

**Elizabeth Musodzi: The Catholic Woman Agent of the Gospel  
In Harare**

**ABSTRACT**

The role played by Catholic African Women agents of the gospel in the propagation of the faith in Zimbabwe has not been highlighted in Catholic historiography in Zimbabwe. This article focuses on *Mai* Musodzi of St Peters Mbare in Harare, a laywoman, who contributed a lot to the propagation of the Catholic faith in Harare. The article intends to critically investigate the role played by Elizabeth Musodzi at every in the development and expansion of Catholicism in Salisbury by unravelling problems and challenges those women in the likes of Elizabeth Musodzi faced in a male dominated Church and a male dominated environment. Thirdly the article intends to find out the role that Elizabeth Musodzi played in the religious, and socio-political spheres. Finally the article will try to investigate if she played any decisive role in conscientising the Catholic Church about racism and segregation that was rampant at the time.

## **COLONIAL AUTHORITIES AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN SALISBURY**

Harare was founded in 1890 by the member of the Pioneer Column who were in the employment of the British South African Company; a company in which Cecil John Rhodes, Rochfort Maguire, Frank Thomson and Alfred Beit and Jameson had shares in. Right from the start Salisbury/Harare was a male dominated city. Lawrence Vambe a journalist in the 1940's says, "Originally Harare was not intended for respectably married people, but for that type of 'native' who kept his wife and kids some where in the reserve of his birth. Hence the first section of Harare, *MaOld Brikisi* consisted only of single-roomed houses and it was hoped that this would prevent the native from having his wife and rows of piccaninnies in the area. There are reasons why the Rhodesian authorities pursued a policy that denied women entry into the then Salisbury. As the study by Jeater has shown missionaries, traditional leaders and colonial authorities feared that town life would have a negative influence on African women (Jeater, 1993:122). As Noted by K Jochelson, it was widely believed that women were the cause of venereal diseases, adultery, the collapse of marriage and the end of morality (Jochelson, 1995:323-332). Elizabeth Schmidt has also noted that because the Rhodesian authorities did not have statutory instruments to deal with African women many African girls and women flocked to the cities whenever there was a misunderstanding in the family. Older man, chiefs and colonial officials colluded together to control women's mobility to the cities. In 1927

several chiefs and headman called upon the colonial authorities to enact a pass system for any female who entered either mining towns, farms or any city. Ordinance 16 of 1901 was to be amended so that women who sought employment in the city would be required to obtain permits from senior administrative officials. The restrictions became more severe in the 1930s as they became applicable even to women who were legally married. A permit could be granted only if the guardian of the female agreed to let her go (Schmidt, 1996:120). Until 1945 Government pursued a policy that was anti women city migration. In spite of the bottleneck laws it was not long before the black woman forced herself where she was not wanted (Vambe, 1976:185).

Most of the women as noted by Vambe were single people either looking for husbands or opportunities to work and so take care of themselves outside the constricting tribal environment in rural areas. The women found out that they were not wanted by the whites and therefore could not get employment. As a result they turned to prostitution. Harare proved to be a fertile ground (Vambe, 1976:185-186). Between the first and Second World War prostitution seem to have enjoyed some official recognition. They acquired rooms as easily as legitimately employed male workers. In some cases, they had more hold on local officials and location police than had the ordinary masculine police. Women were in demand in the city because of the high masculine urban population. But not all women had come to the city for prostitution. Some had come with their husbands and others had followed their parents.

Our reporter of the time Lawrence Vambe says, “In the eyes of most Rhodesians the African woman was either a unite, ignorant breeding machine or a prostitute. There was nobody in between” (Vambe, 1976: 185). As from the 1930’s African women begun to distinguish themselves as people capable of proving to their masters that they were not useless creatures. Most of the women became nunnies, cooks and waiters. A young African woman Magurimbo from Highfields acquired a Bachelor of Arts degree in South Africa the First Rhodesian woman to have done so in a male dominated world where their contributions where limited to taking care of the family only (Vambe, 1976:185).

