

## Imitation as Transformation of the Male Self

How an Apocryphal Saint Reshapes Zambian Catholic Men

*Imitation et transformation du soi masculin. Comment un saint apocryphe remodèle les hommes catholiques zambiens*

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/17259>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesafriaines.17259

ISSN: 1777-5353

### Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

### Printed version

Date of publication: 28 May 2013

Number of pages: 119-142

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2387-7

ISSN: 0008-0055

### Electronic reference

Adriaan S. van Klinken, « Imitation as Transformation of the Male Self », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 209-210 | 2013, Online since 06 June 2015, connection on 18 June 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/17259> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.17259>

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# Imitation as Transformation of the Male Self

## How an Apocryphal Saint Reshapes Zambian Catholic Men\*

Imagine a group of Catholic men in Zambia who together form a lay movement named after St Joachim. The constitution of their organization explicitly states that St Joachim is “the role model of every Catholic husband and father”. In the organization, these men tell and retell the narrative about St Joachim who, according to an apocryphal gospel, was married to St Anne and was the father of Mary, the mother of Jesus. How would these men read this story, creatively apply it to their own context and relate it to their own lives? What type of manhood does Joachim represent for them? How do they imitate this model *vis-à-vis* the challenges they are facing as men in a contemporary urban African setting, such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, changing family and gender relations, and so on? How does the participation in the organization and the imitation of St Joachim affect the moral and spiritual lives of these men, how does it shape their male bodies and gender identities? These questions call for a closer examination of the practice of imitation of St Joachim in the context of this men’s organization. This article offers such an examination, exploring how a sacred text is mobilized and functions to shape male bodies after a religious ideal of masculinity in an African context. Even though the story about Joachim and Anne is not part of canonized Scripture, it certainly is a “sacred story”. Sacred stories are stories that, in the words of Mircea Eliade (1959: 97), in a specific

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\* A draft version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (Chicago, November 2012), in a session of the Catholic Studies Group. The author thanks the conveners as well as the participants and the respondent for their stimulating questions and comments. Many thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers and to Anne-Marie Korte who gave critical and helpful feedback on earlier versions of this article. The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO Rubicon postdoctoral fellowship, no. 446-11-006) that enabled the research for the article, and SOAS, University of London where the research was conducted during a postdoctoral research fellowship in the Centre for Gender and Religions Research.

community are considered to narrate “the various and sometimes dramatic irruptions of the sacred into the world’ and which have a paradigmatic function in that community”<sup>1</sup>. In the Catholic tradition, then, the lives of saints are sacred stories: saints are considered saintly precisely because they are believed to reveal a manifestation of the sacred through their lives, and hence their lives are exemplary to the faithful. This may apply particularly to Joachim and Anne as they are believed to be sanctified by God to bring the immaculate Mother of God into the world; they are the starting point of the Christian (hi)story of redemption through Jesus Christ.

This article presents a case study of the St Joachim Catholic Men’s Organization in Zambia. Through the case study it explores the intersections of religion, men and masculinity in a contemporary African context. As such it makes a contribution to various fields: the study of men and masculinities in Africa, the study of Catholicism as a lived religion, and the study of religion in Africa.

### **Rethinking Masculinities in Africa: Taking Religion into Account**

It is a *cliché* to say that in Africa religion plays a vital role in people’s lives and is a vibrant element of societies. Although Africans may not be “incurably religious”, as a popular myth goes, indeed it seems that most people in Africa consider themselves as religious and identify with particular religious traditions that help to shape their beliefs and attitudes. As Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar (2004: 2) contend, “it is largely through religious ideas that Africans think about the world today, and [...] religious ideas provide them with a means of becoming social and political actors”. Moreover, in contemporary African societies religious traditions are revitalized and present themselves assertively in the public and political domain. This particularly applies to Christianity and Islam, two religions that were originally imported in Africa but now can be considered “African religions”, but it also applies to Hinduism, Buddhism, Baha’i and other religious traditions that more recently have spread over Africa. Given the religious dynamics in Africa and the importance of religion in people’s lives, religion cannot be left out of the discussion of men and masculinities in contemporary Africa. If masculinity is a social and discursive construction, religion is one of the factors, and possibly a major factor, in the processes in which masculinities are constantly (re)configured. When this is true for Western religious contexts (Krondorfer & Culbertson 2004), it certainly applies to Africa. Yet in the growing body of material on African masculinities

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1. Eliade seems to use the term sacred stories only in relation to primeval myths of origin. However, I think that other stories can have similar characteristics and also can be considered sacred. In a certain way, the story about St Joachim and St Anne is a myth of origin in an Eliadian way, as it seeks to answer the question about the origin of salvation.

(Morrell 2001a; Lindsay & Miescher 2003; Ouzgane & Morrell 2005; Uchendu 2008; Mugambi & Allan 2010) little attention is paid to religion. This gap reflects the general trend in masculinity studies in the social sciences and humanities where religion is largely neglected. R. W. Connell (2005: 186), in the foundational book *Masculinities*, mentions the “slow, contested, but decisive decline” of religion in Europe as a historical development in the modern period, and seems not to consider it a relevant factor for the study of masculinity in contemporary society. In the literature on masculinities in Africa, religion is not a blind spot in the sense that it is completely ignored. In most volumes it is formally mentioned as one of the contributing factors in the construction of masculinities. However, how masculinity is shaped and reshaped in and through religious beliefs and ideologies, religious practices, religious communities and faith-based organizations, both in history and today, is hardly explored in depth. This is surprising, as scholars in this field, in the words of Robert Morrell (2001b: 7) seek “to identify what forces operate to effect change in masculinities” in the multiple and dynamic contexts of contemporary African societies, and explore “when, where and how such changes occur, and what their effects are”.

