

Witches and healers in southern Africa

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Harare, Zimbabwe
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Dear Peter:

Early one morning in the crowded township of Highfield, a cemetery assistant claimed to have seen three naked witches sitting near a dug-up grave as he arrived for work. He quickly told anyone who would listen that one witch was eating a female corpse's breast, while another was feasting on the head. As the story spread, hundreds of angry residents gathered outside the cemetery. Riot police fired tear gas into the crowd as people tried to batter down the steel gates to find the culprits and stone them to death. By evening, the mob laid siege to a police station, where the witches were said to have been taken. Defying baton-wielding police, many people maintained an overnight vigil there, hoping to catch a glimpse of the witches. A few lingered for days, despite police insistence that no witches had been taken into custody.



The Herald (Zimbabwe)

When I stay in Harare, sometimes I feel like I'm not living in the "real" Africa. Movie theaters screen U.S. hits. Radio DJs play rock-n-roll. Italian cafes serve **cappuccino** and **gelato**. Tall buildings loom over streets bustling with men toting briefcases. Occasionally, however, weird incidents remind me that traditional African magic flourishes alongside imported modern materialism.

Lightening, for example, figures prominently in popular tales of magic. Zimbabwe has the world's highest rate of death

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from lightening, with more than 100 dying every year. Each rainy season, the national newspaper notes on an almost daily basis the mounting count of lightening fatalities. Scientists say Zimbabwe has the highest number of lightening strikes per area in the region because the country has so many radioactive granite outcroppings. Radioactivity ionizes the air above the rock, making a likely path for lightening.¹ Many accept this scientific explanation but also believe that lightening bolts can be directed by sorcerers to kill victims. How else can it be explained that lightening strikes one person dead and leaves his companions untouched? Even normally cynical people admit that they are convinced magic users keep lightening in a pot until they send it on a deadly mission. A few friends insist they've seen demonstrations.

Zambian minister bewitched by juju

THE Zambian Minister of State for Power, Transport and Communications, Cosmas Masongo has revealed that he has become seriously ill after being attacked by juju directed at him by political "friends".

Masongo, recovering in a Chingola hospital, told *Palaver* "I was bewitched. Each time I entered my office I was in terrible pain and had it not been for the timely intervention of Dr Emmah Chisha, I would have gone."

His troubles started in May 1990. He was in the master bedroom of his Kasama house in northern Zambia, preparing for a provincial council meeting, when suddenly he was struck with something "with the force of a bullet".

He fell onto his bed and during the night his right leg, from the hip downwards became "totally paralysed". "Had it not been for my driver who dragged me to doctors who administered European medicine, I would have died on the spot," he said.

He was entirely cured and had to go back for further treatment. But

the affected parts turned black as if they had been "smeared with black polish".

The white man's magic was not working so he travelled from one end of the country to another and consulted a whole series of African medicinemen over six months.

Finally he met Dr Chisha, a spiritual and traditional medical practitioner. Chisha said that a bolt of magical lightning had been directed at him. "When he came to see me the situation was so bad that maggots were coming out of his body," Dr Chisha said. The only way to heal the minister permanently was to deflect the spell back onto the perpetrator. Prayers were held so that he would become mad. But thus far the identity of the evil doer has not emerged.

Minister Masongo was so worried that he once asked permission to change his government offices, but his colleagues would not believe his story that he was being bewitched and he was not allowed to move. This convinced him that some of his political colleagues were trying to take over his ministerial post.

New African magazine (London)

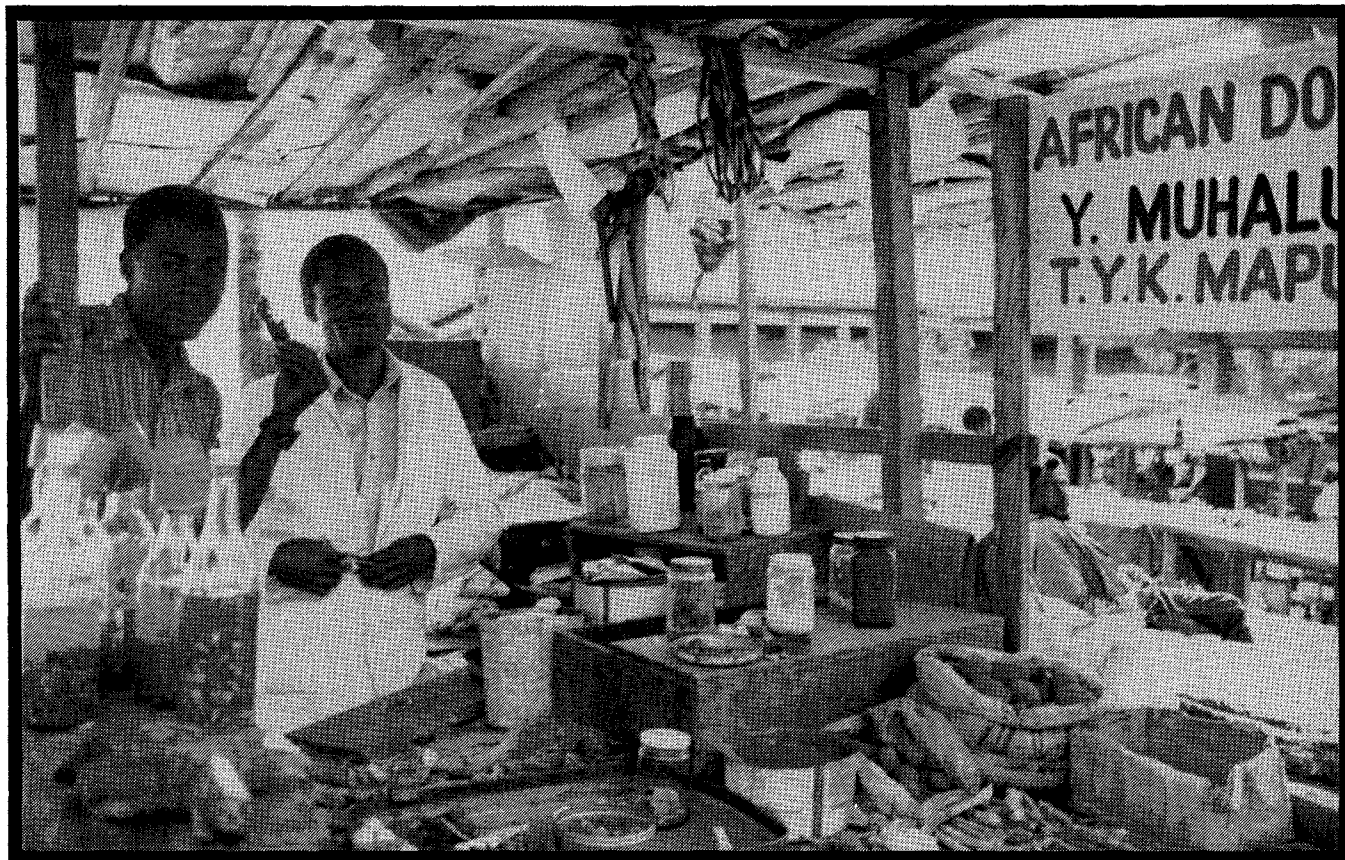
"Witchcraft is a dangerous subject to be researching," warned Maxwell Chivasa, editor of a local monthly newspaper *Development Dialogue*. "I'm not saying I believe in all kinds of witchcraft, but when I was working as a reporter for the *Manica Post* (newspaper) I met shepherd boys in rural areas near Chipinge who could send lightening to strike any tree you pointed out. They'd say: 'You want lightening to hit that tree?' and it would. That area has some very strong sorcerers. People there say if you have no magic, then you're still a young man and not a real man."

