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## Shona traditional religion and sustainable environmental management: An Afrocentric perspective

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### ABSTRACT

*Africans are a very religious people and religion permeates almost all facets of their lives from cradle to the grave. Religion is at the centre of African ontologies, cosmologies and African existence. There is no separation between the spiritual and the material in traditional African life. From a traditional African belief system, the ultimate dominion over the whole world is in the hands of God. Most indigenous African religions including the Shona traditional religion have peculiar beliefs and practices that have a bearing on the environment. For example, in Shona traditional religion, certain natural features like trees, rivers, mountains, animals and birds are considered sacred and should be conserved. Popular in Shona traditional religion are Shona taboos (zviera) that have a bearing on sustainable environmental management together with the Ubuntu African philosophy. Certain places are considered dwelling places for mashavi, masvikiro and ancestral spirits hence such places should be conserved. Despite the central role of African traditional beliefs and practices among the lives of indigenous Africans, they have suffered western hegemony mainly due to the infiltration of Christianity. It is the proposition of this paper that Shona traditional religion has some beliefs and practices that encourage sustainable conservation of the environment. Though such beliefs and practices are at times wrongly referred to as paganism and mythology especially in colonial literature, they have in the past helped in conserving the environment for future generations and they have the capacity to do the same in the future if they are preserved.*

**KEY TERMS:** Afrocentrism, African traditional religion, indigenous knowledge systems, Shona traditional religion, sustainable environmental management, ubuntu

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## INTRODUCTION

In literature the subject of African religion is clouded by many diverse opinions. Early missionaries, anthropologists and historians believed that the Shona did not have a religion. This is converse to Gelfand (1981) and Machinga (2011) who note that the Shona admit a Creator, an omnipotent spirit whom they call Mwari, *Chikare* or *Musikavanhu*. Early missionaries and anthropologists called the Shona religion, the “*Mwari cult*”. The Shona people are known for traditional religious practices that are ecologically friendly. However, their environmental friendliness has been weakened by the coming of Christianity and western ideas (Taringa, 2006). Traditionally the Shona were environmentalists, but this weakened after the intrusion of western hegemony. They practiced behaviors that had an effect on preserving the environment. According to Taringa (2006), the Shona hold that there is a causal connection between the moral conditions of the community and the physical environment. The fundamental attitude to land is a religious one and is based on the fear of mystical sanction by the ancestors. According to Kazembe (2009), Shona religion goes beyond what can be termed religion in narrow western sense. Traditional African religions view land and its resources as communal property that belongs to the living and generations to follow. Mhaka (2015) also argues that Shona beliefs can be tapped into for purposes of increasing agricultural production in the contemporary society. According to Mhaka (2015) Shona indigenous knowledge hinges on the holistic philosophy which views man as part of the environment. This philosophy encourages people to use natural resources sustainably and it discourages people from damaging the environment. Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) is “Knowledge that is characterized by its embeddedness in the cultural web and history of a people including their civilization and which forms the backbone of the social, economic, scientific and technological identity of such people (Rusinga & Maposa, 2010). It is the objective of this paper to show the influence of African traditional religion, in particular the Shona religion, on sustainable environmental management. This paper is informed by the Afrocentric theory.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Afrocentrism/Afrocentric theory was championed by Molefe Kete Asante. Afrocentrism literally means placing African ideas at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviours. According to Asante (2003:2) “Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate”. Olaniyan (1992) views Afrocentrism as an ethnocentric ideology which places emphasis on things African and attempts to give Africans their rightful place in the world. Asante (2009) further defines Afrocentrism/ Afrocentricity as a paradigm based on the idea that African people should re-assert a sense of agency in order to achieve unity. Karenga (1988:404) also defines Afrocentricity as a quality of perspective or approach which is rooted in the cultural image and human interest of African people.

The basic assumption in Afrocentricity is that Africans must determine their reality and world view. The origins of an Afrocentric world view are found in traditional African history before the advent of European and Arab influence. Afrocentrism is seen as a scholarly theory, paradigm, philosophy and ideology. As a theory, Afrocentrism places African people in the centre of any analysis of African phenomena. This paradigm has originated from African American scholars who questioned Eurocentrism. From Asante’s point of view, Afrocentrism asks the question “*What would African people do if there were no white people?*” Afrocentrism studies ideas, concepts, events, personalities and political and economic processes from a Black, African perspective. It enthrones the centrality of the African, which is Black, African ideas, values as expressed in the highest form of African culture.