Recent research by scholars of religion in Africa shows that Pentecostal Christianity and Islamic reformist movements develop discursive strategies and disciplinary practices through which masculinities are transformed (Chitando 2007; Soothill 2007; van Klinken 2012; Wario 2012). In this article the focus is on Catholic Christianity, particularly the Roman Catholic Church in Zambia, which is important given the ongoing tendency in the study of Christianity in Africa to focus on Pentecostalism and “to overlook African Christian vitality in mainline Protestant churches and the Catholic Church” (Kollman 2010: 119). I will explore a distinctly Catholic trajectory to effect change in men and transform masculinity in a contemporary African context: the promotion of a male saint as a model of manhood to be imitated through a practice of religious devotion.

The article is mainly written in the field of religious studies, where the study of men, masculinities and religion is an emerging sub-field. The central question in this sub-field is how religions “create images of men and impose particular modes of being a man [...] [and how they] impede or cultivate a man’s development and provide alternative pathways for men” (Krondorfer 2009: xii). Though there is a growing body of literature on religion and masculinities, little attention has been paid so far to masculinities in contemporary Catholic circles. Joseph Gelfer (2008: 51), in a rare study of a Catholic men’s ministry in the United States, observes that the devotion to saints is characteristic of the religious practice in this ministry, mentioning the particular significance of St Joseph. Yet he does not explore what the devotion to a male saint brings to bear on the religious construction of masculinity. The case study of the St Joachim Catholic Men’s Organization in Zambia, presented in this article, shows that the devotion of saints can be highly significant for the configuration of masculinity.

The empirical data for this study were collected during two field work periods, in 2009 and 2012. I attended several meetings of the St Joachim Catholic Men's Organization in Zambia (archdiocese of Lusaka), both at parish, deanery and diocesan level, and I conducted interviews with over twenty members as well as with some priests and church officials working with the organization. On the basis of these data, in this article I give an account on the imitation of St Joachim in the organization and how this effects change in masculinity—with masculinity being understood, in this context, as a reference to the symbolic, discursive and performative construction of embodied male gender identity. Two theoretical concepts inform my analysis, being the concept of imitation as a hermeneutical process (Duyndam 2004) and Michel Foucault's (1993, 2000a) conceptualization of the technologies or hermeneutics of the self, as I found these helpful to understand the processes of religious change in masculinity in the case study.

### Why Saint Joachim?

The St Joachim Catholic Men's Organization is one of the officially recognized lay movements in the Catholic Church in Zambia. Established in the early 1990s in the Archdiocese of Lusaka, the organization has grown in numbers and spread over Zambia and can now be found in all the Zambian dioceses. The organization is certainly not a mass movement but rather, as a diocesan officer put it, "a group of elite Catholic men". Founded in order to get men more actively involved in the life of the church and more committed to the church's moral teachings, the organization's members play a key role in what the church calls "the evangelization of men". The Catholic Church in Zambia, being a mainline church comprising about a third of the population, is concerned about all kind of problems it observes in marriages and families, as well as about the high levels of HIV/AIDS and violence against women in Zambia. The church realizes that, as part of its response to these challenges, it needs to target men for a change. More or less explicitly, the St Joachim men's organization is used as an instrument for this. Not only does the organization demand moral and spiritual change of its members, but these members are also presented as exemplary figures to fellow Catholic men who are not (yet) involved in the organization and not (so much) committed to the church's moral teaching. The organization can best be described as a men's fellowship organized in local parish groups, where members meet almost weekly for prayer and bible study, to share personal, matrimonial or family problems, and to discuss issues related to the parish and the organization. Members also are involved in practical work in the parish, such as cleaning and gardening, in catechetical activities to the youth, and they provide teaching and counselling to young men entering marriage and to couples facing marital or family problems.

Why, one may ask, is the organization named after St Joachim? Of course, in a Catholic context it is quite common to name a group after a saint. In Zambia, for example, many of the so-called Small Christian Communities (SCCs, geographical sections that together form a parish) are named after saints. These patron saints may be chosen randomly, and I have not found a special devotion to the name-giving saints in the SCCs apart from celebrating their feast days. However, in the case of the men's organization, the name of St Joachim has been a deliberate choice for at least two reasons. First, there already was a Catholic women's organization called St Anne. In the account of members of St Joachim, the men's organization was established by men who were married to members of St Anne, as a counterpart to the women's organization. Thus, the choice for the name of St Joachim was rather obvious. Second, and more essential, there is a long tradition in which St Joachim and St Anne are considered as a model of conjugal life. According to the apocryphal *Protoevangelium Jacobi* or the *Infancy Gospel of James* (170-180 CE), St Joachim and his wife St Anne were the parents of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This gospel, which largely is about the life of Mary, opens with a story about Joachim and Anne. In this story, Joachim is presented as a rich man who always brings double offerings to the temple. One day, he is disallowed to offer first because he—different from all the righteous of Israel—did not have offspring. Full of grief he retires to the desert and is fasting and praying for forty days and nights. Meanwhile, his wife Anne starts lamenting, bewailing her childlessness and her seeming widowhood. Finally an angel appears to Anne, announcing that she will conceive a child who will become famous throughout the world. Anne then promises that she will offer the child as a gift to the Lord. Joachim, too, is visited by an angel with a similar message. He leaves the desert and is reunited with Anne. When the baby is born she is called Mary. At the age of three, Joachim and Anne bring her to the temple where she spends her childhood and grows up as a holy virgin, as is narrated in detail in the rest of the gospel. This story about Mary's parents is a product of the emerging cult in early Christianity where St Anne and St Joachim were subject of a popular devotion. The emergence and continuing popularity of this cult can be explained from its "close connection with the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary" but also by the fact that "Christian married couples find in the parents of Mary a model of conjugal life such as they do not find in Joseph and Mary, at least on the level of conjugal relations" (Asselin 2003: 469). This cult is also reflected in medieval iconography of Mary's parents, especially of St Anne, who is depicted, for example, as a wise mother teaching her daughter (Sheingorn 1993). Thus, the choice for Anne as the patron saint of a Catholic women's organization, and for Joachim as a patron saint of a men's organization, stands in a long tradition. Both organizations are strongly concerned with issues of marriage and family life, and they promote their patron saints as

role models for Catholic women and men respectively. From early Christianity up to today in Zambia, there is a popular devotion to St Joachim and St Anne in which these saints are considered a model of conjugal and parental life. The men's organization of St Joachim discussed here shows the ongoing vitality and innovation of this tradition.

