

MATHIAS MHERE'S FUNCTIONAL USES OF GOSPEL MUSIC IN THE ZIMBABWEAN POST-2000 MALADIES

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ABSTRACT

The article critiques Mathias Mhere's gospel music from an Afrocentric perspective within the context of complexities and maladies that have impacted negatively on the majority's livelihoods in Zimbabwe's post-2000 period. The maladies have seen society marshalling different strategies and oral art forms to keep people's spirits buoyant. Oral art forms have always been at the centre of African experience, constituting a repository of the philosophy of life as desired, imagined, and treasured among most indigenous families and communities. In the absence of the oral folklore and oral art forms of yesteryear that were used to inculcate communal values and skills to self-define and safeguard cultural spaces, gospel music has made inroads and carved an indelible niche that needs critical attention. This strategy is not novel to Zimbabwe. Music as an oral and performance art has always been deeply ingrained in most social activities to raise and censure conduct across all ages for society's greater good, including cementing the social fabric, and fostering social cohesion and stability among most indigenous families and communities. In the recalcitrant environment, fraught with a myriad of maladies and many a family in dispersion, gospel music in the indigenous languages becomes critical in exhorting and censuring attitudes, conduct and desires in order to uphold treasured values. Family dispersions disrupted institutions and fractured relationships, further fanning insecurities and imbalances. It is from this angle that this article makes a critical analysis of Mathias Mhere's gospel lyrics. Mhere is one of the most popular young gospel artists whose albums have been hits on the Zimbabwean music charts. The article therefore examines the forte behind Mhere's gospel music in the Zimbabwean post-2000 maladies. It also interrogates Mhere's

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artistic creativity, sensitivity and commitment to sustainable livelihoods and survival in post-2000 Zimbabwe's fractious environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article locates local gospel music within the post-2000 realm of a myriad of maladies and a recalcitrant environment, focusing on Mathias Mhere's selected gospel lyrics. The need to dig deeper into issues of survival and sustenance in a morally, politically, economically and culturally recalcitrant environment has also witnessed many gospel voices emerging. Like most other local artists' compositions, Mhere's gospel lyrics in Shona, one of Zimbabwe's indigenous languages, occupies a critical role in influencing the much-desired transformation, improved livelihoods and critical self-knowledge construction within the post-2000 society seething with a myriad of maladies. Gospel music, like rap music and spoken poetry (whose adherents are mostly the youths) has carved an indelible niche that needs critical attention. Because of family and community dispersions, the use of traditional oral forms of artistic expression previously appropriated to nurture and propagate treasured communal values has waned. Gospel music compositions by local artists have thus emerged, taking centre stage to fill this void. Production by emerging artists, especially the youths, has been prodigious in the post-2000 period, begging envisioned solutions to the problems that society is grappling to contain and surmount. This scenario has seen gospel music in the local indigenous languages repeatedly claiming its place on the local popular music charts.

With many families in dispersion because of the turbulent environment, and therefore beyond the reach and influence of traditional oral art forms for social edification, heightened use of social media platforms has left the young and the old alike exposed to morally indescribable and spiritually hazardous influences that undermine and erode the once cherished still precious indigenous social fabric. Gospel music has gained popularity in most black urban communities, taking the place of spoken oral art forms that were previously ingrained in oral strategies once used to socialise individuals and nurture them for a desired and desirable prosperous, peaceful and harmonious society. This also partly explains why local gospel music has taken a place in the public sphere as a "stratagem of empowerment and critique" (Biggs-El, 2012) for both individuals and communities. It reaches public and individual inner places where most other oral art forms can hardly permeate. As an oral art form, gospel music is increasingly being appropriated to censure untoward conduct and destructive attitudes, and also to critique self-annihilating practices that some members of society appear to imbibe and embrace in order to get excessively rich overnight. Unlike in previous generations where censure and exhortation, training and adherence to communal social values were achieved by

use of many traditional oral forms, at different stages of individual growth, the 'modern' dispensation has been severely challenged. Yet, the social fabric should be safeguarded for peaceful co-existence, development, sustainable livelihoods and stability.

