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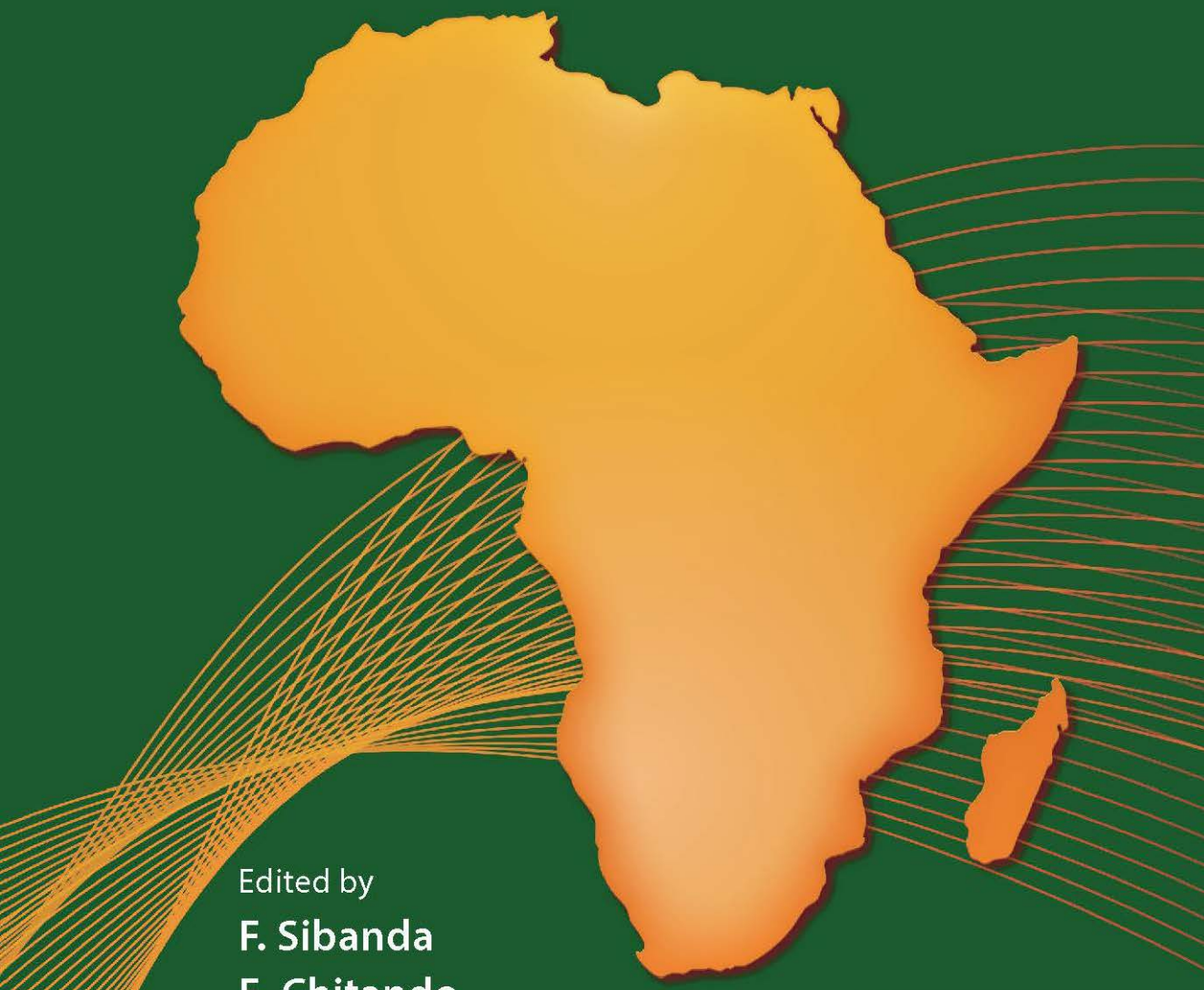

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4 "The future is young?": Religion, youth identity and political leadership in Zimbabwe

Molly Manyonganise[1]

INTRODUCTION

The study of youth participation in politics has always been complex and problematic.[2] Literature on youth and political participation has established that the youths are marginalised in decision-making processes globally,[3] and specifically in Africa.[4] For example, 14 per cent of lawmakers on the African continent are under the age of 40.[5] For political scientist Gilfred Asiamah and colleagues, this is indicative of the gap between youths' voice and their importance to economic and social progress.[6] The situation worsens in those African countries that tend to be autocratic,[7] Zimbabwe included, where the maxim "the future is young" has come under question.

While some youths are members of youth leagues within political parties, they are largely absent from key decision-making positions, in political parties and national governance structures. However, they are deployed by old politicians

1 Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Arts, Culture and Heritage Studies, Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy, Zimbabwe Open University/Research Associate, Department of Religion Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

2 Fisher DR. 2012. "Youth Political Participation: Bridging Activism and Electoral Politics", *Annual Review of Sociology* 38:119-137.

3 See Farthing R. 2010. "The politics of youthful antipolitics: representing the 'issue' of youth participation in politics", *Journal of Youth Studies* 13(2):181-195; Pruitt L. 2017. "Youth, politics and participation in a changing world", *Journal of Sociology* 53(2):507-513. Kwon SA. 2019. "The politics of global youth participation", *Journal of Youth Studies* 22(7):926-940.

4 Abbink J. 2005. "Being young in Africa: The politics of despair and renewal", in Abbink GJ and Van Kessel WMJ. *Vanguard or Vandals: Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa*, Leiden: Brill, 1-33; Faye M. 2017. "African Youth Integration in Politics", *Argumente und Materialien der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit* [Arguments and Materials for Development Cooperation] 21:28-36. Amupanda JS. 2018. "Who is in the 'we': Interrogating the African Union's Agenda 2063 and Youth Political Participation", *International Journal of African Development* 5(1):103-121; Asiamah G, Sambou OD and Bhoojedhur S. 2021. "Africans say governments aren't doing enough to help youth", *Afrobarometer Dispatch* No. 418.

