

# **Shona Religion Holistically Portrayed: Selected Solomon Mutswairo Novels**

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## **Abstract**

This presentation examines the portrayal of how Shona religion is holistically interrelated with other aspects of life in Zimbabwean novelist and poet Solomon Mutswairo's selected Shona novels, *Feso* (1956) and *Mweya waNehanda* (1988). Mutswairo was a professed Christian, and a son of a dedicated Salvation Army missionary officer. He does not portray Shona traditional religion in the traditional Eurocentric image of Africa as barbaric, savage and pagan as done by most European writers with a strong Christian religious background do. In his novels, he demonstrates how Shona religion is holistically interrelated with other aspects of life, and how all phenomena are divinely inspired and pregnant with spiritual significance. He shows that African religion is characterised by various aspects (God, ancestral spirits, spirit mediums, traditional healers, etc.) and that it plays many significant roles in life, such as: uniting people, providing answers to challenges faced in life, safeguarding peace among people, as well as providing platforms for self-entertainment. Informed by the theory of Afrocentricity, this composition strives to demonstrate how some of the learned people of African heritage like Mutswairo, despite growing up in a devout Christian family, have become champions of promoting and protecting Shona traditional religion and African interests from Europe's concerted effort to destroy Africa, and her institutions.

**Key Words:** Shona traditional religion, Afrocentricity, spirit medium, ancestors, *n'angas*

## **Introduction**

Despite receiving Western education which described anything that did not conform to European beliefs and values as abhorrent and primitive, Zimbabwean novelist and poet Solomon Mangwiro Mutswairo (1924-2005) emerges out of the school system learned, and endeavours to give a positive portrayal of Shona religion. The time he spent in Canada and the United States of America never changed his understanding and attitude towards indigenous religion and cultural practices. He does not fall into the trap of stereotyping Shona traditional religion as barbaric, like some of the other writers who are professed Christians do. These writers who criticise and distort African religion only imbibed the views and tastes of their teachers; they just received colonial education without getting learned. Mutswairo emerges from the schools system, learned; having realised the limitations and prejudices in the Western school's system. He thus endeavours to project Shona religion in a positive image. In the novels examined in this paper, *Feso* (1956) and *Mweya waNehanda* (1988), he demonstrates that Shona religion totally integrates with every aspect of life and that religion is the fulcrum around which Shona life radiates. Even though there are Christian images in his writings, they do not denigrate but help the author to illustrate that Shona religion serves its believers with all their spiritual needs in even more ways than Christianity has done for its followers.

Mutswairo's efforts are quite in line with those by Boaduo and Gumbi (2010) who lament the negative influence that colonialism has had on its African victims. The two scholars criticise the classification of indigenous people done by the coloniser, into groups such as black, tribe, coloureds and native. These classes were based on speculations that Europeans had about these people, based on socially constructed and perpetuated beliefs. Such classification was meant to justify the subordination of African people. It also strove to present some races as superior than others; hence anything that fell short of European was considered as primitive and uncivilised, including the indigenous people's religion. It is against this background that Boaduo and Gumbi call for African intellectuals to group together and provide a worldview grounded in the heritage of religion, philosophy, science and art. They stress that African people need to reach back into their wealthy past and take along with them all their works of arts, philosophy and rich customs, traditions and culture and portray them positively to the rest of the world (2010: 47). They furthermore stress that Africans must focus on what is positive so that African people can have a duty to push to the forefront the positive aspects of their indigenous knowledge systems and ways that have been ignored, misinterpreted and misrepresented to bring forth a lot of positives about African humanity. Mutswairo's novel seems to border on the recommendation by these scholars as he digs dip into the Shona past, unearthing rich layers of heritage for the benefit of the contemporary African person.

It is stressed in this essay that Mutswairo's marked pre-occupation with Shona religious matters during the colonial and post-colonial settings indicates his deep-rooted desire to contribute towards the development of Zimbabwean nationalism, with its culmination in nationhood and the building of a new nation. With religion being the focal point, and indeed the worldview of the Zimbabwean people, the writer strives to give cultural, historical and national identity to a newly born nation.

Shona traditional religion is depicted as highly inspirational to the Shona people. It plays a number of critical functions in Shona society as: a unifying force, a source of vital knowledge for its believers' survival, a promoter of peace, a source of inspiration, a form of entertainment and above all, as powerful and real. Hence, a better understanding of Mutswairo's portrayal of Shona traditional religion can better be understood by briefly discussing the Afrocentric theory which informs his social vision of traditional religion in his novels, as selected here.