Gospel artists are therefore brazenly and increasingly tackling most social maladies, advocating self-introspection by all and sundry for sustainable social transformation so that Zimbabweans can take responsibility for the ultimate destiny of their lives, their communities and the country, including quality of life, now and in the future. Like other oral art forms in the African worldview, gospel music composed by local Zimbabwean artists in the indigenous languages promotes connectedness, harmony, inclusion and interaction for the majority's greater good. Some of the local gospel artists of high repute whose music is heard in commuter omnibuses and other public platforms and fora are Baba naMai Charles Charamba, Augustine Magacha, Blessing Shumba, Painos Jaravaza, Mercy Mutsvene, Agatha Murudza and, lastly, Mathias Mhere, with three popular albums to his name since 2012. In one package, Mhere's lyrics entertain, inform, educate and subtly critique attitudes and conduct, using Biblical references to gently persuade and attack audiences to change attitudes, perceptions, focus and strategies about their problems. This changes the dynamics of the manner in which gospel music has been viewed. Corroborative evidence will be drawn from lyrics of selected songs on his albums.

2. BACKGROUND

Post-2000 Zimbabwe has courted massive media attention regionally and internationally for various socio-economic, political, cultural and religious reasons. The first decade of the new millennium has been definitive in terms of Zimbabweans' post-independence lived experiences, developments, aspirations and history. Compulsory acquisition of land by the Government for redistribution and the 51–49 percent indigenisation policies in favour of blacks, sowed acrimony that in the short term could be viewed as having eroded the strides made since 1980 towards broader economic emancipation through formal employment and job-retention. Livelihoods, service delivery, education standards, health standards, and opportunities for self-advancement through research among the academia are widely claimed to have plummeted because of Government's rushed policies (Sachikonye 2012). Plummeting livelihoods (Mathema 2009), then, led many Zimbabwean citizens to search for greener pastures elsewhere. Despite the high hopes and aspirations for total liberation, especially after the sacrificial armed liberation struggle that ushered in majority rule and political independence in 1980, lived reality, thus, pointed to a wide dissonance and mismatch between the liberation war promises and people's general expectations and livelihoods for a country as richly resourced as Zimbabwe. 'Answers to the fundamental question of human life and society' (Karenga 2007:450) central to post-2000 Zimbabwe are, therefore, fundamental, especially in view of post-2000 Zimbabweans' struggles for survival and general meaning in life,

amidst a myriad of contradictions and maladies. This does not in any way suggest that Zimbabweans have never before experienced life-threatening challenges. That would be falsifying history, lived and imagined. However, acrimony has been sharp in the majority-acclaimed democratic country that waged an armed liberation struggle to socially, politically, economically, culturally and spiritually emancipate a people whose majority had been systematically dehumanised and excluded from benefitting from the country's resources and their beneficiation by former settler regimes. That these systems remained intact in post-independence Zimbabwe, and that colonially-inherited disparities were further strengthened by the country's constitution, is historically documented (Muzondidya, in Mlambo and Raftopoulos 2009).

It is equally indisputable that the systems needed overhauling to accommodate, embrace and improve the livelihoods of the majority. It would not morally make sense that despite self-rule, injustices inherited from previous regimes remain at the heart of the African experience, further compounded by corruption and the self-aggrandisement drive among the elite. Thus, the same majority that had been reduced to paupers, squatters and scum by previous regimes, in a country for whose liberation they had sacrificed, would not understand why they would continue wallowing in poverty several decades into black self-rule. From a lay person's perspective, freedoms envisioned to be accompanying political independence are not negotiable. They are a right, like any other human right. For these reasons, it would not be surprising that expectations for wholesome and fulfilled lives are especially acute and unstoppable within a richly-resourced country like Zimbabwe. The leaders and the elite, strategically positioned as beacons and luminaries of the country's cherished dreams, continue to be expected to deliver 'milk and honey' to the highly expectant formerly marginalised majority. It is ironic that after some decades of waiting for the delivery of armed liberation war promises, hopes and dreams remain unattainable for most blacks who missed the land reform and indigenisation benefits. This creates overtures for gospel musicians who are striving to influence and permeate lives of many people seeking meaning and reasons behind the 'wretched' existence that most Zimbabweans continuously seek to escape.