5 Asiamah et al. "Africans say governments aren't doing enough to help youth".

6 Asiamah et al. "Africans say governments aren't doing enough to help youth".

7 Babatunde AO. 2015. "Youth Uprising and the quest for political reform in Africa: Issues and challenges", *African Security Review* 24(2):107-121.

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during election time to perpetrate violence against perceived political enemies.[8] In most cases, they are told that they are the leaders of tomorrow. Child and youth researchers Helen Cahill and Babak Dadvand argue that young people are viewed as not-yet-ready for active participation in civic life.[9] In most cases, this participation is deferred to their adulthood. Cahill and Dadvand argue that "this 'futurity' discourse values young people for what they will become, rather than for their present contributions, and sits in tension with a recognition that young people can, and do, act as partners and active contributors."[10]

Such declarations need further analysis, as they continue to postpone the participation of young people in decisions that obviously affect their lives, because their tomorrow remains a pipe dream. If anything, such attitudes are steeped within African religio-cultural norms and values which tend to perceive young people as children and minors. Scholars like law and international relations expert Mamadou Faye ascribes this challenge to the gerontocratic nature of African societies,[11] which dictate that decisions are made by elders while the youth are expected to comply.[12] This chapter, therefore, seeks to interrogate the influence of religion on youth identity and political participation factoring in the youth quota that allocates ten parliamentary seats to young people in Zimbabwe. The focus of the chapter is on establishing the way African cultural values and norms work against Zimbabwean youths' constructive participation in politics. Such an analysis challenges the abuse of the youth as tools of political violence and encourages them to claim their rightful place in decision-making processes. This chapter is largely a thorough review of literature relevant in the analysis of the problem of religion and politics in Zimbabwe. In order to give the chapter both a global and local relevance, reference is made to both non-African, African and Zimbabwean scholarship.

Theoretically, the chapter is informed by the youth participation theory of change. The theory was co-created by young people and other stakeholders through workshops organised by Oxfam.[13] This theory is crucial, as it places young people at the centre and makes them agents in issues that affect their lives. For social workers Barry Checkoway and Lorraine Gutierrez, youth participation is a process of involving young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives,[14] politics included. Youth participation is considered to be a marker of quality

8 See Abbink, "Being young in Africa"; Faye, "African Youth Integration in Politics"; Amupanda, "Who is in the 'we'".

9 Cahill H and Dadvand B. 2018. "Re-conceptualising youth participation: A framework to inform action", *Children and Youth Services Review* 95:243-253.

10 Cahill and Dadvand, "Re-conceptualising youth participation", 242.

11 Faye, "African Youth Integration in Politics".

12 Abbink, "Being young in Africa".

13 Oxfam. 2019. "Theory of Change Co-Created by Young People: Youth-led input to Oxfam's Youth Participation and Leadership Meta Theory of Change". Oxford: Oxfam, 4 January.

14 Checkoway BN and Gutierrez LM. 2006. "Youth Participation and Community Change", *Journal of Community Practice* 14(1-2):1-9.

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within interventions involving young people since it can act as a "remedy" to the economic, social and political uncertainties of contemporary societies.[15] To this end, youth participation can "strengthen their social development, build organisational capacity and create changes within societies".[16] In Checkoway's and Guiterrez's analysis, youth participation would yield positive results such as personal confidence, social connectedness, civic competencies and leadership development.[17] For youth researcher Tomi Kiilakoski, participation is linked to concepts such as engagement, empowerment, inclusion, citizenship, voice or agency.[18] This can lead to democratic decision making.[19] For purposes of this chapter, the youth participation theory of change challenges the "futurisation" of youth political participation and leadership. This futurisation is largely influenced by African religio-cultural beliefs and practices. As the chapter progresses, it focuses on the problem of defining "youth", analyzes the way in which the youth in Africa grapple with the challenges of intergenerational inequalities, examines religious influences on youth political leadership in Zimbabwe, discusses youth political agency within the Zimbabwean political space, critiques contradicting maxims in reference to youth political leadership and ends with a conclusion.

WHO ARE THEY? GRAPPLING WITH THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

Defining the term "youth" is never straight forward. For youth and development consultants Celina Del Felice and Peter Onyeigwe, the meaning of "youth" is broad and carries with it many connotations.[20] Scholarship on youth studies has defined the term in various ways. However, it is generally agreed that youth as a stage of life is seen differently in different societies,[21] implying that the definition of youth varies depending on context. Broadly, the term "youth" is used to refer to the transition from childhood to adulthood and this is determined by biological, psychological, social and cultural factors.[22]

According to UN Habitat, the intersection of socio-spatial factors like religion, maturity, gender, familial obligations and rural or urban location further contextualises who youth are. However, even in a single society, the definition of the term is never static. UN Habitat describes the category of youth as one that is fluid

15 Cahill and Dadvand, "Re-conceptualising youth participation".

16 Checkoway and Guiterrez, "Youth Participation and Community Change", 2.

17 Checkoway and Guiterrez, "Youth Participation and Community Change", 2.

18 Kiilakoski T. 2020. "Perspective on Youth Participation", *Analytical Paper*, European Union-Council of Europe Youth Partnership.

19 Kiilakoski, "Perspective on Youth Participation", 3.

20 Del Felice C and Onyeigwe OP. 2018. "Introduction", in Del Felice C and Onyeigwe OP (eds) *Youth in Africa: Agents of Change*. Las Palmas Gran Canaria: CASA Africa, 15-19.

