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RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS AND POLITICAL CHANGE *

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IN 1978 I HAD a dispute with Maurice Bloch in the pages of *Man*.¹ Bloch had argued that formal language, as found in political rhetoric, various art forms and ritual, is an impoverished form of communication.² Being constrained by its formal nature, it lacks the freedom required for a genuine expression of the truths of the world. In particular, Bloch argued that in sharp contrast to the everyday language of experience, formal constraints in ritual language serve to hide the real state of the world, and to support through mystification inequality and hierarchy. I argued that although ritual language can be used in this way, there are more auspicious uses for ritual. I held, following in different ways both Durkheim and V.W. Turner, that ritual language can provide a genuine way of speaking about things and subjects which are not readily accessible to common sense language. I also argued that ritual can be used as a check on the abuse of authority — and consequently a check on inequality — by subordinate people in a society.³

Although I still stand by the position I took up in 1978, I have had some misgivings about it. Now, I think Bloch's analysis of ritual has more frequent validity than I would have been prepared to concede at that time.

There are three grounds for my misgivings. The first relates to a rereading of some of the ethnography that I cited. I cited Peter Fry's study of Shona spirit mediums in the middle of the 1960s as an example of ritual being used to challenge the inequalities of the racial Government of Rhodesia.⁴ Although there was clearly a political element in the oracles of certain of the more renowned mediums, and although the flourishing cult of spirit possession was certainly related to the political situation, the vast majority of seances were concerned with divining the cause of illness and with witchcraft accusations. At a time when land was scarce and political activity had been heavily suppressed, the tensions in the community were channelled into cults of affliction. One could argue that the diagnosis of spirit mediums served to hide the real source of tension in the

*I am very grateful for comments on earlier drafts of this article by my colleagues Angela Cheater, Coenraad Brand, and others who took part in seminars at the University of Zimbabwe and the University of Toronto.

¹ M.F.C. Bourdillon, 'Knowing the world or hiding it: A response to Maurice Bloch', *Man* (1978), XIII, 591-9. See also correspondence in the subsequent issues.

² See M. Bloch, 'Symbols, song, dance and features of articulation: Is religion an extreme form of political authority?', *Archives européennes sociales* (1974), XV, 55-81; and M. Bloch, 'The past and the present in the present', *Man* (1977), XII, 278-92.

³ For a case study, see M.F.C. Bourdillon, 'Religion and authority in a Korekore community', *Africa* (1979), XLIX, 172-81.

⁴ P. Fry, *Spirits of Protest: Spirit Mediums and the Articulation of Consensus among the Zezuru of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe)* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976).

community, and so indirectly supported the political inequality of the time. There is more to be said on this point, and I shall come back to the role of spirit mediums.

The second source for misgivings is more personal. Over the past few years I have noticed more than I did in the past, how in the Roman Catholic Church, ritual can be used to assert authority, although in this case it is ecclesiastical authority that is being asserted. The formal prescriptions around ritual language often prevent true communication, and can be used to stifle and control ideas. I use the word 'can' deliberately: the formal nature of Roman Catholic ritual also serves to express a rich tradition and the values it embodies. The poetry and the variety of ideas that have accrued over centuries in the written ritual tradition surpass the banalities of the more spontaneous expressions of most people, including leaders of religious rites. Probably the degree to which one regards the formal rituals as the communication or suppression of ideas depends on how far one is in sympathy with the orthodox tradition of the Church.

A third reason for mistrusting the communicative value of ritual language derives from my reading of Sperber's *Rethinking Symbolism*.⁵ It is true that disciplined poets strive to define accurately the symbols they use, and academic theologians aim to analyse and strictly define religious symbols. Nevertheless, I have noticed how frequently in practice symbols acquire their power — and particularly their power to control behaviour — through vagueness of association. Unlike encyclopaedic knowledge, in which it is important to analyse precisely what ideas are to be associated in any instance, symbols generally comprise a conglomeration of connotations which may be applied or removed as convenience demands. This vagueness of meaning can be used by politicians and others to befuddle and confuse their followers.

These misgivings of mine about an earlier position relate to important questions about the nature of religious symbols. To what extent do religious symbols divert peoples' attention from real political issues? To what extent do they excite an emotional response at the expense of accurate understanding? These are useful questions with which to approach data I wish now to present on Shona religious symbolism during the war of independence and immediately after it. Clearly, the literate and highly-structured tradition of the Roman Catholic Church is far removed from the kind of rituals that I shall be discussing; but questions of rigidity and control remain.

There are three sets of relationships which we shall be looking at: relationships between religious authorities and their subordinates; relationships between political authorities and their subordinates; and relationships between religious and political authorities. Each set involves two-way relationships which are not

⁵ D. Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975).

necessarily viewed in the same way from both sides; and each set involves ideology, and the use of symbols. Let us now turn to the data.

