Pioneers of African Initiated Churches (AIC) as actors of
development: A case of Paulos Matsea Mureri of the United
African Apostolic Church (UAAC) and community
development

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Abstract. The role of Africans, those associated with African Initiated Churches (AIC), in
spreading the gospel, which contributed to human development, has not been fully recognized
even in the current political dispensation in South Africa. Most literature has given specific focus
to the western missionaries and their approach to the gospel has been widely accepted as the way
of the gospel. The establishment of AICs such as the United African Apostolic Church (UAAC)
initiated by Matsea Paulos Mureri display an unignorable phenomenon in terms of the
contribution he made as a gospel crusader and actor of development within and outside his
community. Through the seed that Matsea Paulos Mureri planted, the church has grown to over
a million members internationally. He comes from a generation that experienced the emergence
of the Pentecostal movements which shaped the African Initiated Pentecostal Churches (AIPC)
and they have survived a century of various marginalization. Unlike Evangelical and Pentecostal
movements, their contribution to human development has been recognized through their
contribution to education and health sectors. However, human development concept is much
broader. In terms of Paulos story, important questions are asked in reflection of some of the
challenges which continue to confront the AICs particularly in the area of succession. Like most
of the AICs, the UAAC has not been spared from disputes and splits which have confronted most
AICs since their inception. Some of the imperative questions asked is whether the leadership
conflicts and disputes which surround the AIC’s are real leadership disputes or are polygamous
conflicts which are disguised under church leadership battles. Secondly, a question is raised
about the contestation of two opposing cultures i.e. the African unwritten law versus the western
written law on the rights and privleges of adopted children in terms of succession. Although the
two question may sum up the kind of legacy that Matsea Paulos Mureri left in his quest to be a
gospel distributor, it does not erode his contribution to human development.

Keywords. Community development, Black Missionaries, human development

1. Introduction
The assertion by Crafford (1991) that “the story of the South African black
missionaries and pioneers of the 19th century has never been properly told” is not just truthful,
but rather an understatement. The limelight has been greatly awarded to white missionaries with blacks relegated to be the mission field whose contribution to the advancement of the gospel and its subsidiary programs have not been fully comprehended, particularly in the former Vendaland. As a result, only a handful of literature is found which seeks to trace the missional contribution made by black missionaries amongst their own people. When the gospel crusaders landed, they brought with them their approach to education and health systems.

When Africans welcomed the new approach, a hybrid model emerged as a combination between the African and Western approach to both education and health approaches. One of such people who advanced the gospel through his own interpretation is Matsea Paulos Mureri whose significant contribution to the advancement of the gospel amongst his people cannot go unnoticed. Despite his contribution, efforts to find a scholarly biography has since not yielded any results. This article argues that despite the lack of academic papers on his role amongst the Vhavenda, his contribution to human development should not be downplayed.

Paulos Matsea Mureri is a pioneer of the syncretic African Initiated Churches (AIC) established in the former Vendaland, now Vhembe District, Limpopo province of South Africa, called the United African Apostolic Church (UAAC) established in 1912. Anderson (2002) notes two types of AICs with one having a Pentecostal expression whilst the other having elements of traditional practices infused within their religious activities. Their common feature is their independence from Euro-Western control and/or oversight as they are ‘self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting’ (Anderson, 2002). At its birth, the UAAC was called Dzanda la Mudzimu. Dzanda is referred to sticks or wood packed and roped together, and Mudzimu means God. By 2021, the church has grown its followership to over a million members in South Africa and other countries combined. Paulos grew in close proximity to German’s missionaries, the Berlin missionaries who confessed the Lutheran faith, and they were gospel crusaders in the Zoutpansberg area, which include the Vendaland area. Venda people encountered people of colour as far back as 1820 with the arrival of Buys, a coloured family, who came from Botswana, and the white Voortrekker who arrived in 1836 led by Louis Trichardt.

There are several mission organisations which came into contact with the Zoutpansberg residents which include the Dutch Reformed Church in 1863, Berlin Missionaries in 1872, Swiss missionaries in 1875, the Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1905, Reformed Church (Gerformeerde Kerk in Venda) in 1910. The missionaries were the first to introduce the western education, health practices and the Tshivenda orthography to the indigenous people of the land. This was therefore followed by the expansion, sustenance of these programs and the introduction of other benefits which were no longer exclusive to the missionaries, but the indigenous people of the land made significant contribution. As a result, they therefore become part of the development which occurred. Although there are arguments of which missionaries introduced the gospel amongst the Venda people, evidence shows that by the time the missionaries landed in Vendaland in the 1860s, some among the Venda people had already converted to Christianity while working as migrant labourers in Natal and Cape Colony. This report maps the manner in which individuals, such as Paulos Matsea Mureri, advanced the gospel with novel ways to develop the people using his own interpretation of the gospel and blending it with his cultural orientation.

2. The Study in context

The existence, conservation, and continuance of AICs such as the UAAC for over 100 years correct the distortion that the advancement of the gospel in the Vendaland during the 19th
century is exclusively accredited to the Western Christian missionaries sent by the European missionary institutions. As Mafukata (2017) indicates, ‘indigenous Africans would not so often write their issues’ and therefore their imperative data disappear risking their experiences into myths. He further attributes this as a reason why African religiosity was regarded mostly as mythical by Westerners and Christian missionaries when they arrived on the continent. Important historical accounts have been dismissed in Africa – especially about Africans and Africa for lack of textualized information and records. This is even though some of these characters and stories would later emerge genuine (Mafukata, 2015b).

The result of this is that some of the events which were regarded as a myth were viewed as such on the basis of ignorance and misinformation. The contribution of African personalities in leadership, indigenous concept of development in education, health and social cohesion has mostly been downplayed and despised with the intention of promoting the Europeans through a Eurocentric approach to retelling African stories and history. Because of this approach, the African story has been told without its own iconic actors but promoted those of European origin as heroes and icons of the Africa history. As indicated by Mafukata (2017) Africa ended with the history of Europeans told in Africa as African history while issues of the indigenous Africans were never told anywhere.

