Theology, Gender Ideology and Masculinity Politics
A Discussion on the Transformation of Masculinities as Envisioned by African Theologians and a Local Pentecostal Church

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ABSTRACT
As a result of the HIV epidemic, masculinities in sub-Saharan Africa have become problematised. There is called for a transformation of masculinities. But what is the vision of such a transformation? This article explores the different visions and strategies proposed by, on the one hand, some African theologians and, on the other hand, a local Pentecostal church. The fundamental difference is that the church seeks to transform masculinity within a patriarchal framework while the theologians envision a transformation of masculinity beyond patriarchy, towards a reality called “gender justice”. The article critically analyses and discusses the different masculinity politics and makes a constructive contribution to the debate by providing an eschatological perspective to the transformation of masculinities.

Keywords: Masculinities; patriarchy; gender justice; HIV and AIDS; African theology; Pentecostal church.

Introduction
The HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa has given rise to a critical interest...
in men and masculinities. This is informed by the understanding of HIV as a gendered epidemic, meaning that power relations between men and women and the social constructions of masculinity and femininity contribute to the epidemic and particularly affect women’s risk for HIV infection. Dominant versions of masculinity in African societies are said to encourage behaviour among men that is problematic in view of HIV. It is even said that ‘without men there would be no AIDS epidemic. Men are involved in almost every case of sexual transmission. … Men determine the path of the disease.’ Hence the transformation of masculinities has been put high on the agenda of NGO’s and activists, as well as academic scholars. In the year 2000, UNAIDS underlined the need for active masculinity politics: ‘Given the urgency of curbing HIV rates … it is important to challenge harmful concepts of masculinity, including the way adult men look on risk and sexuality and how boys are socialized to become men.

Although the need to transform masculinities may be clear, the question arises concerning the direction of this transformation. As Fulata Moyo wonders in the quotation above, what transformed definitions of masculinity are to be developed? As I will show in this article, this question is answered differently by, on the one hand, a number of African theologians and, on the other hand, a local Pentecostal church in Zambia. Ultimately, to tip the scale of my conclusion, the crucial difference is that the church seeks to transform masculinities within a patriarchal framework, with central notions like male responsibility, male headship and self-control, while the theologians envision a transformation of masculinities beyond patriarchy towards gender justice. Though I do not claim that the particular church in my case study is representative of African churches in general, or of African Pentecostal churches in particular, its patriarchal ideology reflects a general pattern among African churches from various traditions. This means that the divergence of the church and the theologians in their visions to transform masculinities is critical, because the latter seek to work with local churches in this transformation project. For an effective collaboration between theologians and churches, both

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2 In the context of this article, I will not explore the concept of masculinity/ies, but just describe it as the social construction(s) of male gender identities and of men’s place in gender relations. For a theoretical account, see R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press 2005).


5 In this paper I focus on these scholars in religion and theology that are members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, and some male scholars that work in a close collaboration with the Circle.

should agree on the direction of this transformation or at least should understand and respect the different approaches. Therefore in this article, I analyse and discuss the two different theological strategies and visions to transform masculinities. I also suggest a theological base for the theologians to evaluate the efforts of churches like NAOG more positively, in spite of the different perceptions.

To be clear, this is not an article on African masculinities as such, but is about African Christian/theological discourses on masculinities. Recognising that masculinities are informed by and embedded in complex social, economic and cultural realities, my scope is limited to theological visions for their transformation. Coming from Western Europe and with the study of world Christianity and the study of religion and gender as my areas of specialisation, I write this article as a critical outsider. Being aware of the historical western hegemony in the production of knowledge about Africa, I do not intend to make a normative evaluation of the African theologians or of the Zambian Pentecostal church. However, I do engage with the work of the theologians in a critical way, as this is part of academic dialogue.

In the article, first I will outline how the theologians envision the transformation of masculinities in the context of HIV. Second, I will present the case of one particular church, Northmead Assembly of God in Lusaka (Zambia), outlining how this church addresses men and promotes an alternative ideal of masculinity. In the third section, I critically discuss the different approaches and make a constructive proposal.

