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**The Seventh-day Adventist Church and the
Traditional Rain-Cults in Africa**

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THE S.D.A. CHURCH AND TRADITIONAL RAIN CULTS IN AFRICA.

Scholars on african religiosity have, of late, observed that the African people are generally religious. Every facet of their lives seems to be permeated by religion.¹ Ancestral spirits play a major role in providing for the needs and protection of the living against the vicissitudes of present life. These spirits are not worshipped as previously perceived by earlier missionaries, but are rather considered to be intermediaries between God and the living. Death is believed to have given them easier access to the Almighty God.² It is in this light that these spirits are to be appeased if calamitous situations are to be avoided within communities. Incidents of droughts are generally perceived to be expressions of anger at societal misdemeanors by the cult god and it calls for retrospective review of societal behaviour to remedy the situation.

The purpose of this paper is to consider, in a nutshell, the changing character of the "Rain-God" (Mwali Cult) in the Matopo Hills in Western Zimbabwe. It traces the hostility of past decades to a search for a league and comradeship on issues pertaining to rain production in times of drought. Of particular significance to Seventh-day Adventist Christians are claims by the cult-shrine priestess, Gogo Ngcatu, at the Njelele shrine that she is a Seventh-day Adventist Christian.

¹ J. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, (London: Heinemann, 1982) p. 1

² Ibid p. 162

She claims that she too is wishfully looking up and waiting for the soon return of Jesus Christ in the clouds of heaven. The dangers of deception and impending persecution of Adventists are highlighted together with suggestions on the measures needed to delay or avert the impending persecution of God's people by traditionalists.

General overview of Some Rain Cults in Africa

Most communities in Africa have developed Rain-Shrines where communities pray and confess their wrongs to the cult god in times of severe droughts. The Lozi king, in Zambia, plays a centrifugal role in unlocking the heavens. He is considered the chief priest who officiates at the grave sites of the ancestor kings to plead for rain on behalf of his subjects.³ The Lovedu people in South Africa believed that their queen had the capacity to produce and withhold rain. Their borders were not guarded by the army since the queen could simply order the showers of rain to stop falling on the territory seized by the invaders.⁴ She was feared and well-nigh divinized. The Zulus believed that their ancestral spirits brought rain from the sea when properly appeased by the living.⁵ The Inyakyusa, in Tanzania, developed a grove where kings were buried. On

³ Gwyns, Prins, The Hidden Hippopotamus, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p. 195

⁴ Mbiti p. 55

⁵ N. Bhebhe, Christianity and Traditional Religion in Western Zimbabwe, (London: Longman 1970) p. 13

occassions of severe drought the elders went to the grove and by a process of elimination through divination discovered who, among the dead ancestor kings, was offended and thus withholding rain. A ceremony of appeasement was thus organized. The living king was considered to be divine, as such, he was not susceptible to the common diseases of mankind.

If he became ill and was discovered by the village elders, even in cases of a common cold, he was smothered to death at night, his mucus membrane together with the finger nails and those of his toes were buried in a black soil on the banks of the river to provide fertility to the land.⁶

The Shona in the east of Zimbabwe pray to the Mhondoro spirit in times drought. This Mhondoro spirit is believed to be the apparition of their first ancestor king, (Matope) who at his death, told his people that he would change into a lion and continue to guide and provide for their needs for generations to come.⁷ At such occasions the lion is seen at night in their villages. While the Shona and the Ndebele in Western Zimbabwe developed a shrine cult commonly known as the "Mwali shrine cult" situated in the Matopo Hills, south of the city of Bulawayo. In times of drought religious convocations were held to solicit the favours of the Almighty to grant the nation much needed rain.⁸ It is this cult god in the Matopo Hills who will

⁶ Monica Wilson, Communal Rites of the Nyakyusa, (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) pp. 37 - 43.

⁷ W.G.L. Randles, The Empire of Monumotapa, (Gwelo: Mambo Press, 1975) pp. 74 - 75.

⁸ Bhebhe p. 21

now constitute the focus of attention because of his unprecedented overtures to christianity during and after the 1991 -92 drought which engulfed the Southern Region of the Continent of Africa.

