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THE DRAMATIZATION OF LIFE AND DEATH BY JOHANE MASOWE

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... studies of conversion look at different ways in which Christianity may be accepted, involving different degrees of modification of traditional belief systems ... conversion to Christianity is often simply part of a larger package: Christianity goes with education, new forms of income and a new way of life.¹

Abstract

This article raises questions about earlier studies in which Johane Masowe, the founder of the popular Masowe vapositori movement, has been portrayed as a replacement of Jesus Christ. This has resulted from the uncritical use of Christian orthodox views of the death and resurrection of Christ as the main background against which to interpret the experiences associated with Johane Masowe's claim to authority as a leader of a new movement. Attention is drawn to vernacular religious idioms in which life and death are dramatized in claims of authority by prophetic figures in society such as masvikiro and n'anga. I suggest that Johane Masowe is best understood as he himself stated, as a prophet whose role model was John the Baptist. The references to suffering, including the several stories of Johane Masowe's death and the miraculous restoration to good health are thus no more than a way of claiming authority for the prophet in the vernacular.

INTRODUCTION

FOR THE LAST TWO decades at least, African theologians have been trying to face up to the challenge of post-colonialism by drawing attention to traditional African religions and to questions of liberation and the political control of churches.² To my mind, this continual pre-occupation with the process of 'inculturation', and/or 'contextualization' of Christianity against the background of the traditional African religions, culture and the aspiration for independence distracts theologians from their proper task.³

¹ G. Lienhardt, 'The Dinka and Catholicism', in J. Davis (ed.), *Religious Organization and Religious Experience* (London and New York, Academic Press, 1982).

² E. Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (New York, Orbis Books, 1993).

³ P. Turkson and F. Wijsen (eds.), *Inculturation: Abide by the Otherness of African and the Africans* (Kampen, Uitgeveersmaatschappij), J. H. Kok (1994). Papers from a congress held between October 21-22, 1993 (Heerlen, the Netherlands).

For, there are many religious groups in Africa for whom 'inculturation' is not an issue and where the political control of churches has long been the responsibility of Africans.⁴ A great deal of time has thus been spent setting up an agenda for the development of an authentic African theology rather than in carrying out in-depth theological enquiries of the various ways in which Africans have interpreted Christianity.

In recent years Bediako and Sanneh have tried to explain the need for theologies which draw upon the Bible and African culture in the post-colonial setting.⁵ Bediako writes,

Perhaps the real challenge of the vernacular primacy on the Word of God [Bible] is that African theology will make a deliberate attempt to relate theological reflection and construction to the actual vernacular articulation of faith in African Christian experience. Taking the vernacular seriously then, becomes not merely a cultural but also a theological necessity. For it is only through the vernacular that a genuine and lasting theological dialogue with culture can take place.⁶

Whether we are thinking about Greek, Latin, French, Igbo, Shona or Zulu, there cannot be many modern theologians who would dispute the fact that whatever language people use to express their beliefs is key to their theology. As Wiles put it, 'Christian theology is being worked out in an increasingly wide range of languages and cultures.' The task of a modern African theologian will be seen as theologizing with a new idiom.⁷

Instead of repeating the need to pay attention to the vernacular in African Christianity, African theologians could be fulfilling that need by articulating the various popular ways of interpreting Christianity. As indicated below, in my study of Masowe teaching about its founder, I shall see how Shona religious ideas about suffering and healing, which are dramatized as dying and rising, are re-interpreted alongside the imagery about John the Baptist gleaned from the Shona version of the Judaeo-Christian Bible. Although this article is written in English, a language with which many Zimbabwean Christians have become familiar because of education in missionary-founded schools and the British colonial legacy, it is important to note that what gives character to Masowe concepts discussed below are the Shona ideas used by the *vapositioni* to express

⁴ A. F. Walls, 'The Anabaptists of Africa: The challenge of the African independent churches', *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research*, III, (ii).

⁵ L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: Missionary Impact on Culture* (New York, Orbis, 1990), 88ff; K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (New York, Orbis, 1995), 109-125.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷ M. Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine: A Study of the Principles of Early Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1967), 10.

their Christian beliefs.⁸ As Bourdillon observed, vernacular Christianity among the Shona 'involves the believer in the re-orientation and re-interpretation both of traditional ideas and of concepts introduced by Christian missionaries'.⁹

THE MASOWE VAPOSITORI

Of the many churches in Zimbabwe initiated by Africans, the Masowe *vapositori* are the most popularly known and widely studied. This is shown in the attention given to Masowe *vapositori* in research work done by anthropologists,¹⁰ historians,¹¹ religionists,¹² and missiologists.¹³ The anthropologist Dillon-Malone writes about the emergence of the Masowe *vapositori* movement among Shona people and its spread through the whole of the southern and central African region.¹⁴ The movement was founded in the 1930s by a man called Shonhiwa Mtunyane, sometimes called 'Sixpence', from Gandanzara in Makoni district in Zimbabwe. He became popularly known by his religious titles of Johane Masowe (meaning John of the Wilderness) and John the Baptist.¹⁵ At the time of his death in 1973, Johane Masowe left an estimated following of over half a million people in nine different countries of east, central and southern Africa.¹⁶ My own estimation is that today the numbers of Masowe believers has

⁸ French, English, Portuguese and other European tongues spoken in Africa are now part and parcel of the new African cultures. The challenge lies in knowing how to use these languages to further communication without devaluing the vernacular.

