

## **The Relationship between God and People in Shona Traditional Religion**

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### **Abstract:**

This study was carried out between 2005 and the last quarter of 2008 covering spirit mediums in Mashonaland Central and their clients in Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East, Manicaland and Harare Provinces. The clients of leading spirit mediums, maGombwe, are from all over the country and across the borders. They include other maGombwe, ancestral spirit mediums, mashave mediums, spiritual healers, and herbalists, other patients who include church leaders, business people, politicians, and ordinary people. The maGombwe officiate at gatherings at their residential place, on mountains, by rivers, and in forests, depending on the specific purpose. They also attend to gatherings assembled at clients' places for different types of celebrations, including thanksgiving by families. Members of families and clans contribute to meet the expenses of such gatherings, which will be attended by maGombwe, ancestral spirit mediums, mashave mediums, traditional healers, relatives, and neighbors. The food and beer consumed at such gatherings must be of African origin and prepared the customary way.

Different spirits may compete to possess one medium, and each such spirit may have its own pantheon of mashave spirits. Many spirits may end up possessing one medium for a variety of reasons. Some spirits possess a medium because they are attracted to the medium, while some possess a medium because they have nowhere else to go to, and others possess a medium as payback for services rendered. The different spirits will come in with their entourage of mashave spirits to possess a medium who has become attractive as a result of cleansing that removes unwanted spirits. Spirits cause people to gather, exchange views, and enjoy themselves in the name of the spirits and God. God and spirits are believed to enjoy such gatherings, which demonstrate the oneness of people, spirits, and God.

**Key Words:** Gombwe, ancestral spirits, mashave, God, traditional religion, healers, herbalists, promiscuity.

## **La relation entre Dieu et le peuple dans la religion traditionnelle Shona**

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## **Résumé**

Cette étude a été conduite entre 2005 et le dernier trimestre 2008, et porte sur les esprits médiums au Mashonaland Central et leurs clients au Mashonaland Central, au Mashonaland de l'est, et des provinces de Manicaland et Harare. Les clients des principaux esprits médiums, maGombwe, viennent de partout à travers le pays et au-delà de la frontière. Ils incluent d'autres maGombwe, des esprits médiums ancestraux, des médiums mashave, des guérisseurs spirituels, des herboristes, d'autres patients incluant les leaders de l'Eglise, les gens d'affaires, les politiciens, et les gens du peuple. Le maGombwe officie aux rencontres à leur résidence, sur la montagne, près des rivières et en forêt, dépendant du but spécifique. Ils participent également aux rencontres chez les clients pour différents types de célébrations incluant les actions de grâce en famille. Les membres de familles et clans contribuent aux dépenses de telles rencontres auxquelles participent le maGombwe, les esprits médiums ancestraux, les médiums mashave, les guérisseurs traditionnels, la parenté et les voisins. La nourriture et la bière consommées lors de telles rencontres doivent être d'origine africaine and doivent être préparées de manière habituelle.

Différents esprits peuvent être en compétition pour posséder un médium et chaque esprit peut avoir son propre panthéon d'esprits mashave. Plusieurs esprits peuvent finir par posséder un médium pour une variété de raisons. Certains esprits possèdent un médium car ils sont attirés par le médium, certains possèdent un médium car ils n'ont nul part d'autre à aller, d'autres possèdent un médium en remboursement d'un service rendu. Les différents esprits arrivent avec leur entourage d'esprits mashave, pour posséder un médium par qui ils sont attirés due à un nettoyage qui a retiré les esprits non désirés. Les esprits font que les gens se rassemblent, échangent leurs opinions, et s'amuse au nom des esprits et de Dieu. On croit que Dieu et les esprits apprécient ces rassemblements qui démontrent l'unité des gens, des esprits et de Dieu.

### ***Mots clés***

Gombwe, esprits ancestraux, mashave, Dieu, religion traditionnelle, guérisseurs, herboristes.

## **La Relación entre Dios y la Gente en la Religión Tradicional de Shona**

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### **Resumen**

Este estudio fue llevado a cabo durante año 2005 y hasta último cuarto del año 2008, cubriendo médiums espiritistas en la Mashonaland Central de Mashonaland y sus clientes en Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland del Este, Manicaland y las provincias de Harare. Los clientes de los principales médiums espiritistas, maGombwe, son de todo el país y países vecinos. Ello incluye otros maGombwe, médiums espiritistas ancestrales, médiums

mashave, curanderos espirituales, yerberos, otros pacientes que incluyen líderes de iglesias, gente de negocios, políticos y gente ordinaria. Los maGombwe offician en reuniones en sus lugares de residencia, en montañas, en los ríos y bosques dependiendo del propósito específico. También van a atender a las reuniones que son organizadas por sus clientes para celebrar diferentes tipos de eventos, incluyendo el día de acción de gracia por la familia. Los miembros de la familia y los Clan, contribuyen para solventar los gastos de estas reuniones las cuales son atendidas por el maGombwe, médiums de espíritus ancestrales, médiums mashave, curanderos tradicionales, parientes y vecinos. La comida y la cerveza que se consume durante estas reuniones tienen que ser solamente de origen africano y preparado a través por los medios que acostumbra en la región.

Diferentes espíritus pueden competir para poseer a un médium, y cada tal espíritu puede tener su propio panteón de espíritus mashave. Muchos espíritus pueden terminar por poseer a un médium por diferentes razones. Algunos poseen al médium porque simplemente el médium les atrae, otros porque no tienen a donde más ir, otros poseen un médium como un cobro de los servicios prestados. Los diferentes espíritus vendrán con su cortejo de espíritus mashave para poseer a un médium que resulta atractivo por su limpieza al haber removido otros espíritus que lo poseían. Los espíritus causan que las personas se reúnan, intercambien puntos de vista, y se diviertan en el nombre de los espíritus de Dios. Se cree que Dios y los espíritus disfrutan estas reuniones las cuales demuestran la unidad de las personas, los espíritus y Dios.

### **Palabras Clave**

Gombwe, espíritus ancestrales, mashave, Dios, religión tradicional, curanderos, yerberos.

## **O Relacionamento Entre Deus e o Povo da Religião Tradicional Shona**

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Este estudo foi realizado entre 2005 e o último trimestre de 2008, cobrindo os “espíritos” (médiums) em Mashonaland central e seus clientes no centro e leste de Mashonaland, como também no Manicaland e nas províncias de Harare. Os clientes dos principais médiums chamados maGombwe, são de todas as partes do país e através das fronteiras. Estão incluídos outros maGombwe, médiums ancestrais, médiums mashave, curandeiros espirituais, outros pacientes que incluem líderes de igreja, executivos, políticos, e povos ordinários. Os maGombwe officia reuniões em sua residência, em montanhas, por rios e nas florestas dependendo da finalidade específica. Eles também participam de reuniões nas casas dos clientes para tipos diferentes de comemorações que incluem a ação de graças pelas famílias. Os membros das famílias e dos clãs contribuem para pagar as despesas de tais reuniões atendidas pelos maGombwe, médiums ancestrais, médiums mashave, curandeiros tradicionais, parentes e vizinhos. O alimento e a cerveja consumidos nesses encontros devem ser de origem africana e preparados de maneira habitual. Espíritos diferentes podem competir para possuir um médium, e cada um destes

espíritos podem ter seu próprio panteão de espírito mashave. Muitos espíritos podem acabar tomando posse de um só médium por várias razões. Alguns espíritos possuem um médium porque são atraídos à ele, alguns possuem um médium porque eles não têm nenhum outro lugar para ir, e outros possuem um médium como retorno para os serviços prestados.

Diferentes tipos de espíritos virão com sua comitiva de espíritos mashave para possuir um médium que se tornou atraente como um resultado de limpeza que remove espíritos indesejáveis. Os Espíritos causam a reunião de pessoas, troca de pontos de vista, e o divertimento em nome de Deus e dos espíritos. Acredita-se que Deus e os espíritos se beneficiam com tais reuniões, pois demonstram o caráter único das pessoas, espíritos e Deus.