The active use of magic isn't simply a rural phenomenon, either. In cities, where people are generally more sophisticated, college-educated men also employ magic or countermeasures against it. At soccer matches between local clubs, I've seen players jumping over the fence when entering the pitch, rather than

¹ M. D. A. Van Olst, "Progress in Lightening Research," *Zimbabwe Science News*, Vol. 25, No. 10/12, Oct/Dec 1991.

entering through the normal gate. I always thought they were being exuberant until a Zimbabwean friend corrected me. Actually, the men were avoiding the *muti*, or magical charms, they suspected had been planted at the entrance to weaken their playing. Visiting teams on unfamiliar territory take other precautions to neutralize witchcraft, covertly sprinkling salt or urinating on the grass while they warm up before a game. Still, some players have claimed they shot off target after seeing double goal posts and unlucky goalkeepers have sworn they saw two balls coming at them. Others say they've seen supernaturally inspired hares, snakes, flocks of birds and swarms of bees on playing fields.

During the past two years of travel across the region, I've found the stories about the supernatural and the beliefs in spirits remarkably similar. There are avenging spirits or demons that inexplicably kill people, ancestral spirits that punish descendants who neglect them and protect those who venerate them, and cannibalistic witches who cause calamities of every kind. On the more positive side, there are spirit oracles, healers and herbalists to be found in every country, selling charms in the markets and conducting psychic investigations in every village. If one believes in magic, then it often seems to work. And even



Two herbalists at their stall in the town of Mzuzu, northern Malawi.

if one doesn't believe, it's still a force to be reckoned with.

Most people I've met in southern Africa assume that I don't believe in magic because I'm a white foreigner. They say witches and traditional healers, spirits and spirit mediums are powerful because Africans believe in them. "White Europeans are safe from witchcraft -- I think," my friend said. "If you're not raised to believe in it, then witches can't harm you. But then again, maybe they can. Maybe you'd better watch what you say about them."

An academic writing a doctoral dissertation can certainly explain away belief in supernatural forces as the cultural assertion of African tradition against encroachment from the West: colonialism initially, then Western religious proselytizing and now domination by Western culture and values. Magical beliefs can be also understood as a reflection of a society's "collective unconscious," which reaffirms underlying community values and functions as a social restraint to keep people in line with traditional norms. Even though one can attempt to analyze magic in sociological terms, however, it doesn't mean supernatural things don't really occur. I can vouch that they do.

Spirit mediums and spirit maxims

My first experience of the uncanny came in Zimbabwe about 12 years ago. At that time, I was teaching at an isolated mission school outside of Chipinge, the area where my editor friend Maxwell Chivasa said the most powerful sorcerers reside. Late one night, as I walked home after grading papers, I heard glass breaking in the girls' dormitory. I was 21 years old and a bit too impressed with my responsibilities as a teacher, so I rushed in to take charge. A small girl with foam bubbling from her lips lay writhing on the floor. Shards of glass lay nearby. All the other girls cowered outside in the dark. Even the matron of the dormitory, usually a formidable woman, stood silent and shaking in fear. "These superstitious folk think an epileptic fit is voodoo," I said to myself. I ran to the stricken student, intending to jam something between her gnashing teeth, when she jerked upright like a marionette tugged by its strings. I leaned over her, perplexed. The girl gave me a piercing, malign look. Then she hit me with her hand. It was only a slap, a flick of the wrist, but her swat sent me flying 10 feet across the room.

That was my introduction to an *ngozi*, said by the Zimbabwe

Zambia witchcraft threats

KASEMPA.
ZAMBIA'S ruling party, the Movement for Multi-party Democracy, is to exclude aspiring councilors from contesting the coming local government elections if they continue threatening others with witchcraft.

Acting Kasempa district chairman, Mr Joshua Mukena, told party members that witchcraft was out.

Mr Mukena's warning came in the wake of reports that one aspiring candidate in Mukunashi Ward was threatening to bewitch those daring to stand against him in the local government elections scheduled to take place throughout Zambia on November 18.

He stressed that MMD would ensure that only "clean" candidates with an ability to improve conditions of people in the district would be fielded on that party's ticket.