SPIRIT MEDIUMS DURING THE LIBERATION WAR

The data that I am going to present focus on a chiefdom called Chiruja in the extreme north-east of Zimbabwe, where I originally did fieldwork in 1968–70, and with which I have kept in touch since, including a couple of briefer studies since the war. I shall also comment on religious symbols in wider Zimbabwean society.

I have described the main features of Shona religion elsewhere, and here give only the essentials.⁶ In Chiruja the dominant religious symbols in the lives of individuals focus on the cult of spirits of the dead, for the most part family ancestors who have little influence outside their own kinship group. From a broader perspective, the spirits most influential in the wider community are the remote ancestors of the chiefly lineage. These spirits, called *mhondoro* (lion), include the founders of the chiefly dynasty: they are believed to be responsible for the fertility of the land, and also for its government. A number of them have human hosts whom they periodically possess to utter their oracles.

Immediately before the war, the standing of the lion spirit mediums in Chiruja was at a low ebb, particularly on account of a long and rather sordid dispute over the chiefly succession, at the end of which a man appointed by the spirits became chief in spite of the fact that he came from a lineage which had never before had the chiefship, lived in a remote corner of the chiefdom, was too old to carry out his functions effectively, and was generally an unpopular appointee. Mediums had been accused of accepting bribes and faking possession so that they could speak with their own voices rather than the voices of spirits. Performance of rituals in honour of the lion spirits was irregular and attendance at these rituals was sparse and sometimes clearly reluctant. Spirit mediums were finding themselves left out of social gatherings. By the end of the war, however, there was a general consensus in the community that the spirits of the land, and particularly the senior spirit Nemuru, had played a vital role during the war and were among the most powerful spirits in that part of the country.

The importance of spirit mediums during the war in other areas has been shown and discussed at length. David Lan has argued that guerrillas strengthened their legitimacy through the co-operation of mediums of high status.⁷ My discussion in this article concerns the way mediums gained in status through the

⁶ M.F.C. Bourdillon, *Shona Peoples* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 2nd edn, 1982).

⁷ D. Lan, *Guns & Rain: Guerrillas & Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985). I am not entirely convinced by Lan's argument, which I shall discuss at length in a future article.

war, which demands a very different analysis. The material I present is more in accord with the quotation cited by Ranger, pointing out that when the guerrillas consulted the mediums, people began to think the mediums were important: 'The mediums felt that they had been forgotten but now they were remembered.'⁸ Here I describe how the war affected the mediums specifically in Chiruja.

The first group of guerrillas who came into Chiruja asked to be taken to the spirits of the country: such a policy was widely operated by the liberation forces, and had served them well in acquiring the secret co-operation of the rural population when the war started in earnest about a hundred miles to the west of Chiruja. Some senior men took the guerrillas to a seance at which the senior mediums of Chiruja were present and possessed by their spirits. Nemuru told the soldiers that he did not want war in his country: that territorial spirits dislike bloodshed is a tradition widespread in Shona country and beyond⁹ — there have been very occasional accounts of spirit mediums who remained antagonistic to all bloodshed throughout the war and as a result suffered at the hands of both sides¹⁰ (like so many of the rural people). In Chiruja, the guerrillas told the spirits bluntly that their request was absurd: the war was spreading all over Zimbabwe, and whether the spirits liked it or not war would be waged because the people wanted their freedom. The guerrillas then asked for power to defeat the enemy, and Nemuru gave them snuff and other charms. Nemuru also buried charms at strategic points around the chiefdom, and near one of them a Rhodesian army truck struck a landmine and overturned, killing one of its occupants. Every subsequent group of guerrillas came to introduce themselves to Nemuru.

People also claimed that the spirits helped the guerrillas by advising them when and where to go, and by predicting the movements of the enemy.¹¹ Informants pointed to the fact that less than ten people, including civilians, were killed by security forces in Chiruja, as evidence of the effectiveness of Nemuru's protection. In fact, the chiefdom is in an extreme corner of the country, having as long a border with Mozambique as it has with the rest of Zimbabwe, and it comprises hilly and very wooded country in which it would be simple to hide and easy to lay an ambush. Perhaps outsiders would find these ecological characteristics a more convincing explanation for the relative absence of military contacts and the low loss of life than the effectiveness of Chiruja spirit mediums.

⁸ Quoted in T.O. Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985), 212.

⁹ Lan, *Guns & Rain*, 91–8, points out that the strongest of the mediums' taboos is against seeing blood, and links this to the spirits' dissociation from biological life and death.

¹⁰ Information obtained from Pamela Reynolds, who researched spirit mediums who are healers, in central Shona country shortly after the war.

¹¹ Lan, *Guns & Rain*, 157–9, argues that one of the roles of the mediums was to make the guerrillas familiar with the forest and teach them to read the signs of the forest. The examples he gives are what a Western observer would classify as magical.

