

African Religion and Colonial Rebellion: The Contestation of Power in Colonial Zimbabwe's Chimurenga of 1896-1897

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Abstract

This article examines the unifying roles of the *Mwari* cult, the cultural symbol of land, and the authority of spirit mediums in the first anti-colonial socio-political and religious protest of *Chimurenga* of 1896-97 in colonial Zimbabwe. Using their spiritually and socially defined authority, spirit mediums (*n'anga*) served as movement intellectuals to the *Chimurenga*—they crafted strategies and inspiration for social protest. The shared values of the *Mwari* cult, the cultural symbol of land, and the office of mediums were further employed to mobilize masses into a social movement that sought to reverse rapid sociocultural and political changes brought about by colonialism. To make this case, the article problematizes religion within an African lifeworld. Aside from showing that African religions share many aspects with other world religions; the article rejects Eliade's, and Durkheim's theory of 'the sacred and the profane'. It argues that this separation is hard to establish in African traditional religions and cosmologies. Spirit mediums, for example, employed African sociology, spiritual beliefs and customs in their attempts to reject the colonial order. Besides, the implementation of 'indirect rule' and land grabs led to the contestation of power between colonial authorities, chiefs, and spirit mediums. This contestation is analyzed from a social movement perspective. Amidst contemporary social injustices, human rights abuses and corruption in post-colonial Africa, and without underestimating the role traditional religions play in African politics, the study challenges Christianity to follow the prophetic example of spirit mediums in the *Chimurenga*.

Keywords: Religion, movement intellectuals, social movement, Chimurenga, indirect rule, spirit mediums, Mwari cult

You are just a little fat man. You are so busy murdering my people that you do not see the white sons of my sister — the ones with shining ears and without knees — approaching from the south (Daneel 1973: 30).

Introduction

Mukwati, Mbuya Nehanda, Chaminuka and Sekuru Kaguvi are iconic names in Zimbabwe's Ndebele and Shona community cultures' (tribe)¹ political discourse. The streets named after these individuals abound. Yet these individuals were not politicians or chiefs but spirit mediums (*n'anga*), who recruited masses into a violent rebellion against colonialism in what is popularly known and celebrated as the first *Chimurenga* of 1896-97—the war of liberation. These spirit mediums used traditional cultural symbols and the *Mwari* cult² to mobilize, and direct rebellion against colonial authorities. In social movement terms, these individuals were movement intellectuals, who provided the prophetic imagination, and the ideological framework for social revolt.

The article understands the *Chimurenga* as a countermovement to social injustices created by colonialism. In this regard, African religions served a 'pro-active' as opposed to a 'passive' role in its engagement with colonialism. In the case of the *Chimurenga*, for example, spirit mediums employed their traditional sanctioned authority to successfully recruit masses

¹ Unless citing others, the word 'tribe' is deliberately avoided in favor of 'community culture'. This is because 'tribe' seems to carry some connotations of backwardness.

² I am aware of the tension as regard to the understanding of the cult with both Shona and Ndebele communities claiming ownership. Although the cult center is in Matebeleland as opposed to Mashonaland, both sides have supporters (Daneel 1970; Ranger 1999). In this article, however, the focus is on the mediums as opposed to the history of the cult.

into the movement that sought to oppose the colonial order with the goal of regaining ancestral lands.

But the *Chimurenga* also illustrates the difficulty of defining religion through Eliade's and Durkheim's theory of 'the sacred and the profane'. In Africa, these two realms are somehow interlinked. Through Lugard's theory of indirect rule, colonial authorities pacified chiefs (whose authority was assumed to be political), but outlawed spirit mediums—leading to the contestation of power between colonial authorities, chiefs and mediums. Since spirit mediums' office was concurrently political, social and religious, *n'angas* were central to African life—something colonial settlers missed. Hence spirit mediums employed their traditional authority to undermine the power of chiefs while opposing colonial rule.

The *Chimurenga* also shows that African religions share many elements with other world religions. Just as other religions have been involved in recruiting masses into social action, African traditional religions played a proactive role in seeking social change. Thus, this article problematizes the role of religion in social transformation. Whereas religion can be said to endorse and protect oppressive structures, the *Chimurenga* suggests that it can also be proactive in social transformation.

More importantly, African traditional religions operated in the social system in which the land was an ancestral commons, which defined people's cultural identity. In this regard, the implementation of indirect rule and its social injustices led to the contestation of power between the colonial authorities, chiefs and spirit mediums. This contestation is analyzed from a social movement theoretical frame—arguing that spirit mediums served as movement intellectuals, who crafted strategies for rebellions against colonialism. It concludes that Christians can follow the prophetic example of spirit mediums in challenging contemporary Africa's social injustices.

What is Religion – Problematizing the Definition?

The challenge of living in the West is that you are always caught unaware when it comes to explaining certain concepts about your culture. Once I was asked to explain how my people would respond to the question, 'What is your religion'? Without thinking, I answered that they would claim to be Anglicans or Catholics etc. Later on, I realized that in my

culture, the word religion does not exist. To my people, religion is a Western denomination, thus the above response. They definitely believe in God, the spirits and the ancestors. For instance, traditionalists would refuse to be called 'religious' if they do not subscribe to the Western concept of religion. As such, they self-identify as traditionalists. This is why many Africans would go to Church and still come back and practice their traditional rituals and customs. To them, the two are different and should not be brought into each other's way. What then is religion?