## Theoretical Framework

Correspondingly, this endeavour is informed by the theory of Afrocentricity, propounded by Asante (1990, 1993, 1998, 2003, 2007) as a response to the weaknesses exuded by Western scholarship on the art and heritage of African people. Thus, Western scholarship assessed the African way of life, works and culture from the standpoint of Europeans who had very limited if any knowledge of the culture and language spoken by the people whose experiences they examined. This resulted in many distortions and falsifications, based on the presumptions and assumptions held by the European critics. In contrast, the theory of Afrocentricity calls for "...all African phenomena, activities and ways of life to be looked at and be given meaning from the standpoint and worldview of Africans" (Asante, 2007: 29). Thus, this work uses the Afrocentric theory for the two strengths it has; that is, it "stands as both a corrective and a critique" (*ibid*, 37).

In this paper, the theory is corrective in the sense that it helps to correct the prejudices, distortions and falsifications peddled by Europeans about African people's religion. This is because an analysis of African religion based on Western scholarship has either shown the people as lacking a religion, or in cases where it has been shown as present, it is shown as mere superstition. This is contrary to what African people and even Mutswairo, feel about, and regard to their religion, which they see as integral in their day to day lives. Thus, the theory of Afrocentricity helps give African people a voice to assert their humanness as opposed to earlier understandings by colonial masters that they were subspecies of the human race, beasts of burden and devoid of any rights whatsoever (Asante, 1998). The theory is also a critique in the sense that it is a yardstick to measure Mutswairo's ability to present Shona religion realistically. This is because being a black person, and writing in Shona language does not necessarily make one a writer inspired by Afrocentricity. Therefore, in using the Afrocentric theory, it allows for an enhanced understanding of the Shona traditional religion which informs Mutswairo's novels.

Also, Afrocentricity enables readers to understand Mutswairo's celebration of African values over Judeo-Christian values which he believes should be tapped in the rebuilding and reconstructing of an African identity which is duly guided by African virtues and values. The theory helps highlight Mutswairo's understanding, that a people's religion can never be separated from their way of life because it permeates all aspects of Shona life. Hence, it is prudent that the understanding of Mutswairo's portrayal of Shona traditional religion's influence on the Shona cosmos be appreciated, using the Afrocentric theory. And in considering this, it is necessary to give a brief background of the Shona people of Zimbabwe, the subjects of this exercise.

## **The Shona of Zimbabwe: A Brief Background**

It has to be noted that before 1890 the term Shona was not used to describe the people it refers to today. Beach (1994: 281) states that "...scattered all over the Zimbabwean plateau, the Shona speakers were not conscious of an ethnic identity. The only reality which the Shona seemed conscious of was the local chieftaincy groups." Also, Ranger (1985: 4) concurs with this observation and says, "...It seems to me clear that before 1890 no one called themselves Shona at all, if anyone belonged to a Ndebele state they did not think that this was the same thing as belonging to a tribe or ethnicity." The term Shona is, therefore, a fairly recent invention which was coined by Clement Doke to refer to speakers of Ndau, Manyika, Korekore, Zezuru and Karanga dialects (Doke, 2005; Gudhlanga, 2011).

Nevertheless, there are a number of theories that explain the emergence of the term Shona. The first one is by Bourdillon (1987) who argues that the derivation of the term is uncertain, however it appears to have been first used by the Ndebele as a derogatory term for the people they defeated, particularly the Rozvi. The Rozvi would hide in the mountains, *ukutshona* in Ndebele and ultimately came the term Shona (Bourdillon, 1987). The second theory is by Chigwedere (1980) who argues that all the people referred to as Shona today descended from one family called Mbire, of the Soko who were ruled by one paramount chief. Next, Mutswairo (1996) provides another theory in his paper, 'The Mbire People' which supports the theory of Chigwedere wherein he argues that the so-called Shona are Mbire, and not Shona. To support this claim, he goes back into the oral history of the Shona to identify them as Mbire. In this discussion, the term Shona is used to refer to speakers of Manyika, Karanga, Zezuru, Korekore and Ndau who occupy present day Zimbabwe.

## **Contextualising Shona Traditional Religion Introspectively**

The Shona believe in a sacred being, *Mwari* (God) who is approached through the ancestors. At the apex, there is *Mwari*, then the ancestors, intermediaries, and lastly, the people. People do not approach *Mwari* directly, but do so through ancestors. If people are asking for rain or anything from *Mwari* they do so through the ancestors. Beach (1994) concurs with the hierarchy in Shona traditional religion and states that there is a High God, *Mwari* who is a superior being responsible for lightning and rain. Thus, *Mwari* is generally approached through ancestral spirits.

As the Portuguese noted, this was like Catholics approaching their God through saints (Beach, 1994). The Shona also believe in life after death; the dead continue to live in the form of ancestors and are in constant commune with the living. They continue to bear influence on the communities they have left behind (Bourdillon, 1976). If one dies, especially one who would have been married, there would be a *Kurova guva* (bringing back the spirit of the dead) ceremony performed after a year the deceased has passed on. It involves the brewing of beer and performance of some rituals. This ceremony transforms the dead person into an ancestor.