In a neighbouring chiefdom, which I also visited, a number of informants made similar remarks about their spirits during the war. Spirit mediums used to send messages to guerrillas with information about the movements of security forces and advice on guerrilla operations. There were, however, some sceptics. One remarked that if the protection of the spirits was so effective, no one would have been killed; to which the faithful replied that those who died took no notice of the spirit's warnings, or broke their taboos, especially the one against sleeping with girls. Another sceptic commented that it was the young helpers of the guerrillas (known as mujibhas), and not the spirits, who were the eyes and the ears of the guerrillas, informing them of enemy movement.

Certainly the guerrillas took the spirit mediums seriously. In Chiruja, Nemuru was supposed to give his approval to the execution of any witch (a point I shall return to), although in practice it is agreed that one alleged witch was killed by mujibhas without his approval, and it is disputed whether he approved of the execution of another. In a neighbouring chiefdom, one possessed medium was influential in preventing the killing of the chief's family when the chief was killed, for which she incurred the anger of the mujibhas and fled to town. More generally, returning fighters describe how they were protected by spirits. One was in a troop, the leader of which was a medium who kept them free from danger and free from casualties all through the war. This fighter insisted that those guerrillas who were killed died because they did not listen to the spirits of the land or because they did not introduce themselves to these spirits.

SPIRIT MEDIUMS AFTER THE LIBERATION WAR

The comments extolling the work of the spirits during the war were collected about a year after the end of the war, around the end of 1980. The ex-guerrillas were then still stationed at a camp some fifty miles away, and used to patrol the area. The situation was sufficiently tense for my assistant to suggest I did not go back to stay in the area but leave the data collection to him.

At this stage, it was not possible to obtain an exact picture of people's attitude to the war. Certainly it was a painful experience, and has left much bitterness. Not all the people, however, had a clear idea of what the war was about (in some minds, it followed so soon after my fieldwork that another visit by me was cause to fear a further war).¹² The people in this corner of the country had not been disturbed as far as their land goes. Although the size of the chiefdom may have been diminished by the drawing of the international boundary, there is no

¹² I heard from various sources the comment that when Bourdillon came before, war followed; now that he is here again, does this mean there will be another war? This is perhaps an unusual example of the vagueness of association which Sperber regards as typical of symbolism — or perhaps it was a disingenuous micro-political move against those who approved of my visit.

evidence that any people had to move as a result of this;¹³ and there were few immigrants to this dry and inhospitable corner of the country from more crowded areas of the country. People pointed out in the 1970s that they had been left alone only because their land was stony and dry and the Whites did not want it; and, as elsewhere in the country, they bitterly opposed interference by the government concerning soil conservation measures. But nationalist policies had never been strong here, and it is not certain that initially the people felt grievances sufficiently strongly to fight a war over them. The main motivating force driving young people into the guerrilla forces in the early stages of the war seemed to be ill-treatment at the hands of the Rhodesian security forces. Equally, it is not clear what people thought of Nemuru during the war. Elsewhere, certain mediums had stood out against fighting to the extent of being beaten by both sides, and later became important in the process of cleansing fighters from guilt (which I shall mention again later). What is clear is that religious authorities in Chiruja (the spirit mediums) and those with political power (the guerrillas) supported each other during the war.

There are indications that the people on the whole supported both: the guerrillas' victory depended on popular support, and throughout the country there appears to have been a resurgence of traditional religion. In Chiruja, a clear example of this was the resurrection of a rain ritual which had been dormant for ten years (and which appears likely to become dormant again now that the war is over — it was not performed even to attempt to avert the very bad 1982/3 drought). What is certain is that when victory came, both political and traditional religious leaders were held up as heroes.

The medium of Nemuru, however, was already in 1981 dissipating the esteem he had won for himself during the war. Many people disapproved when he started wearing trousers instead of the traditional spirit's loincloth. Then, even while not possessed, he started telling people not to use the seeds and fertilizer which government distributed, threatening very poor harvests if people did put these foreign materials into the soil. He picked a quarrel with the chief, who, he claimed, did not send him gifts as the previous chief had done. He instigated a case against two men who had found elephant tusks and sold them outside the chiefdom instead of bringing them to the spirit Nemuru as tradition decreed. He also fraternized with a man who was believed to have falsely got a number of people into trouble with the guerrillas (there was a long-standing friendly relationship between the medium and this scheming old man). The standing of the mediums was not improved by a serious quarrel within their ranks. The senior mediums were eventually brought together with great difficulty by senior men to

¹³ This makes the situation in Chiruja very different from that in Makoni as described by Ranger, *Peasant-Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe*, and even from that in Dande, as described by Lan, *Guns & Rain*, which had received a large number of displaced people.

sort the conflict out, a meeting at which the spirits brought up a number of complaints against various families in the chiefdom. Another indication that the mediums carried little weight was the fact that no one formally reported to them any of a number of publicly known cases of incest, traditionally believed to be an offence against the spirits and to endanger the fertility of the land. Nevertheless, the standing of the spirits was partly restored when the meeting just mentioned was followed by a good start to the rainy season, late, in mid-December.