Unfortunately, such narratives from socio-economic and political historical contribution extended to the advancement of Christianity. The growth and influence of this Christianity is told as if Africans themselves a mission field were just composed of recipients of the gospel without any positive role. However, Africans noticed such exclusions, and this prompted African scholars to begin to tell African stories in modern literature and scholarship. As a result, some literature (Kanu 2014b; Mokotso 2015) began to develop as early as the mid-1950s remarking on African philosophy, religions and cultures in general. The majority of these literatures focused on group issues, not individuals. This article also intends to make a contribution by displaying a story of an African as a contributor to development.

Marginalisation of minority groups

It has been observed that there has been a tendency in social research, particularly on philosophy, religion and culture to focus mostly on larger and dominant groups such as the Swazi, Pedi, Zulu and Xhosa (Boeyens 2012) while rendering the smaller groups such as the Tsonga, Venda, Ndebele insignificant. In South Africa, prior to 1994, it was even difficult to find any content televised in such languages. Although democratization brought in some changes, suppression of such languages particularly in the visual media has not been totally eradicated. As Mafukata (2017) indicates the histories of these smaller groups are therefore relegated to the periphery and ousted to the brink of extinction. However, even in areas where such history is recognized, it goes with historical distortions. Mabogo (1990) indicated that much of what has been written on the Vhavenda history is restricted to one or a few tribes while in addition “the available historical information on the Vhavenda is not only incomplete and one-sided, but also highly fragmentary.” This also suggest that the exclusion of the minority groups is not credited to western scholars and missionaries only, but is also excluded, ignored and distorted to undermine such groups even by fellow Africans with the objective of undermining such groups socially, economically and politically. Unfortunately, what follows this marginalization is ‘prejudicial attitudes and subsequent disrespect of the religions and cultures, while the entire Africa is penetrated by Western civilization (Kanu 2014b; Manus 2007; Mokotso 2015).
The Westernisation agenda disregarded African cultures, religiosity and religions and portrayed the peoples in Africa as being without religion or any culture (Amoah and Bennett 2008; Hassan 2015). It is for this reason that Mbiti (1969) defended the notion of Africans having had their own religion for centuries before the arrival of the Western missionaries and their Christianity citing that “wherever the African is, there is his religion. An African would carry his religion to his fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting new crops, he would take it to social gatherings such as funeral ceremonies; and he would take his religion with to the examination room at school or in the university; he would also take it to his workplace. This assertion strengthens the view that Africans have been highly religious because they too have their own religion (Agbiji and Swart, 2015).

This research found that Paulos also had a strong bond with his environment because his relocation to his final residence was in defense of the natural resources which were in danger due to the local leadership approach of dealing with a natural dilemma. The attitude of the Western missionaries dismantled the religion-cultural heritage of Africans until African peoples lost all their religious and cultural orientations (Hassan 2015; Kamwaria and Katola 2012; Kanu 2014b; Mokotso 2015; Nwoye 2011). The deception was consolidated within a notion ‘the Westerners brought and introduced religion to the African peoples who had no religion of their own’, yet indigenous Africans have had institutionalized religion with clearly defined logics of Supreme God(s).

As Kanu (2014b) indicates, by the time Western missionaries arrived in Africa, African indigenous peoples have been living over so many centuries in utmost consciousness and profound sense of their own deities, mysteries, sacredness and personal inclinations to the divine in their day-to-day life. There is evidence from reviewed literature that religion in Africa was not an invasion of the European missionaries. This was just a propaganda intended to brainwash African indigenous peoples to believe this systematic falsehood to “reduce all the indigenous beliefs to little more than animism and ancestor worship” (Amoah and Bennett, 2008) or mere primitivism; paganism; heathenism and practice of magic (Kanu, 2014b).

The marginalization of African religions by Western and Christian missionaries had a profound impact on the practice of religion in Africa. One visual key indicator is within the indigenous African Christianity, particularly the one characterized by the theology of prophesy and healing miracles, has been categorised as ‘practice of witchcraft’, ‘anti-civilization’ and ‘paganism’ by the missionaries (Ndung’u, 2009). Indigenous African personalities with spiritual gifts and supernatural miracles have for over the centuries been categorised as ‘messianic unchristian faith healers’ and ‘witchdoctors’ amongst others (De Visser, 2011; Fernandez, 2001; Khorommbi, 2001; Ndung’u, 2009). The danger that arises from this is the absolutization of a European perspective of religion and the subsequent recognition of its theology as being absolute and superior over African religion. As a result African indigenous perspective of religion and its subsequent theology are suppressed to a point of being rendered non-existing. A plethora of literature (Khorommbi, 1996; Khorommbi, 2001; Ndou, 1993) however began to emerge refuting this insinuation.

Modern Christian Church history in indigenous African communities such as Vendaland disregards and sidelines the role played by African indigenous individuals such as Paulos Matsea Mureri in the growth and expansion of Christianity in the region. Kumalo (2016) argued that “There is a need to tell the stories and experiences of the native missionary agents who were the first Christian educators in their communities. When we do that, we are not only liberating their silenced voices, but we are also liberating the contribution they made to the Africanization of the church which had initially been biased and in favour of Euro-centrism and
the denigration of African culture.” Kumalo (2016) further indicates that “It must not be assumed that the white missionaries alone were responsible for the conversion and conservation of African members. It is noteworthy that throughout the century of missionary advancement, it was often African converts who enthusiastically initiated new work in remote areas.” Based on Kumalo’s argumentation, this article demonstrates that African indigenous missionaries such as Matsea Paulos Mureri made significant contributions to social cohesion, growth and expansion of the work introduced by the missionaries in the region. The growth and development of his church, the UAAC, also came with the construction of church buildings, some of which benefits the community for their meetings and educational programs. This construction was done without external contribution unlike in missions orientated churches where such project would be solemnly or co-funded through external assistance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Method Adopted

The study followed a mixed approach known as integrating, which is a synthesis for amalgamation, and multi-methods as it combines the quantitative and the qualitative approaches of the study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). This is a multidisciplinary study which cuts across religion, culture and development. Unlike other literate preachers, Paulos Mureri did not keep a diary of events of his life and ministry and as result, this research relied on oral sources obtained from those who have known him personally, or heard of him, as his role in the establishment and advancement of the UAAC continue to be told.