### **Das Verhaeltnis zwischen Gott und Volk in der traditionellen Religion der Shona von Takawira Kazembe**

#### **Zusammenfassung**

Diese Studie wurde zwischen 2005 und dem letzten Quartal von 2008 unternommen. Sie berichtet ueber Spiritmedien in Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East und den Harareprovinzen. Die Klienten der leitenden Spiritmedien, maGombwe, kamen von allen Teilen des Landes und ausserhalb der Grenzen. Sie schliessen andere maGombwe ein, sowohl als Spiritmedien der Ahnen, Mashave medien, spirituelle Heiler, Herbalisten und andere Patienten, einschliesslich kirchlicher Leiter, Geschaeftsleute, Politiker und gewoehnliche Leute. Die maGombwe amtieren auf Versammlungen in Ihren Wohnstaetten, auf Bergen, bei Fluessen und in Waeldern, und sind abhaengig von ihren spezivischen Absichten. Auch kuemmern sie sich um verschiedenartige Feiern in den Behausungen von Familien, zum Beispiel Danksagungen. Familien- und Sippenmitglieder tragen zu den Kosten der Zusammenkuenfte bei, die vom maGombwe, sowohl von Spiritmedien der Ahnen, Mashavemedien, traditionellen Heiler, Verwandten und Nachbarn besucht werden. Nahrungsmittel und Bier die bei solchen Versammlungen verzehrt werden, muessen afrikanischer Herkunft sein und auf herkoemmliche Art zubereitet sein.

Verschiedene Geister moegen um die Besessenheit des Mediums wetteifern und jeder dieser Geister mag sein eigenes Pantheon von Mahavegeistern haben. Viele Geister koennen am Ende aus verschiedenen Gruenden von einem Medium Besitz nehmen. Manche Geister nehmen Besitz von einem Medium weil sie sich zu ihm hingezogen fuehlen, andere tun es weil sie nicht wissen wo sie sonst hingehen sollen, noch andere tun es als Vergeltung fuer geleistete Dienste. Die verschiedenen Geister erscheinen mit ihrem Geleit von Mashavegeistern um von einem Medium Besitz zu nehmen das durch eine Reinigung mittels Austreibung von unerwuenschten Geistern attraktiv wurde. Geister bewirken, dass Menschen zusammen kommen um Ansichten zu teilen und sich im Namen Gottes und der Geister zu erfreuen. Man geglaubt, dassGott und die Geister sich an diesen Versammlungen erfreuen, was einen Einklang zwischen Gott, den Menschen und den Geistern zeigt.

***Schlüsselworte:***

Gombwe, Ahnengeister, Mashave, Gott, traditionelle Religion, Heiler, Herbalist.

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**The Relationship between God and People in Shona Traditional Religion**

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**Introduction:**

African religions are closely associated with African peoples' concepts of ethnic identity, encompassing beliefs in supernatural beings, ritual acts of worship, and all aspects of life, focusing on the eternal questions of what it means to be human, what is the meaning of life, and what are the correct relations among human beings, spiritual powers, and the natural world. African religious systems also seek to explain the persistence of evil and suffering, and portray the world as operating with some degree of order and predictability. They uphold certain types of ethical behavior as expressed in sacred oral (and sometimes written) traditions, handed down from generation to generation through the performance of rituals and through intensive periods of traditional education, including rites of passage.<sup>1</sup> Zimbabwean African traditional religion has a strong foothold in contemporary Zimbabwe as an integral part of the everyday lives of many Zimbabweans. It is seen as a way of life. The religious influence goes beyond what can be termed religious in a narrow (or Western) sense: it is seen to be evident in cultures, the literature, politics, medicine, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Their strong belief in the existence of spiritual beings requires that they attend their day-to-day activities and relationships with caution, respect for human dignity and in peace with their environment. Offences, wickedness, violation of societal norms, and other sinful acts are not spared by god according to traditional African religion.<sup>3</sup>

In Shona and Ndebele religions, God (Mwari, shona or uMlimo, Ndebele), is seen as the creator and sustainer of the universe in much the same manner as within Christianity and is believed to be active in the everyday lives of people, and even in politics. Although God and spirits are important in African religions, religious belief and practice are central to all aspects of life in Africa, impacting on the way people live.<sup>2, 4, 5</sup>

Religious belief and practices are not restricted to one day each week, but are present in the most common daily activities as well as in special ceremonies, providing people with a system of values, attitudes, and beliefs (worldview) which give mechanisms to understand the world in which they live together with everyday events and occurrences. The worldviews provide a system of morality that establishes right from wrong, good and appropriate from bad and inappropriate behavior. Children and adults learn right from wrong and what is appropriate or inappropriate in every situation that they face.

Rituals are often associated with important human events: birth, marriage, death, planting, and harvest. They serve to reinforce important religious beliefs through meaningful activities that bring comfort or joy and thus strengthen the unity of the followers of the religious tradition.

In indigenous African religion, the concept of God is similar to the three main monotheistic religions: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Hence these three were relatively easily accepted into African communities. A pantheon of spirits act as intermediaries between God and human beings<sup>4,5</sup> in a way similar and comparable to angels in Christian, Islam, and Jewish traditions. Gender harmony is not negotiated, but occurs naturally, unlike what has happened in some Christian orders.<sup>6</sup>

Africans do not treat spirits as gods and do not worship them; however, just as they respect living elders, even more so the spirits of ancestors are remembered and respected but not feared because their blessings are important to personal and community well-being. Appropriate behavior and observance of obligations and rites are important and required to maintain social harmony, longevity, and contentment of spirits. The spirits are believed to constitute an invisible community within the community of the living, always around their descendants, caring for them and participating in their joys and sorrows.<sup>3,4,5,7</sup>

There are good spirits, for example, maGombwe, ancestral spirits, and good mashave (related to talents); and there are bad spirits, for example bad mashave, ngozi. Bad spirits are responsible for causing much of the misfortune individuals and communities suffer.<sup>4,5</sup>

Every religious tradition has individuals who perform specific religious tasks and duties, each with a specific title: rabbi, imman, minister, pastor, or priest. In African religious traditions, there are different religious roles, which include spiritual leaders, ceremony leaders, rain makers, counselors, healers (diviners and herbalists), and assistants in each of the above. Most of the people who perform these roles are spirit mediums or potential spirit mediums.<sup>8</sup>

In some African traditions these various roles may be served by the same individual; in other traditions different persons may serve each position. The religious leaders may be considered as professionals in that each position requires long periods of training. The positions are often full time, leaving little time for activities beyond the fulfillment of their duties. In most African religious traditions women and men may serve in any leading capacity, one of the most important functions being officiating at religious ceremonies, a practice that is very important for maintaining religious and cultural traditions and is vital to maintaining a close-knit community.<sup>4,5,8</sup>

Extracts from plant parts provide the basis for the medication used by traditional healers in Africa. Spiritual traditional leaders, healers, and herbalists go through a rigorous training through which they learn about the various duties, every step involving the intervention of spirits and God, since in African culture everything is under the control of God and spirits. Herbalists and healers will be able to prescribe herbal medicines for



many different illnesses upon completion of training. When they are confronted with a new or strange disease they seek assistance from the spiritual world where the spirits possess them and lead them to appropriate medication for the disease. Diviners treat illness primarily through facilitating the direct intervention of the spiritual world. African healing is based on close observation of the patient and his/her disease using remedies that have a track-record for successfully treating the ailment.<sup>4, 5, 8</sup>

Early Christian missionaries tried to destroy African religion and African medicine, regarding many African traditional religious rites and rituals as against the Christian faith and morals. They also preached that African religion promoted the belief in witchcraft and encouraged people to worship their ancestors instead of God. They regarded African medicine as unscientific and also regarded some of its treatment methods as antichristian. Hence they tried to stop converts from taking part in African traditional religious rituals and from consulting traditional healers who they described as heathens.<sup>4, 5, 8, 9</sup>

