



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

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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on women's leadership in African Indigenous Spiritualities (AISs). It argues that the issue of women's leadership in AISs has not been fully explored and/or critically examined. At face value, women

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are understood as holding little or no leadership roles in AISs. Scholarship is almost unanimous on this assertion. Many have sought to show how women are side-lined in leadership positions in AISs or to grapple with how women can be given some more active leadership roles in AISs (Chitakure, 2016, 2017; Coetzee, 2001; Nyanhongo, 2011; Lugira, 2009, Oduyoye, 1987). In this chapter, we depart from the traditional line of argument and advance one that maintains that women are actively involved in leadership in AISs, both visibly and invisibly. For purposes of clarity on this, we explore cases where women's leadership gains traction, especially where male leadership either falters or is inadequate. We acknowledge that in some cases, men and women come together to prop up women's leadership, this is an area that has not been given attention in previous literature on the subject. We make some occasional references to some African communities in sub-Saharan Africa, but our focus is on the Ndaue people of south eastern Zimbabwe. The rationale for this approach lies in the understanding that AISs are not monolithic but they exhibit a cacophony of variants. We justify our choice of the Ndaue people of south eastern Zimbabwe in a section below. We begin by engaging with the concept of 'women's leadership' so as to clarify the conceptual context of the chapter. We will then look at the women's leadership roles in the socio-economic, religio-cultural, and political spheres among the indigenous Ndaue people. The chapter concludes by proffering some recommendations on how to mobilize indigenous women's leadership qualities in an endeavor to realize the goal of equitable representation of female and male leaders in institutions and organizations in the contemporary Zimbabwean society.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The chapter is informed by a Hudson-Weems (2004) propounded Africana womanist perspective. It is a specific theory within the broader theory of Afro-centrism. Afro-centrism or Afro-centricity establishes a frame of reference wherein ideas and events are studied from the standpoint of Africans as key players, not victims (Asante, 1991: 172). The perspective contends that most, if not all of what Euro-feminists view and desire do not apply to Africana women. It posits that Africana women and Euro-feminists have different agendas owing to their divergent histories and culture and so, African women should not be swayed by the

wishes and aspirations of women of other races. In this regard, Euro-feminists deplore African women's household duties contending that they limit and confine women to less important chores. For them, the household sphere disempowers women and puts them at the mercy of men. Men are, therefore, the enemy of women. On the contrary, the Africana womanist perspective argues that women instead gain control, respect, and honor by undertaking their household responsibilities frowned at by Euro-feminists. For them, the African man and woman are never enemies, but complementary opposites. African women embody humility and modesty that make them appear passive, but could present themselves as alternative powerful public leaders when need arises, often with the support of both men and women. Africana womanism argues that main-line feminist theories do not adequately explain the image and position of especially African women, one which needs to be done in the context of African people's history and culture (Hudson-Weems, 1993, 2004).

## METHODOLOGY

The chapter is both a theoretical and an empirical qualitative phenomenological study for we seek to access the meaning of women's lived experiences of the dynamics of leadership in the Ndaun indigenous belief system. Data were collected through interviews with purposively selected informants and accessing available secondary sources on the Ndaun people of Zimbabwe. We purposefully sampled our participants on the basis of our knowledge of the population to provide the best information to address the purpose of the research (Rakotsoane, 2012: 55). In this regard, we determined our sample sizes on the basis of theoretical saturation, that is, the point when new data no longer brought additional insights to the research question (Mack et al., 2005). We seek to reflect critically on how African Indigenous Spirituality informs women's leadership in the socio-economic, religio-cultural, and the political lives of indigenous African societies. We use the Ndaun people of south eastern Zimbabwe for the reason that they are a people who have endured various hegemonies while maintaining their own local traditions. As MacGonagle (2007: 107) notes, "despite facing exclusion and incorporation during periods of intense domination, the Ndaun have demonstrated an ability to alter their identities, both temporarily and permanently, in creative ways." We contend that in this whole process, women have played leading roles.

We are aware that the Ndaus are independent of the Shona, but until 2013 they have been regarded as part of the Shona to the extent that they share a 70% language similarity with the four Shona broad categories of Karanga, Zezuru, Manyika, and Korekore (Sithole, 2017). When the term ‘Shona’ is used in this chapter, it will, therefore, be referring to all those who speak the Shona dialects in Zimbabwe including the Ndaus by then.

## RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

In this chapter we use African Indigenous Spirituality (AIS) as opposed to African Indigenous Religions (AIRs). We concur with Nyathi (2015) who observes that the term African Indigenous Religion does not capture the spiritual aspect inherent in African Indigenous Spirituality. Our conviction is that the latter allows us more room to explore and articulate women’s leadership dynamics in the African indigenous belief system than the former. ‘Religion’ is a western term that usually implies an organized and structured set of beliefs and practices to be distinguished from a non-religious sphere of life (Nyathi, 2015; Young, 2013: 28). The term is, “meant to imply an institutional framework within which specific theological doctrines and practices are advocated and pursued usually among a community of like-minded believers” (Johnston, 1994: 4). Thus, the term ‘religion’ creates an impression that the phenomenon is something apart from humans. It is problematic to employ the term when referring to indigenous people in general and African indigenous people in particular. This is so because indigenous people do not make a clear cut distinction between the religious and the non-religious realms. We agree with Johnston (1994: 4), who sees spirituality, on the other hand, as transcending the normal parameters of organized religion, suggesting a less bounded and at times, more far reaching scope of human involvement. This resonates with de Gruchy & Chirongoma’s (2008: 295) observation that African spirituality is an “all pervasive reality which serves to interpret society and give wholeness to the individual’s life and community.” Pervasiveness, as the first and foremost tenet of African spirituality, is what we deem necessary for the interpretation and conceptualization of women’s leadership in the African indigenous belief system.

## CONCEPT OF WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

The concept 'women's leadership' needs to be explained because it is one that can be used in different contexts to mean different things. We concur with Poltera (2019) who posits that, "concepts such as 'women leadership' can be taken for granted ... and applied in ways that are intuitively plausible at first glance, but on closer inspection require more conceptual analysis and care." Women's leadership in African contexts is an umbrella concept which denotes individual and collective leadership typically enacted and experienced by African women in African countries. Poltera (2019) argues that the concept of women's leadership, particularly in the African context is complex and open to contestation. Across African contexts, there are multifarious racial, socio-cultural, ethnic, political, and historical norms which shape power relations and inform the ways in which women can and do lead in formal and informal ways (Amadiume, 1987, 1988). It is, therefore, imperative to understand that not all women leaders are women in positions of political power or traditional leadership roles (Gasa, 2007 cited by Poltera, 2019). In a majority of cases, women influence the direction that their local community life takes even without direct political or traditional leadership powers. One of the criticisms of attempts to explore women's leadership in African context is a tendency to overlook the role that men play in promoting women's leadership, directly or indirectly. There is a need to localize leadership theories bearing in mind that the African context is not monolithic, but is characterized by complexity and diversity that impact on women's leadership in various ways. It is important to bear in mind that African cultures and contexts are distinct from western cultures and contexts that often tend to inform mainstream leadership theories. What this means is that insights from mainstream leadership theories cannot be generalized to African contexts.

## THE NDAU OF SOUTH EASTERN ZIMBABWE

The Ndaus live in the Eastern parts of Zimbabwe, specifically in the Chimanimani and Chipinge Districts of Manicaland Province, sprawling into the central parts of Mozambique (Dube, 2017). The Chipinge area comprises seven Ndaus chiefdoms, namely Garahwa, Gwenzi, Mahenye, Mapungwana, Mupungu, Musikavanhu, and Mutema while the Chimanimani area is home to five Ndaus chiefdoms that include Chikukwa,

Mutambara, Muusha, Ndima, and Ngorima (Sithole, 2017). This chapter focuses on four chiefdoms, two in Chipinge, under chiefs Mapungwana and Musikavanhu, and two in Chimanimani, under chiefs Muusha and Ngorima. These areas were chosen on the basis of the authors' familiarity with the places which enabled them to get informant consent without hassles.