In the neighbouring chiefdom of Diwa the spirits forbade the use of fertilizer — they did not want the soil 'salted'¹⁴ — although they allowed the use of government seed packs, and were with some difficulty persuaded to allow the tractor which the local council had acquired to operate (they did not want the soil smelling of oil). People thought that by the following year, they would be allowing fertilizer. In Chiruja the view was expressed that neither chiefs nor spirits had much power any more, and soon people would be paying more attention to government plans for developing the rural areas than to anything the spirits said. There was no evidence in this area of spirits encouraging any kind of development.¹⁵

Two years later, the war was still bitterly remembered, but life had returned to something approaching normality. By then it appears that the spirit mediums had lost their standing again, perhaps partly on account of the bad drought that was threatening the country for the second successive year. In January 1983, a visiting medium from Mozambique was claiming traditional ties with the spirits of the land (which the local mediums did not recognize — I had never before heard of the visitor), and apart from acquiring a reputation as a powerful healer, was being consulted even on local rituals to obtain rain — much to the indignation of Nemuru. At a ceremony for rain held at the home of the senior female spirit of Chiruja, attendance was so low that there were not enough senior women to perform the traditional dances, which were left to younger girls whose knowledge and ability were very limited. The dancing finished early when shortly after midnight the girls said they were tired and were going to bed. The old medium conducted a seance, in which she spoke at length on internal petty politics and the problem of the chiefship, raising the issues of the chiefly election as if nothing had happened in the thirteen years since the old chief had been elected. She was apparently unaware of the radical loss of influence the chiefship had undergone as a result of government policy: she complained about the elected presiding officer

¹⁴ Salt is related to 'hot' foods which are taboo to the spirits.

¹⁵ D.M. Lan, *Making History: Spirit Mediums and the Guerrilla War in the Dande Area of Zimbabwe* (Univ. of London, unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, 1983), 317-9, where the author describes a medium who was very much involved with the guerrillas during the war, and who after the war was introducing new attitudes and ideas in keeping with the ideals of independent Zimbabwe. None of the mediums I came across were that progressive.

who is now in charge of the customary court, and said that people should respect the chief whom the spirits had chosen and who had performed the rites of chiefship.

SPIRIT MEDIUMS AND POLITICAL CONTROL

How do we understand this pattern of rise and fall? Although not universal, the pattern is not unique to Chiruja. An obvious example of the rising influence of mediums during the war and immediately after it was the case of Nehanda. Nehanda was famous in the early 1896/7 war against the White settlers,¹⁶ and the medium was executed for her involvement in stirring the fighters. During the recent war, an aged medium of Nehanda was taken into Mozambique by guerrillas for protection whence she is said to have helped numerous bands of guerrillas;¹⁷ and her name received some prominence in the public media immediately after the war. As we shall see, this did not necessarily give to her medium immunity from government control after the war.

One reason that could be given for the rise in status of the Chiruja mediums during the war is that the leaders of the liberation army simply found the best tool to control the rural population who feared and respected their mediums. The Rhodesian Government certainly adopted this line, accusing the fighters of exploiting mediums in order to get a 'spiritual hold over primitive tribesmen'.¹⁸ The tactical advantage of co-operating with spirit mediums, together with certain misgivings about using them, were evident to leaders of the liberation army.¹⁹ But I have argued elsewhere that the need for spirit mediums to express public opinion indicates that there is more to their involvement in the war than cynical political manipulation.²⁰ As we have seen, many of the fighters themselves strongly believe in the power of the spirit mediums. And a medium like Nemuru gained in standing through his involvement in the war; he was not simply manipulated on account of his previous standing.

A more useful suggestion follows Fry's interpretation of the multiplication of spirit mediums in Chiota in the 1960s:²¹ the mediums were an expression of cultural nationalism. Legends about their achievements in the remote past emphasized a power which was independent of the technological and political

¹⁶ Made even more famous by Ranger's account of the war. See T.O. Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896-7: A Study in African Resistance* (London, Heinemann, 1967); and see D.N. Beach, 'Chimurenga: The Shona rising of 1896-7', *The Journal of African History* (1979), XX, 395-420.

¹⁷ The incidents are briefly described in my *Shona Peoples*, 191, and in more detail in Lan, *Guns & Rain*, 3-6.

¹⁸ Rhodesia, *Parliamentary Debates, House of Assembly, Third Session, Twelfth Parliament... 21st November, 1972 to... 10th May, 1973*, LXXXIII (1974), 1072, 29 Mar. 1973.

¹⁹ See Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War*, 205.

²⁰ M.F.C. Bourdillon, 'Spirit mediums in Shona belief and practice', *NADA* (1974), XI, i, 30-7.