This attempt to destroy African religion has not succeeded. Religion is the strongest element in traditional African culture and exerts great influence upon the conduct of the African people. Religion is closely bound up with the traditional way of African life, and therefore, has shaped the lives of Africans, while at the same time life has shaped religion as well.<sup>10</sup> Many African Christians have continued to participate in traditional religious rituals, and they have also continued to consult traditional healers. Thus, many have dual membership: membership in the Christian church and in the African religion.<sup>8</sup>

Traditional medicine and traditional religion are inseparable. The general theory of illness in African traditional systems is very broad. It encompasses African theology and attempts to explain illness, disease, and life in general in terms of the relations between God, the universe, and human beings. Traditional healing is governed by traditional religious practices. The traditional practice has continued to grow, despite the efforts of missionaries and colonizers to destroy it. Traditional solutions to the problems of life have remained respectable and satisfactory because of the successes of traditional healing and traditional life-ameliorating systems which incorporate herbal medicines, traditional religion, and the relationship between God, the spirits, and humans.<sup>8</sup>

Traditional medical practices have succeeded in curing a large number of illnesses using both scientific and non-scientific (or subjective) knowledge. Scientific medicines are obtained from plants. Plant medicines recommended by traditional healers have been developed through trial and error, experimentation, and systematic observation over a long period of time. The major source of non-scientific knowledge are the various spirits (mashave, in particular), which are believed to be capable of enhancing even the efficacy of herbal medicines.<sup>5</sup> The social and psychological methods of treatment developed from the unscientific base often bring good results. The idea that many African religious rites and rituals and many of the cultural practices are against Christian faith and morals is, in fact, not correct. Instead, traditional religion is involved in all aspects of the African's life, bringing together God and spirits into every activity. In recent years a number of African scholars have shown that many traditional practices that Christian churches tried to eliminate were, not in fact, against Christian faith and morals. African religion does

not encourage witchcraft, it merely accepts its existence; at the same time, it regards witches as sinners and at times, persons practicing that tradition have been persecuted and even executed. African religion does not encourage people to venerate their ancestors, but to worship God.<sup>8</sup>

Whenever two or more cultures meet, there is potential conflict. Spiritual conflict exists between African traditional religion and Christianity. It is difficult to separate African culture from African traditional religion because religion is embedded in African culture. Traditional religion is part of African ethos, and an understanding of it should go hand in hand with Christian evangelism.

God does not communicate with people directly, but through maGombwe and ancestral spirits. The ancestral spirits interact with their descendants on a day-to-day basis and communicate their requests, needs, and obligations through maGombwe to God. People can also communicate directly with maGombwe, who in turn communicate peoples' requests, needs, obligations, and aspirations to God. MaGombwe involve ancestral spirits in all the intervention between God and people.<sup>4, 5</sup> Many African people who became Christians found it difficult to abandon their religion and medicines completely. Christian conversion was shallow, and it did not always change African peoples' understanding of life and relations with their ancestral spirits and mashave, maGombwe, and God.<sup>4, 5, 8</sup> African traditional spiritual systems have been misunderstood by Christian evangelists, and others and have been unjustly demonized. Most of the people who condemn the systems base their information on the advice given by the very same people who wanted to destroy it and everything about African culture.<sup>11</sup>

### **Great Zimbabwe Ruins**

The case of the Great Zimbabwe ruins illustrates how far the enemies of African culture have gone in order to destroy it. Great Zimbabwe is located in south central Zimbabwe. These ruins of monuments and cities built of stone are believed to have been built by southern Africans 600-1000 years ago. They are evidence of a thriving culture that was in the heart of Africa. Up to recent years Western historians believed the ruins to be remains of a settlement of a "mysterious white race." Colonial treasure hunters and amateur archaeologists ravaged the ruins in search of evidence of white influence in the construction of the stone buildings, which are among the most remarkable monuments on the African continent. Cecil Rhodes had recognized the considerable propaganda value the evidence of an ancient foreign white settlement with biblical origins would have on tourism and the morale of settlers, and how it would vindicate the settlers' lies to the world concerning the capabilities of the natives of the nation he was trying to annex to the United Kingdom. He acquired many antiquities from Great Zimbabwe and initiated excavations at the site and searches of the archives of Rome and Lisbon for documents referring to foreign construction of the ruins. It was only at independence in 1980 that architects started taking a professional look at the ruins and similar sites.<sup>12</sup>

Westerners failed to appreciate the spiritual powers of African religion. The drama at the hanging of Nehanda might have been a display of spiritual powers. Two unsuccessful



attempts were made to hang Nehanda until an African prisoner present at her hanging suggested that the executioner should remove a tobacco pouch from her belt, and Nehanda was hanged at the first attempt after this was done.<sup>12</sup>

The death of the spirit medium Chaminuka is another case in point. The Ndebele had been unable to kill the medium with guns and spears. In the end the medium himself had to tell them that he could only be killed by a boy under the age of puberty. Before he died he predicted the country's conquest by whites and the demise of the Ndebele Empire. This happened. Shona religion proclaims that Nehanda and Chaminuka had not been conquered, but even in their deaths and by means of their deaths, they comprehended events and controlled them.<sup>13</sup>

The conversion of Kaguvi further serves to illustrate the shallowness of the conversion of Africans to Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Vera clearly shows that the priest and Kaguvi did not understand one another,<sup>15</sup> and yet Kaguvi is reported prominently in history as having been converted to Christianity.

### **African Community Culture**

Missionaries were fascinated by the community culture of Africa, they themselves having come from individualistic cultures. The missionaries made the mistake of believing that to become a Christian, people had to be "removed from their indigenous cultures."<sup>16</sup>

They treated African religions as an evil which had to be eradicated, and frequently believed that traditional religious beliefs and practices were inferior, and traditional customs had to be done away with before the acceptance of Christianity. This was resisted and it contributed to the process which is being seen as religious syncretism in religious beliefs today, and what Bishop Desmond Tutu has described as a "form of schizophrenia."<sup>16</sup>

The role of the missionaries in the colonization of the region was also considerable in terms of the cultural and political domination of the people. Missionaries contributed to turning Christianity into an ideology which was used to convince Africans not to resist white domination, using religion to legitimize, sustain, and even promote political tyranny and oppression, as well as in other instances for reasons of political liberation of the people. Although missionaries claim to have been opposed to the colonial ideology, they were part of the colonial structure and brought with them religions, beliefs, and practices which confused the natives. In the early days, missionaries did not differentiate between their faith and their own culture,<sup>2</sup> yet traditional religion remained part of the people.

During the second Chimurenga (war of liberation in Zimbabwe), the church was criticized for appearing to be on the side of the oppressors, although some churches and missions did support the struggle for independence, particularly the rural missions. However, traditional leaders were playing an increasingly important role through their cooperation with the spirit mediums. Traditional religions boosted cultural identity and pride, which not only gave strength, but also set the majority apart from the ruling

minority associated with Christianity. The spirit mediums became symbols of traditional power and knowledge through their association with heroes of the first Chimurenga, through resistance to changes introduced by the colonial powers and “white culture” in general, and through their association with Gombwe and God.<sup>4,5</sup>

Some missionaries and churches did, however, join the people in the fight against colonialism. The Catholic Church of Zimbabwe voiced strong criticism of the minority rule and oppression of the people, and they have subsequently gone the furthest in “indigenizing” their leadership, church services, and forms of worship. Although many of the leaders of the second Chimurenga had been educated at various mission schools, it is often argued, however, that mission education coincided with the colonizers’ interest, since only education could lay the basis for a smooth-functioning colonial administration. The missions also had a stake in education since it prepared people with whom the missionaries themselves could communicate and whom they could use to translate the Bible into indigenous languages. Thus mission schools, in varying degrees, served the interests of the colonizers, the settler regimes, the missions themselves, and, finally, to some extent, the people.<sup>2</sup>

### **Objective**

This research sought to collect information that will help explain the relationship between God and followers of traditional religion, to provide the readership with a clear picture of issues pertinent to traditional religion, to correct some apparent distortions in some published reports, and to extend the dimensions of the body of knowledge pertaining to African traditional religious systems.