⁹ M. Bourdillon, 'Gleaning: Shona selections from Biblical myth' in Wendy James and Douglas H. Johnson (eds.), *Vernacular Christianity: Essays in the Social Anthropology of Religion* (Oxford, JASO Occasional Papers No. 7., 1988), 120-130.

¹⁰ C. M. Dillon-Malone, *The Korsten Basketmakers: A Study of the Masowe Apostles* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1978). Richard Werbner, 'The argument of images: From Zion to the wilderness in African churches', in Win van Binsbergen and Matthew Schoffeleers (eds.), *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 253-286.

¹¹ T. O. Ranger, 'Poverty and Prophetism: Religious Movements in Makoni District, 1929-1940' (Unpublished paper, 1981), 20-21.

¹² E. Chitando, 'Spirit Type Churches as Holistic Healing Movements: A Study of the Johane Masowe weChiShanu Church' (BA Honours dissertation, University of Zimbabwe, 1991). E. Mashiri, 'A Study on Prophecy and Prayer in the Johane Masowe Vapositori 1937 Sect' (BA Honours dissertation, University of Zimbabwe, 1988). M. Choga, 'Polygamous Tendencies in African Independent Churches with Special Focus on Johane Masowe of Glen View' (BA Honours dissertation, University of Zimbabwe, 1997) and others.

¹³ M. L. Daneel, 'The Apostolic Sabbath Church of God of Johane Masowe (of Gandanzara)' in *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches: The Background and Rise of the Major Movements, Volume I* (The Hague, Paris, Mouton Press, 1971), 339.

¹⁴ Dillon-Malone, *The Korsten Basketmakers*, 43.

¹⁵ File S138/22. National Archives of Zimbabwe, Harare. Statement made by Shonhiwa [Johane Masowe] to Detective Bond, CID, Salisbury, interpreted by Native Detective Zakia, 1 November, 1932.

¹⁶ Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 43.

doubled, especially as there is now a whole new generation of people born members of the community and the movement continues to attract new members.

Although much is known about the origins of the Masowe *vapostori* in missionary Christianity¹⁷ and their ritual activities,¹⁸ a thoroughgoing theological enquiry of this popular movement is yet to be done.¹⁹ In this article my aim is to encourage further work on the theology of the Masowe *vapostori* and other African initiated churches by explaining the significance of vernacular idioms.

JOHANE MASOWE: REPLACEMENT OF CHRIST OR PROPHET

Dillon-Malone writes, Johane Masowe is

... the messenger who has been sent by Jehovah to African peoples [i.e. *mudzimu waMwari*], just as Jesus had been sent to white people (as they understand it). The Apostles [disciples of Masowe] do not reject Jesus Christ, but they have not experienced the relevance of his work.²⁰

In this quotation, Dillon-Malone suggests that Johane Masowe does among the Africans what Jesus Christ did among Whites. At the same time Dillon-Malone refers to Johane as a messenger of Jehovah described in Shona as a *mudzimu waMwari*. The Shona word *mudzimu* carries two meanings. First, the word designates 'the souls of the dead' who intervene in the affairs of the community to offer guidance and protection to the living members of the lineage. For example, *Mbuya Nehanda* was once a human being like us.²¹ Today she is a *mudzimu*, i.e. she is believed to influence society from the realm of the dead ancestors. Second, the word *mudzimu* can be used to describe her spirit-medium, sometimes known as a *svikiro*. These are the human agents of the souls or rather spirits of the

¹⁷ Ranger mentions an Anglican baptism, a 'great admiration' for Catholicism, affinities with the South African Missionary Apostolic Faith Mission and 'the most important influence on the idiom of Masowe's movement' as the United Methodist Episcopal Church. T. O. Ranger, 'Poverty and Prophetism' (Unpublished paper), 20.

¹⁸ Masowe believers gather in large numbers for worship in Seke on Saturday and Sunday most weeks. Research students have become accustomed to visit this particular community, mainly because of the attention which Masowe believers get from the popular press.

¹⁹ I. Mukonyora, 'The Complementarity of Male and Female Imagery in Theological Language: A Study of the Valentinian and Masowe Theological Systems' (Doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 1998); B. Sundkler, *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists* (Uppsala, Gleerups with the Oxford University Press, 1976) and *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (2nd Edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961).