### **The Devotion to St Joachim**

Writing about the role of saints in Catholic and some other Christian traditions, Lawrence Cunningham (2006: 287) points out that saints are object of veneration and imitation: "Derived from the early cult of the martyrs in Christianity, saints are those who act as intercessors in heaven for those still living on earth. The process of canonization thus demands some evidence of a miracle gained through the intercession of the saint. Saints are held up as models of religious living since they are considered virtuosi of faith and practice. Toward saints there is, then, a combination of veneration and emulation." Now, St Anne and St Joachim belong to a specific category of saints because they have never been officially canonized as such but were recognized by the rise of a spontaneous cult in early Christianity. Their names not being mentioned in the Bible, they most likely are "a late invention of popular piety" based on the "assumption that they were sanctified by God in view of their election by Him to bring the immaculate Mother of God into the world" (Asselin 2003: 468). Perhaps more than for any other saint, the argument of sociologist Pierre Deloof (1985: 195) that saints are social constructions in the sense that "they are remodeled in the collective representation which is made of them", applies to St Anne and St Joachim. However, the case study of the men's organization shows that even an invented and constructed saint can become an object of veneration and imitation.

The veneration is expressed in the great respect with which members of the organization talk about their patron saint, especially when they refer to him as the father of Mary and the grandfather of Jesus Christ. His contribution to God's plan of redemption in Jesus Christ is commonly acknowledged. As one of the members put it, "Joachim, because he was so committed to God, that's why in fact we say the salvation did not just come through Mary but it started from Joachim and Anne". Interestingly, because Joachim is the father of Mary and the grandfather of Jesus Christ, he is also considered the father of the church. As the constitution of the men's organization puts it: "St Joachim is the father of our blessed Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, our mother and the mother of the church. [...] Therefore, Joachim is the grandfather of Jesus Christ and the brother and sister of Jesus—the Christians." It is because of this highly esteemed status, more than because of any miracle, that Joachim is an object of veneration. In fact, the members of the men's organization did not narrate any

miraculous intervention of St Joachim. As one of them explained, Joachim “is a different type of saint”. Neither did members talk about him as if he—or any other saint—is actively present in their daily lives. Being asked for examples of the role of saints in their lives, only one interviewee after some thinking came up with a story about St Anthony who had once helped him to find a lost key. Apparently the devotion to saints, and certainly the devotion to St Joachim, in this Zambian case study takes a different form from the type of devotion as described by Robert Orsi (2004) in his book *Between Heaven and Earth*. Here Orsi describes how, among American Catholics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, saints play an active role mediating and representing the sacred in people’s lives. However, in Zambia, for members of the men’s organization, St Joachim seems to be a rather distant figure in heaven. Indeed, in their meetings they always pray a standard prayer addressed to their patron saint, in which they ask for his intercession. However, being asked if they use this prayer also privately, or otherwise pray personally to St Joachim, most members responded negatively. As one of them put it, “In difficult situations I pray directly to God. But as we meet as a group, we recognize our patron saint by asking for his intercession”. This quote illustrates the way St Joachim is perceived: at a distance but yet related to them. It is believed that St Joachim is a heavenly intercessor for them to God. The fact that the primary means through which he is asked to intercede for them is a standard group prayer illustrates the communal and ritualistic character of the devotion to St Joachim in the men’s organization.

### St Joachim as “a Living Dead”

Fascinatingly, various members in interviews drew a parallel between St Joachim and the traditional African understanding of the ancestors. One of them, for example, stated: “I can refer to my patron saint Joachim as a living dead: he is there as a saint, looking and trying to help us. We believe that all the saints are there. What are they doing for us? They are praying for us. If we have problems, we have to channel these to the saints.” The living-dead is a term traditionally used in many African cultures for the ancestors: persons who are physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew them in their live as well as being alive in the world of the spirits and who are the closest links that human beings have with the spirit world and God (Mbiti 1990: 25, 82). The idea of St Joachim as an ancestor or living dead illustrates how the devotion to saints is contextualized and inculturated in a local African context. The link between saints and ancestors has also been made by African Catholic theologians (Bujo 2006: 197-198; Tanye 2010: 225-238; Chukwu 2011: 186-187), following pope John Paul II’s (1995: 43) suggestion in *Ecclesia in Africa* that the traditional idea of the ancestors in Africa is a “preparation for belief in the Communion



of the Saints”. However, where according to Mbiti (1990: 82) the living-dead are actively involved in people’s lives—they return to their families from time to time; they know and have interest in what is going on in the family; they may even warn of impending danger or rebuke those who have failed to follow their instructions—St Joachim (or any other saint) does not seem to play such a role for members of the men’s organization.

The similarity between Joachim and the ancestors is not so much in an active presence and involvement in people’s lives, but in the fact that Joachim, like the ancestors, is considered a figure whose name and legacy is highly respected and whose instructions are to be followed. In the words of one interviewee: “The ancestors left certain things, certain traditions which they continue despite the fact they are gone. [...] [Likewise] Joachim, although he is dead, he is alive in the sense that we carry on the works he commanded us to do. We take it that he is still alive. We cannot say: He is dead and he has gone. We remember him, we carry on with the works that he did.” Where the ancestors are living-dead only for four of five generations—as long as there are relatives on earth that have known him (*ibid.*: 83)—Joachim as a saint continues to be a living-dead and he is alive in the memory of those who follow his footsteps. This shows how crucial imitation is as part of the devotion to St Joachim.

