A Diet of Wives as the Lifestyle of the Vapostori Sects: The Polygamy Debate in the Face of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe

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Abstract
Christianity takes a lion’s share in the Zimbabwean religious market particularly when compared to other non-indigenous religions like Islam, Buddhism and Judaism. What is interesting is that, even though Christianity is a religion that has been associated with equality and freedoms of every human soul, the status of women in relation to polygamy in the apostolic sects have topped the debate. Critics of apostolic sects have argued that, women in these apostolic churches are there to serve the sexual appetite of men hence ‘the apostolic diet of wives’. This article seeks to interrogate the practice of polygamy in the Johane Marange sect in the light of HIV and AIDS. The purpose of this research is to show that until and unless there is a paradigm shift on the beliefs, teachings and practices of apostolic sects in terms of a deeper HIV and AIDS awareness programmes targeting these sects, the Zimbabwean women will continue to suffer.

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Introduction: A Short History of the Johane Marange and Johane Masowe Sects

There are many apostolic sects in Zimbabwe, but the two apostolic sects that command sizable following are the: Johane Marange and Johane Masowe sects. It is important to note that, any debate or talk of spirituality in Zimbabwe will not be complete, if one generally ignores the place that apostolic sects occupy in the Zimbabwean spiritual space. In terms of percentage, 75% of the population of the mainstream Christianity and the apostolic sects account for approximately 20% of the population. The percentage figure of the apostolic sects in the Zimbabwean spiritual market then translates to more than two and half million followers. In 1999, the Johane Marange church alone was estimated to be around one million affiliates in Zimbabwe, with thousands more in countries further north; making it the second or third largest denomination in Zimbabwe (Allan Anderson 2001, 116). If the Johane Marange sect has approximately more than one million followers, this will imply that the combined number of people who subscribe to the apostolic sects will be much higher. What is interesting is that, the exact figure of members belonging to these apostolic sects cannot be established with certainty as no official count has ever been done. In fact most of these sects use a loose method for assessing their membership. Counting is usually done during the Passover feast where, for example, after receiving Holy Communion, each member confirms his or her attendance by throwing a stone in the provided container. Yet such methods of counting are not helpful in establishing the reliable number of people in that Church. However, one cannot deny that, the Johane Marange sect is now found in southern, central and east Africa and Europe, something that confirms its growth.

The Johane Marange sect is named after its founder. Johane was born in 1912 in the Marange tribal area and his father and his mother were all from royal families. As reported in the Apostolic Book called *Umboo Utsva hwavaPostori* (The New Revelation of the
Apostles) which is revered by the Vapostori as a canonical addition to the Bible; Johane received his call to ministry in 1932 (Daneel 1971, 319). The Umboo Utsva hwavaPostori have records of visions (Chapter 1 to 11) and dreams (Chapter 12) showing Johane Marange’s direct calling from God, in much the same way as the Biblical prophets of old. Chapters 13 to 26 deal exclusively with the personal experiences of Johane Marange particularly his movements in the reserve areas of then Southern Rhodesia like: performing healing miracles, preaching, spiritual exorcisms, speaking with tongues and walking on fire (Daneel 1971, 329). The initial growth of the Johane Marange sect is believed to have first taken place within the inner and extended family circles. As the news of the new Church spread in Zimbabwe, people started coming from all over the Marange area and then it became spiritual force to reckon with when compared to mainline Churches like the: Catholic, Methodist, Salvation Army and Lutheran Churches. Some critics argue that, the healing miracles by Johane became a powerful spiritual force of attraction such that, all new members who came for healing sessions were automatically converted. There is much mention about the role of the Holy Spirit in Johane Marange’s ministry; something that is important in fully understanding the theology and pneumatology of most of the apostolic movements. The pneumatological ideology is important in understanding the role that Holy Spirit is purported to play in sanctioning second, third and fourth polygamous marriages. The Johane Marange sect has continued to grow besides the schisms that took place after Johane Marange’s death.