The Sunday Mail
(Zimbabwe)

Shona people to be an avenging spirit that can possess an individual or a member of his or her family who wronged it when alive. For example, a person who meets a sudden death at the hands of another will become an angry, restless spirit that bedevils the culprit's family. A fellow teacher later told me that the girl's brother had been a guerrilla fighter who had killed an innocent person during the war that led to black majority rule in 1980. An *ngozi* (one with a wicked backhand) possessed her out of spite for her brother. But only a *n'anga*, a traditional healer/diviner, can diagnose the problem and prescribe suitable appeasement to the spirit.

A case of *ngozi* made headlines recently, although the drama started back in 1973. In that year, a farmer in the Tokwe area was found dead at the foot of Chamanyeredzi Mountain. Enos Madzivanyika had set out on his bicycle to retrieve a milk pot he had left in another village. A doctor's autopsy found the cause of death to be heart failure. The bicycle, missing from the death scene, turned up a month later. The deceased's son, Israel, questioned if "heart failure was also responsible for the missing bicycle." But police dismissed his suspicions of foul play and closed the case. After the funeral, Israel learned of a fishy land deal between his father, a neighbor named Chibingemushananga and a government land inspector. This inspector then demanded payment of an outstanding debt of 75 cows owed to him for "expanding your farm," so the family eventually gave him some land and 25 cattle.

Years afterward an *ngozi* began to attack the neighbor's son, who then became mentally deranged and kept crying: "I am Madzivanyika! Why did you kill me? I want my entrails and tongue which you took, as well as my pot of milk." Chibingemushananga became ill and five more of his children began falling prey to fits of madness. More years passed. Madzivanyika's own children became mentally disturbed. A *n'anga* said the father's spirit had turned on his family to push them into finding his killers. By 1990, Chibingemushananga died. Six months later, his family sent intermediaries to confess culpability for Madzivanyika's death. The delegation leader died months afterward. The son of another

School invaded by 'evil spirits'

BOTH Kasirisiri primary school and secondary schools in Sanyati communal lands are haunted by evil spirits (*zvishiri*) which are reported to be beating up pupils, teachers and villagers.

Following the incidents, many pupils are said to be reluctant to go to school for fear of becoming victims.

The headmaster, Mr Luke Masendeke who confirmed the incidents recently, said the attacks had become a common occurrence every week with reports of either a pupil, teacher or a member of the community hav-

ing been attacked.

Those attacked often fell to the ground, crying and shaking their heads and eventually prostrate on the ground and relapse into a coma.

After that the spirits would make various demands threatening to kill their victim. They also reveal the identities of person/persons who would have sent them.

All the information by the evil spirits would only come after the person alleged to have been attacked had been sprinkled with a concoction (*muti*), it is believed.

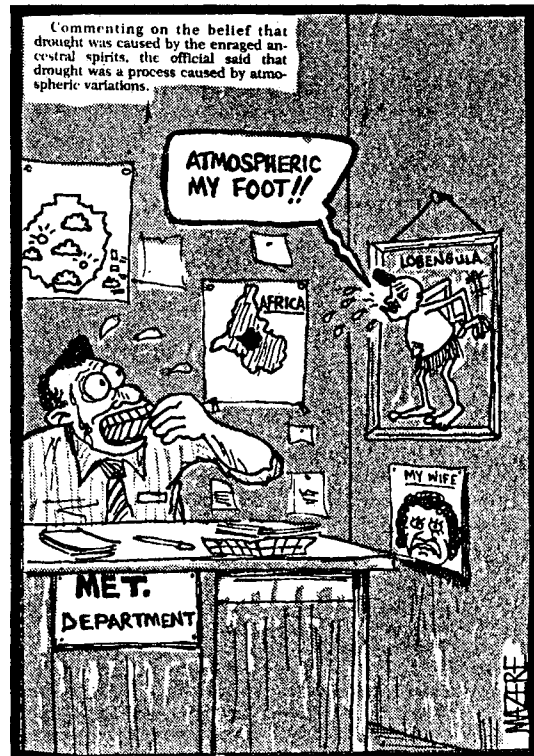
—ZIS

Daily Gazette (Zimbabwe)

go-between, a relative of Chibingemushananga, also died. Then, Chibingemushananga's family paid a settlement: 45 cattle and Z\$3,000 (about US\$500) to the Madzivanyika family. They got off lightly. The customary settlement is often a virgin girl from the family, a practice that parliament finally outlawed last year.

"The ngozi has affected my faith," Israel Madzvivanyika said. "I am a Methodist. My father was a fully-fledged preacher in the Church, but right now I don't know. Later in life I might be able to go and pray in my house, but my faith has suffered."

Spirits play a variety of roles in Shona culture. An ancestral spirit or **mudzimu** can beneficially influence the lives of his or her descendants. All deceased relatives become a **mudzimu**, so long as they have children. There must be hundreds for every clan, dead mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers in an unbroken line stretching back to the beginning of time. The work of the **vadzimu** (plural **mudzimu**) is to protect the lineage. They guard descendants by warding off threats of evil. Life must hold more meaning for a person who believes that his relatives' spirits invisibly throng the air around the homestead to influence each day's circumstances. Such beliefs may impart relevance even to small coincidences and imbue a sense of mystical wonder to life.



However, **vadzimu** also act as a conservative force to uphold tradition. Custom says the spirits of people who die childless wander in frustration, unprovided for by posterity, seeking acknowledgement from strangers by attacking and possessing them. (This belief in **shave** spirits can explain why the traditionally-minded are skeptical of population control efforts.) And if **vadzimu** are ignored or neglected, they punish a family by allowing misfortune, sickness or death to enter their homes.² As Western culture erodes belief in spirits, some people insist there are fateful consequences. Bus accidents, locusts, drought and other disasters are blamed on angry ancestors.

² Michael Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona* (Harare: Mambo Press, 1973).