²⁰ C. M. Dillon-Malone, *The Korsten Basketmakers*, 50. 'Whites' are the Europeans who brought the Gospel among the Shona.

²¹ *Mbuya Nehanda* was a mystic remembered today for her role in inspiring the First *Chimurenga*, 1893-1896. N. Bhebe, *Christianity and Traditional Religion in Western Zimbabwe 1859-1923* (London, Longman Group Ltd., 1979), 278-295.

dead. Since Johane Masowe was called *mudzimu waMwari* as a living member of society, the phrase tells us that Johane Masowe was a mediatory figure. Instead of serving the ancestors, it is suggested in the above quotation that Johane Masowe mediates for God (*Mwari*). It is arguable, therefore, that in Biblical language Johane Masowe was a prophet and not necessarily a Christ.

Sundkler observed that Johane Masowe was viewed within his own community as 'the Secret Messiah'. He adds,

When asked by his people if he was God, John preferred to leave the matter undecided . . . he was John Masowe the Son of God, sent to prepare for the judgement of God . . . hidden in the white-robed thousands of believers, walked the real Messiah, John of the Wilderness.²²

References to Johane Masowe as the Son of God and the Messiah suggest that he might have been among his followers what Christians generally believe of Jesus Christ. Worth noting, however, is the fact that in the same quotation, Sundkler refers to the same leader as John of the Wilderness from whom the name Johane Masowe was derived. If religious titles and name-giving remain important in Shona culture, then the name Johane Masowe suggests that he was a prophet emulating the works of John the Baptist. Caution is thus required in measuring the role of 'the secret Messiah'.

The idea of Johane as 'the Son of God' (*mwanakomana waMwari*) is not intended to suggest that we equate Johane with the Messiah. After all, the title 'Son of God' can be looked at simply as a title of honour given to someone who lives in obedience to God.²³ In Shona such titles of honour are common. At a petrol station recently, an attendant thanked me for paying my bill by calling me *Mbuya walshe* (the grandmother of our Lord). Not only is the title *Mbuya* sometimes used as a name for the Shona high God (*Mwari*), the word *Ishe* is a title of great honour used to translate the word 'Lord' which is sometimes used to name Jesus in the Shona Bible. I was called *Mbuya walshe* simply because someone wished to express their respect for me in a poetic way which most Shona people would understand. This was certainly not because my presence had any spiritual meaning.

My opinion is that Johane Masowe was aware of himself as some kind of messenger of God, meaning that he was a prophet or someone comprehensible as a *mudzimu waMwari* or *svikiro* among Shona people. Johane could not have been a Saviour figure as suggested in the above quotations if he chose to be named after John the Baptist.²⁴

²² Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets*, 325.

²³ M. Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1976), 1-15.

²⁴ Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 54-55.

DEATH AND RESURRECTION IN SHONA RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

The main argument used by Dillon-Malone to support the view that Johane Masowe is a Saviour figure is that Johane Masowe is reported to have died and risen (*wakafa akamuka*).²⁵ He writes, 'The Apostles really believe that their founder did die and rise again as a person with a new mission'.²⁶ The frequent references to 'death and resurrection' in stories about Johane Masowe have in fact led scholars to suggest in earlier studies of the Masowe *vapositioni* that Johane Masowe can be understood as the Messiah i.e. a replacement of Christ among the followers of the movement.²⁷

By examining the grounds for this claim, I propose to show how, in the Shona religious language of Johane Masowe's background, there exists an idiom in which suffering and healing are dramatized as forms of death and resurrection by figures comparable to prophets, especially the spirit-mediums. It is often stated in Shona stories about the spirit mediums, for instance, that they 'die' in the sense that they go through acute suffering (*kufa nekurwara*) until the ancestors exercise their powers of healing over them, anoint them and give them names and accompanying tasks.

Moreover, in Shona to die is a process which begins with suffering before it leads to the end of life itself. For example, *Ndafa nenzara* (I am dying of hunger); *Ndafa nehope* (I am dying of sleep); *Ndafa nekurwara* (I am dying of an illness) are all expressive of conditions of discomfort and suffering. The verb *kufa*, meaning 'to die' is used as much in popular language about suffering in general as it is used to describe the end of life as we all know it.

Even the temporary withdrawal from a community to become a *n'anga* (healer) can be interpreted as a way of dramatizing death. In Shona mythology, *n'angas* are often referred to as individuals who spend months living under the water; in pools, rivers and oceans acquiring new skills and learning about medicine from *njuzu* (water spirits — mermaids). This is a way of dramatizing their withdrawal from society and of claiming authority as healers. In fact, there are many ambiguities surrounding the notion of dying in Shona. We might add that *kufa nehope* (sleeping) and entering the world of dreams refers to the experiences which *n'angas* and spirit-mediums often refer to as forms of speech symbolizing the mental journey of the individual into the realm of the living dead before their anointment. As Schoffeleers observed, spirit-mediums and *n'angas* rise to positions of authority in the community first, by 'dying', seen here

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50. cf. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, 325.

as a way of withdrawing from society for a period and/or experiencing marginality through suffering from acute illnesses (*kufa nekurwara*).²⁸ Second, people 'rise' and/or become awakened. This is sometimes interpreted as healing through the benevolence of the ancestors to become recognized as a healer, diviner or spirit medium.²⁹ In brief, 'dying and rising' are metaphors which give meaning to experiences that the community associates with certain leadership roles. In this sense, *kufa* describes both the threat to life through illness and suffering in general. The term is not confined to death as the permanent end of life.