**From Patriarchy to Gender Justice: the Vision of Some African Theologians**

The issue of masculinities and the call for their transformation has only recently appeared in African theological debates. The issue has arisen from the realisation that HIV is a gendered epidemic. African women theologians, organised in the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter: the Circle), have actively addressed issues of gender and HIV and AIDS. They specifically point to the gender inequalities that exist in African cultures, societies and religions that put women at increased risk for HIV infection. Hence they call for the empowerment of women and a transformation of gender relations. However, as it takes two to tango, it was also realised that it takes women and men to transform gender relations. Furthermore, it was realised that a critical analysis and transformation of

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masculinities was required, in order to understand and overcome male behaviour that is critical in light of the HIV epidemic. This resulted in a number of African male theologians being invited to the 2007 continental conference of the Circle, with the quest for “Liberating Masculinities” high on the agenda.\(^8\) Thus scholars like Tinyiko Maluleke, Gerald West, Kā Mana and in particular Ezra Chitando currently work with African women theologians on issues concerning gender, masculinities and HIV and AIDS.\(^9\)

**Patriarchal masculinities as dangerous and deadly**

In their critical account, the theologians point to patriarchy as the root problem of masculinities that are harmful in the context of HIV. According to Kā Mana, masculinities in patriarchal cultures are characterised by power, potency and fertility.\(^10\) Hence he explains why men often are preoccupied with sexuality, engage in risky sexual behaviour and are not likely to use condoms. Also Chitando argues that patriarchy makes sexuality a central domain of masculinity. Additionally he points out that patriarchy limits men’s participation in caring for people living with HIV, and reinforces the stigmatisation of women living with HIV.\(^11\) The most critical issue in the context of the HIV epidemic, consistently underlined by women theologians, is that patriarchy attaches power over women’s bodies and women’s sexuality to men, leaving women vulnerable to gender based violence and to HIV.\(^12\)

The general perception among the theologians under discussion is, in the words of Maluleke, that ‘the myriad challenges brought about by the HIV pandemic cannot be dealt with without dealing with patriarchy and masculinity

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\(^9\) In this article, I refer to these scholars with the broad term ‘African theologians’. I realise that some of them actually are trained in religious studies rather than in theology. However, I observe that these scholars, when writing on HIV and AIDS and on issues of gender and masculinities, often engage in a more normative theological discourse rather than in the descriptive and analytical discourse that is common in religious studies.


issues.' Patriarchy is considered to be one of the social structures underlying the HIV epidemic that facilitate the thriving of HIV. In the tradition of liberation theologies, the theologians develop an HIV and AIDS liberation theology which names these structures as unjust and sinful. In addition, patriarchy is considered a sinful ideology and a structure of gender injustice, which is in line with African women’s theology (and classic feminist theology). More than ever it is realised that patriarchy is destructive, as it informs HIV-critical masculinities. As Rosinah Gabaitse puts it: ‘[T]he patriarchal construction of masculinities that the society is holding on to is deadly.’

The vision of gender justice

To overcome patriarchal masculinities that are believed to be dangerous and even deadly in the context of the HIV epidemic, the theologians present a vision of gender justice. Pointing to the Circle’s involvement in gender and HIV, Isabel Phiri says: ‘Gender justice is particularly important in the church’s fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The African Women Theologians have argued that as long as there is gender injustice in Africa, HIV/AIDS will continue unabated.’ Likewise, Ezra Chitando points to gender justice as the criterion for masculinities that are adequate in the context of HIV and AIDS. Thus, in the account of these scholars, gender justice is the horizon for the transformation of masculinities, in order to realise “liberated” or “redemptive” masculinities. Although the concept of gender justice is often referred to, it is hardly defined. Rather than a clear definition, some broad associations are given. For example, gender justice is

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14 For an elaborate account on the HIV epidemic from the perspective of liberation theology, see M.W. Dube, *The HIV and AIDS Bible. Selected Essays* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press 2010).
associated with equality of women and men and with mutuality, partnership and companionship in gender relations and marriage. According to Phiri,

Gender justice means promoting the humanity of both women and men in the church and using their gifts as revealed by God. Any form of discrimination and oppression mars the image of God in creation and humanity, for God is a God of justice and the practice of Christianity is supposed to reflect the justice of God.¹⁹

Though this gives a general indication, it does not become clear how, from the concept of gender justice, gender relations are to be shaped precisely, and what a transformed masculinity should look like.