The General Apostolic Regulations
The ‘Apostles’/Vapostori are known to set themselves apart from their neighbours in many ways and they have strict obligations on the Sabbath days and members are not allowed to work on that day. They follow the Jewish sabbatical laws (Ex 20:8, 20:13, 22:15, 34: 21, 35: 3, Lev 26: 2, Dt 5:12, Ne 10:31, Isa 56: 2, 58:13-14 and Jer 17:27). They don’t handle money on Saturdays and they don’t allow their members
to cook on the Sabbath day. All alcoholic beverages and cigarettes are prohibited as they are considered as defiling to the body. The Johane Marange and Johane Masowe sects don’t own properties like church buildings arguing that God had not approved of Church buildings such that they assemble on open spaces or under big trees. It is common to find members of the apostolic sects donning their church uniforms for the Sabbath service. Women usually put a white veil tied to the head whereas men wear white tunics, each with an embroidered decoration including a badge indicating the person’s office in the Church. White or plain is favoured colour for all their clothing as shown in the picture below on the Johane Marange.

The Johane Marange Sect Members at a Passover Meeting

The white colour is their symbolism for purity, light and cleanliness and their members do not put on anything that is black in colour.

Members of the Johane Marange sect are head shaved as a sign of religious commitment to God and the group. Head shaving is also a visible symbol of separation from the world. Demons and evil spirits are believed to reside in hair, so head shaving is another way of getting rid of such spirits. Edmund Leach (1967, 77) offers an
interesting observation that can be made on apostolics about head shaving that, ‘it generally represents discipline, self-control, and the repression of worldly desires’. Men are encouraged to have long beards which are interpreted as a sign of the moral authority of the Jewish patriarchs. All the members of the sect go barefooted at a Church service, typified by taking their shoes off as done by Moses (Exodus 3: 5) which is a sign that the ground where they do their services is holy. Angelology or believe in angels is prominent in these sects and every member of their Churches is regarded as having an angel that protects him or her all the time. Besides all these beliefs and regulations, the Johane Marange and Johane Masowe sects are known for clashes with the government as a result of their radical views on healthy, marriage, education and the mainstream society. Even though they have strict rules based on their religious beliefs and purity, polygamy has never been regarded as defiling to the body making critics argue that ‘the apostolic marital lifestyle is all about the diet of wives’. Of notable interest in their practice of polygamy are the reports of child marriages, inheritance and lack of tangible programmes on HIV and AIDS. It is important to note that, polygamy is not practiced by all the members of the Johane Marange sect. However, it is a practice that is encouraged in this Church and we cannot also run away from the fact that, African culture also permits it and was commonly practiced amongst the Shona people.

**Shona Culture and Polygamy**

In the traditional Shona custom and philosophy of the family, a man could have as many wives as possible particularly if the man was able to provide for the needs of the family. It is important to note that, polygamy was not an impingement on the women’s rights. Sexual rights of women and children were so central to Shona marriage and men were encouraged to live peacefully with their families. Polygamy was by choice and not forced on people and the majority of men avoided it because it was so challenging to keep the family intact. It had a purpose and meaning and not meant for self-serving sexual
manias. However, polygamy was not without problems just like what happens to all marriages in any given society. Jealousy was the dominant factor among wives which gave rise to irreconcilable hatred and practice of witchcraft amongst wives and family members (Gelfand 1973, 95). Intergroup marriages were encouraged amongst the Shona people hence the proverbial saying “Rooranai VeMatongo- Marry from within the clan”. Blood relatives within the patrilineage were not allowed to marry as it was regarded as incestual and would invite curses from ancestral spirits. In fact they encouraged preferential marriages among clans in the same village.

The philosophy behind polygamy was that, the more wives a man had, the more children he was likely to have particularly the large group of descendants which also had something to do with a large labour force who would work in the fields of the family head (Bourdillon 1976, 49). Polygamy was acceptable, workable and was a great social and economical asset. It is important to note that, in the traditional society, it was not easy to have many wives as possibly thought by early missionaries and explorers. Polygamy was for people with the means or resources particularly kings and senior members of the community. Polygamy could also come as a result of the search for sons particularly if the couple had girls only in their marriage. The other widely practice that resulted in polygamy in the pre-colonial period was kuzvarira, pledging. Jeater (1992, 22) noted the practice of kuzvarira, whereby young girls were pledged to ‘big men’ who were rich in exchange for grain during food shortages. The other factors were a result of the fact that, the first wife was aging or having consistent miscarriages or being unable to sexually satisfy her husband. There were also other factors that led the Shona men to become polygamous like the first wife failing to have children. M F C Bourdillon (1976, 290) rightly observed that, many Shona people were not prepared to go into a monogamous marriage, especially if there was no possibility of first ascertaining that the proposed wife can bear children. Barrenness was negatively regarded amongst the Shona
people and never associated with men because of patriarchy. Isabel Mukonyora (2007, 25) noted that,

Being unable to produce good crops and failing to give birth to children were regarded as signs that a woman was evil. Infertility was a reminder of Earth as *ruware* (a dry rock), incapable of nurturing life and threatening to humanity. Barren and unproductive women were unwelcome.

