



**DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILISATIONS**

**THE AFRICAN RELIGION**

**IN ZIMBABWE TO-DAY**

**BY**

**PROFESSOR GORDON CHAVUNDUKA**

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## DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS

### THE AFRICAN RELIGION IN ZIMBABWE TO-DAY

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There has never been any genuine dialogue between practitioners of the African religion and practitioners of other religions in Zimbabwe. In fact, for over one hundred years attempts were made by Christian missionaries to destroy the African religion.

They viewed the African religion as a childish religion of fear, full of black magic, sorcery and witchcraft; full of superstition and senseless taboos; a religion which encouraged people to worship their ancestors instead of worshipping God.

It seemed to the church leaders, particularly during the early part of the last century, that the best way forward in their attempt to build the churches in Zimbabwe was to destroy not only the childish African religion, but their culture as well, and transplant a Christian faith with all its European cultural background, imagery and orientation: They did not see any need for entering into any dialogue with the practitioners of the African religion and other community leaders.

With the assistance of colonial administrators it was decided that African shrines or places of worship were to be destroyed; their spirit mediums or religious leaders were to be ignored and where possible they were to be stopped from organising and conducting their religious services; Christians were to be discouraged from consulting African traditional healers; Zimbabweans were told that participating in any traditional rituals of a religious nature was a sin. On the subject of witchcraft the church took the view that witchcraft is a myth; that witchcraft beliefs are based upon an essentially mistaken view of the world; that witches do not exist except in the minds of certain primitive Africans. The belief in witchcraft was to be destroyed.

However, the church and government leaders failed to destroy the African religion and culture completely during the last century. Although some national and provincial shrines were destroyed or became inaccessible, many district and family shrines were not destroyed. They still exist and are being used for public worship by members of the African religion. The authority of the ancestors has survived to this day. Spirit mediums also survived and, in fact, did a great deal better than just survive; they have continued to conduct religious services, to get possessed, to roar like lions, to heal, to bring the rain or attempt to bring the rain in precisely the same way. The detail of their ritual practice has remained con-

sistent in a most remarkable way (Lan David 1985:227). The belief in witchcraft is still very strong.

We also know that many Zimbabweans who became Christians did not resign from the African religion nor did they abandon African culture completely; they have maintained dual membership. Many Christians in Zimbabwe continue to participate in traditional religious rituals; they continue to consult traditional healers; many Christians believe in witchcraft, some even practice it or attempt to practice witchcraft.

The African religion is still a very strong force in the minds and hearts of the majority of Zimbabweans. In fact, participation in traditional religions has been increasing world wide since the end of colonialism (*The Herald*, 7.7.1989).

Dual membership is made possible by the nature of the African religion and by the African culture itself. The African religion is a hospitable religion which accepts the fact that other religious systems may be equally valid, or even more so. The African religion is prepared to embrace other beliefs and practices as long as the necessary cultural adjustments are made to accommodate them. The African religion can, therefore, facilitate inter-religious dialogue.

But as in the past many people from other cultures are still being pushed off, in their attempts to understand the African religion by the central role occupied by ancestral spirits in our religion, by spirit possession and the role of spirit mediums and by the strong belief in witchcraft. It is to these issues that I must now turn.

Ancestors occupy a central position in our African religion largely because of their ownership of land and their relationship to God. Ownership of land forms the main link between politics, religion and spirituality in Zimbabwe. It is thought that each geographical area or territory belongs to the ancestors, that is, ancestors of the early settlers or founders of the territory. These ancestors are believed to control rainfall and the fertility of land. All ancestors – family, clan, provincial and national ancestors – are interested in good government, social order and stability. Ultimate dominion over the whole world is in the hands of God. God is for everyone. It is believed that God takes very little interest in individuals in their day-to-day life. He is concerned mainly with matters of national and international importance.

Thus, when problems arise in social life many people appeal to the ancestors for assistance. Most problems are solved at this level. Consultation with the ancestral spirits is done through spirit mediums, that is, individuals who have the ability to communicate with the dead. They communicate with the dead while in a state of spirit possession. Those who have attended our African religious rituals and ceremonies will agree that spirit possession is one of the most fascinating aspects of the African religion; it is certainly an impressive sight to see a person in a state of possession; it is as if the whole body has become occupied by a new personality and it is believed that the words expressed by the possessed individual are derived from the spiritual world and therefore constitute the truth. People in attendance can put any questions they may have to the ancestors or ask for further information and so on. Thus one purpose which the African religion

clearly serves for the believers is its provision through rituals for direct communication with the powers that control over welfare.

