Spirit Possession in the Zimbabwean Black Novel in English

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Introduction

This essay discusses the numerous ways in which the African traditional religious phenomenon of spirit possession has been narrativised and given a permanent, yet extended literary form in two Zimbabwean novels: *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* (1983) and *Nehanda* (1993) by Solomon Mutsvairo and Yvonne Vera respectively. "Spirit possession" is in this essay taken not as some form of 'trance' or bodily "twitches", but as the re-incarnation of the spirit of dead ancestors through a living host. Spirit possession underpins the essence of the African traditional way of generating knowledge that found its use in the family and national life of the Shona people. Such knowledge invariably dealt with social problems and the solutions to those problems.

In the permanent tension between tradition and modernity within whose borderlines spirit possession is often analysed in Zimbabwe, three interrelated themes suggest themselves clearly. First, there exists within the minds of Africans (educated or uneducated, Christian or non-Christian) a knowledge of two forms of consciousness; one distinctively African deriving from orature, and the other considered modern and emanating from the West. Whether these two social consciousnesses are always "warring" (W.E.B Dubois 1965: 215) or complementing each other, the tendency has been to write of a double consciousness as a problem reflective of an alienated soul. And yet under colonial conditions, colonized African people who possess a dual consciousness can be said to wield a broader cultural interpretive framework that enables them to possess enormous powers to control their spiritual world. This is evident in the fact that even those educated Africans were never totally detached from their cultural roots. A dual sensibility in which the influence of African orature was central enabled African values, beliefs and worldviews to exist as a "clandestine culture" (Fanon 1963: 191). This suggests the possibility of a distinct yet alternative way of knowing and organising reality.

Second, defined as an ever-changing tradition, or part of it, spirit possession

is, to use another of Frantz Fanon's phrases, a "zone of occult instability" (Fanon 1963: 183) which belongs to the contemporary world in the African people's sphere of thought. Africans have used it to describe, justify and praise the actions through which they have recreated themselves and kept themselves alive. Third, when spirit possession, as a shaping force connecting the past to the present, is transferred onto the literary medium of the novel, the interface generates new meanings and symbols which relate to an experience that can be felt as being at once "continuous and significantly new (Irele 1981: 175).

Re-living Collective Myth in *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe (1983)*

Solomon Mangwiro Mutsvairo can rightfully be considered the literary father of the black novel in Zimbabwe. Born in the Chiweshe communal areas in 1924 and educated in Zimbabwe, South Africa and the United States of America, Mutsvairo's first novel, entitled *Feso*, was published in 1957. The publication of the novel was important because it transformed the Shona language from oral tradition into the written form. This process also lends the Shona language the enduring permanence associated with transferring a folktale mode into an extended literary product. In *Feso*, the allegorical and symbolical qualities of the Shona oral tradition are carried through into the written form and they manifest themselves as the ode to *Nehanda*, the poem through which the characters in the novel appeal to their ancestors for deliverance from the grip of colonial servitude. In the 1950's, *Feso* was a rallying point for the nationalist cause in Zimbabwe. The book was banned in the Rhodesia in the '60's. Mutsvairo's continued promotion of cultural nationalist politics in Zimbabwe was further confirmed in 1990, when he won the first prize for the best lyrics for a new Zimbabwean national anthem.

In *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe*, Solomon Mutsvairo returns to the question of re-evaluating Shona culture by invoking themes, motifs and oral stories associated with the traditional Shona religious ritual of spirit possession. For Mutsvairo, the creative impulse to draw on a stock of common beliefs and cultural symbols from the Shona indigenous oral resource base and elaborate these elements into a new pattern of meaning, attests to his desire to capture a distinct Shona sensibility through an originally African idiom. It also registers forcefully Mutsvairo's search for fundamental human and spiritual values. Briefly stated, the novel raises the question of the survival of Shona people in the light of the invasion of the country by the Ndebele people in the 1830's and the British South African Police in the 1890's. *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* is meant to trace a "continuous stream of collective consciousness from the traditional to the modern" (Irele 1981: 174) in the life of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. The novel also attempts to forge a "new spiritual coherence"(Irele

1981: 174) within the humanistic philosophy of the Shona people.