Barrenness could sadly result in divorce and accusations of witchcraft. Coincidentally as observed by Isabel Mukonyora (1993, 208), women of the Johane Marange movement have been victims of witchcraft accusations and infertility charges. Every marriage was expected to produce fruits in terms of many children as a sign of God’s blessing. Barrenness was taken as a curse from the ancestral spirits and God, which automatically implied a possibility for another woman joining the couple as long as the man deemed so. Usually polygamy could come at the suggestion of the wife’s relatives who feared that the son in law would demand back the dowry paid as ‘Roora or Lobola’. Polygamy could come as a result of an inheritance of the deceased brother’s widow. It was culturally right that at the death of a brother, the surviving brother found himself under the obligation of keeping the deceased’s widow and children if the brother had children. The inherited wife automatically became the second or third wife to the men provided she conceded being inherited. However, inheritance was not forced down the throats of surviving widows amongst the Shona. According to J M Gombe (1993, 84), the widow of the diseased man had the freedom to choose the man she wanted (if she deemed so) from the relatives of her husband. There were mechanisms that protected the widow if she was not interested in being inherited, for example, at the ‘bringing back ceremony’, the women could be allowed to give her eldest son some water to wash his hands or the aunt to the deceased man, as a sign of turning down the offer of being inherited.
On the first coming of missionaries and their evangelization, polygamy was part of their evangelization. The missionaries failed to understand all those dynamics about polygamy but only thought of Africans as having been interested in having a diet of wives, a sign of sexual pride. Missionaries and the colonial settlers created legislations like: Native Marriage Ordinance and the Native Adultery Punishment Ordinance which were meant to reinforce the European norm of teaching monogamy based on Christian principles. Yet the Bible does not specifically condemn the practice of polygamy as shown by the various characters who were polygamous and neither does it recommend polygamy as the ideal form of marriage (Mbiti 1973, 82). The settlers’ legislation made it unacceptable to marry “in twos and threes” and it was illegal to register more than one wife (Mukonyora 2007, 50). At Independence, Zimbabwe adopted the same legislation but under a name, the Native Marriage Act which had one man, one woman policy. But the Zimbabwean government later included the Customary or Traditional Marriage Act which recognises polygamy.

The issues of polygyny, witchcraft and belief in ancestral spirits were matters in which White missionaries were particularly insensitive. Polygamy was attacked, despised and made into a test of churchmanship or commitment to Christ. J S Mbiti (1973, 82) argues that:

Polygamous families or some of their members were denied the sacraments of Baptism or the Holy Eucharist. Some polygamous families had to pay the price of divorce and separation, commanded, directed and sanctioned by the very Church to which they became members.

They thought by making conditionalities to membership, this would bring polygamy to an end as if all Africans men were polygamous. They were just a few African people who were polygamous and interestingly that practice have not abated and polygamous families have not flocked into the missionary Churches
in large numbers as deemed. African Independent Churches continued to grow with their pride in polygamy. Modernization has had a greater impact on how people view the institution of marriage, for example, people now look down upon a man who has two wives as backward, outdated and puts the lives of women and the children to be born at the risk of the present epidemic of HIV and AIDS.