Integral political and economic checks collapsed under the advent of forced and forceful land redistribution from 2000 onwards, resulting in unprecedented massive drying-up of the formal employment sector, thereby scattering millions of Zimbabweans to the Diaspora. Closures of factories, mines and industries in protest against Government's compulsory acquisition of land and introduction of the indigenisation programmes, in addition to shrinking productivity on the newly-occupied commercial farms, testify to the vicissitudes of the much-desired freedom and independence. However, '[t]he recognition of the structural causes of poverty has been big help in the formulation of strategies for change' (Phiri, Ross and Cox, 1996: 27), and it is aspects such as these that musicians like the Charambas, Mtukudzi, Magacha and Mhere try to explore and expose through their songs. That Zimbabweans sank to their lowest ebb in every respect between 2007 and 2008, was drive enough for local musicians to marshal

and usher in the only remaining possible and practicable move for continued moral sustenance — looking upwards for divine intervention.

Further, these difficult times continue to witness myriads of people seeking divine intervention and sanctuary in the Church, with an upsurge of indigenous African-based churches and African-led ministries and denominations. Gospel music and Christianity, and other forms of spirituality steeped in prophetic healing and deliverance, have therefore become the most popular forte, drawing multitudes of followers among most African families and communities. People have gone as far afield as West Africa, Nigeria in particular, in search of spiritual remedies that could cure Zimbabwe's post-2000 maladies. Traditional churches, apostolic sects, and Pentecostalism have thus witnessed increased and heightened peddling and popularisation of the themes of wealth and miraculous prosperity, to the mesmerisation and endearment of thousands of flocking followers. People's attempts to survive by any means necessary also creates the recalcitrant environment that the gospel musicians seek to alter. This background, then, gives gospel musicians like Mathias Mhere the licence to persuade their audiences and followers to strive for positive and productive ends, rather than to perpetuate the maladies characterising most people's lives in the post-2000 period.

3. THE FUNCTIONAL USES OF GOSPEL MUSIC AMONG MOST ZIMBABWEAN BLACK COMMUNITIES

Chinouriri (2013) observes that the age old role of music was to reflect or mirror society and to act as a barometer for conflict resolution in society. Chinouriri echoes and reiterates the functional uses of Shona traditional oral art forms, including music, as explored in Aaron C Hodza's *Ugo Hwamadzinza avaShona*, whereby music and other oral art forms performed diverse roles of celebrating, exhorting, cautioning, querying and correcting social, political, cultural, spiritual practices and critiquing economic deviations from what any society regarded as the norm. Hodza's *Ugo Hwamadzinza avaShona* shows music being central to Shona daily lives – as dance to entertain and socialise the community members, as didacticism for moral building, as performance at different rites of passage, as dirges to mourn the dead and console the bereaved, as celebration at harvest and other happy occasions like marriage and so on.

