

# MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



*Scroll down to read the article.*

## The Shona Religion

### M. Gelfand

#### THE MEDIUM

In this article I would like to attempt an appraisal of the Shona religion. This is a difficult task because in the literature the subject of the African's religion is clouded by many diverse opinions. Carothers (1940), a much quoted authority on the African mind, when speaking of the religion of the Kenya African, refers to a lower form of belief: "In religion the Native is expected to jump from animism to an idealistic Christianity". Indeed many people today still consider that the Shona have no religion at all. But anyone who studies the Shona religion sympathetically will soon discover that he is dealing with a deeply religious people. So complex and developed in fact is this cult that one day the Shona religion may come to be accepted as a form of monotheism.

The Shona admit a Creator, an omnipotent spirit whom they call *Mwari*, *Chikare* or *Musikavanhu*. The Christian faith, like that of the Shona, has its own great spirits like the angels and the different saints who can be appealed to and from whom help and comfort can be sought. On the other hand, whereas the Christian approaches God directly, this is not the case with the Shona. They do not pray to God himself but always contact the lesser spirits, who, living as they do in the spiritual world, are in communication with all the other spirits including God. *Mwari* has made them all and everything in this world, the good and the bad. God is responsible for the good ancestral spirits as well as those of the evil ones.

Therefore it is much better to appeal and place one's trust in the good spirits (the *mhondoro* and *vadzimu*) in the first instance. An authority like

Hannan (personal communication) would not interpret this as I do. He points out that in the most common oath taken *Mwari* is called on to witness the truth of what is said. In time of bereavement the Shona show their belief in God and approach Him directly by complaining to Him: "*Mwari ndaita sei!*" ("God, what have I done to deserve this") they cry. Should one of his children die a Shona may exclaim, "*Mwari akapa uye ndiye atora*" ("God has given and God has taken away".)

The Shona believe that their tutelary spirits (*mhondoro*) can prevent and facilitate the fall of rain, that their *vadzimu* (family spirits) can cause sickness and that they can protect them from harm, sickness and from a witch entering their homes. When they pray in order to ask for something they do not address God directly but pray to the spirits. It is possible that on more close questioning the Shona might admit that the *mhondoro* or *vadzimu* refer everything to *Mwari* but this is not the way they usually explain the powers of the spirits intermediary between man and *Mwari*. Let me here quote a prayer made by the head of a family to the small clan spirit (local *mhondoro*) which controls the area in which they have decided to start their new village. "We have entered your country. We are asking you to forward our words to the *magombwe* (the great tribal spirits). We thank you very much for allowing us to come into your area and to plant our crops. Keep our crops for us. Give us good rain. We only tell you this because you are the owner of this area. But do not forget to take our words to the *magombwe*."

One of the fundamental tenets of Shona religion

is the belief in real communication with the world of spirits through the *medium* or host of the particular spirit whose help is sought. The Shona accepts revelation through their mediums in a way that is not completely different from that in which a Christian accepts revelation from reading his Bible. In the ancient Hebrew faith it is quite possible that the possession of the prophets occurred, but it would be true to say today that possession of a living individual by a spirit, in the way that is characteristic of Shona ritual, is not a feature of orthodox Judeo-Christian practice.

The Shona finds the phenomenon of possession particularly satisfying for they claim that they hear the "voice" of the spirit calling or addressing them through the medium, and see this as proof of the existence of the spiritual world. It is not the medium who is talking but the spirit who has made use of the body and voice of the host. This to the Shona is very real and convinces them that their beliefs are true, whereas the Christian never claims to hear the voice of God or the voice of Christ in the same way. The Shona think that they make a real contact with a spirit for once the medium becomes possessed he is no longer the same as when he is not possessed. When the spirit possesses him he acquires an altered personality. The medium is a bridge between the present and the spiritual worlds in one being, he himself is drawn into the spiritual world in a prehypnotic state.

Music is an important element in the inducement of possession. Special tunes of a lively tempo are played to the medium. The most usual instruments employed in Mashonaland are musical gourds (*mbira*) and drums (Figs. 1 and 2). The medium or mediums as well as the congregants join in the dancing which goes on for minutes or for several hours until the possession takes place. Even an onlooker is carried away by the swift rhythm, the patter of bare feet on the ground and the shrill cries of the women (Fig. 3). The whole ritual dance is very lively and the physical effort so hypnotic that all who take part seem to be borne away towards the spiritual world. The living and the departed are all joined in unison.

Everyone knows the moment possession takes place. First the medium sucks in air through a narrowed larynx with loud, high-pitched inspiratory sounds. The neck muscles become taut and stand out and then after a succession of mighty shudders he relaxes and assumes a normal position, yet

giving the onlooker the impression that he is not quite there (Fig. 4).

The ease with which possession takes place varies greatly. In some cases it would seem that the more experienced the medium the more easily he falls possessed. On other occasions, even the more experienced might take hours or even days to undergo possession. Mainly it is best achieved when the spirits' favourite tunes are played. On the whole the description of possession of the medium given by Field as she found it in Ghana is very similar to what I have observed (Field 1960). However, she suggests that this state of possession may be induced by abstinence from food and drink before and during the ceremony thus maintaining a state of hypoglycaemia.

There are five main categories of spirits in whom the Shona believe (Table I). The *mhondoro* is the tutelary spirit of the whole clan or tribe whose concern is the good of the people as a whole. The Shona believe that they bring rain, are responsible for the production of good and bountiful crops, and in many areas, with the decision as to who shall succeed to the chieftainship. In every area under the protection of a *mhondoro* a special day called *chisi* is set aside by the spirit when no work may be done in the fields or gardens. It is a ritual day of rest and was formerly determined by the phase of the moon, but of recent years a certain day of each week, frequently Friday or Thursday is fixed as *chisi*.