21 United Nations. n.d. Defining Youth. Online at:

22 Del Felice and Onyeigwe, "Introduction", 16.

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and ever-changing.[23] For example, in most African societies, the rights of passage determine the transition of one from childhood to becoming a youth. However, modernity has brought in other variables, such as level of education, economic status and marital status, to be considered when dealing with the category of youth. Del Felice and Onyeigwe summarise this well when they explain that

> A person is considered an adult when s/he has reached maturity and can be autonomous, indicated by markers such as being able to support oneself economically. But these markers vary greatly depending on the cultural and specific socio-economic context. In some cultures, rites of passage are common to indicate the end of this transition period. But as it is transition, it is difficult to rigidly state where it starts or ends. Moreover, there is a subjective factor, that is, people can feel more or less young.[24]

Be that as it may, the United Nations defines the term as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence. As a result, age has been used to define the term "youth". Although reference to age is crucial for statistical purposes, UN Habitat notes that chronological age or calendar is rarely a universal way of defining youth.[25]

As such, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa argues that youth is a socially constructed life stage rather than simply chronological age, though this social construction is not recognised in policy discourses.[26] Sociologist Alcinda Honwana supports this view, explaining that age categories are not natural, but constitute cultural systems with particular sets of meanings and values.[27] In her analysis, "the relationship between social position and age is not only complex but also contested, because age divisions involve power relations."[28] In Honwana's assessment, age classifications produce a particular social order to which each individual is bound.[29] This has led anthropologists John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff to view youth as both the essential precondition and the indefinite postponement of maturity arising from the effects of modernity.[30]

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23 United Nations Human Resettlements Program. 2012. "Young People: Participation and Sustainable development in an urbanizing world". Nairobi: UN-Habitat.

24 Del Felice and Onyeigwe, "Introduction", 16.

25 UN-Habitat, "Young People".

26 United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. 2017. "Africa's Youth and prospects for inclusive development: Regional situation analysis report". Addis Abab Addis Ababa: UN ECA.

27 Honwana AM. 2012. *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa*. Boulder, CO: Kumarian Press.

28 Honwana, *The Time of Youth*, 11.

29 Honwana, *The Time of Youth*, 11.

30 Comaroff J and Comaroff J. 2005. "Reflections on Youth, From the Past to the Postcolony", in Honwana A and De Boeck F (eds). *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*. London: James Currey, 267-281.

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In terms of age, the United Nations says that youth are persons with ages ranging from 15 to 24 years.[31] Commenting on the UN definition, social scientists, Fiona Klein Klouwenberg and Inge Butter argue against its narrowness, maintaining that the limits of this definition are too narrow in an African context because Africa has many people aged above thirty years who have had to delay their entry into adulthood because they feel excluded or powerless and they struggle to survive.[32] Other UN agencies such as the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) as well as the World Health Organization (WHO) define youth as persons between 10 and 24 years.[33] The African Youth Charter places the age of youth between 15 and 35 years.

Coming closer home, trying to find a definition of youth within Zimbabwe's legal framework is a difficult task on its own. The Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA) of 1982 stipulates that one ceases to be a child at the age of 18 years.[34] Before May 2022, the legal age of consent was 16 years. The Zimbabwe National Family Planning Council and the Central Statistical Office define youth as any person between 10 and 24 years of age. The Zimbabwe National Youth Policy defines youth as any person between 10 and 30 years. The varying ages may be indicative of the fact that there is no consensus on how to define youth using age. This may lead to some young people being disenfranchised in socio-political spaces. Social scientist Rijk Van Djik and colleagues have brought attention to the fact that we need to recognise that our understanding of youth should be situational, that is, we must factor in issues of where and when one is a youth.[35] Such a view understands youth as a situated and mutable category as it acquires distinct meanings in different places and times.[36] In their analysis, youth should be understood in their "locational" dimensions – in their relation to specific spaces and places.[37] To this end, sociologists Filip De Boeck and Alcinda Honwana view youth as a plural and heterogeneous category with varied and multifaceted experiences.[38] In this case, aspects such as gender and class also play significant roles in differentiating youth. In order to put this into perspective, there is need to understand the issue of youth and intergenerational inequalities in Africa.

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31 Mpungose L. 2020. "Africa's Diverging Approaches to Youth Inclusion and Participation". African Perspectives, Global Insights, Occasional Paper 307. Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs, 3.

32 Klouwenberg FK and Butter I. 2011. "African Youth since Independence: Notes on a Bibliographic Overview, 1990-2005", *Africa Development* 36(3/4):55-65.

33 UN ECA, "Africa's Youth and prospects for inclusive development", 14.

34 Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA) (1982).

35 Van Dijk, R, De Bruyn M, Cardoso C and Butter, I. 2011. "Introduction: Ideologies of Youth", *Africa Development*, 36(3/4):1-17.

36 Honwana, *The Time of Youth*, 12.

37 Van Dijk et al, "Introduction: Ideologies of Youth", 5.

38 De Boeck F and Honwana A. 2005. "Children and Youth in Africa: Agency, Identity and Place", in Honwana A and De Boeck F (eds). *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, 267-281. London: James Currey.

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THE YOUTH AND INTERGENERATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN AFRICA

In Africa, young people constitute the majority of the population.[39] They are, however, marginalised in socio-economic and political processes. In order to understand this scenario, there is need to analyze the place that young people occupied in pre-colonial African societies. African pre-colonial societies in general, most of which were pastoral or agrarian, were structured into different generations where age was a critical identity marker. Historian Thomas Burgess explains this well when he maintains, "Generation embodied a series of rankings based upon age, each rank possessing a high degree of affinity and connectedness. Male initiation rites provided instruction that commonly reinforced age deference as a principle necessary for communal cohesion." [40]

Burgess' analysis is crucial for this chapter because it shows that in most pre-colonial African societies, due to age difference, juniors were expected to pay homage to their seniors. Hence, despite enforcing strict social and economic hierarchies, generational discourse could also ensure reciprocity.[41] For young people to participate in politics and governance processes, they had to be allowed access by their elders. The performance of rituals or rites of passage determined the transition of people from one level to another. Apart from age, one had to be able to perform certain duties ascribed by society for them to be able to transition from childhood to youthhood. Among the Shona of Zimbabwe, exclamations such as "*inga akura chokwadi*" (he/she has grown up) were meant to show that one had succeeded in performing duties expected of their age. A critical reading of folklore, myths and literary texts focusing on pre-colonial African societies show that certain tests had to be passed for one to be declared a "man" or "woman". The genderedness of most African societies meant that young men were the ones who were often prepared for adulthood and for the public space, while girls were left out. Shona literary texts such as *Jekanyika*[42] and *Pfumoreropa*[43] allude to this fact. In *Jekanyika*, the protagonist Jekanyika had to wait for a particular initiation rite for him to qualify to go to war. The role of the traditional court (*dare*) in its masculinised form is apparent, as the men in *Jekanyika* wielded the power and authority of passing the young men from one stage of life to the other. Hence, Africa scholar Stephen Smith explains that "the old gerontocratic order in Africa was grounded on the 'principle of seniority' the requirement that age commands respect and privileges in exchange for patronage and welfare."[44]