### Hermeneutics of Imitation

The key term in the devotion of saints, as John Hawley (1987) in his *Saints and Virtues* points out, is “example”. Saints are believed to represent certain virtues and therefore they are considered exemplary figures. A saint is not just an illustration of a virtue, but is “a model, a prototype, not merely an example but an exemplar”; he or she presents “a paradigm that sets the shape for a series of imitative phenomena” (*ibid.*: xiii). Clearly, this also applies to St Joachim in the context of the men’s organization. According to the constitution, he is not *a* model but *the* exemplary model for *every* Catholic husband and father. And indeed, among the members of the men’s organization his example gives rise to an imitative practice through which they model themselves after their patron saint. I will argue below that the imitation of Joachim as an exemplary male figure is the primary means through which male bodies are shaped and masculinity is constructed. Before exploring this, however, it is important to focus on the practice of imitation as such, as this is quite a complex process. How, one may ask, does an apocryphal saint actually become an exemplary model imitated by men in a contemporary context?

Developing a philosophical approach to sainthood and exemplariness, the ethicist-philosopher Joachim Duyndam (2004) has coined the concept of “hermeneutics of imitation” to highlight the hermeneutical character of the process of imitation (of saints and other persons considered exemplary,

both in religious and wider cultural settings). Distinguishing imitation from aping, copying, duplicating, mirroring or counterfeiting, Duyndam (*ibid.*: 11) emphasizes that imitation is a creative process in which the values represented by another's life are "translated" to one's own. "To become really one's own value, it cannot be just borrowed or adopted from another's life, but it must be interpreted, transfigured, reconstructed". In Duyndam's account, this translation or application entails two movements: first, the imitation begins with a sense of being appealed by the exemplar. This indicates a certain familiarity or kinship with the exemplar: the values he or she represents are recognized. But second, these values are also alien, in the sense that they are not (yet) mine. This leads a person to "move toward" the values represented by the exemplar. Together this motivates the imitation where the moral and spiritual values represented by a saint from another historical and/or cultural context are interpreted and applied to one's own life.

It is not difficult to apply Duyndam's general concept of the hermeneutics of imitation to the case study central in this article. Members of the organization indeed expressed to me that they are appealed by the figure of St Joachim. One of them explicitly used the word "attraction". Retelling the story of the saint he emphasized that Joachim "used to do a lot of offerings to God", "used to work very hard", and "used to keep his family well", and then he stated: "That attracts me in Joachim. I should try to emulate him by looking after my family well in a religious way. Working together with my friends and neighbours in a religious way. Where there is need for help, I should help. I want to do such things." According to Duyndam (*ibid.*: 15), the experience of being attracted to a saint assumes a certain familiarity with that particular saint. What, then, is the "experience of recognition" of these men *vis-à-vis* St Joachim? How is this saint familiar to them? First, there is a moment of recognition—if you like, identification—with Joachim as a husband, father and grandfather. Of course, these are universal images, but they are rare among saints. Joachim is one of the few saints in the Catholic tradition men can identify with in the areas of marital and family life. Second, these men recognize the values associated with St Joachim, such as faithfulness, hard work and maturity, as part of their own culture. This is reinforced by the fact that as part of the process to join the organization, members also go through the traditional rites of marriage initiation. Thus, the cultural teachings about marriage and manhood and the Christian teachings promoted by the organization are not considered as being opposite but rather in harmony. As one of the members explains, in the organization "we are taught as Zambians to follow our culture which does not contradict the teaching of Christ. Because here we are taught not to fornicate, not to womanize, that is what the traditional way also teaches. So they meet". This reflects the African Catholic strategy of inculturation (Magesa 2004) and as part of this process St Joachim, in a certain way, becomes an "African" saint.

Though the members of the organization recognize and are appealed by the values represented by St Joachim, clearly there is also a distance to the saint. Joachim embodies a moral and spiritual ideal they have not yet reached but strive to meet. They look up to him as an exemplary model, both in the areas of marriage and family life and of spirituality and piety. One of the members refers to the patron saint as “a mentor”, a term that illustrates both intimacy and a certain hierarchy in the relationship with St Joachim. The distance to St Joachim is not only morally and spiritually, but also materially. Being asked to tell the story about Joachim in their own words, almost all interviewees started to say that Joachim was “a very rich man”<sup>2</sup>. This is particularly interesting because the women of the St Anne’s organization, being asked the same question with regard to their patron saint, tended to emphasize that St Anne was “a poor woman”. If Joachim and Anne indeed were so happily married, how then one of them can be rich and the other poor? This can be understood from the above-mentioned notion that saints are socially constructed. The perception of Joachim, who in the organization is considered a model for Catholic men, seems to be shaped, among other things, by the norms of masculinity in society. Social ideals of men as breadwinners who are able to provide in the needs of the family are reflected in the idea of Joachim being a hard-working, rich man who was able to look after his wife and child(ren). On the other hand, the members of the St Anne Catholic Women’s Organization, which is a much larger organization than St Joachim and comprises many women from Zambia’s socio-economic lower class, can more easily identify with a poor, faithful woman as a patron saint.

As Duyndam (2004: 15) points out, the recognition and the experience of being appealed by the virtues represented by a saint, combined with the realization that one has not yet reached this level, motivate to the imitation of that saint. Here, the values and virtues embodied by the saint are applied to one’s own life and actions, which is “a practical form of hermeneutics”. The interviews with members show that this indeed is a creative hermeneutical process: specific virtues associated with an apocryphal saint are interpreted by the devotees and applied to their lives in relation to specific issues and challenges they face. The most important virtues of St Joachim that appear from the interviews are: faithfulness, humility, hard work, and prayerfulness.