**Bible and Polygamy**

When the Bible was made readily available in the vernacular language; most of the Shona people were now able to interpret it and put some emphases in their own cultural way, for example, accounts of the Old Testament heroes with their numerous wives and concubines against the missionaries’ emphases on monogamy. Allan Anderson (2001, 31) notes that, the translation of the Scriptures was often the first literature to appear in an African language such that great authority was given to the printed word, making Africans be able to distinguish between what the missionaries had said (or hadn’t said) and what the Bible said (or didn’t say). What Africans found in the Bible in relation to their lives became an independent source of authority besides the missionaries. Lovemore Togarasei (2009, 51-64) looked at the politics of the Bible translation into vernacular languages and how missionaries worked to destroy African beliefs through the power of Biblical translation. Besides the challenges, Africans still saw the connection between what was in the Bible and the African cultural beliefs when the Bible was translated. A Hastings (1979, 527) adds that, the African features that were found in the Bible were the features that Africans were quick to discover and proclaim and criticize the missionaries for not being Biblical enough. The Old Testament is the favourite for the Johane Marange apostolic sect as a result of certain practices like polygamy. As much as I don’t like the practice of polygamy, what is interesting is that, the God of the Bible emerges initially as the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses (whose one of the wives is believed to have been an African), David, Solomon
and other patriarchs most of whom were polygamists. We don’t find them being cautioned by God, all of them belong to the champions of faith and the Bible does not treat marriage in terms of either monogamy or polygamy (Mbiti, 1979, 190). However, in my view monogamous marriages give an ideal expression of human relations as well as God’s relationship with people.

As a result of the authority that was given to the vernacular Bible (excluding the Johane Masowe who does not use the Bible) in all aspects of life, the Vapostori interpreted it in a literal and fundamentalist way. Johane Marange as the founder of this sect is believed to have married 13 wives with some of them younger than his first born Abel. The total number of his children is not known. The apostolic sect leaders have been emphasizing on polygamy which resonates well with the African and biblical concept of polygamous marriage. It is not easy to clearly state which types of marriage interpretations are most valid, African Traditional concept of polygamy or the Jewish concept of polygamy as portrayed in the Old Testament. Can we talk of a single interpretation of polygamy in the apostolic Churches or merging of the two, Jewish and Shona cultures of polygamy?

**Johane Marange and Polygamy**

The Vapostori queried the White missionaries’ perspective of marriage and their ignorance of Bible particularly the fact that they were polygamous men like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David and Solomon who were regarded as pillars of faith. The case of Solomon who had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 kings 11:3). For the apostolics is a clear sign of a man of faith, who pleased God even though he had a ‘diet of wives’ implying that God had no problems with that. The wealth that these patriarchs had is interpreted as resulting from polygamy and hardworking. The apostles’ men try to have as many wives as possible and the wives engage in various
income generating skills like making furniture, forming containers from sheets of tin, knitting various types of garments, tending small plots of vegetables and weaving baskets enabling them to support themselves and others. It is a fact that, many AICs allow polygamy because they see it as an economical and social asset as well as one of the fundamental features of African life and also in tune with the Biblical (OT) way of life. Some AICs leaders felt that, the missionaries concealed the truth about polygamy in the Bible for certain reasons or that the missionaries had misunderstood the Biblical truth about polygamy. MW Murphree (1971, 178) and G D Oosthuizen (1968, 178-180) also noted that, the Marange apostles just like other sects have an observable range of alternative life styles that they offer particularly their persistence to maintain polygamy as a symbol of continual dissatisfaction with mission Christianity and Western Christianity.

Marriage within the apostolic group is encouraged and they are totally against any marriages with non-members of the Church. It is one of the principles of the Vapostori, not to marry a pagan or for an apostolic to marry his daughter to a pagan (literally taken as a person of the devil by virtue of not belonging to apostolic sect). Critics argue that, the marriage teachings in the Johane Marange Church disadvantage women who form the biggest percentage of this Church as compared to men. If women are not allowed to marry men from outside the Church, this again easily exposes them to polygamy as their teachings allow marriage within the Church where there are few men. That gap of women to men ratio is filled by their encouragement of polygamy (Dillon-Mallone 1978, 95). Premarital relations are strictly forbidden and sexual relations between couples are only allowed after permission from the parents of woman and when proper religious stages in this sect are followed. Premarital purity is guarded by encouraging girls to remain virgins. Virginity is associated with purity (something highly regarded amongst the Shona people) and it is common that, all girls in the Johane Marange and Johane Masowe Churches are expected to pass a ceremonial
virginity examination. The adolescent girls of the sect are taken into the bush by some of the older women and examined to see if they are still virgins (Murphree 1969, 103). The inspection is usually done at the Passover (Paseka-Musangano Mukuru) celebrations. Virgins in the congregation are usually selected days before the celebration and their duty is to prepare the unleavened bread and fruit juice ‘wine’ (Bourdillon 1976, 301). Those who are found to be virgins are congratulated and those who are not are usually jeered at by the crowd and scolded by their parents. In fact each girl found to be virgin is given an undamaged tree leaf as token of the fact while those found to have lost their virginity are given leaves with holes punched in them. It is common to hear about stories of girls who are found to be non-virgins being influenced into polygamous marriages with older men (already with wives) in the Church whereas virgins are encouraged to become head-wives with men who had not been married before.