### **THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ELIZABETH MUSODZI**

It is this growth of the city and its problems that we have to situate the rise of Mrs Musodzi Ayema or Elizabeth Musodzi or Mrs Frank Ayema Musodzi (literally tears) was born in the Gomba valley near the present day Mazoe Dam about 25 Kilometers from Harare. The whole valley was under the jurisdiction of Chief Hwata of the Shava Mufakose totem. Leonard Chabuka my main informant says:

When the first Shona uprisings (*Chimurenga*) against the white colonial settlers began, Musodzi was eleven years old. This means that she was born around 1885 or 1886. Her Father was called Chibhaga the son of Mufumira who was a renowned traditional diviner and healer. Chibhaga and his wife Mazviwana of the Mazarura Rwizi of Chitungwiza had three children. These were Rinda, which means 'Grave', Musodzi and Nyakapfu. Musodzi means 'tears'. Her name would later describe the suffering that she went through after the death of her parents. Musodzi was related to Charwe one of the greatest spirit mediums of Nehanda ever to execute a struggle that brought the settler regime to its knees. Charwe was her father's sister (aunt). At the age of four or five she could have heard about the Pioneer Column (Chabuka, 2004).

The whites in a gold rush came to Rhodesia in 1890 hoping to fill their bags with gold and go home. But when they realized that there were not many goldmines in the country they turned out to grab land from the indigenous people. This was done with the blessing of the British South African Company that was in a way compensating them for the role they had played in the occupation of the country. Mazoe Valley, the most fertile part of the country was not spared. Chief Hwata and other neighbouring chiefs and spirit mediums with the lead of Nehanda waged one of the most remembered war in the history of Zimbabwe (Ranger, 1967:392). In the end they were defeated but the spirit of rebellion remained. It was during this brutal war that Musodzi's parents and some of her relatives died. For the Settlers dynamited the caves where hordes of families had taken refuge. Crops and houses were set aflame to starve the insurgence and bring the rebellion to an end. Cattle, goats, sheep and pigs were confiscated and became spoils of the victors. As a result of this war Musodzi was left an orphan.

Rinda Musodzi's elder sister was pregnant by a certain Muganhiri whose parents were possibly killed during the war. Muganhiri was of the same tribe with Rinda. This was certainly regarded as incest. Muganhiri was supposed to pay an ox to the chief. The ox was a symbol of the discontinuity of the tribal relationship that existed between the two. The two eventually got married. Muganhiri since he was also an orphan he was struggling to find money to buy the ox. Rinda gave birth to two sons Shamhuyenhanzva and Chiweshe. Rinda did not leave for long she got ill and died. Musodzi sought refuge with Chinhamhora who was married to her paternal aunt. Chief Chinhamhora was living here in highlands. Since Chinhamora was in good books with the missionaries it was arranged that Musodzi would go to school at Chishawasha as a day scholar. But the death of Rinda did cut short her schooling at Chishawasha mission. She was to look after the children left behind by her sister (Chabuka, 2004).

There is no doubt that Musodzi had been exposed to Catholicism during her school days at Chishawasha mission. Finding it difficult to look after the kids left behind Musodzi now baptized as Elizabeth made contact with the missionaries so that they could assist her in looking after the kids. The missionaries provided her with clothing, food and other bodily needs. Whilst it was good that the missionaries were assisting her they had imparted on her survival skills (Chabuka, 2004).

The Zambezi Mission Record an official journal of the Jesuits reports that Chishawasha girls school which was opened in 1898 and run by the Dominican sisters taught the girls house cleaning, cooking, dressmaking, gardening, and tree pruning. House management was part of the training (ZMR, 1914-1917:234-236). With these skills Musodzi was able to look after the kids left behind by Rinda. Chabuka my main informant says:

It was in her contact with the Missionaries that she met a man called Frank Kashimbo Ayema the son of King Lewanika of Zambia. He was a Bemba. Lewanika had given Kashimbo to a British colonel Hartley who was responsible for the building of the railway line from Livingston to the Copper belt. His task was to explain to the junior chiefs about the proposed railway line. The consent of chiefs was vital if the Rhodesian authorities were to be successful in their developmental programmes. When Musodzi met Kashimbo to be referred to later as Frank Ayema the railway line had been completed and Frank Ayema had joined the British South African Police where he rose to the rank of a sergeant. Colonel Hartley had told Frank that he should assist orphans. Frank took interest in Musodzi and eventually the two married. Musodzi's lobola was given to Kazingizi the young brother of Musodzi's Father. After their customary marriage the two did build a home at Chizhanje near Mabvuku turn off on your way to Mutare. It was there at Chizhanje that in 1909 Harupindi baptized as Lucy was born. In 1911 Musodzi bore Luke. This is the time that Musodzi came to St Peters. St Peters was opened in 1911 having started in 1910. Those who came for church service used to gather under a tree in St. Peters grounds. In 1913 Musodzi bore Funwell Moses Ayema. At this time Mr Frank Ayema was now a sergeant and an instructor of the British South African Police based at Cleveland Shooting Camp. Musodzi in a year that my informant does not remember she bore some twins but the other died a premature death whilst the other Francis Joseph Ayema survived. In 1917 Elizabeth Musodzi wedded with her husband Frank Kashimbo

Ayema. The wedding took place at St Peters. In 1923 she moved from St. Peters Area to the Kopje. She was of course following her husband. At the kopje were the stores of the British South African police. The stores were in between Coventry and Bishop Gaul. Musodzi did not as yet abandon her home at Chizhanje where she had her cattle. At times missionaries visited her with the intention of getting assistance in recruiting people to the Catholic faith. She worked well with the missionaries and the people from Hwata, Chishawasha, Seke and Chkwaka, giving them the help they required. In a way she was giving back what she had received (Chabuka, 2004).

## **ELIZABETH MUSODZI AFRICAN AGENT OF THE GOSPEL**

St. Peters became a stronghold of Catholicism. With Father Hesse Musodzi began the *Chita ChaMaria hosi yedenga* (The sodality of Mary Queen of Heaven) known at that time as the *Prima Pri Maria*. Maria Yotamu a contemporary of Musodzi has this to say,

The sodality was begun by a number of women. Amongst them were Amai (Mother) Musodzi, Sabhina Maponga, Bertha Chalie, Regina Solo, Maria Steamer, Maria Meki,

Mrs Fernando, and Blandina Onismo. According to Maria Yotamu most of these women were illiterate. At that time Catholics were not allowed to read the bible. The Church was lead by the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth Musodzi and the above women approached the Church Fathers with intention of starting the sodality. They requested the Fathers to write to the Pope. The request was granted and Elizabeth Musodzi was made the leader of the first women's movement in the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe. The reason that propelled Musodzi to begin this movement was that other churches had their own sodalities. After all women wanted to be on their own without being led by men all the time. The big number of people in the sodality was of women. The sodality did allow men and it still allows them to participate (Yotamu, 2004).

Marja Hinfelaar's study on the origins of Catholic and Methodists sodalities has successfully argued that the Catholic sodality of Mary the Queen of Heaven which began in the 1940s was based on the Sodality of Our Lady movement in Chishawasha Hinfelaar, 2001:55). What this implies is that a lot of women who had received mission education took the movement with them to wherever they went. Most of the above women who were pioneers of the Chita Chamariya Hosi Yedenga had done their schooling at Chishawasha mission. My informants tell me that women with the help of Father Adof Hess initiated the movement. Fr. Raymond Kapito thinks that the movement was associated with Fr. Alois Nyanhete (Kapito, 2004). This is collaborated by the official handbook of the movement which states the role played by Fr. Nyanhete in the origins of the movement (Hinfelaar, 2001:55). There is no documentary evidence that clearly states that Fr. Nyanhete was the originator of the movement. What is possible is that he could have been a catalyst in the development and expansion of the movement.