The ancestors make known what they want to the living through various ways, among them, making a member of the family sick. The ancestors can also speak through a *svikiro* (spirit medium) whom they possess and say what they expect the living to do. The Shona world therefore is an arena of interplay of various forces, and the dead, the living and the natural forces work together to enhance people's life (Bourdillon, 1987; p'Bitek, 1986).

The ancestral spirits are the torch bearers who give direction to the living and resolve conflicts in the day to day running of the community, and disobedience to the ancestors normally brings disastrous effects (Gudhlanga, 2011). The living souls are guided by the ancestors, whose wisdom and pronouncements they implement. In Shona traditional religion is also the belief in *ngozzi* (the avenging spirit). If one kills someone, that person will face the wrath of *ngozzi* until reparation is paid, and this prevents the Shona from killing each other.

Also important in Shona traditional religion is the institution of *n'angas*, traditional medical practitioners, who have been termed witchdoctors by Eurocentric scholars. These traditional medical practitioners or *n'angas* are often consulted in times of need. They can heal mental illnesses, those struck by lightning and many other ailments and situations that Western medicine has not as yet been able to accomplish. Beach (1994) has also seen the importance of *n'angas* in Shona worldview, and he describes them as true doctors, psychiatrists and political scientists. And likewise, Chavhunduka (1994: 1) has shed more light on the importance of *n'anga*. He states:

“Before Zimbabwe became a colony of Britain at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century traditional healers enjoyed tremendous prestige in society. Not only were they regarded as the only medical specialists but they were also expected to deal with a wide range of social problems as well. In fact, much of the healer’s time was spent trying to help people come to terms with their social problems.”

This amply demonstrates that *n’angas* are very important religious figures with a significant role in Shona cosmology. They are not witchdoctors as some Eurocentric scholars would like us to believe. Even to this day, their importance is still acknowledged by the Shona people, including the converted Christians who visit them secretly to get whatever help they need without being noticed by their fellow Christians. This background to Shona traditional religion thus enlightens those who are not participants in the indigenous culture.

## **Summary of the Novels**

With the above insight on Shona traditional religion, we best precede with a brief outline of the selected novels’ story lines. First, *Mweya waNehanda* is a story that begins with young twins; Bute, a boy and his sister, Nyamita. They disappear as a result of having been captured by a *njuzu* (mermaid, a key aspect in Shona religious beliefs of the aquatic world).

The mermaid only releases the children after rituals have been performed. Their disappearance was to set them apart as would-be medium spirits for the legendary Shona spirits of Kaguvi and Nehanda; Bute being the medium of the former spirit and Nyamita, the latter. After this, the novel dwells on Nyamita’s long journey from Dande (in northern Zimbabwe) to Chiweshe (north-central Zimbabwe) where the spirit of Nehanda became active in her, and with the coming of the British colonialists, she leads a war of resistance and is executed.

Second is the story in *Feso*, centred on two chiefdoms, one led by Chief Nyan’ombe and the other by Chief Pfumojena. Nyan’ombe is a young unmarried chief who rules his people properly and according to tradition. He is liked by his people and they always speak well of him. In contrast is Pfumojena, a ruthless chief who rules his people with an iron fist. He executes all those he suspects to be plotting against him and because of this there is no freedom in his chiefdom. Hence, the people of Nyan’ombe are satisfied with his governance and they decide to find him a wife to marry. They find that the most suitable wife for their chief was Chipochedenga, Pfumojena’s daughter and in a war fought between the two chiefdoms, Pfumojena is defeated. This novel *Feso*, is an allegory of how the white people (Pfumojena, white spear) have dispossessed the Shona people of their land and interestingly, the original first chapter which discussed vividly the land issues was removed due to censorship (Kahari, 1990; Chiwome, 1996; Vambe, 2006).

However the poem of Nehanda Nyakasikana in the middle of the novel invoked political consciousness among the Shona people and inspired them to take up arms and fight the white man who had taken away their prime land. This novel was later banned in colonial Rhodesia due to its political inclination which the Nehanda Nyakasikana poem alludes to. However, it returned after independence and has been a set text in schools and tertiary institutions.