What is interesting is that, this practice has been going on for some time and women are still the vital adepts/clientele of the Johane Marange sect by bearing many children as well as being bearers of a belief system in which they are not leaders (Jules-Rosette 1987, 127). The apostolic perspective of women as supposed to be followers and not equal partners was shown at one of the meetings held in Buhera between the apostolic sects and the Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association (ZWLA). The meeting was meant to encourage the society about laws that protect women and children’s rights, for example, the legal provisions of the Child Guardianship and Custody Act, the Domestic Violence Act. Madzibaba Pauro of the Johane Marange sect was quoted saying: “As community and church leaders from the Vapositori sect, we do not accept the gospel of equality at all. How can we (men) be equal with women? It is there in the Bible that women will always be under men and must never make decisions”. (The Zimbabwean). Women in the apostolic sects are regarded as minors on leadership positions and the running of the Church. The
perspective on women has negatively impacted the status of the girl-child. Children from the members of the Johane Marange particularly girls do not go to school. The last statistics from the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture district office reveal that out of the 10,000 girls who enrolled in Form One in the Marange district where the Johane Marange sect is dominant, only about a third completed Form Four in 2003; with the highest probability that, those who dropped out became wives” said a senior district education officer who did not want to be named (Kachere Phyllis). The Johane Marange and Johane Masowe sects (including other apostolic sects) are known for marrying off ‘young girls’ under the guise of religion. Most girls stop schooling in July when the sect celebrates Passover, a religious festivity during which marriage ceremonies take place. The reason why it is rampant is that most of these men hide behind prophecies. Leslie Moyo (The Standard 2010) observed that, “most of the men usually abuse their position as prophets to hand-pick girls for the elderly men in the church who already have other wives”. It is painful to note that, early marriages remain a barrier to education as young girls are forced to drop out of school. This stands in direct conflict with the objectives of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that promotes gender equality and empowers women so as to combat HIV and Aids and other diseases.

David Bishau (2010, 25) noted that, the Johane Marange just like Johane Masowe belongs to the world of people who neither write nor read many books, often because the majority are illiterate and are rarely understood when they express themselves. High school training is the preserve of the select few. The high rate of illiteracy has impacted negatively on their theological articulation of educational and health issues particularly in relation to women. It is painful to realise that, any form of family planning is passionately prohibited as devilish. Women who engage in any form of family planning are likened to murderers and put in the same rank as those who engage in
abortions. It is such a mentality that heavily exposes women to HIV and AIDS. Philemon Mutumwa, a Johane Marange sect member said:

Family planning is against God’s law. We don’t use family planning. When a woman has many children, she’ll be naturally pouring out what would be inside her. There are human souls inside her spirit, so if she has only three children when she was destined to have 10, it means she has actually sinned against the other seven souls. Children who would have been prevented from coming into the world might have added value to society as journalists, soldiers and nurses (Newsday 2 February 2011).

It is not surprising that as a result of many wives, some men in the sect might not be aware of the number of children they have; fulfilling critics’ claim that ‘a diet of wives is the only concern of Vapostori. Kristeva (1986, 140) found in her critique of the Judaic tradition, the bearing of the children as in fact the guarantee of permanence to the community, something motivating polygamy in the sect. In the Johane Marange sect, if a man has two, three or seven wives and the children; all become members of the sect. It is important to note that, the growth of the Johane Marange and Johane Masowe sects is as a result of their teachings on marriage and avoidance of family planning methods. Unfortunately that growth has reported painful cases where apostolic families arrange the marriage of their under-aged daughters to members of the sect.