The central myth in the novel through which this is done is the possession of Pasipamire by the spirit of Chaminuka, the great Shona ancestor. While in the state of possession, Pasipamire spiritually journeys to Guruswa, the historical point of the beginning of the polities of the Shona nation. This "leap from fact and history into myth and metaphor" (Cooper 1991: 65) enables Pasipamire to retrieve the Shona tribal history, beginning with such founding fathers as Murenga Sororenzou, "ruler of Govanwa in Guruswa and Nembire, the Shona great patriarch (p. 17). Transported back into Shona history through spiritual possession, Pasipamire is also able to relive the archetypal myth associated with Mutota, the founder of the Mutapa empire. What is celebrated in this aboriginal myth is the capacity of the Shona people to survive adversity and remain a cohesive whole.

Mutsvairo's individual genius in *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* resides in the way he has imaginatively reworked the myth of Chaminuka's journey from Guruswa to Chitungwiza to suit his nationalist purposes. In the myth that Pasipamire recreates while in a state of spiritual possession, Guruswa is invested with life-giving properties. It is a place of constant rain, tall grass, abundant food, goats and cattle (pp. 7-8). Here in Guruswa, family stability, peace and harmony are celebrated as human essences. This picture of plenitude contrasts sharply with the image of suffering by the Shona people under the Ndebele in the nineteenth century and under white people in the twentieth century. On the other hand, by giving us the history of the Shona people at its glorious moments of creativity, Mutsvairo wants to prove that the African past was informed by a humanistic philosophy. The Shona people had a vibrant history and culture. This act of cultural retrieval rehabilitates the wounded ego of the Africans so as to enable them to acquire a new confidence in order to substantiate their humanity through struggle.

Also, considering the year (1983) when *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* was published, the rehearsal of the past history of the Shona people is meant to establish cultural roots between the past and the present, thereby giving a 'national' form to the new black government in the country. In other words, in its "longing for form," Zimbabwean nationalism as expressed in *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* draws on an "apparatus of cultural fictions" (Brennan 1994: 44-49) from an invented past. Nationalism uses this apparatus to legitimise itself and construct its discourse as the natural follow-up to a great tradition which can be traced "back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events" (Malinowski, quoted by T. Brennan; ibid;45). The creative principle embodied in the journey from Guruswa to Chitungwiza (p. 7) which is enacted by a possessed Pasipamire, thus exhibits something of the janus-face character of Zimbabwean nationalism. While underlining the significance of the disruptions of the Shona way of life in the past, the visionary myth of spirit possession

emphasises the very strength of the Shona people's moral and spiritual resources to survive a brutal history. Like the attainment of independence by blacks in 1980 in the country, the ultimate settlement at Chitungwiza by Chaminuka and his Shona people in the novel celebrates the establishment of a community over adversity. In this way *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* exhibits what Ato Quayson calls a "will-to-identity" which, as the critic further argues

> yields a simultaneous concern with the African nation-state as the implicit horizon, the political unconscious of the literary enterprise as it were, as well as a concern with projecting a viable identity outwards into the global arena (Quayson 1997: 17).]

In some metaphorical sense, the journey from Guruswa up to the end of colonial rule in Zimbabwe in 1979, as depicted in *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe*, represents alternating movements from 'wetness' to 'dryness,' and back to 'wetness'. The period of the restoration of communal health in post-independence Zimbabwe is accompanied by Pasipamire's prophecy that a "rooster will emerge from (the) ashes to restore power and dignity, peace and prosperity to the troubled nation of the Mbire"(p. 95). In post-independence Zimbabwe, the 'rooster' is the political emblem of Robert Mugabe's nationalist party, Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). In order to project the ZANU PF Government as the bringer of peace, stability and the promise of fertility for the nation, Solomon Mutsvairo makes further strategic recourse to the Shona myths of rainmaking. Apart from being endowed with the spiritual capacity to see the future from the past, Pasipamire also possesses the power to conjure up rain. In Shona myths of rain-making, drought was broken through the 'sending back' of the first Mambo into the pool to bring rain to the people. As David Lan (1985) has shown of the Shona, the people whose ancestors bring rain are the indisputable owners of that land. Because rain is the life-force of creativity, its control cannot be left in the hands of unknown and capricious forces. That Pasipamire controls it demonstrates man's desire to control natural forces for his own benefit. In a significant sense, the rain-making ceremony is a cultural code used by the author to thrust the debate on the land question in public. The implication is that because both the Ndebele and White peoples' ancestors in Zimbabwe are not known for possessing the powers to cause rain to fall, their descendants cannot legitimately claim ownership of land in Zimbabwe. In *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe*, the author thus uses spiritual possession to recuperate an ethnic identity based on the cultural ascendancy of the Shona people in general, and the legitimization of Robert Mugabe's corrupt government in the post-independence period in particular.