Jesuit archives are silent on this issue and so are diocesan archives. Given this complexity the above theory namely that the Chishawasha club transformed the sodality movement into the Mary Queen of heaven (*Chita Chamariya Hosiyedenga*). All they possibly needed was to formalize their movement through the structures of the church. That sodalities originated in the middle ages almost at the same time with religious confraternities (Hillerbrand, 1987:18).

Maria Yotamu further testifies that she saw and worked with Elizabeth Musodzi whom she describes as a huge woman who wore a white short dress and a blue cap. She first saw Musodzi at Monte Casino when Father Simon Turo was ordained a priest (Yotamu, 2004). Simon Turo and Father Isdore Chikowore were the first black Zimbabweans to become Catholic Diocesan priests. Maria Yotamu says that Musodzi worked well with her vice Sabhina Maponga. On the works and activities of Musodzi Otilia Madzimure testifies that she saw Mai Musodzi when she was still at school. She says that Elizabeth Musodzi used to assist those who were suffering, those lacking, those with no accommodation and those who were visitors to the city and with no where to put for the night (Madzimure, 2004). When questioned on what exactly they did when they met she said that they discussed various issues and we were taught how to pray and how to meditate. Otilia further testifies that many women from the St. Peters Church used to go into the beer halls to drink. There men would molest them. Fr. Adolf Hess suggested that each woman should accompany her husband to their beer hall if both of them took beer. This did not work because the prostitutes would simply come to one's husband and take

the beer from him and begin drinking there and then. Conflicts would start that would result in fighting. From this experience *Mai* Musodzi made it a rule that no one was supposed to enter a Beer Hall. She encouraged women to get involved in clubs and meetings that were held at the recreation hall now known as *Amai* Musodzi Hall in honour of her contributions and achievements (Madzimore, 2004).

Otilia was a witness to the industriousness of Elizabeth Musodzi. She says:

Musodzi used the area around Stodart Hall in Mbare as her rice fields. She used donkeys to plough her fields. If one visited her home one would see bags of maize, rice, grounds and stakes of firewood that she would sell to the people to supplement her income (Madzimore, 2004).

On some of the her responsibilities Leonard Chabuka says:

When Musodzi was made leader of the *Chita chaMaria* (Mary Queen of Heaven) her husband Frank became the leader of *Moyo Musande waYesu* (Sacred Heart of Jesus sodality) another sodality movement at St. Peters Mbare. This sodality was for all regardless of one's status in the church. Musodzi exhibited her talent in leadership by forming the African Women's Club which specialized in lectures that addressed the plight of African women in the city. They met in *Amai* Musodzi Hall. The women were from all denominations. In 1921 Musodzi bore her lastborn Raphael. In 1925 her daughter Lucy got

married to Chabuka. She bore Zenzile who was baptized as Josphine. In 1927 Musodzi was given a cottage in Mbare. She continued to cultivate her fields in Mbare, Mabvuku and Cleveland Dam area. Leonard Chabuka says that the missionaries taught her all things. She left Chizhanje in the 1930's. She came to stay in Mbare. In 1939 Musodzi joined hands with A British woman by the name Barbara Tredgold in forming the Red Cross. The formation of the Red Cross was due to the call made by Britain on her colonies to prepare them selves for the Second World War. With the outbreak of the Second World War many nurses left Andrew Fleming Hospital to nurse British who had been injured in the war. Given this state of affairs Red Cross nurses filled the void that had been created by the departure of the nurses to the front. Among the Red Cross nurses who went to serve at Andrew Fleming Hospital was Lucy the daughter of Musodzi, Tecla Ayema, Elise Nelton, Rebecca Leonard, Hilda Chaoma, Anna Chasasa Alouise Mapundu and many others (Chabuka, 2004).