## Portrayal of Shona Religion

There is need to discuss the manifestation and aspects of Shona traditional religion. Mutswairo shows that traditional religion has so many aspects that characterise it. Its influence is witnessed in the various social, economic and political activities that people engage in. At its core are human spirits (of departed people). These continue to commune, interact and shape the lives of their progeny. The author gives the spirit of Kaguvii and Nehanda (in *Mweya waNehanda*) and Nehanda (in *Feso*) as clear examples. These living dead may visit their surviving relatives in dreams or visions or may even cause sickness in a bid to make their intentions known as happens to Charwe, Nehanda's spirit (in *Mweya waNehanda*) who is struck by a serious illness and is possessed by Nehanda's spirit after all recommended rituals have been observed. In *Feso*, the spiritual world strikes the king, Nyan'ombe with illness so as to make it known to him that the ancestors now expected him to get married. Here, Mutswairo amply demonstrates that the dead person continues to bear influence on the community he has left.

Mutswairo also portrays that equally important in traditional religion are intermediaries, *masvikiro*. These are usually spirit mediums and traditional diviners or *n'angas*. These religious figures are depicted as sane, very helpful and influential members of the society and their advice is always sought after and heeded. Their existence is in line with Shona people's world-view that a person of high status is usually not approached directly, but through someone else, and being so powerful and important, God is usually approached through intermediaries. In *Mweya waNehanda*, Mutswairo presents Matope (medium of Nyakotyo family), Katonje (Mutota's medium), Nyamita and Charwe (both Nehanda's mediums) and Bute (Kaguvii's medium) as powerful mediums among the people of Chiweshe. In *Feso*, the author acknowledges the presence of both spirit mediums and diviners. Nehanda spoke through a medium urging her progeny to fight the white people. The Chief, Pfumojena has his diviner, Mhindudzapasi, whose task is to unearth all his enemies. Such beings are believed to be capable of discerning any secrets harboured by the physical and metaphysical worlds as well as speaking and understanding the language of both the invisible world and that of the human beings. They convey and interpret important information from the spiritual world for the benefit of the living. The author shows that they are however, not worshipped, but are simply used as helpers or go-betweens between the physical and metaphysical worlds. And in addition, Mutswairo has shed some light on the *n'anga* who has been branded a witch, liar and imposter by writers of the Empire (Chiwome & Mguni, 2000).

The practice of making sacrifices and offerings occupies an important position in traditional religion. Material or physical things are given to spiritual beings. In *Mweya waNehanda*, the blood of animals and offerings such as foodstuffs in the form of beer and snuff are given to the spiritual world as done when the people of Nyakotyo appease the spirits that are behind the disappearance of the twin children. The contingent brews beer and offers libation to the spirits, sacrifices goats and cows. In doing so, Mutswairo shows that Shona people's belief is that serious matters are never presented to spiritual beings without anything; something like an offering or sacrifice shows the gravity of the need or even the desperation and invokes benevolence from the spiritual world. This marks the point where the visible and invisible worlds meet. These sacrifices and offerings are done and made with the belief of saving the lives of many people.

Since religion percolates all spheres of life, many objects and places accordingly acclaim religious significance. Ritual objects and places are thus an integral part of all religious activities of the Shona. As presented by Mutswairo, religious objects include ritual drums, knobkerries, sacrificial animals like goats and cows, clay pots, gourds and snuff bottles without which such rituals would neither be meaningful nor impressive. Some religious places are regarded as sacred and are simply used for particular religious purposes while others are general places which at times attain religious significance. In *Mweya waNehanda*, the pool distinguishes itself as a popular religious place. The missing twin children are said to have vanished near a sacred pool. In a bid to discern the twins' whereabouts, Matope, the spirit medium of the Nyakotyo family consults a pool and when he fails to obtain an answer, he refers the matter to Katonje, Mutota's medium who also consults and gets a response from a religious pool.

In *Feso*, Nehanda's spirit at times spoke through trees. The king's diviner, Mhindudzapasi also uses a consortium of religious objects which include horns and divination bones. Such objects and places embody the beliefs attached to the rituals, and in fact, they are external concrete symbols of internal ideas, beliefs and values which are demonstrated in the rituals (Mbiti, 1975: 145).

Prayers also often accompany offerings and sacrifices so that the various purposes of the sacrifices are declared. After pouring libations at the mysterious pool where the twins had vanished, the spirit medium of Nyakotyo states the purpose of the ritual; to have the missing twins back. Such prayers are aimed at presenting the various problems, wishes and aspirations of the living to the spiritual world.

Apart from prayers, songs and dance also punctuate Shona religious practices. And in general, African people enjoy celebrating life, so whenever they come together for public worship, they sing, dance, clap and ululate, expressing joyfulness, sorrow or thanksgiving. This activity of singing and dancing thus enables the people to participate both physically and emotionally in worship and it may take the whole night (as with the case of asking for the return of the twins). And after such lengthy cases of performance, although the people may feel weak in their bodies, they feel satisfied and strong spiritually.