Then there are the *vadzimu* (ancestral spirits or spirit elders) which protect and help the individual family units of the clan. Each family looks to its *mudzimu* (the spirit of the grandfather) for protection although the spirits of the grandmother, father and mother too can protect it to a lesser degree. When help is sought the head of the living members of the family prays to its *mudzimu* (Fig. 5). Usually the pleas are not directed to the spirits beyond the grandfather stage although the more remote ones may be remembered merely in prayer. The moral needs of the Shona are satisfied through these lesser spirits. The *vadzimu* and the *mhondoro* insist that the strict moral values of the family are maintained and frown on incest, adultery and despoiling of unmarried girls. Respect for elders is inculcated in the family by the belief that an unkind act towards one's mother, for example, would be remembered after death by her angered spirit which would descend as an *ngozi* on the

**TABLE I**  
**THE FIVE MAIN CATEGORIES OF SPIRIT AND THEIR MEDIUMS**

<b>THE CREATOR</b>				
		(Mwari)		
Tutelary spirit (MHONDORO)	MUDZIMU (family spirit)	SHAVE	Healing spirit of NGANGA	Evil spirit of witch
SVIKIRO (medium)	Medium for family spirit SVIKIRO or VATETE	Medium for SHAVE spirit	Medium (NGANGA)	Medium (MUROYI)

guilty child and so punish him or his children. The material needs in Shona life are catered for by the *mhondoro* (tribal spirits) which bring rain and the *vadzimu* (family spirits) which ensure the prosperity of the family and their means of livelihood and prevent witches from entering the home.

The *shave* is the third kind of spirit and it is said to be that of a talented foreigner, a Matabele or Senna for example, who died many years ago, a stranger in Mashonaland, and had not been accorded a proper burial. So the spirit was obliged to wander until it could find a medium or host through whom it could reveal itself. When a medium accepts its particular *shave* spirit he becomes endowed with the talent once possessed by the foreigner. Thus when he has agreed to be the spirit host of a hunting spirit a man becomes able to kill many wild animals. All that the *shave* requires is that the host remembers it from time to time through prayer at a ritual ceremony when he wears special garments and decorations and the *shave* "comes out" (Fig. 6).

The *nganga* is possessed by a special spirit of healing and of divining, that is said to have originated from a person with these gifts, many generations ago when the clan was founded. The original person whose spirit now possesses a *nganga* knew how to treat disease and to discern its spiritual cause. This special *nganga* spirit remains in the family and when a *nganga* dies his healing spirit selects one of his children who, in his turn becomes a *nganga*. This spirit is a good one and can contact the ancestral spirits of any family and and so discover what has annoyed them and what is necessary to make amends.

In contrast to the spirit of goodness which possesses the *nganga* there is the spirit of evil which also originated from an evil person many years ago. This spirit, like that of the *nganga*, remains within a family and when its possessor

(*muroyi*) dies the evil spirit passes to his offspring (Table I).

In my book *Shona Ritual* (1959: p. 129), I gave this description of how an evil *Shave* (in this case the *muzirikasi shave*) operates:

"When a pregnant woman is possessed by this spirit, her husband must not eat anything he finds in the woods without her permission. A hunter far from his home and very hungry may decide to eat some of the meat of the animal he has killed. He may not be aware that his wife is possessed by this type of *shave*. But even before he sits down to eat the roasted meat, his wife at home becomes possessed with the *muzirikazi shave*. The *shave* devours her baby, all except a leg which it leaves hanging in the hut. The spirit leaves the woman before her husband's return. When she looks up and sees the leg of her baby she becomes frightened. Her other children tell her that they saw her eating the baby and she cries bitterly. She looks at her fingers and finds they are covered with blood and she sees a blood-stained knife.

"As he reaches home the husband hears the wailing of the people and is told that his wife ate her baby while she was possessed. He recognises his baby's leg and realises what has happened. He is angry and distraught and tries to kill his wife but is restrained by the people in the hut. At this juncture the wife becomes possessed again and her *shave* addresses him, 'look here, do not be harsh and let me explain my action. I told you before that whenever you kill anything in the woods you must never eat the meat without telling me. You did not believe me. Thus when you ate the meat of the animal you killed in the forest, I also ate my meat here.' The friends and relations persuade the husband to take no further action until the wife is no longer possessed. He sends a message to her father asking him to come and take away his daughter. When the parents arrive they are told of their daughter's terrible affliction.

The husband demands the return of the *pfuma* (bridewealth) and refuses to have his wife any longer." In a recent publication Mary Aquina (1968) confirms that the *muroyi* is possessed by an evil *shave*.

Recently I obtained an interesting account of how the spirit of a witch may first enter its host, from Sibanje, a Shona man employed at Chief Nyamakoho's *dare* in the Mtoko district. A married woman becomes troubled by a *shave* called *zimbuya mukande*, which she has inherited from her great grandmother, who was a witch. The spirit wants her to accept and attempts to enter her, but at first she refuses to come to terms with it. Each time she is pregnant this evil *shave* makes its presence felt by causing her to lose the foetus. Unless she can be cured her affliction will stop only when she agrees to accept the spirit. As each pregnancy ends in abortion, her husband becomes more and more suspicious and begins to observe his wife closely. He may discover that during her sleep she leaves her bed, opens the door and disappears into the night. When he realises that the *zimbuya mukande shave* wishes to possess her he takes her to her father who finds an *nganga* to drive away the evil spirit. This may prove impossible if she is really prepared to accept the evil *shave*. Once she agrees she becomes a witch and the spirits of *zimbuya mukande* can enter her any time, making her a danger to other people. But she is now able to produce children without any trouble.