A spirited revolt

"Today, I don't see anyone practicing the old ceremonies," complained a **mhondoro** of the Chinamora clan. "The problem today is that nothing is held sacred." Earlier in the day, the man speaking to me had been 50-year-old Hendison Gwindi, a former chief of the area outside Harare known for its weird rock formations. Now he had become a 200-year-old spirit, talking in a frail falsetto. A **mhondoro** is the spirit of the clan founder at the top of the hierarchy of ancestral spirits. **Mhondoros** are concerned with the clan as a whole and create rain, watch over the land, and appoint chiefs. When I arrived at Gwindi's home, he wore a tweed sports coat that made him look more like a college professor than a spirit medium. After we requested an interview with the **mhondoro**, Gwindi changed into a simple robe of black and white cloth. Spirits are said to dislike modern colors like red. They also don't tolerate modern innovations like perfume or wrist watches, I am told. Retiring into the darkness of a mud hut with attendants, Gwindi began to sputter and scream as the spirit manifested. After listening to almost an hour of agonizing sounds resembling childbirth, I saw a hand poke out of the pitch-black doorway. A finger beckoned me. I felt like Dorothy going into her first confab with the Wizard of Oz. It was time to get some answers from the spirit. Once inside, I asked: "What will be the future of Zimbabwe and its land?"

"If this country fails in respecting the sacredness of mountains, forests and holy trees, then I think this country's future is really in doubt," the **mhondoro** said through an interpreter. (Gwindi himself speaks good English but his ancient spirit supposedly knows only an archaic form of Shona.) "Most of our sacred forests have been given to individuals. Chitungwiza (the site of a township) once was a temple for Chaminuka (an even greater **mhondoro**). Now the trees have been cut down, the grasses burned, the water polluted. Why should I talk to you foreigners when my own people, my Zimbabwean children, won't listen to me?"

The Chinamora spirit seemed more concerned about ecology

A MISTEROUS fire at a place near Sadza Growth Point in Chikomba District is now cause for concern for the community, prompting local leaders to call for strict adherence to traditional and cultural values.

The villagers said natural combustion erupted recently at a place in Mamire area and raged for two days before it eventually faded. A similar fire occurred at the same place last year, the locals said, adding that the fires were causing a severe damage to the environment.

The local leaders, however, feel the fires could be an omen for something more serious to befall the community because the people were not observing their culture.

Most of the traditional leaders in the community attributed the strange happenings to a well in the area which they said was being abused and desecrated by locals, especially women.

The District Administrator for Chikomba, Mr Ephinus Magunda, also echoed the leaders' sentiments and said some indisciplined people in the area were desecrating the well by washing their laundry with perfumed soap there, a thing that was forbidden traditionally.

He also said some of the women came to the well dressed in red which was in contravention of the traditional rites attached to the well.

Mr Magunda called on the local people to observe their tradition and urged them to organise a ceremony to appease their ancestors to avoid such incidents in the future.

The Sunday Times (Zimbabwe)

than anything else but in the 1970s, when **mhondoros** helped guerrillas fight the white Rhodesian regime, spirits and spirit mediums had talked more about politics. The spirits established a continuity with the first **chimurenga**, or uprising, in 1896-7 when Shona people rebelled against white settlers with encouragement from two paramount Shona **mhondoros**, Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kuguvi. In the second **chimurenga**, almost 80 years later, spirit mediums played a more active role. They guided guerrillas across rough terrain, showed them places to hide or cache arms, and identified government informers.³ In this way, the **mhondoro** spirits legitimized the guerrilla war with their blessing and, at the same time, represented the means by which rural peasants could have a measure of control over the young men with guns.⁴ One commander referred to Mbuya Nehanda as the guerrillas' "most important and influential recruit." After the war, however, **n'angas** and spirit mediums had their hands full trying to cure a society afflicted with more madness than ever before. The spirits of people not given the proper **kurova guva** burial rite and those killed wrongfully in war remained unsettled and attacked the living as **ngozi**.⁵ Mbuya Nehanda reappeared on August 11 this year to officiate at a traditional "cleansing ceremony" held on Heroes Day, the holiday commemorating those who died fighting in the liberation war. After possessing her spirit medium, Mbuya Nehanda poured water over 30 ex-combatants to cleanse them of the blood they had spilled. A sheep was slaughtered to appease their dead comrades and "to send their spirits back to their homes." Mbuya Nehanda also warned that drought will strike again unless government leaders carried out certain traditional rituals.

Adapting Christianity to traditional beliefs

At the mission where I taught 12 years ago, church leaders condemned the practice of honoring ancestral spirits as the work of the devil. Some called such traditionalists pagans and Satan worshippers. Even though mission members might call themselves Christian, they hedged their bets with **vadzimu** rites. Whenever a burial was scheduled for Sunday morning at the mission, I could hear the drums of the ancient burial ceremony beating on Saturday night. After a few months, during which the dead man's ghost was said to wander in the bush, women on the mission covertly brewed

³ Robert E. Mazur, "Social Class Differential in the Impact of Repression and Guerrilla War on Rural Population and Development in Zimbabwe," *The Journal of Developing Areas*, No. 25, July 1991.

⁴ Terence Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe*, (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985).

⁵ Pamela Reynolds, "Children of Tribulation: The Need to Heal and the Means to Heal War Trauma," *Africa*, Vol. 60, No. 1, 1990.

old-fashioned millet beer to appease the spirit. Such a ceremony, called **kurova guva**, is thought necessary to call the dead back home into the pantheon of household ancestral spirits.⁶

These days, the mainstream Christian churches in southern Africa talk of "inculturation" and "charismatic renewal" because they recognize the hopelessness of trying to eradicate strong indigenous beliefs in spirits. Inculturation is defined by Zambia's catholic bishops as "the task of making Christianity in all its aspects our own, truly African." Charisms are supernatural manifestations, such as speaking in tongues, healing or predicting the future while possessed by the "Holy Spirit." In either case, the strategy is to acknowledge animist beliefs but weed out anything contradicting the church's dogma. While established religion is becoming more liberal here, it can be perilous for a minister or a priest to talk too much about spirits. The archbishop of Lusaka, Zambia, used to hold healing sessions attended by thousands to drive out evil spirits. Though achieving miraculous success, Father Emmanuel Milingo was accused of unorthodoxy by his superiors. He was recalled to the Vatican in 1982 for psychological and theological examinations, and subsequently resigned his high-profile post. He reportedly continued faith-healing in Rome, drawing large crowds.⁷

"The traditional main line church has actively sought to suppress spirituality. Because the church is spiritually dead, it is not surprising that now we have some people from the non-Pentecostal religions advocating a syncretism that will combine the theologies of the church and the only spirituality they know, i.e. ancestral worship. Where the spirit of God is absent, it is inevitable that people will seek to include Mbuya Nehanda, Chaminuka, Sekuru Kaguvi and their own dead great grandfather in Christian worship to fill in the spiritual vacuum!