In the absence and waning or limited use of other oral art forms because of family and community dispersions, the recalcitrant environment characteristic of post-2000 Zimbabwe, then, fosters opportunities for gospel music to continuously make inroads into many people's lives, increasingly becoming a forte for inspiration, support, inner strength and resilience in a sea of challenges and problems. Suffice it to say that in African communities in Zimbabwe, gospel music takes on the same role as other indigenous oral art forms take in moulding communities and establishing a sustainable and peaceful co-existence. Much like African oral art forms that constitute a repository of the philosophy of life as desired, cherished and treasured within the African social milieu, gospel music

has, because of its easy accessibility, similarly risen to the challenges. It has over time come to share the same intrinsic role as African oral art forms in influencing and shaping attitudes and outlook on life, making them intricately interwoven and embedded in the African lived experiences. Like other oral art forms and performances, gospel music, then, continues to be appropriated and marshalled into assuaging the lives of a nation and country where 80 percent of the population boasts and claims to be Christians. Like the much treasured but waning indigenous traditional oral art forms, gospel music attacks, rebukes, and persuades in order to create peaceable and stable lives within families and communities. This briefly explains this article's motivation for examining Mathias Mhere's albums, of which selected songs are examined sequentially in the sections that follow.

4. THE RECURRENT MESSAGES OF CONSISTENCY, HARD WORK, HONESTY AND TRANSPARENCY IN MATHIAS MHERE'S LYRICS IN SELECTED SONGS

Mathias Mhere, one of the local Zimbabwean gospel artists, was born on 13 June 1988, placing him among Zimbabwe's first generation of the born-frees. Mhere has earned local acclaim, performing at national galas and Pentecostal revival gatherings organised by African-led Pentecostal ministries. The selected songs for this article provide a site for debate, socio-political commentary and 'persuasive attack' (Chinouriri and Nyakudya 2015) so that Zimbabweans may introspect on their moral bearings and socio-political undertakings and deals in the recalcitrant environment of 2000 and beyond. The songs 'Vimba naJehovha', 'Favour naMwari', from the album *Anoita Minana*, Mhere's first album released in 2012; 'Ziya rangu', 'Zino irema', 'Mhandu yako imhandu yangu' and 'Pamazuva angu' from Mhere's second album *Nguva yenyasha* released in 2013, and 'Ephiziba', 'Pahushamwari', 'Madzorerei' and 'Vasiye varonge' from the latest album released on 13 February 2015, constitute the raw data to be analysed in the context of the acute post-2000 maladies alluded to elsewhere.

Interestingly, apart from some of the selected songs topping the local charts, Mhere continues gracing Pentecostal gatherings upon invitation, for hired performances. Ironically, contrary to the persistent messages in Mhere's songs, most Pentecostal gatherings peddle the gospel of prosperity, miracles and deliverance to keep people's spirits buoyant within the current recalcitrant environment. Prioritising individual material prosperity above all else deviates from the Gospel's founding principles of loving one's neighbour as oneself and worshiping God in spirit and in truth. Like the Biblical Prophet Amos, Mhere's songs are a scathing attack on the undesirable phenomenal opposites of extreme wealth and extreme poverty flourishing side by side among the elite and the commoners in post-2000 Zimbabwe. Mhere sings:

Pamazuva angu Mwari-wee, ndipei rudo nevamwe/Handidi kutsvinyira vamwe kuvaona sevasipo
/ Paya pandinopfuura vasaridze tsamwa/Pamazuva angu Mwari wangu Ndipei rudo nevamwe

/ Job wakataura muShoko, munhu akabarwa nemukadzi ane mazuva mashoma panyika...
Rangarira mwanawe-e, uya wakabva muvhu, achadzokera muvhu mangwana anouya.

(In my short life, God, grant me a loving heart/Forbid that I look down upon others/Let not the
downtrodden and poor curse when I pass by/Grant me genuine love for others/ In your Word Job
says that everyone born of woman/ shall return unto dust from whence he came/Remember, my
brother/sister, your days in this life are short/soon you will return unto dust...)

The song is a direct attack on obsession with self-importance among the avaricious elite. It also attacks insensitivity towards the plight of others. Preoccupation with and indulgence of the self whilst ignoring the needy in our midst has undermined the once valorised Zimbabwean cohesive social fabric. Mhere therefore begs:

Pamazuva angu Mwari Babawe-e, Handidi kushainira vamwe, ndipei rudo nevamwe (In my short life God, allow me not to abuse others, but to be sensitive and to be loving and caring.) *Uya waunodadira dzimwe nguva mangwana achakubatsira* (You never know where your help will come from on a rainy day.)