Smith (1996: 5) defines religion as a 'system of beliefs and practices oriented toward the sacred or supernatural, through which the life experiences of groups of people are given meaning and direction'. In the sociocultural context, religion aids the construction and creation of meaning-systems through 'shared codes, norms, values, beliefs, and symbols that tell its members what to do with their lives and why' (Smith 1996: 5). Religion, he adds, 'orients people to the world they inhabit, providing a sense of direction and purpose' (Smith 1996: 5). Geertz (1993: 90) who understands religion from what it does (cultural system) rather than what it is, compliments this definition. To him, religion is:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in [people] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (1993: 90).

Unlike Geertz, Spiro (2003: 197) perceives religion as an institution 'consisting of culturally patterned interactions with culturally postulated superhuman beings'. By superhuman beings, Spiro means sacred beings that have the power to punish and reward social actors.

To some extent, Spiro's substantive definition covers sociocultural elements of African traditional religions. In traditional African societies, ancestors and other spiritual powers are said to monitor human behaviors. Nonetheless, in this lifeworld, the division between what Eliade (1959) and Durkheim (1965) called 'the sacred and the profane' is hard to identify. Durkheim, for example, argued that all religions possess and share a common

feature:

... they presuppose a clarification of all things, real and ideal, of which [people] think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words *profane* and *sacred*.... This division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought; the beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers which are attributed to them, or their relations with each other and with profane things (1965: 37)³.

Although this understanding is helpful, an African is born into a socio-spiritual system in which both worlds are intricately intertwined. As Chabal and Daloz (1999: 65) observe, the central feature of ‘African belief systems is the absence of a firm boundary between the religious and the temporal’. While western societies view this separation as critical to its socio-political and economic order, in Africa they argue, ‘politics is played out in a world which incorporates both and in which both have a direct significance’ (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 65). As a result, many Africans would agree with McGuire’s (2008: 1) opening statement that religion plays a critical role in human action as well as in people’s comprehension of all realities and life. She writes,

Religion is one of the most powerful, deeply felt, and influential forces in human society. It shapes people’s interactions and relationships with each other, influences family, community, economic, as well as political life. Religious beliefs and values motivate human action, and religious groups organize their collective religious expressions. Religion is a significant aspect of social life, and the social dimension is an important part of religion (McGuire 2008: 1).

³ Durkheim’s understanding of the sacred is not restricted to gods and spirits, but extends to rocks, trees and houses among many things—‘anything can be sacred’.

McGuire's observation speaks to the value of religion in African communities. It directs all socio-economic and political relations. For this reason, African religions are intricately linked to culture—to exist is to be religious and vice versa. To Africans, therefore, culture provides the spiritual and religious 'tool kit' from which social action is born. Since culture is often appealed to during periods of rapid social transformations and cultural crises (Swidler 1986: 273), it is also one of the most utilized anthropological symbols in collective social actions—people react differently when their perceived 'cultural values' are threatened. As Legee and others argue, culture controls the perception of right and wrong; it is the gauge of social harmony. They write,

People who identify with different social groups often have different, deeply held perspectives not only on how they should live but also on the scope of political community and purpose. They have a sense of a legitimate moral order, and they expect other citizens and the government to further that design (Leege et al. 2002: 27-28).

Whenever such moral order is perceived to be threatened, people employ various means to ensure the enforcement or return to such values—hence culture politics is 'often explosive' (Leege et al. 2000: 29). While the authors are speaking about American politics, at the center of rebellions in colonial Africa was culture politics, by which Africans sought to regain their cultural heritage and ancestral lands.

The Two Faces of Religion in Social Transformation

According to Max Weber (2001: 223), 'religion explained and legitimated social arrangements'. For instance, the Protestant theological concepts of 'asceticism' and 'calling' invited active participation in society as a way of working 'out one's salvation'. This ethic called for 'inter-worldly asceticism', that is the active disciplining of one's life that involves both piety and good works. This ethical code, Weber argued, led to tangible this-worldly success. In this regard, Protestant beliefs contributed to the transformation of the socio-economic order in Europe.

Weber's 'pro-active' religion contradicts Karl Marx's 'passive' religion, which the latter viewed as incapable of transforming oppressive

economic systems. Yet both of them are right—just as religion can legitimize and preserve status quo, it can also overturn oppressive social, political, and economic systems. Through the use of religious images, symbols, and ideas, groups can disrupt socio-economic and political configurations for good or bad. In that regard, religion can be the ‘*Opium des Volkes*’ (opium of the people) as Marx observed, but it can also be the catalyst of human liberation. McGuire (2008: 245) writes:

While certain aspects of religion inhibit change, others challenge status quo and encourage change.... Religion is a profoundly revolutionary force, holding out a vision of how things might or ought to be. Historically, religion has been one of the most important motivations for change because of its particular effectiveness in uniting people’s beliefs with their actions, [and] their ideas with their social lives.

In colonial Africa, traditional religions united people to organize against, and in some cases, to violently rebel against colonial rule.

In addition, religion is signally social and doesn’t exist without a community of adherents. In sociological terms,

religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting, which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states (Farganis 2000: 82).

Here, the idea of religion only makes sense within an organized human community.

The above discussion is critical to locating the influence of African religions in traditional societies. Since African religions are communal or community centered in expressions, they carry socio-political and economic overtones. From the socio-religious perspective, colonialism and Christianity caused major socio-political upsets and dislocations in African traditional societies. As discussed at length below, the colonial pseudo-empowering of chiefs through ‘indirect rule’, and the outlawing of spirit mediums (*n’anga*)—who were at the center of the pre-colonial social

order—further destabilized African communities. Building on this social discontent and colonial injustices, charismatic spirit mediums recruited masses to revolt against colonialism. In this case, rather than legitimizing the colonial status quo, African traditional religions threatened it.