...It is time people went to church to get rid of the tormenting spirits of witchcraft that follow them even into the cathedrals. It is time the church stopped electing people to church offices for fear of being bewitched."

Burning Issues Magazine (Zimbabwe)

Belief in spirits became one of the principal reasons that Africans split off from established denominations to form a hybrid Christianity. The roots of southern Africa's religious "black consciousness movement" ironically go back to Illinois, where the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion was founded

⁶ Ignatius M. Zvarevashe, "Shona Religion," **Shona Customs**, ed. Clive and Peggy Kileff (Harare: Mambo Press, 1970).

⁷ Leny Lagerwerf, **Witchcraft, Sorcery and Spirit Possession** (Harare: Mambo Press, 1987).

in 1896. Somehow that apocalyptic sect transplanted itself to South Africa. The movement spread across southern Africa in the first half of the century. Early leaders of the mweya (Shona for spirit) churches spoke in tongues and prophecies when possessed by spirits, healed by exorcising evil spirits, granted fertility to barren women and made rain.⁸ Today, the members of numerous Zionist sects wear white robes, carry shepherd crooks and worship outdoors so God can hear their prayers better. Leaders function like n'angas to give the faithful what the missionaries

condemned. For example, Vapostori or apostles continue the kurova guva or home-bringing ceremony for spirits, but now the ritual accommodates the deceased in heaven. The spirit still acts as family guardian, but intercedes with God instead of hovering around doorways at night. At least the parishioners have some kind of psychic safety. Worshipers in orthodox churches can feel unprotected against witches and evil spirits, so the independent African churches are growing faster than ever.

Just like Israel Madzvivanyika, whose faith was shaken by a Zimbabwean ngozi, Namibians Sackeus Paulus and Saima Petrus aren't sure what to believe in anymore. More than five mysterious fires destroyed their homes and valuables, leaving them and their nine children to live destitute under a tree in the village of

Teachers flee from haunted primary school

TEACHERS at Mazabuka Primary School, in southern Zambia, stopped work claiming their lives are being threatened by witchcraft. The school's Parents/Teachers' Association chairman, Mr Labban Mbole, said that teachers had complained that there is a human ghost which threatens children and their teachers in the toilets.

He said the human ghost is said to be in the habit of stretching a white hand which looks like smoke and whoever sees the hand gets sick instantly.

Authorities say so far three teachers have died in the past six months due to the same alleged witchcraft practice. Pupils and teachers who have been victims of the alleged witchcraft practice say they had always been turned away from the hospital on grounds

that they do not exhibit any signs of illness when examined.

Mr Mbole also said all parents who have children at the school have been called upon to donate 100 kwacha each in order to raise money for the witch-finder who would be called in to rid the school of such practices.

He added that pupils have been sent away so that parents could pay the money quickly.

There was no immedi-

ate comment from the acting district education officer for Mazabuka as he was reported to be in Chikankata on official duties.

The Herald (Zimbabwe)

⁸ M.L. Daneel, *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches*, Volume II: Church Growth (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1974).

Ombalantu near the border with Angola. According to Paulus, no one had ever been seen near the huts when they ignited in broad daylight. He tried sending some of his children to stay elsewhere in the village. In two days' time, two huts at their new home burned. Other children sent to a different relative in a nearby village were sent away after a similar calamity.

Both Paulus and Petrus describe themselves as devout Christians, yet the couple believed that only a traditional **sangoma**, or sorcerer, could thwart whatever burned down the huts. Paulus and Petrus decided to pay the **sangoma** 50 Rand and a goat to track down the cause of the mysterious fires. "We do not know what to think," said Saima Petrus. "We do not believe in witchcraft, but if something similar to what we were told by our parents is happening to us, what can one call it?"

Witches and witch-hunters

Some people have never had trouble with spirits but still believe in charms. Fear compels their faith in magical self-defense. While I think co-existing alongside the spirit world must give life more significance, a believer's nights could be filled with terror when every sound, creak in the rafters or flutter outside the window might be an evil spirit sent by an enemy. Worse yet, it could be the witch herself.

A **muroyi**, or witch, is said to ride naked at night on the back of a hyena to visit the homes of people she wants to harm. Occasionally she rides a mesmerized man, leaving the baffled victim to awaken exhausted or even lying naked in the bushes. Often a witch sends her "familiar," such as owls, snakes or bizarre little psychic creatures called **zvidoma** to do her dirty work. The **muroyi** is almost always a woman possessed by an evil spirit, in the same way a **n'anga** is possessed by a good, healing spirit. Men can be **muroyi wamasikati**, or "daytime witches," but these sorcerers do simple things, like poison sharp objects and plant them on a footpath. They are regarded as less dangerous than female witches.

Like the cemetery worker whose witch story caused a riot, several people have sworn to me that they have seen naked witches gathering in cemeteries to rob graves. That witches eat or use

Man's private parts vanish

A 30-YEAR-OLD Masvingo man on a visit to Mutoko recently received a shock of his life when he woke up to discover his private organs missing and sleeping in the bush instead of a house.

The man (name supplied) was coming from Masvingo on a visit to Nyadire Mission when he dropped from a Mudzi-bound bus at Nyadire turn-off.

As it was getting dark, a woman in her mid-20s arrived at the turn-off also intending to go to Nyadire Mission. It was while there that the man proposed love and the woman accepted.

When hopes of getting transport faded, it is alleged that the woman invited the man to her home for the night.