Bennetta Jules-Rosette (1975, 202) correctly noted that, the relationship between custom and change is not always correlative. The modern changes to various cultures cannot be under-estimated but what is clear is that, polygamy in apostolic sects like the Johane Marange have continued to be an issue to the Zimbabwean community at large and the government in particular. The Johane Marange sect still takes polygamy with some sense of pride but impacting badly on women in general and the girl child in particular. Even though there are awareness programmes that are run in the country, apostolic sects are secretive and exclusivistic in nature, such
that it is sometimes very difficult to help victims of polygamy particularly young girls. The awareness programmes will possibly not have impact considering that when President Mugabe attended the Johane Marange apostolic Passover feast, for whatever political, cultural or religious reasons best known to him; Mugabe donned at the feast in apostolic garbs and was quoted saying: “Our Constitution allows polygamy. We will not force people into monogamous marriages. It’s there even in the Bible -Solomon was not only given wealth but many wives” (Tongai Mudiwa, 2010).

President Mugabe’s support of polygamy did not take into the consideration the loud outcries raised by the media, children and women activists against apostolic sects’ involvement in ‘child marriages’. The child marriages have resulted in small girls as old as 8 years being married as fifth or sixth wives to old men. Zimbabwe Girl
Child Network Worldwide chief executive officer, Betty Makoni, once confirmed an urgent appeal on behalf of a 13 year old girl, a member of the Johane Marange Church in Rural Murehwa was rescued from a 50 year old man with more than 5 wives. In addition to that, the sister of this girl who was 12 years old had also been married off to a 57 year old man who already had 6 wives. She observed that, some of these young girls are forced to marry men who are older than their fathers. In another case, a 14 year old girl, Matipedza Svosve, of Marange district in Manicaland was married off to a 67 year old man. Although her marriage is not legally registered, it is customarily recognised, and the teenager is expected to live as a housewife and soon bear children. When Matipedza Svosve was asked about her feelings, she said that “I can’t go against the will of the Church elders and leave my husband in order to attend school. Besides, where would I go if I leave? My parents will not welcome me because of the apostolic belief” (Phyllis Kachere). The most unfortunate thing is that according to Church doctrine, she could not override her father’s decision to marry her off, let alone report to police. As for many villagers in the area and members of the Johane Marange sect around the country, there is nothing peculiar about Matipedza’s case. It has become normal for old men to marry girls young enough to be their great-grandchildren. Cases of child abuse go unreported and offenders’ are seldomly prosecuted (Roselyne Sachiti, 2011). These are types of marriages which I would classify as ‘forced marriages’ by other people or certain circumstances as in the case of apostolic sects. Some would rather prefer to call them ‘early marriages’. What is painful is that, the young girl did not want it and was not ready for it voluntarily, psychologically, sociologically, emotionally, ethically and religiously. Despite these challenges, most infamous marriages in the Johane Marange and Masowe sects are still arranged between adult men and under-age girls mostly against the consent of the girls. Such women and girls who are forced into such unions are religiously made to feel guilty and irreligious to opt out or run away. Child marriage is a violation of human rights and such marriages are a
disgrace to our society and Christianity as they infringe on the rights of women as well as expose young girls to HIV and AIDS. The future generation of the nation is put at risk. The task of teaching leaders and followers of these sects is huge as the majority of polygamous men in apostolic sects at one time married an underage girl. It is common to find that the Johane Marange men defending the sect’s policies of marrying off young girls arguing that, it has been their tradition for years and there is nothing wrong with the practice. According to the Girl Child Network, an estimated 8 000 girls in Zimbabwe have been forced into early marriages or were held as sex slaves in 2008 (Roselyne Sachiti, 2011).

It is such marriages that leave women as ‘part of the diet of sexually hyperbole’ men who are only interested in sexually self-serving and not concerned about the future of young girls in their sects. This is despite the fact that, it is criminal under the recently enacted Domestic Violence Act as well as the Section 94 of the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act to pledge a female person or to marry off an under-age girl. The age of sexual consent in Zimbabwe is 16 years, yet it is difficult to stop these marriages, as members of the Johane Marange and Masowe sects are complicit and secretive. The Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe-Africa (UDA-CIZA), a coalition of 160 apostolic sects in Zimbabwe, have tried to raise awareness among apostolic sect leaders on the dangers of early marriages. But in most cases, it faces serious resistance because of such radical beliefs. In some cases, the police has been the biggest let down in early forced child marriages as they are accused of having continued to turn a blind eye to these crimes, largely because police view these cases as not serious and because some of the sect leaders are highly networked with the authorities as explained by the UDA-CIZA programme manager, Edson Tsvakai (Phyllis Kachere). Caroline Nyamayemombe, gender officer at the United Nations Population and Development Agency (UNFPA) country office in Harare, says studies have confirmed that teenage
pregnancy is on the increase in Zimbabwe and a leading cause of maternal mortality. She said that in apostolic sects:

Young girls are married off to men often older than their own fathers. This scenario has significantly contributed to pregnancy complications in teenage mothers. These harmful cultural and religious practices are rampant in some districts in the country. Single adolescent girls who become pregnant are more likely to drop out of school, thus compromising their future earning capacity and becoming more likely to end in poverty. Maternal mortality and mortality from HIV/AIDS related causes become a reality for these girls and often lead or exacerbate poverty, most of which are not allowed to visit medical institutions. A pregnant teenager faces the risk of immature uterine muscles and mucous membranes that pose serious danger and a high risk of a ruptured uterus in cases of prolonged labour”. Apart from religious beliefs from these sects, poverty is one of the key reasons for early marriages, as UNFPA data have shown that about 80 percent of pregnant teenagers come from poor families who take marriage as a source of protection.

Girls are usually encouraged to be married early. Women and children are seen as attached to some male contractor by marriage or parentage. As already mentioned marriage is strictly between members of the Johane Marange sect and any marriage outside that setting is radically sanctioned against or censored. There have been cases of parents who forcefully take back their daughters from their husbands for the only reason that they don’t belong to the Johane Marange sect particularly if the son-in-law is not prepared to convert to the sect. However, men are allowed to marry women who don’t belong to the sect provided the woman is prepared to become a member of the sect. Marriage is only pure as long as it is strictly within and by the members of the sect.

To show their exclusiveness of other people, the Johane Marange sect has home-grown huts or maternity “hospital” in
makeshift tents and shacks of sacks, plastic or canvas for their patients especially women waiting to give birth and they claim such facilities will also cater for the spiritual needs of their followers. According to the 52 year old Mbuya Netsai Mohwa (The Herald, 10 August 2010):

The popularity of the “hospital” had risen dramatically over the last five years and we’ve attended to members of our sect even from as far as Angola, Namibia and Zambia. The maternal service is strictly for Johane Marange members, but of late other people have come here seeking help. Our services here are for free and we don’t use any modern medication. We strictly use holy water as per our religious belief. When the women come here, we also consult the Holy Spirit which guides us concerning a particular patient’s problems. Because of some protracted problems foreseen by the Holy Spirit, the women can be here for up to five months until they deliver. When it’s imperative for a pregnant woman to stay here, she and her husband have to bring a tent, food, blankets and clothes. The husband can also stay, or he can visit. I gave birth to all my 10 children at home as per our church regulations which stipulate that we should not attend antenatal clinic and use only holy water....While hospitals use medicines to cure, we keep our faith in holy water. We’re against the idea of forcing people to take medication or vaccination against our religious belief.

It is common to get reports of women who die from complicated pregnancies at such makeshift hospitals of the sect. Most of the women (giving birth there are not documented) are not given birth records to help them enrol their children for schooling and medication in conventional hospitals. Some of the victims are mostly young girls who were married off early above and fell pregnant early as noted. It is feared that hundreds if not thousands of girls die from birth complications as it is not easy to track how many underage girls die from such complications as such cases are mostly not reported to responsible authorities. In fact, victims of complicated births in the Johane Marange Church as well as other apostolic sects are quickly
buried soon after death. The doctrines of the sect as already mentioned are against anyone seeking treatment at a hospital. Recently released research by Harare-based non-governmental organisation Women and Law Southern Africa (WLSA) has shown that young girls in early marriages are likely to suffer birth complications, some of them resulting in death. The Herald (22 January 2010) reported a painful death of a Johane Marange apostolic young woman in Buhera who died from such complications. However, it is the manner in which the Buhera death occurred that left villagers angry and they said:

We just heard that this young woman of the Johane Marange sect had her first pregnancy with twins and the mid-wives failed to take out the children from the mother’s uterus on time resulting in three deaths. The midwives tried to save the children by pulling them out, but it was too late. What they only managed to do was to quickly bury them without reporting the case to the police.

The WLSA study also revealed that those girls are prone to cervical cancer, suffer psychological trauma and encounter a host of problems, such as failing to deal with the social pressures that come with being a wife in a polygamous union.