²¹ Fry, *Spirits of Protest*, 112-15.

power of the Whites. Indeed, the traditional mediums were opposed by the Whites with their Christianity. Traditionally, important spirit mediums in these remote areas have often been totally opposed to White society, forbidden to wear European dress, forbidden to ride in vehicles, forbidden the presence of Whites at their seances, and so on. The spirits are the traditional owners of the land, whose authority the White invaders usurped. Whereas Whites had taken land away, the spirits protected the land and provided fertility. The spirits and their mediums are the converse of so much of White culture that has infiltrated Shona society, particularly through the schools and urban life. In the fight to overthrow the domination of the Whites, the ancient spirits are natural symbols of Black power which can give more courage to the fighters.²²

In putting forward this explanation, one needs to notice the looseness of the term 'culture'. The opposition between 'White culture' and 'traditional culture' fails to make the distinction between those patterns of behaviour relating to changing economic and demographic environments (like a growing emphasis on the elementary family) and those patterns of behaviour simply copied from the élite group (like the choice of dress). The opposition also fails to distinguish changes in language and knowledge arising from improved technology, from changes which are simply the result of copying: English words are necessary in technical conversation, but not so necessary in casual conversation.

But then looseness of definition is not a bar to symbolic effectiveness. The absence of definition in symbols allows people a stark contrast between binary opposites without bothering about the untidiness of reality between the ideal poles. The mediums express a power in opposition to White power, the glories of the pre-colonial past, the conflict between the indigenous people and their White invaders. They obscure the impotence of the pre-colonial people against disease and superior military forces, the petty feuds and battles between chiefdoms, and the absence of the technology brought by colonization. In time of war, emphasis is given to oppositions to encourage people to fight.

The ability of mediums to inspire confidence and determination in the fighters depended partly, no doubt, on their personal powers of leadership. But more important were their links with the past. As a person, the medium of Nemuru has frequently failed to inspire confidence. During the war, his personal weaknesses were overridden by the legendary power of his spirit in the past, and by his links with this past dramatized in his ritual performance. Although mediums exercise a degree of freedom within their ritual framework, in order to be accepted by their

²² See Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War*, 188-90. Lan, *Guns & Rain*, 143, elaborates, and in my opinion overstates, these political and racial elements in the symbolism of mediums. The taboos affecting the use of material goods had largely died away in more developed areas of the country, notwithstanding the fact that in such areas political consciousness is more developed. Perhaps the taboos are better understood in the more banal terms of the conservative nature of religious traditions.

clienteles as influential mediums they must speak and act within an established framework of ritual. The power of the symbols that the mediums manipulated cannot be divorced from the constraints of established ritual. Through ritual, even a weak leader can inspire his followers.

After the war, the situation changed; and with it the apt symbols. With the war won, reconciliation is needed between all peoples to make use of the technology which could now benefit more than just the élite Whites. Traditional spirits, although still lauded by some, are too limited in their appeal to become national heroes. Although Nehanda, for example, still has her praises sung, and has a maternity hospital named after her in Harare, she has no appeal for the Ndebele (the principal non-Shona group in Zimbabwe). And she has limited appeal for the new élite, eager to enjoy the material fruits of taking control of a relatively developed country.

The question of control is, I think, important. Spirit mediums have a degree of independence from all political controls, and this independence suited them to the role of disturbing the existing order and the existing political control in the 1970s. After the war, however, nationalist leaders were trying to establish a new order over which they expected to be firmly in control. The independent, prophetic role of spirit mediums is now viewed with a certain ambivalence. There is no obvious way in which one can even imagine the more important mediums coming under any kind of bureaucratic control.²³ Some, like the mediums of Chiruja, have been unable to understand the political changes and have got left behind by them. Others were unable to adapt to peace. In one case, a woman claiming to be the medium of Nehanda and living near the Great Zimbabwe (bringing another powerful symbol into the Nehanda legends) was convicted of conspiring to murder two White farmers: she had supported guerrillas in the area during the war, was harassed by police and security forces, and was imprisoned. On her release after the war, conflict with the Museums authorities at Great Zimbabwe resulted in continued police harassment, until the ex-guerrillas authorized to guard her committed the murders which resulted in her conviction.²⁴ Other mediums were able to understand and co-operate with the new political power, adjusting ancient genealogies to emphasize the new unity in the country, and abolishing ancient customs which emphasized divisions in society or hierarchy.²⁵

²³ Notwithstanding Fry's account of Korekore mediums. See M.F.C. Bourdillon, 'Suggestions of bureaucracy in Korekore religion: Putting the ethnography straight', *Zimbabwe* (1981), IX, 119-36; also 'Freedom and constraint among Shona spirit mediums', in J. Davis (ed.), *Religious Organization and Religious Experience* (London, Academic Press, 1982), 181-94. Lan's account of the manipulation of Korekore spirit history suggests that the structure is even more fluid than I have argued: see Lan, 'Making History', 242-7 and 318.