Secondly, the study also considered the secondary data such as operational documents produced by the church. Given the nature of this research, this paper adopted the qualitative historical research design. As indicated by Hassan (2015), historical research design could “enable the researcher to systematically collect, evaluate, and describe data to explain, and understand actions or events that occurred sometime in the past” The story of Paulos Mureri, the establishment and advancement of the UAAC is about the actions and events that occurred in the past, with reflection on recent occurrences and it fits correctly to the chosen methodology. The adopted methodology of this study is reflected on Table 1.

Table 1. Research design for the study on Pioneers of the African Initiated Churches (AIC) as actors of development: A case of Paulos Matsea Mureri and the United African Apostolic Church (UAAC) and community development as guided by Mouton (2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of data collection</th>
<th>Design classification</th>
<th>Type of sampling</th>
<th>Data analysis and interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>Non-empirical, secondary, textual data</td>
<td>Non-probability, literature selected based on theoretical consideration</td>
<td>Mainly qualitative analysis with subjective interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured interviews of participants</td>
<td>Empirical, primary, textual data</td>
<td>Non-probability, purposive sampling of participants</td>
<td>Mainly quantitative analysis with objective interpretation</td>
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</table>
This method of oral histories is also advocated by Hassan (2015) and Boeyens (2012) who defines it as “memories and recollections of the individuals who experienced or witnessed in their own lives the events they relate.” Given this definition, this paper depended on key informants who provided memories and recollections of their personal experiences and witnesses of the life and exploits of Paulos Mureri and the evolution of the UAAC. Through ‘oral traditions,’ the context of Paulos Mureri was developed within the ‘recent past,’ ‘foundational accounts’ and the ‘middle periods’ categories of the ‘oral tradition’ approach. As Boeyens (2012) indicates, the ‘recent past’ allows the story to develop from recollection of events some generations back, and these events are then related and dated. This was applied on the story of Paulos Mureri’s case wherein sites are remembered and located. This is because some of the issues happened a while back and therefore necessitates this approach. Although the story of Paulos Mureri reveals significant mythical references, the ‘foundational accounts’ approach provides this research with a best way possible to address identified mythical characterisations of this story.

The ‘floating gap’ or ‘middle periods’ as defined by Boeyens (2012) is the period between the ‘distant mythical past’ and the ‘recent past and it allows for the analysis of the events. The justification for this approach is used for a story that lacks archived material and sources for data collection. This necessitates a departure from common methodological approach of document analysis as adopted by both Brock (2003) and Nwoye (2011) in similar studies needed reconstruction of the storyline.

3.2. **Study Area**

The study was conducted mainly in the Vhembe District Municipality which is located at the North-western tip of South Africa in the Limpopo Province. The district borders Zimbabwe in the north and Botswana on the northwest. Through the Kruger National Park the Vhembe District also borders Mozambique on its Eastern side. Within South Africa the Kruger National Park to the east, the Mopani District to the Southeast, and the Capricorn District to the Southwest border the Vhembe District.

![Figure 1: Map of Vhembe District Municipality showing municipalities where the UAAC churches predominantly located](image)

3.3. **Sampling Procedure**

A list of the names of those who had known and worked with Paulos Mureri was compiled through snowball sampling techniques. These informants were found scattered around villages such as Pile, Tshino, Ngovhela, Tshithuthuni, Mauluma, Thohoyandou, Makhado, Ha-
Mavhunga, Thembisa, Milaboni, Beitbridge, Khalavha, Mulodi, Mangodi, Malamulele, and many more. These are the areas where the respondents are residing and have established similar AIC’s and/or African Independent Pentecostal Churches (AIPC). After moving around these areas for approximately three months attempting to locate some of the identified possible informants, it became evident that the pool of those who had lived and personally interacted with Paulos were limited. Firstly, because of the succession conflicts which ravaged the UAAC in recent years after the death of Elias Mureri who led the church for 40 years until 2018.

The succession conflicts also created mistrust in providing information due to continuous litigation processes. Secondly, some of the possible informants had died while others could simply not be traceable. Amongst those still alive, there were others who could only remember insignificant information which could not have assisted the research objectives. Finally, only a few informants were found to be credible to provide reliable, logical, traceable, authentic, and valid data.

3.4. Data Collection

Individual interviews were subsequently conducted with the selected participants as key informants. Key Informant Interviews (KII) were preferred over Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) because of the distance complexities between the sources and the Covid19 protocols. Most of the identified KII were considered vulnerable according to the Covid19 protocols and they could not be exposed as they are considered to be high risk. It could not be possible to conduct Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) for data collection because of constraints related to Covid19 protocols although it was a desirable approach at the inception of this study. Although Key Informant Interviews (KII) were still opportune and effective enough to supply the required reliable, authentic and valid data, the element of discomfort was detected particularly with reluctance to talk about the recent succession conflicts. Data from the interviews were recorded as field notes for analysis and collected data was compared and matched for similarity. Unmatched and non-correlating data were discarded as being unreliable because its reliability and validity could not be guaranteed.

3.5. Data Processing

During the interviews, some crucial observations were made. For instance, some similar data between sources emerged although it could be deduced that some of that data could have easily made entry into the story of Paulos Mureri, however, not necessarily having had happened. As a result, the researcher was cautious of what Mafukata (2015a) indicated quoting O’Brien et al. (2004), advising historiographers and ethnographers that “history stands or falls on the researcher’s ability to obtain a range of reputable and credible sources of evidence.” As a result, in instances where such dilemma arises, it was not possible to reject and discard data based on the researcher’s ‘doubts.’ This was in line with O’Brien et al. (2004) who argued that “Each researcher will have his or her own set of criteria for accepting a piece of evidence as relevant and credible.” Data illustrating Paulos Mureri’s exploits which could not have happened in the other village(s) for the other respondents to have known about them, were found to be consistent to his known exploits and accepted into the data base. This approach is also argued by O’Brien et al. (2004) who argued that there is a huge possibility that certain not so reliable or valid data may ‘enter into the process’ (Mafukata, 2015a). In the main report, such data is highlighted and similar data emerging between sources, which did not appear as being authentic, but easily made entry into the story of Paulos Mureri over the years was also highlighted.
3.6. Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected data involved identification of certain patterns and themes reflected in it; the data coded and synthesized as proposed by (Hassan, 2015). There emerged substantial data which had to be discarded because of unreliability. Accepted data were developed and written into this report as presented below.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Paulos family background