A closer look makes it clear that the actual concern behind the arguments for gender justice in the context of HIV and AIDS is a concern with power. It is believed that in a situation of gender justice, women will be empowered so that they can control their own sexuality and can protect themselves. As Musa Dube says, where dominant gender constructions disempower half of humanity – women – gender justice will redistribute power. This, she believes, will result in a change of gender relations ‘so that they do not serve as pathways of death, but become life-affirming, resisting poverty, powerlessness and HIV/AIDS.’²⁰ In line with this, Chitando points out that men have ‘to give up their privileges in pursuit of gender justice’ because gender injustice leaves women vulnerable to HIV.²¹

The role of religion and churches

In their analysis, the scholars under discussion are very critical about the role of religion(s) in general, and of Christian churches in particular. These would reinforce patriarchal masculinities and unequal gender relations and thus facilitate HIV. With regard to churches, Fulata Moyo puts this in a firm (and generalising) statement:

In the Church in Africa, not only is sexuality a taboo issue, but it is also a power issue at the mercy of those who have the decision-making power – in this case, men. The power of men is affirmed and safeguarded by a range of local religious and cultural sexual practices that frustrate the mutuality of sexual decision-making between the genders.²²

As an example of how churches affirm and safeguard the power of men in gender and sexual relations, Moyo points to the concept of male headship. In her opinion, headship is a major symbol of patriarchal ideology that assigns power

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¹⁹ I.A. Phiri, Life in Fullness: Gender Justice, 77.
²² Moyo, Sex, Gender, Power and HIV/AIDS in Malawi, 130.
and authority to men, leaving women as inferior and submissive beings whose sexuality, body and life is controlled by men.23 From the realisation that Christian and biblical teachings inform patriarchy, and that patriarchal masculinities lead to the oppression of women and are critical in the HIV context, churches are challenged to give up the ideology of patriarchy and to promote masculinities that forego notions of dominance, power, and authority. Beverley Haddad, for example, calls on churches, saying that they cannot continue to moralise in face of HIV while leaving patriarchy unabated.24

Significantly, churches are not only addressed critically for maintaining patriarchal masculinities, but also as instruments for their transformation. According to Chitando,

Churches have a major role to play in the transformation of men. (…) African churches should implement programmes that help men appreciate the value of the power to love and to care, over and above the kind of masculine power that tends toward domination.25

It appears that for Chitando, the transformation of masculinities is part of the life-bringing mission of the church in the face of HIV. He calls for a “creative evangelism” of men, where the pulpit is used to address men and to preach gender justice, where youth, women’s and men’s groups are involved in developing new ideals of manhood, and where outreach to men in prison, the military and places of entertainment are organised. Chitando believes that when ‘all church departments were actively involved in the shaping of new ideals relating to manhood, society would be transformed in a radical way.’26

To conclude, for the African theologians under discussion, patriarchy is the root problem of HIV-critical masculinities that are dominant in society. The way to overcome these is to realise gender justice, which includes a redistribution of power between men and women. They believe that churches play a critical role in reinforcing patriarchal masculinities but also can play a key role in the transformation of these masculinities. The question, then, arises, as to whether churches indeed address men and transform masculinities, and if so, whether their praxis is in line with the approach of the theologians.