According to the man, he remembers very well entering into a house and going to bed with the woman. But what shocked him was that when he got up the following day he was in a bush and the woman was nowhere to be found, also his private organs had disappeared.

Teachers at both Mutoko Primary and Secondary schools confirmed that they had seen the man with private organs missing and was looking for jobs to raise money to consult **n'angas** over the whereabouts of the woman or to have his private organs restored.

Mr Goodwin Muri-ndagomo, a teacher at the school, confirmed that he had seen the man without his organs. — ZIS.

The Herald
(Zimbabwe)

human flesh is one of the most common beliefs across the region. As the story goes, one witch will beat on the grave with a stick, causing it to open up so the witches can take meat from the corpse. Beating the grave again closes up the hole to look as if never disturbed.

"Witches exist! They operate in groups and it's well known that they like human flesh, which they cook and eat before going out at night," said Gordon Chavunduka, former president of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers' Association (ZINATHA). "I have personally seen people who were said to be witches and I have seen dried human flesh. The story fits very well with what's known by the traditional healer." One might be tempted to dismiss Chavunduka as a crank. But perhaps not: Chavunduka, a professor of sociology, is the vice-chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe.

ZINATHA, a government-sponsored group that Chavunduka helped found, boasts a membership of more than 45,000 traditional medical practitioners or *n'angas*, spirit mediums and faith healers. An additional 45,000 are not registered. It aims to narrow the gap between traditional and Western medicine. The group holds workshops to teach members how to incorporate AIDS awareness, prevention and community home-care into their work. Some *n'anga* are herbalists with a wide knowledge of medicinal plants. Others are diviners who throw down carved wooden sticks or bones called *hakata*, cowrie shells or tree seeds and then study their pattern to determine causes of illnesses or foretell the future. In either case, traditional healers say their talent comes from an ancestral spirit or a wandering *shave* spirit, rather than from their own learning.

With a shortage of health care in southern Africa, traditional healers take the place of doctors. In Zambia, there are only 1,000 medical doctors (about one doctor to 8,000 people). By contrast, the number of registered traditional healers has grown rapidly from less than 10,000 in 1980 to 25,000 in 1992. Estimates indicate another 25,000 are unregistered. In Zimbabwe, where visiting a clinic or hospital used to be

Deaths Spark Off Witch-hunt

By Absalom Koch

KHORIXAS

PARENTS OF children at a school here have requested the help of regional commissioner Hans Boois to unravel the "mysterious" deaths of two boys, said to have been victims of witchcraft.

Parents living in Windhoek have gone as far as taking their children out of the school.

One boy died of a cold last December, while the other died at the beginning of the school term, complaining that he was suffocating. He also apparently asked people to hold his head "as his neck was loose".

Boois and Deputy Director of Education Linus Garoeb went to the school after a request by the headmaster to investigate and arrest the situation before things got out of hand.

New Era learnt that Boois and Garoeb were shocked to find that witch-finders were allowed to practice at the school and that almost all the teachers and pupils had washed their feet to ward off evil spells.

Witch-finders have been paid R2,500 in cash and some goats although R1,000 is still outstanding. They claim that if they were given five head of cattle they would work wonders and cleanse the school.

New Era (Namibia)

free, fees are skyrocketing because of economic reforms. As a result, more and more people are turning to traditional healers because they can't afford a doctor or his medicine. Healers often only charge their patients once they are cured and accept clothing, crops or livestock as payment.

Of course, there is another reason there are so many traditional healers. "We have so many healers because there are so many more witches," said Peter Sibanda, ZINATHA's secretary for research and education. "In this country, witchcraft is still practiced. Everyone knows this, though some pretend it isn't. Many of the very rich are practicing witchcraft on a higher level. People are killing their first-borns, or those of others, for the sake of being rich by witchcraft."

Among the officers of ZINATHA, perhaps none is respected more than Peter Chilongo, who heads the association's disciplinary committee. His job is said to be the most dangerous of all: hunting down witches who kill and punishing n'angas who violate the group's code of conduct. One n'anga usually balks at angering another for fear of reprisal. Yet it's estimated that there are up to five healers and spirit mediums residing in every Zimbabwean village, so there must be some kind of supervision. White commercial farmers are frequent customers, paying up to Z\$3,000 for Chilongo to find the person killing cattle or causing farm workers to die in succession.

"I remember one dispute between a chief and healer, outside of Mutoko," Chilongo said. "This man manifested lions. Lions that ate four of the chief's cattle. They even tried to kill the chief himself." He paused to see if I understood. I didn't. "He used a root that became a full-sized lion. I made him demonstrate and I saw it grow. From a root to a rat to a cat to a dog to a lion." He stopped again to take a pinch of snuff. "The chief had tried to chase him away, so the healer grew angry. Eventually, with my help, a magistrate ordered the n'anga to pay a \$1,500 fine or spend three years in jail. Eventually, I chased him from the area." Chilongo said he also vanquished a man who often became a crocodile that preyed on villagers fetching water. Each year, as the rain flooded the swamps, the n'anga would strike. "I took his charms away," he said. "The man is spending two years in jail."

However, there are legal hazards to witch-hunting. The Witchcraft Suppression Act, passed in 1899 as a copy of South Africa's law, remains in force in Zimbabwe. Anyone who accuses another person of being a witch can be fined, sentenced to jail for up to three years, or given "corporal punishment not exceeding twenty lashes." Employing a witch-finder is illegal, while professing to be know witchcraft is not. Similar laws exist in Namibia and Botswana. Not surprisingly, ZINATHA is lobbying for significant amendments to the law. They say it limits a n'anga's ability to fight the national scourge of witches.

The law has led to some interesting courtroom drama. Emelia Chikati, an 18-year-old woman from southern Zimbabwe, stood trial a few months ago for violating the Act. Her crime was not that she dug up corpses, which she admitted, but that she insisted her elderly neighbor helped her. "Are you a witch?" the judge asked Chikati. "Oh yes," she said and told of an owl, a snake and other charms given to her by her mother.