Paulos Matsea Mureri’s family comes from Dzwaini (Thavhani ya Muno – mountain of salt) where the traditional Venda restation song “Ndo bva na tshidongo tsha nama” originated from. It is the same area that Kirkaldy (2002) indicate that the Voortrekker temporality established themselves with their first main base being on the western side of the mountain at the saltpan which was later named Zoutpansberg and now Soutpansberg. His family is linked to Vhatwanamba clan and he comes from Muleya lineage. Paulos’s father was Gadisi, and he was a traditional healer (maine) and because of the herbs which mainly comes from trees, he was then nicknamed ‘Ramiri’ - ‘the tree man’ which later became Miriri – coming from Miri (trees). However, overtime, due to Paulos preaching, another version of the surname emerged as Mureri (the preacher). In the modern days, members of this family use either of the two versions i.e. Miriri and/or Mureri. Paulos grew in Dzhokolwe, a village next to Khunda in the Nzhelele valley. His Christian faith brought conflict between him and his father Gadisi.

4.2. Conflicts of faith

Christian faith landed in Vendaland in the mid to late 1800 (Kirkaldy, 2010). Before then, Venda people were dependant on their ancestral gods. Paulos ‘father Gadisi was also a traditional healer who subscribed to traditional faith. As indicated by Munyai (2007), Vhavenda regards traditional healer as a religious person whose purpose is to find out the needs of the spiritual ancestors including establishing matters which displeased the ancestors. Parrinder (1962) view them as specialists who diagnose diseases and prescribe a solution by means of inspiration and manipulation of objects through various techniques. Some amongst them are regarded as the diagnosticians who has the ability to prescribe traditional medicine to cure diseases. Mbiti (1969) also regard them as specialists due to their knowledge and skills in various categories although some of them overlap. Amongst the Vhavenda, traditional healers have been, and continue to be the greatest source of help even amongst some who profess to be Christian.

It is not known if Paulos’s father ever came into contact with Christian’s fellows who recruited him to their faith. However, there are historical evidence of family conflicts created by introduction of the new religion, particularly Christian faith in some families (Kirkaldy, 2005). In the case of Paulos and his father Gadisi, their difference was not based only on the contestation of beliefs, but on the enterprise operation and competition between the faiths. This is so because consultations with traditional healers are not freely provided, and the same trend has been recently observed in prophetic ministries.

Although their disagreements are said to have become clear when Paulos started receiving people coming to consult him on their problems, and after he helped them, he did not demand and/or expect compensation and/or payment, but the co-existence of the two religions was naturally going to be disastrous. The co-existence and non-payment did not settle well with his father, whose practice as a traditional healer required people to compensate him for his services. Paulos operations started to gain popularity and people flocked for free services. The
competition of services created conflict between Paulos and his father. When their differences advanced, his father chased him away. Paulos then relocated to Milaboni village where he established himself and that’s the area where his ministry gained more popularity amongst the Vhavenda people.

Paulos later relocated to Ha-Mavhunga village, after his sharp disagreements with Chief Nyamananga. It is in Ha-Mavhunga where Chief Mavhunga inaugurated him as a Mukoma (steward) of Mavhunga village. This is the village where he established himself and even built a modern church building of that time, and he stayed there until his death in 1975.

4.3. Family life

There is an African proverb that says “it takes a village to raise a child” which means that an entire community of people must provide for and interact positively with children for those children to experience and grow in a safe and healthy environment. Paulos was not different from the society that natured him. He grew up observing the culture, customs and tradition observed by his people. It is evident that Paulos was shaped by the environment under which he grew-up. One of the monumental and visible characteristics of the Vhavenda community was their family structures where polygamous family arrangements was a normal practice which is still acceptable even in the recent times. It should be noted that marrying more than one wife is a cultural practice among Vhavenda people. The causes of this practice are diverse as they include economic emancipation, adultery avoidance, migrant labour, cultural practice, bareness, and sexual outlets.

Given the social arrangements and practices of the Vhavenda people, this practice was more prevalent during the times of Paulos upbringing. Although there is evidence of decline which can be accredited to the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements which discouraged these kinds of practices, it is still widely embraced by members of the AICs, particularly the Zionists and the apostolic groups. The impact of this cultural orientation is therefore seen in Paulos family structure. Paulos had three wives, the first one known as Vhakoma who was married in 1899 coming from Shanzha, Ha-Shavhani, from the Bugana clan, in a western style wedding (UAAC, 2020). The name Vhakoma is actually not a personal name, but a title which is given to a village steward and/or the mother of a chief or leader. This has been an indigenous novel way to build and empower women in a traditional sense. It is not clear how she ultimately adopted this name.

The second wife was Vho-Flora (Florence) and the third wife was Vho-Louisa (Louis). Vhakoma had two children – a son known as Jeremiah and a daughter known as Rebecca. The second wife, Vho-Flora (Florence) had four children i.e., two daughters in the name of Magi and Betty, and two sons in the name of Obed and David. The third wife was Vho-Louisa who had three sons being Titus, Sathiel and Ephraim. The above shows that Paulos had three wives, Vhakoma, Florance and Lousa and nine children being, Jeremiah, Rebecca, Magi, Betty, Obed, David, Titus, Sathiel and Ephraim. It is also understood that Paulos had other children outside his household.

4.4. His Christianity conversion

Paulos was considered an intelligent person amongst his people because he used to interact with the Germans missionaries and they also used him as a translator when they communicated with the indigenous people of the land. His proximity to the white men in a black community earned him respect amongst his people because it was rare to see a white man in a
predominantly black community. Therefore, whoever was able to communicate and interact with them would then be regarded as a very intelligent person.