Early Christian missionaries tried to destroy African religion and African traditional medicine (Chavunduka, 2001; Kazembe, 2009 and Mararike, 2009). They argued that African traditional religion promoted beliefs in witchcraft and encouraged people to worship their ancestors instead of God. According to Chavunduka (2001), they viewed African religion as a child religion of fear, full of black magic, sorcery, witchcraft, superstition, senseless taboos, a religion which encouraged people to worship their ancestors instead of God. Mararike (2009) notes that Christian missionaries were used to further the interests of colonialism by promoting the love of poverty in order to have heavenly riches through using gospels such as, ‘Happier are the poor because they will inherit heaven’, and ‘Its very difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God’. However, African religion is still a strong force in the minds and hearts of the majority of Zimbabweans. African religion has remained resilient up to present and has continued to be a force to reckon in many African countries (Harr & Ellis, 2006; Chavunduka, 2001). It has been taken advantage of as it is not written down but is passed from one generation to the next orally. A number of scholars (Omari, 1990; Schoffeleers, 1978; Mhaka, 2015) have noted that religious and spiritual beliefs can be a motivation for conservation and environmental protectors. Muchinako (forthcoming) in a study on traditional religion and environmental conservation found that certain traditional religious taboos prohibiting cutting of certain tree species (like *muchakata* where rainmaking rituals are conducted), killing of certain animals and birds and farming in wetlands helped in environmental conservation. In an interesting argument Machoko

(2013) argues for the integration of African traditional religion and western modernity in a new natural environmental conservation paradigm in an effort to restore Zimbabwe's natural environment to its pre-colonial state. Since the advent of modernity, Zimbabwean attitude towards the environment gradually moved from one of intimate relationship and contact to one of alienation and disengagement (Machoko, 2013).

When the West colonised Africa, there was a total distortion of African values. This is evidenced by Chukwuoko (n.d:31) who reiterates that "...imperialism bequeathed Africans with two main unforgettable experiences, namely the denial of African identity and the tendentious imposition of Western thoughts and cultural realities and perceptions". Furthermore Edwards, Makunga, Thwala and Mbele (2009:1) note that "Converging lines of recent evidence from various disciplines such as genetics, linguistics, palaeontology and archaeology all point consistently to Africa as the cradle of civilisation for all humanity, with homo sapiens evolving some one hundred and fifty thousand years ago and gradually emigrating across the Sinai Peninsula some fifty thousand years later".

Afrocentrism is opposed to theories that dislocate Africans to the periphery of human thought and experience. Afrocentrists believe that Eurocentricity has become an ethnocentric view which elevates the European experience and downgrades all other experiences. According to Asante (2003) "Afrocentricity is not the reverse of Eurocentricity but a particular perspective for analysis which does not seek to occupy all space and time as Eurocentricity has often done". Afrocentricity aims to see all cultural centres respected.

Given the Afrocentric philosophy, it is necessary to examine all data from the standpoint of Africans as subjects and human agents rather than as objects in the European frame of reference (Asante, 2003). According to Asante (2003), Afrocentricity is not colour-conscious, it is not colour that matters but culture. Colonialism rendered Africans an epitome of barbarism, morons, primitives and sexual perverts among other binary oppositions (Viriri & Mungwini, 2010). It seemed as if whites discovered/ invented Africa against Africans themselves. Africa was forced to imbibe and accept values and cultures of her colonisers. Political subjugation traumatized Africans that many of them lost confidence in and looked down upon their culture. Western thought dominated by Christianity created hierarchical structure of world religions implying that certain religions were inferior to others. This forced most of them to view and embrace Christianity and Islam as progressive though they did not completely lose their old cosmology or basic beliefs. Africans have been forced to believe that western environmental conservation practices are the best, which is not always the case. Westernisation through urbanization and industrialization has far reaching consequences on the environment than what prevailed in pre-colonial Africa. Global warming and climate change are all effects of activities in the industrialized areas of the world though they have detrimental consequences on the poor people of the developing world. From an Afrocentric perspective it can be argued that it is Europe or the adoption of European ideas in developing countries that has traumatized flora, fauna as well as aquatic life.