Faithfulness does apply both to the relationship with one’s wife and with God. The latter may be self-evident: of course a saint is assumed to be faithful to God during his life. A remarkable detail, however, is that interviewees generally referred to Joachim as a faithful and staunch *Christian*

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2. This may be informed by the account in the handbook that is used for the teaching of new Joachim members, which reads: “Joachim was a descendant of King David and a very rich man.” See Patrick TEMBO, *St Joachim Lay Organisation: Lessons*, p. 1 (unpublished material).

who was frequently praying, reading the Bible, attending church and receiving the sacraments. “If Joachim was doing all that”, one member explained to me, “we are expected to follow his footsteps in our Christian life. We are expected to do offerings as well, to participate in all the activities at church, whether it’s work or Mass, and so on”. They did not seem to realize that the grandfather of Jesus Christ cannot have been a Christian, have read the Christian Bible, have gone to church, or have received the Eucharist. Of course, from a Catholic perspective there is much continuity between the Jewish temple cult and the later Christian church. However, the idea of Joachim as a “staunch Christian” also shows how the saint is modelled after their perception of how an ideal Catholic man should be: faithful to God, committed to the church, and devoted to religious life. The virtue of faithfulness is also applied to the marital sphere. Retelling the story about St Joachim, interviewees emphasized the exceptional faithfulness of Joachim to his wife in the many years their marriage remained childless. They related this to the Zambian context where relatives and the community would put pressure on a man to separate and look for another woman, when he has stayed with his wife for some years and there is no child. Thus, they say for example: “Compared with what most of the men would do, if there is no child most men would go out to find another woman who gives them a child. Traditionally and I think not only in Africa, it’s believed that the woman is barren. But Joachim didn’t leave St Anne; they continued together in prayer until they had a child. So I believe he was a good husband for her. They lived together forever.” Members also underline the importance of faithfulness in relation to the context of HIV and AIDS in Zambia. Several interviewees told me how they had seen their peers suffering from this sexually transmittable disease, and how Joachim’s example of marital faithfulness had motivated them to adopt a preventive lifestyle. As one of them put it, “I could have been among the people who died firstly of HIV. Because I was so ruthless with my life. But fortunately [...] I have devoted myself to God, and I have forgotten about playing around with women, drinking”. As I pointed out elsewhere (van Klinken 2011: 473), St Joachim is a model of manhood in times of AIDS, showing men that the B of the popular ABC prevention message (Abstain, Be Faithful or use a Condom) is possible. The imitation of such a moral ideal is particularly relevant in a Catholic setting where the church prohibits the C of the same message.

A second virtue represented by St Joachim is humility. Members consider their patron saint as a man who was able to humble himself, especially in relation to his wife because he treated her with respect. Though St Joachim, in their opinion, definitely was the head of the home, he did not exercise his headship in an oppressive manner but rather through care, love, wisdom and respect. Referring to the disrespect and even aggressiveness and violence that would often characterize the relationship of husband to wife in Zambia, members refer, again, to St Joachim as an example to

follow. In their accounts they translate the virtue of humility into concrete behaviors. They tell to have learned, for example, to admit mistakes to their wives and ask them for forgiveness, to involve their wives in decision making in the home, and not to shout at their wives or children, or beat them, when there is a quarrel in the home but rather to solve issues in a peaceful way. Also broader in society, Joachim's humility teaches them how to practice leadership: "When you are a leader you should humble yourself, you should know when to say what, you should always make sure that what you do doesn't hurt others."

As mentioned above, the apocryphal gospel story presents Joachim as a wealthy man. Perhaps in order to explain this richness, retelling the story about St Joachim members often emphasized the notion of hard work. "St Joachim was very hardworking. He was not lazy. He used to do a lot to enable him to sustain himself in so many things." Thus, St Joachim represents an almost Weberian Protestant work ethic. This emphasis appears to be related to the male role of providing for the family—a role and social expectation that is difficult to fulfill for most men in Zambia because of economic hardship and the lack of employment opportunities. At the same time, Joachim members expressed their concern that their fellow men often spend the little money they earn on drinking and girl friends rather than investing it in their families. In this context, St Joachim provides them again with a model to imitate, as is reflected in this quotation from an interview: "I have to work extra hard, the way Joachim used to work extra hard to provide for his family. As I was telling, [...] I am retired, I am supposed to do fewer things, but I am doing all those things to work extra hard, to gain a little coin to provide. So trying to do all those things is the way of trying to emulate Joachim." The ability to provide in the material, as well as the spiritual and moral, needs of the family is a key characteristic of an ideal Joachim member as described in the organization's constitution, and that is why the organization teaches its members a strong work ethic. The notion of hard work, however, is not only related to paid labour, but also to involvement in the church and the community: "As Joachims we have to [...] work hard to contribute to the growth of the church. To work hard so that the community where you live is one where there is love and unity. You must work hard so that you can see that people are encouraged to seek God and the Word of God."

Prayerfulness is a fourth virtue associated with St Joachim. In their stories about the saint they emphasize that, when his marriage remained childless, Joachim does not leave his wife but devotes himself, together with Anne, to prayer. They also highlight that it was through Joachim's persistent and intense prayer—when he retires to the desert for forty days and nights—that, finally, Mary was born. Thus, he is considered "an inspiration of what prayer can sometimes do". Although his example is not followed literally—none of the members told me that they have been fasting and praying in the wilderness for a period of time—the annual retreat of

the Joachim groups, where new members are initiated, is considered a way of imitating Joachim's withdrawal in the wilderness. Some members also told me how they, when facing difficult situations in their lives, were inspired by the story about St Joachim and also involved themselves in persistent prayer, or how they use prayer to resist sinful temptations. On a more daily basis, Joachim's example motivates them to lead a life of prayer, both personally and as a family. Thus, members tell to pray when they wake up in the morning, when they arrive at work or in the break at work, and before they go to sleep at night. They also tell to pray in their families, making their children familiar with standard Catholic prayers like the rosary. "A family that prays together, stays together", is a popular saying among Joachim members, suggesting that prayer is a means to strengthen the family and to build the so-called "domestic church".