Not everyone can become a spirit medium. When there are signs that a spirit was about to possess some one, there are a number of tests to be passed by the candidate beginning with the preliminary tests prescribed by an accredited medium and ending with the more searching tests conducted by a senior medium. These tests may take place over number of years. During this period the candidate is considered as under probation. Not all candidates pass these tests. Some candidates are told to go away for a while and return when they are properly possessed. After completing all these tests successfully a ritual or graduation ceremony is held at which the spirit is accepted and honoured and the possessed individual begins its practice. This recruitment to the system is controlled by the senior mediums (Bourdillon 1976:243). Only highly qualified persons can practice as religious leaders.

Spirit mediums do not occur or operate hazardly. They are organised into a system. At the head of each clan or territory, for example, is a senior or national spirit medium – the high priest or Bishop, to use the commonly understood terminology. Below the senior medium are the provincial and then the district mediums and so on. Provincial and districtal mediums are not equal. They can be ranked according to the positions that the spirit guardians whom they represent occupy in the genealogy of the territory.

Although spirit mediums do not usually involve themselves in politics, preferring to remain in the background as advisers when their territory or country is faced with a political crisis, ancestors through their spirit mediums do sometimes intervene and take an active part in an attempt to solve the problem.

Senior spirit mediums assist in a crisis such as a war by promoting dialogue, promoting unity, by maintaining morale and so on. We have seen the direct involvement of the spirits in active politics during certain periods of our history. The first example in recent times is their role during the war with British settlers in 1896-97. Then there was the revolt in the country in 1901 known as Mapondera revolt, and in 1917 was the Makombe war against the Portuguese. We saw the involvement of spirit mediums in active politics again during the war of Independence. In many parts of the country spirit mediums were regularly consulted by the freedom fighters and political leaders who wished to receive protection, legitimacy and advice. At the end of the war of Independence, for example, ancestors were celebrated and applauded at the ceremonies that marked the achievement of independence.

The names of the ancestors who have played a part in all the wars in the past are still praised in speeches made by political and religious leaders from time to time. Thus like other religions, the African religion not only changes with the society but can also be an active agent of social change.

Spirit mediums also play an important role in the field of health. In fact, it is difficult to separate African traditional medicine from African religion. The main link between African religion and medicine are the spirit mediums who are both religious leaders as well as health specialists. This link explains why most

spirit mediums to-day are members of ZINATHA, that is the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association. ZINATHA is not a medical association like, for example, the Zimbabwe Medical Association: it is also a religious body.

This strong connection between healing—land—religion in our society is due at least in part to the African theory of illness. The African theory of illness is very broad: it includes African theology. In other words the African theory of illness not only attempts to explain illness and disease but also the relations between ancestors, God and the Universe. The theory makes a distinction between two major categories of illness: natural and social illnesses. Natural illnesses are easy to understand. There are illnesses caused by natural agents such as germs, bacteria and viruses. On the other hand most illnesses are caused by social agents such as witches and spirits of various kinds.

We believe that people do not die; they merely pass on from this world to the next world – the world of spirits. Spirits can punish the living members of society when offended by, for example, their bad behaviour. One way by which they can punish the living members of the society is by sending illness. Where spirits are believed to be responsible for an illness, people turn to spirit mediums who, as we have already noted, have the ability to communicate with the dead to find out more about the illness and how it can be removed. Many spirit mediums are also doctors of medicine: they can prescribe medicines in addition to the rituals that may be necessary.

The impressive propaganda campaign mounted by early Christian missionaries and some government administrators was not aimed at destroying the religious aspects of the African culture alone, but also the medical aspects as well. The African medical system was presented as unscientific; it was based on superstition. Fortunately many of their followers knew better; they did not accept the views held by the church leaders. As I have already pointed out, many Christians have continued to use the services of traditional healers. They know that traditional doctors are successful in curing a large number of illnesses; they know that many medicines recommended by traditional doctors are correct even when judged by modern scientific methods; they also know that some of the social and psychological methods of treatment recommended by them often bring good results.