The name 'Ndau' means not just a place, but a sacred geographical territory entwined with the Ndau people's sacred history. In Ndau indigenous spirituality, the land symbolizes belonging, connectedness, and continuity. It is for this reason that for the Ndau, land is priceless; it offers them an identity, a livelihood, and it is sacred because it forms a close and enduring bond between the living and the dead. To this end, the Ndau believe that they have a sacred duty to protect and work responsibly on the land and bequeath it to future generations in good shape. Needless to say, the land among the Ndau is the domain of the women where they lead as farmers and caretakers of the crucial natural resource. Ndau women also immensely contribute to the survival of Ndau indigenous spirituality through their link to the land. In acknowledging the pivotal role played by Ndau women, we make reference to their leadership during the two crucial phases in the history of the Ndau. The first phase is the Gaza-Nguni overrule that stretched from the 1830s to 1889, beginning with Soshangane and ending with his grandson, Ngungunyana. This harsh reality was to continue into the period of formal colonization under the British that spanned from 1890 to 1980.

The second phase is that of the Ndau encounter with the American Board Mission (ABM) and the South Africa General Mission (SAGM) in Chipinge and Chimanimani respectively stretching from the early 1890s (Dube, 2017). The two phases threatened to overrun Ndau spirituality through a protracted onslaught on its culture. Ndau women played a more crucial role than their male counterparts in negotiation, reproduction, and survival of the Ndau culture. In the first phase, they influenced the language and culture of the Gaza-Nguni through transmitting the same to their children in marriages with the Gaza-Nguni elite at a time men learned the language and culture of their rulers (MacGonagle, 2007: 96). As a result, a single Gaza-Nguni culture never emerged among the Ndau. In fact, there were more cross-cultural exchanges throughout this period courtesy of huge contributions by Ndau women. The second phase saw the Ndau contending once again with the SAGM and ABM missionary activities that operated within the broader context

of colonialism, bent on ushering in a total collapse of the indigenous religio-cultural and socio-economic life of the Ndaus in Chimanimani and Chipinge and present them as sufferers of an identity crisis. Taringana and Nyambara (2018: 14) aver that, “the penetration of Christianity into the Ndaus community engendered various forms of social stratification.” There were bitter confrontations between a class of the Ndaus clergy and Ndaus Christian converts, commonly known as *makorwa* (converts) on one hand and the traditionalists on the other. The former advocated the advance of western religion and culture while the latter defended the indigenous religion and way of life. The traditionalist did not have access to the opportunities presented by the missionaries within the context of colonialism. The majority of traditionalist Ndaus men in Chimanimani and Chipinge resorted to migrant labor as they went to work in the mines and on farms in South Africa. Women remained behind taking care of families and once again became the vanguards of the indigenous spirituality. Tevera and Zinyama (2002) state that, “almost 25% of adult Zimbabweans’ parents or grandparents had worked in South Africa at some point in their lives.” A male person was regarded as a man ready to marry after having emigrated to South Africa to acquire some personal wealth which would make it possible for him to pay *lobola/roora* (bride price) and to support his family. Migration to South Africa became a rite of passage for most boys and young men then. Bourdillon (1987: 53) asserts that:

The influence of women in the rural areas has probably increased through the frequent absence of their husbands, who periodically leave home to seek wage employment, but it is probable that women always had more say in Shona society than was formally admitted. A man who publicly asserts the prerogative of men to make decisions and to control the economy, may in private regularly consult his wife on matters of importance and frequently defer to her judgement.

Although many Ndaus have converted to Christianity, they have not relinquished their connection with Ndaus indigenous spirituality to the extent that there are fluid boundaries between the two worldviews operating in the Ndaus communities. Thus, the mission created a dual society which embodies both the western/Christian and indigenous ways of life (Taringana & Nyambara, 2018). One of the landmarks in the history of the Ndaus in Zimbabwe is the recognition of the Ndaus language, and by extension culture in the new constitution of Zimbabwe adopted in 2013.

The Ndaus had wanted this separation for a long time. For example, they had for long lamented the imposition of a language on them, especially through the school system where Ndaus children were expected to learn some Shona dialects at the expense of their own Ndaus dialect then. When the Ndaus make distinctions between themselves and others, they often turn to language to define the wider Ndaus identity (MacGonagle, 2007: 17). This is so because language is a carrier of culture. For the Ndaus, therefore, it was dehumanizing to have a language imposed on them. We attribute this pivotal historical milestone to the gallant Ndaus women who have fought with tenacity as they baby-sat the Ndaus culture through painful historical phases of conquest and overrule.