Thus the spirits of each of these categories must find a host or medium in which to establish a haven and through which to reveal its wants and advice. Usually the selected medium becomes ill and only gradually realises what has befallen him. He may only start to dream or the illness and dreams may be simultaneous. The nature of the illness is eventually recognised by a *nganga* and once the medium accepts the spirit and agrees to carry out the ritual requirements, such as the wearing of special clothes on ceremonial occasions, the host recovers. Thereafter the spirit enters him when called upon to do so or when it wants to reveal a message to others..

The usual Shona term to denote a medium is *svikiro*. Strictly speaking, this word refers to the medium of the *mhondoro*, but is commonly employed for the medium of the *mudzimu* (family spirit). Among the Vakaranga the term *mhondoro*

is not used for a tutelary spirit, but instead the word *svikiro*, although it strictly refers to the medium and not the spirit itself. Others sometimes use the word *mudzimu* (family spirit) for the tribal spirit, whilst among the Vakaranga the *svikiro* of the *mudzimu* is referred to as *vatele* (paternal aunt). I have not often heard the term used in this connexion. As I have already mentioned, a *nganga* is the person who becomes endowed with the good spirit of healing and divination and this, in my eyes, is a medium. Similarly, I consider the *muroyi* the medium for an evil spirit which has human destruction or anti-social acts as its object.

Each of these mediums may become possessed with their spirits at any moment even though possession may occur rarely. The medium is the servant of its spirit and must always be ready to serve its purpose. In the case of the tribal medium (*mhondoro*) or family medium (*mhondoro* or *mudzimu mudiki wapamusha*) possession has a special reason such as incest or the misbehaviour of one member of the family towards another. In this instance the spirit often enters the medium in the early hours of the morning. He is heard emitting noises which waken others who hurry into the hut to see what is happening. Then the spirit speaks through its host and explains the reason for its concern.

Each of the mediums has its own favoured method of inducing possession and the speed and constancy with which it occurs in the different mediums vary greatly. For instance in the male *nganga* possession usually occurs as soon as he starts throwing his *hakata* (divining bones). Thus it is the divining spirit which turns the *hakata* in the air causing them to fall in such a way as to reveal the spirit's message. But in those *nganga* who divine only through their spirits and not with the aid of *hakata*, possession may take several minutes and has to be induced by music.

Depossession of the medium usually takes place as soon as there is no further need for the spirit to be consulted or for it to address the people. The loss of the spirit may be accompanied by great physical effort and even exhaustion. Care has to be taken when such efforts occur. It may be necessary for someone to stand by and pour water on the convulsive muscles of the medium as he becomes depossessed (Fig. 7). But in the *nganga* for instance, depossession may be instantaneous and hardly noticeable. The more ex-

perienced the medium, the less is he disturbed as the spirit leaves. One tribal medium whom I observed, started to wave his arms like a bird in flight whenever the spirit left him.

In conclusion I would like to call attention to a very significant element in Shona belief. As may be seen from the account just given, there is a strange inter-dependence of the living on the spirits and of the spirits on the living. For those in this world life is incomplete, unproductive and dangerous without contact with the spirits. Spirit life, too, is incomplete without contact with the living.

#### **WITCHCRAFT BELIEFS AND THEIR PLACE IN THE RELIGION**

Mary Douglas (1967), conscious of the many terms and definitions relating to witchcraft, appeals to us not to be too closely tied to Western terminology in our interpretation of the facts of witchcraft practices in Africa. This does not necessarily mean that the better known hypotheses of the purpose or function of witchcraft beliefs in Africa are not correct. Many of them are rational and reasoned explanations of witchcraft and probably apply to many territories in Africa. The applications of many of them may even extend to Shona religious practices. For example, Fortes (1949), who worked amongst the Tallensi of Ghana, postulates that when women are brought into a patrilineal society as wives, they become suspect and the men are apt to find fault with them, accusing them of being envious and wanting to disrupt their patrilineage with an evil power. Consequently in this form of society the power of witchcraft tends to be associated with a uterine line of descent (Fortes 1949).

On the other hand, Mitchell (1956) noticed that among the Yao, accusations of witchcraft practice often arose in traditional society from ambitious men who wanted to disrupt the existing authority, split the lineage and so oust their elders (Mitchell 1956). Nadel (1952) is more inclined to regard witchcraft beliefs as being related to the tensions which exist in any society. He draws special attention to the fact that accusations of wizardry against an individual are usually made by someone who is intimately connected or concerned with the victim in a network of social relationships.

Marwick (1952 and 1965) shows that witchcraft accusations are likely to develop between people who are competing with each other, but since

tribesmen live in a society in which tensions are concealed their accusations of witchcraft find an outlet for their pent-up feelings. Mitchell has recently pointed out that hostility and jealousy are likely to occur, especially in the economic field. In contrast to the tribal areas where lineage opposition often precipitates accusations of witchcraft, conditions are different in the towns where an alternative explanation must be sought because of the economic stresses which have occurred. Since in town the victim is unable to take direct action against the rival he suspects, he (or rather the *nganga*) prefers to attribute the illness to the *vadzimu* whose protection is removed thus allowing witches to enter. By this little twist in thought, an open accusation is avoided, and the immediate problem is to placate the offended ancestral spirit (Mitchell 1965).

It was largely Evans-Pritchard's researches amongst the Azande which stimulated interest in witchcraft practices in Africa, and his deductions were accepted by social anthropologists. Much of what he had to say about the Azande has been applied by researchers to the rest of Negro and Bantu Africa (Evans-Pritchard 1937). Even Mary Aquina (1968) seems to have accepted the Azande pattern for the Vakaranga of Mashonaland.

Evans-Pritchard insists on a distinction between sorcery and witchcraft. A sorcerer is one who practises evil against an enemy by the use of medicines and the casting of spells. His art is not inherited but an acquired or inherent skill. Witchcraft, on the other hand, is a mystical or spiritual power used for the same ends as sorcery. But witchcraft requires no instruments. The mere thought of the witch is enough to achieve its object though the spirit can travel at night on her hyena or despatch her snakes or owl to the home of the victim. The witch, moreover, passes on her power to her children, or at least to one of them.