African Traditional Social Structure

African societies are deeply religious; hence the existence of the spiritual world occupied by the Supreme Being, ancestors and other spiritual forces is generally uncontested. Whereas the Supreme Being can be said to be transcendent, the living dead and other spirits are in constant communion with the living. But Africans also believe in the visible world, which operates under the authority of the spiritual world. For this reason, the Supreme Being and ancestors are believed to adjudicate human actions. It is from this perspective that the role of *n'anga* (spirit mediums) becomes critical in African cosmologies.

In addition, Africans also believe in hierarchical and reciprocal obligations. It follows that those on the bottom should honor those above them. For instance, a child should honor the elders, who in turn should honor the ancestors, and who in turn honor the Supreme Being. In return, the Supreme Being has oversight over the ancestors, the ancestor have the obligation to protect the elders, while the elders have the obligation to protect the child. This chain of power relationships must be kept in mind as we discuss the disruptive elements of African religions. When one wants to communicate with the elders, ancestors and God, for example, s/he should ask someone above them to supplicate on their behalf.

But how do we know the will of the ancestors? Because life revolves in the realm of the sacred, the spirit of ancestors and the Supreme Being occasionally possess certain individuals. These persons are believed to possess the ability to communicate with the ancestors and other spiritual powers as well as to see the future. Popularly known as *n'anga*, these individuals mediate between the Spiritual world and that of the living—hence the name *spirit mediums*. For this reason, they are greatly respected for their ability to communicate and manipulate spiritual forces. As Kaoma (2015 a: 114) argues,

spiritual mediums were watchmen/women of community wellbeing.

By claiming to speak for God as well as the ancestors, diviners claimed power over the rulers. As [was the case] in the Bible, where prophets were spokespersons of Yahweh, Africans believed that mediums were possessed with higher powers.

Yet through indirect rule, colonialism outlawed this office—thereby leading to the contestations of power in colonial Africa.

The Contestation of Power – Indirect Rule, the Chiefs and Spirit Mediums

In Africa, indirect rule followed Frederick Lugard's theory. Lugard argued that for British rule to be established, colonial authorities needed the collaboration of traditional rulers and every white person in the colony (Crowder 1964: 197-205; Wipper 1977: 179-94). Although the colonial regime employed chiefs as its 'mouthpieces' and 'right hands', Fields (1985: 51) observes, white officials 'operated the machinery whereby the regime sought simultaneously to control chiefs and to foster the [chiefs'] control over their people'.

Since colonial authorities made chiefs 'strong enough to control their people and yet weak enough to be controlled by the regime' (Fields 1985: 192), Gordon (2006: 79) argues that indirect rule 'restructured the politics ... from the oral forms of titles held by the heads of clans to the rule of colonial chiefs and officials. However, chiefs had to contend with challenges from their rivals and subjects'. For instance, indirect rule created new political chiefdoms among amorphous communities such as the Tonga people of Zambia and Zimbabwe (Kaoma 2013: 21). Nonetheless, the strongest challenge to indirect rule came from spirit mediums, who were the bridge between the two worlds—the spiritual and temporal. Unknowingly, this colonial error disempowered chiefs in the face of their subjects—leading to tensions and social unrest as Wipper (1997) rightly argues. Whereas traditional leadership was based on consensus, indirect rule turned colonial chiefs into dictators—further undermining the chiefs in people's eyes to an extent that colonial authorities had to intervene to restore social order (Rotberg 1970).

It is not coincidental that colonial rule depended on the domestication of the cult of chiefs and the destruction of the office of

mediums. By controlling the chiefs and outlawing spirit mediums, colonial governments created a social crisis in colonized communities. By denouncing witchcraft as superstitious, for example, Europeans were not just rejecting the socio-political powers of spirit mediums, but also undermining the authority of chiefs, who highly depended on *n'angas* for their authority. Despite being outlawed, however, they actively existed to this very day. And just as mediums counted chiefs among their clients then, today, *n'angas* have traditional rulers, politicians, and many religious leaders.

The outlawing of the *n'angas* from colonial politics was highly influenced by the colonizer's worldview which separated politics from religion. Yet, as Chabal and Daloz (1999: 65-67) rightly observe, to this day, African politics is by definition, religious. The religious overtones of African politics were actively employed to resist and undermine colonial rule and its African mouthpieces—the chiefs. Using an African cosmology and the social injustice of colonialism, spirit mediums brought the African God and ancestors into colonial politics. Amidst the anthropological insults Africans experienced; spiritual leaders sought the disruptive elements of religion to organize rebellion against the new status quo. With God, the ancestors and other spiritual forces on their side, spirit mediums and in some cases with the help of disenchanted chiefs declared war against settlers—leading to violent uprisings such as the *Chimurenga* in Zimbabwe (1896-97), the *Maji-Maji* Revolt in Tanzania (1903-04), the Zulu rebellion in Natal (1906), the Chilembwe uprising in Malawi (1915), and the *Mau Mau* in Kenya (1945) among many others (Rotberg and Mazrui 1970; Ranger and Kimambo, 1972).