²⁴ P.S. Gariake, 'Prehistory and ideology in Zimbabwe', *Africa* (1982), LII, iii, 16 *et seq.*

²⁵ Lan, *Guns & Rain*, 198 and 212-4, describes the medium of Chiwawa and other mediums of Dande developing in this way. Some of the changes, however, that Lan interprets politically, correspond with changes made elsewhere long before the war, as mediums came into contact with materially developed styles of living.

But none were under any kind of centralized authority, and there is no way that the new political élite could be conceived to control them. Although traditional mediums are not publicly denigrated in Zimbabwe, many activities of mediums are seen as relics of a primitive past.²⁶ One cabinet minister, Dr Ushewokunze — the first Minister of Health of the present Government —, did encourage traditional healers and the mediumship that goes with it; but only under the auspices of an association that could exercise some control over its members (who include a number of ex-guerrillas who became mediums during the war).

CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICAL CONTROL

The question of control leads us to the changing status of Christianity during the war and after. Christian churches do fit more readily into a cognitive framework of bureaucratic control.

Christian missionaries were largely left alone in the rural areas in the early stages of the war. The German Roman Catholic priest operating near Chiruja was told by guerrillas that they were fighting the government and not the Whites as such. Later there were moves to kill him, partly at least because he insisted on helping persons beaten by guerrillas, and burying persons killed by them. However, he survived until he was withdrawn when a missionary was killed at another station in the region. It is not simply that the growing number of attacks on missionaries was the result of an increasing callousness over years of bloody war. Anti-Christian propaganda was part of the guerrilla campaign as it became established: where was the God of the Christians while the people suffered? This is not to say that Christianity was necessarily suppressed: a small group of Christians in Chiruja continued to hold Sunday services throughout the war, but the dominant ideology was to promote the mediums against Christianity.²⁷

Nevertheless, once the war was over, it was the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Harare who led the prayers of dedication at the independence celebrations (although there were also songs honouring the great Shona spirits). The President of Zimbabwe is a minister of a Christian church. Missionaries returned to the rural areas with the blessing of government — and if they were not received with enthusiasm in the tense atmosphere immediately after the war, the churches are now filling again. Now one could argue that symbols of opposition to White

²⁶ Professor Chavunduka, Chairman of the Department of Sociology of the University of Zimbabwe and also President of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association, has been under repeated attack in the Press for his support and encouragement of traditional healers. Recently, he supported a statement by the Prime Minister suggesting that the vast majority of traditional healers are frauds (*The Herald*, 24 Sept., 1985).

²⁷ Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War*, 215, argues that the guerrillas found themselves obliged to accept the Christian customs of certain of the peasant communities in Makoni District. See also T. O. Ranger, 'Holy men and rural communities in Zimbabwe 1970-1980', in W. J. Sheils (ed.), *The Church and War* (Oxford, Blackwell, Studies in Church History 20, 1983), 443-61, for an account of complementarity of Christian leaders and spirit mediums.

culture are no longer needed; rather, a cult which can incorporate all the diverse people of Zimbabwe is needed to replace the traditional local cults.²⁸

There is more, however, to the rise to favour of Christian churches than their ability to symbolize a certain universalism. There is material aid, particularly for the poorest areas, which the Government is ideologically committed to help. The churches were very helpful in coping with the resettlement of refugees immediately after the war. Less cynically, there is the fact that many of the Black leaders had received education and help from churches, and wished to maintain their friendship with these sources.

I suggest there is a further fundamental attraction towards Christian churches on the part of political leaders: the element of control over the populace. Many public statements made by political figures urging co-operation between government and churches have emphasized that churches must co-operate with government policy. The Prime Minister has urged the churches to help create socialism.²⁹ The President has urged the Church to join the continued fight for freedom and to work for the political liberation of all.³⁰ The Deputy Prime Minister has argued that the Government sees no difference between Christianity and Zimbabwean socialism, and told a meeting of clergy that the church could help the Government by countering 'untruths, prejudices, crude stories and hoary myths' about Zimbabwean socialism.³¹ Other Ministers, in the fashionable rhetoric of the time, have urged Christian churches to transform themselves, in accordance with national 'transformation'. The message is clear: the Government wishes to be friendly with the churches, but expects the churches to toe the government line and to help spread its ideology (and hence its control) to the mass of the population.

In practice, of course, Government has not been able to control the churches as much as it would like. Although church leaders have on the whole been sympathetic to Government and its ideology, they have maintained the right to criticize. When church leaders, and particularly the Roman Catholic bishops, showed their independence by criticizing the Government's treatment of the Ndebele, they were roundly condemned by Press and politicians alike, and told they were jeopardizing Church-State relations.³² Perhaps a large international organization has more power to oppose Government than isolated spirit mediums. But cognitively, the control of churches is easier to visualize from the bureaucratic point of view. Hierarchical churches fit in with the model of hierarchical government: decisions are made by the élite, and it is assumed that

²⁸ See Robin Horton's analysis of conversion to Christianity and Islam in 'African conversion', *Africa* (1971), XLI, 85-108.

