatable diseases and conditions. The study examines the beliefs and practices of Johane Marange Apostolic Church (JMAC) with regards to issues of health and healing, education, child marriages and human rights in Zimbabwe. The paper argues that the JMAC stultify the girl-child rights on education and also exposes children to child killer diseases such as measles, tuberculosis, malaria, HIV and AIDS because they shun conventional medical treatment on the basis of their faith. The study established that there are some clashes between the government and JMAC members for evading high impact child survival interventions such as immunisation programmes to curb communicable and non-communicable diseases among children. This scenario negatively impacts on children who are made to either 'march or die'. The research utilised the phenomenological approach, observation and interviews to provide perceptual analysis as well as government and media reports for factual interrogation of data gathered.

Key Words: African Initiated Churches, Children's Rights, HIV and AIDS, Johane Marange Apostolic Church, Zimbabwe

1.0 Introduction

The religious landscape in Zimbabwe is characterised by a rainbow of religious movements. In general, mainline historical churches were dominant in all circles of human life. The churches in Zimbabwe mainly fall under four categories, namely, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) and the Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe (ACCZ). The fourth category is a recent organisation in Zimbabwe that used to operate loosely as an association of African Independent Churches (AICs) (Verstraelen 1998). ACCZ is an umbrella organisation of apostolic and Zionist churches whose aim is to transform indigenous churches to suit national values and standards. This group is important to this study because Johane Marange Apostolic Church (JMAC) that forms the heart of this research is still yet to join this category of churches. In recent years JMAC has come under the spotlight for some of its beliefs and practices given that the role of religion in determining social reality cannot be underrated.

The paper argues that some of the teaching and practices of JMAC are detrimental to the well being of the majority of its members. Therefore, the study examines the operations of JMAC that violate the rights of children concerning education, preventable and treatable diseases as well as the issue of child marriages. The paper further argues these are human rights matters since some JMAC practices stultify the girl-child rights on education and exposes children to child killer diseases such as measles, tuberculosis, malaria, HIV and AIDS as they shun conventional medical treatment on the basis of their faith. This scenario negatively impacts on children who are made to either 'march or die', hence the title caption of the study.

2.0 Research Methodology

The research is informed by the phenomenological approach. It utilised the research instruments in the form of observation and interviews to gather data. Cox (1996: 19) argues that the phenomenological approach is a descriptive method that thrives on *epoche*, empathy and eidetic intuition. In *epoche*, preconceived judgments are held in abeyance, whereas empathy allows the researcher to step into the shoes of the believers. *Eidetic* intuition refers to the essence, form and meaning of the religious phenomenon being investigated. The phenomenological injunction traceable to W.B. Kristensen that says 'the believer is always right' (Chitando 1998) was also informative to the researchers who were investigating the

practices of the 'other'. Through the phenomenological method data of religious expression could be recorded without judging the value or truth of a religion (Chitando 2001). However, the phenomenological approach is not without weaknesses. One of the weaknesses is that *epoche* is difficult to put into practice since a person always carry his or her cultural baggage (Cox 1996). Notably, in order to cover up for such weaknesses of the phenomenological method through the use of observation and interviews as data collection instruments.

In general, the researchers utilised the observation method extensively because the community of JMAC members is reserved and does not freely give out information about their beliefs and practices to outsiders. The observation technique enabled the researchers to informally or covertly detect the practices of JMAC. Although, not much break through could be realised in interviews with JMAC members, the researchers also gathered information from informants and a few 'insiders' who cooperated. The interview technique just like observation has an advantage of allowing the researchers to gather data in its original context thereby allowing cross examination of evidence.

3.0 AICs in Zimbabwe

The AICs are a heterogeneous group in Zimbabwe. Historically, the AICs arose in the 20th century mainly as separatist movements from the white dominated mainline churches and later as schism from churches under fellow African leadership (Sibanda, Makahamadze and Maposa 2008:70). JMAC is one of the oldest and populous AICs in Zimbabwe, yet in recent years some of its practices attracted attention. Therefore, in the last decade of the new millennium, the government encouraged AICs to form their own associations in Zimbabwe to increase their commitment as accountable and responsible religious organisations. Notably, ACCZ was formed to promote peace, harmony, sanity, hygiene, cultural values, decency, prosperity, crime prevention, property rights and human rights. This explains the development of ACCZ as a group of Apostolic and Zionist churches that was formed in September 2010. The first president of ACCZ is Reverend Johannes Ndanga. This Apostolic and Zionist association was launched by Vice President Joice Mujuru of Zimbabwe. ACCZ has a total of 200 member churches and it becomes the 4th umbrella body of the Christian religions in Zimbabwe after the ZCBC, ZCC and EFZ (The Sunday Mail 2010:D6). Some of the sects that are members of the ACCZ include United Apostolic Faith Mission, National Apostolic Faith Mission of the Holy Ghost and Johanne Masowe Nyeredzi Nomwe. Paradoxically, JMAC of all the most outstanding and well known movements both inside and