Just as it would be a misinterpretation of Shona mythology to say that *n'angas* really live under the water like fish for up to two years, to say that the spirit mediums literally die (*kufa nekurwara*) before they can assume their duties in the community would be a mistake. Schoffeleers appropriately describes experiences such as the ones just outlined as a 'dramatization of death', thereby suggesting that death in a literal sense does not take place in these situations.

In the light of the above explanation of the Shona idiom used to account for the experiences of the *vadzimu* and *n'angas*, it sounds inappropriate to draw the conclusion that the prophet Johane Masowe (a mediatory figure like the *mudzimu* and *svikiro*)³⁰ viewed himself as Christ the Messiah. Christians claim that Jesus experienced a real death and rose to go to heaven as the ground for the claim that Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity. Johane Masowe believed that his life was threatened by an acute illness (*akanga afa nekurwara*) until God intervened, healed and anointed him 'John the Baptist'.³¹ As he put it himself,

I am John the Baptist . . . I have been sent as a messenger to the Africans. This is the name which is inherited by messengers whether they be Africans or Whites. I was once sent to Judaea as a white messenger but now here in Rhodesia, I am a messenger to the Africans (*nhume yavatemala*).³²

Just as the *vadzimu* might be described as *nhume*, meaning messengers of the ancestors in the community, the biblical prophet, John, who prepared the way for Christ, as Johane Masowe understood him, was a messenger of God. It seems only fair, therefore, to accept Johane Masowe's own

²⁸ M. Schoffeleers, 'Folk Christology in Africa: The dialectics of the *n'anga* paradigm' in the *Journal of Religion in Africa*, (1989), XIX, (ii), 157-183.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 47.

³¹ File S138/22, National Archives of Zimbabwe, Statement made by Shonhiwa to Detective Bond.

³² The phrase *nhume yavatemala* can be translated in a literal way as 'the messenger of the Blacks'. As such the phrase is descriptive of the role of the *mudzimu waMwari* which Johane equated a prophetic role. Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 47, 149.

teaching that he was a messenger of God by the name of the prophet 'John the Baptist'.³³

The suggestion that Johane is as significant as Christ highlights some common ground between Shona religious and Biblical language. In particular, the ambiguity of meaning of the Shona word *kufa* has led to the equation of Johane Masowe with Christ. It is arguable, nevertheless, that Johane Masowe was first and foremost a prophet with a mission to preach repentance and baptism in the Jordan. He did not die and rise from the dead as orthodox Christians claim with respect to Jesus Christ, but experienced 'death' as most Shona people would understand the suffering of spirit mediums. In other words, Johane Masowe merely suffered acutely from his illness before his followers recognized him as a prophet. He did not die and rise as Christ did to save humankind, only to die again to be buried at Gandanzara some 30 years later.

THE SELF-DECLARATION OF JOHANE MASOWE AS A PROPHET

The religious name of 'Johane Masowe' tells us much about the leader of the Masowe *vapositori*. This name, meaning 'John of the Wilderness', was derived from Biblical teaching about John the Baptist. By reading the Bible,³⁴ Shonhiwa found a religious title for himself, a way of portraying himself among his followers and an imagery with which to develop the structure of his *vapositori* Church.³⁵ Names adopted for religious purposes among the Shona are so symbolic that they can determine the roles fulfilled by individuals in a community.

Today the name Johane Masowe is associated with communities which pray in open air venues called *masowe*, preach repentance and carry out baptisms in rivers and/or dams called 'Jordans'. In fact, insofar as the Bible furthers our understanding of the role of Johane, stories about John the Baptist come first.

Although writing about the Maranke *vapositori*, a movement which shares many of its characteristics with the Masowe *vapositori*, Werbner's reference to a 'Church of the Wilderness' describes also the way Johane Masowe could be comprehended. He writes,

The disharmonic image of the Wilderness Church focuses on indefinite space instead of either permanently or temporarily defined place. God's chosen people are in exile. They are migrating towards the Promised Land, and wherever a congregation meets, it is the Wilderness. Bereft of

³³ Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 47.

³⁴ M. Bourdillon, 'Gleaning: Shona selections from Biblical myth', 120-130.