²⁹ See, for example, *The Herald*, 1 May 1982.

³⁰ *The Herald*, 28 July 1982.

³¹ *The Herald*, 2 June 1983.

³² See *The Herald*, 31 Mar. 1983.

people will follow; when they do not, they are assumed to be morally at fault and therefore legitimately subject to coercion.

I am not arguing that the preference for large organized institutions in order to have an extra means of control over the populace is necessarily a deliberate policy. I think it probably is not. But I think that preferred religious models arise from familiar patterns in other settings.³³ People who benefit from an ordered, bureaucratic system, feel most comfortable with systems of hierarchical control, provided they can trust the people in control of the hierarchy.

The preference for bureaucratic control applies primarily to the élite. The mass of people are not so concerned with Christianity in its orthodox forms. In June 1980, for example, the Anglican Bishop Hatendi was still seeing the resurgence of traditional religion as a threat to the Church in the rural areas.³⁴ Three years later, in the ceremony to bury the remains of persons who died in an encounter during the war, the main association of traditional healers was called in to help.³⁵ Although the standing of mediums as persons of national, or quasi-national, significance may not be as high as it was, there is no evidence of decline in the number of spirit mediums dealing with personal and family affairs. Traditional forms of religion remain important and in frequent practice among the mass of the population, although people may now more readily combine these with church affiliation.

TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

There are still traditional symbols which are in demand to help people cognitively and socially cope with the traumas of war and possibly with subsequent disillusionment. One is the belief in *ngozi*, avenging spirits believed to be very threatening. In a number of areas, there have been increasing interpretations of misfortune in terms of *ngozi*, particularly related to young guerrillas or their youthful supporters who may have killed, or caused to be killed, innocent people, and who certainly during the war repudiated the authority of elders. These young people, who gave up their education, who worked hard to win the war, and who had to carry responsibility for lives and deaths which sometimes created permanent rifts in their home communities, have received little, if any, reward for their efforts. They are forced to depend on those whose authority they may have thrown off during the war. When trouble surrounds them, it is likely to be interpreted as an avenging *ngozi* which must be appeased by the family consulting together. In the process, old values and the old structures are reasserted, the young person's conscience is allayed, and the person is reincorporated into the family. I am not in a position to state the degree to which young persons are willing actors

³³ Cf. R. Horton, 'African traditional thought and Western science', *Africa* (1967), XXXVII, 50-71 and 155-87.

³⁴ *The Herald*, 5 June 1980.

³⁵ *The Herald*, 4 Aug. 1983.

in such processes of reintegration into a more traditional local community. Probably it varies widely: my assumption is that in the majority of cases the young persons are broadly willing, either because they feel a need to expiate guilt, or because of the absence of realistic alternatives — and these two reasons may well be connected. Certainly it is widely rumoured that there is a lot of mental illness among former guerrillas and former mujibhas. I came across one case in which an ex-guerrilla appears to have had a complete nervous breakdown, doing and saying nothing at home; while I was in the field he ran away into the bush and was found and forcibly brought home after more than a week (he is said to have been unbalanced even before the war).

For families involved in such problems in the rural areas, traditional rituals of reintegration are more likely to be helpful than anything Christianity has to offer. For the young people, it is precisely the national bureaucracy that appears to have robbed them of the spoils of war. Many of them have fought against Christianity as a symbol of White power, and it is only the traditional religious symbols that have any power to reintegrate them into their local communities.

Another traditional symbol which has come to the fore during and after the war is witchcraft. Prior to the war, there were in Chiruja occasional accusations of witchcraft, and certain persons in the community were widely believed to be witches. These were left largely in peace, although people complained that government law prevented them from dealing properly with these evil people.³⁶ During the war, two such persons were killed and others were left untouched. In one case about which I have some knowledge, an elderly woman was killed, after a number of deaths had been attributed to her; not all her family accepted the verdict and after the war those responsible for her execution fled the chieftdom in fear of revenge from her returning sons. More frequent were accusations of, and executions for, co-operating with government.

After the war, I got little accurate information on witchcraft and witch-hunts in Chiruja: I know only that the issue did arise occasionally, and that recently there was evidence of persons using human remains in witchcraft rites. More widely, guerrillas were responsible for the execution of persons believed to be witches. Once the war was over, this activity came to an end when Government put a stop to the 'kangaroo courts' at which witches and 'sell-outs' were tried and punished. Immediately, in some areas, a more traditional form of witch cleansing emerged. Certain diviners acquired a reputation for hunting out witches and cleansing communities of witchcraft. Government objected to the high fees being charged for such services, and the treatment which named witches suffered. Government attempted to suppress the movement, notwithstanding its popular support — for many, providing further disillusionment about the new order.³⁷

³⁶ G.L. Chavunduka, 'Witchcraft and the law in Zimbabwe', *Zambezia* (1980), VIII, 129-47.