outside Zimbabwe is not yet a member of ACCZ. This forms an interesting observation to the level of accountability of this movement to its members. It has to be asked: Why would an age-old movement such as JMAC delay or hesitate to join ACCZ?

Historically, apostolic sects have been rocked by scandals that tarnished their images such as fights over shrines, ownership wrangles, and violent confrontations over contrasting principles, forced marriages of minors, rape and adultery, administering of deadly concoctions and fraud. Furthermore, the apostolic churches open air services were said to be against the city by-laws. In recent years JMAC is among the churches that were victims of the government instituted Operation Murambatsvina (Restore Order) because of, *inter alia*, open air churches services at undesignated sites and selling their wares unlicensed (Sibanda, Makahamadze and Maposa 2008). Even in the post-Operation Murambatsvina era, JMAC and other sects are still under the spot light for operating at premises where there are no ablution facilities and clean water supply. It is said that they pose a threat to the environment and sanitation. This makes it easy to spread various diseases among members of the sect and the people in the community they are squatting. It was feared that without clean running water, worshippers, were put at risk of contracting diseases, particularly children. It was important to establish how and where they baptise their converts and the quality of water in which they carry out such baptisms. They litter and dispose waste in the bush or open spaces. The environmentalists are concerned about a clean, safe and healthy environment. Thus, JMAC is one of the AICs that do not go scot free from such accusations of the local Municipal Councils and the government. In this way, some of their beliefs and practices are found wanting in the human rights framework.

4.0 Beliefs and Practices of JMAC

The beliefs and practices of JMAC are largely influenced by the Old Testament. The members follow the examples of respectable Old Testament prophets like Moses, Elijah and some New Testament personalities like John the Baptist and Paul. Whereas Moses and Elijah were great prophets with a simple and ascetic life, John the Baptist influences them on the baptismal rite which they also term 'Jordan baptism'. The apostle Paul, with his Jewish background perpetrates the subordination of women that JMAC members have sustained. It is on the basis of biblical stories that JMAC upholds its teaching on polygamy. This is vital for the study as the girl-child is put at risk due to the patriarchal tradition. JMAC have two important ways of defining what constitutes a church in different geographical areas. JMAC

stresses the importance of particularly two sacraments, namely, baptism and Paschal (*Pasika*). Baptism takes place in the 'Jordan' river. This is not in reference to the historical Jordan River but a symbolical way of referring to any locally approved river where baptism can be performed by senior members of the church. Such a community is known as *pendi*, a term which is derived from *Pente*, which means fifty. In JMAC terms, for a local church to qualify to have a 'Jordan baptism' in its vicinity, it requires up to fifty families (Sibanda, Mahamadze and Maposa 2008). The annual sacrament of *Pasika* (Passover feast) is also held at places with adequate members that go in line with the conceptions of the *Pendi* element. In general, all members of JMAC whether located in Zimbabwe or broad, are expected to have their *Pasika* at the July annual gathering done at the Marange headquarters in Manicaland province. However, due to different reasons such as financial constraints and old age, some members fail to attend the Passover feast. Such members are normally served with *Pasika* at the local *Pendis* in due course.