These gerontocratic discourses endured throughout the centuries and were never done away with, but they were subject to revision and adaptation according to

39 De Boeck and Honwana, "Children and Youth in Africa", xii.

40 Burgess T. 2005. "Introduction to Youth and Citizenship in East Africa", *Africa Today*, 51(3):vii-xxiv.

41 Burgess, "Introduction to Youth and Citizenship in East Africa", vii-xxiv.

42 Mugugu FC. 1968. *Jekanyika.* Harare: College Press.

43 Chakaipa, P. 1961. *Pfumoreropa*. Harare: Longman.

44 Smith SW. 2011. "Youth in Africa", *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 31(2):97-110.

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changing political and economic conditions.[45] Focusing specifically on Zimbabwe, sociologist Rose Jaji has argued that Zimbabwe's present political organisation around gerontocracy can be traced back to precolonial cultures.[46] In this case, such literary texts provide us with a window through which to view pre-colonial African states' governance systems and how the youth were positioned. Such positions were worsened in colonial times as the youth were further pushed to the margins.

Systems of colonialism, when they were introduced, marginalised the youth in Africa further from political processes and power and authority was usurped from black Africans while being vested in colonial officials. Sociologist Richard Waller explains at great length how the African youth were disenfranchised during the colonial period. He argues that colonial rule invented the concerns of age, but altered the terms of the debate between generations in two particular ways by changing the structure of opportunity that made the young patient and their elders more tolerant, and by proposing new models of responsible behaviour which in some ways discounted the past.[47] Waller further explains that this was done through the ideals of productive masculinity "tamed by work and made responsible through the obligations of marriage and citizenship and of modern wifehood and motherhood that taught girls the disciplines of a new but still subordinate domesticity."[48] In Waller's analysis, colonial governments devoted considerable effort to buttressing the domestic authority of African elders and forged alliances with local gerontocracies to create, define and manage 'tradition'.[49] In Waller's view, the experiences of conversion, education and migration gave the young confidence and the resources to challenge their elders' authority, thereby undermining an alliance between colonialism and "tradition".[50] Hence, to a greater extent, colonialism subverted the institutions of socialisation.

Thomas Burgess notes that colonial rule, Christianity, capitalism, urbanisation, nationalism and independence infinitely complicated relations between youth and elders.[51] For Burgess, "if gerontocratic discourse affirmed that youth was a liminal stage between childhood and adulthood, between dependence and autonomy, the category came in the colonial period to exist in a very general sense somewhere between village and town, 'tradition' and modernity."[52] In Burgess's analysis, modernisation undermined the categorical stability of relatively well-defined notions of youth in agrarian and pastoralist societies, such as those in Africa.

45 Burgess, "Introduction to Youth and Citizenship in East Africa", xii.

46 Jaji R. 2020. "Youth Masculinities in Zimbabwe's Congested Gerontocratic Political Space", *Africa Development* XLV(3):77-96.

47 Waller R. 2006. "Rebellious Youth in Colonial Africa", *The Journal of African History*, 47(1): 77-92.

48 Waller, "Rebellious Youth in Colonial Africa", 79.

49 Waller, "Rebellious Youth in Colonial Africa", 79.

50 Waller, "Rebellious Youth in Colonial Africa", 79.

51 Burgess, "Introduction to Youth and Citizenship in East Africa", xii.

52 Burgess, "Introduction to Youth and Citizenship in East Africa", xii.

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Anthropologist-historian Jon Abbink is of the view that the destruction of the well-knit African societies resulted in young people having no well-defined place in society, making them vulnerable and dependent.[53]

On a more positive note, colonialism enabled young people to "reevaluate their roles, rights and duties in society, in reference to accepted wisdom and the texture of public rituals, as well as a new set of social and economic relationships of unique colonial provenance."[54] Furthermore, young people gained the analytical distance to question the validity and universality of gerontocratic discourse, their participation in school, wage labour, religious congregation and city life suggested that superior age was no longer tantamount to specialised knowledge, wealth or ritual power. If anything, young people were able to gain some authority over their elders because they assumed the roles of breadwinner due to wages received from employment. In Rose Jaji's analysis, colonisation supplanted the elders and eroded their authority over young men through the creation of new avenues for young men to acquire economic independence outside the traditional gerontocratic system.[55]

The post-colonial period did not change the condition of the youth in any way. In fact, post-colonial African governments failed to honour their promises to the youth after independence. This is despite the youth having actively participated in the struggle for independence as alluded to earlier. There exists a huge gap between the ruling elite and the impoverished youth. In Alcinda Honwana's analysis, "the realities of young women's and young men's daily lives expose the gap between the promise of equity, individual freedoms, and prosperity and their lived experience of marginalization, exclusion and lack of opportunities."[56] Looking at the predicaments of the youth, social and cultural anthropologist, Jennifer Cole argues that the promises that accompanied African independence have been betrayed.[57] Van Dijk and his colleagues explain this clearly when they observe:

> The emergence of the nation-state in many parts of Africa produced new divisions of socio-political nature that were easily translated into exclusionary rhetoric. Governments and parliaments began to discuss "youth" as a separate category for policy making but also as a kind of formal representation so that the voice of the youth could be heard in the context of national politics and nation-state building.[58]

In his analysis of politics in post-colonial Africa, Abbink notes that it was and continues to be marked by immobility and the monopolising behaviour of the elites

53 Abbink, "Being young in Africa", 2.

54 Burgess, "Introduction to Youth and Citizenship in East Africa", xii.

55 Jaji, "Youth Masculinities in Zimbabwe's Congested Gerontocratic Political Space", 81.

56 Honwana, AM, 2019, Youth Struggles: From the Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter and Beyond, *African Studies Review*, 62:8-21.