His conversion to Christianity came through the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa (ELCSA), a church which was linked to the Berlin Mission Society. Accordingly, Berlin Mission Society was established in 1824 as a society to promote evangelical or protestant missions by the Prussian notables (Munyai, 2007). These missionaries found their way to Soutpansberg and they ultimately settled themselves in the area. The accommodation of missionaries was regarded as an honour by Venda traditional leaders as it paved the way for the establishment of schools and the prospective supply of weapons. One of the Berlin missionaries who has left recognisable footprint in the area of education is Carl Beuster. As a leaner within that school, Paulos was a regular attendee of their religious services. His interests in their religious activities landed him a role of an interpreter/translator of the missionaries. A combination of his charisma and intelligence made Paulos to gradually become a resourceful person amongst the missionaries in their quest to convert the heathen Venda people to Christianity.

The identification of a gift amongst the Vhavenda by missionaries was also confirmed by Ndou (2000) who narrated an account of Johannes Mutshaeni who was even sent for training in the evangelical and mission work. Mutshaeni was ordained as an evangelist and he was an asset in the establishment of posts such as Khalavha, Mandala and Tshamanyatsha. It is not surprising that Paulos also was one of those identified to a point of being ordained within the Lutheran Church in 1899, the very same year he was married to his first wife (UAAC, 2020). Although there are no records of direct interaction between Paulos and Beuster, one can assume that Paulos knew about Beuster since he was a key missionary until his death in 1901. Paulos did not stay long after the death of Beuster as it is said that he later joined the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) in 1904. The period of joining the AFM is disputable as the AFM was established in 1908. However, there are other Pentecostal movements which preceded the establishment of the AFM.

4.5. Pentecostalism and the birth of African Independent Churches (IAC)

It should be noted that Pentecostalism began in different parts of the world (Creech, 1996), including the United States (Roll, 2004; Synan, 1997), Europe (Synan, 2012), Africa (Anderson, 2005), and Asia (McGee, 1999), in the early period of the twentieth century. However, the Pentecostalism that flowed to South Africa is linked to John Alexander Dowie because in 1895, a former Baptist preacher established a church in Johannesburg, which later joined the Christian Catholic Church in Zion founded by Dowie in Zion City, Chicago. In 1904, a missionary was sent to oversee the South African work, which was already showing signs of growth (Anderson, 2001). In 1908, Pentecostal missionaries, John Graham Lake and Thomas Hezmalhalch, established the Apostolic Faith Mission in Johannesburg. Many members of Dowie’s church joined the Apostolic Faith Mission, but racial segregation created breakaway churches, including the Catholic Apostolic Holy Spirit Church in Zion, founded around 1910, and the Zion Apostolic Faith Mission, founded in 1920 which was also joined by Engenas Lekganyane who later established the Zion Christian Church (Anderson, 2000; Anderson, 2001).

Although Paulos was introduced to Christianity through his school attendance, he later joined the AFM of South Africa and that’s where some of his skills were used. He earned a good reputation within the AFM due to his skills and charisma. During his time in the AFM, he grew closer to people like Engenus Lekganyane, who later founded the largest AIC in South
Africa. Although Paulos’s followers claim that Lekganyane was baptised by Paulos, Lekganyane claimed to have followed this vision, and went to Boksburg and met two Zionist preachers, the Mahlangu brothers, in 1912, who then baptized him using the Zionist method of "triple immersion" and curing his eyesight ailment in the process (Moripe, 1996).

The friendship between Paulos and Lekganyane was also seen when Lekganyane wanted to advance his church in the Vendaland area. The ZCC was unknown in the area and the traditional leaders – ‘Mahosi’ - were reluctant to allow such a church to be established in their land, but it was Paulos who mobilized, negotiated and convinced them to allow Lekganyane to establish his church in their villages because of his relationship with Lekganyane. To date, ZCC membership can be traced in almost every village in the Vendaland area.

Both Paulos and Lekganyane ultimately left the AFM with intention to establish churches which resonate with their African culture and they both focused in their ethnic groups at the start of their churches as Paulos focused in the Vendaland while Engenus focused in Lebowa, a predominantly Pedi speaking community. It is said that they both felt that the AFM was too white in its approach and they wanted a church that will recognise their African culture. As Munyai (2007) indicates, the rise of independent churches was due to the failure of mainstream churches to religious and cultural needs of their converts as some traditional and cultural aspects were not sufficiently incorporated in the mainstream churches. This view is attributed to the fact that the gospel was preached from the cultural context of the preacher, in this case it has been the European and American missionaries, with African culture treated as inferior, primitive and to a certain extent, demonic. As Munyai (2007) indicates, the coexistence of the African Traditional Religion and Christianity has been a major contributing factor to the birth, growth and development of the Zionist syncretic religion. In recognising the AIC approach to life, Munyai indicates that:

“The AIC’s are pragmatic with regard to contextualising Christianity in African culture. They are practical and down to earth in their beliefs, doctrine and responses to the problem of the African congregations. They preach a brand of Christianity that is deeply rooted in African traditional culture and flexible enough to respond to the local people’s needs. The worldview of the members is taken into consideration in their beliefs such as forces of evil, malevolent spirits, witches and wizards. They also engage in interpretation of dreams and visions. Their solutions to problems are varied, including rituals, exorcism, prayer, fasting, and bathing in flowing streams or the rivers.”

Some of these practices are similar to practices which are conducted by traditional healers in their quest to address ailments of their clients. Paulos, as a son of a traditional healer, would relate better with these kinds of operations and practices. The second reason for their departure from the AFM was the AFM position on spiritual matters such prophecies. Although Paulos had a prophetic spirit, he was not referred to as prophet. Although part of AFM emphasis is on faith healing, to this date, the prophetic ministry has not gained much recognition as the only recognised portfolio is that of a pastor.

Although the first and the second reasons were emphasised as the basis of Paulos departure from the AFM, it is imperative to note that the missionaries recognised monogamy as the only acceptable form of marriage amongst the Christians, and anything beyond that would not find space within their circles. This presents a third reason for the departure of many Africans from the mission established churches to establish AIC movements. The missionary’s response to polygamy led to formation of AICs such as the Nazarene Baptist Church of Isaiah Shembe, the Zion Christian Church of Engenus Barnabas Lekganyane, and others. In as far as
polygamy is concerned, AIC’s are the only churches where polygamists are widely recognised and accepted without restrictions. This trend was also identified amongst the respondents of this study.