³⁵ R. Werbner, 'The argument of images' in African Churches' in Wim van Binsbergen and Matthew Schoffeleers (eds.), *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 253-286.

any enclosure, the usual space for ritual is not marked apart in any way, and it is boundless: the space for ritual must be in the open.³⁶

Rather like a people in exile³⁷ awaiting a promise to be fulfilled in Christ, the Masowe *vapostori* travelled from Southern Rhodesia in the 1930s, towards Bechuanaland and reached Port Elizabeth in South Africa. In 1962 the Masowe community was repatriated to Rhodesia by the South African government and settled on land allocated to them by the Rhodesian government in Seke.³⁸ Some of the members migrated to Lusaka in Zambia and others later travelled as far as Tanzania and Kenya *en route* to the promised land.³⁹ In short, we might say that the Masowe *vapostori* do not have the saviour among them. Rather, they await the return of Christ and do so in exile under the leadership of the prophet Johane.⁴⁰

Below are a few quotations which shed some light on the way forward in the interpretation of Johane Masowe's role against the background of Shona religious idiom described above.

Following arrest for travelling without a pass, Shonhiwa told the police that he had been ill and during the course of a dream about death,

I heard voices telling me that I was John . . . I thought that I was meant to be called John the Baptist . . . I think that I was given that name, John the Baptist by God.⁴¹

Anyone familiar with the Shona religious heritage whereby names of ancestors are bestowed upon spirit mediums will recognize the importance of dreams and voices from the supernatural realm. This way individuals become recognized mediators between the ancestors and the living members of a community.⁴² One can understand why Shonhiwa adopted the name Johane Masowe on the basis of the claim that he had dreams and heard voices from above. Just as it is meant to be an honour to be given the name of one's ancestor and render a service to one's community as

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 254-255.

³⁷ For a fuller discussion of Masowe theology, see I. Mukonyora, 'The Complementarity of Male and Female Imagery in Theological Language' (D. Phil. Oxford, 1998).

³⁸ C. Kileff and M. Kileff, 'The Masowe Vapostori of Seke: Utopianism and tradition in an African church', in B. Jules-Rosette (ed.), *The New Religions of Africa* (New Jersey, Ablex Publishing Co., 1979), 151-167.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 30-33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Likewise orthodox Christians take Jesus beyond his own words in the development of early Christian doctrine.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Johane Masowe was arrested several times for travelling without a pass to preach the Gospel at a time when Europeans only were the recognized leaders of the Church. Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 11-12. File 138/22, National Archives of Zimbabwe. Statement made by Shonhiwa [Johane] to the police.

⁴² M. Gelfand, 'The religion of the Mashona', in *NADA*, (1956), V, (xxxiii), 27-31.

dictated by the ancestor spirit, Shonhiwa viewed himself as an individual especially anointed by God to fulfil a ministry of the type of John the Baptist. Hence, Johane moved from place to place preaching repentance and baptizing believers in the context of a church.

Johane Masowe goes further to draw ideas from the Shona religious heritage concerning the ancestor spirit-mediums, often referred to as *vanhu vane mudzimu* or *svikiro*. He points out that he suffered from headaches and dreamed about death. When Johane was restored to good health through the healing power of God, he was simultaneously anointed 'John the Baptist'. As such he was 'sent by God' to preach against sin among Africans.⁴³ He claims his authority thus; 'No human has guided me . . . [I am] only guided by the voice . . . I no longer suffer from pains in the head.'⁴⁴

Johane Masowe's experiences got worse. He lost consciousness, 'as if in a dead faint'; he appeared thereby 'lifeless'.⁴⁵ In an official document of the Masowe church entitled *The Calling of Baba Johane* there are more references to God as the source of Johane's authority as a prophet.

God then asked, do you know why you have been ill for so long? He answered, 'I don't know Lord'. God said, 'You have been ill because of the sins which you have committed against me on earth since the day you were born.' Sixpence [Masowe] was dead at this time. We (his followers) were hearing his voice answering Jehovah from heaven . . . his corpse was lying before us . . . [then] We heard the spirit getting back into the corpse making a sound like that of air being pumped into a bicycle.⁴⁶

In the story of the attack of Johane Masowe by Satan, we read,

Then the devil left [after feeding him with witchcraft poison] . . . his illness had become worse until he lay down like a corpse. At sunrise we heard the voice of God calling Johane Masowe in order for him to wake up.⁴⁷

Johane Masowe, not only heard the voice of God and became healed, he was given the name 'John the Baptist' which is in keeping with the anointment of the spirit mediums in his background culture.

The heavenly Christ, clearly distinguished from Johane says to the new messenger of God, 'I have given you power of John the Baptist and I will give you other witnesses to help you to do your work in the world.'⁴⁸

⁴³ File 138/22, National Archives of Zimbabwe, Statement made by Shonhiwa to Detective Bond, CID, Salisbury, 1 November, 1932.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ 'Shonhiwa's vision in heaven', cited by Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 149.