JMAC is an apostolic church and is a spirit type church that exhibits syncretistic tendencies (Daneel 1986). At the same time, the church stresses the use of prophecy under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therein, the phenomenon of speaking in tongues is prevalent. They also value the power of revelation, dreams and visions. It is on this basis that some unscrupulous 'prophets' could manipulate this gift to their selfish advantage but to the detriment of some church members particularly women and girls. It can be argued that whilst this apostolic sect enjoys freedom of worship, it should not infringe the constitutional rights of others. JMAC believes in faith-healing and have their own mid-wives such that they do not send their sick for medical attention at hospitals. Nevertheless, JMAC has been accused of infringing the children's right to health by denying them immunisation and proper health care (Rusere 2010). The central of senior healers, prophets and elders in JMAC is a source of liberation from the perspective of insiders whereas outsiders tend to detect facets of oppression in JMAC. The authority of spiritual leaders is essentially unquestionable. This explains why Changamaire, an authoritative leader of the church has the final say on matters of policy that guide the church. The principal spiritual leader of the movement assumes power through hereditary means is the chief administrator and chief mediator between the members and God (Mazambara 1999:333). This spiritual power is extended to selected senior members who are said to perform supernatural acts in the name of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The beliefs and practices of JMAC can be summarised as follows:

- They believe in the Holy Spirit.
- Their Doctrines are influenced by the Old Testament.
- They emphasise the power of prayer.
- They believe in faith-healing.
- They believe in the use of water baptism.
- They use holy water warding off evils spirits.
- They use their own mid-wives for the delivery of pregnant women.
- They do not allow members to get medical assistance at the hospital.

In the light of these beliefs and teachings, the study seeks to establish the extent to which JMAC has violated children's rights in Zimbabwe.

5.0 JMAC Violation of Children's Rights

This section provides the findings of the study. The findings reflected upon as part of a two pronged framework in which JMAC represents an archetypical AIC, but in ambivalent light. On one hand, the church is one of the most populous and has a fair pattern of geographical distribution of its membership in Zimbabwe and abroad. In a way, the church has been consulted and patronised by both members and non-members seeking spiritual healing from evils forces that define the belief system of most Zimbabweans. This has seen some members of the historical mainline churches consulting JMAC for alleviation from their spiritual problems that are believed not to be adequately addressed in their churches (Sibanda, Makamadze and Maposa 2008). Furthermore, this positive framework of JMAC makes one to assume that people are invited to 'march' forward in faith towards a salvific efficacy. This is liberative. A sizable number of informants pointed out that women and children occupy the lowest status in JMAC but also lead in singing. Thus, although women and the girl-child are exposed to unequal opportunities in JMAC as compared to their male counterparts, it was established that women and girls take pride in their 'leadership' in the singing or choral sector of liturgy. The use of music in worship has a biblical basis. For instance, music was used by some Yahwist prophets to get into ecstasy (cf. I Sam. 10:10-13). In Jesus' time it is said that the Bible was sung in Hebrew and read in Aramaic (Makahamadze and Sibanda 2008:293). Thus, women and girls in JMAC have their key result area in singing in the church that is in tandem with biblical teachings. They believe that singing consoles, glorifies God and brings church members closer to God. Some of the popular liturgical songs in

JMAC have words that say in part thus: “We are marching over to Jerusalem”. On the basis of songs, one can notice the importance of Jerusalem, a heavenly Jerusalem – one that transcends the current earthly Jerusalem. No one can suspect any ulterior motives in a church dominated by such ‘melodies to God’ (Makahamadze and Sibanda 2008). Generally, this rosy picture smack of ‘a-pie-in-the-sky’ perspective that is contrary to the practical experience of the ordinary members of the church, particularly women and girls.

Politicians are another wave of patrons who ‘march’ now and then to JMAC seeking to exploit the numerical strength the church for political expediency. For instance, President Mugabe attended the JMAC Passover festival in 2010 and was captured by the media adorning the apostolic garbs of that church. On that occasion he was quoted supporting polygamous marriages that are prevalent in the JMAC (Machingura 2011:199). Whereas President Mugabe’s statement to support polygamy was presented to counter the emerging phenomenon of homosexual relations in Zimbabwe, it can also be argued that he was not alarmed and perturbed by the cross-generational marriages that are prevalent among some JMAC members. The marriages violate the rights of children, some of whom are forced into early marriages. Such a stance compromises the efforts of some non-governmental and governmental organisations that safe guard the rights of children such as the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, the Ministry of Health and Child Welfare, Girl Child Network and Childline.