Characteristics of the Mwali Cult God

Mwali is the shrine god who is concerned primarily with rain, the well-being of crops, and local politics in the region.⁹ He is active and immanent and is the spiritual owner of the earth and creator of mankind. He intervenes in human affairs. He manifests himself in such great natural phenomena as volcanic eruptions and lightning. Mwali speaks directly to the living not only in thunder and wind but as a voice heard most frequently in caves amidst the rocks. He is a god who can be approached by the living with sacrifice and supplication. At the shrine cave reports from the districts are made to an officer known as the "eye", petitions are addressed to another officer known as the "ear" and answers are received from the senior officer known as the "mouth".¹⁰ It is believed that when the rocks were still soft Mwali walked the earth and left an imprint on them, such rocks and hollows constitute sacred zones in mediation and provide points of contact between him, as creator, and the people who talk to him and hear his voice in

⁹ D.N. Beach, The Shona and Zimbabwe 900 - 1800. (London : Heinemann, 1980) p. 249.

¹⁰ T.O. Ranger, Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896 - 97, (London : Heinemann, 1967) p.22 - 23.

response.¹¹ He is viewed as the god of plenty, rain, fertility, life, war and peace. He punishes those who refuse or forget to thank him by offering gifts after he has given his blessings. It is further believed that soil is thrown into the eyes of anyone attempting to search the source of the voice from the semi-dark cave.¹²

Mwali is considered to be the creator of the universe, the spiritual power that made the world and everything in it. His benevolent power that made all things ensures that the prosperity of the world and that of its peoples multiply. For the world to prosper it needs water which is controlled by the creator, hence he is to be requested to supply the blessings of bountiful rains.¹³ Mwali has many shrines yet he is one, he is believed to manifest himself in the following ways:-

1. As "Shologulu" the big-headed one who is powerful and transcendent, the god who is feared and respected. He manifests himself through natural phenomena like thunder clap and meteorite and is an ambivalent god capable of showing both kindness and anger when offended. He is not considered to be a fetish god bound to a stick or stone but as a god who moved from cave to cave. There is no one cave sacred to him.¹⁴

¹¹ Richard Werbner, Ritual Passage Sacred Journey, (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 1989) p. 248.

¹² Saul Gwakuba Ndlovu, "The Mwali Cult", Paper Presented to the Oral Traditions Association of Zimbabwe, Harare, May 1994.

¹³ I.G. Cockcroft, "The Mwali Cult", NADA X, 1972, pp.83-4.

¹⁴ Ranger, p. 146

2. He also manifests himself as "Banyachaba" the mother of the nation. In this capacity she is the god of the fecundity of the land and its people. It is she who is responsible for providing rain and sustenance to all creatures in the universe. It is this manifestation of the Mwali cult god that is interested in the welfare of the people.¹⁵

3. Finally Mwali manifests himself as "Lunji" the son of god who runs errands between Shologulu and Banyachaba.¹⁶ He is the intermediary going back and forth between father and mother.¹⁷

Ndlovu, one prolific writers on the Mwali cult, says that after the high priest had said all the praises to Mwali at the cave, a loud jingling of iron objects was heard inside the cave before a voice was heard in response to the requests presented by the chief priest. The voice usually said that he would go and present their requests to the greater one - Banyachaba. At no time in the past, claims Ndlovu, has Mwali promised people anything.¹⁸ This seems to be Lunji's shuttle diplomacy between the people, Banyachaba and Shologulu. Werbner says that most commonly people mean Lunji, the son, when they speak of Mwali.¹⁹

Ralushai claims that Lunji too can manifests himself in wind,

¹⁵ Phillip Mason, The Birth of a Delima, (London : Oxford University Press, 1958) p. 195.

¹⁶ Leslie Ntoi, "Wosana Rite of Passage, reflections on the initiation of Wosana in the Mwali Cult in Zimbabwe", paper presented at the conference on the interaction between christianity and traditional religions, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 21 - 24 June 1994.