## **Belief in Ngozi**

Another aspect of Shona traditional religion which Mutswairo focuses on is the belief in *ngozis*, the avenging spirit. Hence, it is an angry and terrifying spirit which attacks suddenly and harshly causing a succession of deaths or loss of property and wealth (Bourdillon, 1987: 233). Its influence is noticed in Mutswairo's *Mweya waNehanda*. Fearing the disastrous consequences that could result due to the death of his daughter Zamuguru, VaNyakotyo informs his son Bakasa to enquire from spirit mediums on what can be done. On another occasion, Zindoga restrains Chikukwa from murdering Mutsakadzi (as they rival for a girl named Nyamita) fearing the wrath of his avenging spirit. By presenting *ngozis* as a concept that regulates human contact in Shona traditional religion, Mutswairo refutes the earlier image of barbaric Africa which is characterised by unwanton killing of different ethnic groups. He, like Achebe through his novels successfully demonstrates that the Shona past with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them (Achebe, 1975: 45). Mutswairo, again like Achebe endeavours through his pre-colonial literature to demonstrate that the Shona traditional society was not barbaric but instead, it was governed by Shona traditional religion which had its own dictates that regulated human contact and ensured that sanity prevailed. And like any other society, it had its imperfections, but it should not be condemned in that regard.

Interestingly, by focusing on a key tenet of Shona religion like *ngozis*, after independence, Mutswairo is going back to tradition as a solution to the current problems the independent state is facing. For example, he:

- uses tradition to warn society against killing each other (after the war of liberation during which a lot of blood was shed)
- makes use of tradition in a bid to bring sanity in society
- wants the new state to respect its traditions and forget about such practices as the ones that occurred during the war
- wants the new nation state to respect human rights

Thus, he exposes a lot of admirable aspects of Shona traditional religion, and second, presents it as a uniting force, a source of knowledge and information, a peace-bringer, and as a source of entertainment and inspiration.

## **Uniting Force**

Mutswairo eloquently shows that Shona traditional religion cultivates a collective spirit among people as they come together for a common purpose, for example, they would unite for prayer, to perform rituals, and to do sacrifice collectively (Mbiti, 1975: 199). Showing that religion unites a people is clearly seen in *Mweyawa Nehanda*. The occasion of the disappearance of the twins is a clear case of this oneness that religion installs among its people. First, the people of Nyakotyo come together to understand the mystery behind the disappearance of the children, and then to brew beer for the rituals in which daughters-in-laws, nephews, nieces and the elderly women would participate. And an even greater crowd of men, women, the old and the young are witness to the actual ritual as they spend a night of song and dance before trooping to the ritual pool to witness the return of the twins. Here the author shows that Shona religion brings people together and enables them to understand one another, communicating ideas and feelings; sharing pain, sorrow, joy and other forms of emotions, disregarding any other personal differences or grudges they may have been nursing against each other before.

The collective spirit is further seen through the orderly sharing of responsibilities by the participants at the same ceremony. While some lead in the singing, others respond in chorus as others clap their hands, ululate, and beat drums or dance in the podium. Such coordinated activities culminate in one solid performance with a clear sense of purpose. Each of the performers carries out his or her responsibilities as best for the good and satisfaction of all. And as such, the rituals integrate with other people to engage the sacred and the secular, the visible and the invisible, the living and the living dead.

So, in addition to the horizontal communication and interaction of performers, there is also a vertical communication between the physical and the spiritual world. These two worlds come closer together, interact and influence each other and thus bring fruition the Shona belief that death does not separate the living from the dead, because the two beings can still commune, interact, influence and shape each other.

## **Shona Religious Figures and Unity**

Religious figures, due to their influence, importance and outstanding nature are shown as undoubted centres of unity in the novel. Some, like Matope are family spirit mediums who are consulted by members of both the nuclear and extended families. Others like Nehanda, Kaguvu and Murenga's mediums are territorial and are thus consulted by and serve the interests of various groups and chiefdoms. In *Mweya waNehanda*, Nehanda's medium is consulted by members of Chiweshe and Hwata chiefdoms as well as people from as far away as Lobengula's capital while in *Feso*, her spirit is invoked so that it guides the whole nation in fighting for freedom, "Nehanda, mukawo kani, muka! Tiyamure" (Nehanda, rise, rise! Help us") (Mutswairo, 1956: 12).

Whenever these religious figures perform their duties, they do so for the benefit of all people under their influence, and therefore although their clients know themselves to belong to various families, groups and chiefdoms, they also see themselves as one by virtue of belonging to the same religious group. So, religion makes distinct and individual people, families and groups appear and see themselves huddled together as a meaningful social unit, and in this way religion influences the people's social and political life.