On the negative side of the beliefs and practices of JMAC, the research established that this apostolic sect has often been accused of fuelling communicable and treatable diseases such as cholera and *gwirikwiti* (measles), *marariya* (malaria) and tuberculosis (TB) by forbidding members to attend conventional medical services of such curable diseases. The six killer diseases of children in Zimbabwe which include the ones mentioned above have been a point of clashes between JMAC and government and non-governmental organisations bent on protecting children’s rights. JMAC members generally evade the high impact child survival interventions such as immunisation programmes to curb communicable and non-communicable diseases among children. In the case of immunisation campaigns, the study noted that children from families who belonged to JMAC but residing in remote districts of Manicaland province, Masvingo and Mashonaland East were most affected. This resonates with the media reports from *The Manica Post* where Samuel Kadungure (2010: W2) reported that that many children in Nzvimbe area in Makoni South of Manicaland province have died

of measles. He added that children were suffering because their parents pursue a fanatical JMAC doctrine that opts for nothing else but faith healing ahead of life-saving medical interventions.

In a bid to immunise children in parts of Bikita district where some members of JMAC continued to resist treatment, the health workers had to use a ruse. According to one informant, the health workers falsely announced that there was a donor who wished to distribute food to children under the age of 15. The beneficiaries were to gather at a school in the area. In this manner, the health personnel were able to immunise a substantial number of children who are normally susceptible to measles between the 1 and 14 years. Research has also noted that women and children are the most disadvantaged group among the church members on the basis of religious doctrines. Pregnant women are not allowed to visit the ante-natal clinic that serves to protect the Mother to child transmission of HIV and AIDS. JMAC expecting mothers are attended by church mid-wives at the time of delivery. This further places the mother and the infant to some risks in case of any complication. JMAC women who breach this rule are labelled in negative terms. If they die at hospital, they are regarded as *imbwa* (dog) when they are being buried. Fellow members are not allowed to express their sympathy to such a deceased 'law breaker' through crying which is done when faithful church members die. The Manica Post (2010:3) notes that "women and children are paying the price in a religious sect community that adjudicates diseases as a manifestation of the devil whose only solution is exorcising. Sect members trust that God with the healing of their bodies and regard seeking treatment as unholy. Apart from laying hands, they administer holy water and feed their sick children with *ruredzo* (a wild plant)." In this way, the church doctrine has brain-washed some of its followers to the extent that they have suffered. In some communities, there is a problem of malnutrition that affects some JMAC children. This requires nutritional supplements. However, JMAC children are not only born in polygamous families that may have food shortages, but are usually forbidden from getting the Welfare Food Scheme vitamin drops that are administered at health institutions in Zimbabwe. Thus, non-access to such supplements on religious grounds violates children's rights to overcome malnourishment.

There is also a general observation that some JMAC children are denied their right to education. Some of the children are barred from attending school and utilising their full potential in education on the basis social and economic reasons. The girl child is a special

case given that where financial resources are scarce in the family with both boys and girls it is more often than not the latter that is dropped out of school. This is a spin-off from the patriarchal and cultural influence that regards the girl-child as less important as compared to the boy-child. Thus, educating a girl is equated to a direct loss to the family. In fact, the girl child is targeted for early marriage through child-pledging that is translated to a better economically viable transaction for the family. In light of JMAC practice of polygamy, normally most of these girl children are married to people who are far much older than them. Women are vulnerable in trying to defend their rights be it in the house, workplace or church. The Director of the Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association (ZWLA), Mrs Emilia Muchawa, noted that girls were forcibly being married to older men in churches and other traditional set ups (Gova 2011:D 12). She said this was the ultimate inhuman treatment of young women that is not being put under serious consideration. She lamented thus, “Just imagine a 13-year-old girl getting married to a 50-year-old man. It is not even easy to imagine that happening, but it is taking place” (Gova 2011:D12). The researchers got from one informant that some members would target a young ‘suitor’ whom they manipulate by mysterious ways referred to as *kushandira jana*. The motive behind is to lure the unsuspecting target into submission to the marriage offer. Over the years, the researchers have observed the polygamous marriages prevalent in JMAC prey on the girl children. Thus, the church violates children’s rights in as far as they want to maintain their practice of polygamy that uses children as pones in a game.