The attack is very subtle, pretending to express a deep personal concern for the wretched whilst attacking the haves of the Zimbabwean society. The lyrics therefore become double-edged. Materialism and self-importance are vices that have destroyed the foundation of the indigenous social fabric. These undesirable characteristics will become our undoing if left unchecked. Amassing wealth just for the sake of it, and self-aggrandisement, make most people vain and phony, forgetting that their lives are but a shadow. The message sounds simplistic, but is very deep. Are we really poor to a point where some live in abject poverty while others in the same country and environment are filthy rich? That is the question that Mhere's song subtly posits as commentary regarding a myriad of maladies that have affected Zimbabwean citizens. Zimbabweans should genuinely introspect on and consciously confront this condition. Mhere's stance is in line with the communal African philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu/humwe* whereby relationships should be dependent on reciprocity (Magosvongwe 2013). Mhere echoes criticisms against the insensitivity of the greedy elite that was preached by Prophet Amos of Israel. It is likely that such messages embedded in Mhere's songs are the ticket that makes his albums popular with the ordinary majority.

Ironically, Mhere advocates a more subtle approach and sensitivity to the man-made maladies that Zimbabwean society should confront and stem. Arguably, Mhere's lyrics underscore the imperative need for self-introspection, in place of the popular Zimbabwean finger-pointing and blame game, attributing almost all ills to impoverishment engendered by the legacy of colonialism. 'The term "gospel" generally means good news or good message, and is often used to express the doctrines and teachings of a divine faith' (Biggs-El 2012: 163). This is the message central to Mhere's music. How much good are individuals giving back to families, communities and broader society? Impliedly, circumstances could be better if Zimbabweans could individually introspect and eliminate the largely man-induced misery that compounds the poverty ravaging some sections of society. Mhere's lyrics then, proclaim a sensitivity

that our society should regenerate if we are to be truly human and 'African' as often claimed rhetorically from church podiums and public platforms and foras, but never matched with lived actions and undertakings. 'Zino irema' (Fake smile) that is analysed below exposes hypocrisy as a leading vice eating at the core of our lives individually and collectively. Mhere's subtle criticisms authenticate the imperative to embrace the philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu* that is corroborated by the Christian gospel of the Church, founded on the principles of love. The message is critical in a country where 80% of its citizens purport to be Christians.

Other critical issues that Mhere's songs raise are avarice and miraculous wealth which have seen Zimbabwean society seething with secret fetishes, brought from the Diaspora, to bring luck and fortune into self-seeking individuals' lives. These are desperate measures by a society in turmoil and are unlikely to be sustainable. Mhere's album 'Ziya rangu' (The work of my hands) pleads with God to bless the work of his hands as promised in the Holy Scriptures.

Mwari ndirangarireiwo maoko angu aya chandinobata, Baba ndichibuditsa ziya x4 / Makati muchandiropafadza ndichibuda mumba mangu /Mukati muchandiropafadza ndichipinda mumba mangu./Zvakare Mwari munoropafadza zvinobatwa namaoko/ Mwari ndirangarireiwo, maoko angu aya, chandinobata Baba ndichibuditsa ziya x4

Handidi kuteera Esau kuwa murume wesango x3 /Uya akadzungaira musango pasina mhuka, x3 / Nhai Mwari wee, Nhai Baba we-e kani x3 / Makati tsoka dzavatsvene dzinorongwa naShe

(God remember to bless the work of my hands, You promised that you will bless my going out and my coming in. You also promised to bless the work of my hands. I do not want to roam the forests unproductively like Esau. Your Word says the steps of the righteous are ordered by the Lord.)