### **Methodology**

In-depth studies were conducted of activities at ceremonial gatherings related to (1) annual assemblies, and (2) thanksgiving by individuals and interviews of spirit mediums and the general public attending these gatherings. Spirit mediums were interviewed and observed at their usual places of residence, which also happened to be their workplaces, and at ceremonial gatherings. People who work with the spirit mediums and others who attended ceremonial gatherings were also interviewed and observed. The interviews were primarily aimed at information gathering, but the two sets of interviews and observations also served to confirm one another. What was learned from spirit mediums was compared with what was revealed by the general public. The annual assemblies took place over a week at a time, and a number of such gatherings were covered over the three-year period.

### **Delimitation**

The study began in 2005, and extended into the last quarter of 2008, involving spirit mediums, n’angas, and herbalists based in Mashonaland Central Province. These persons were interviewed and observed at their residential places and when they visited different places throughout the country to attend to ceremonies, especially in Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East, Manicaland, and Harare Provinces. Some of the people who work with the mediums, and some of their hosts in places where I accompanied them for

ceremonies, were also interviewed and observed. Although the people interviewed were based in Mashonaland Central Province, they do not all belong to that province. The spirit mediums and the people who work with them come from all over the country and work from Mashonaland Central Province because this area, more than most areas of Zimbabwe, is believed to have retained customary practices. Even their clients come from throughout the country as well.

Collection of information started some five years after I began conducting meetings with the key people who took part in this study. By then the spirit mediums and the people around them fully comprehended what I stood for, and not only did they accept me, but they were also keen to present unambiguous information, which enabled me to critically and fairly report their views so that my readership would become informed and develop a clear picture of their operations.

### **Instruments**

This study was carried out as a Case Study, which is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context. In this type of study, the boundary between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and there is no control over events. The study used multiple sources of evidence such as interviews, observations, participant observations, and personal information. Collected data were assessed by using different sources. Inevitably contradictions may be encountered, but truth may then be established by finding further information. This type of study allows the researcher to concentrate on instances and identify the different interactive factors at work in individual events. The results are not for generalization in the sense of quantitative research, but they give insights into possible solutions for similar problems, and can also be used to identify areas requiring further research.

The case study is an approach particularly appropriate for individual researchers, because it gives an opportunity for selected aspects of issues to be studied in depth within a limited time, collecting evidence systematically, and the study is methodically planned as for any other research. In so doing, the interaction of factors and events may be understood from the full picture thereby obtained. Observations and interviews are most frequently used in this type of study, but no method is excluded. Methods of collecting information are selected on the basis of appropriateness for the task.

The case study researcher aims to identify pertinent features of what is being studied and show how they affect the implementation of systems that influence phenomena. In this study the danger of bias was guarded against by the triangulation between the different views of the interviewees and through obtaining consensus on issues that are prone to be disagreed on.

The reliability of a study is more important than its generalization. If a study is carried out systematically and critically; if it aims at correcting inaccuracies of earlier reports (particularly in the present topic which has largely been reported by foreigners and by other people with hidden agendas, e.g., coverage by missionaries who usually aimed at

discrediting the traditional religions); if the study aims at putting the record straight; if the findings are relatable; and if the publication of findings extends the boundaries of existing knowledge, then the study is a valid piece of research.

The success of a study of the nature of traditional religion, in particular the relations between members of the religion and God, will be judged by the extent to which the study provides readers with a three-dimensional picture and will illustrate relationships, micro-political issues, and patterns of influence in context, and the extent to which the study attempts to give a correct picture of issues at stake.<sup>17, 18, 19</sup>

### **Participants and Data Gathering**

The participants were selected on the basis of how well they would serve our purposes and involved only potentially information-rich informants. To that extent, prominent spirit mediums were interviewed, and observed over a three-year period at their residential places and at religious ceremonies in the mountains, in forests, and by river banks. Formal interviews were carried out by appointment at the above-mentioned places. Informal interviews were conducted on an impromptu basis as they were met strolling the grounds of their residences, or in their fields at home, or in the shade of trees and rocks by locations allocated to them at annual religious ceremonies, or at ceremonies to which they were invited by their followers as the researcher followed them to the different places in the country provinces, or while traveling by automobile. In an attempt to achieve maximum exposure, the researcher even offered to drive some of the spirit mediums to places they were visiting throughout the country, especially in Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East, Manicaland, and in Harare Provinces, and held informal discussions while traveling by automobile. There were usually four of us in the car as we traveled—talking and behaving as any four people would while traveling by automobile.

Such interactions led to the gathering of a considerable amount of information about the life of spirit mediums. At all such times the three or four passengers were spirit mediums. They usually traveled with one senior Gombwe and the other two were either a Sadunhu or a Tateguru, or an n'anga or an herbalist. The researcher traveled with different sets of spirit mediums so that he would have exposure to as many of them as possible under informal circumstances where they would talk, joke, and behave informally. They all knew the reason the researcher traveled with them, and they accepted him and were keen to convey information to him. When they reached their destination the researcher was free to be with spirit mediums when it was appropriate, or he could join the congregation, who accepted him as the one who had traveled with the spirit mediums. Members of the congregation were also generous with information. Some of them knew very much less than the researcher did by virtue of his association with the spirit mediums. But the important thing was that he was satisfied that they gave him the information that he required to best of their abilities. He obtained a considerable amount of information concerning the reasons for such gatherings, what the conveners of the gatherings hoped to achieve, and how they had materially made such gatherings possible.

The duration of the gatherings at the followers places generally extended over two or three days, depending on the complexity of the purpose for the gathering. Annual gatherings extended over weeks at a time. The senior mediums with whom the researcher traveled usually spent less than three days at a time at such places. The researcher and the mediums usually conducted an assessment of events on their way back to the mediums' bases. Such an assessment gave the researcher a chance to ask questions concerning what he may not have understood during their visit or about information from some of the interviewees during the ceremonies. Such informal discussions were so valuable that, on many occasions, the researcher pulled off the road to write down notes.

The visits gave him extended times with the current mediums of Nehanda, Chaminuka, Jembere, Mutota, and Nohoreka. He also had discussions with a large number of Sadunhus, Tategurus, family mediums, and mashave, and he was able to witness the suffering caused by zvikwambo and ngozi.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Hierarchy of Spirits**

Mwari> Gombwe> Sadunhu> Tateguru>Sekuru and Mbuya> Machinda and Madzitete>Mashave.

Mwari is the creator of all and everything, Gombwe is the angel of God.<sup>4, 5, 20</sup> The spirit of Gombwe is believed to have been specially created for the purpose of being a messenger of God and is not believed to be a spirit of a dead person. Spirit mediums are able to trace the origins of the different mediums of particular spirits of maGombwe over the years and are adamant that the spirit of Gombwe has no known origin. Closely related to the Gombwe are the spirits of maSadunhu or maSadzinza. These are spirits of dead people who were founders of the different clans. The powers of the spirit of Sadunhu are closely related to the powers the Sadunhu had when alive. The stronger he was as the leader of the clan, the stronger the powers of the spirit will be. Originally there were twelve clans. These were, however, increased due to wars and to facilitate intermarriages. It is taboo to marry within one's clan. The Sadunhu looks after the interests of the people of his clan, working in association with spirits of leaders of the sub-clans, chieftaincies, extended families, and families.<sup>4, 5</sup>

Each one of the spirits possesses members of families of his descendants. Their respective duties are primarily to look after the interests of the people in their respective units. It is common for one to be possessed by a number of different spirits in one's lineage. For example, a medium may be possessed by a spirit from the family, at the same time being possessed by a spirit from the extended family, sub-clan, the clan, and the Gombwe. A spirit may possess different mediums at the same time, but the intensity of the powers of the spirit may differ between different mediums.<sup>5</sup>

All spirits are associated with mashave, which enhance their powers. One of the most respected mashave is shave renjuzu. Njuzu is said to be a spirit which stays under water.<sup>21</sup> The spirit may take a person and keep him/her under water for varying lengths of time, which may be months, giving the person foods of all types, including fresh food, cooked and uncooked food, some insects, and mud. The person must accept whatever food is given if he/she is to survive; besides, the people left behind must not mourn the captive's demise otherwise the njuzu becomes angry and kill him/her. When the njuzu has finished with the person, it allows him/her to come out of the water as a medium of njuzu with many talents such as talents for amassing wealth, healing, foretelling events, and many others, including being a great n'anga.<sup>22</sup>

Spirit mediums concurred that one does not, however, need to be taken under water by the spirit to be a medium of the njuzu spirit. Many people are known to be possessed by njuzu, yet they have never been taken under water by the spirit. They stress that this spirit is associated with cleanliness, hunting (kushava), traditional healing, and many other capabilities. Its mediums are usually keen to wear white clothes and use white plates.