57 Cole J. 2011. A Cultural Dialectics of Generational Change: The View from Contemporary Africa., Review of Research in Education, 35(1), 60-88.

58 Van Dijk et al, "Introduction: Ideologies of Youth", 6.

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in power, sustained by often surrealistic and ruthless methods of intimidation.[59] Focusing specifically on Southern Africa, he argues that those that led the attainment of independence, blocked the path of the younger generation in political life and in state bureaucracy.[60] In Abbink's analysis, in the first decades of independence, young leaders were carefully screened and contained. They were lured to enter the ranks of the reigning elite, to set themselves against each other or were banned.[61]

This analysis is also true of Zimbabwe. At independence, Zimbabwe exuded great promise for all its citizenry. During the struggle, ZANU-PF had a Main Wing and a Woman's Wing only, at independence, it introduced a Youth Wing so that the voice of the youth could be included in political processes. Hence, it has been envisaged that in Africa, through youth wings, the youth became enlisted in the coming into being of the nation-state, and the rise of the nation-state as a political project. However, practically, there was no political commitment to allow the youth to fully participate in political processes. If anything, the youth wings were tools of controlling the youth through ensuring that they toed the party line. Even more than four decades after independence, there has not been a young president in Zimbabwe and the assumption of high political offices by the youth in most political parties in Zimbabwe is very minimal. At one point, ZANU-PF had a youth leader who was over sixty years of age implying that the youth were not capable of leading themselves. This infantilisation of the youth after independence led the youth to be seen as inessential.[62] Jaji, therefore, argues that youth is more of a question of political positioning than age.[63] As noted by the UN Economic Comission for Africa, despite the youth in Africa being foot soldiers, they are often excluded from decision-making in their political parties.[64] By Honwana's description, the youth in Africa are placed in perpetual "waithood", explaining that waithood represents the contradictions of modernity, in which young people's opportunities and expectations are simultaneously broadened and constrained by lack of access to basic resources due to unsound socioeconomic policies, epidemics and political repression.[65]

In fact, when the Zimbabwean state felt its existence threatened after the 2000 referendum, it introduced the National Youth Service (NYS) in 2001. African economic historian Ivo Mhike notes that the NYS was introduced at a time when Zimbabwe was experiencing its worst socio-economic crises since independence in

59 Abbink, "Being young in Africa", 13.

60 Abbink, "Being young in Africa",13.

61 Abbink, "Being young in Africa", 15.

62 Cooper S. 1994.Political Violence in South Africa: The Role of Youth. A Journal of Opinion, 22(2):27-29.

63 Jaji, "Youth Masculinities in Zimbabwe's Congested Gerontocratic Political Space", 83.

64 UN ECA "Africa's Youth and prospects for inclusive development", 36.

65 Honwana, *The Time of Youth*, 4.

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1980.[66] While this was touted as a move to inculcate youth citizenship, it was mostly used to spread propaganda about ZANU-PF and to train the youth to violate those labelled as enemies of ZANU-PF for certain benefits. In Mhike's analysis, the NYS was an important part in ZANU-PF politics of patronage whereby young people were rewarded for toeing the party line. In his opinion, ZANU-PF used the NYS programme as a "de facto 'rite of passage' for youth access to tertiary education, jobs in the civil service and state funded youth economic empowerment programmes."[67] Abbink views Zimbabwe as having, during this time, channelled youth into semi-criminal, pro-regime militias. The youth were abused in more ways than one. A topic that is not much discussed, though, is how the young girls who were recruited into the NYS were sexually abused by officials and politicians overseeing the programme.

Overall, the programme produced militant youths aligned to ZANU-PF who then became instrumental in the 2008 political violence that saw over two hundred Movement for Democratic Change supporters killed around the country, with over a thousand injured in various ways. The programme was then disbanded during the Government of National Unity and it was only in 2024 that ZANU-PF sought to resuscitate it in response to waning support. This is a clear indication that the government continues to view the youth as tools that can be used for its own ends. In other words, they are "children" who are often sent on errands by their elders but who do not benefit meaningfully from the nation's political processes. The construction of gerontocratic political leaders as "fathers" and "mothers" places the youth in perpetual childhood. This infantilisation of the youth has religio-cultural overtones which require further analysis.

THE INFANTILISATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE: RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES ON YOUTH POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN ZIMBABWE

Scholarship has generally noted the intersection of religion and politics.[68] Historian Stephen Ellis and religion and development scholar Gerrie ter Haar argue that religion and politics have been linked throughout history.[69] They further note that in pre-colonial African political systems, public religious performance played an important role. For example, rulers in pre-colonial Africa were regarded as sacred practitioners with a direct link to the living dead (ancestors). Hence, they had to be

66 Mhike I. 2017. "Political Violence in Zimbabwe'National Youth Service, 2001-2007", in Oinas E, Qnodera H and Suurpaa L (eds). *Youth and Political Engagement in Africa.* Leiden: Brill, 246-264.

67 Mhike, 2017, 246.

68 Ellis S and Ter Haar G. 1998. "Religion and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa", *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 36(2):175-201; Manyonganise M. 2023. *Daring Patriarchy: A Biblical Engagement with Gender discourses on Political Participation in Post-colonial Zimbabwe*. Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press.

69 Ellis and Ter Haar, "Religion and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa", 187.

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revered by society and their positions were not to be challenged. It was only at their death that succession was possible.