### NDAU WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP ON THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC SPHERE

Women in the Ndaus society play a crucial role in ensuring a working society. They are the hub of the education of the children as they transmit the social, cultural, and moral values of the society to the children. They owe this quality to the foremothers of the Ndaus society. The reconstruction of the Ndaus cultural identity can never be complete without some consideration of the (leadership) role of women in the Ndaus cultural encounter with the Gaza-Nguni overrule that lasted about seventy years from the 1820s to 1889 (Sithole, 2017). Ndaus women played a major role in perpetuating the Ndaus culture. Their presence as wives and mothers among the Nguni elite served as a transmission route of various aspects of Ndaus cultural identity to children of the next generation. Thus, their contributions were most notable when marriage alliances or arrangements provided women with the opportunity to produce and reproduce the regional political order. MacGonagle (2007) posits that this social reality reveals one method the Ndaus relied on to maintain continuity of cultural traits amid political overrule. Ndaus women raised their children within a certain cultural and linguistic framework that shaped identity formation. This is a very important role in traditional leadership. Taiwo (2010: 229) corroborates that, "in traditional African society, the survival of the family depended very much on the woman." She plays a key role in, "the education and the teaching of children social, ethical and moral values which are part of the cultural standards for evaluating proper societal behaviour."



Ndau women also tend to assert their leadership in Ndau society through their expertise in the practice of indigenous health, especially indigenous maternal healthcare where women are the majority. Through their link with Mother Nature, women have a strong connection with their natural environment which acquaints them with a mastery of indigenous medicinal herbs and other medicinal paraphernalia that render an indispensable service to the community. Ndau indigenous women are essentially the key holders of traditional food and medicinal practice. The women health practitioners among the Ndau are highly respected and their advice is taken dearly. MacGonagle (2007: 97, 99) espouses that, “in southeast Africa today, Ndau healers continue to enjoy a reputation as the most powerful practitioners in the region.” She goes on to say that women tend, “to assert their power overtly in Ndau society as influential healers and spirit mediums.” They are leaders in the indigenous health delivery system who assume an integral role in the healthcare provision. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2004) recognized the services that indigenous maternal health providers render for enhancing maternal and infant health at community level.

Economically, women are the engine of the Ndau society. Since time immemorial, the Ndau are a people sustained by an agricultural economy. Women lead; they are in the forefront as farmers in Ndau rural communities. They take pride in productive hard work in order to lead decent livelihoods. Their indigenous spirituality inspires a work ethic that promotes sustainable use of natural resources for sustainable livelihoods. It also regulates their interaction with the natural resources, especially the wetlands. The EMA (2015) defines wetlands as, “areas of land that are flooded with water, either seasonal or permanently.” These wetlands are grouped into three types, namely inland wetlands, coastal wetlands and man-made wetlands. Inland wetlands include marshes, ponds, lakes, fans, rivers, floodplains, and swamps. Coastal wetlands comprise mangrove, salt-water marshes, estuaries, lagoons, and coral reefs. Man-made wetlands include fishponds, salt pans, and rice paddies.” In this chapter, we focus on the inland wetlands because Zimbabwe is a landlocked country.

Wetlands are called *matoro* in Ndau. The wetlands are sacred spaces since they provide habitats to aquatic life that is associated with the spirits. For example, some pools in wetlands are the abode of *njuzu* (mermaid or water spirit) and some big snakes like the python. They are the guardians of the wetlands on behalf of the spirit world. Wetlands are the domains of women. Women prepare and preside over rituals that are intended to

preserve these wetlands. Ndaу women approach such places with caution and strict observance of the taboos that allow proper utilization and management of these wetlands. There is a neat synergy with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (UN SDG) number 6 that calls for the need to protect wetlands and rivers. It can be noted that the Ndaу women had for long taken a lead in this trajectory and their indigenous knowledge can be mobilized for a sound contribution to the achievement of SDG 6.