## SHONA WORLD VIEWS

African Traditional Religion (ATR) is a nebulous concept with no founder, scripture or laid down liturgy (Anthony, 2014). According to Ekwunife (1990), ATR are those institutionalised beliefs and practices of indigenous religion of Africa which are the result of traditional Africans' response to their beliefs, revealing superhuman ultimate and which are rooted, from time immemorial, in the past African religious culture, beliefs and practices that were transmitted through oral traditional, sacred specialist persons, sacred space, objects and symbols. Awalalu (1976) made a similar observation by arguing that, in the context of ATR, the word traditional means indigenous, that which is aboriginal, or fundamental, handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practiced by Africans today.

According to Turaki (1999), African traditional religious system has four fundamental beliefs: the belief in impersonal powers, the belief in spirit beings, the belief in divinities/gods and the belief in the Supreme Being. African peoples have never believed in an anthropocentric universe. Rather they have always assumed that humanity is surrounded by a realm of spirits in which God is thought to preside over a pantheon of sub-divinities and ancestral spirits (Paris, 1993). Washington (2010) supports the view that Africans believe in a Supreme Being by indicating that the word Zulu (an ethnic group in South Africa), refers to God's people or people of heaven.

The Shona people are a dominant ethnic group in Zimbabwe. There are a number of dialects under the umbrella name Shona. These include the Manyika found in Eastern Zimbabwe, Korekore found in Northern and North East of Zimbabwe, the Zezuru found in Mashonaland provinces in central and eastern Zimbabwe, the Karanga found in Masvingo province, and the Kalanga found in South West of Zimbabwe. African traditional religion has a strong foothold on contemporary Zimbabweans as an integral part of their everyday lives (Kazembe, 2009). Shona religious thinking pervades the whole of life. Ancestors occupy a central position. According to Chavunduka (2001), ownership of land forms the main link between politics, religion and spirituality in Zimbabwe.

The Shona traditional religion is sometimes called the *Mwari* religion as hinted by The Patriot (2014:12) which argues that "Zimbabwe had a vibrant Mwari religion that had been in existence since the creation...". This is against some Eurocentric scholars who believe that the Shona have no religion (Gelfand, 1962). In Gelfand's

words, the Shona admit there is a Creator, an omnipresent spirit whom they call Mwari, *Chikare* or *Musikavanhu* (Gelfand, 1962:37). When praying, the Shona approach lesser spirits who are in communication with senior spirits which include God. Kazembe (2009) notes that among the Shona, the concept of God is similar to the one used in the monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Machingura (2012:85) mentions that “The aspect of being in touch with the spirit world is something linear and centrally important in the Shona worldview before one’s birth, during one’s life, at one’s death and after one’s death”. He further indicates that in the Shona worldview, one can never think of a situation where s/he is not in contact with the spirits. In order to have peace, the “living living” must thus have contact with the “living dead”.

Shona people do not believe God to have a shape or form, but they see Him as a Spirit who inhabits heaven but is also present on earth. It is believed that a human being cannot argue directly with *Mwari* and the concept of an individual having an intimate relationship with God as in Christianity is not accepted (Bosman, n.d). The traditional Shona religion does not provide for the existence of Satan or demons. Commonly, witches (*varoyi*) are seen as responsible for a lot of evil that takes place in their world. Witches are usually women (Bosman, n.d). Some of the influential spirits among the Shona are *mashavi*(wandering spirits) and *mhondoro* (ethnic spirits). Wandering spirits are spirits of people who died away from their homes and were not decently buried and the mandatory *kurovaguva* ceremony was not done (Shoko, 2007; Masaka & Makahamadze, 2013; Gelfand, 1962). However, according to Masaka and Makahamadze (2013), although *mhondoro* and *mashavi* are important, they are not as important as *vadzimu*. Shona cosmology thus notes the centrality of *vadzimu* in terms of life and death, good health and bad health and other vicissitudes of human life (Masaka & Makahamadze, 2013). The *vadzimu* protect their families or withdraws their protection when offended.