Though Duyndam's concept of the hermeneutics of imitation can clearly be applied to the present case study, it also needs some revision. Duyndam (2004: 12) approaches imitation as an individual issue, emphasizing that it is "a matter of free action and free choice" and that the moral agent is free to comply with the appeal of the inspiring exemplar or to reject it. However, the case of St Joachim Catholic Men's Organization presents imitation as a collective process. Of course, St Joachim himself does not force anybody to imitate him. But the organization has selected him as its patron saint and promotes him as an exemplary figure, not only to its members but to all Catholic men, meaning that social and religious force may play a role in the imitation of St Joachim. More important, the creative interpretation and translation of the values represented by St Joachim is not an individual affair but takes place in a group. Storytelling is an important instrument in this process. It is through telling and re-telling the story about St Joachim, and through listening to this story, that men come to understand and appreciate the meanings of the saint in relation to their own lives. Each year, when new members are prepared to join a Joachim group and are taught the introductory lessons, the opening question that is discussed first is, "Who was St Joachim?". The above section has shown that this is not a question without consequence, because Joachim is considered an exemplary model of Catholic manhood. But what precisely is the effect of imitating St Joachim?

### **Imitation as a Hermeneutics of the Self**

It is now clear that, in the hermeneutical process of imitation, the values represented by St Joachim are translated and applied to the lives of the Joachim members and in relation to the concrete issues and challenges they are facing. Duyndam's concept of hermeneutics of imitation helps to understand and analyze the mediation between the two "texts" central in the process of imitation, the "text" of the saint, and the "text" of the imitator.

However, it does not help to grasp the effect of imitation on the imitator, assuming that the effect is more complex than the simple application of certain moral and spiritual values to one's life. As the accounts of the Joachim members illustrate, imitators are changed in the process of imitation: they come to understand themselves as moral and spiritual subjects in new ways, and this leads them into a process of moral transformation. Foucault's terminology of technologies of the self, and more specifically the hermeneutics of the self, may be helpful to further understand this process. Adopting this terminology I will argue that the imitation of St Joachim leads the members of the Joachim men's organization into a hermeneutics of the self. Putting it more straightforward, imitation *is* an example of the hermeneutics of the self that Foucault found characteristic of Christianity.

The relation between "technologies of the self" and "hermeneutics of the self" in Foucault's work is not very clear, and Foucault (2000a: 224-225), not offering a systematic treatment, sometimes uses the terms interchangeably. However, in his 1980 lectures that were later published under the title "About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self", Foucault (1993) suggests that "hermeneutics of the self" is a specific type of the more general category of "technologies of the self". The latter term refers to various techniques, to be found in all societies, "which permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on" (*ibid.*: 203). Sketching out the historical development of these technologies in Greco-Roman culture, Foucault observes a transformation of those practices at the beginning of the Christian era. The ancient obligation of "knowing oneself" and "taking care of oneself" became, in Christianity, an "interpretative analysis of the self" leading into confession. "With this transformation", says Foucault (*ibid.*: 204), "starts what we would call the hermeneutics of the self". This hermeneutical technology of the self is informed by the fact that Christianity, according to Foucault, is a confessional religion, meaning that it imposes an obligation of truth on its practitioners, including the truth about oneself. "Everyone, every Christian, has the duty to know who he is, what is happening in him. He has to know the faults he may have committed: he has to know the temptations to which he is exposed. And, moreover, everyone in Christianity is obliged to say these things to other people [...] and hence to bear witness against himself" (*ibid.*: 211). The result of this form of self-knowledge and confession is purity of the soul and moral perfection.

Foucault's (2000a: 242-249) discussion on technologies or hermeneutics of the self in Christianity has mainly focused on the practice of confession. However, his terminology can be broader employed to analyze and understand how religion is involved in the shaping of individual subjects and how religious practices "create the 'truth' of ourselves" (Carrette 2000: 150).

Thus, Talal Asad (1993: 83-124)—building on Foucault’s work—examines how in monastic settings in Medieval Christianity ascetic practices such as the infliction of pain on the body function as technologies of the self. Joel Robbins (2004: 253-288), in his study of a Christian community in Papua New Guinea, analyzes how certain rituals such as church services, prayer, confession and charismatic dances, help people “to overcome the difficulties of ethical self-formation”, construing these rituals in terms of technologies of the self. Also Ruth Marshall (2009), in her study of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria, employs a Foucauldian frame to analyze how Pentecostal conversion through various techniques of the self, such as bodily asceticism, fasting, prayer and public testimonies, results in a personal mastery and constitutes moral subjectivity. In a similar way, Foucault’s terminology of the hermeneutics of the self enhances the understanding of the meaning of the imitative practices taking place in the Zambian St Joachim Catholic men’s organization. Clearly, the imitation of St Joachim leads the members of the organization into a reflection upon, and evaluation of the moral self. In interviews they could not retell the story about St Joachim, or reflect on the meanings and values their patron saint represents, without evaluating themselves *vis-à-vis* the model he presents to them. This indicates that story telling, which is central to the above outlined hermeneutics of imitation in the organization, is a crucial means by which imitation becomes a hermeneutics of the self. Telling the story about St Joachim leads into introspection and self-evaluation. The conclusion of this evaluation is always that they are *not yet* like St Joachim, that they do *not fully* possess the values he embodies. That is “the truth” they learn about themselves, and out of the knowledge of this truth they want to take example from Joachim and seek to apply his values to their own lives. Imitation, thus, is an introspective process in which they examine and judge themselves, and then come to acquire certain moral values and reform their moral selves. What Foucault (2000c: 282) says about asceticism does also apply to the process of imitation, which actually is an ascetic practice: it is not so much a “morality of renunciation”, though members certainly renounce certain habits, for example in the areas of drinking alcohol and sexual relationships, but it is “an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being”. In other words, imitation, like ascetic practice in general, is productive: it produces new moral and religious subjects through a specific hermeneutics of the self.