### **Residential Places of Mediums of Gombwe**

The Gombwe may have a place he/she calls home, but will not normally live there. The spirit causes the medium to choose a place outside some village which then becomes a place of worship. Assistants, clients, and guest mediums help maintain the place. The assistants may be other maGombwe (at comparable level to him/her, or of lower ranks), ancestral spirit mediums, traditional healers, herbalists, and apprentices. Guest mediums are mediums of other maGombwe, mediums of maSadunhu, and maTateguru, whose purpose will be to consult and compare notes with the resident Gombwe, or to join the Gombwe in worship, or to be assisted. Most of the lower mediums come as clients. The Gombwe does not charge anybody for services rendered. He/she lives on gifts from well-wishers. The Gombwe may travel to different places to assist clients, or to conduct ceremonies, or to worship.

### **Clients of Spirit Gombwe**

People travel from all over the country and beyond the borders to consult spirit mediums (maGombwe in particular) in an attempt to have their health and sociological problems solved. Among these will be other maGombwe, ancestral spirit mediums, mashave spirit mediums, and other spirit mediums who come as patients or in need of assistance with their practices; patients referred to Gombwe by the different healers; patients who have been turned away from hospitals as helpless cases; and people who are simply trying their luck at having their health problems solved. Some are people who do not appear to be connected to any religion, and people who visibly belong to the different Christian religious groupings as judged from their way of dress.

The researcher interviewed some of these people, the sampling being purposeful, using the interview guide (Appendix 1). The interviews vindicated the assertion that conversion



into Christianity was shallow, that many Christians had a dual religious membership, and that many people secretly consulted traditional medicine practitioners.<sup>4, 5, 8, 23</sup>

Most were confident that the Gombwe would solve their problems as judged from reports given to them by those who had referred them to the Gombwe and those who had had similar problems solved. Some boldly stated that if the Gombwe could not solve their problem it meant that they would return home and wait for death because “whatever the Gombwe cannot cure, no one else can.”

Even leaders of some of the Christian denominations were observed consulting with the Gombwe. A bishop of a Christian denomination who had consulted on how to go about brewing beer for his father’s chenura admitted that his church preached against the practice and that what he preached was for the benefit of his congregation. He was doing this to solve personal problems. His father had also been a bishop. Even prominent politicians also visited these places to consult on their health and chances of success in their political endeavors. Business people consulted on their health or on the status of their businesses.

Although most of the people one meets at such places are indigenous Africans, people of other origins also frequent these places, most of them secretly, under cover of night or secretly invite the spirit mediums to their houses. The researcher occasionally had a chance to accompany the mediums on such secret visits and was convinced that the problems affecting people were basically the same regardless of color, origin, or religion.

Spirit mediums also perform thanksgiving ceremonies for themselves, where they invite other spirit mediums and their clients to take part in the proceedings. The details for these and requirements for annual ceremonies are similar to the family gatherings.

### **Religious Gatherings Convened by Families**

Consider a situation where a member of a family wants to conduct a thanksgiving ceremony and he or she has invited the mediums in his or her family lineage, as well as the Gombwe and all these have obliged. All the family members, representatives of the extended families, and representatives from some of the categories of other relatives are expected to attend. The reason all these must be present is that according to African customs, thanksgiving goes beyond prayers and ceremonies and is not a one-person affair. It is an occasion when problems and attributions will be attended to. Imminent problems will be foretold and prepared for. Mistakes of the past (by both the dead and the living) will be exposed and corrective action suggested. Some of the mistakes will require the whole family or sub-clan to attend to in the presence of representatives from the maternal side at the different levels, i.e., at the level of personal, father, grandfather, and at least up to great-grandfather. Punishment for mistakes will not be aimed at any one person or family, but at anybody within the clan or sub-clan.

It is believed that if corrective action is taken in the absence of any of the relevant people or their representatives, the problem will not be solved, but will only be diverted to those

not present. When the problem affects those who might have been absent, these will perform their own ceremonies and the problem shifts to others including those who tried to attend to it in the first place, and its effects will be more painful. A vicious circle is thus created. Hence, it is important for all who might be affected to be there in the first place and have the problem attended to once and for all.

### **The Responsibility of Conveners**

The role of the family of the person who caused the gathering to be held would be that of making sure that the events of the gathering proceed smoothly. They make sure that all the material requirements are in place, and in time. These include the animals for slaughter, beer, food for guests, firewood to be used during the gathering, transport of important people who must make it to the gathering (especially mediums; family elders who might have to come from distant places; and relatives, particularly from the maternal side), invitations of relatives and neighbors, as well as working out all the other logistics for the success of the proceedings (including alerting the chief(s) and headmen).

As the day of the gathering approaches, the family-elder communicates the purpose of the gathering to the ancestors and asks them to pass it on to their own elders and higher powers until the message finally reaches God. All immediate relatives and representatives of relatives from the maternal side—even those who might be resident in distant places—must be present when this happens, and neighbors will also be invited. Relatives will represent ancestral spirits and non-relatives will represent *mashave*. This is the time when the purpose of the intended gathering is explained to all concerned. The family elder asks the ancestors to accept and bless the grains (normally *rapoko*) which will be used to brew the beer for the occasion.<sup>20</sup>

Nobody else communicates with the spirits on this occasion. Men show their agreement with the words of the elder by clapping hands at the appropriate stages of the proceedings and, when necessary, point out omissions by the elder. Women show their agreement by ululating. When the communication is over, the people who will brew the beer for the occasion begin the preparations for brewing and allocate each other different duties related to the beer brewing. The brewing will be performed by elderly women who are no longer sexually active and helped by young girls who have not yet reached the age of puberty.<sup>20</sup> These elderly women and young girls will at least be members of the family or members of the extended family or members of the clan. Women who are still sexually active will have their own appropriate duties during the process. They will be allowed to do anything else except activities that involve handling of the grain and water used for beer brewing. That is, they are allowed to wash up, to gather firewood, to cook for people (including those performing the beer brewing), and so on. These will not be restricted to relatives of the family. Any woman will be allowed to help.

Materials such as *rapoko* will be supplied by family, extended family, and clan members, who may be assisted by anybody able and willing to do so. The same happens concerning the animal or animals to be slaughtered for the occasion. The expenses will not be restricted to one person. When only one person or a few will be able to supply anything,

he/she or they will do so on behalf of the others. No one will be forced to contribute. People contribute according to their will and ability. Those who contribute will be rewarded and those who do not contribute because they do not want to or because they do not agree with the purpose of the intended gathering might not be afforded the benefits accruing from the activities of the gathering.<sup>4</sup> If the purpose of the gathering is the removal of suffering and misfortune, such will not be removed from those who do not partake when they are able to do so. Those who contribute and participate willingly will be graced, for example, through luck for the generation of wealth, and prosperity of property (including livestock or crops in the fields). It will not be proper for only one person to shoulder everything because the ancestors, mashave, and God will not be pleased with situations whereby all graces and blessings will be accruing to one person.

The above generally applies to a member of a family in which there is an influential person who can arrange a chain of spirit mediums up to the top, the Gombwe. Less fortunate families might perform similarly, but without the attendance of as many influential spirit mediums. The general activities will be similar, but likely less dramatic. Rules and qualifications concerning the beer brewers, the family members who lead in the prayers and other activities, as well as the people who are expected to attend, remain the same.