Nehanda (1993) and Spirit-Nation

By 1993, when Yvonne Vera's novel, *Nehanda* was being published, Solomon Mutsvairo had already published *Feso* and *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe*. Vera's *Nehanda* can be seen as being based on indigenous oral resources from the Shona folkloric tradition on one hand, and harvesting elements of spirit possession from the works of earlier writers such as Mutswairo on the other. There is a sense in which *Nehanda* can be said to reveal a continuous stream of the collective consciousness as it is found in the unique but distinct Shona traditional worldview. However, the novel is more nuanced in its elaboration of the terrain of spiritual possession. This signifies the author's conscious intentions to shift the traditional meanings associated with spirit possession in order to fit her own ideological designs. The emphasis of the novel is on the mythic qualities of Nehanda. *Nehanda* privileges the importance of the African cosmology. In this cosmology, Khombe Mangwanda (1998: 83) argues that "the nation in its African sense (is represented as) a community consisting of the departed and living." There is thus in the novel a deliberate blurring of the boundaries between 'reality' as experienced on earth and 'reality' as it is lived and felt in the spiritual world.

The spiritual world offers a continuous extension of human responsibility beyond the world of tangible things. As Nehanda's mother says: "The dead are not gone. The dead are among us, guiding us to clearings in the future where we shall all triumph" (p. 53). The spiritual world of ancestors in *Nehanda* is meant to operate as the locus for retrieving a Zimbabwean cultural memory which energises opposition to colonialism. By insisting on the continued relevance of African ancestors in "protecting" and guiding the Shona nation, the novel reclaims a distinct racial and spiritual difference for Africans. This effects an ironical reversal to imperial narratives such as *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, which worked to legitimize colonialism's claims to control Africans.

The recognisable aspect of spirit possession which Vera has culled from African oral tradition and inserted in *Nehanda*, informs the consciousness of her African female protagonists. Through the use of spirit possession as a visionary myth, the Shona people in the novel re-enact the collective regeneration of their tribe/nation. In other words, where colonialism attempts to "abolish" or "annul" the history of the colonised by emphasising the so-called superiority of its own "order" and "culture" (p. 55) the novel insists on its use of spiritual possession as the basis for creating an alternative spiritual order for Africans. Spirit possession, in *Nehanda*, reflects the material aspirations of the Shona nation. It connects the past to the future and ratifies the links between the incorporeal and the mundane in the affairs of the Shona people. This "earth-orientation" (Kunene 1980: 194) in the African cosmological belief system against the background of Mr Browning's "sky-oriented" (Kunene 1980: 194) religion, gives *Nehanda* a distinct literary identity as an African novel.

The notion of spirit possession and its construction of an identity of spirit-family or spirit-nation for Africans also reformulates our understanding of reality and effects resistance to our conventional attitudes towards realism, especially as it exists within the boundaries of normative western rationality. As Toni Morrison argues, black people are very practical people:

> But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were 'discredited knowledge' that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was 'discredited'. And also because the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible (T. Morrison quoted by Cooper 1991: 65).

Spirit possession can thus be viewed in *Nehanda* as the real means by which Vera sought to re-possess or recuperate a national identity by "re-appropriating devalued folk wisdom ...associated with the silenced language of women and the 'primitiveness' of orally transmitted nowledge" (T. Morrison quoted by Cooper 1991: 65).

In centring spirit possession as a carrier of a distinct African cultural sensibility, both *Nehanda* and *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* imply a struggle to replace the colonially inspired missionary text with alternative, renewed and modernised African spiritual values. The two Zimbabwean novels confirm the use of some of the textual strategies typical of post-colonial writings in which, as Bill Ashcroft and others (1989) argue, the African novel refuses to endorse

> the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words (Ashcroft *et al* 1989: 38).

But the major difference of the two novels is that Vera's novel uses African female protagonists to carry the African cultural consciousness of a spirit-nation.

Gendering the Spirit-Nation in *Nehanda*

In *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe*, the status and historical fortunes of African female protagonists are imaginatively reworked in terms of African national-

ism's core discourse of land as Mother, resting in the metaphor of the maternal body. In *Nehanda*, the appropriation of spirit possession by a female character generates meanings that destabilise both the colonial and African patriarchy's worldviews. Women-centred meanings are in the novel suggested from and in the mystical birth of Nehanda, which only the ancestral spirits can will and sanction. As the omniscient narrator asserts, "The departed had come to deliver a gift to the living, to shape the birth of voices, to grant the safe passage of the unborn" (p. 3).