A proper use of wetlands can avert hunger and starvation in times of droughts or just serve as a source of supplementary foods for rural households. For example, the wetlands around Rambachena, Utido, and Murimbira pools in Chief Mapungwana, Bonyongwe village along Musirizwi River, are a source of livelihoods for the local Ndaу community. The same can be said about those in the Dzingire village in Chimanimani, commonly known as the Dherudhe area, as well as those in the Machongwe area, both under Chief Muusha, and those around the Hlabiso and Muchadziya areas, under Chief Ngorima. The surplus from their harvest is ferried to urban markets around the country. The Ndaу women hold that if proper conduct is observed through respecting taboos and prohibitions, the wetlands provide rich supplementary foods (Machowi, 2019). The Ndaу women cultivate yam, sweet potatoes, banana, sugarcane (grass crop), and a variety of vegetable crops that help to improve household nutrition. These types of crops also help to improve soil and water quality and prevention of soil erosion. Planting of most crops is not done by anyone anyhow, but women know members among themselves *vane nyara yendimo* (the hand of bumper harvest) (Mhlanga, 2020). These are people believed to be endowed with the gift of the spiritual world that assures good yields. As such, they are the ones who are in charge of planting most of the crop varieties mentioned above as food crops in general in line with the indigenous knowledge of the Ndaу.

Agricultural activities on the wetlands in Chipinge and Chimanimani have also impacted on the livelihoods of Zimbabweans around the country as evidenced by the national outcry that followed Cyclone Idai's devastation of the two areas in question in 2019. Their wetlands are also a source of fish and other small aquatic animals that can improve nutrition especially in dry seasons only if people take what they need to survive and spare the rest for future needs. The UN SDG number 2 emphasizes the same as it calls for the mobilization of efforts that can end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable

agriculture. The Ndau partnership ethic is also applied to wild fruits and other edibles in the forest where women are the main forest food gatherers. In all these activities, men make a very awkward presence in the least occasions that they feature. But this does not mean that men do not participate in the agricultural activities on the wetlands. They provide complementary services when they are called to do so by their female counterparts. For example, the gathering, collection of organic manure, and erection of fences around the fields are men's allotted tasks. They also help with harvesting.

Ndau women in their local communities have also initiated self-help communal projects in their backyards. A good example is the road-runner chicken and goat projects organized and run by women themselves. They employ Ndau indigenous knowledge systems that increase poultry and goat production. For example, members unanimously select members of the group *vane nyara yebuku nembudzi* ('those with a hand for chickens and goats') or *gwasha rebuku nembudzi* (a spiritually endowed gift that enhances chicken and goat production) to lead the respective projects for obvious reasons of maximizing production. They would sell mature batches of their chickens and/or goats and share the proceeds for household use or when need arises (Mhlanga, 2020). Their self-organization capacity informed by an indigenous spirituality contributes to an improved social, economic, and political life of the community. Similar to what Masoga & Shokane found in the Ga-Sekororo community in Limpopo in South Africa (Poltera, 2019: 5), the Ndau women's "self-organisation contributes to building cultures of participatory decision-making in contexts where formal structures of power and influence have done little to improve lives."

The ensuing section illustrates that the leadership of Ndau women has a socio-economic basis derived from the importance accorded to women as pillars of households. They determine the social status of the community since they are largely the ones who produce the material wealth as mothers and farmers. The Ndau women provide the balance that ensures the resilience of the community even in the worst of economic hardship. As Hudson-Weems (2004: 79) notes, "societal stability depends largely on family stability and the stability of families is determined by the conditions in the home; the woman's place." What this means is that Ndau women initiatives and creativity on the socio-economic front sustain Ndau communities in an incredible way.