### **The Battle for Chastity and the “Mystique of Faithfulness”**

In their respective studies on ascetic practices in monastic settings, both Foucault (2000b) and Asad (1993) point out that here the well-developed and complex technologies of the self-serve, and lie at the heart of, the battle



for chastity. In his discussion and detailed analysis of the influential texts of Cassian (ca. 360-435), Foucault emphasizes that in the monastic setting where the renunciation of all sexual relationships is the basis of the rule of life, sex is renounced not so much through an internalization of a whole list of forbidden things or through physical self-control, but through very complex techniques of self-analysis. To be clear, the case of St Joachim Catholic Men's Organization is in many ways different from the medieval monastic settings Foucault and Asad write about. Besides the differences in terms of historical and social context, the men's organization is a much less strict form of organized community life—although the men's groups that make up the organization certainly are an example of contemporary Christian community life, with their initiation rituals that include the making of vows, the distinct way of clothing (the organization's uniform), the explicitly defined spiritual objectives and moral obligations, and a strict disciplinary code of conduct. Related to the less strict form of organized community life, in the men's organization technologies of the self are certainly not so well developed as in the monastic settings Foucault and Asad write about. Yet my point here is that the hermeneutics of imitation, which is a hermeneutics of the self, in the men's organization also serves what Foucault calls "the battle for chastity". Chastity here does not mean the complete renunciation of sex to observe the vow of celibacy, but the regulation of sex to observe the vows of holy matrimony. This battle for chastity has been central to missionary Christianity in Africa from the colonial period—concerned as it was with the presumed "promiscuity" of "the blacks", particularly black men—and is still central to African Christianity, particularly in the contemporary HIV era.

The Catholic Church in Zambia, and broader in Africa, is very much concerned about marriage and family life. In their pastoral letters and statements, the Zambian Catholic bishops frequently address the "erosion" of Christian marriage and family values, which in their opinion is expressed, for example, in the increasing levels of separation and divorce, the high level of pre- and extra-marital sexual activity, the rapid spread of HIV and the oppression of women and violence against women in marriage and the family (see the collected letters in Komakoma 2003). They explain this from "economic hardships, increased urbanization, and the breakdown of traditional patterns" (Catholic Bishops of Zambia 2003: 253). In response to the "erosion" of marriage and the family, the bishops have promoted the development of programs for marriage preparation and counselling, and they actively support lay organizations within the church that are devoted to the promotion of Christian marriage and family life. The recognition and support of the St Joachim Catholic Men's Organization from the side of the official church hierarchy can be considered as part of this response. The church, both in the pastoral writings of the bishops and in the various programmes and groups for marriage and family education, clearly insists on a strict adherence of the moral teaching of the church by its members. For

example, in their most recent pastoral letter the bishops call upon parents, teachers, priests and religious to equip the youth “with sound values and virtues that will assist them shun pre-marital sex in order that they will lead chaste lives” (*ibid.* 2012, no. 18). Also members of St Joachim told me that in the organization members are simply taught not to engage in sex outside marriage but to be faithful to their wives. However, a closer look makes clear that the chastity-oriented type of asceticism among members of the organization is not simply an adherence to certain moral norms, “a sexual ethics based on physical self-control” (Foucault 2000b: 195), but is enabled by a spiritual subjectivation of the self. Similar to the “mystique of virginity” which, in the medieval monastic setting, transformed “the negative aspect of continence into the promise of spiritual marriage”, that is the union with Christ (*ibid.*: 194), the imitation of St Joachim creates something that can be called a “mystique of faithfulness” in which the negatively formulated moral norm of “no sex outside marriage” becomes part of, and is embedded in, the sacred story about St Joachim and St Anne who together present a model of Christian marriage and family life. Different from the monastic setting, the marital and sexual relationship is not replaced by the promise of a spiritual marriage, but is incorporated in a spiritual or symbolic-theological narrative. This becomes clear in the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* where the late pope John Paul II (1995, no. 83), out of a similar concern about the erosion of marriage and family life in Africa, emphasizes that the true meaning of Christian marriage is found in “Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom who loves and gives himself as the Saviour of humanity, uniting it to himself as his Body”—and Christ, of course, is eternally faithful in his love for humankind. Reversing this marriage theology, John Paul II points out that the mutual love in a Christian marriage is an image of the love of Christ for his Church (*cf.* Ephesians 5, pp. 23-27, though the aspect of mutuality is not explicit in this text). For this reason, he argues, marriage is “a state of life, a way of Christian holiness, a vocation” (*ibid.*). These words, which I also found being used in circles of the St Joachim organization, are meaningful as they resemble the Catholic terminology of the vocation for priesthood and religious life. It illustrates how the marital relationship is understood from a deeply religious perspective, contributing to the “mystique of faithfulness” of which St Joachim is an exponent.

The mystique of faithfulness is symbolically expressed in the uniform of the organization, which members wear two Sundays a month and at special occasions such as feast days and funerals. The light blue suit, according to the constitution, is the “heavenly colour” of love, while the white blouse is the colour of faith and purity. The uniform most clearly reveals the new spiritual orientation in life of the Joachim members: they no longer set their hearts on earthly things, but seek to live up to different values. These values, like the uniform, distinguish them from their fellow men in the community, Catholic or not, who embody a kind of masculinity that the Joachim members now consider “immature”.



In response to the key question in the study of men and masculinities in Africa “what forces operate to effect change in masculinities” and “when, where and how such changes occur, and what their effects are” (Morrell 2001b: 7), this article has highlighted the role of religion. In particular, it has explored a Catholic trajectory to effect change in men and transform masculinity in the context of contemporary Zambia by promoting the collective devotion to and imitation of a male saint figure. I have conceptualized the process of change that is initiated by this religious practice with Foucault’s terminology of the hermeneutics of the self. The imitation of St Joachim, who is considered a model for every Catholic husband and father, entails a hermeneutics of the *male* self: men evaluate themselves *as men* in relation to the model of Catholic manhood represented by St Joachim and model themselves after his example. The imitation of St Joachim opens up a trajectory in which male subjectivity and agency are transformed. It has become clear that this is certainly not an a-historical and a-contextual phenomenon: Joachim is imagined as an African saint, his role is compared to that of the ancestors or living dead in traditional African thought, and the moral and spiritual meanings he embodies are interpreted and applied *vis-à-vis* the issues and challenges men in contemporary Zambia are facing, such as HIV/AIDS, violence, and changing gender and family relations.