In *Nehanda*, ancestors confer on the central character, Nehanda, the power to name reality and to create a new cultural consciousness of nationhood. The "birth of voices" which guarantee a safe passage to the unborn members of the Shona is heavily implied through a community of women present at Nehanda's birth. These women too, have been chosen by the ancestors, and each of them has already met Nehanda in a dream. The implication is that the process of evolving a national consciousness is a community undertaking. The women who welcome Nehanda come from different social backgrounds. These *Nyamukutas* or 'midwives' are all united by the birth of Nehanda which, in a sense, is the birth of the nation. Again, what is implied is that black women are active presences at the forging of a new national identity.

The biological birth of Nehanda has its ideological meaning further underscored in the dream of the trader woman. In the trader woman's dream, what is recalled in the cultural memory of the community is the history of colonization and how it dislocated the 'coherent' life-style of the Africans. Beneath the otherwise 'historical consciousness' announcing the defeat of the Shona people, there is, in the dream, celebration that ancestors have intervened to protect their posterity. The significance of the trader woman's dream is that on one hand it underlines the fragility of the Shona nation, and on the other hand it has more to do with the black community's ways of imagining new ways of resisting colonialism. As Maggi Phillips (1994) argues, in African literature by female writers, dreams not only disturb and challenge the rational stability of male-centred knowledge systems but they are "a valuable storehouse of experience with which to explore narrative-ness and question the nature of knowing across the breadth and depth of the human story (Phillipps: 1994; 91).

The spiritual possession of Nehanda and the trader woman's dream supply the novel with a cultural framework within which Vatete's tale is composed and embedded. Vatete's tale tells of a young girl who was abducted by strangers towards a faraway land (p. 15). The girl freed herself from her captors by way of singing a song "taught to her by her mother and [which] put the men to sleep" (p. 15). When the captors were asleep the girl forced herself into freedom by "chewing off the skin of the bag" (p. 15). This folktale of 'captivity and struggle for independence' recalls the Jikinya legend in Shona oral tradition. But Yvonne Vera has shifted the emphasis of the meaning and context of her story so as to

enable her novel to acquire the identity of a cultural nationalist master narrative. It is not difficult to recognize that the 'strangers' in the story represent the colonizers, while the young girl is "Zimbabwe" in captivity. In the 'girl' story by Vatete, Africans use their own internal spiritual and subterranean resources to contest the domination of their lives by the colonial system. Therefore, in presenting the emerging dialectical opposition between an African cultural consciousness and colonialism through the folktale mode, Yvonne Vera attempts to lend the paradigm of African resistance a permanent identity in the African imagination through a peculiarly African idiom.

On a cultural plane, the 'girl' folktale - just like spirit possession and dreams in the novel - undermine Mr Browning's assumptions that in Shona society, women are not 'respected,' and that they are treated like children and have "nothing to say in the life of the natives" (p. 75). Vatete, Nehanda and the trade woman are shown as performers and disseminators of beliefs, cultural ideals, and personal/collective history. The black women are also depicted as producers and composers of knowledge, which as Obioma Nnaemeka observes, "sometimes, transformed and re-created an existing body of oral traditions in order to incorporate woman -centred perspectives"(Nnaemeka 1991: 138). In *Nehanda*, not only is Kaguvi surbordinate to the spiritual powers of Nehanda, but he derives his "limited" war-like powers from the "people, who are the only ones with the powers to grant him authority over their future" (p. 71). Through the use of female voices, Yvonne Vera attempts to project a community of women who "improvise speech in order to communicate an anguish, an experience and finally a voice often unheard or unrecognizable in the larger world" (Lucdicke 1997: 67). The anguished speech is directed firstly at the colonial system and secondly against African patriarchy, which not only belittles but sometimes appropriates female creativity for its own ends. The significance of these dynamics, contradictions and tensions in *Nehanda* is that they effect a gendering of the realities of the spirit-nation in ways which affirm the roles of African women as mothers of the revolution, midwives, peasants, traders, martyrs, visionaries and dreamers (Mangwanda 1998: 130). In this sense, a women-centred perspective is installed at the heart of the national consciousness.

Mythic Realism in *Nehanda* (1993)

A strong sense of achieved strategic transformation arises from the novel's emphasis on myth, dream and the folktale mode as discursive strategies to recoup a distinct African cultural identity. In an interview with *Moto Magazine*, Yvonne Vera suggests that her novel uses myth to challenge history. "It is forceful and liberating to use myth, which is nevertheless history" (Moto Magazine 1994: 22). It is clearly not the writer's intention to write a historical chronicle whose fidelity to the facts of the Chimurenga history as contained in school text books

would correspond point by point. Rather, spirit possession in the novel is meant to re-organise historical fact in a way that drastically revises our notions of the real.