Chikati said Makosi Hwanya, the neighbor she alleged was her witching tutor, took these tools of the trade and wouldn't give them back. "We use the owl, the snake and the charms when we travel at night to various places to bewitch people and collect human flesh from graves."

"Are you normal?" asked the judge. "Yes, I am normal, Your Worship," Chikati said. "I have on many occasions eaten human flesh, which I was given by Hwanya." Chikati said she wanted the animals and charms back because she no longer wanted to practice witchcraft. Asked why, Chikati claimed Hwanya had ordered her to bewitch her own relatives. Hwanya denied all. The judge sentenced Chikati to nine months in jail for labelling Hwayna a witch.

Witches seem to personify every imaginable evil. They're cannibals, breaking the most fundamental of taboos. They attack members of their own family, destroying the lineage that so concerns the ancestral spirits. They work magic, so their power is threatening. And they associate with dangerous creatures like snakes, or nocturnal birds like owls. As the symbol of everything detestable, a witch is a scapegoat for social tensions bottled up by the strict code of polite manners governing Shona society. Faced with unpredictable misfortunes, a community believes in magic because they can find answers about the causes of life's problems and find solutions to deal constructively with them.⁹

Woman in possession of alleged human flesh

THE police in Murehwa are investigating circumstances which have led to the possession of human flesh by a Mukarakate woman who allegedly claims that she is a witch who delights in human flesh delicacies.

The 25-year-old woman was picked up last week at Mukombe Resettlement Scheme Village Nine where she was living with her husband who had since sent her away and was allegedly interested in the police investigations into the saga.

The officer-in-charge of Murewa police, Inspector Silas Kamunhukamwe who confirmed the arrest, said the suspected human flesh had been sent to the forensic laboratory.

He said the police were still investigating the case which he described as an exceptional one in police histo-

ry. But he could not be drawn to comment on her submissions to the police that she was a self-confessed witch.

Eyewitnesses at the police station on the day she was released into her parents' custody pending the investigations alleged that the woman bragged that she had helped in the exhumation of human corpses which she later shared with other witches.

The woman, who could not look straight into the eyes of a small crowd which had gathered to have a glimpse at her, openly confessed that there was nothing as delicious as human flesh "especially that of young children because of its tenderness".

She also gave details on how they used to open graves using branches of an unnamed tree. — ZIS.

The Herald (Zimbabwe)

⁹ M.L. Daneel, Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches.

In southern Africa, witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft can also function as a potent means of enforcing uniformity. Society's stability can be threatened by an individual's success because it attracts jealousy and creates social friction. Powerful individuals do exist in traditional culture but achieve their positions in the hierarchy gradually, as family elders die off, not by brilliance. An African village, like a gossipy small town in the United States, maintains social cohesion by discouraging innovations on "accepted community values." Conservatives wanting to protect the traditional status quo can destroy opponents with witchcraft. Or they can brand nonconformists as witches because once someone is regarded as a witch or sorcerer he loses all credibility.

Ilse Noy, a German development worker in Zimbabwe who runs workshops for rural women in art and handicraft, discovered that the greatest obstacles for women artists were the consequences of success. "Witchcraft is an important tool within Shona society, guaranteeing stability and preventing extreme social changes," Noy said. At the start of one of her weaving workshops, a self-confident and well-respected young woman was elected group leader. When her mother-in-law died a few months later, however, the admired leader became an outcast accused of using witchcraft to kill her in-law. The next leader, a timid woman, immediately complained of illnesses caused by magical attacks by those jealous of her position. Finally, Noy abandoned the European notion of a leader in favor of a management committee that didn't expose individuals to such witchcraft accusations and attacks.¹⁰

"Witchcraft is threatening to the new individuality and, at the same time, reassuring because it provides traditional answers to unknown personal experiences," Noy said.

The changing pattern of resettlement in Zambia reveals the fear of witchcraft. Successful individuals who return to rural areas won't reestablish themselves in their home villages. In a phenomenon called "peri-urbanization," they build homes and till land on the outskirts of provincial towns instead. "There's a jealousy of wealth when people move back to the village to plant crops or start businesses," said Leslie Ashbaugh, an American doctoral student conducting field research in Zambia. "People would just as soon torch your house and poison you if they think you're living above the standard of everyone else. So returnees move closer to the road and stay away from relatives. Even then, small roadside shops are constantly closing because of witchcraft." I wanted to confirm Ashbaugh's observations, so I asked a progressive tobacco farmer in the eastern province town of Sinda if his neighbors were envious of his prosperity. "I used to get 4,000 to 5,000 bags of maize (corn) from my fields every

¹⁰ Ilse Noy, *The Art of the Weya Women*, (Harare: Baobab Books, 1992).

year since 1979," said 56-year-old Joseph Makomechi. "Then fire destroyed the harvest in 1983, then again in 1985. I saw it start in the middle of the field, so I knew people had become jealous. So I made a vow never to grow a commercial crop of maize again."

The most telling story of witchcraft fear comes from Botswana. A newly hired staff member working in a religious organization told me that he had wondered about its hiring and firing practices. A surly office worker seemed able to do as she pleased, insulting colleagues and ignoring supervisors with impunity. Finally, behind closed doors, he learned that the employers would not fire her because they feared witchcraft.

Some dubious kinds of magic

Undoubtedly, some of the stories about witches and spirits printed in the newspapers and retold among friends are fake. Pretending to have magical powers is an easy way to make money anywhere in the world because gullible people exist in every country. I know I'm gullible, but at least I'm getting to be more discerning. The *mhondoro* I visited, for example, seemed too well-informed to be real. The squeaky voiced "ancient spirit" became startled by an airplane flying overhead and wondered without comprehension what caused the loud noise. Yet a few minutes later, when I asked the spirit if it resented Western culture, the *mhondoro* began to sing a Michael Jackson tune. ZINATHA'S

traditional healers also gave me reasons for doubts. While I waited for an interview one morning, a young guy walked in and plunked down Z\$73 dollars. The secretary immediately typed up a red and white certificate proclaiming him a registered traditional healer. I asked ZINATHA's Sibanda if the man had passed a test or completed a required course. "We used to have a test, but we found too few could pass it," Sibanda said. "Out of a 100 people, maybe 10 or 20 people could get a passing mark. No one else could join and few people were paying dues. So we dropped the test. Actually, I've never seen that man who came in today, but the secretary will ask him with whom he trained. If she's not satisfied with his answer, she'll turn him away." I retorted that the secretary asked no questions. Sibanda shrugged and said nothing.