One may wonder what concrete changes in behaviour and lifestyle are the results of the primarily discursive and ritual trajectory of moral and spiritual transformation in the men’s organization. Have these men *really* changed, are masculinities *really* transformed? Is religion helpful to bring about a transformation of masculinities in Africa? Of course, to investigate to what extent the moral and spiritual demands that the organization puts upon its members are met in the daily lives of these men would require detailed ethnographic research which lies beyond the scope of this study. Most likely, such research would reveal a diverse picture, related to the varying degrees of involvement in the organization. The members whom I interviewed, who were actively involved, all testified major changes in their life. They say, for example, that “joining St Joachim has actually saved me and helped me to become who I am now. Because I was a very different person before that, especially when I was drinking. [...] Playing with women and so on. All those things have been buried because I have joined Joachim and have devoted myself to the church”. Other members came up with similar accounts. Perhaps more significant, however, is that women evaluated the effects of the organization upon men quite positively. The members of St Anne Women’s Organization, for example, spoke with great respect about the Joachim members and praised them for their exemplary Christian and moral lives. These women told me to encourage their husbands to join the Joachim organization, not only because a St Anne ideally is married to a St Joachim, but also because they believed that their

spouses, once they had joined the organization, would become more responsible husbands and fathers. This does not bring about a large-scale transformation of masculinity in Zambian society—therefore the organization is too small, and the senior and pious type of masculinity it promotes is not attractive enough to the large young male population of the country. However, building on the idea of multiple masculinities that are related to each other in a dynamic power system (Connell 2005), it is significant that religious groups such as the St Joachim organization provide men with alternatives to popular forms of masculinity, showing that there are different ways of being a man.

Many contemporary debates about men and masculinities in Africa are informed by concerns about gender inequality, violence against women, oppression of women, and male power and superiority. Against this background scholars and activists call for “redemptive” masculinities that liberate men (and women) from the myths and burdens of patriarchy (Chitando & Chirongoma 2012). In these debates, religion is often considered an obstacle because it would legitimize and reinforce male power over women. The case study presented above problematizes this representation and calls for a more nuanced understanding. Indeed, the St Joachim Catholic Men’s Organization, or the Catholic Church more generally, does not aim to bring about “gender equitable men” who respect and contribute to gender equality. On the contrary, the organization adopts and promotes certain patriarchal religio-cultural ideas, such as the notion of men being the head of their families. From this perspective, the organization does not really help to bring about a radical transformation of masculinities towards an ideal of gender justice. However, in the complex and hard realities in local Zambian communities, women seem to be more interested in concrete and significant changes in the behaviour of men than in the question whether men adhere to an abstract ideal of gender equality. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, a monolithic concept such as patriarchy may actually hinder the understanding of religious transformation of masculinity in Africa: “Even if religious discourse promotes (soft) patriarchal ideals of masculinity, we still have to examine what type of male agency is produced here (and how), because we cannot assume that we already know what power means” (van Klinken 2013: 189). When the accounts of Joachim members are analysed in terms of agency, it becomes clear how the participation in the organisation and the imitation of St Joachim helps them to discover and live up to their “vocation” of being “a family man”, investing their male identity in their marriage, the family and in the church that is imagined as the Family of God (*ibid.*: 195-198). Rather than being success stories about the changes in their life, these accounts reflect the challenges of being a man and the fragility of masculinity. The case study presented in this article shows how the St Joachim Catholic Men Organization provides men with a social and spiritual space and a ritual practice to transform the male self.

This is only one example of the way religion, in this case Catholic Christianity, operates to effect change in men and masculinities in contemporary Africa.

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## ABSTRACT

St Joachim, who according to the apocryphal *Protoevangelium Jacobi* is the father of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the patron saint of a Catholic Men's Organization in Zambia which promotes him as model of Catholic manhood. Through a case study of this organization, this article explores the intersections of religion, men and masculinity in a contemporary African Catholic context, in relation to broader discussions on African masculinities. The focus is on the practice of imitation of St Joachim and its effects on masculinity as the symbolic, discursive and performative construction of embodied male gender identity. Two theoretical concepts inform the analysis, being the notion of imitation as a hermeneutical process and Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the technologies or hermeneutics of the self. The article shows how a sacred text is mobilized and inspires a communal imitative practice through which men are shaped, and shape themselves, after a religious ideal of masculinity.

## RÉSUMÉ

*Imitation et transformation du soi masculin : comment un saint apocryphe remodèle les hommes catholiques zambiens.* — Saint Joachim, présenté par le proto-évangile apocryphe de Jacques comme le père de Marie, elle-même la mère de Jésus, est le saint patron d'une organisation catholique d'hommes en Zambie, qui le promeut comme modèle de masculinité catholique. À travers l'étude de cette organisation, l'article explore l'intersection entre religion, hommes et masculinité dans le contexte de l'Afrique catholique contemporaine, en lien avec une discussion plus large sur les masculinités africaines. Une attention particulière est accordée à la pratique d'imitation de saint Joachim et à ses effets sur la masculinité comme construction symbolique, discursive et performative de l'identité de genre masculin incorporée. L'analyse repose sur deux concepts théoriques : la notion d'imitation comme processus herméneutique et la conceptualisation des techniques ou herméneutiques de soi par Michel Foucault. L'article montre comment un texte sacré est mobilisé et inspire une pratique imitative commune à travers laquelle les hommes sont façonnés, et se façonnent eux-mêmes, sur la base d'un idéal religieux de masculinité.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: Zambia, St Joachim, catholicism, hermeneutics of the self, imitation, masculinity/*Zambie, saint Joachim, catholicisme, herméneutiques de soi, imitation, masculinité.*