## **Knowledge, Information and Answers**

Shona traditional religion also provides people with a view and knowledge of the world, hence, supplying them with answers to questions that arise from daily experiences which lie beyond their intellectual competence. For example, the mystery of the missing twins is a puzzling event to ordinary people and so Nyakotyo sends his first son Bakasa to seek an explanation from representatives of the spiritual world, and after proper consultation a delegation is informed that the children are not dead, but instead, they have been secluded and earmarked for important tasks for the well-being of society at large. The delegation is again tutored on the religious procedures to be honoured for the children to be safely returned. So, the whereabouts of the twins, the reasons for their disappearance as well as the steps to be undertaken for their return is important information that religion alone and not ordinary people, no matter how intelligent, could discern.

The same notion applies to the destruction of Jingamvura's homestead and the defeat of the people of Chiweshe at the hands of white settlers, both of which have religious explanations. The demeaning, asserting, stubborn and women-loving Jingamvura homestead knows that tragedy has befallen them because they have forcibly taken Nyamita (Nehanda's medium to be a wife) and have killed Katonje, Mutota's medium. Also, the people of Chiweshe come to know that their defeat by the whites is because they had taken some belongings from white people against advice from the spiritual world.

These two incidents indicate that traditional religion always has answers to mysteries that happen in life. By giving people a way of interpreting the world and understanding their own existence and experiences, Shona traditional religion equips its people intellectually, emotionally and culturally to manage experiences and problems that arise in life.

Unquestionably, in trying moments, religion provides people with advice and counsel. In *Mweya waNehanda*, when white people make inroads into the Chiweshe area, the people consult Nehanda's spirit on what course of action to take, whereupon they are told to stay peacefully with the intruders. It is only after the whites enforce a bad system of leadership that the same medium urges the people to fight against and exterminate them. The legend of Nehanda inspires Mutswairo towards nationalist literature. Here, by seeking advice on such issues, the people prove religion to be a vital source of important information and knowledge about how to live and manage life. Other information that the people had learned earlier from Chaminuka was that a new race of people would come and cause mayhem to the people's way of life, which comes to fruition.

Hence, Mutswairo demonstrates that Shona traditional religion also has seers or prophets who can foretell the future truthfully. In all cases, religious figures in the novel are presented as great counsellors, advisors, knowledgeable and indisputable sources of truth. They are famous, respected, honoured, revered, adored and highly rated people of the community whose word is obeyed without doubt. And indeed in the novel, they are shown as community leaders, who shape the direction and destiny of Shona society, and therefore, Shona traditional religion is shown to be corrective and a source of morality.

In *Feso*, the *n'anga*, Mhindudzapasi is scorned by the writer for working for an ego-centric, cruel and inhuman king, Pfumojena. Mhindudzapasi thus helps in propping an oppressive system and he represents those Africans who were used by the colonial regime to defend the colonial system despite its exploitation. He is therefore depicted negatively, because his divination is not for the well-being of society, and here the author describes his legs as “*tukumbo twake twakasvisvinika, twakasvava, twune mateya*” (legs that are thin and frivolous, that are wilted and rickety). Mutswairo, (1956: 33) notes that society also has recalcitrant and recidivistic kings and diviners who do not have the people’s interests at heart, and as a result, they fail to be remarkable representatives of the spiritual world which explains why the king’s reign is cut short.

## **Peace Bringer**

The Shona have generally been a peaceful and peace-loving society which strives to establish and maintain sound and health relations among its citizens. Being a religious people, it means that their religion plays a pivotal and positive role in guaranteeing and safeguarding peaceful existence. In the novel, the disappearance of the twins which causes a stir and restlessness in society is calmed and brought to normalcy after people seek advice from the spiritual world, and are informed that the children are alive, and that what only needs to be done is to perform rituals for their return.

Second example, the coming of white settlers invokes suspicion, anger and a spirit of war among the people of Chiweshe, but Nehanda’s medium challenges her people to be peaceful, tolerant and accommodative to the intruders. In addition, Nehanda arranges for the new citizens a great feast where she slaughters a beast “... *pakabayiwa mombe yokuvagamuchira nomweya werunyararo noweruwadzano kuvatorwa vakanga vauya munyika*” (a beast was slaughtered to welcome the whites in a spirit of peace and tolerance) (Mutswairo, 1988: 98). This worldview is akin to that of the Igbo who would never want to harm a stranger, especially if he has not done anything wrong (Achebe, 1958: 3). So, it is religion that determines peaceful coexistence and relations. It is only after the whites backtrack on the peace they had purported to cherish that Nehanda urges the Shona to fight them. In *Feso*, the people call to Nehanda’s spirit to help them so that they fight and bring back the peace that has been thwarted by colonisation. Thus religion shapes even the political events in society; urging people to fight and return to a peaceful political environment.