As indicated by Daneel (1987) the Old Testament is of a particular interest on the aspect of polygamy because it resonates well with the African worldview in terms of sexuality, infertility, ancestors, polygamy, land and host of other cultural and religious similarities. Amongst the Vhavenda, polygamy enhances the social status of the husband as he is regarded as a wealthy man and his social status is regarded as being above the monogamists. This is so because if such a man has many daughters, he is likely to get a lot of cattle which shall be received as lobola (dowry) when his daughters are married. Polygamous marriages also were used as a means for the labour force in the fields, and whoever was able to feed this kind of family structure would be highly respected. Western culture and missionary Christianity were problematic to most Africans because it tempered with this worldview, and the AIC establishments were an encounter against the imposed Western culture and white church practice to the African way of life and values.

4.6. Paulos’s ministry amongst the Vhavenda

One of the factors that characterise the AIC is the faith healing which they have adopted from the Pentecostal movements. Sickness and healing are integral part of human wellbeing and as Sullivan (1987) indicates, in most parts of the world, religion and healing are inextricably linked. Most of the respondents also advanced their reasons for joining the AIC and their continuous loyalty to the same church as the fact that they received healing in the same church, and they therefore feel indebted to the same church.

Paulos ministry was also centred in faith healing as his main spiritual gift. This explains the prophetic gift, although it was less pronounced, as the two gifts are usually found operating together. Several of the respondents also confirmed their personal experiences of healing from Paulos ministry. Although their interaction with Paulos ceased in his passing in 1975, they continued to hold him in highest regard as a faith healer. Their loyalty to the church is also attributed to their healing experiences because they consider the church as the place where their lives were saved.

It is said that Paulos healing powers also attracted people as far as Eswatini including King Sobhuza II of Eswatini. Locally, King Frans Rasimphi Tshivhase did not understanding Paulos’s ministry well, particularly prophesy and healing through prayers. In his worldview, healing could only happen if there is medication – traditional and/or modern. Tshivhase tricked Paulos by putting a marula fruit in his cheeks claiming to be swollen. He then asked for prayer from Paulos. However, Paulos told Tshivhase that he had no sickness in his body, but just playing funny tricks. A story is told of Paulos praying for the horse that Tshivhase used to travel with which was injured, and it was healed from its broken leg. The healing of animals through prayer is in consistent with the story of Abel Mphagi who is alleged to have been baptised by Paulos (Mafukata, 2015)

One respondent recalls of the circumstances that led to the baptism of his father in 1919 in Milaboni village. The respondent’s father took his brother-in-law, the respondent’s uncle, who was mentally ill and brought him for prayers to Paulos. Paulos explained the dangerousness of the spirits that are possessing the patient and indicated that there is a possibility that when these spirits are chased away, they may possess the respondent’s father because he is not a believer. However, to protect himself from being possessed by these spirits, he would have to be baptized so that the mental sickness tormenting his brother-in-law should
not possess him. Out of fear and/or compassion towards his brother-in-law, the respondent’s father was baptized. His baptism marked the Christendom conversion of his family which has now lasted for over a century adopted by several generations thereafter.

4.7. Socio-economic development and benefits

The establishment of UAAC has brought with it socio-economic benefits to the members, business enterprises located in the vicinity of where the church is established, and the community where the church is established. One of the visible features within the UAAC is that the church has adopted the construction of modern church buildings which are also accessible for community to use. In some communities, the church buildings are used as gathering centres for training and capacity building activities, whereas others are used for different community meetings. In addition, others are using the building as centres for Education Childhood Development (ECD) and drop-in centres, yet others are made accessible as study centres in preparation for exams by leaners at the community. The church has adopted a preaching model that involves everyone, and this model has produced public speakers.

Secondly, the church has also adopted a social responsibility programme with the following programmes statement – “Community outreach to the needy is at the centre of the church doctrine. To this end, the church conducts social responsibility functions on an annual basis where food parcels, clothes, equipment and other items are offered to specific orphanages or homes of the needy” (UAAC, 2020). Their projects are spread between Limpopo and Gauteng provinces. Another visible feature of the church is its adopted uniform attire which has different categories based on gender, age and leadership roles within the church. Unlike in ZCC where the manufacturing of the uniform and other church products is exclusively protected, the UAAC uniform can be produced by anyone with a skill of producing such materials. Therefore, the economic beneficiation of the church uniform is not exclusive but spread along different entrepreneurs who may not even subscribe their membership to the church.

The UAAC has also adopted what Stark (2009) describes as religious tourism. Religious tourism is a form of tourism that is conducted at religious sites and often includes aspects of religious worship. Thus, a religious tourist is someone who engages in tourism but does so at religious sites. Rinschede (1992) also indicates that religious tourism is a genre of tourism that is exclusively or strongly motivated for religious reasons. This involves a dynamic element – movement in space, a journey, as well as by a static element – a temporary stay at a place other than the place of residence. The pilgrims mainly attend this gathering for the purpose of attaining blessings. These gatherings bring with them economic benefits as the visitors will need transportation, accommodation, food, etc.

A study by Gyekye et al (2014) estimated an attendance of over hundred thousand people in one gathering where members of the church congregate in Ha-Mavhunga village for their annual conference in September. This study indicates that the economic benefits drawn from this gathering extend from formal to informal businesses such as hawkers and vendors. During this gathering, it is revealed that there is a sharp increase of sales which results in local entrepreneurs benefiting from this establishment.

4.8. Paulos and his fond of nature

It is said that Paulos was mostly followed by various types of birds wherever he resides. Although this is explained as part of mystery, it could be that he fed them given that the livelihoods during Paulos’s time was sustained through agricultural production. Secondly, birds are delicacy amongst the Vhavenda people. They even developed several means of catching the
birds as part of feeding themselves. An incident is told of his unceremonious relocation from Milaboni village to Ha-Mavhunga village. Milaboni village was under the headmen Nyamananga who had a field of crops where he planted millet.