### Shona religious beliefs and the environment

Shona people under the influence of traditional religion do not exploit the environment. People and nature are bound together by moral order (Taringa, 2006). The Shona believe that the land belongs to Mwari and other lesser spirits. Also, for the Shona land belongs to the living, the dead and those yet to be born. Land and its resources therefore ought to be used sustainably for the benefit of future generations. Also, among the Shona, land belongs to ancestral guardians of the land (*varidzivenyika*). According to Chavunduka (2001), it was believed that each geographical area or territory belongs to ancestors. The ancestors are responsible for controlling rainfall and fertility of the land. This implies that people should not exploit land as they are only stewards manning it on behalf of the ancestors. Ownership of land forms the main link between politics, religion and spirituality in Zimbabwe. The environment is thus sacred as it belongs to the spirit world. According to Ranger (1985), Shona ideas are about relationships whether with other people, animals, ancestors and with the land.

The Shona personify animals in the principle of totem animals (*mutupo*) (Taringa, 2006). Rocks, water bodies and mountains are also personified as living beings. People should therefore respect their totem animals. Good examples may be the *shiri* (bird) totem, people with such a totem are not expected to eat birds and also the *dziva* totem where people should revere water bodies thereby preserving aquatic life. Land is entrusted in the chief. Traditionally land had no marketable value and could not be sold. More importantly most resources found on the land like wood and other non-wood forest products had no market value. The practice of selling firewood which has caused a lot of deforestation was therefore unheard of among the Shona people.

Of paramount importance is the sacredness of the land. Land is sacred because it houses the dead relatives buried in it. Taringa (2006) also notes that land is sacred because the umbilical cords of people are buried in it. Common practices of, for example, starting veld fires were unheard of. Only natural fires were common in mountains and these had a religious significance among the Shona. The impacts of such fires were not destructive. Sacred sites on the landscape play a role in many African regions. Byers, Cunliffe and Hudak (2001) gave an example of Rusitu Botanical Reserve which is a traditional sacred forest in South eastern Zimbabwe. Unauthorized tree cutting is believed to be revenged by ancestral spirits through droughts, death, mental illness or vanishing.

According to Bourdillon (1987), *mhondoro* spirits are viewed as guardian spirits of a place and are represented by lions. They maintain harmonious relations between people and the land. Chiefs and village heads are supposed to enforce respect for sacred sites and punish people who break the rules. In a study by Byers, Cunliffe and Hudak (2001) it was found that there existed numerous sacred places in Muzarabani area and these include sacred pools, forests, trees, rivers, mountains and mountain ranges. In the same study, a Korekore respondent indicated that dry forests are used as burial places, and this makes them spirit inhabited. The respondent argued that people like places with *Acacia ataxacantha* for burials because its thorns catch and stop witches from entering the forests to disturb the bodies of the dead for evil purposes. In a study by Byers, Cunliffe and Hudak (2001), 57.6% of the respondents acknowledged that there was a sacred site near them and 85.7% reported that it was important to respect sacred sites.

Taboos (*zviera*) form part of Shona morality. Taboos are understood to be specific rules that forbid people from performing certain actions, the performance of which may result in the negation of the moral conduct that govern human behaviour (Chemhuru & Masaka, 2010). Breaching of *zviera* is thought to invite misfortunes such

as bad luck, drought or death (Tatira, 2000). Violation of Shona taboos is thus said to invite an angry reaction from the spirit world. Taboos are one of the approaches used by the Shona to manage water sources such as springs (*zvutubu*, *zvisipiti*) or wells (*matsime*). According to Taringa (2006), water bodies/wetlands are sacred because they are the abode of animals associated with spirits. Metal and clay containers which have been used for cooking may not be used to fetch water from certain water bodies. Water spirits/ mermaids and pythons are considered guardians of wetlands. Appropriate behavior and observance of obligations and rites are important and required to maintain social harmony, longevity and contentment of spirits (Kazembe, 2009).

The Shona peoples believe that there are spirits that guard such water sources and they migrate if the source is polluted and this results in drying up of the water source. Containers with soot are believed to pollute water sources, so through some cultural beliefs and practices, the Shona protected sources of water from pollution and running dry. Water spirits performed important duties and some of them were rainmaking and to mobilize chiefs and the community to conserve the environment (Machoko, 2013). He argues that there is an urgent need for Zimbabweans to be reconnected to their traditional beliefs if environmental degradation is to be reversed.