23 Idem, 129ff.
26 Ibid., 47.
Reinventing a Patriarchal Masculinity: the Strategy of a Local Church

In the second part of this paper, I will focus on one particular local church, Northmead Assembly of God (NAOG). This is a Pentecostal church located in Northmead, one of the suburbs of Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. The congregation has about two thousand members, with the majority being young and relatively highly educated. The church is one of the most prominent Pentecostal churches in Lusaka, and its senior pastor, Bishop Joshua H.K. Banda, is among the most prominent Christian leaders of the country. The question central to this section is: How does this church address men in its midst, and how does it seek to transform masculinities in the face of the HIV epidemic? Answering this question I focus on formal church discourses such as sermons, because my interest here is in the vision and strategy of the church to transform masculinities rather than in how this transformation takes place in the concrete lives of church members.

Contested masculinities

In NAOG, critical issues concerning men and masculinities are explicitly addressed. A significant example is a series of eight sermons delivered in 2008, aiming to correct “the distortion of manhood” that is perceived in society. This series, entitled *Fatherhood in the 21st Century*, shows that the evangelisation of men, and the transformation of masculinities, is an explicit project in the church, arising out of the vision of Banda. Preaching is a crucial instrument in this project. Other instruments are the various ministries that make up the congregational life: the youth ministry, the singles’ ministry, the men’s ministry, and the marriage ministry. In all these departments of the church, I found issues concerning men and masculinity to be addressed critically. The issues that are addressed most frequently are:

- Sexuality. There is a strong concern with sexuality, which seems to be reinforced by the HIV epidemic. When it is about the importance of abstinence before, and faithfulness in marriage, the focus is often on men. It is believed that they in particular have problems in these areas and the dominant type of manhood in society is considered to be preoccupied with sex. Banda emphasises that “biblical manhood” transcends sexuality and ‘is not just defining yourself as a sex machine.’

- The drinking of alcohol. According to the church, the intake of alcohol is incompatible with being born-again. In sermons, Banda points out that

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alcohol has a worse effect in the HIV context as it diminishes men’s ability to control themselves. He also says that because of alcohol, men do not take their responsibilities as a husband and a father seriously. Therefore Banda calls on men, stating: ‘If we are to live as men of truth, it [alcohol] must be behind us and we must restore the dignity of the African home.’

- Domestic and sexual violence. The statistics on violence against women are referred to as a clear illustration of the ‘impairment of true, biblical manhood’ in Zambia. Wife-battering in marriage is rejected as an ‘indecent violent and pervasive act’. Men who are engaged in this are called to repentance, and women who suffer from this are encouraged to inform the church leadership.

- Male dominance over women. The church is concerned about the dominating way men exercise power and authority over women. According to a church marital counsellor, ‘without us as a church giving guidance, almost by default men will appear to be very dictatorial.’ This tendency towards male domination is strongly opposed.

- An overall irresponsibility of men. It is said that men tend to neglect their responsibilities and do not fulfil the roles they have in their marriage, the family and society. In a sermon, Banda spoke about “the mess” Africa is in, referring to AIDS, corruption, violence, poverty. Then, mentioning that men are supposed to be the leaders, he said: ‘We men are doing a bad job. It is a very serious problem. We love the power but we don’t love the responsibility. Shame on us, men.’

Together these issues make up the type of masculinity that, according to the church, is popular in Zambian society. The concern about this is not only informed by the HIV epidemic, but by a broader critical analysis of the role of men in marriage, the family and society.

Re-defining manhood

In view of all these critical issues and the contested type of masculinity, the church seeks to promote an alternative masculinity. As Banda says: ‘It is necessary for

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31 Interview with Rosay Mbuizi (fictional name), Lusaka: 29 October 2008.
us to discuss afresh from a biblical angle what fatherhood really means in our society.\textsuperscript{33} In sermons he explores the ideal of “biblical manhood”, which is defined by four major concepts (that of course are closely related).

\textit{Responsibility} is the central notion defining masculinity, both in the church’s teaching and in the accounts of church members. The general opinion is that to be a man means to be responsible. Of course women are to behave in a responsible way as well, but men are believed to have a \textit{primary} responsibility. Among others, this concerns a responsibility to head the marital relationship, to provide in the material needs of the family, and to provide leadership to the family and in the community.\textsuperscript{34} More precisely, men’s responsibility is defined as “benevolent”, meaning that it is not preoccupied with the self but is concerned with serving others: in marriage, the family, the community and society in general.