Mhere exhorts that for the righteous – which most Zimbabweans are striving to become if one goes by the numbers packed to bursting capacities at church and religious organisations venues every Sunday – wealth is therefore earned and worked for. It does not mysteriously drop into one's lap. Miracle wealth has always been held with suspicion, even culturally. The miracle money and miracle wealth propagated by upcoming Pentecostal ministries and peddled among the unsuspecting Zimbabwean masses struggling to make ends meet in a materially and economically starved environment, is both dangerous and misleading. The song 'Favour' echoes and buttresses a similar message: 'Favour *inouya naMwari*/Favour *haitengwi kun'anga* /favour *haitengwi nemari*' (Favour comes from God. Favour cannot be sought from traditional healers/ Favour is not a commodity that can be bought using money).

However, references to divine favour bestowed upon the Biblical Hannah in the song 'Favour' that remains a hit on the charts, could mislead an uncritical mind. God rewarded a persistent and diligent woman, not an untrusting indolent individual who just complained without applying herself. The same applies to other Biblical figures whose efforts were rewarded with success only after they had played their part and

trusted God to bless them. Subtly, Mhere urges Zimbabweans to revert to the traditional modes of consistent honest hard work and transparency in their daily travails to sustain their livelihoods using practicable means. Any other means are unsustainable in the long term. Flocks seeking miracle money and miracle wealth from self-styled prophets are self-deluding, seeking strife and bitterness in the end. Similarly, didactic discouragement of a dependence on fetishes to acquire material wealth is the opening track to Mhere's third album, 'Ehpiziba.' In 'Ehpiziba' Mhere emphasises that it is taboo for anyone to spill blood or to use fetishes in order to accumulate wealth. Though Ephiziba in the song represents the young generations, the song admonishes Zimbabweans' obsession with wealth, and avoidance of working hard and earnestly seeking divine favour to prosper in their efforts. There are no shortcuts to getting rich, Mhere implores. The constancy and consistency in Mhere's albums regarding this theme is critical. It rings as a reminder to millions who could fall prey to temptation in the recalcitrant environment that they are living in. That Mhere directly castigates and discredits ill-gotten wealth is undeniable.

If everyone indolently awaits wealth to fall from heaven like manna did in the wilderness for the Israeli dessert sojourners, who then will work to build the Zimbabwean economy, on what foundation, for how long, for what futures? Mhere's message buttresses the Shona philosophy of hard honest work embedded in the sayings: '*Maoko maranda anosara musu wekufa*' (Your hands are slaves that should only rest at death) and '*Cheziya hachiurayi*' (The sweat of your labour sustains you to perpetuity) respectively. Only the gullible can allow themselves to be duped by fly-by-night prophets swarming the Church scene. Only consistent hard work pays in the end, Mhere subtly admonishes. Shameless endeavours to be rich overnight or miraculously, and also the avaricious drive for self-aggrandisement, manipulation and exploitation of the vulnerable by the political elite and religious leaders engender a hollow culture of covetousness and unproductive competition. Mhere also attacks the elite's hollow condescension in their dealings with the weaker members of society because everyone's life is but a shadow: '*Rangarira mwanawe-e uya wakabva kuvhu, mangwana anouya achadzokera kuvhu. Pamazuwa angu Mwari ndipei rudo nevamwe*'. This inclusivity is important because it calls upon the entire society to introspect individually their roles, contributions and responsibilities towards safeguarding individual and collective survival interests as further reiterated in the refrain of the rhetoric song '*Zino irema*' (A smile is a veneer of deception). *Zino irema* is a Shona proverb that means that smiles are deadly because they are dishd generously even to foes, misleading the recipients.