¹⁷ Werbner, p. 248

¹⁸ Ndlovu, p. 5

¹⁹ Werbner, p. 248

thunder and lightning.²⁰

Werbner further states that the earthly location of the oracles in the Matopo Hills corresponds to the celestial location of the trinity. In the south at Njelele is "Shologulu" the great head and father. It is there he arrived first and left his footprints. In the east of Njelele in another shrine called Dzilo which corresponds to "Banyachaba" the mother of the nation. Finally, in the south of Dzilo is Dula which corresponds to the son, "Lunji".²¹

The Metamorphic Nature of the Mwali Cult God

From the time christianity was first introduced in Western Zimbabwe a tense or perhaps a hostile atmosphere between the adherents of traditional and christian religious systems has existed for decades. This has often become conspicuous in times of disastrous situations such as droughts. Such catastrophic events have generated accusations and counter-accusations by protagonists of both religions for the prevailing conditions. Communities and families have been torn apart specially when religious convocations have been called by either side to remedy the situation. Traditionalists, for decades now, have considered the Bible as a whiteman's tool to undermine traditional religious systems and have urged communities to reject it totally. No common denominator of any

²⁰ V. Ralushai, "The Mwali Cult", paper presented at the Research Day, Oxford University, 23 April 1994.

²¹ Werbner, p. 286

kind has been found to induce a relationship between the two religious systems. The christian faith looked up to God in heaven for answers to their prayers for rain, while the traditionalists looked to the Matopo Hills for answers to their drought predicaments. The lines of demarcation between the two systems of religion were distinct and clear. But the 1991 - 92 drought scenerio precipitated what could be termed "the christianization of the traditional religious systems in Zimbabwe" with neither a precedent nor parallel in the religious fraternity of the cult shrines in the region. On the basis of my interviews I shall now briefly describe three of the significant movements which emerged during this period as responses to the drought situation that engulfed the Southern Region of the Continent of Africa.

Njelele. Gogo Ngcatu Ncube, the new shrine-priestess at Njelele initiated a theological order hitherto unprecedented in the history of the cult shrine. 1. She considered herself a believer and worshipper of the God of the Bible and further claimed to have been instructed by the shrine god to keep and frequently read the Bible. It was in line with this directive, she claimed, that she had just finished her morning devotions at the time we visited her. 2. She believed and taught that the God who appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai and gave him the Ten Commandments was the same God who spoke in the past and still speaks even now at the Njelele cult shrine in the Matopo Hills. The methodology of his communication has not changed, what has changed is the venue and the audience addressed. 3.

She believed that the Lord Jesus Christ will soon come to this earth to establish his everlasting kingdom. Her hope of the second coming of Christ was based on the gospel of Matthew chapter twenty four (24) where Christ spoke of the signs of his coming in power and glory. 4. She now conducts Bible lessons for delegates from the various districts of the country who come to pray for rain at Njelele. She claims to be a Seventh-day Adventist christian who regularly attends camp-meetings. She owns both a Bible and an Adventist Hymnbook. When we visited her at Njelele in September 1997 with a group of eighteen graduate students she requested the group to conduct a worship service during which she requested certain songs in the hymnbook to be sung for her.

Mbuya Juliana. Another movement of significance was spearheaded by a middle-aged woman commonly referred to as "Mbuya Juliana". Its grip and intensity of its influence on the populace in the Mberengwa district was phenomenal. Her base was at Dzilo east of the Njelele shrine. Mbuya Juliana claimed to have been sent by a team of six divinities, namely, Musikavanu, Mapa, Nehanda, Chaminuka, Ancestors and Jesus Christ. The above divine figures had declared Sunday and Wednesday, for christians and traditionalists respectively, as days of rest. Such days, in the language of traditionalists, are known as "chisi days", which means rest days. All members of the community were required to observe them and should do no agro-business. She claimed to be a christian but disliked Adventists for their non-co-operative stance in observing chisi

days, giving gifts to the cult shrine and attending rain-ceremonies. She called on chiefs and elders of the communities to come up with stiffer penalties for individuals who refuse to co-operate. Chiefs in these affected areas sought the government for more powers to enforce these measures.