Those without their own high-powered and influential spirit mediums, or without the required material means to organize large gatherings, will be helped by those who can, or they will be limited to carrying out their ceremonies under less dramatic circumstances.

### **The Activities of the Spirit Mediums, Elders, and the Different People at Gatherings**

The Gombwe leads in the main prayers and might not even talk to the people in the gathering, but instead, conducts his/her prayers and ceremonies away from the limelight. His/her main purpose will be to look after the security of the host and guests; to direct the activities of those directly involved with the proceedings of the gathering; to ask for God's intervention in matters which may be beyond the medium's control; to liaise with the ancestors of the people who are responsible for the gathering, pleading with them to direct the activities of their people and ensure that the purpose of the gathering is achieved.

The family elders play their own family roles together with extended family elders. These conduct their business without pomp so that onlookers might not even notice what takes place. They will be assisted in their activities by family, extended family, and non-family spirit mediums. These mediums will act in consultation with sub-clan and clan spirit mediums, trying to ensure that both invited and uninvited guests go about their business in safety and tranquility.

The sub-clan and clan mediums will be in constant contact with the Gombwe, who in turn will be in contact with God. Such gatherings may be too large to be accommodated at somebody's home, but may be held out in the open (perhaps in the mountains, in the forests, or alongside rivers). The different spirit mediums will be in separate locations

with their respective sleeping places, cooking places, resting places (not houses or rooms, but in the shade of trees or other forms of shelter).

The spirit mediums (in particular the Gombwe) usually do not have cooks or other such assistants. They do their own cooking because the spirits cause them to be very selective in their eating habits. They do not eat particularly good food. What they eat is dictated by their spirits, usually eating what the ancestors used to eat, but definitely not factory-processed foods. Their food is prepared over fire in clay pots or roasted over wood fires. Dishes, pots, cups, and so on, are of clay or carved from wood. There is no room for fancy foreign objects or foods. A spirit medium can go for months or years without eating meat, even though it may be available in large quantities. The spirits simply may not allow them to eat meat. Their eating habit might consist of a long constant prayer, or a long sacrifice. It usually is not voluntary, and the medium might not even be aware of what may be taking place. The sacrifice will be answered to all the same, as revealed by concession by God to the people for whom the sacrifice is performed; usually nothing accrues for the medium's personal benefit.

Spirit mediums do not generally accept being compared with, say, Christian priests, bishops, brothers, or nuns. They consider the ranks in Christian organizations to be lower than theirs and, besides, their Christian counterparts benefit materially from their works since they have salaries, whereas spirit mediums are not materially paid for what they do. They, in fact, would not have time to enjoy salaries.

Spirit mediums are always generally under possession by the different spirits, who always descend on them, and they can only eat or enjoy what the spirit permits and usually it is the sort of thing that most people would not enjoy eating or having. For example, the medium might want to enjoy a beer once in a while and the spirit might permit him/her to drink, or the spirit might cause the medium to want to drink. Even then, he/she might be lucky to go through one beer as he/she might have to give it up after one sip. The medium's life is very unpredictable and is generally one of poverty and sacrifice, having to go for days without eating, even when food is available in abundance. The medium might just not feel like eating the food. Under such circumstances, even if the human part of the medium decides to eat, the food might just be thrown out and the person may fall ill, so ill that if he or she was not a spirit medium, he/she would be hospitalized. Hospitalization is not part of a spirit medium's life. He/she might even be punished for having been hospitalized, and the illness might become worse, only to get better or the spirit medium recover fully as soon as hospitalization is stopped.

The spirit mediums will feel insulted if their lives are equated with those of Christian bishops, priests, and nuns because they believe that their own lives are more sophisticated and more complex than those of their otherwise Christian counterparts. They go on to say that bishops, priests, and nuns can set aside time to enjoy themselves and they can even go on holiday, however, they themselves cannot do that since they are always possessed by the spirits. They say that the life of a spirit medium is a long and painful prayer and sacrifice. Their lives can be very long; some can live up to well over one hundred years. It is quite possible to meet one who is over one hundred years of age and feel as if you

have met a seventy-year-old man or woman, yet later on the same person might appear twenty or thirty years older. That will not be a result of magic. What is perceived might be influenced by the spirit possessing the medium at the time. It is possible for one medium to be possessed by different spirits under different circumstances even in one day. Different spirits will not possess one medium simultaneously, but give another spirit a chance: i.e., one comes in, the other goes.

A large number of spirit mediums of different levels appear at gatherings assembled to solve family, clan, or regional problems. Each medium will be doing his/her thing and meet others for consultations. Although each medium will appear to be acting as if independent of the others, they will all be acting for the same purpose related to the success of the gathering, since the success of the gathering will be the primary goal of all mediums, their followers, the spirits, and God.<sup>20</sup>

The gathering might have been assembled because a particular member of a family needed to offer thanksgiving or had a problem to solve, or the family medium might have suggested that a gathering might be appropriate for the solution of a problem, or to appease God or the ancestors. Whatever the reason given for the gathering, the ultimate purpose is invariably to please ancestral spirits by gathering for them in happiness and to plead with them for wrongs committed, to thank them for their guidance, protection against enemies, and intervention with God, and to ask for a better future. In all the requests and praises, the ancestors are asked to transmit the messages to God. Requests and praises are always directed to the spirits known to the living, those the living have heard about, those they do not know about, and ultimately to God. Those mentioned, for example by name, are always asked to transmit the requests up the ladder and ultimately to God.

The family medium would normally have consulted with other mediums with special powers for the different aspects of life. Such consultations are not always vertical. Lateral consultations might carry the day. When family mediums consult those higher than themselves, usually the clan mediums, the consulted will also consult laterally and vertically. Depending on how bad the problem is, consultations might go all the way to the Gombwe. All the different levels of mediums will be invited to the gathering. Each of the guest mediums will be doing their own thing, all with the purpose of ensuring the success of the gathering.

There will be good and bad people among those in the gathering. The spirits of the different levels and origins will be checking the activities of the different people in the gathering. The success of the gathering will be judged by the absence of quarrels and fights among the people gathered. Spirits enjoy and feel honored when people of all walks of life gather and enjoy themselves in their honor. It is believed that enjoyment and merrymaking in harmony is itself a strong prayer to God, and the spirits will be happier for it. Seeing people gather and enjoy each other in peace and harmony is very pleasant to the spirits, and ultimately to God. Such is the reason the gatherings will be blessed with beer, meat, and all sorts of food.<sup>20</sup>

Spirit mediums themselves might not take part in much of the eating and drinking, but the spirits will be happy for the enjoyment of the gathered people. That signifies the cooperation between people, spirits, and God. The spirits will not favor any members of the gathering, regardless of them being relations of the convener, acquaintances, or strangers. They look after everybody, good or bad, without favor or jealousy.

When mediums are doing all this, the ordinary members of the gathering will be busy merrymaking, drinking, eating, and dancing in praise of God and ancestral spirits. The spirits enjoy watching people being happy in their honor and that is believed to be the greatest prayer to God, who will in turn bless the gathering. The beer drunk at such gatherings should not be from bars, and meat consumed should not be from butcheries, or food from restaurants. Whatever is eaten or drunk there should be prepared in the traditional way. The beer must be brewed by women who have reached menopause, with the assistance of young girls who have not started menstruating. The meat must be of an animal that has been killed especially for the purpose of the gathering—preferably an ox or a cow. A number of them may be slaughtered, depending on the size of the gathering. Ancestral spirits will be very pleased with this. The angels will be happier, and God will be happier still. Whatever was requested in connection with the gathering will be granted as a reward for all the trouble of convening a successful gathering. The problems that worried the people who convened the gathering should disappear and enable people to have a better life.

The Gombwe does not always physically attend such gatherings. On occasion, the Gombwe may influence proceedings from his/her residence. It is believed that the Gombwe spirit will communicate with the spirits through mediums who will be physically present at the gathering, or the Gombwe influences the ancestral spirits of the conveners. They, however, admitted that their efficacy under such circumstances was not very good. Hence they traveled to the places when it was possible.