Mhere's song '*Zino irema*' becomes a social tool dissuading Zimbabweans to feign friendships, including forging dangerous alliances with pretentious partners dishd out smiles. Not every smile could be well-meaning. Relationships in these volatile times in the country's history should be held in suspicion and therefore approached with extreme caution. This includes friendships at all levels – family, party politics, church organisations and national. Such mechanical alliances could be tantamount to self-betrayal and complicit in Zimbabweans' own destruction as people blindly participate

in and initiate deals and alliances with aliens feigning sympathy and goodwill. Fusing both biblical and Shona philosophy, Mhere's song openly chides:

Ndisahwira wako here uyo? / Wauinaye ndisahwira wako here uyo? Hezekiah ndisahwira wako here uyo / Wauinaye Babylon ndisahwira wako here uyo?....

Anoita zino irema, kusekerera asingadi / kunyepera kunge kukuda mumoyo make akatsamwa / x3 wanouya samakwai, mumoyo wari mapere/Anouya nesetswa mumoyo ane utsinye / .. Ndisahwira wako here uyo? x3

Chinangwa chake kukuuraira basa raShe / Chinangwa kukuuraira ramangwana, Chinangwa chake kukuuraira chipo...Mwar wanozviona, wanozviona, wanozviona, Mwari wanozviziva, wanozviziva / Mweya wegodo watiurayira basa raShe...)

(Is that your bosom friend my brother/sister? He fakes a smile to hide his anger and evil intentions/He is a wolf in sheep skin, feigning friendship, but bent on destroying you/His aim is to destroy God's work, to destroy your talent/loot your resources and destroy your future/Is that your bosom friend I see you hosting?/..The omnipresent/omniscient and omnipotent God can neither be fooled nor deceived.)

The repetition of the caution *Ndisahwira wako here uyo* is deliberate, to make it ring in the hearts of the Zimbabwean audiences. Citing Kwaramba (1997), Chinouriri and Nyakudya (2015) argue: 'The text produced by a composer, for example, has an intended meaning that is negotiated and reinterpreted by the audience to make sense out of it, according to its social realities'. Vambe and Vambe (2006) similarly argue that through innuendo, the song can bring out what is not said, while through inflection, the song supplies an overflow of surplus or multiple meanings. Therefore, the image and symbol of Hezekiah's friendship and alliance with the Syrian king central to Mhere's song 'Zino irema' is critical. Mhere alludes to the foolishness of opening the secret chambers to foreign eyes scouting for resources and unsuspecting countries to pounce upon.

Likewise, references to Babylon symbolise blindly walking into captivity. Impliedly, these foreigners seeking alliances with most Zimbabweans at their weakest moment in history are motivated by ideological persuasions tangential to indigenous Zimbabweans' survival interests. Unwittingly, Zimbabwean politicians, elites and miracle seekers have opened the gates to crocodiles on the hunt. This ruins the entire future of Zimbabwe (Israel), as all resources, defence strategies and wealth are now public knowledge. Because people are most vulnerable when they are at their weakest point, the song attacks alliances of convenience, cautioning against self-annihilating practices in the long term. Hezekiah's admitted into our secret chambers spell future doom and destruction, because as the Shona philosophy warns – *mutorwa ane hanganwa*/ an alien always conveniently ducks to short memory as a duck takes to water. Narrow and restrictive individual whims for prosperity are superseded by those of *mhuri*, the larger whole of family/community/country, whose survival interests should be safeguard by any means necessary. Further, Mhere's earlier song 'Vimba naJehovha' on the album *Anoita Minana* warns against such self-centred alliances and intrigues

because they backfire, hence the need to depend entirely on God because people are fickle. Zimbabwean divisive political intrigues that account for the internal political turmoil and political violence offer ready examples. Internal party strife within the major political parties of Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the splintering Movement for Democratic Change (MDCs) can be equally critiqued. Even churches are splintering on account of individuals' hunger for power. The destiny of the collective should therefore not be sacrificed at the altar of self-aggrandisement. Mhere's functional use of gospel music lyrics is 'consistent with p'Bitek (1986: cover page) dictum – Artist the ruler' (Chidora 2015).