Indirect rule also benefited from missionaries, who aided the establishment and administration of colonies. Aside from arguing that the African perception of missionaries and colonial authorities was that they were 'kith and kin', Fields (1982: 102) asserts that a missionary tactic 'was to summon a[n African] chief or headman to the mission to 'speak to him,' just as local [colonial] officials summoned these men to the boma for instructions and discipline'. She further contends that the missionary radical agenda 'consisted in using the prestige of the colonial state to advance teaching that would presently free men and women from the moral authority of customary religion and from the political authority it justified' (1982: 102). While missionaries were involved in the administration of colonies, ironically, they

taught their followers that Christianity was somehow opposed to colonial politics. Neither did missionaries anticipate the disruptive role of Christianity on both the missionary Church and the colonial State. Aptly stated, indirect rule pacified chiefs and outlawed mediums, while Christianity worked to distance the colonized from their socio-cultural and religious heritage; creating conditions propitious to social revolts.

Consequently, these rebellions were compounded by the complex transitions and colonial imposition of taxes, forced labor, land grabs and other oppressive laws. Giving an example of the Watchtower rebellions in Central Africa, Fields (1985: 5) observes that the movement emphasized the end of the world, ‘with it, colonial rule’. In other words, the movement looked forward to a time when ancestral lands would be restored to rightful owners, and taxes, forced labor, and false religion (including missionary-led Christianity) would be overturned. In *Rebellion in Black Africa*, however, Rotberg (1970: xv) makes a critical point that places these rebellions in the religio-cultural context of colonial Africa—the uprisings ‘were organized by or around religious figures and were sustained...by the mobilizing force of powerful supernatural observance. Even the Zulu uprising, the most avowedly secular’, he insists, ‘was probably to an extent assisted by para-religious loyalties to Zulu ancestors and their religious representatives’.

It is important, however, to note that the question of whether these rebellions were driven by religious or non-religious factors is due to attempts to separate the sacred from the profane as Eliade and Durkheim did. But as already observed, such a separation is impossible in African traditional worldviews. It is from this perspective that Africans judged colonial rule—it simultaneously threatened both the sacred and the profane of the African world.

Land Ethics – Ancestral Commons

Millions of Africans shared the Watchtower movement’s position on the restoration of ancestral lands to lawful owners. Anti-slave trade campaigner Thomas F. Buxton (1840: 66) made a very critical observation about how Africans related to their ancestral lands—when they were captured or sold into slavery, ‘their strong attachment to their families and lands are apparent. They refuse to stir, some clinging to trees with all their strength ... that it is

necessary to separate them with a sword'. To Africans, the European concept of land as a commodity was foreign since land was a sacred identity and cultural symbol which could not be sold. In fact, what Troisi (1979: 130) says about the 1855 - 1856 Santal rebellion against British rule in colonial India applies to revolts in Africa:

Economic factors could have contributed to the uprising but their attachment to the land provided also an emotional basis without which the rebellion might not have taken place. Here it is worth noting that for [Africans], as also for most tribals, land provides not only economic security but also a powerful link with one's ancestors. In fact no land is taken possession of unless the spirits first approve of it. Though the demands of the Santals preceding the Rebellion were mainly concerned with the improvement of their general economic situation, the question of land had a special significance for them. --- Thus, for the Santals [Africans], land is part of their spiritual as well as their economic heritage⁴.

In 1864, Henry Rowley (1867: 222-23), who was among the first Church of England missionaries to settle in today's Malawi made a similar observation. Among Africans, he noted, land was a sacred commons—the chief can alienate the land, but common rights stopped him. Similarly, Rosman and

⁴ The 1868 *Cornhill Magazine* (1868: 231) presents a detailed narrative of this rebellion including the number of casualties among the Santals as well as the nature of this revolt: 'It was not war', wrote Major Jervis: 'they did not understand yielding. As long as their national drum beat, the whole party would stand, and allow themselves to be shot down. Their arrows often killed our men, and so we had to fire on them as long as they stood. When their drum ceased, they would move off a quarter of a mile; then their drums beat again, and they calmly stood till we came up and poured a few volleys into them. There was not a sepoy [an Indian colonial soldier though the term is still in use in the region for army officers] who did not feel ashamed of himself.---The prisoners were for the most part wounded men. They upbraided us with fighting against them. They always said it was with the Bengalis they were at war, and not the English. They were the most truthful set of men I have ever met ... brave to infatuations'.

Rubel (1985: 153) reached the same conclusion: ‘Where land symbolizes the continuity of the social group (the clan) from mythical times to the present, the land could not be sold for money without destroying the identity of the group itself’.

In traditional Africa, therefore, no individual claimed total ownership of the land. Besides, the African ‘cosmological dimension’, that is, ‘worldview assumptions, attitudes to nature and society, and most especially their interrelationships’ (Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 70) was land centered. This cosmological dimension led to critical collective consciousness in colonial Africa, as Africans questioned the legitimacy of the colonial social order—vis a viz their ancestral lands.

It is important to add that in this *cosmological dimension*, land carries religious overtones. Being the sacred residence of the ancestors, land is a sacred commons that links the living to one another, ancestors, other spiritual forces and ultimately to God. In this regard, land is not only the locus of social interactions, but spiritual too. Thus, the expulsion of Africans from their ancestral lands, imposed taxes and rapid social change led to further social and religious insecurity. Oberschall (1973: 274) writes,

In settler colonies the grievances of Africans were greater to begin with; land had been alienated to European farmers; native reserves were kept in an undeveloped state in order to provide an abundant and cheap source of labor for a white-dominated economy; racial discrimination and segregation everywhere increased as the European community grew in size and [the white minority] could conduct its social life in self-imposed isolation from the African environment.