Even today, religio-cultural beliefs inform the way the youths are viewed within Zimbabwe's political circles. Such beliefs infantilise young people and disempower them from effective political participation. In most cases, this role is postponed into the future. The existing political structures and regimes exploit youth to expend their energies as political and military foot soldiers for the political elite, but they are not being mentored to be prepared for positions of leadership.[70] Commenting specifically on Zimbabwe, sociologist Manase Chiweshe explains that youth involvement in politics has mainly been as cannon fodder for older politicians who use them as campaign foot soldiers and at times as perpetrators of political violence, but without appointing them to senior political positions.[71]

Charismatic Christianity, in particular, plays an ambivalent role in this regard. While scholarship on religion has argued that this form of Christianity empowers the youth to challenge their political marginalisation, it has been noted that it can also exacerbate it. As actors with perceived legitimacy in society, religious leaders and institutions play complicated and diverse roles both economically and politically.[72] Political scientists Tracy Kuperus and Richard Asante argue that "African pastors who are rooted in Charismatic Christian traditions have stressed political engagement which generally does not challenge the status quo or demand systemic change."[73] In concurrence, Shepherd Mpofu, a scholar of journalism and media studies, opines that Pentecostal churches are supportive of the political staus quo because there is no democracy in these churches.[74] In Mpofu's assessment, the churches project political gangsterism and inequitable distribution of power and resources.[75] In Zimbabwe, political leaders have invoked religion to secure their leadership positions. The frequent visits made by political leaders to religious shrines and churches are meant to safeguard their positions with the assistance of religious leaders. For example, religious leaders endorse old politicians as chosen by God, thereby leaving out the youth from political leadership. Rose Jaji argues, "The way traditional and modern structures and institutions are intertwined has… brought about a paradoxical situation in Zimbabwean politics. Political leaders rule

70 Ziembe-Dickens CF, Buckley KJ, Hassig KO and Yarwood J. 2012. "Roundtable Proceedings-Strengthening the Civil Society Africa Needs: Challenges and Opportunities in West Africa", Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses.

71 Chiweshe MK. 2017. Social Networks as Anti-revolutionary Forces: Facebook and Political Apathy among Youth in Urban Harare, Zimbabwe. *Africa Development*, 42(2):129-147.

72 Patterson AS. 2014. "Religion and the Rise of Africa", *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 21(1):181-196.

73 Kuperus T and Asante R. 2021. "Christianity, Citizenship and Political Engagement among Ghanaian Youth", *African Studies Quarterly* 20(2):37-61.

74 Mpofu S. 2021. "Religious and Political Intersections: The instrumentalization of Christianity during Zimbabwe's 2018 elections", *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 56(2):383-406.

75 Mpofu, "Religious and Political Intersections".

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with the absolute power of ancient monarchies and attribute this to anointment by God, while at the same time claiming to have been chosen by the people through elections."[76] This accords with my own previous work in which I have alluded to the transactional relationship between religion and politics in Zimbabwe, where religious leaders support old politicians for their own gain and vice versa.[77]

In most cases, even young people take an active role in sustaining this narrative. Hence, in Zimbabwe, religion has been used as a pacifying tool for the youth to accept the status quo that prevails in political spaces. In Jaji's assessment, "the 'divine right to rule' rhetoric closes party political opportunities for the youth."[78] Furthermore, the cultural representations of the youth as children reinforces their political marginalisation and are often major causes of the tensions that exist between them and the older generation in Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular. They have been told to wait until it is their time—a time that never comes. This, to a large extent, has led the youth to chart their own political path so that they can move from the political margins to the centre. As Abbink notes, it would be a mistake to deny African youth intentionality and agency, as is common in Africanist discourse.[79]

YOUTH IN ZIMBABWE AND POLITICAL AGENCY

Despite the marginalisation of the youth from governance processes in Africa generally, and for purposes of this chapter in Zimbabwe specifically, young people have started to exercise their agency by either demanding more political space or rising up against governments. From Honwana's perspective, young people are rising up against unemployment, socio-economic marginalisation, unsound economic policies, corrupt governments, political exclusion and lack of respect for their rights.[80] Del Felice and Onyeigwe note that often militias or violent groups are composed of or led by young people.[81] As they demand to be heard, the youth exercise their agency through protest, resistance, alternative choice among others.[82] In this case, across Africa, youth protest movements have emerged, the most popular one being the Arab Spring.

Honwana views such protests as an indicator that the youth have lost faith in the ability of politicians to deliver concrete responses to young people's needs and expectations.[83] She argues that in their shared marginalisation, young people

76 Jaji, "Youth Masculinities in Zimbabwe's Congested Gerontocratic Political Space", 84.

77 Manyonganise M. 2022. "The March is not Ended: Church Confronting the State over the Zimbabwean Crisis", *Religions* 13(2):107ff.

78 Jaji, "Youth Masculinities in Zimbabwe's Congested Gerontocratic Political Space".

79 Abbink, "Being young in Africa".

80 Honwana, *The Time of Youth*, 3.

81 Del Felice and Onyeigwe, "Introduction", 16.

82 Van Dijk, "Introduction: Ideologies of Youth", 12.

83 Honwana, Youth Struggles, 9.

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develop a sense of common identity and a critical consciousness that leads them to challenge the established order.[84] They can do this through confrontation or creating new paths to their desired socio-economic and political goals. Sociologist Catrine Christiansen and her research colleagues have introduced the concept of "youthscapes" whereby the youth create their own spaces of empowerment. They argue that young people are always on the look out for both social paths and social escapes. In their analysis, youths are both social navigators of the present and social generators of individual and collective futures.[85] Similarly, Jaji notes that young men in Zimababwe assert their presence in Zimbabwe's political terrain by devising strategies of performing masculinities that range from co-opting gerontocratic masculinities to subverting them.[86] However, she also notes that cooption creates a situation in which young people perpetuate their own subordination and exclusion through their submission to older men.[87] In Jaji's analysis, youth participation in the cooption system, "sustains the very gerontocratic system that marginalizes them from leadership positions beyond the political party youth wing."[88]

Some young people have chosen to join civil society as an alternative route to engage with the state. The youth civil society organisations are intended to bring awareness to the youth on their rights to economic and political participation. According to Jaji, as the youth in civil society raise awareness of the repressive politics of the older generation, they disrupt the cultural configuration in which the elders are seen as repositories of wisdom and morality, which they and utilise to guide and contain young people according to custom.[89]