### **Food and Materials for Mediums**

Spirits of maGombwe do not allow their mediums to eat or to handle foreign equipment, e.g., no bread, no electrically- or electronically-generated music, in some cases not even cameras or recorders are allowed, no foreign beers or drinks. Spirit mediums are very selective in the food they eat. They eat only customarily prepared African food which has been prepared in a particular manner by particular people or by themselves. Their food is cooked in clay pots using firewood, or roasted over firewood. When eating, they wash their hands using water in clay or wooden dishes, or gourds, and eat from clay bowls or wooden bowls or appropriately cut gourds, and use their hands, or wooden or clay spoons.

The spirit will not allow the medium to eat or drink anything that does not satisfy the requirements for use by spirit mediums. If the medium persists in wanting to eat whatever is not sanctioned by the spirit, the medium will vomit or fall ill, or both. The behavior of the medium under such conditions will be similar to that of a person who has been food-poisoned. Under such circumstances no medication can help the medium. The



punishment will continue for varying lengths of time, which may be days, weeks, or months. Unknowing onlookers might mistake the victim for a person who is dying. Such problems might arise even when the medium has not defied the spirit. If the medium eats anything the spirit does not want him/her to eat, such illness ensues. It happens even if the medium has eaten such food before without any problems.

The spirit may cause the medium to stop eating certain foods as a result of punishment or as a sacrifice. The signal to stop the consumption of any type of foods by a medium is usually through illness after eating the food. The medium will then realize that he/she is being ordered to stop eating the food. The spirit may advise the medium in a dream, or the medium will hear a voice telling him/her to resume eating the food or the medium will start craving for that type of food. Experience will lead the medium to resume eating whatever he/she had been ordered to stop eating. There is a purpose for which the spirit will stop its medium from eating a particular food. It may be for security, or it may simply be a sacrifice or prayer. Such sacrifice might not be for the benefit of the medium, but such events are common and apparently acceptable in spirit medium circles. Such stoppage may be a security measure in that a spirit may fear that its medium might be attacked by some other spirit mediums, in particular those with evil mashave.

It is believed that a witch with powerful witching mashave can poison some person's food simply by looking at a person as he/she eats, or simply by wishing that person's food bewitched. The only way the intended victim survives is by his/her own spirits protecting him/her. In his/her bewitching prayers, the witch may not know what the intended victim is eating that day. If the chain of foods is broken, the bewitching prayers will not work, hence the stoppage by the medium from eating particular foods, albeit, temporarily. Thus, given food, a spirit medium will not rush to eat. He/she puts the food aside and waits until the spirit tells him/her to go ahead and eat. This is a security measure whereby the spirit examines the food, searching for spiritual and material poisoning. If safe, the spirit permits the medium to go ahead and eat the food. It is common for a spirit medium to go for days without eating food and not feel hungry at all. The medium does not decide to do this. It just happens. But it is known to be caused by the spirit for different reasons, including security.

The spirit not only examines the food, it also examines the person who prepares or gives food to its medium. The medium's food handler must be a person of sound character. If, say, a medium eats food which has been handled by a prostitute, the medium might fall ill as if he/she has been materially poisoned because the spirit does not want the medium to eat what has been handled by such people. Spirits detest spiritual impurity the same way human beings detest dirt. To the spirit, food handled by unclean characters is like food put on the floor of a dirty toilet and is not fit for human consumption. Hence, if the medium eats it, illness ensues. Unlike the illness resulting from human food poisoning, which may be cured in hospitals, nobody can cure illness caused by spiritual poisoning. Only a spirit can cure it. The spirit will allow the medium to fall ill only to cure him/her at a later date, as if to mete out punishment and eventually cure him/her after a considerable amount of suffering, and the illness disappears as if to signify that the spirit has meted out enough punishment to the medium.

## **Interaction between Spirits and the Medium**

In the world of spirits, suffering is a type of prayer, which may be for self or for relatives or for non-relatives and the world at large. If the medium and his/her possessing spirit are the Gombwe type, the spirit no longer belongs to the family but to the “world”. Angels do not belong to families, but to the world, just as Nehanda did not belong to the Hwata clan, but to the world, and all maGombwe, such as Chaminuka, Kaguvi, Dzivaguru, Nohoreka, Mutota, and so on, did not belong to their earthly parents, families, and clans, but to the world. The clans cannot treat them the way they would treat the Sadunhu. In fact, the spirit of Gombwe will not be the only spirit possessing the medium. The spirit Sadunhu may also be resident in the medium, together with other spirits—both of the Gombwe lineage and of the ancestral lineage. One spirit is usually prominent and the others will be ancillary. Whichever spirit is prominent, Gombwe or ancestral, will dictate the fame of the medium, since the medium will be known by what it does most and best, and this depends on the most prominent spirit.<sup>5</sup> The situation is usually confusing to most people.

In connection with activities related to ancestral spirits, a medium whose prominent spirit is Gombwe, and one of the ancillary spirits is ancestral, the medium will be playing ancillary roles because his/her activities in those cases will be the activities of the ancillary spirits. If the other spirits around are lower in power than that of the ancillary spirit, the medium will still be prominent.

The switching between spirits can occur without onlookers noticing anything. Only the very experienced and knowledgeable might notice that there has been a change. Hence, at any occasion the medium might behave in as many peculiarities as there are spirits that possess him/her. Both spirits of male and female will be represented. Each of the spirits will have its own pantheon of mashave spirits, although some will share mashave. These, also, may take turns in possessing the medium. On the maShave side, the medium may also behave in as many ways as there are the numbers of mashave resident in him/her. The different spirits (Gombwe, ancestral, or mashave spirits) will give each other a chance to express themselves through the medium. In some cases the situation may not be fair. The strong ones may suppress the weaker ones. In such cases, however, the life of the medium becomes less complicated

### **But Why Should So Many Spirits Possess One Medium?**

The situation is understood to be similar to what human beings do. Who does not want to be associated with a good person? The medium becomes attractive as a result of the cleansing that must be done when the first spirit announces the intention to possess a particular medium. When the medium becomes clean, i.e., when most unwanted spirits (which include ngozi, zvikwambo, and others) have been driven off, the medium becomes attractive to all sorts of spirits, who will compete for possession. A number of them become permanently resident in him/her, yet others just surface to have their problems solved and then disappear.

This might also help towards explaining why a person who has solved a problem related to ancestral spirits might not rest for long before further problems surface, one after another, worrying the same person. What happens is that when one has solved a problem related to ancestral spirits, other spirits will also bring their own problems to be solved by the same person who has been successful in solving a similar problem. Some spirits are so poor that they fail to reward those who perform on their behalf and they become indebted. It may take long, but it eventually pays, though not necessarily during the lifetime of the one who suffered in order to get the things done. Perhaps the descendants of the sufferer will enjoy the benefits. The poor spirit becomes indebted in the first place because its superiors could not accept it until it had its problems solved and be able to join them after its time in “purgatory.”<sup>4, 5</sup>

The poor spirit thus becomes clean by forcing an innocent person to suffer and perform for it. However, this new crime might be lighter than the original one, and the punishment might also be lighter. The spirit then goes back to the people who should have helped it in the first place and causes them to settle its debts. When its crimes are finally lighter in the eyes of its superiors, the powers of that particular spirit are increased and can then cause good to befall the person who helped during its troubles. Spirits are more generous than living people.<sup>20</sup> The payback to the helper might not be a one-off affair. It might even be a permanent occurrence in the form of an activity that will permanently reward the helper and his/her family, for example a talent to amass wealth, i.e., in the form of maShave, which may permanently be part of the family rapporteurs.

Thus, the gathering, which was meant to give the family a chance to celebrate an event, may end up serving as a pivotal point for suggestions that lead to the solution of problems unrelated to the original purpose of the gathering.