Although the British government could have addressed this injustice, Oberschall argues, it failed to control ‘settlers’ for fear of using force on its own ‘kith and kin’. This British government’s oversight resulted in bitter relations between what Memmi (1965) termed ‘the colonizer and the colonized’. To negotiate this tension, Africans turned to the defiant nature of traditional religions. Mwase and Rotberg (1967: 28) write, ‘Throughout the early 1890s British troops engaged in a succession of military campaigns against those chiefs [one may add mediums] who chose forcibly and, in the end, forlornly to oppose the imposition of British overrule’.

While Ransford (1966: 213) rightly credits the British Empire ‘for ending tribal warfare and stamping out the slave trade...as well as having established security’ in Central Africa, Moyo and others (2000: 10) argue that colonial policies worked against African interests. Colonialism was another form of slavery, one can safely argue. Unlike the first slavery in which Africans were shipped to work in foreign plantations, colonization turned them into ‘hoes’ and tools for European settlers. In their account of the 1915 Chilembwe uprising in Malawi, Mwase and Rotberg (1967: xi) assert that the 1892 colonial government-introduced taxes required Africans to pay for the Crown land they occupied, which according to Vyvyan’s (1899: 35) *Précis of Information Concerning the British Central Africa Protectorate*, was 3 shillings per hut (Africans tended to have different huts for boys, girls, and wives). Those who could not afford paid in kind by working for Europeans. If an individual had one hut, he would work for White farmers for at least 3 months. Those who failed to meet this obligation had their huts destroyed and their wives arrested, if it was suspected that their husbands had run away.

As noted above, such injustices were part of the wider colonial agenda of ensuring perpetual cheap labor for the European controlled economy. This colonial agenda did not only increase what Misztal (1998: 38) terms ‘social insecurity’, but also created favorable conditions for social revolts. As Rotberg (1970: xiv) asserts, ‘by rebelling [Africans] sought to reclaim their lost liberty and spiritual freedom’.

Planting Colonial Rebellions in Social Movement Discourse

According to Gusfield (1970: 2-3), social movements are products of human interactions, with the idea of movement suggesting efforts to achieve change. Gusfield (3) defines a social movement as a group of people with ‘socially shared demands for change in some aspect of the social order’. Although social movements are born from anthropological and sociological discontents, a social movement involves beliefs and values, which communities seek to reform or defend in a specific social location. Because social movements grow with mobilization, they ‘are not sporadic acts occurring only once; they take on momentum and growth. They call for response from all those who oppose them and defend the existent order’ (Gusfield 1970: 3). In other words, social

movements attempt to resolve real life problems in a specific social context. Gusfield (1970: 10) concludes,

Whether they seek means of defense to maintain old habits against the blows of unfortunate changes or align themselves as proponents of new ideas and norms against the past, the partisans of social movements are grappling with problems that have emerged within their lives.

Gusfield's observation is critical to understand the social context of colonial protests. The introduction of colonialism and Christianity accelerated this crisis—leading to ontological insecurity. To resolve this insecurity, Africans sought answers from the spirit world.

In retrospect, the colonization of Africa was a product of another social movement—the nineteenth century missionary movement. Aside from mobilizing masses to support the missionary cause to ensure the establishment of civilization, Christianity, and commerce on the continent, missionaries played a critical role in the conquest of Africa—hence the four Cs—civilization, Christianity, commerce and conquest. While the missionary goal of establishing Christianity was noble, the entire colonial project sought to bring about major structural and cosmological changes in African communities. In other words, colonialism and Christianity were social movements that sought to transform Africa into black 'European' communities. As Fields (1982: 96) writes,

Mission Christianity, by deliberate plan, corroded African village life. Its Gospel included such tangibles as Lancashire cotton, cash crops, red-brick houses, Western medicine, tombstones, books, and money. The intangibles pertained not only to Christianity's transcendent God, but also to individualism, formal schooling, the nuclear family, middle-class values and virtues, skilled trades, and ambition. All had religious meaning. Christian conversion aimed at a cultural, as well as a religious, conversion. As missionaries were fond of saying, the converted 'set themselves apart'; they 'declared for a completely changed life'.

In return, African rebellions were countermovements that sought to resist, oppose, and reverse major changes brought about by colonialism and Christianity (Fields 1982; Wipper 1977: 135-160)⁵. Correspondingly, just as

⁵ Wipper (1977: 135-160) maintains that Africans rejected White authority, but

charismatic missionaries like David Livingstone recruited masses into the missionary and colonial movements, traditional charismatic and prophetic leadership utilized cultural tools to mobilize masses into opposing it.

Spirit Mediums as Movement Intellectuals

The success of a social movement highly depends on the charismatic leadership capable of mobilizing people into seeing the injustice as well as the ‘vision’ of the just social order. While this leadership can come from anywhere, traditional authority is vital to social mobilization. A leader who builds his or her authority on established foundations is likely to mobilize people better than the one whose authority has no traditional history. In the context of colonial protests, spirit mediums’ traditional authority, though unrecognized by colonial authorities, was fundamental to the mobilization of people to participate in these revolts.

Besides, the articulation of issues that need confronting to bring about a desired change is fundamental to the success of a social movement (Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Sahedi 1996)⁶. This role is played by movement intellectuals, who provide the ideological tools for social mobilization. Aldan Morris (in Smith 1996: 33) for example, demonstrates how the black clergy provided intellectual resources for the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Specifically, they provided the ‘leadership, institutionalized charisma, finances, an organized following and an ideological framework through which passive attitudes were transformed into a collective consciousness supportive of collective action’. The same can be said about spirit mediums—they provided the moral case and the ideological justification for such rebellions.