**HIV and AIDS-The Way Forward**
What is interesting is that, just like any other religious Christian grouping in Zimbabwe, women constitute the majority of members. Yet with this polygamy debate, women are at the receiving end as polyandry is prohibited. Polygyny has painful effects on women and children in the face of HIV and AIDS. Yet the Johane Marange services are characterised by Bible reading and their sermons focus much on encouraging women to be submissive to their husbands. Critics argue that, the Johane Marange sect dogma has little theology save great deal of moralistic teachings that are not helpful to women particularly in relation to polygamy that involves marrying off of young girls. This
study is not meant to play feminist games but is motivated by the experience that young girls undergo when forced into marriages that are grounded on the religious beliefs of these sects. HIV and AIDS is killing people and it has not spared apostolic sects with their negative attitude towards modern family planning methods. As already noted, the apostolic sects’ highest rate of illiteracy, poverty and marginalization make women the hardest hit group from HIV and AIDS. Current statistical evidence shows that HIV and AIDS hits hardest the poor, the marginalized, the exploited individuals and the list equipped. If men in the apostolic sects are list equipped on HIV and AIDS, it then implies that women are the worst equipped as a result of the level of patriarchy in these sects and how sexuality issues are regarded. Women in the apostolic sects are marginalised as well as the list equipped in dealing with HIV and AIDS issues and the demands of its care. Musa Dube (2008, 101) noted that, women and young girls are among the poorest in the world because of their gendered identities. It is clear that with this anti-modern healthy methods attitude in the apostolic sects, women will continue to be the victims of polygamy, forced marriages and HIV and AIDS. Weinreich and Benn (2004, 40-45) rightly noted that, even though women face high infection rates, they carry the heavy burden of providing care. With these challenges for the apostolic women, the way forward is for the government, civic organisations and various ministries to put their heads together and socially engage apostolic sects in relation to their beliefs on polygamy, child marriages and family planning. Awareness campaigns must involve these apostolic sects on the consequences of such beliefs on millennium development goals, women’s rights and children’s rights. The awareness must help clarify that, by targeting apostolic sects it’s not a fight against their belief system as done in the past by missionaries and colonial administrators but it’s a matter of saving peoples’ lives and preparing the development of the nation.
Conclusion
The study has shown that, the extent to which women are denied more authority through leadership roles in the Johane Marange and other apostolic sects is a clear pointer to the degree to which women cannot work for the uplifting of the girl child. Every Church in Zimbabwe has women as the main clients which urgently calls for their empowerment and help do away with cases of forced child marriages. The Bible as well as religion must not be used as an aberration tool against women. Times have changed to the tune that, it is no longer acceptable to view women as second-class citizens; a fact that must dawn on all apostolic sects in Zimbabwe. Women including young girls have rights that must be respected and must also meet the same Savior and the Church giving hope to them than making them feel that their presence in the Church is for them to get married and having many children. However, it is my belief that, society must accept couples who are already in polygamy marriages but must work hard to assist those in polygamous marriage to have successful marriages that realise the importance of engaging in modern family methods so as to fight against HIV and AIDS epidemic. This approach will help not to compound those people who have found themselves to be born in polygamous marriages. If the mainstream society, government and civic institutions are to heal society; they cannot afford to eliminate apostolic sects who are also objects of God’s love in their HIV and AIDS awareness programmes.

Notes
1“Kurova Guva Ceremony”-is a ritual performed immediately after death as the the spirit of the deceased is considered ‘unpredictable and dangerous’. This is the ritual called kurova guva or magadziro or kuchenura. Kurova guva often takes place between six months and two years after burial. The purpose of kurova guva is to bring back the spirit of the deceased from the grave to his hut to be in the midst of his descendants. The ritual is also associated with the final dissolution of the deceased’s estate, the inheritance of widows and the installation of the new family head who carries the name of the deceased. Because of the perceived importance of the ritual of kurova guva, the living
descendants of the deceased do their best to facilitate the spirit’s homecoming. There are many steps taken before and after the actual kurova guva (Gundani 1994, 124).

ii The term “early marriage” refers to both formal marriages and informal unions in which a girl lives with a partner married before age of 18, UNICEF, Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, 2005. The Forum on Marriage and Rights of Women and Girls as well as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2003) defines early marriage, also known as child marriage, as “any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically, and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing” (Otoo-Oyortey and Sonita Obi, 2003, 8)

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