\textit{Headship} is the second key notion defining the church’s ideal of biblical manhood. It particularly concerns men’s position and role in marriage and the family. Because of the “principle of male headship”, men have to be the provider, the priest, the prophet and the protector of the family.\textsuperscript{35} The notion of male headship is “balanced” by Banda with a notion of gender equality: on the one hand the importance of partnership in marriage is underlined while on the other hand men’s primary responsibility is emphasised.\textsuperscript{36} With reference to Ephesians 5, the church teaches that headship does not mean domination but service, just like Jesus Christ came to serve the Church. Thus a nuanced version of headship is promoted which is about men providing direction to and taking care of their wives and families.

The third notion is \textit{leadership}, which concerns the role of men in the family, extending to the society at large. In the family, male leadership is about providing moral and spiritual guidance. At the level of the society, it is about “making a difference” socially, morally and economically in the community and in the nation. Again, it is underlined that men should not practise leadership in an autocratic manner, but in a serving way, respecting women and mobilising their capacities.\textsuperscript{37}

Last but not least is the notion of \textit{self-control}, which often is emphasised in relation to sex and alcohol. Referring to the popular perception that men are ‘unable to control their sexual desires’, Banda calls on men to take control over their lives and to master their desires through a change of their mindset.\textsuperscript{38} The

\textsuperscript{33} Joshua Banda, \textit{Fatherhood, part 1}.  
\textsuperscript{34} Joshua Banda, \textit{Fatherhood in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century, part 6} (DVD), Lusaka: Northmead Assembly of God 2008.  
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Premarital counseling general guide}, Northmead Assembly of God Church (unpublished material).  
\textsuperscript{36} Banda, \textit{Fatherhood, part 5} and 6.  
\textsuperscript{37} Joshua Banda, \textit{Fatherhood in the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century, part 5} (DVD), Lusaka: Northmead Assembly of God 2008.  
\textsuperscript{38} Joshua Banda, \textit{Fatherhood, part 1}.  

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ability to control the self becomes a feature of “true” male character, although it is mentioned that one may need the help of God or Jesus Christ in order to break with certain habits.

With defining notions such as responsibility, headship, leadership and self-control, the church promotes an ideal of manhood that can be considered patriarchal. However, as headship and leadership are “balanced” with a notion of gender equality, it is a soft patriarchal ideal. The church believes that this will make a difference in “the mess” that society is in. Where, on the one hand, men and dominant masculinities are perceived as the cause of many problems facing Zambia, at the same time men and a transformed masculinity are considered to be the key to the solution. The reason for this is that the church believes that men, compared to women, have a particular role to play in God’s creation. The fact that, according to Genesis 2, Adam was created first is taken to mean that ‘there is something higher and bigger given to men.’ The church’s ideal of “biblical manhood” is built on this perception of a distinguished position, a primary responsibility and role of men. This provides the church with a base from which to call on men to change their lives.

An Analysis: Two Different Paradigms

Thus far I have outlined the visions of African theologians and a local church to transform masculinities. In the present section these will be compared and discussed. Clearly, the two presented strategies and visions are different. But there is also a significant similarity: the theologians and the church correspond in their critical perception of the role of men and of dominant masculinities. Similar to the call of the theologians, NAOG addresses men in relation to issues as sexuality, violence against women, abuse of power, and so on. Moreover, the church not only addresses male behaviour critically, but also actively promotes an alternative ideal of manhood. The transformation of masculinities appears to be an explicit project in which the church has engaged, just as the theologians have called for.

Although both the church and the scholars share a similar concern with men and critical masculinities, they express this concern in different discourses. The theologians primarily employ a gender-critical discourse, using concepts such as patriarchy, gender (in)equality and gender (in)justice, while the church engages in a moral discourse, referring to (ir)responsibility, (im)maturity and (im)morality. The difference in discourse is not just an issue of language. It indicates a more fundamental difference in the analysis of men and masculinities. For the church, issues like men’s sexual conduct, the use of alcohol, the engagement in violence,
and a general irresponsibility are extremely critical. These are understood as expressions of masculinity in a culture that is morally degrading and is not rooted in the Christian faith. The theologians consider many of these issues to be critical as the church does, but understand them as inherent consequences and manifestations of masculinity in a patriarchal culture that is maintained by Christian churches and ideology.