Pena convincingly argues that social movements are effective when movement intellectuals articulate pertinent ideologies as well as point out social injustices that need collective action. How these ideologies

not white civilization. Although they wanted to expel whites from their ancestral lands, she argues, they nevertheless hoped that in the new life, Africans would inherit white people’s property. She concludes that this belief was part of the ‘tool kit’ for rebellions.

⁶ Sahedi (1996: 47) argues that the pre-existent radical Islamic leadership and its beliefs and values were instrumental in the 1978 Iranian Revolution.

resonate with the popular sector has a huge effect on the realization of the movement's goal. Social mobilization occurs not just because a group believes in a cause, but also because a group has a strong ideology (Pena 1995: 118; Swidler 1986: 278). Persuasive ideologies, an organized constituency, and valuable leadership are excellent resources in social activism. She writes:

Critical to this process are individuals who are able to assess strategies and act accordingly. The motivations to act often comes from a belief that real change can occur only through action...I propose that intellectuals and the ideologies they profess can play a greater role in social movements than simply creating beliefs in causes; they often become the underlying reason for network development and constituency overlap. — The ability to generate a set of ideas compelling to more than one population can become a critical factor in social movement mobilization process (1995: 33-34)⁷.

Besides, movement intellectuals synthesize goals with an ideological message that makes sense to potential social actors. In colonial Africa, spirit mediums played this role—they were the movement intellectuals by default.

Supernatural intelligence and wisdom are generally attributed to spirit mediums. The Bemba and Chishinga people of Zambia speak of mediums (*in'ganga*) as *abamano* or *abacenjela* (the wise ones)⁸. The Shona also perceive *n'angas* as capable of *kuvheneka* (to see in darkness)—seeing the past, the present and the future. As movement intellectuals—albeit in a traditional sense, mediums articulated issues, and provided a rational explanation to the problems their societies faced as well as proposed solutions to the same. Through the cosmological interpretations of mediums, traditional religion provided organizational resources such as shared identity, normative motivational systems, and

⁷ Pena (1995: 116-117) further argues that in Latin America, theology provided the ideological basis on which religious constituencies could justify their political activities.

⁸ The Bemba word for a spirit medium is *n'ganga*.

public legitimacy on which to build collective social activism.

Traditional religions did not have colonial government's protection, but like mediums, they had community fortification. To this day, most Africans would honor spirit mediums over government officials and mainline clergy or bishops—something that has made Nigerian Nollywood movies and charismatic Christian 'prophets' attractive to the African mind. As discussed below, by pointing to droughts, animal sickness, unexplained deaths and many other social calamities, spirit mediums employed traditional beliefs to define colonialism.

Of course, some chiefs could have realized some 'injustice frames' in Lugard's indirect rule, but they were somehow paralyzed when it came to raising cognitive collective liberation. To use Smith's (1996: 10) words, chiefs lacked the 'fundamental moral standards against which status quo [could] be judged'. They had fallen prey to the unearned privileges of colonialism, under which their colonial-defined authority was based. As a result, mediums became the legitimate rulers and intellectual authorities to mobilize masses to join the rebellions. And since social movements require an ability to harmonize ideologies and activities, traditional religions as well as spirit mediums were the catalysts of collective consciousness. This is because 'religion deals with the sacred and the supernatural; and perhaps, because in some situations, it may have a history or current status as a socially powerful institution. This authority, legitimacy, and protection can be put to good use for the cause of social-movement activism' (Smith 1996: 20).

But movement mobilization or recruitment needs what Snow (1986: 464-481) terms 'frame alignment'; that is relating issues to people's immediate concerns and needs. Snow rightly notes that frame alignment consists of four parts, which are equally vital—frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension and frame transformation.

Frame bridging is accomplished by creating a relationship between two ideologically similar frames that share a common issue. Until the issue is bridged, people are not likely to join the movement. For mediums, the social calamities and landlessness were due to the communities' failure to resist colonialism. Secondly, frame amplification focuses on the meaning of events and their connection to one's immediate life situation. To Africans, rapid social change, forced taxations, droughts and landlessness amplified the need for change. Thirdly, frame extension deals with extending the

movement forum to address the issues of that particular group. For Africans, colonialism meant loss of cultural identity, which only collective action could remedy. Finally, frame transformation occurs when some of the key ideas of the framework are redefined to meet the primary goal of the social movement. To many Africans, their ancestors would aid their wars against the settlers, as well as restore the glory of old days—as the following case shows.

The Mwari Cult, the Spirit Mediums and Chimurenga

In this article, I argue that spirit mediums used cultural symbols to recruit masses into a social movement that sought to oppose colonial rule as well as to reverse rapid sociocultural and political changes brought about by colonialism. As a social movement, for example, the *Chimurenga* rebellion was centered on the religious symbol of the *Mwari* (Shona) or *Mwali* (Ndebele) cult and the ancestor cult⁹, which are the center of the Shona and Ndebele cosmologies. Originally the God of the Rozvi Empire of Monomotapa, the cult has been integrated in both Shona and Ndebele cosmologies (Daneel 1970; Ranger 1999; Shoko 2007). Usually approached from the shrine at Matonjeni in Matebeleland's Matopo Hills of Zimbabwe, *Mwari* provides answers to the people's existential questions. A woman medium communicates *Mwari's* will to the people 'through the senior tribal ancestors (mhondoro), or through his messengers' (Daneel 1970: 18). Importantly, the Deity's presence is usually felt in times of crisis; hence the cult has socio-political overtones.