Marwick, who worked among the Cewa of Malawi, clearly accepts the fundamental conception of the Evans-Pritchard classification, but prefers the term sorcery to witchcraft. He defines magic as a ritual which involves the manipulation of material substances and the use of verbal spells as well as the despatching of hyenas and wild cats to devour the livestock of the victim in the same way as the witch of other tribes sends her familiars. Such an individual is said to depend on material magic for his evil deeds. The Cewa sorcerer (*nfiti*)

also belongs to the nephrophagous guild. He often uses threatening language. I am interested in Marwick's description of the Cewa sorcerer because of its resemblance to the Shona *muroyi* (witch). But like Mary Douglas, I regret that Marwick has described the *nfilu's* art as sorcery, and I feel that he has over-extended Evans-Pritchard's pattern by applying it to Central Africa.

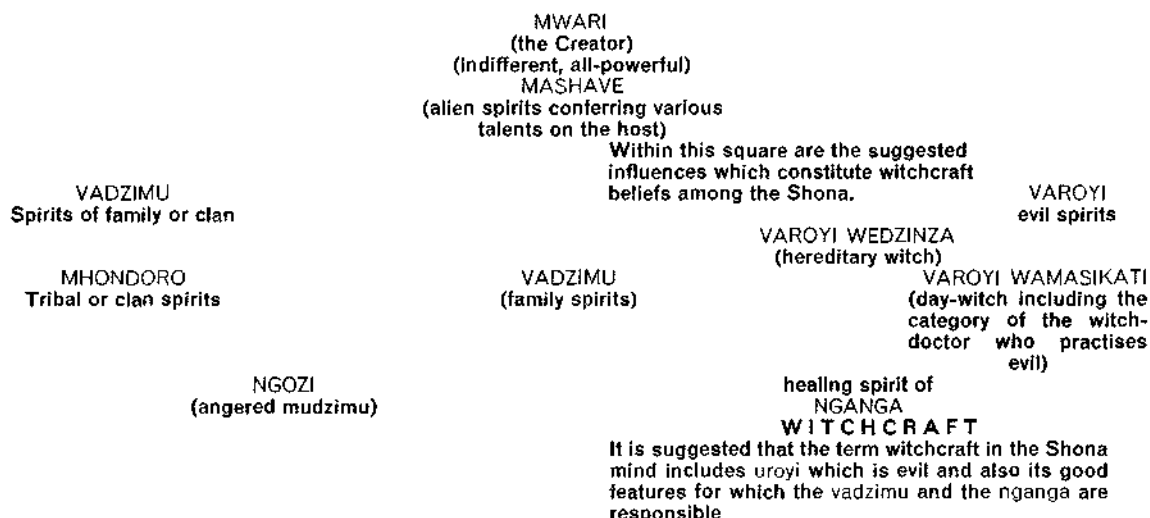
I find that a good deal of what is written about magic, witch, sorcerer and magician is difficult to apply to the Shona context for witchcraft is part of the Shona religion and integrated into their religious concepts. In the eyes of the Shona, all events in their lives, and in nature, depend on supernatural forces, everything that exists, every success or failure originates in the spiritual world. The Creator is responsible, too, for the entire spiritual world but he is too far removed, powerful and indifferent to be contacted by man. Just as a son would not dare approach his father directly on any important matter, the Shona does not pray or ask help from *Mwari*. They believe that just as *Mwari* made the good spirits to help and heal man, so also he made the evil ones. Consequently there is a link between the *muroyi* (the evil witch) and the *nganga* (the good one). Both are mediums of an ancestral spirit. Both knew medicines. The *nganga* even knows the poisonous ones, but will never use them for other than a good purpose. Both know their antidotes and both know other

mediums who can help them. Both dream how to administer their medicines and how to practice their respective arts. In their dreams they learn of future events and are so able to warn and advise their clients (Table II).

A *nganga* can harm, but only where punishment is deserved. For instance, the *nganga* who has a *chikwambo* spirit can bring suffering, ruin and death to the man who refuses to honour his debts or steals another man's wife. But such retribution is said to be good. In contrast to the *nganga*, or white witch, is the true *muroyi*, or hereditary witch.

The Shona believe that the *muroyi* can only practise evil, and in their eyes anyone who practises evil is a *muroyi*. So amongst the Shona there is no word applicable to Evans-Pritchard's sorcerer or witch. A Shona simply refers to him as *muroyi*, no matter how he practises his witchcraft. In fact, in conversation he may even refer to the one who operates by poisoning as being a *nganga* but implies that he practises evil and not good. There is no doubt that in his own mind the distinction between the two is very clear. This concept of witchcraft in Mashonaland may not necessarily apply to the rest of Africa, since all witchcraft beliefs do not always conform to the same pattern. But the effects of belief in witchcraft are the same throughout the Continent. Those who are accused of being witches (*varoyi*) are very liable to be man-handled, injured and even, on occasions, beaten

**TABLE II**  
**THE SPIRITUAL HIERARCHY OF THE SHONA**



to death, just as they were in other parts of the world.

### THE ATTRACTION OF THE RELIGION

It takes time, often many years, before an outside observer can assess certain phenomena in a society, particularly those concerning religion. It is also often impossible to exclude one's own bias or preconceived ideas. In most fields the observer begins to form an opinion long before his acquaintance with his subject has attained any depth. When I first attended religious services of the Shona I believed that they were heathens and pagans. Even if this concept can still be argued, I consider these words bear a connotation that is derogatory and impugns the dignity of the people. But at first my concern was not so much with the Shona's religion, but with the *nganga*, my colleague in Shona society. This led to his role in the religious practices of his people. Many years passed before I was able to crystallize my observations on his religion and its structure.