The difference in perception results in a different politics to change men and masculinity. The church reinforces its teaching on “biblical manhood” and emphasises the responsibilities related to man’s position as head and leader. The theologians challenge men to change not only their behaviour but their position in gender relations and to give up the power related to this position. To put it briefly, Northmead Assembly of God seeks a restoration of masculinity within a patriarchal framework, while the theologians envision a transformation of masculinity beyond patriarchy. This crucial difference becomes clear from a closer look at the ideal of “biblical manhood” in the church. As outlined above, this ideal is built on notions such as headship, leadership and a primary responsibility for men. These notions clearly fit in the patriarchal ideology that is criticised by the theologians. However, the church does not simply reinforce patriarchal masculinities but also corrects them. The power of men is restricted, men’s tendency to dominate over women is addressed, men’s responsibilities to their wives and families are underlined, and the equality of women and men is emphasised (though the meaning of this equality is ambiguous). Here we are faced with what has been called “soft patriarchy”.40

In the face of the devastating reality of HIV and AIDS and other urgent social problems, the church in its politics to change men and to overcome contested masculinities opts for a reinvention of patriarchy. In this strategy, there is an appeal to men’s “biblical” position as heads and leaders, and men are challenged to recapture these roles by living up to the related responsibilities.

The two visions for the transformation of masculinities are informed by a different understanding of gender. The gender ideology of the church is based on a literal reading of the Genesis 2 creation story, with Adam and Eve being considered as models of “biblical manhood” and “biblical womanhood”. This gives rise to an essentialist (and heteronormative) perception of gender, with men and women being believed to be fundamentally different but complementary. As a critical biblical hermeneutic is hardly developed in the church, concepts such as male headship are taken uncritically from the Genesis creation story and from the Pauline epistles in the New Testament. Opposite to this are the theologians under

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discussion. From a critical reading of the Bible, they consider male headship to be “a myth”. Likewise they revisit traditional, patriarchal interpretations of the Genesis 2 creation story, or they creatively recapture African myths of origin that count for equality, reciprocity and justice in gender relations. Generally their theology of gender is not based on an account of creation but on re-creation. They envision a new community of men and women from the biblical vision of the new earth where all of humanity will achieve fullness of life.

**Patriarchal yet constructive**

The primary context of the present investigation of masculinities is the HIV epidemic. It will be clear that the church’s emphasis on responsibility and self-control has an HIV preventive effect, as far as men indeed practise this teaching. Robert Garner has argued that in Pentecostal churches, members are most likely to practise the moral teaching of the church, because this type of church has markedly high levels of four crucial factors that affect HIV related behaviour patterns: indoctrination, religious experience, exclusion and socialisation. NAOG’s effort to change men and masculinities is congruent with this. Men are not just addressed critically from a narrow moral perspective, but an alternative ideal of manhood is actively promoted. This ideal is related to the major religious experience of becoming born-again, and the ongoing sanctification of one’s life that is characteristic of Pentecostal spirituality. Furthermore, the ideal of “biblical manhood” or of the “responsible man” is used to separate “born-again” men from other men in society.

The potential of Pentecostal churches like NAOG to challenge and transform prevalent constructions of masculinity that are critical in the HIV context, is also acknowledged by Ezra Chitando. From a study on Pentecostal masculinity in Zimbabwe he observes:

Pentecostals seek to empower men to realise that abstinence and faithfulness are realistic options in the HIV era. The Pentecostal teaching on mutuality and communication in

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marriage is also critical in the HIV era. … The Pentecostal engagement with masculinities offers a lot of promise in the struggle against the HIV epidemic in Zimbabwe.45 