### **AN ACTIVIST FOR THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN THE CITY**

When the Second World War was over the Rhodesian African Rifles Troops were received at Rufaro Stadium. Elizabeth Musodzi was invited to receive the troops. She was given the task of distributing food to the soldiers as they were demobilized to go to their places of origin. Musodzi became a member of the Native Advisory Board, which fought for the rights of the Africans in the city. She together with other women fought the bylaws that were restrictive to women. Most of the laws were a duplication of South African Laws. Musodzi fought for the rights of women immigrants in the city. She fought for the right of the divorced and the widows. She wanted these women to own their own

houses. In 1947 when King George the sixth came to Rhodesia she together with Mrs Dumbujena were invited to Government House where she was presented with a medal that made her a distinguished member of the British Empire. In his unpublished Doctor of Philosophy thesis Tsuneyo Yoshukuni says that Elizabeth Musodzi exemplified the respectable African woman, standing in a position directly to women like a Nyirenda. Yoshikuni goes on to say that prior to her death in 1952 at the age of about sixty, she was representative of women on the committee of the African Welfare society for many years and was on the Harare advisory Board at one time. She was founder and chairman of the African woman's club and the leader of the Red Cross society and many other community activities. Musodzi played an important role in the reforming of the African home life and improving living conditions, especially relative to women in Harare Township (Chabuka, 2004).

In 1951 She won a contract of clearing the place where Lake Chivero was to be built. She did the Job successfully. She sold all the firewood that she got from the trees that were cut down there (Chabuka, 2004).

## **CONCLUSION**

Elizabeth Musodzi was diabetic. In 1952 her health deteriorated. On July 21 1952 Amai Elizabeth Musodzi Frank Ayema died. Lawrence Vambe the editor of the African weekly devoted a long obituary to Musodzi. The African Weekly said, “ The death of Elizabeth Maria Frank on July 21, removed from our midst a very colourful personality and robbed the Harare African people of one who was very much like a mother in more than one sense.” She was a big part of Harare. Her crowning moment came at her funeral that was attended by several hundred residents of Harare and Municipal officials as well as Red Cross representatives. She died, as she would have wished fortified with all the rites of the Catholic Church. With a crown (*Chita Chamaria Hosi Yedenga*) Mary Queen of Heaven Sodality crown on her head Musodzi was laid to rest ( *African Weekl*, 1952.

In an article, One Great Mother Remembered, published on 8 April 2005 by The Herald Joyce Jenje Makwenda Says:

Musodzi was not only a mother to her children but to many. Affectionately known as Amai Musodzi, Musodzi was an unsung hero! She is a woman who represents most aspects of our society: Social, economic, politics, women’s emancipation and our history as Zimbabweans. Zimbabwe feels proud to be associated with such a figure, as most of us have benefited from her foresight. A woman who achieved the best in life despite the circumstances. Today as we celebrate Mothers day we remember you MAI MUSODZI, (The Herald, 2005: E8)

Indeed this is the legacy of Amai Musodzi. She was indeed a product of the missionaries. They taught her not only catechism but also how to be industrious. She became a woman for others, the very core of Christian teaching. Politically, socially, and economically Musodzi awakened women to their responsibilities thereby earning them the honour the patriarchal history has denied them. Dominican Missionaries did not simply domesticate African women but imparted on them skills that would enable them to survive in a fast changing world where African values were under threat from western modernity. She was an orphan who dedicated her life to helping others. If the epitome of Christian teaching is to be a person for others then Musodzi just became that. If Christianity is about the memory of the Christian people then Musodzi ranks amongst the African saints such as. She was an unofficial Catholic agent of the Gospel in Harare as she was responsible for the welfare not only of the people in the Catholic Church, but also of Harare at large. Catholic Historiography has not captured any of her works. There is no Church built in her honour not even a building except the Government Recreation Hall in Mbare. When Pope John Paul II came to Zimbabwe he was presented with a brief History of the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe in which the whole history is of a patriarchal Character. Is this not a gender disparity? It is indeed my contention that there should be a counter balance to the patriarchal history of the Catholic Church in Africa. Such a counterbalance can be achieved by highlighting the question of gender disparity in our history textbooks. Elizabeth Musodzi died an uncrowned Queen of Harare if not a saint. She did not need official recognition of her status by the church. Her people in Mbare accorded her the status that she deserved.

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