Chief Nyamananga was worried that birds are devouring his produce and he started shooting birds with his rifle gun. When the message about the killing of birds landed in Paulos ears, he confronted Chief Nyamananga about it, protesting about the killing of the birds. A sharp disagreement erupted between the two and ultimately, Chief Nyamananga exercised his authority by expelling Paulos from his land. This shows how Paulos related to the environment that surrounded him such that he could give up his homestead which he worked hard to build. He even disregarded the risk of disorientating his clients be relocating to a new area, let alone the cost of re-establishing himself. When Tshivhase learned about the feuds between Paulos and Nyamananga, he suggested to Paulos that he should relocate to Makonde or Matangari villages, which were areas under Tshivhase Traditional Council. But Paulos rejected that offer and went to Ha-Mavhunga village as it was a village under the leadership of his cousin Ha-Mavhunga.

4.9. A mysterious man

In Milaboni village, that’s where Paulos’ ministry work grew tremendously. It is said that, when people came for prayer, Paulos would also send them to go fetch water from the nearby river for prayer purposes. If the sent person is possessed with witchcraft spirit, he/she would return with an empty calabash, but if the sent comes back with water, it was a sign that such a person does not practice witchcraft.

Another story is told by a woman who claims that Paulos prayed for her husband who was dead, and he resurrected. She started fellowshipping in the UAAC church around 1943 when she was 17 years. Her coming to the church was after she received healing from a long sickness. She grew in the church, and ultimately got married to Johannes Nemakanga. When her husband got sick, she felt helpless until she sourced assistance from some village men to carry her husband from Lukau (an area where the University of Venda is currently occupying) to Milaboni to be prayed for by Paulos. This is a distance of over 20km through mountains and valleys. However, on arrival Paulos refused to pray for him because he said, “how can they bring a body whose spirit is left in his house”.

They had to carry him back to Lukau to call conduct a ritual of calling back his spirit, and thereafter carry him back to Milaboni village, and the Paulos attend to him. After the prayer her husband came back to life and such an incident strengthened her faith, not just in the Christian God, but also in the UAAC church and Paulos as a spiritual leader. During his ministry, Paulos is said to have baptised a lot of people in the rivers. Another story is told of a day when he was baptising people in one of the rivers in Musina. On that day, it is said that the river stopped flowing and the water piled up, more like the biblical story of the Israelites crossing the red sea. It is said that on that day, Paulos prayed until people alleged that his tongue is cut because he could no longer utter words from his mouth. He walked day and night preaching in different villages. It is said that at night he would even sleep in the sand because he had nowhere to sleep. Due to his travelling between South African and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Paulos grew the church between the two countries.
4.10. **Ministry leadership and administration**

As Daneel (1988) indicates, AIC are mostly initiated by charismatic leaders and the unity of the church in the early stages revolves around the founder. In most cases he will serve in various responsibilities such as being a priest, a shepherd, a judge, a prophet, healer, baptizer, etc. It is mostly when the ministry grows that the leader will then begin to delegate some responsibilities by establishing hierarchical structures to assist in other responsibilities. However, one unique tendency in this arrangement will be to parachute family members to occupy key positions.

As a result, these churches tend to become dominated by family members at the leadership positions.

As the work grew, Paulos introduced a leadership council. This is also in line with traditional leadership arrangements where a leader will be surrounded by council members. Paulos church council included, but not limited to, the following people: – Mphagi, Nemaungani, Nekhararu, Mahafha, Tshikunde, Fhodzi, Madanda, Tshimeemee, Ralutendele, Munzhelele, Dalani, Ramasunzi, Nemulalate, Ramalamula, Khaphathe. Nemaungani was given Vhukalanga District which expanded the church in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), while Mahafha was allocated the whole of Venda. Nekhararu was responsible of Tshikhuwani area (Which included Gauteng and some parts of Northwest province which had links with Gauteng). Raluonde was responsible for collecting tithe from the Tshikhuwani area.

As Paulos was already advancing in age, it is said that in 1963 Paulos instructed his son Obed to induct his younger brother David on the welcoming protocol of guests. Paulos had established a protocol on how visitors should be received. This protocol is similar to the existing protocol observed when visitors arrive at a traditional leader’s royal house. The protocol would be that a visitor will be welcomed and hosted in a certain chamber where he/she will explain the reasons for their visits to the person who welcomes them. The visitors would be screened through interviews by the person who welcomes them, and this is the same protocol which Paulos wanted his son David to learn. Thereafter, the visitor would be announced to Paulos after due consideration of his programme. He would then prepare himself to meet the guest. The guest would then be summoned to meet with Paulos. At times Paulos may not even meet the guest, but rather pray for David and issue prescriptions of what the guest should do without seeing him/her. This was also confirmed by several respondents who indicated that David was very close to his father Paulos.

In March 1967, Paulos gathered his family to inform them of his death wish. Amongst others things said, he pronounced his son David to be the one who will inherit the homestead, which has been used as a gathering point for conferences and take over the church leadership as he has trained him to do so. In that meeting, it is said that there was no objection expressed from any of his family members including his wives and children. But, the non-objection does not mean that all the recipients of the message were in agreement with the sentiments shared by Paulos. On the same year, in September 1967, as they were closing their church conference, Paulos gathered his church leaders and made the same pronouncement and the announcement was welcomed by his church council. Some of the respondents confirmed to have been part of the meeting where such announcement was made by Paulos. But the manner in which Paulos wanted the succession issue to be handled, would soon display a diversion from traditional leadership phenomenon which most of the AICs subscribe to. Although the succession would mostly target the offspring of the leader, there are hierarchal considerations. First, in terms of the seniority of the wives who happened to be the mother of the successor, secondly the gender as certain roles are exclusively meant for men, and thirdly the age of the successor.
4.11. The battle of succession and inheritance

As Matshobane and Masango (2020) indicates, succession can be a challenge in AIC as they do not have a rotation system, which transfers ministers from one congregation to the next after a specified period. Unlike in African Independent Pentecostal Churches (AIPC) where pastors can retire or be removed mostly due to moral failure, or even incompetence, succession in AIC is triggered by the death of the leader. Succession by death is most prominent in independent churches, especially in the case of founders. As a result of death of a leader, succession becomes an emergency with various parties having conflicting interests.