Thus, it appears that in light of HIV and AIDS, the effort of NAOG to transform masculinities towards the ideal of responsible manhood can be evaluated positively. This nuances the massive statements of the theologians discussed above, who point to patriarchy and patriarchal masculinities as generally dangerous and deadly in times of HIV. In the church, a type of masculinity is promoted that is patriarchal but yet is preventive in view of HIV and opposes men’s oppression and domination of women. It appears that analytically the concept of patriarchy as used by the theologians is too monolithic: it is not sensitive to the different ways in which masculinities are shaped even within a patriarchal framework. A more nuanced conceptualisation of patriarchy is needed, which enables investigation into the differences, nuances and ambiguities of masculinities that may all be patriarchal but not necessarily are equally oppressive to women and have a negative impact in the context of HIV and AIDS. For this purpose, the concept of agency, as used in cultural anthropology and gender studies, could be helpful.46 A focus on agency would show, for example, that in NAOG a notion such as male headship – though having a patriarchal connotation – not simply reinforces male power but is used to remind men of their “God-given” responsibility towards themselves, women, their families and the community. In the context of this Pentecostal church, the notion of male headship may be effective to initiate change among men and may result in a relatively constructive type of masculinity.

**Constructive yet patriarchal**

Although Chitando and other theologians discussed in this article realise that Pentecostal masculinity can make a positive difference in the HIV context, they are still critical. Chitando puts this most clearly when saying that the Pentecostal engagement with masculinity is helpful yet not radical and adequate enough. He formulates his critique as follows: ‘The Pentecostal approach is still rooted in the paradigm of the male as the leader. … [Pentecostals] are not willing to challenge the myth of male headship. The HIV epidemic calls for courage in redefining gender roles.’47 Chitando’s fear seems to be that the Pentecostal concepts of male leadership and headship are not just symbolic but are attached to power, which can be easily misused by men. A similar concern is indicated by Sarojini Nadar.

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45 Chitando, *A New Man for a New Era?*, 121
46 There is no space to elaborate on this. For an introduction to the concept of agency, see N. Rapport and J. Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge 2000), 1-9. For an argument how this concept could be employed in the study of religion and masculinities, see my forthcoming dissertation (Utrecht University 2011).
47 Chitando, *A New Man for a New Era?*, 122 and 124.
In the tradition of feminist theology, she employs a hermeneutic of suspicion in her evaluation of a South African Christian men’s movement. Hence she says that the responsibility-discourse on men that is used in this movement, just as in Northmead Assembly of God, may easily result in men asserting dominating and coercive measures. Even more clearly, she states that ‘a theology of headship and submission is simply yet another way of promoting violence (in its varied forms).” The concept of responsible male headship, in her opinion, may appear as a “palatable patriarchy” but should not deceive us. It should rather raise “our justice antennas”. Thus, a suspicion of any form of patriarchal masculinity, however soft or constructive these might be, is advocated by these scholars. They are convinced that the only ‘formidable line of defence against HIV’ is that men ‘give up their privileges in pursuit of gender justice.’

It appears that Chitando, Nadar and others understand gender justice in terms of a radical equality of women and men. For them, the HIV epidemic provides an opportunity to realise a feminist agenda of masculinities that promote gender equality. Although they often point to the abuse of power by men as the problem in the HIV context, they actually seem to consider men’s existing possession of power as critical, because it could enable such abuse. Hence they call for a re-distribution of power between men and women in order to transform gender relations radically. Because Pentecostal churches like NAOG – as many other African churches – do not support such an agenda, their attempts to transform masculinities are evaluated as not adequate enough. At first sight, this critique seems to be ideologically driven. However, it arises out of a critical sensitivity that a masculinity of responsible headship as promoted in the church might be constructive and preventive in light of HIV, but still maintains a structure of gender inequality. The theologians seek to take into account the structures underlying the HIV epidemic that facilitate it to thrive. From their HIV and AIDS liberation theology, they do not just want to bring about behavioural change among men but a structural transformation.