Belief in *ngozzi*, the avenging spirit, is one sure way that religion establishes and safeguards peace. During life, a person must never do anything to provoke someone to return as an avenging spirit (Bourdillon, 1987: 234). Of all the evil influences, an angry spirit (*ngozzi*) is perhaps the most feared by the Shona (Bourdillon, 1987: 235). In their confrontation with Mutsakadzi over Nyamita, Zindoga restrains Chikukwa from shooting the former due to the fear of his avenging spirit, “*Ngozi yemutorwa inonetsa kuripa*” (the avenging spirit of a stranger is difficult to appease) (Mutswairo, 1988: 73). Such a world-view thus brings sanity, and in the Shona view, *ngozzi* as a moral policeman who hunts his victims and unearths them and knows no bribe. So, to the author, religion provides humankind with moral values by which to live. It informs people what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil, what is just and what is unjust, what is virtue and what is a vice (Mbiti, 1975: 198). So, the author presents Shona traditional religion not as violent, cruel, primitive or shameful, but as civilised, noble, admirable and indispensable in Shona life. Therefore, it is presented as humane and sensitive to the need to treasure humanity, and as a way to cultivate sound social relations. And his portrayal of traditional religion provides another opportunity for the contemporary Shona generation to be proud of their past.

## Source of Entertainment

Shona traditional religion affirms and celebrates life through an assortment of rituals, festivals and ceremonies that are carried out. All these activities are a celebration of life as the living want to celebrate the joy of being alive. They do not sit down to meditate upon life but instead, they put it into action; they dance life, they sing life, they ritualise life, they drum life, they shout life, they ceremonise life, they festivise life, for the individual and for the community (Mbiti, 1975: 201). This life as shown by Mutswairo does not end at death, but continues thereafter as the spirits of the dead are invoked to perform the responsibilities expected of them. Through such occasions, people are entertained and their tensions and pent up emotions find an outlet thus producing a healthy and vibrant society, and simultaneously, various artistic talents would be identified, brought together, and utilised fully.

In *MweyawaNehanda*, Mutswairo presents two occasions in which the Shona celebrate; one is the ceremony to witness the return of the missing twins and the other is when Nehanda's medium performs to welcome the white settlers. In the former, both the old and the young perform various dances; and during the performance, some wriggle along the floor like snakes as others roar like lions and stagger back and forth. Haruna, a dancer of Jerusarema ululates, swinging both her hands and waist with her head proudly prodded back and forth. Bakasa, the drummer also grows mad, twisting his head from side to side, then upwards and downwards and at times jumping while simultaneously playing the drum. Mellifluous and well-modulated voices are tunefully blended. Here, religion provides an arena for interplay of various talents, and apart from cementing values of unity and responsibility among members; religion also cultivates a need to dovetail all efforts and talents into one rhythm, something quite good for a society that shares similar values and practices.

Therefore, this moulds a society that treasures the importance of being in harmony with societal dictates. This is true because the Shona always do religious activities with reverence and undoubted perfection, since their lives and well-being are hinged on religion. Here the author shows that Shona traditional religion produces an organised and self-entertaining activity as a platform for all to showcase their capabilities in the spirit of togetherness and role consciousness.

## Source of Inspiration

Armah (1973: 10) writes that people losing sight of their origin are dead. The ‘origin’, apart from it being a people’s past experiences also takes into account their traditional religion which is passed from generation to generation. This religion as shown by Mutswairo is a source of inspiration in many ways – in resisting colonial domination, in working hard for the good of society, and in providing role models for emulation by younger generations. Hence, Murenga’s spirit is evoked by the people of Chiweshe in a bid to fight against and exterminate the rule of the whites. Nehanda’s spirit also urges the same people to join hands and resist settler rule, and the people willingly organize to free themselves. The second *Chimurenga* (liberation) that culminated in the advent of independence for Zimbabwe was also partly due to the inspiration that Zimbabweans got from Nehanda’s promise that her bones will rise as shown in *Feso*. So, religion presents role models to emulate during crisis situations, and therefore it is not only linked to nationalistic issues of sovereignty, freedom, self-pride, dignity and humanity but also to closely intertwined with economic issues since the people yearn to regain their land; hence, their invaluable source of their livelihood.

The same religion also challenges contemporary generations into being industrious and self-sustaining citizens. In their childhood, Bute and Nyamita, who both later develop into the spirit mediums of Kaguvi and Nehanda respectively, perform various tasks like hunting and the collection of firewood and they in turn are showered with group praises. These group praises, which are also a rich cultural heritage for the Shona, bring together the living dead and the living who are thanked and adored as a single unit. Thus, when Bute is thanked, the author writes that, “*Achinzwa izvi, akabva ati zenze tuku nokufara*” (Hearing this, he felt very elated and proud) (Mutswairo, 1988: 36). This in no doubt spurs him into more if not better activities that would be a source for him to gain more praises.