## NDAU WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP ON THE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL SPHERES

Schoffeleers makes an analysis that forms the rationale for treating the religious aspect as an integral component of the political. Schoffeleers (1978: 6) argues that, "...territorial cults are by nature political since they are the religious representation of what are basically and primarily territorial and political groups, and because the boundaries between religion and politics are notoriously difficult to demarcate..." Among the Ndau, women play a central role in the territorial shrines of the chiefdoms. Generally, women held and still hold fort in religious and political matters of the Ndau society. A good example is the founding mother of the Musikavanhu chiefdom. Manley (1995: 113) posits that the rain charm which gave rise to the Musikavanhu rain cult was stolen by their founding mother, Chapo from her lover, a Rozvi chief of the Mbire group. The Musikavanhu chiefdom prides in its rainmaking powers which it owes to a woman. There is also a myth that points out that the Mazungunye Chiefdom in Bikita became famous for rainmaking powers because of an alliance by marriage with the powerful eastern rain cult of Musikavanhu in Dondo, on the Mozambican border (Manley, 1995: 111). Pfupajena had married a Ndau woman with rainmaking powers. One elder of the Mazungunye court argued that, "Pfupajena had no rain-making powers, it was his wife who had these powers" (Manley, 1995: 111). There are renowned women mediums of influential territorial spirits today that are petitioned for rains among Ndau chiefdoms.

MacGonagle (2007) concurs when she points out that although men usually held positions of political power among the Ndau, female chiefs were appointed at times. She has it that:

Women in Ndau society tended to assert their power overtly as influential healers and spirit mediums. Empiumbecasane, the mother of Ngungunyana, the last leader of the Gaza-Nguni state, was Ndau. She exerted control over her son's decisions and over the affairs of a village. She was also the head priestess at the shrine where Ngungunyana worshipped the grave of his grandfather, Soshangane. Some of the wives of the ruler lived in distant parts of the region and helped the Gaza-Nguni king to maintain relations over a wide area.

Bourdillon (1987) corroborates that in African societies, women are known to have held very active roles in divining, healing, leading rain petitioning rituals, and seldom occupying offices such as kraal heads, village heads, and sub-chiefs, among others. He cites daughters of Manyika paramount chief who were sometimes appointed as head-women over subject territories. More commonly women could and still can hold significant sway in the government of a chiefdom by becoming a medium to a senior spirit. It has always been possible, although unusual, for a woman to hold a position of authority in Shona communities.

From the above excerpts, we draw some insight that the decisions that often run African societies are reached through a consultative process where emphasis is on participation and contribution, not whether one is a man or a woman. In other words, women in African Indigenous Religions were, and are not silent partners in the affairs of their communities. Generally, women in African societies rule by pulling strings behind the curtains, but when called upon or when circumstances dictated they would rise to the occasion and perform public leadership roles. Bourdillon (1987: 52) avers that:

Traditions concerning the spirits are considered to be in the male domain, and the men of a community normally conduct ceremonies in honour of the spirits. Yet women do interfere when they are not satisfied with the way the men are performing their duties, and occasionally a senior woman may preside over a ceremony when the men appropriately related to the spirit are absent or reluctant to perform the necessary rituals.

Baum (2015) writing from the context of the nineteenth-century colonial Senegambia, also observed that male leadership's failure to contain or repel militarily or ritually the Portuguese and French foreign presence among the southern Diola communities from the mid-nineteenth century prompted the rise of women's religious leadership. Women assumed religious leadership and spoke up in public fora where they wielded authority over entire communities of women and men as they planned strategies of opposition. The women made their claims to direct revelation from Emitai (Supreme Being) and transformed what had been a tradition of male prophetic leaders before the colonial conquest into a predominantly female prophetic tradition throughout the twentieth century. Through the authority of their experience, the women moved beyond protest to become leaders of their communities, for men and women alike. What

we can draw from MacGonagle (2007), Bourdillon (1987), and Baum's (2015) observations is that women in the African indigenous societies provide the checks and balance on men's performance of public leadership roles. This implies that women are custodians of a model of leadership which must be executed appropriately and they closely monitor proceedings with keen interest.

Agricultural rituals provide the platform for the dramatization of the religio-political power dynamics. In the Ndau society, women conduct most agricultural rituals because they are oriented with fertility, the territory of the female gender among the Ndau and in many other African communities. For instance, the rain making, crop pest eradication, and first fruits rituals are the province of women. The threat of termites in a crop field, for example, is eliminated through a ritual performed by an elderly woman of the *Beta* (termite) totem. She brings with her to the affected spot in the field a symbolic bundle of firewood that she drops at the spot. She then leaves for home in silence without looking back nor greeting anyone along the way until she enters the kitchen (*hut*). The next morning the threat would have vanished (Nguwa, 2020).