Mhere warns against alliances that will likely in the end destroy affinities and bonds at the level of family, organisation, church, political party, community, nation and country. The spiralling detrimental effect is subtle, and should therefore be nipped in the bud. The lyrics from the song 'Zino irema' are a direct attack on the naïve who take strangers to secret alleys, tunnels and sacred chambers in their castles, homes, or communities. Mhere, steeped in the indigenous philosophy of life of not baring all secrets to purported friends, likens such conduct to that of the Biblical King Hezekiah who foolishly took the Syrian kings into the most secret chambers of the Israeli palace. Yet, Syrians had always been arch-enemies of Israel, fighting over control of land and resources. Hezekiah, intoxicated by the purported bonds of friendship and defence alliances threw all caution to the wind, rendering Israel vulnerable to future attacks. Hezekiah's conduct was sacrilegious in view of the fact that Israel had entered into sacrilegious alliances disregarding divine leadership that had taken them to the land that they then occupied, and had to defend by the same means. Similarly, a short collective memory may lead Zimbabweans into similar snares if they forget their history and fail to contextualise their struggles and isolate pressing issues.

The inclusivity in the songs points towards the collective responsibility that every Zimbabwean carries for his or her continued survival. Mhere, hence, implores everyone to guard against wolves in sheep's clothing coming into the country to spy and forge secret alliances and then manipulate the Zimbabwean society, striking it at its core. For example, a West African proverb warns that when two brothers fight, it is the neighbour who picks up the spoils. While it needs no begging that it is human nature to fish in troubled waters, Zimbabweans are being warned to be on their guard. Yet, not everyone is a potential hazard and liability. Clearly discernible are the attacks on suspicious friendships and alliances, ranging from individual friendships, party political alliances and external relations that may lead the country into serious security problems. Mhere subtly warns Zimbabweans about the unforeseen potential dangers that could lead to self-annihilation in the long term after enjoying a few crumbs from these purported friendships.

'Pahushamwari' then, castigates those refusing to turn from their wicked ways, buying time to live luxuriously. The song highlights reasons for postponing repentance, such as the mirth in prostitution, the high life offered by affluent husbands, and the

intoxication of the senses that saw the destruction of the world in the time of Noah and Sodom and Gomorah respectively. Indirectly, Mhere's song draws on these biblical references to show the ephemeral nature of both pleasure and hardship because the Creator ultimately punishes all evil-doers. Even in Shona folklore vice is always punished, and virtue rewarded. These functional uses of art are worth noting. The need to remain focused and purposeful despite the hardships and machinations of detractors formulates the central theme in the song 'Vasiye Varonge' in Mhere's February 2015 album *Glory to Glory*. His exhortation to ignore detractors is especially critical. This offers practical advice, especially at a time when people are competing as church, community, family, political and national leaders. In the midst of the challenges that Zimbabweans are presently struggling against, it would be easy to lose focus and concentrate on trivial issues rather than dwell on matters for survival, matters for the common and general good. However, this does not align Mhere to propagandists for the establishment, rather, it marks him as a real gospel musician concerned with the greater good of the Zimbabwean society.

5. CONCLUSION

Because of the general quest for wholesome livelihoods, stability, survival and peaceful co-existence, gospel music composed by local artists in the local indigenous languages has made indelible inroads, drawing multitudes of followers. The article argues that Mhere's role as a musician is to critique society. In drawing from Biblical images and symbols and parallels from African lived philosophy of life, Mhere, however, makes room and allowances for people arriving at individual and or group interpretations, showing the respect and regard he has for his audiences. Whilst some may suggest that his lyrics are 'open-ended so that the audience finishes the work according to their own personal background, temperament and ideological disposition' (Chinouriri and Nyakudya 2015), the didacticism remains inherent throughout his songs.

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DISCOGRAPHY

- “Vimba naJehovha”
- “Favour naMwari”
- “Ziya rangu”
- “Zino irema”
- “Ephiziba”
- “Pahushamwari”
- “Vasiye varonge”