The main elements of a Shona religious ceremony is union with the spiritual world through the medium (*svikiro*) who, when possessed, affords immediate contact with a spirit of the Shona celestial hierarchy. This spirit is honoured with prayer and is propitiated for man's trespasses by gifts or animal sacrifice. Through the medium the spirit advises and warns its worshippers.

The rituals are always prompted by certain vital basic problems of the family or the clan, such as sickness, death, drought and famine. What stands out so strongly is that the ceremony is mostly a family affair, in which the family group gathers to communicate with its *vadzimu* or a tribal affair in which the tribal group meets in order to communicate with its tribal spirit. Details of an after-life, as well as of the life led by the *vadzimu*, are remarkably vague. We are told that the spirits live and at times are pleased to receive beer and tobacco from their kin on earth. The family spirits hover round the village of their families, but the *mhondoro* live in the forest in special lions, perhaps in the sacred *muhacha* tree, or even in the heavens above. The Shona show no concern over retribution in the world to come. Punishment for ritual offences is meted out in this world. Once a person dies, no matter what his record on earth, his spirit does not suffer in the next world, except by being forgotten by the living.

Shona ceremonies are not complicated; they

are easy to follow. The minister of the family ritual is the senior male member of the family or the *muzukuru* (son of the father's sister). I am surprised at the ease with which the *muzukuru* conducts the ritual prayers. For instance, a typical example of a prayer to an ancestral spirit to which an animal has been sacrificed is as follows: "Grandfather, we have gathered today to give you your beast so that your grandchild can become better. We have roasted the meat for you—keep us well and happy and do not forget us." Such prayers are said with great decorum. While he prays, the minister's head and shoulders are wrapped in a black cloth (*jira*) not unlike the praying shawl worn by the Jew. He half kneels and claps his hands as a token of respect. Women kneel fully with their heads bent forwards touching the ground. This is an impressive scene and one that shows genuine humility. The *nganga* who has detected the source of the upset in the spirit world takes no part in the prayers. All worship of the *vadzimu* takes place within the family group and this intensifies the feeling of kinship. A minister from outside the family group is not only unnecessary, but would be unwelcome to the *vadzimu*. There is little distinction between male and female in the rites. Both take part in the ceremonies and both have their duties. Though the actual prayers are generally said by the male *muzukuru*, the ritual beer, so important to the ceremony is the responsibility of the women. Women, too, come forward in front of the musicians and dance as often as the men (Fig. 8). As a rule, 10 to 30 people dance in the small arena. The medium joins in too, and all the dancers mingle, but do not hold each other. There are also female mediums (*masvikiro*) and female *nganga*. Some of the mediums of the greatest *mhondoro* are women and many of the *shave* mediums are of this sex. When possessed the medium is given the same attention, whether male or female, but the possessing spirit is male and the female medium is given male greetings when possessed.

No elaborate setting is required for services. No church or ornate building is required. If prayers are to be made to the family spirit (*mudzimu*) these are said before the *rukava* (potshef) in the main hut (*imba*) of the family. They are very much a family affair with the family spirits close at hand in the home. Even their graves are just outside the family village. No special day is set aside for prayers to



the ancestral spirits of the family. They generally take place only when required by the untoward events already referred to or by the departure of a member of the family on a long journey. This person does not pray to the *vadzimu* himself, but this is done on his behalf by the head male in the family.

Ceremonies for the tutelary spirits, *mhondoro*, are held in an enclosure (*ruchanga*) surrounding the sacred *muchacha* tree (Fig. 9) or in a specially made wooden structure which resembles a hut (*dendemaro*) (Fig. 10). Such gatherings emphasize the proximity of the worshippers to nature and to the trees, the grass, the soil and the rocks. Their environment forms a background to their religion.

Offerings have a prominent place in the ceremony. The Shona has no doubt that he has to make a real effort to obtain forgiveness for his transgressions. He must do something tangible to appease the offended spirit. But he knows that he can reconcile and live in peace and equilibrium again with the spiritual world (Fig. 11).

Most Shona who have had experience of western teachings maintain that it is more comforting and real to pray to their ancestral spirits than to a remote Creator. Only those who really loved them in this world can be relied upon to take an interest in their problems and intercede on their behalf with the mightier spirits.

As I have already mentioned the principal effect of ancestral worship is domestic harmony and respect. "Honour thy father and thy mother" is a primary Shona commandment. Failure to observe it will turn a beneficent *mudzimu* into an angry *ngozi*. Inculcated too, is the interdependence of all the members of the family and their ritual knits the family closer. The importance of such a solid unit in a harsh menacing world need hardly be emphasised. Even the modern Shona has experienced the advantage in a difficult economic world of knowing that he can rely on his family. So deep and close is the attachment of the Shona to the spirit of his dead grandfather (*sekuru*) that he follows in his footsteps throughout his life, believing it will please his ancestors to live just as they did in the same village, growing the same crops, wearing the same clothes and living in the same huts, never changing or acquiring more than his ancestors before him. The result is a compulsory uniformity, a philosophy which tends to encourage normality.