Baum (2015: 63) tells of a similar ritual among the Diola of the nineteenth-century Senegambia where women and girls were responsible for conjuring away grasshoppers from rice paddies through invoking the all-powerful *Emitai*. The ritual concluded with libations of palm wine at the spirit shrine. Where women had no power to initiate the ritual activity, they would demand that rituals be performed at all the spirit shrines of the community. Ndau women perform the first fruits ritual for any crops before anyone consumes any of the new harvest. Women would place the boiled assortment of the ripen crops under a tree in the field and ritually present it to the spiritual world to herald the onset of the new season of harvest. The ritual is believed to be a show of respect to the spirit world and an acknowledgment and recognition of the protective role of the spirit world over the fields. Failure to perform this ritual results in the withdrawal of this protection, leaving the fields exposed to all forms of threats that include locust plagues (Salani, 2020). Munyai (2007), cited by Msila and Netshitangani (2016: 85), had the same findings among the *Vhavenda* of southern Zimbabwe. He explains that, "the first grains, the marula and other fruits of the New Year among the *Vhavenda* culture cannot be eaten before the *makhadzi* informs them." The *makhadzi* is the father's senior sister, who plays various pivotal roles in the community. Baum (2015: 64) echoes the same where he posits that among the

Diola communities, “women also performed a first fruits ritual, involving small amounts of rice offered at the Ehugna shrine before anyone ate newly harvested rice.”

What this means is that women lead in agricultural rituals that are largely religious in form but having a huge bearing on the political order of the society. In the first historical phase referred to earlier on, some of the wives of Ngungunyana lived in distant parts of the region and helped the Gaza-Nguni king to maintain relations over a wide area. MacGonagle (2007: 101) points out that these “women most likely supervised agricultural production in the royal gardens of outlying areas. Thus, women served symbolically and practically as stewards of the state.” This is what happens in rural Ndaou communities today where men have either chosen to take a supportive role or are away due to employment-induced absence and many other factors. Thus, Msila and Netshitangani (2016) conclude that the nurturing role of women in Africa can bring forth a number of lessons for both women and men in leadership in various organizations today. Important women’s leadership qualities that derive from the mothering role include caring, loving, protecting, providing, and serving. Women in African Indigenous Spirituality demonstrate traditional values of womanhood that can be mobilized to model leadership in today’s institutions and/or organizations.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we do not deny the argument that stresses that women are underrepresented in leadership positions in AISs. We, however, focus on a different line of thought which avows that the seeming underrepresentation in leadership is more apparent than real. If anything, we argue that women are actively involved in leadership in AISs and that they are in innumerable ways ‘the brains’ behind most of the decisions that are made by their male counterparts in the different leadership roles that these men play in AISs. We have also demonstrated that Ndaou women have had various roles underpinned by their Ndaou indigenous spirituality that show them enhancing the livelihoods of their communities. The ability of Ndaou women to multitask, coupled with their strong and creative thinking, make them good leaders who could provide a model for institutional and organizational leadership today. That women can rise to public leadership

roles when the occasion demands show that women's leadership is people-oriented and abhors any exercise of leadership that prioritizes pursuance of personal ego.

In this regard, Ndau women have demonstrated tenacity and endurance as they fought, both overtly and covertly, for the maintenance of their own local traditions. They have demonstrated immense capacity in influencing the livelihoods of people through driving the socio-economic and religio-cultural activities of the Ndau society. They have not executed their roles alone but have often done that with the complementary support of their men who usually play a ceremonial leadership role. Based on the findings presented in this chapter, it is our conviction that it will be futile to envisage the realization of Zimbabwe's Vision 2030 among the Ndau if the pivotal role of Ndau women in economic development, indigenous healthcare, agricultural production, and community leadership is not accorded the vital role it deserves. In the spirit of the UN SDGs' mantra of "leaving no one behind" the rural-based Ndau women's oasis of knowledge and innovation has a high potential of motivating the realization of a number of the SDGs 2030 as has been illuminated above. We find Bourdillon's (1987: 56) observation quite befitting as a concluding remark to this chapter wherein he states that, "In modern Zimbabwe...the subtle traditional influence of women is changing into an open force for progress and change."

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