### **Spirit Mediums’ Views on Incurable Diseases**

The spirit mediums views with respect to incurable diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, are simple and straightforward. “There is no cure for AIDS yet, and God does not condone sex outside marriage.” They argue that a cure will be found as soon as God and spirits are satisfied that people have earned their relief from the suffering. They say that God permits people to suffer for a purpose, and then allows a solution to be found. Asked why spirits are not pleading with God to stop AIDS, the mediums answered that as human beings, they are trying to help, and they are able to relieve the AIDS victims of some of the symptoms—for example, some forms of STDs, and some cancers, such as Kaposi’s sarcoma, which is not curable according to “modern medicine.” As for spirits, they say that people have to bear in mind that spirits can only do what God permits them to do. People just have to live according to the wishes of God and desist from promiscuity, although we are not suggesting that AIDS resulted from promiscuity.

### **Conclusion**

Shona religion believes that God interacts with people through the Gombwe and the ancestral spirits. The Gombwe is the messenger of God, created specifically to play that

role. Ancestral spirits are spirits of dead ancestors. Gombwe and ancestral spirits are associated by spirits of mashave. These are spirits created to serve similarly to talents.

In Shona, spirits may be (1) ancestral spirits, i.e., spirits of dead ancestors of the medium; or (2) they may be spirits of people who have no relationship with the medium or (3) they may be spirits which are not spirits of dead people. These behave like some animal or object, but they are not spirits of the animal or the object. Mashave are not spirits of dead people. No one knows their origin. They are believed to have been created for a purpose. Mashave are divided into good and bad. The good serve as talents, for example shave rokuvhima, i.e., the talent of amassing wealth. Shave rokurapa i.e., the talent of healing. The bad ones lead people to do bad things, for example shave rokuba, i.e., the spirit that leads people to steal, etc. They are thought of as demons. The good mashave are thought of as talents.

In the Shona religion people pray to God and not the different spirits and objects. Spirits cause people to gather in prayer, to exchange views, and to enjoy themselves in the name of spirits and God. God and the spirits enjoy that very much, as it demonstrates the oneness of people, spirits, and God.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Interview Guide:**

1. Do you believe in the existence of God?
2. What is the relationship between God and Gombwe?
3. What is the relationship between God and ancestral spirits?
4. Are ancestral spirits all of one type?
5. What makes Gombwe different from other ancestral spirits?
6. Do you think that everybody knows about the different levels of ancestral spirits?
7. Since Gombwe and mashave were created as spirits, and ancestral spirits were created as people, is it proper to assume that Gombwe and mashave are in one class and ancestral spirits are in separate class?
8. Are there differences between mashave used by Gombwe, mashave used by ancestral spirits, and those used by people who are not spirit mediums?
9. Is there any explanation for the observation that mashave are not mentioned in the Bible in the sense that Shona religion talks about them?
10. Do we have a hierarchy of mashave in the manner that we have a hierarchy of spirit mediums?
11. How do mashave relate to God?
12. Njuzu is one of the most talked about shave. Does it mean that it is on top of the hierarchy of mashave, in the sense that Gombwe is on the top of the hierarchy of spirit mediums?
13. What is the difference between spiritual work and magical work?
14. Why does Shona religion not respect zvikwambo?
15. What is the difference between chikwambo and Gona?
16. Up to recent times Shona religion respected Gona, and there is mention of Gona in the Old Testament. Why is Gona no longer tolerated in Shona religion?
17. Ngozi has prominence in Shona religion, but there is no counterpart of it in the Bible. Do you have any explanation for that?
18. Do you believe in the existence of heaven and hell?
19. What happens to a person after death?
20. Is it proper to classify spirit mediums as bishops, priests, brothers, and nuns?
21. How often do you pray?
22. Why is the Shona religion not worried about its followers joining Christian churches?
23. Do you think that the Shona religion ever gained from Christianity the way traditional religion gained from Western medical practices?



24. Do you think that the Shona religion should be actively developed?
25. What are your wishes about the future of the Shona religion?
26. What should be done to enable people to live happily?

## Appendix 2

### Glossary (Kazembe, 2007):

**Chaminuka, Dzivaguru, Kaguvi, and Nehanda** are some of the most revered spirit mediums in the history of the Shona people of Zimbabwe.

**Chikwambo** (plural: zvikwambo): Article, or thing, or animal (dead or alive) used by bad people to perform tasks such as amassing wealth, working in fields, enhancing some activity, maybe magical; mechanism of operations not clear. Harmful to other people and not respectable in Shona society; detested in same way as witchcraft. It is used by witches as well. Owners and users usually end up suffering. It is believed that chikwambo will serve the owner for some time, then demand payback. That stage is a painful one. Many people reportedly suffering because of zvikwambo. Chikwambo is all right when you get it, but you must be able to abide by its rules. Failure to abide by its rules makes it angry, and then it fights you. Many will then try and get rid of it, but usually to no avail. They fail to locate whoever sold it to them.

**Chitumba:** A sample of the property of the dead that will be distributed on the appropriate day.

**Gombwe:** Shona name for the highest spirit medium, for which the spirit is not of a dead person. This is not an ancestral spirit, but believed to be a spirit created for the purpose.

**Gona** (plural: makona): Gadget with supernatural powers. May be used to perform magic or to enhance productivity. Having a gona used to be respectable, until some started using it to harm others, just as chikwambo, gona usually ends up harassing the owner. People generally associate gona with the n'anga. They refer to it as the container kept by n'angas to help them perform their tasks.

**Guva:** Grave

**Hwahwa or Doro:** Beer

**Kudira hwahwa:** One of the last stages of beer brewing.

**Kugadzira:** To rectify

**Kurova guva:** To throw beer onto grave.

**Kusuma:** To introduce

**Kutora mudzimu:** Bringing the soul back.

**maGombwe:** Plural of the word Gombwe

**maSadunhu:** Plural of Sadunhu

**maSadzinza:** Plural of Sadzinza

**maShave:** The spirit which possess these are spirits which were created for the service of people. They are not spirits of dead animals or of living animals. These spirits render the people they possess to behave like animals when they are possessed, hence they are erroneously thought to be spirits of animals. A person possessed by any of these spirits will behave like the animal associated with the spirit. For example, a person possessed by shave rebveni, behaves like a baboon. Bveni is the Shona name for a baboon. The spirit just renders, the medium behaves like a baboon, but the spirit did not come from a dead baboon. The spirit was created to be like that. There are many animals associated with such spirits. These spirits are not limited to animals. They can be associated with anything else.

**maTateguru:** Plural of Tateguru

**Mbuya:** Grandmother

**N'anga:** Spirit medium who is also an herbalist who charges clients for services. Most traditional healers belong to this group. These are the real herbal practitioners. Most of their powers emanate from the medicines they possess. Their spiritual powers are considered to be much less than those of the Gombwe and of the Sadunhu.

**N'gozi:** Spirits associated with people who must be compensated for something bad that was done against them. They may be spirits of dead people who come back for vengeance. They return to cause the wrongdoer, or relatives of the wrongdoer, to pay compensation to their families. The level of compensation depends on the severity of the “crime.”

**Njuzu:** Believed to be an animal that has a human head and a fish head, which lives in water. Anybody taken into the water by this animal comes back as a very powerful healer.

**Sadunhu:** This word is synonymous with Sadzinza. This is the founding leader of a clan. The Shona people believe that clans were started when they moved to southern Africa from the north. As they moved from Egypt, they settled around the area of the Great Lakes for a while. It was during that time that they divided themselves into clans to facilitate marriage. Originally twelve clans were created. The number increased as need for intermarriage arose, and also because of wars.

**Sekuru:** Grandfather

**Tateguru:** Great grandparent, usually in an extended family. Plural for the word is maTateguru.

**Sahwira:** A family or extended family friend.

**Shave:** Singular of maShave

### **Appendix 3**

*Specific events that must be performed*

Kusuma zviyo and adding this to chitumba

Kusuma hwahwa

Kugadzira guva

Kudira hwahwa

Taking beer to the grave and kurova guva nedoro

Drinking the beer at home all night

Kutora mudzimu

Distributing the property of the deceased and the remains of his responsibilities, such as allocation of who looks after the family of the deceased.