In JMAC children are forbidden to attend education to the level of self-actualisation. The majority of girl children are forced into early marriages with elderly church members. Such a practice increases the risks of children in contracting Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) including HIV and AIDS. Research has shown that there are increased risks of contracting HIV and AIDS in polygamous relations than those that are monogamous (Jackson 2002). Furthermore, given that JMAC members are not allowed to visit the hospital, this suggests that its members cannot access Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT), not to mention the Anti-Retroviral-Therapy (ART) when they were found HIV positive. On another note, JMAC members infected by TB just as those infected by HIV and AIDS would only rely on the church administered healing water than medical therapy. Thus, the “Let’s Talk about TB and HIV” campaign flighted through the media and sponsored by National AIDS Council, The Global Fund, USAID, UKAID and PSI would be meaningless to JMAC members. Yet it is said that many people infected with HIV will develop TB during their lifetime and that TB is harder to detect in HIV positive people. Furthermore, is said that TB progresses faster in HIV

infected people. The general advice is: “Get tested early for TB and HIV. Get treated early”. In JMAC, there is no medical treatment that is acceptable and this is a violation of the members’ rights. There is yet another paradox in JMAC that was noted through the research. Some well-up and educated members of the church clandestinely get medical treatment at the hospital. In fact, some insiders revealed that in Masvingo city, one prominent member got all of his children delivered at the hospital and send them for all medical check-ups including immunisation. This shows that religion is such a double-edged sword. The majority of the women and children are negatively affected by church policy exercised by those in the echelons of power. Some insiders said such offenders to the church principle will just confess (*kureurura*) before church elders. However, it is not certain whether *all* the ‘culprits’ confessed. In this light perhaps the Marxist injunction that ‘religion is the opium of the people’ could be repeated as ‘religion is the opium of the poor and defenceless’ forming the majority of membership of the church.

6.0 Turning the Tide?: Some Theological Reflections

The beliefs and practices of JMAC attract some theological reflections. In general the Church of God must provide a prophetic voice that liberates people. However, the study established that the type of religious education availed to children in JMAC ‘blinkers’ the minors. By and large, the study notes that JMAC negatively impacts on children who are made to either ‘march or die’. One phenomenon that muffles the voices of children is the liturgical songs. Yet women and children take pride in singing. But a closer look at this role shows that women and children are diverted from focusing on what matters. The melodies of the music tend to act as a lullaby to some adherents to the extent that they do not realise the ‘dark side’ of some of their church teachings and practices. A theological reflection invites the question: Is it not possible for JMAC to translate songs praising Jerusalem, for instance, to *orthopraxis* not merely *orthodoxy* that has violently stultified the rights of children? To what extent are such songs propelling a marching to death, marching to life, marching to school, marching to hospital?

In theological terms, God is said to be always on the side of the poor, defenceless and oppressed. This refers to those who are on the ‘underside of history’ (Gutierrez 1972). Children and women are the main victims of some of the church beliefs and practices. Definitely, the powerless and defenceless should not be led to the ‘slaughter’. It is useful to engage other theologies that fight the oppressive elements of religion. Banana (1996)

suggests that combat theology could be a useful tool for resisting repression. This resonates with a theology of struggle that belongs to the genre of liberation theology. The theology of struggle is vital in this context because it seeks to transform individual lives as well as society. It adopts a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' such that theology of struggle is not seen only an interpretation of the struggle but also struggle for interpretation (Fernandez 2000:201). Yet another relevant theology for the study is child theology. This builds up on the example of Jesus Christ when he took a child into his hands in order to teach about matters of the kingdom (Luke 18). The church must serve the interests of its members and not to perpetrate some conservative teachings that violate the rights of innocent children. It is the responsibility of all stakeholders, *inter alia*, various government institutions and non-governmental organisations to fight a war with a justified cause. Therefore, religion can either liberate or oppress.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

The study concludes that the numerical strength of AICs needs to be tapped positively to prevent unwarranted violation of children's educational rights and loss of life on the basis of religious beliefs. It is dangerous to take the interface between religion and education for granted. JMAC oppresses children's rights by forbidding them to attend education, conventional health facilities and forcing them to get married early. This turns the children to be parcelled out like chattels and they cannot self-actualise their dreams. Thus, this issue has implications for sustainable development especially when religion that should bring liberation becomes a culprit of oppression. The researchers recommend that the government must enforce stiff penalties to adults who refuse medical treatment and education and promote early marriages to minors on religious grounds. The government must also ensure that all religious movements are registered under an officially approved association to enhance measures of making churches and individual members accountable for their actions. Finally, no one should be allowed to be above the law to the extent of sacrificing life at the altar of conservative religious beliefs and practices that violate human rights.

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