⁴⁶ 'The calling of Baba Johane', cited by Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 145.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁸ 'Shonhiwa's vision in heaven', cited by Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 148.

Jesus goes further to explain the prophetic duties to be carried out by Johane Masowe,

You are to go back to earth to drive away witches and to destroy all medicines (*mishonga*) because the world is about to come to an end.⁴⁹

In short, even if some of Johane Masowe's followers developed a perception of the founder of their community as the Saviour, Johane Masowe's ministry is best understood as that of a prophet. First, Johane chose to be named after John the Baptist. Second, as indicated above, Johane refers to Christ as someone with authority to anoint and instruct him on how to serve God. Third, the threat of death removed by God in the quotations above is comprehensible in Shona as a way of designating leaders of the community who are comparable to prophets. The suggestion made by Dillon-Malone and Sundkler above that John of the Wilderness was 'the Messiah', therefore, highlights what could be either a misunderstanding or changing view of Shona as the language of transmission of Johane's ideas.

JOHANE'S VIEW OF CHRIST

Below is a list of references which show that Johane Masowe understood the difference between his own prophetic ministry and the role of Jesus as the Saviour of the world.

In 'Shonhiwa's vision in heaven' Jesus is associated with the heavenly passage to God. Johane claims to have heard from the third gate of heaven the sound of thunder '... then a man called Jesus arrived and he took my hand'.⁵⁰ Thunder is once again used to highlight the special significance of Jesus as the Saviour whose second coming Johane Masowe announces.

At midnight, there was a roar of thunder on earth from east to west. Cattle bellowed as they looked towards the east. There was noise everywhere... Many people were awakened by the sound... it was the word of God which had caused this noise.⁵¹

The association between the 'word of God' and thunder is a reminder of both the biblical idea of the light which the darkness could not comprehend in the opening remarks of John's gospel, but also God's means of intervening in the world in the Shona pre-Christian religion. Bourdillon writes,

Thunder and especially lightning are usually understood to come from the high god. They reveal occasional unusual power coming from the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵¹ 'Signs announcing the coming', cited by Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 143.

heavens which is terrifying, unpredictable and inexplicable in terms of ordinary events of social life.⁵²

Highlighting once more the difference between himself and Jesus Christ, Johane describes his vision of the heavens,

On the other side of the river, there was a village shining like the sun. Inside this village and also outside of it there was an uncountable number of people. I had a very strong desire to enter this village. I walked as far as the river . . . Jesus arrived and took me by the hand.⁵³

What is significant about this statement is the fact that Jesus appears at the river which lies at the border of 'the village shining like the sun'. Johane's ascent to the heavens stops when Jesus appears at the borders of the higher heaven. The shining light, which is a traditional Shona religious symbol of the source of knowledge and power of God (*Mwari*),⁵⁴ is beyond Masowe's reach. The 'strong desire to enter this village' could not be fulfilled by Johane Masowe who still belonged to the realm of the living on earth. When the light came towards Johane Masowe, he says, 'I trembled with fear . . . I fell down' unconscious. As Daneel put it, glowing whiteness symbolizes the nearness of God Himself in many African initiated churches.⁵⁵ Hence, Johane instructed his followers to pray to 'God the Father, God the Son' as he did himself.⁵⁶ Johane Masowe could not have asked his followers to confuse himself with 'God the Son', the focus of his prayers.

Thus, the argument that Johane Masowe is the Saviour in the Masowe community can be questioned on the basis of a study of the vernacular language used to portray Johane Masowe. In the preceding discussion, Johane Masowe talked about Jesus Christ in a way which shows clearly that he understood the difference between the Saviour and himself. The references to dying and rising in Masowe religious language must be read with caution as ways of claiming authority for the prophet in a way comprehensible among Shona people.

ISAIAH SHEMBE, PROPHET OR SAVIOUR FIGURE

Apart from Johane Masowe, Johane Maranke (also popularly known as John the Baptist) and Mai Chaza from Zimbabwe, Alice Lenshina from

⁵² M. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples. An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona with Special Reference to Their Religion* (Gweru, Mambo Press, Revised Edition, 1987), 227.

⁵³ 'The message of God in Africa', cited by Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 147.

⁵⁴ H. Aschwanden, *Karanga Mythology: An Analysis of the Consciousness of the Karanga in Zimbabwe* (Gweru, Mambo Press), 1989, 16.

⁵⁵ M. L. Daneel, *Old and New, Volume II*, 163.

⁵⁶ 'The calling of Baba Johane', cited by Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 147.