Another group of youth, within political parties, have chosen force as a way to gain political and economic power. For example, youth in the youth wings formed sub-groups within which at times became militant and violent. A good example is the ZANU-PF aligned Mbare Chipangano group, which claimed to own market spaces where those who wanted to use them had to pay a fee on a daily basis. In a country where unemployment was and remains very high, it became difficult for the government to ban this group, hence, it turned a blind eye to its menace. Some youth in ZANU-PF risked suspension, demotion from leadership positions and expulsion from the party for challenging the pillaging of national economic resources as well as the closed political space. In Jaji's view, these suspensions, demotions and expulsions serve to show the grip of the older men on party youths.[90]

84 See Honwana, *The Time of Youth*.

85 Christiansen C, Utas M and Vigh HE. 2006. "Youthscapes: Navagating Youth, Generating Adulthood", in Christiansen C, Utas M and Vigh HE (eds). *Social Becoming in an African Context*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 9-28.

86 Jaji, "Youth Masculinities in Zimbabwe's Congested Gerontocratic Political Space", 78.

87 Jaji, "Youth Masculinities in Zimbabwe's Congested Gerontocratic Political Space", 79.

88 Jaji, "Youth Masculinities in Zimbabwe's Congested Gerontocratic Political Space", 79.

89 Jaji, "Youth Masculinities in Zimbabwe's Congested Gerontocratic Political Space", 90.

90 Jaji, "Youth Masculinities in Zimbabwe's Congested Gerontocratic Political Space", 86.

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Cognisant of the threat of youth agitation, the government enacted a National Youth Policy in 2000, reviewed again in 2012 whose goals were:

1. To empower youth to participate and contribute to the socio-economic development of the nation,
2. To develop a coordinated response and participation by all stakeholders in the development and empowerment of the youth,
3. To instill in youth a clear sense of national identity and respect for national principles and values, and
4. To promote the health of young people and develop youth oriented healthcare.[91]

In this policy, the government lists twelve key strategic areas of focus, but it avoids mentioning explicitly youth political participation and leadership. Regardless of this, the youth have continued to agitate for more political space. In the August 2023 elections, a youth quota was introduced through an amendment to the Zimbabwe Constitution providing for 10 parliamentary seats for youth under the proportional representation system.[92] Political scientists Fadzai Mutasa and Enock Ndawana are of the view that the need to fill in the positions of youth quota legislators has boosted the participation of youth in electoral processes. After the election, 35 young people managed to get to parliament. Out of these, 17 were elected vote for while 10 and 8 were appointed through the youth and women's quota respectively.[93] It is important to note that the quota candidates are not elected, but rather are appointed into these posts. Despite this positive development, Mutasa and Ndawana are sceptical as to whether the introduction of the youth quota will bring meaningful changes to youth political participation. They argue that it is still to be seen whether "the presence of the youth in parliament enhanced by the youth will translate into their meaningful participation in the formulation of policies that benefit them."[94] This scepticism arises from the failure of the women's quota to produce any meaningful changes to women's condition and experiences in Zimbabwe.

Youth agency in Zimbabwe has also been enlarged by the new information and communication technologies that make young people more globally integrated. In Honwana's analysis, youth relate to local social structures and cultural patterns, but they are also connected to global culture via mobile telephones, cyberspace, television and advertising.[95] In Zimbabwe, information communication technologies have opened up political spaces for youth, as they have managed to use social media which is less regulated, to communicate political messages, campaign for preferred candidates and protest against government on issues of their interest.

91 Zimbabwe Human Rights Archive, "Youth Policy" Online at:

92 Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment No. 2 of 2021, s 11 (amendment of s 124 of Constitution).

93 Mutasa F and Ndawana E. 2024. "Youth participation in Zimbabwe's electoral processes post-2008: Challenges and prospects for peacebuilding", *African Security Review* 33(3):277-293.

94 Mutasa and Ndawana, "Youth participation in Zimbabwe's electoral processes post-2008".

95 Honwana, *The Time of Youth*, 4.

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Anthropologist Godfrey Maringira notes that social media has become alternative political space for political engagement.[96] From the year 2013, social media became an important tool for political participation particularly for the youth in Zimbabwe. In 2016, Pastor Evan Mawarire mobilised Zimbabweans for a job stay-away/strike through his #ThisFlag. The success of this stay-away influenced the youth to turn to social media for political messaging. Movements such as #Tajamuka (we have risen up) and #ThisGown emerged to register youth dissatisfaction with socio-economic and political exclusionary policies by government. Social scientist Simbarashe Gukurume explains this well when he says that these movements were initiated and led by young people frustrated with the deepening economic crisis, declining employment opportunities, worsening causes of corruption by government officials and growing cases of police brutality against vendors and protesters.[97]

In the run-up to the 2023 elections in Zimbabwe, social media, specifically Twitter/X, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram, played a crucial role in mobilising the youth to register to vote. Discussions that were held on Twitter/X spaces assisted in persuading the youth to make their vote count. Project Vote 263, a youth-led initiative conducted voter education through collaboration with artists, sports tournaments, door-to-door outreaches, musical concerts and roadshows. These activities were often posted on the group's Twitter/X account as a way of promoting youth participation in democracy. Apart from such groups, political activists such as Hopewell Chin'ono also made use of social media to encourage the youth to register to vote. By the time of the elections, Aljazeera journalist Calvin Manikai, indicated that 71 per cent of the youth in Zimbabwe were registered to vote, an increase from the 44 per cent in the 2018 elections.[98] International affairs expert Tanja Bosch avers that social media has facilitated protest participation by increasing opportunities for engagement in collective action.[99] In this case, Twitter/X spaces became political spaces in which the youth engaged and challenged authoritarian governments.[100] In Maringira's analysis, Twitter /X spaces produce and offer political space for youth engagement with the state.[101] It also supports multiple opportunities for participation such as creating, tagging and sharing content among other activities.[102]

Even after the elections, the youth have continued using social media for political communication. For example, on 18 July 2024, Walpe Academy posted

96 Maringira G. 2022. "Youth and Politics on Twitter", in Baikady R et al (eds). *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Social Change*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 1-19.