The Shona also believed in sacredness of flora. Cutting down trees in certain areas was prohibited and these areas were called *marambotemwa*. Flora ensures that water table does not fall as it minimizes runoff. According to Mhaka (2015), vegetative cover of *marambotemwa* prevents soil erosion and sedimentation of water sources thereby ensuring sustainable environmental use. In most traditional communities among the Shona people, mountains and forests are burial sites for chiefs and are also considered habitats for ancestral spirits. The Shona considers it morally wrong to cut trees in certain forests. The Shona thus holds taboos in relation to cutting or destroying of certain trees. Taringa (2006) is of the view that some Shona people also believe that ancestors dwell in branches of certain large trees. Certain trees have religious significance. Examples are *muzenze* which is used for purification after burial and *muhacha* which is used for rainmaking ceremony (*mukwerera*). To this day people of Chivhaku village in Buhera cannot cut a *muhacha* tree without permission from the headman.

It was also believed that if the land and its resources are used extravagantly, misfortunes such as death or disappearing may befall the perpetrator. In some cases, the misfortunes may befall the whole community in the form of droughts, hailstorms that destroy crops, or wild locusts that devour crops. Among the people of Chivhaku clan in Buhera district, it was believed that some wild beasts would destroy the perpetrators' crops.

Certain animals are associated with bad omens and these include hyenas and owls. Hardly could a Shona person kill such animals as they are associated with witchcraft. According to Mhaka (2015) it should be noted that there are situations where Shona religious leaders have resisted embracing western scientific approaches to pest and weed control and enhancing soil fertility arguing that doing so would anger guardian spirits. Excessive use of agrochemicals can have a negative impact on the environment. The Shona sometimes performs rituals when the land is invaded by pests.

## Ubuntu philosophy

Though the concept of *ubuntu* has gained tremendous prominence in recent years, it is difficult to define. As noted by Mawere (2012), this difficulty to define *ubuntu* is mainly because the concept is elastic and pragmatic as it is used in almost all the spheres of *Bantu* worldviews. Current definitions tend to focus on human-to-human relationships but *ubuntu* also includes human to community and human to society relationships. This means that *ubuntu* exists not only at individual level but at community, country and societal levels. Broodryk (2012) defines *ubuntu* as an ancient African worldview which is based on the primary values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values which ensure happy and qualitative human community life in the spirit of the family. Those who abide by the *ubuntu* ethic are called *abantu* or *vanhu* in Shona. Mkize (2003) further argues that *ubuntu* means qualities such as warmth, empathy, understanding, communication, interaction, participation, reciprocation, harmony, a shared worldview and co-operation. Bennett and Patrick (2011) posit that *ubuntu* implies a collective personhood in which an individual becomes a person through other people. As a philosophy, it is allergic to any form of discrimination (Museka & Madondo, 2012). Museka and Madondo (2012) further argue that it is a way of living that contributes positively to the welfare of all members who make up the universe. *Ubuntu* is also seen as an effort to help people in the spirit of service, to show respect to others and to be honest and trustworthy. The concept has originated from the Nguni tribes of South Africa, and it has equivalents among other *Bantu* languages. For example, the word *hunhu* is used among the Shona. Lately, the *ubuntu* philosophy has taken a centre stage in jurisprudence, management, health in Africa and the African diaspora.

The philosophy of *ubuntu* plays a critical role in environmental conservation. This is further buttressed by the fact that according to the *ubuntu* philosophy, the community is important and individual needs are secondary to family and community needs. If a person's behaviour is deemed to benefit the community, then one is deemed to be human. If a person's behaviour endangered the whole community such behavior was chastised. The Shona therefore strived to avoid behaviours what bring problems to the community. Such behaviours include environmental degradation or pollution as the whole community would be punished by God or the guardian spirits. Punishment that affected the whole community came in the form of droughts, hailstorms, locusts or worms. People

therefore showed their Ubuntu by being friendly to the environment as their philosophical responsibility to the community. The Ubuntu values were not limited to fellow human beings but extended to flora and fauna. A person with good *unhu* would therefore not recklessly cut down trees.

## **CONCLUSION**

For most African communities and the Shona people in particular, all aspects of nature, plants and wildlife and water bodies are under the mystical tutelage of ancestral spirits and guardian animals. People are therefore mandated to use natural resources sustainably on behalf of these owners – spiritual beings. It was also seen that there are environmental taboos that are intended for the ethical use of the environment. These taboos help keep people away from further depleting the environment. The Shona people have a rich indigenous knowledge system which if used wisely may help in environmental conservation. However, it must be noted that this Afrocentric perspective has its own weaknesses just like any other school of thought.

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