Some Christian denominations have in recent years shifted their official position with respect to African traditional medicine. They now say they have no objection to herbal medicine but still condemn its spiritual aspect. They condemn the rituals and social techniques of healing developed in African religion and medicine. The Catholic church, for example, stated a few years ago that,

“The church has no objections in principle to traditional herbal cures, either here in Zimbabwe or anywhere else in the world. Nowadays, church hospitals gladly make use of traditional midwives in their outreach work and co-operate in training them. Where a traditional healer diagnoses a broken personal relationship as the cause of some psychosomatic illness and heals by effecting a genuine reconciliation,

no one has any objections either. But the church does not wish to receive treatment in the course of which the traditional healer 'exposes' someone in the community who wishes evil upon the patient, that is, allow someone to be accused of witchcraft. Such accusations, if taken seriously, create an atmosphere of fear and mutual distrust, and as such are socially disruptive." (*International Bulletin of Mission Research, January 1998*)

I will now turn to this subject of witchcraft – a subject which has created a lot of controversy in Zimbabwe and in many other parts of the world. The first point to make is that the African religion does not encourage the belief in witchcraft; it merely accepts the fact that witches exist in society and, in fact, they do exist. Witchcraft is not a myth. Some people in our society practice witchcraft. These witches are regarded as sinners and it is the duty of religious leaders to discourage the practice of witchcraft.

In dealing with witchcraft two important aspects need to be born in mind: the social or religious aspect and the legal aspect. Many people who accuse others of witchcraft are not seeking a legal ruling on the matter. Witchcraft is the paradigm of all evil and anti-social behaviour. When a person accuses others of witchcraft, he may be saying that the accused is a trouble maker: that is he is a bad person, a deviant who ought to be helped to conform. The accuser may well be right. Those who accuse one another of witchcraft are people who ought to like each other but in fact do not. There is tension between them. Thus, this accusation may be a means for the expression of social strains and tension or a means of social control. These are religious and social issues. But there are real witches as well.

The reality and existence of witches has been questioned by many missionaries particularly from Europe because of ideas they inherited from eighteenth-century Europe. Many Europeans have accepted the doctrine of the unreality of witches. This doctrine developed in Europe mainly because of the inhuman treatment inflicted upon persons accused of witchcraft. Certain types of witchcraft were practised in Europe.

The present Christian attitude to witchcraft should, therefore, be considered as a reaction against the untold suffering and brutal treatment meted out to witches or people suspected of witchcraft in Europe. Some people suspected of witchcraft were burnt alive. The church then declared belief in witchcraft as a heresy. Records show that Hutchinson, an Anglican Bishop, who published a book on belief in witchcraft in 1718, is regarded as one of those who dealt the last blow to the belief in witchcraft which came to be seen as vain superstition (Lagerwerf 1985).

Since, as far as they were concerned, there was no such thing as witchcraft, the missionaries who went to Africa were simply not prepared to consider the question whether or not the person accused of witchcraft in Africa was guilty of the offence. This attitude, as others have pointed out, cannot be said to have helped the cause of Christ in Africa; for even the missionaries, against the very clear

testimony of the bible, could not believe in the reality of witchcraft, although these things were very live issues for the Africans. (Erivwoo 1985; Lagerwerf 1985:14)

In Zimbabwe witchcraft includes the use of harmful medicines, harmful charm, harmful magic and any other means or devices in causing any illness, misfortune or death in any person or animal or in causing any injury to any person or animal or property. All this is possible. Thus by denying the existence of witches, the Christian church lost an opportunity to remove the evil from the society. Many witches remain active members of the church in Zimbabwe. The suggestion by the churches that the only solution to the problem of witchcraft is the abandonment by people of their beliefs in witches and witchcraft makes no sense. As some anthropologists have pointed out, it is as if you were to tell a physician engaged in public health work that he could eradicate malaria merely by denying its existence. (Middleton and Winter 1963) We do not see the problem as one of eliminating the ideas but as one of eradicating the witches. This is what the African religion has always attempted to do.



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