When succession is not successfully handled, it becomes contentious and ends up tarnishing the image of the congregation. In the recent years, the battle for leadership succession in South African AICs has been featuring in the public domain in recent years including the UAAC. After the death of Paulos in 1975, the battles of leadership started playing itself out despite the alleged pronouncement of succession by Paulos prior to his death. It started as a battle of occupying the homestead where Paulos was residing, which is the official headquarters of the church. Elias, the first-born son of Jeremiah, together with his brother Philemon relocated to Ha-Mavhunga village to occupy the homestead of their grandfather Paulos. They chased Florance, Paulos’ second wife and her children. Elias and Philemon, the sons of Jeremiah, traded on the authority of their grandmother as the first wife of Paulos. In a polygamous relationship, the wives do not carry equal rights, authority, and privileges as there are hierarchies. This mostly outplay when the family is confronted by the death of the husband. The death of a household leader, including that of an AIC church is followed by schisms. Daneel (1988) also indicate that AIC rely on traditional law, which is not codified but open to manipulation to advance certain interests. The first wife would have elderly children who are likely to dominate the children of the other wives. In some instances, other children born of the other wives maybe at the age of the grandchildren from the first wife. There are instances where the other wives would even be younger than the children of the husband, hence social dominance would mostly be carried by the children and grandchildren of the first wife. This is so with Paulos family where the grandchild, Elias, dominated the situation to a point of evicting Paulos’s second wife from the homestead.

4.12. Leadership dynamics

David was still too young to ascend the position of being a leader of the church. This created a leadership gap, and the church was led by a church council for a little while. Considering that the church had adopted some cultural protocols informed by the traditional leadership protocol, it was justifiable for the leadership to consider adopting the same protocol in resolving the leadership gap by appointing an acting leader amongst Paulos’s sons given that David was still young to assume the position. Such an acting leader would be there until such time that the council would be satisfied with the fitness of David to assume the position. Although this has created many conflicts in the traditional leadership, the same practice is still existing where an acting leader would be appointed to act until the confirmed leader is fit to assume leadership responsibility. There is evidence of chieftaincies that divided because the acting leader refused to hand over the reins to the rightful leader when the time arrives. Amongst the Venda people, there is a saying that goes “Vhuhosi a vhu thetshelwi” which is a caution statement against having a taste of the thrown through acting arrangements, as there could be a temptation to insist on continuing despite the expiry of the acting arrangements.

However, unlike the traditional community leadership, church leadership will demand additional requirements such as the faith convictions of the person who should act in the
positions. With the adopted cultural orientation, Jeremiah, the firstborn son of Paulos would be expected to occupy the position as a successor to his father, but because Paulos had declared David as a successor, Jeremiah could not assume that responsibility. Secondly, Jeremiah was not a Christian, and he was a well-known beer consumer whose behaviours were not in consistent with the message of the church. That totally threw him outside the favours of those who would want the position to be filled immediately. When it became apparent that Jeremiah would not succeed his father Paulos, Elias, the firstborn son of Jeremiah concocted a plan whereby he brought his father Jeremiah in a conference in 1976. He mobilised a group of some members and they presented Jeremiah as a new leader of the church.

This came as a shock particularly to the family members and church leaders who knew about the succession plan presented previously to them by Paulos. Unfortunately, Jeremiah did not live long thereafter as he passed away the same year. Elias noticed the sickness of his father few months before the conference, and he dragged his father to the conference, dressed him with church regalia and pronounced him as the rightful new leader of the church. This was viewed as a well-calculated move because it was widely accepted that when the father dies, the next person to take the reins is the first-born son. When Jeremiah died, it was justifiable to have Elias as a successor of his father. Elias then mobilised some leaders to have him declared as a leader of the church. Being aware of the succession declarations by Paulos, his grandfather, Elias initially presented himself as an acting leader. Elias led the church for 40 years i.e. 1978-2018. However, this angered some church members and leaders including family members. As a result, several breakaways were hatched because of that division and the matter was even taken to court but was later withdrawn.

Elias was not appointed by the church council or through family resolution, but rather declared himself a leader of the church immediately after chasing Florence and her children. Although this was difficult for David and his siblings to absorb, he was too young to fight the battle and he ended up consoling himself by saying – “Ndo dzhielwa maanda, fhedzi kereke ndi ya khotsianga” which means “power has been snitched from me, but it is my father’s church.” Elias leadership was not widely accepted by the family and some leaders who were aware of Paulos succession declarations.

The church elders and some family members were offended with this action as it was never agreed in any of their engagements on matters of succession. The tension was also aggravated by the fact that Jeremiah, Elias’s father, was not a convert, let alone a church attendee or a member of the church. Although the matter was even taken to court, but later withdrawn as others conceded to support Elias instead of fighting him. Some respondents viewed Elias as a good mobiliser who mobilized support around himself and pushed away those who carried a different view. Elias died in 2018 and the succession battle resurfaced. The death of Elias presented a second opportunity to David to ascend to the leadership. However, another grouping did not agree with that and wanted Itani, the adopted son of Elias’s first wife, to be the one who should occupy the leadership. This presents a question of equality of rights and privileges of adopted children between the customary and civil laws. Given the fact that the disputes are still in progress, this paper did not cover the current conflicts and disputes.

5. Conclusions

Although AIC’s not yet recognised as active actors in community development, the case of Paulos identifies imperative elements of community development birthed out an AIC. The role played by AIC’s is goes beyond the provision coping mechanisms in adverse environments, support in social transformation and social capital, little information is available
on their role as development actors. The objective of this paper was to provide a synopsis of an African contributor to the spreading of the gospel, which was inclusive of development, using his own African interpretation and approach to the gospel. His approach to the gospel displays a combination of various approaches which he gathered from different denominations he attend at the early stages of his life. This includes his association with Evangelicals such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church and Pentecostals such as the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa. Their approach to the gospel was not just religious, but it was intertwined with human development.

With experiences gathered from both Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, Paulos added his African flavour to his approach to the gospel and therefore detached from the gospel which was influenced by the cultural orientation of the white missionaries. His model and approach found favour amongst the people such that there is a continuous cemented loyalty amongst the members of his UAAC establishment because they are comforted by the fact that this kind of church addresses their daily life situations. The approach and interpretation of the gospel in accordance with the cultural orientation of the preacher proves that it can be a main factor which can determine the success or failure of the ministry beyond the life of the founder.

References