Between 1896 and 1897 the Shona and the Ndebele community cultures sought *Mwari's* help in addressing the colonial crisis they both faced. With the help of their mediums (Mukwati among the Ndebeles, and Nehanda and Kaguvi among the Shonas respectfully), the two community cultures sought to reclaim their ancestral lands through violent means. As Kamudzandu (2013: 14) posits,

Determined to fight for their land, religious leaders from both the

⁹ Unlike the Shona, the Ndebele (the Zulu community culture in Zimbabwe) do not have 'R' in their alphabet, hence they spell *Mwari* as *Mwali*—the spelling Ranger (1999) opts to use.

Ndebele and Shona responded by conducting uprisings against British occupation of Zimbabwe. In both eastern and western Zimbabwe, whites were targeted and, within weeks, about one hundred white families were killed. The response from Rhodes was brutal and furious: he declared war on the indigenous people. While whites had the advantage of superior weapons, the Shona [and Ndebele] people had bows and arrows, Mwari (God), and ancestors on their side.

However, the disruptive nature of the *Mwari* cult was not limited to European settlers. When the Ndebele community culture raided and oppressed the Shona people, *Mwari* approved of the coming of whites. In that instance, however, *Mwari* told Lobengula, the King of the Ndebele, ‘You are just a little fat man. You are so busy murdering my people that you do not see the white sons of my sister — the ones with shining ears and without knees — approaching from the south’ (Daneel 1970: 30). Ironically, after being disappointed with *Mwari*’s own white sister’s sons, in the late 1890s, the Deity called on both the Shona and the Ndebele to unite and reclaim their ancestral lands with the words:

These whites are your enemies. They killed your fathers, sent the locusts, caused this disease among the cattle and bewitched the clouds so that we have no rain. Now you will go and kill these white people and drive them out of our father’s land and I Mwari will take away the cattle disease and the locusts and send you rain’ (Daneel 1970: 31).

Aside from defining Europeans, the dual role of *Mwari*’s voice is evident. As the embodiment of *Mwari*, the female voice represents both the Deity as well as the people of *Mwari*. Phrases such as ‘your enemies’, ‘your fathers’, ‘we have no rain’, and ‘our father’s land’ suggest *Mwari*’s identification with the people’s plight through the female medium. The emphatic ‘I Mwari, will take away’, as well as ‘send you rain’, however, point to *Mwari*’s overwhelming authority over the ecological harmony of the land. In line with African cosmologies, it is *Mwari* and not the ancestors, who control the ecological fertility of the land—hence, ‘I Mwari will take away the cattle disease and the locusts and send you rain’.

Since land is the locus of African religions, *Mwari* pointed to the ecological hardship of the people—droughts, locusts, and cattle diseases. *Mwari's* words also reminded the people of the Deity's solidarity with their dehumanizing plight. Like the God of the Exodus, *Mwari* had witnessed the afflictions and suffering of the colonized people and through the mediums, acted 'to deliver them out of the hand of the [Europeans]' (Exodus 3: 7-8). Unlike Israel's God who rescues the Hebrews by driving them out of the land of oppression, *Mwari* will expel the oppressors (Europeans) from African lands.

Moreover, *Mwari's* declaration of the war of *Chimurenga* also meant that victory was certain. Through the words of mediums, one can safely conclude, the Deity presented what Martin Luther King Jr. called 'the fierce urgency of now' which calls for immediate 'vigorous and proactive action'. Until Africans attended to this divine and sacred call, the ecological harmony of the land will not be restored! As Daneel (1998: 32; Kaoma 2015 a: 115) rightly observes, the *Mwari* cult and the mediums such as Mbuya Nehanda, Sekuru Kaguvi and the *mhondoro* spirit of Chaminuka 'played a prominent role in organizing Shona resistance'. While the issue of the history of gender relations in Shona cosmology is not the focus of this article, it is important to note that just as *Mwari's* voice is a woman, Mbuya Nehanda was a female medium—suggesting the important role of women in Shona traditional religion, as Nyajeka (1996) rightly argues.

One would question how Africans expected to win the war without guns. Yet this question underplays the role of religious beliefs in violent fundamentalist religious-driven social movements such as the Lenshina movement in colonial Zambia, the Chilembwe uprising in colonial Malawi, the *Maji Maji* in colonial Tanzania, and recently terrorist groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab among many others. Just as the God of the Exodus called on Moses to liberate the people with the shepherd's staff (Exodus 4:17), *Mwari* and the ancestors had decreed the war and would provide the means of fighting it. I propose that these convictions motivated both Shonas and Ndebeles to participate in the war to liberate their ancestral lands. As expected, the rebellion met strong resistance from colonial authorities—leading to many deaths as well as the execution of these mediums.

Snow's observation about frame alignment deserves highlighting

here—social movements can bring diverse groups with different agendas together. Although Ndebeles and Shonas were avowed enemies, in the face of colonial oppression, their need for cultural identity and land unified them. In addition, their shared belief in the *Mwari/Mwali* cult, the ancestors, and in spirit mediums erased ethnic differences for the bigger goal of reclaiming their ancestral lands. As is the case with other social movements, the political goal of liberation from colonial exploitation and the desire to live peacefully on their ancestral lands unified the two communities in their protest against colonial rule.