In the past I have ventured to query the survival of the Shona religion in urbanised society. I have always regarded it, with its ritual sacrifices, as the religion of a rural environment, and so far, it seems to me, no serious attempt has been made to adapt it to town life. Is it adaptable? Is it such that any modification of its structure would essentially change or even destroy it? That it has not lost its hold even on the urbanised world may well be because of one of its striking features. It is a religion that engenders a profound satisfaction and even of joy. As the men and women dance and sing to the accompaniment of *mbira* and drums their animation and pleasure is obvious (Figs. 12, 13, and 14). The human spirit seems to emerge from the tawdriness of its human routine to be absorbed by the spiritual principles of life and of the earth. The music and songs are not enough for this satisfaction and joy. There must always be the ritual beer to help the worshippers lose their inhibitions and attune their minds to the atmosphere of spiritual possession (Fig. 15). How different is such worship from that of the ordinary Christian prayer meeting or the normal service in an orthodox Jewish synagogue! And yet it is not so different from certain liturgical manifestations of the Christian and Jewish bodies. In the north of Spain, for example, Christian processions of the Blessed Sacrament include the admirable dances of the Basque athletes as part of the worship as well as the lively music of the people's bands. Nor are the ritual gestures and music of the Shona a far cry from the philosopher, Martin Buber's description of the Torah—in his hands. And in order to promote animation and spiritual uplift the Hassid takes alcoholic drink as a means of bringing about union between himself and God: he goes out of himself in order to find and meet his God. Some of the rabbis—the Zadick of the movement—even claim to enter into spiritual contact with God almost as if possessed by Him (Cohen 1957; Friedman 1955).

In the Shona religion it would hardly be exact to speak of an encounter similar to the "I-Thou" relationship of Buber, for, as I have said, it is a religion not of the person, but of the group in which the encounter is between the living group and the dead. Nevertheless, I think that the domestic or tribal entity with its spirits has analogies with the Buberian experience.

## REFERENCES

- AQUINA, M. (1958) NADA, 9, 47.  
CAROTHERS, J. C. D. (1940) E. Afr. Med. J., 17, 90.  
COHEN, A. A. (1957) Martin Buber, Clay, London.  
DOUGLAS, M. (1967) Africa, 37, 72.  
EVANS-PRITCHARD, E. E. (1937) Witchcraft, Oracles & Magic Among the Azande, Clarendon Press, Oxford.  
FIELD, M. J. (1960) Search for Security, Faber, London.  
FORTES, M. (1949) The Web of Kinship Among the Tallensi, London.  
FRIEDMAN, M. S. (1955) Martin Buber. The Life of Dialogue. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London.  
GELFAND, M. (1959) Shona Ritual, Juta & Co., Cape Town.  
MARWICK, M. G. (1952) Africa, 22, 120 and 215.  
MARWICK, M. G. (1965) Sorcery in its Social Setting, Manchester University.  
MITCHELL, J. C. (1956) The Yao Village, Manchester.  
MITCHELL, J. C. (1965) African Systems of Thought, edited by Fortes, M. and Deiterlen, G. Oxford Univ. Press., p. 193.  
NADEL, S. F. (1952) American Anthropologist, 58, 18.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am deeply grateful to both the Rev. Fr. M. Hannan, SJ. and the Rev. Fr. P. Moloney, SJ., for their invaluable aid and criticisms.





Fig. 1. The musical instruments commonly employed at a ceremony held for a *mhondoro*.



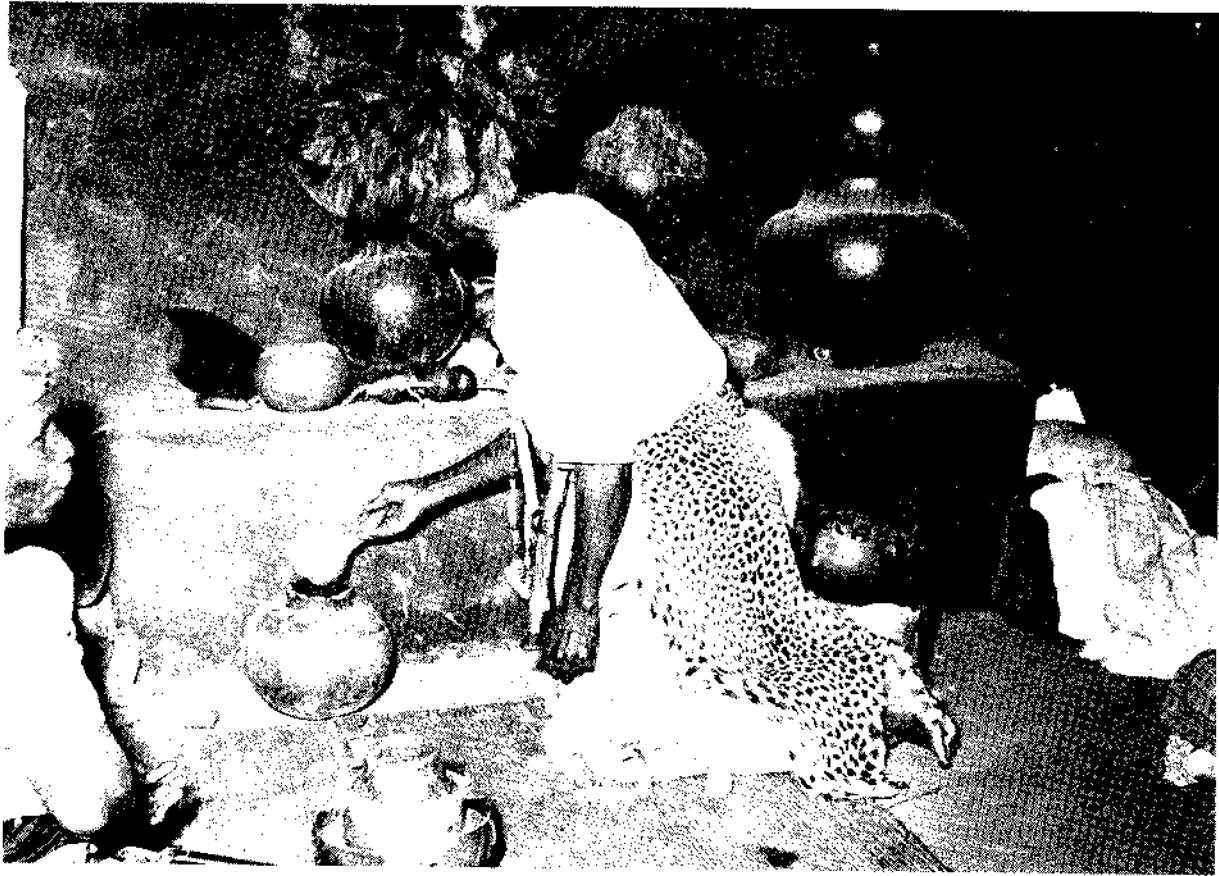
*Fig. 2.* Musicians playing at a ceremony held for the tribal mediums in the Rusape district