For example, when, in the novel, Kaguvi drinks warm blood from the bull, a surface and superficial reading of this incident will see this as a confirmation of the 'savagery' of African people. But considering the cultural context informed by the values/beliefs embodied in the traditional Shona religion of the Mhondoro system of knowledge, one can see Kaguvi is only reincarnating the Mhondoro powers to fight and to protect the Shona from colonial invasion. Similarly, at the ritual to welcome the ancestral spirit, Nehanda can be seen sleeping in the next room, while her spirit dances on the shoulders of the best dancers among those gathered "in the other room" (p. 33). Furthermore, at her death, Nehanda is able to detach her spirit from her body: "she travels to the faraway place where her body turns to smoke" (p. 2). Metaphors of travel and transport associated with the spirit of Nehanda underscore a search for African liberation values as can be captured within the cultural frame of a mythic consciousness which the novel insists on. It seems that for Vera, 'historical realism' would have confirmed Mr Browning's arrogant assumption that the hanging of Nehanda and Kaguvi was the 'end' of Shona history. Mythic realism preserves the historical openness of forms of struggle and accommodates new realities, giving them a permanence of form associated with Shona cosmic principles.

The adoption in *Nehanda* of spirit possession, dream and folktales as cultural reference points to frame the resistance to domination can be read as a literary response to the question "Do you have your own symbol?" that Mr Browning formulates, and which Ibwe gives expression to. In answering this question the novel rejects the narrative conventions associated with western realism which insists on fiction's truthful mimesis of reality. In rejecting the protocols of realist representation, *Nehanda* embraces an oral aesthetic whose major modes of representation emphasize symbol, allegory and metaphor. This enables Vera to place her characters in a broadened imaginative frame which can be used to access alternative forms of knowing. More so, in the post-independence context of the publication of the novel, Vera attempts to effect an ironical reversal which problematises the nationalist government's models of macro-economic policies. In this context, realism is associated with rationality by both writers, politicians and critics. The use of dreams, tales and spirit possession can also be read as the process by which African orature validates its presence through the written mode. It also testifies to the important point that the African novel has had to depend on African orature for the supply of literary raw material, for the constant regeneration and thematic treatment of national issues of identity-formation.

The individual success of Vera in *Nehanda* is that she evolves a set of cultural images and symbols associated with the departed, spirits, dreamers, story-

tellers, visionaries and voices which carry an African structure of consciousness. This set of cultural signifiers carries a sensibility which is distinctively meant to oppose another set of signifiers such as stranger, darkness, shadows, drought and black crows, that denotes the destructive sensibility of colonialism.

Conclusion

As in *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe*, Vera's *Nehanda* uses spirit possession, prophecy, dream and the folktale motifs in order to capture a coherent African worldview. This worldview is portrayed as being informed by a shared culture which provides Africans with continuous cultural frames of reference and meaning. The significance of this act of cultural retrieval should not be underestimated in the process of national identity formation. For, as Stuart Hall argues: "Hidden histories have played a critical role in the emergence of many of the most important social movements of our time, feminist, anti-colonial and racist" (Hall 1996: 111). *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* and *Nehanda* are two Zimbabwean novels whose 'structures of feeling' are united by a desire to reject the idea that European ways of ordering reality and values are superior to those of Africans. The novels have attempted to move away from the orbit of the dominant Western realist aesthetics. The aesthetic effect of this important experiment has been to create African forms of knowing which help to access human knowledge beyond the artificial boundaries imposed by Western 'irrationality'. But Vera's novel also attempts to effect some kind of differentiation from Mutsvairo's novel at the level of employing female characters to depict a distinct Shona cultural consciousness. This way, a female-centred perspective is also installed at the heart of an emerging Shona nation.

However, a question that is bound to be asked by many readers *of Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* and *Nehanda* relates to how much the authors may have simplified history by projecting the African cultural consciousness as a coherent whole, unaffected significantly by the ruptures of colonialism. The use of an Africanized English in the two novels does recall to one's mind the proverbial Caliban appropriating the master's language and using it to undermine the values of the same master. And yet one cannot help feeling that it would have been preferable if the two novels were written in the Shona language so as to capture most of the cultural nuances of spirit possession as it occurs within the traditional Shona cultural context. Nevertheless, the persistence of some aspects of the traditional Shona religion of spirit possession within the novelistic form suggests an achieved transformation and adaptation of African traditional religious modes of thinking onto a new cultural environment.

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