The executions of these mediums by colonial authorities turned them into movement icons, martyrs and *mhondoro* (senior tribal ancestors). Like Dr. King in the Civil Rights Movement, their final words would become sacred norms for the future nationalist movement in Zimbabwe. Through the prophetic imagination of both male and female mediums, nationalist leaders evoked the *Mwari/Mwali* cult and the spirit of Mukwati, Mbuya Nehanda, Sekuru Kaguvi and Chaminuka among many others to mobilize masses to join the second *Chimurenga* (the war of liberation), which led to the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980 (Mufurahunzi 1995).

Finally, aside from proving that African traditional religions are at par with other religions in movement building and mobilization, in social movement theory, the first *Chimurenga* confirms what Smith (1996: 1) calls, ‘the disruptive, defiant, unruly face of religion. [That is] religion’s capacity to mobilize, promote...or resist social change through disruptive means’. While colonialists underestimated the power of African religions (which settlers and missionaries perceived as backward and superstitious), like other world religions, African religions played and still play a critical role in African politics. Of course, the first *Chimurenga* failed to reclaim the colonized lands, but it sent a positive message to colonial authorities about the disruptive nature of African religions. Amidst the life-denying oppression; amidst rampant corruption; and amidst human rights abuses in post-colonial Africa, can religion play a disruptive role?

Looking Foreword – Can the Christian God Speak?

Mediums were watchmen/women of community wellbeing. The colonial government’s execution of these mediums for their roles in the rebellion,

and their elevations to national heroes' status in independent Zimbabwe suggest that the colonial and post-colonial governments were wary of the power of spirit mediums in African politics. Unlike politicians who get their power from the living, mediums are believed to receive their authority from God and the ancestors.

Without underplaying the role traditional diviners still play in contemporary African politics (in most cases, secretly), I propose that the Church should employ the disruptive role of religion in its attempts to address the social, economic and political issues of the continent. Every African government in Christian sub-Saharan Africa reveres the Church; hence the Church can mobilize masses to disrupt post-colonial injustices, corruption and other social evils. The Church's voice, like that of the traditional mediums and biblical prophets, represents God's moral voice on issues of governance, economic justice, and human rights. Like the Black Church in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and in the South African Anti-apartheid Movement, African theologians and Church leaders ought to mobilize masses against rampant socioeconomic and political injustices that the continent faces.

Moreover, the Church should labor to know what God is saying in the face of Africa's abject poverty, corruption and human rights abuses. As Rowan Williams (2004; Kaoma 2015 b: 133-134), former Archbishop of Canterbury noted, a 'theologically educated person is someone who has acquired the skill of reading the world, reading and interpreting the world, in the context and framework of Christian belief and Christian worship'. Accepting that theology is the science of God through which we read the world from the Creator's perspective, the task of theologians, ethicists and missiologists is to point God's people toward divine activities and the Creator's mission (*missio Creatoris Dei*) in the world. 'The complex nature of Africa today', so Kaoma (2015 b: 134) argues,

demands theologians who can 'read the continent' from the perspective of the Creator. Our theologizing should aim at addressing the ecosocial crisis confronting the continent at many levels. We need rational, theological and moral analysis of root causes of such problems and thus propose godly actions and plans to resolve them.

In comparison to spirit mediums and the Old Testament prophets, the Church's total allegiance is not to worldly powers, but to the Creator God. As

Reinhold Niebuhr (1960: 13) notes,

The man of power, though humane impulse may awaken in him, always remains something of the beast of prey. He may be generous within his family, and just within the confines of the group which shares his power and privilege.

Niebuhr's point is suggestive—the Church can pro-actively hold politicians accountable for all their decisions and actions. Across Africa, successive governments promote the interests of the rich over those of the poor; the powerful over those of the powerless; and multi-national business interests over those of local land-dwellers. With the spirit of Mukwati, Mbuya Nehanda, Sekuru Kaguvi, and Chaminuka; with the passion of the eighth century biblical prophets—Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah; and with the dreams of contemporary prophets such as Desmond Tutu, David J. Bosch and Gunther Wittenberg in South Africa, and Festo Kivengere of Uganda among many others, the Church in Africa can still become a catalyst for positive social change. This role is not optional; it is imperative to Christian mission, worship, spirituality and theology.

Conclusion

Religion can maintain status quo, but it can also challenge and disrupt it. This is true with all religions regardless of how they are defined or understood. The problematization of 'religion' as it relates to traditional cosmologies suggests that African religions possess disruptive and obnoxious elements that can be exploited for positive social change. The centrality of land in the African lifeworld, for example, accorded spirit mediums with a shared cultural symbol that served as an organizing tool against colonialism. It is from this socio-religious perspective that the article examines the *Chimurenga* rebellion of 1896-97. Rather than viewing the *Chimurenga* rebellion as a spontaneous act, the revolt was a countermovement against the colonial and missionary agenda. To colonial authorities, these spirit mediums were 'uncivilized' and ignorant. Yet, they acted as movement intellectuals, who articulated and connected issues, and provided public legitimacy for the rebellion. In other words, these mediums employed traditional beliefs and the

colonial-created social injustices to counter-organize and mobilize masses against the colonial social order. To win public support, however, the countermovement was planted in the Shona and Ndebele *Mwari/Mwali* cult and the common belief in ancestors. The first countermovement of *Chimurenga* did not successfully defeat colonialism, but it became the nationalist movement's organizing tool—leading to the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980. It also showed the power of African traditional religions in disrupting and challenging the status quo. Today, Christianity and Islam are growing in Africa and so is bad governance, human rights abuses and other social injustices. Just as spirit mediums used religion in disrupting colonial injustices, Christianity can do the same. African religious leadership ought to employ the disruptive elements of religion to challenge and not to legitimate bad governance.

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