Zambia, Simon Kimbangu from Zaire, Isaiah Shembe from South Africa are all prophetic figures reported to have 'died and risen' and/or experienced the threat of death.⁵⁷ All these founder figures of African initiated churches 'died and rose' in ways quite similar to the experience of Johane Masowe.⁵⁸

Yet, Werbner writes,

... in southern Africa and across the continent, there are very few passage rites or other ritual of new religious movements which reconstruct personal or collective identities and the self around the agony of the crucifixion... In Africa it is far more the resurrection and the promise of redemption that has caught the religious imagination, culminating in the embodiment, within a remarkable wealth of ritual forms, of numerous redemptive passages through life to death.⁵⁹

Of course, one would have to carry out detailed studies of the languages used to describe these deaths and resurrections in order to show the way in which the different individuals listed above 'reconstruct personal or collective identities' through the concept of suffering like Christ. So far we have shown how a religious leader aware of himself as a prophet and/or messenger of God among African peoples in southern and central Africa has used the idea of 'the suffering body'. Although we have maintained that dramatizations of death by Johane Masowe are quite different from the experience of real death as Christians claim for Jesus, Werbner seems to underestimate the importance of 'the suffering body' in African Christian encounters.

Schoffeleers, from whose article I selected the title for this article, suggests the opposite. He maintains that, out of the spectrum of 'folk-lore' traditions in Africa are many ideas of dying and suffering which could become the foundation for an African Christology representative of the thought pattern of many.⁶⁰ I would agree with Schoffeleers in the sense that African Christologies could be written making use of the life and death religious idiom. This can be done provided; first, the differences in meaning between the orthodox Christian claim of a real death and resurrection and the dramatizations of life and death by *n'angas* and spirit-mediums are recognized; and second, founder figures, who fulfil the role of prophets, are not confused with the person of Christ even if they emulate Christ, like all Christians should.

⁵⁷ Shembe dreams about death as opposed to literally dying. B. Sundkler, *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists* (Gleerups with Oxford University Press, 1976), 166.

⁵⁸ A. Hastings, *African Christianity: An Essay in Interpretation* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), 71.

⁵⁹ R. Werbner, 'The suffering body: Passion and ritual allegory in Christian encounters' in *Journal of Southern African Studies* (June, 1997), XXXII, (ii).

⁶⁰ M. Schoffeleers, 'Folk Christology' in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, (1991), XIX, (ii).

As a way of widening the scope of this article, I propose to revisit earlier studies on the founder of at least one other African initiated church. The literature on the Zulu prophet from South Africa, Isaiah Shembe, provides us with another example of how ambiguities in the religious language used by the prophet and his followers have led to the interpretation of the role of Isaiah Shembe as that of a Black Messiah.

According to Oosthuizen, Shembe 'accepts fully the position of Jesus Christ'.⁶¹ The most important grounds for this claim is that Shembe is reported to have 'died'⁶² and 'risen'. It is not easy to explain what this means. In the following quotation Shembe is not represented as dying. He simply dreamt that he was being

. . . pursued by ferocious people who tried to kill him; he was visited by lions, and by leopards pretending to be angels, and saying 'We are sent by God.' Then he found himself surrounded by a rattling host of the skeletons of the dead, making a noise . . . He fell down in terror.

When he woke up (i.e. arose from his sleep), he saw himself as someone whom God rescued from death. Shembe proceeded to become a well known Zulu prophet and healer.⁶³

There is another story about Shembe's encounter with the forces of death and God's intervening power.⁶⁴ As he was about to die, he told his followers,

'Throughout my life I have worked for God alone. I came with nothing, I leave with nothing.' Shembe was born of the Spirit, he was Spirit . . . [and] sent by God.⁶⁵

What is interesting about the dream mentioned above and this story is that there are comparative elements between them and stories told about Johane Masowe. In fact, just as stories about death in Johane Masowe's testimony cannot be taken literally, Shembe's references to death perhaps need to be taken with caution. Sundkler disagrees with Oosthuizen's suggestion that Shembe is a Black Messiah. He criticizes Oosthuizen for making 'a blunt *a priori* claim that Shembe is not only a mediator but is Messiah, the manifestation of God'. Moreover, Oosthuizen fails to understand 'the subtle and sophisticated nature of Shembe's proclamations'.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Cited by Sundkler in *Zulu Zion*, 191.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 185.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁶⁴ It is common among people who are dependent on orality to have more than one way of making the same point. As shown below there are several ways of expressing the fact that Johane Masowe had religious experiences which explain his role as a prophet and leader of the Masowe Church. Sundkler, *Zulu Zion*, 184-185.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

Sundkler proceeds to interpret Shembe as an *eikon* of Christ, meaning 'a mask' of Christ. By designating Shembe 'the mask of the Black Christ', Sundkler tries to suggest that the prophet Shembe was someone helping Black people to believe in Christ without himself replacing Christ. Sundkler goes further to recommend that other prophetic figures and founders of African initiated Churches such as Simon Kimbangu, Johane Masowe and others can be interpreted as *eikons* (masks of Christ) rather than Messiahs.⁶⁷