Manyangwa.The third Movement was the Manyangwa Reform. This cult shrine is located in the west of Njelele, about thirty kilometres west of Plumtree Town. Mr Manyangwa, the cult priest, is by profession, a minister of religion in the Covenant Church of Christ. His attire symbolized a unity accord between the christian faith and the traditional religion. He wore, across his shoulders, two scarves of different colours. One was blue and had an emblem of a white cross on it, while the other was black. The former represented christianity while the later symbolized traditional religion both of which had now united. Mr Manyangwa and Reverend Nkomo, of the Faith Apostolic Church of Zion, claimed that the shrine god had, the previous year, audibly declared that he was the "Word" referred to in the Gospel of John 1 : 1 - 3. The shrine had further claimed to have been in existence before anyone else and was the creator of the universe. As god, the shrine god owned the Bible and had actually written and given the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Mr Manyangwa further claimed that the Old Testament God has a culture of using mountains and rocks as places of communicating his will to mankind. For example, he spoke to Abraham on one of the mountains in the land of Moriah in

Genesis 22 ; He spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 20; and spoke to Elijah in the cleft of Mount Horeb in 1 Kings 19. The observable difference today with that of biblical times is that the mountains and the communities are in Zimbabwe.

Some Implications for a. Adventist Communities; b. the
Integration of Faith and Learning in Our Institutions of
Higher Learning.

A. Adventist communities living in areas predominantly controlled by the Mwali cult protagonists are under intense pressure to either give up their religious principles and participate in the rain-ceremonies or perish. Communal demand on them to comply is almost unbearable. The shrine god generally demands total obedience by every member of the community if full blessings are to be realized. Adventists have, in most cases, been blamed for the absence or inadequacy of rain. Communal compliance with the expectation from the cult-shrine are not optional. This is the reason behind the urgent call to the chiefs to fine or evict those viewed as social deviants from their chiefdoms. If evicted, for example, from chief "A" it would be highly unlikely that chief "B" would accept them unless they undertake to comply with the directives from the "Rock" (another name for the cult god.) The areas of non-compliance for Adventists that have become conspicuous are;- The Chisi days, when no work, especially agricultural work, should be performed. It is believed that on such days, Wednesdays of every week, Mwali works in the fields,

on crops destroying insects bent on destroying crops, enriching the soil so as to produce bumper harvests, and generally bless what has been planted in the fields. When god is at work in the fields, no mortal being should disturb him by being out there in the fields. It is not uncommon during harvest time for Adventist members to receive scathing condemnations and threats to their very lives from the adherents of traditional religions especially if poor harvests have been realized. B. Each year during the month of September representatives of the Mwali cult go to the chiefs to require gifts in kind to be presented to the cult centres to secure abundant rain for the nation. Chiefs, usually, issue orders and appoint, in each village, someone to collect these gifts with a careful record of those who have given and the nature of the gift presented. It is at such occasions that Adventist's non-compliance becomes apparent. Among the gifts to the shrine are;- 1. unground tobacco; 2. Daggah or marijuana; 3. the skin of a gennet, (a small animal found on mountains). The above items would be difficult for Adventists to handle even if they wanted to comply. The third area of exposure for Adventists' non-compliance is at what could be described as "report back meetings" by delegates to the cult shrine. Usually some kind of festival is held in each district on such occasions and delegates are given the opportunity to report if there was a word from the shrine god. Again every member of the community is expected to attend. Adventists have, conspicuously, been absent. This has, in most cases, exacerbated the anger and hostility of community leadership.

The writing on the wall is clear to every thinking Adventist that tumultuous times are upon them and that urgent measures are necessary either to forestall or derail the impending persecution of the members of the church in these affected areas.

Suggested Contingency Plans.

1. The church leadership needs to appoint a sub-committee to study and recommend to the main committee the extent of the problem. The committee would do well to interview members of the church concerned, chiefs and community elders.
2. Consider and explore legal protection for Adventist members presently undergoing the baptism of fire in the hands of their opponents. For Now, in Zimbabwe, the constitution of the country has enshrined "freedom of worship" as its cornerstone. Therefore, any coercion of our members to comply on the part of the cult protagonists would constitute an infringement of the law.
3. The church should consider exploring the possibility of proving temporary shelters to those evicted while measures are taken to secure permanent places for them or while the church contests their evictions in the courts of law. As a church the time has come to sharpen and put into practice our caring skills, we are our brother's keepers. Temporary structures could be build on our school properties where possible.
4. The church leadership needs to be reminded that the christian faith has a culture of dividing members of the

family, father against son; mother against daughter etc. (Matthew 10 : 34 - 39) hence the christian members of the church must, of necessity, shoulder the burdens of their brothers and sisters; fathers and mothers in Christ. In fact, members of the Adventist church in other districts could be called upon to temporarily shelter their displaced christian relatives.