Conclusion and Reflection: Transforming Masculinities in “the Interim”

The evident conclusion is that there is a significant gap between African theologians and NAOG concerning the vision and strategy to transform


49 Chitando, A New Man for a New Era?, 122.
masculinities in the context of the HIV epidemic. The fundamental difference is that the church seeks a *restoration* of masculinity within a patriarchal framework, while the theologians envision a *transformation* of masculinity beyond patriarchy. These different masculinity politics are informed by differences in deeply rooted theological perceptions of gender. Though I do not claim that the case of NAOG is representative of African churches in general, I think that the findings in this case study are more or less in line with patterns in many other churches in Africa (and in other parts of the world). As African women theologians argue consistently, Christian and cultural traditions of patriarchy tend to reinforce each other in many African churches. From this perspective, NAOG may even be a progressive case, as the church clearly opposes male domination of women and violence against women, supports a notion of gender equality, and seeks to transform masculinities in a constructive, soft patriarchal way.

The differences in vision and strategy make it difficult for the theologians to collaborate with churches in the transformation of masculinities (and in a broader project of a transformation in gender relations). As appears from the critique of Chitando and Nadar presented above, these scholars are very critical of the efforts of churches and Christian movements to transform masculinities. I understand this critical evaluation and I have great sympathy for their radical commitment to gender equality. In the above section I have argued that the concept of patriarchy is too monolithic to analyse religious discourses on masculinity such as in NAOG in a nuanced way, but I realise that the theologians use it as a critical prophetic concept which emerges from their fundamental belief that men and women are equally created in the image of God. The question at stake, then, is how the theologians can uphold their critical sensitivity to patriarchy and their commitment to gender justice, while at the same time evaluate the efforts of churches such as NAOG to transform masculinities in a more nuanced and positive way. Though I am not an African theologian, I would like to engage this question and to make a proposal that can be helpful to African theologians in their relation to and collaboration with churches in the project of transforming masculinities.

My starting point is a minor remark of Chitando on “the interim”. Though Chitando, as outlined above, presents a radical critique of patriarchy and its subsequent masculinities, in a recent publication he indicates some nuance. Referring to the cultural notion of men as protectors of their families, he comments: “It is likely that most African women theologians would call for more efforts to deconstruct the notion that men are protectors. However, in the interim the idea can be utilized to encourage men to be more responsible in their sexual lives.”50 Chitando here suggests that some patriarchal notions of masculinity can be used to transform masculinities in a way that is preventive to HIV and

thus promotes life among women and children, though this is not the ultimate ideal he strives for. His reference to “the interim” is significant. Where Chitando and other theologians tend to present “patriarchy” and “gender justice” as two mutually exclusive realities, the idea of an interim creates space for a more fluid understanding. Even in a context and ideology that can be considered patriarchal, certain masculinities may help to achieve greater justice in gender relations in the sense that they are more or less life-giving, promote the humanity of women and children, and benefit the community. Clearly these “patriarchal” masculinities can help to make a difference in the face of HIV, sexual violence and other life-threatening phenomena, even though they do not meet the criterion of the “fullness of life” that African women theologians dream of. However, as Isabel Phiri points out, gender justice is a ‘utopian vision’ and an ‘eschatological hope’. This implies that it is not yet fully realised and cannot be fully realised at once. In line with this I would argue that the transformation of masculinities takes place in the interim. It anticipates at and gradually works towards the full realisation of gender justice. This eschatological perspective could provide the theologians with a base for a more nuanced evaluation of and constructive engagement with the “soft-patriarchal” masculinities in churches such as NAOG, while at the same time maintaining their critical sensitivity to gender inequality and a commitment to gender justice. The space of the interim also provides time for a dialogue between theologians and churches on the fundamental theological perceptions that inform their understandings of gender and their visions for masculinity. This is an urgent challenge. As the present article shows, in order for HIV-critical masculinities in African contexts to be transformed, and in order for theologians and churches to collaborate in this project, there is need for further and more detailed reflection on the direction of this transformation and on the envisioned type of African Christian masculinity.

51 Phiri, Life in Fullness: Gender Justice, 79; Phiri, A Theological Analysis of the Voices of Teenage Girls, 43-45.