My opinion on this matter is that the difference between the viewpoints of Oosthuizen and Sundkler is minimal. Whether Shembe is best understood as an *eikon* of Christ or a Black Christ does not clear the confusion about the role and function of the founder figure in Shembe's case.⁶⁸ Granted, the centrality of the story of Shembe's 'death and resurrection' as a claim to Shembe's authority makes it difficult to ignore Christ in studies of Shembe. What Sundkler overlooks in his own attempt to improve on Oosthuizen's theology, however, is that when one wears someone else's mask among the Shona at least, they step into the shoes of the owner of that mask. In Shona ritual, for example, spirit mediums become *eikons*, i.e., they change their behaviour patterns in order to 'become' the ancestors whom they represent in the community. Put another way, the voice of the spirit medium is taken as that of the ancestor.⁶⁹ When Sundkler suggests that we interpret Isaiah Shembe as an *eikon* of Christ, he is not, therefore, saying something very different from Oosthuizen who says that Shembe is 'the Black Messiah'.⁷⁰ Either way, the suggestion being made by these two writers is that we regard the dramatization of death and resurrection by African prophets as reminders of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to save humanity.

Worth noting, as a caution on the claim that Shembe became a Messiah is the fact that Shembe merely dreamt about death and awoke with a feeling of empowerment by God. As we have done with Shona religious language in this article, someone would have to examine the Zulu language and the traditional religion to find out the key to Shembe's thought pattern before giving him the title Black Messiah and/or *eikon* of Christ.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁶⁸ Black Messiah, Saviour, Black Christ are commonly used to describe prophets, especially founders of African initiated Churches. The problem of interpreting Jesus Christ's mission has always been difficult for theologians. The problem is made more complex when the use of terminology applicable to Jesus is applied to individuals from other cultures.

⁶⁹ M. Gelfand, 'The religion of the Mashona' in *NADA*, (1956), XXXIII, 27-31.

⁷⁰ G. Oosthuizen in Sundkler, *Zulu Zion*, 166ff.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I take for granted that the Shona language used by Masowe believers tells us about their theology. By examining key words used to designate the founder of the Masowe *vapositori* church, I not only dispute the claim that Johane Masowe literally died and rose again, but also question the suggestion made in earlier studies of the movement that the prophet replaces Christ.⁷¹ My opinion is that earlier enquiries of leaders such as Johane Masowe and Isaiah Shembe do not really help us to understand the position of prophets whose claims to authority are based mainly on their prophetic and healing ministries. Johane Masowe and Isaiah Shembe are examples of prophets who create dramas about life and death in order to claim authority for themselves as *vadzimu waMwari* and/or prophetic figures.

Of course, ideas about dying and rising used to claim Johane Masowe's authority might remind us of Christian teaching about the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Every Easter, Christians worldwide remember the death and resurrection of Christ and some do it through dramatizations of the suffering death and resurrection of Christ.⁷² Using dramas of death and resurrection to further our understanding of Christ, therefore, happens anyway without anyone replacing Jesus Christ. In this article, we have shown that Johane Masowe claimed authority and gained understanding among his followers by drawing upon ideas of death and resurrection from a Shona religious heritage. Dying and rising in the sense described in Masowe teaching is applicable to the experience of the prophet and not the saviour. The 'death' experienced by Johane Masowe thus differs from the death of Jesus. Johane's notion of death among the Shona extends from falling asleep, becoming unconscious, dreaming about death, suffering from headaches, being bewitched and so on. To rise in this context simply means to become awakened and, in some cases, to be restored to good health. We can conclude this article, therefore, by stating once more that Johane Masowe did not claim to be Christ. He simply used Shona language about death and resurrection to allow his followers to recognize him as a prophet anointed by God and given the name John the Baptist.

Finally, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the various instances in which founder figures of African initiated churches have been described as saviour figures comparable to Christ among their followers. It is interesting, nevertheless, to note that Simon Kimbangu, Alice Lenshina, Mai Chaza and the prophet Isaiah Shembe are all examples of founder

⁷¹ Dillon-Malone, *Korsten Basketmakers*, 50.

⁷² I grew up observing this in the Catholic Church. Today in the Phillipines, people carry crosses, get beaten up and hung on the cross, only to remember Christ.

figures comparable to Johane Masowe. Their claims to authority are expressed in terms of the experience of sleeping, dreaming and waking up renewed; suffering from illnesses, persecution, experiences of healing through the power of the Holy Spirit and/or God.⁷³ References to 'dying and rising' can be understood in these situations as metaphorical ways of expressing the two conditions of absolute dependence on supernatural power and the victorious conquest of the forces leading to death. Whether the above male and female prophets saw themselves as the 'Black Messiahs' who replace Christ in their communities or are interpreted as such by their followers perhaps warrants a separate study on African views of Christ based on the model of prophetic figures. For our purposes now, it should be noted that the language of dying and rising again is used in the background culture of Shona people at least to make a rather different point than that which the titles of Christ signify in orthodox Christianity.

⁷³ A. Hastings, *African Christianity*, 60ff.