5. Adventist leaders at Conference, Union or church levels could lobby Adventist members of Parliament or their sympathizers to forestall any measures suggested to change the present constitution to suit the whims or desires of traditionalists on religious freedom. It may be necessary, if conditions deteriorate, for the leadership of the church to secure an appointment with the president of the country to explain the plight of our members.

6. The church leadership should be encouraged to be aggressive in its approach in protecting the rights of its members to freedom of worship and jealously guard the church of God against destructive forces of the evil one.

B. 1. Adventist scholars and Institutions of Higher Learning have, over the years, given little or no credence to the study or understanding of traditional religiosity in the continent.

They have entertained the illusive idea, together with other protestant churches , that traditional structures would collapse and die a natural death as more Africans become educated and urbanized. The last few years have, however, proved the falsity of this perception, as witnessed by a resurgence of traditional religious structures at unprecedented

levels. This has been particularly so with the attainment of independence by most African countries. The only viable and honourable course of action is to prepare our ministerial students and teachers in training and students in other disciplines on how to deal with traditional religious systems.

This calls for the inclusion of the study of traditional religious systems in our curriculum to effect a meaningful integration of faith and learning.

2. The Integration of Faith and Learning would enable our students to understand the nature of the foe we are dealing with. Paul has postulated that the devil will (in the last days) transform himself into an angel of light (1 Corithians 11 : 14) this accounts for some similarities between some of the doctrines of traditional and christian belief systems.

3. Our students need to understand that the christian God is still adequate for any challenges including that of rain production if this is in line with His will. He demonstrated this on Mount Carmel.

4. Counseling services should be organized for students who come from affected areas or villages, this could include special prayers for them.

5. To appreciate the Mwali cult problem better our ministerial students could be assigned to pastors whose districts are affected by traditional religions during the Winter quarter or long vacations to receive the "on the job training and skills of counseling".

6. Institutions of learning and other organizations are to set up or source funding to assist and sustain students of

displaced families in school. Most people would be willing to contribute towards such a cause.

7. Fear and threats of some calamity are useful tools of traditionalists to force people to comply, it is necessary through the integration of faith and learning to re-assure students that if they are committed to Jesus Christ, the God who protected Daniel in the lion's den, is the same God we serve and worship. He is able to afford them the same protection today.

Conclusion.

The hostility of the Mwali cult to the christian religion dates back to the days when missionaries first came to Zimbabwe. Since then the battle for supremacy in the fields of religiosity has been on until the 1991 - 92 drought scenerio in the region. What exactly has caused the change on the part of the Mwali cult is not clear but the assumptions are that these are, but tactical moves by the cult system, to derail and hamper the forward advance of the christian faith especially Adventism. For Adventists the battle is on two fronts. The first is that of persecution through fines and threats of eviction and the other is that of deception in the case of claims by Gog Ngcatu Ncube, the shrine priestess, that she is a Seventh-day Adventist christian. This has the potential of derailing the faith of unstable members of the church. Furthermore, Gogo Ngcatu has introduced the Bible to the cult shrine something unprecedented in the past. It is now possible

that, if the present trend continues, delegates to the shrine cult may be required to bring along with other items, their Bibles too. The challenge to the Adventist leadership and Institutions of Higher Learning to protect its membership and unmask the devil's hidden agenda, is immense. The equipping and preparation of our members calls for the combined efforts of all the organs of our church systems and prayerful implementation of the above measures.

The scenerio described in this paper may not fit every situation in the continent but the basic principles could be modified to meet the changing nature of our enemy in various localities and thus secure for them peace of mind as they prepare for the soon return of their Lord in the clouds of heaven. Furthermore the drastic measures suggested above can only be used as a last resort when every endeavour at resolving the matter peacefully has been exhausted.

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