*Fig. 3. Two mediums of bveni shave dancing with the orchestra.*



Fig. 4. A female medium possessed by the *mhondoro* spirit. Note the tightened neck muscles



*Fig. 5. An nganga praying before the rukuva (potshelf and offering beer to his ancestral spirits).*



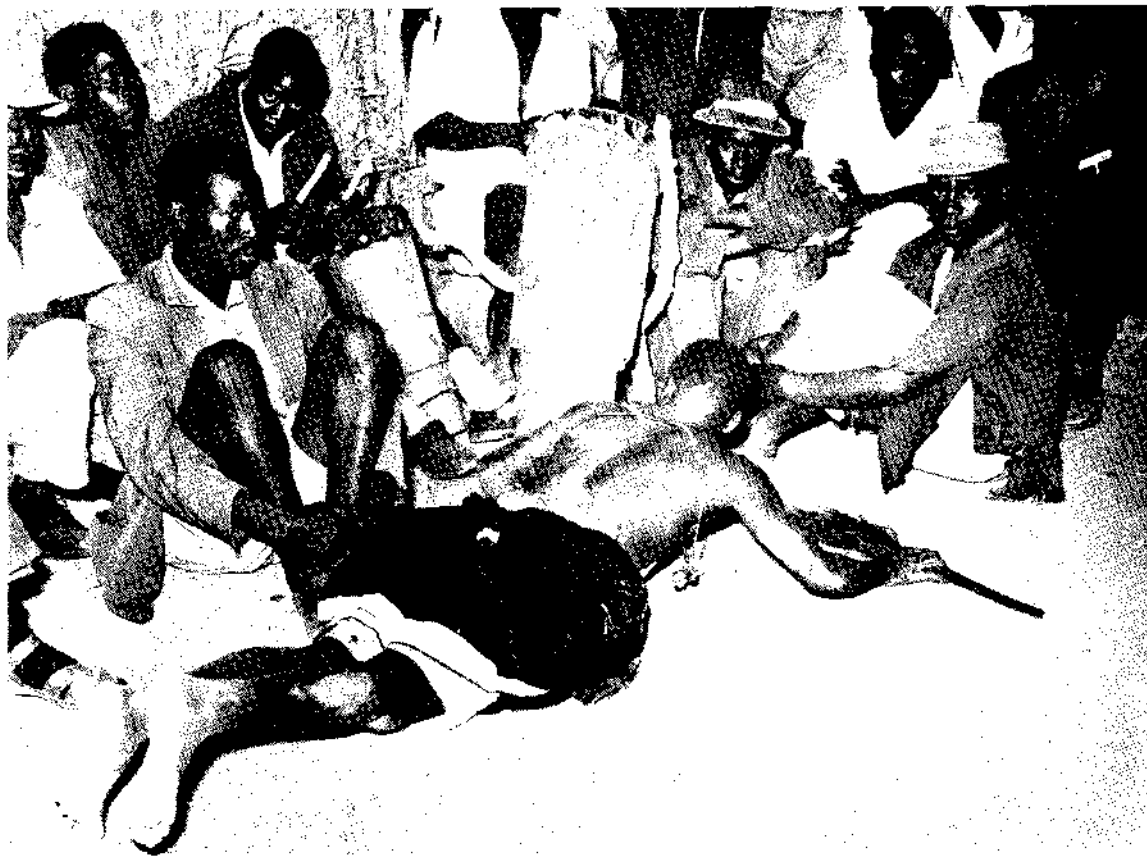


Fig. 6. A Baboon shave ceremony (*bveni shave*). Note the medium appropriately clothed has fallen on the ground before the musicians



*Fig. 7.* After the shave medium has become depossessed he washes himself down with water.