97 Gukurume S. 2017. "#ThisFlag and #ThisGown Cyber Protests in Zimbabwe: Reclaiming Political Space", *African Journalism Studies* 38(2):49-70.

98 Manika C. 2023. "Igniting hope: Young Zimbabweans rally to make their voices count". *Al-Jazeera*, 22 August.

99 Bosch T. 2016. "Twitter activism and youth in South Africa: The case of #RhodesMustFall", *Information, Communication and Society* 20(2):221-232.

100 Maringira, "Youth and Politics on Twitter", 1.

101 Maringira, "Youth and Politics on Twitter", 1.

102 Bosch, "Twitter activism and youth in South Africa".

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on its Twitter/X account that it had petitioned the government to increase youth participation in government. It argued that the youth should not only participate in political parties as chanters and sloganeers, but also as candidates. In this post, youth were demanding a 50 per cent quota in government. On the same day, Open Parly Zim posted a female law student from Great Zimbabwe University calling for increased youth participation in politics. She argued that the youth not only need to be elected but to also vote and have their voice heard in Parliament because they are the leaders of both today and tomorrow. It is interesting to note that this student realised that the youth need to lead both now and in the future. It, therefore, becomes crucial to question the maxim "the future is young" which seems to procrastinate youth political leadership in Zimbabwe.

"THE FUTURE IS YOUNG": CONTRADICTING YOUTH AGENCY?

The title of this chapter is premised on the remarks of Nelson Chamisa who was Zimbabwe's main opposition presidential candidate in 2018 representing the Movement for Democratic Change-Alliance (MDC-Alliance) and 2023 representing the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC). In preparation for the August 2023 harmonised elections,[103] Chamisa sought to focus and mobilise the youth vote. On 7 May 2021, Chamisa posted on his Twitter account the following message: "The future is young and bright! I salute all the young people whose courage, fearlessness and boldness constitute building blocks to a New Zimbabwe. When young people stand up and speak out, the nation wakes up."[104] Such a statement was premised on the widely held view that the youth was the deciding factor in the 2023 elections.

As such, Chamisa used this maxim on his campaign trail in order to mobilise the youth vote supporting the theoretical underpinnings in this chapter that the youth can bring the change that they want. He often argued that the geriatrics in government like Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa (ZANU-PF), who was his main contender for the presidency, represented the old while he (Chamisa) represented the future. It is not clear as to who represents the present. In order to buttress the need for leadership coming from the young, Chamisa's campaign team came up with a captivating slogan "*Ngaapinde Hake Mukomana* (NHM)" (Let the boy/young man get in). This slogan trended on social media platforms and continues to be used more than a year after elections now. Chamisa was by then in his early forties and his age resonated with the majority of the youth in Zimbabwe who were fed up with the rule of geriatrics. Hence, Chamisa's youthfulness was seen as his trump card in the elections.

I, however, contend that Chamisa, by using the maxim "the future is young" failed to show that it was and is imperative for the young people to cease the moment to assume political leadership in the "here and now". Chamisa appeared to be

103 In Zimbabwe, a harmonised election is one in which the council, parliamentary and presidential elections are held simultaneously.

104 Chamisa, N. 2021. Twitter, 7 May 2021.

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contradicting himself in the sense that while he was campaigning to assume the presidency now, he cast youth leadership into the future. In my analysis, Chamisa failed to do away with the religio-cultural beliefs of his context, which continues to delay youth political leadership by arguing that they will lead tomorrow. He fell into the usual cultural trap, which even his opponents were using against him. For example, Mnangagwa often referred to Chamisa as a "boy" who was immature and inexperienced. While his campaign team was presenting him as young and a necessity as a political leader, Chamisa was decampaigning himself by deferring youth leadership to the future. Such maxims subtly endorse the current rule of geriatrics by hoping for a "fictitious" future which is waiting for the young to govern. His engagement with the youth on social media needed to have strengthened their resolve to be part of today's political leadership.

However, I am of the opinion that as both politician and pastor, Chamisa failed to break free from the clutches of religion in the way that he perceives youth political leadership. As such, in his bid to encourage youth agency in political spaces, Chamisa contradicted himself by campaigning for political leadership in the present but postponing the same leadership to the future. Hence, youth worker Theophilus Tinashe Nenjerama, commenting on Chamisa'a deployment of religion in politics, argues that "the conflation of religion and politics discounts the relevance of fundamental strategies important in challenging oppressive governments."[105] In other words, Chamisa's postponement of youth leadership through this maxim was not strategic, as it failed to ensure that young people contend for political leadership in the present.

CONCLUSION

The intention of this chapter was to interrogate the futurisation of youth political participation and leadership. It sought to establish the role of religio-cultural beliefs and practices in the infantilisation of the youth thereby casting them as perpetual children who need to adhere and conform to gerontocratic ideals of leadership. A critical reading of the discussion above leads us to make key conclusions. First, despite young people playing key roles in the struggle for independence in Zimbabwe, they have not benefitted much as the political elites who continue to push them to political margins. Second, religion (both indigenous and Christianity) Has played a key role. in entrenching gerontocratic princliples of leadership in Zimbabwe's political space, which to a large extent has marginalised young people from meaningful political participation and leadership. Third, youth have not been passive, but rather have exercised their agency to demand for the opening of more political space for them. As shown above, this has led to the crafting of the National Youth Policy as well as the youth quota. While this is not enough, it shows that when young people push for their voices to be heard, gerontocracies listen and

105 Nenjerama TT. 2024. "#GodIsInIt: The Appropriation of Christianity into Politics by Nelson Chamisa in the 2018 Zimababwean Presidential Elections", *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 59(3):751-768.

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can cede some power. In this case, young people are creating their own political identities within a very complicated political space. In the final analysis, Chamisa's deference of youth political leadership to the future was shown to be problematic in a context where young people are agitating to be included in political processes in contemporary Zimbabwean society.

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