Interestingly, ancestors are evoked in the praises because the Shona believe that without them, such good works would not be possible, and also most of the claims in group praises naturally urge members to try to live in accordance with such claims, hence, spurring them into performing a lot of useful tasks for the good of the family or society at large. And in short, religion, through group praises moulds a society of responsible and self-inspired citizens who will hopefully always strive for the best for their people.

## **Traditional Religion: Powerful and Real**

At the centre of Shona people's cosmology is a supreme being and quite powerful spirits which exercise control over the universe. In this regard, religion is considered very powerful among the Shona; as capable of working out wonders, puzzling out and providing answers even to the most difficult questions encountered by people. Hence, Mutswairo indicates that the sole purpose for which the twins had been made to vanish is to demonstrate the powers of the ancestors, the same ancestral spirit that also informs the people on what kind of rituals and sacrifices are to be conducted for the safe return of the children (and thus, after all the laid down ceremonies, the twins resurface). This act does not only just show that the religion is real and true, but that it is also very powerful in that it can make mysterious things and events transpire so that people can continue to see their limitations and therefore constantly seek the guidance and advice of the spiritual world for them to be able to manage life.

Also, after Katonje, the spirit medium of the Nyakotyo family is murdered by Jingamvura's people, there is a heavy and terrible storm that kills the perpetrators of his death as well as the whole homestead, blowing away rooftops, destroying kraals and leading their cattle astray resulting in them being eaten by lions. All this is testimony of what an angered spiritual world is capable of doing, and the same applies to the occasion when Chief Chiweshe Junior forcibly takes Nehanda's medium, Nyamita as wife. In her dialogue with the embattled chief, an angered and wronged Nehanda accuses him of disrespect and humiliation and curses him to payment of recompense in the form of ten herds of cattle yearly, to which the chief agrees. Hence in the novel, even chiefs are summoned, rebuked and made to pay fines and they agree as a clear indication that traditional religion is quite powerful. And of course, among the Shona, it is unheard of, not tolerated and unwarranted for anyone to argue with the spiritual world which guarantees and protects life. Hence, the chief, being a representative of the spiritual world on earth is supposed to uphold, protect and pass on religious values to the coming generations, failure of such duties would lead to him being abandoned by the same world, and once he is cursed, his reign is cut short, and devoid of blessings.

Importantly, Shona religion is not superstitious as some would like to believe, but rather, it is real, authentic and performs tangible and refereed activities in people's lives, thus providing answers and solutions wherein people's questions and problems are solved at the immediacy of their proper request. And above all, any word that is foretold by the spiritual world comes to pass, which shows the truth of the religion when proper observance is performed in ritual as outlined by the spiritual world making the missing twins resurface and reunite with the rest of the community.

## **Shona Traditional Religion is Utilitarian**

The above cases show Shona traditional religion as utilitarian and practical. It has immediate relevance in coping with the various problems of life on earth, and thus concerned with real life issues, and works to help people address them. Unlike Christianity whose God is said to give people late answers to which they have to wait patiently, Shona traditional religion is quick to attend to the needs of the people. Furthermore, the religion is anthropomorphic because the spiritual world is like human beings, is asked to perform its duties and is even rebuked and reprimanded if it fails to honour such responsibilities. The same cases also show that among the Shona, and in African life and thought in general, religion is not distinguished from the non-religious activity, hence there is no separation of the sacred from the secular, or the spiritual from the material (Gykye, 1996: 4). Here the people are born in religion and lead a religious life where there is no specific day or time to practice religion, so it is as real to the Shona as Christianity is to Christians, and correspondingly, a protector and guarantor of the traditional Shona ethos.

## **Conclusion**

Boaduo and Gumbi (2010: 47) observe that Western intellectuals always look for what is wrong or lacking in Africa. Such scholars go into libraries and look for all the negatives to advance Eurocentric tendencies. Here we challenge African people to reclaim their powers to redefine and rename themselves; the power to speak their own special truth, and ultimately, the power to call forth and create a better future for themselves and future generations. We also argue that it is time for African people to reject the use of derogatory and disempowering terminology in reference to African life and culture, and therefore, find their own terminologies that can recognise their worth and contribution to the advancement of humanity (*ibid*, 48). This is what Mutswairo has striven to do, and even with his Christian background, he managed to present an admirable picture of Shona traditional religion. In this, and to him, it renews the community's life, bringing the people together and entertains them while at the same time nurturing important artistic talents, establishing a source of inspiration and a guarantor of political stability. And finally, Shona religion as presented in the work of Mutswairo is indeed an indisputable reservoir of knowledge that can answer society's problems, is concerned with actual needs of society, and that Shona religion is not just powerful, but it is also real.

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