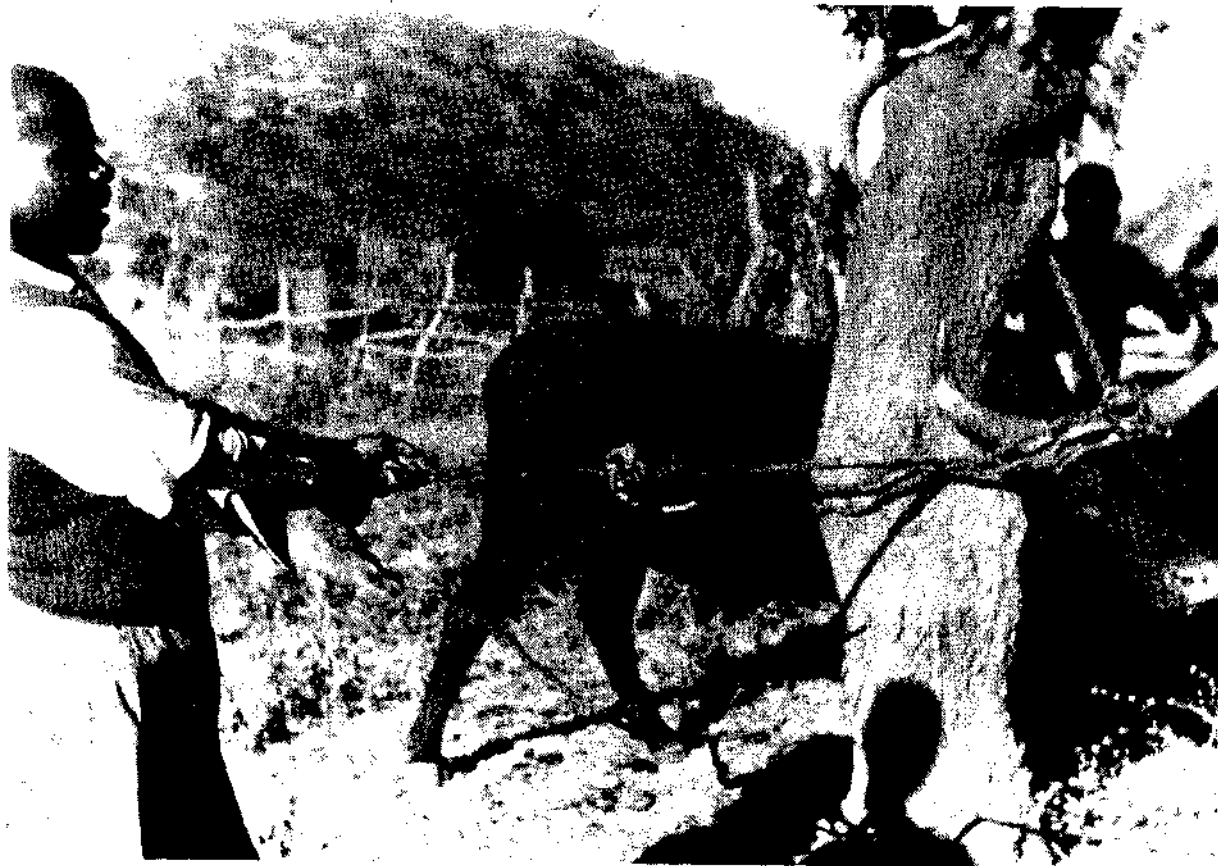
*Fig. 8.* Musicians playing at annual ceremony, at which the witchdoctor thanks his healing spirit. Note the woman kneeling fully before the musicians



*Fig. 9. A tribal medium possessed and in a state of ecstasy dancing outside the sanctuary.*



*Fig. 10.* Woman in a crouched position beating the ground in honour of the tribal spirit before the sanctuary (dendemoro)



*Fig. 11. A bull about to be sacrificed to the spirit of the grandfather.*



*Fig. 12. Dancing at a witchdoctor's annual party. Note the excitement on the face of the witchdoctor who is beating his drum.*

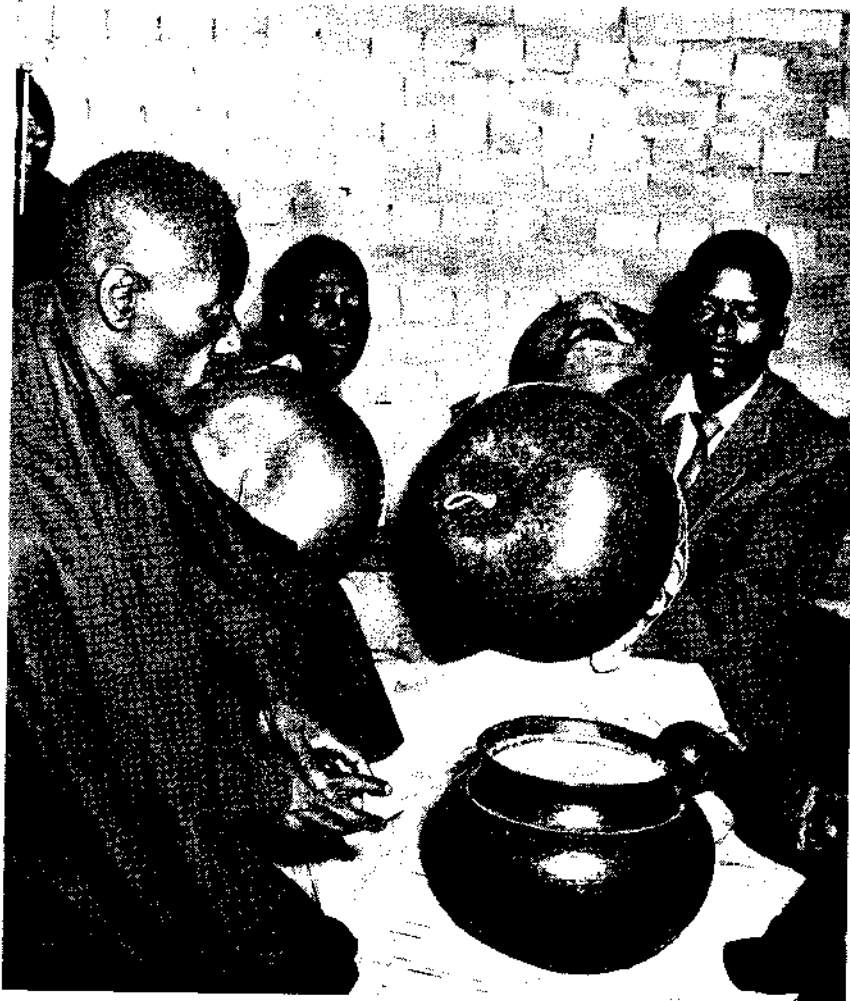


*Fig. 13.* Woman ululating at a ceremony for the tribal spirits in the Rusawe district. An expression of excitement and pleasure can be seen on the face of the woman in the right foreground.





Fig. 14. A ritual service at Mrewa. Consecrated beer is placed in the sanctuary for the *mhondoro*. People gather round the sanctuary for the ceremony. Note the elation of the woman in the foreground.



*Fig. 15.* The acolyte offering beer to the tribal spirit. Musicians are seen in the background playing their "pianos".