³⁷ Witch-hunts still feature in the news media from time to time; see, for example, *The Sunday Mail*, 21 July 1985 and 1 Apr. 1984.

Recently, there have been uncovered a number of witch covens which have been performing rites of arbitrary killing and use of human flesh.³⁸ These have been reported by persons who had been enticed into them, perhaps just looking for excitement, or perhaps with the motive of ridding the community of troublesome persons. Once in the coven, they find it difficult to extricate themselves as they are slowly introduced to ever more wicked activities of the coven. Eventually they have confessed their crimes, perhaps because they have been designated as witches by a diviner and wish to be cleared with the community, but occasionally because someone close to them is chosen to be killed through sorcery. Such covens have been reported in the past;³⁹ it is impossible to know whether more cases have recently come to light because persons wishing to extricate themselves receive more sympathy from the forces of law than they did in the past, or whether the cases are now more common than before. Either way, the cases illustrate that, in practice, individuals do distinguish the different aspects of witchcraft: initially they accept limited aspects of the cult, and later are introduced to practices they would not have accepted initially and occasionally still refuse to accept. An accusation of witchcraft, however, does demand careful scrutiny of exactly what the accused may have been guilty of: the concept 'witchcraft' throws together all possible connotations of the term, to create a horrific symbol to justify violent action against certain individuals. The power of the symbol to inspire emotive actions depends on the fact that it is a loose conglomeration of ideas, the antithesis of an analytic tool.

CONCLUSION

I return now to the question with which I started. Firstly, to what extent do religious symbols divert people's attention from real political issues? Do they hide the world, serving to conceal through mystification the nature of hierarchy and inequality? Certainly, religious symbols are concerned with political issues: whether it is spirit mediums uttering oracles about state politics and war, or at the micro level reasserting the authority of elders through the language of avenging spirits, or supporting a model of hierarchical control, or purporting to justify conflict. In a few of these cases the concern is explicit; frequently, the symbols are used, more or less consciously, to support particular political interests. We do not expect from religious symbols the precise analysis of political issues that a political scientist may give, but is this enough reason to say that religious symbols generally serve to mystify inequality? I think not, though it is a moot point. Religious symbols do divert people's attention from real political issues when they are taken as exhaustive statements about the world, rather than as language to inspire

³⁸ Professor Chavunduka has recently researched a number of such cases.

³⁹ See J.R. Crawford, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in Rhodesia* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), 112-15.

action; and this may well be the usual situation. But then most people do not reflect analytically on political issues anyway, and their reaction to vague symbols is simply in keeping with unreflective reactions in life generally. In the hands of an enlightened leader, whether a Christian minister or a spirit medium, religious symbols can be used to draw to the attention of a clientele a new order of equality and peace.

Both political and religious leaders maintain their position of control through an ideology which states they are working for the good of the people. This ideology is expressed through religious and political symbols. Political leaders, however, do not depend entirely on the acceptance of ideology for their control; and they have certain pragmatic decision-making functions which are not denied even by their opponents. Religious leaders, on the other hand, unless they are actively supported by political power, are dependent on the acceptance of their ideology by the people. Accordingly, religious leaders must provide solutions to people's cognitive difficulties. The focus is on cosmology rather than control.

To what extent does the prescribed nature of religious symbols prevent them from communicating ideas and values? Although the detailed prescriptions traditionally found in Roman Catholic rituals are clearly not applicable to ritual generally, one certainly does find behaviour in the context of Shona ritual which involves a suppression of belief. In the presence of a possessed medium, people behave in the customary way even when they do not acknowledge the mediumship to be adequately established or when they believe the medium to be fraudulently acting out possession. Broad ritual patterns are established, and individuals find it difficult not to act within them. Nevertheless, there is opportunity for free expression of different points of view within the broad framework prescribed by ritual. Not all mediums take the same political line, and different individuals can use the same ritual to express opposed political ends. In the case of spirit mediums during the war, it is precisely their connection with their past — through legend and through their fidelity to traditional patterns of behaviour — that gave them the power to give courage to fighters. The sacredness of a medium depends on a conglomeration of associations as opposed to a discerning scrutiny of the individual concerned. I think there is no doubt that the power of symbols is acquired at the expense of analytical accuracy. But no scientific analysis can express and communicate a perception of the world, based on a lifetime of associations and experiences, that can be conveyed in, for example, religious or poetic symbols — perhaps even a piece of music.

Politicians will always be ready to use as far as they can such powerful tools as religious symbols to further their own interests. It is then that the symbols may begin to acquire for the people new connotations that may dilute their sacred quality and rob them of their poetic power.