'Prophet in the park'

By Tapera Chikuvira

WHEN passing Cde Mpilo Siwawa in the street clad in a grey suit, one would not be able to guess what he does for a living until one visits one of his "surgeries", where he treats people with different health problems.

Yesterday he was operating from the Africa Unity Square, Harare, where dozens of people turned up for treatment of various ailments ranging from leg aches to eye sores.

After the treatment, some people acknowledged that they were feeling better. Cde Siwawa does not charge any fee for his services but welcomes gifts.

By 4 pm the prophet, who "plucks off" evil spirits from the sore part of the body, had attended to more than 200 people.

A visibly excited Chitungwiza man said he had his sight improved by Prophet Siwawa yesterday.

He said his eyes had given him problems since childhood, and he could not read properly.

"My sight has greatly improved. I can now clearly see and read," he said pointing at the Melkies Hotel. "I knew this building but could not read what is written on it."

The Herald (Zimbabwe)

Several n'angas, prophets and faith-healers claim to have a cure for AIDS, attracting thousands to their door. Some clearly are trying to cash in on the desperation of people. Mulenga Bwanga, 28, recently moved his "clinic" from a remote province in northern Zambia to the capital city of Lusaka. He said the move isn't a bid to make money because he was brought to Lusaka by his patients, "so why should I deny the people assistance if they need it?" Bwanga said his dead father's spirit appeared in a dream, telling him to go out and cure diseases. "Mine is not therefore a business, I am merely helping the people, that's all," he said as he held a receipt book. "However, people do have to give me a bit to enable me to survive." His television adverts aren't a publicity gimmick but public service announcements, Bwanga said. Although alleging he can cure AIDS, Bwanga refuses to work in the government hospitals with patients. He said to do so would be to work on a commercial basis, something he claims to abhor.

N'anga's own concoction proves fatal

Herald Correspondent
BULAWAYO.

A ZVISHAVANE traditional healer died on Sunday after drinking a concoction he had prepared in a bid to demonstrate to a patient that the muti was not harmful.

Police in Zvishavane confirmed the incident but declined to give the names of the n'anga and the patient whom they said was in a satisfactory condition.

A police spokesman said both the late 63-year-old and his nephew, aged 48, were suffering from abdominal pains. On Sunday, the elder man collected his nephew from his house after promising that he could concoct a herbal potion to cure their ailments.

The two men then went to the bush where the older man collected some herbs and prepared a concoction which he administered to himself and his nephew through the rectum. The old man then drank some of the muti. The n'anga collapsed and died soon after drinking the mixture, police said.

His body is at Zvishavane General Hospital mortuary. His nephew, who survived, is receiving treatment at the hospital.

The Herald
(Zimbabwe)

In Zimbabwe, Minister of Health and Child Welfare Dr. Timothy Stamps has warned traditional healers claiming to have the AIDS cure not to make such statements until their herbs are tested in a clinical trial under the supervision of medical doctors. "Some of these people are not even members of ZINATHA," Stamps said. "I don't want to raise false hopes or allow someone to be poisoned." Stamps has legitimate concerns. In the last 10 years, traditional medicines were the single biggest cause of poisonings in Zimbabwe, according to a recent study by the University of Zimbabwe. For children under the age of five, more than half of the poisoning cases admitted into the six urban hospitals in the study resulted from herbs prescribed by n'angas. The mortality rate from muti, or traditional medicine, averaged six percent of all those brought to the hospital.

Some local healers have agreed to the clinical testing. But in spite of Stamps' plea for discretion, this month traditional healer Benjamin Burombo staged an impromptu media circus outside the Blair Research Institute on the first day of tests. "I've got the AIDS cure, it's here!" shouted Burombo into television cameras. When the head of the laboratory asked for samples of the n'anga's herbs, Burombo accused him of trying to steal his herbs to claim the royalties on an AIDS drug for himself. Burombo stormed out and still refuses to participate in the tests.

Another Zimbabwean healer, a prophet of the Apostolic Faith Kutungamire sect, openly displays his AIDS cure to visitors: a bottle containing cooking oil and a shred of red wool. Following the guidance of spirits, Boniface Mponda concocted the "cure" after fasting for a full month. A patient licks the oil, then smears it on his forehead for up to three months. Mponda said he has successfully treated many AIDS patients, but no names were forthcoming and he is not participating in the clinical tests. Huge crowds of patients throng to his home, so many that he felt he couldn't treat them all. Now he's training others in his craft. Some members of apostolic churches raised their eyebrows: apostolics believe healing is a spiritual gift that cannot be taught to "trainee prophets" or used for making a profit.

Faith healer invited to Switzerland

Herald Reporter

A RENOWNED local faith healer, Cde Boniface Muponda, has been invited to Switzerland in November by a cancer support organisation to try his healing powers on cancer patients in that country.

In an interview recently, Cde Muponda said his three-week trip was made possible by Toukoo Gutzweller, an institution which rehabilitates cancer patients in Switzerland.

This cancer institution learnt of Cde Muponda's healing powers from a Swiss couple who had their son's mental illness healed by Cde Muponda.

"They took with them a video in which I was helping cancer patients and other ailments to Switzerland and the next thing I heard was this invitation," Cde Muponda said.

Cde Muponda said his tour of duty will not only end in Switzerland but some of his patients in New York in the United States have also invited him.

The Herald (Zimbabwe)

The real thing?

Most of the magic I've seen in southern Africa involved wizards and n'angas making money disappear from my wallet. The mhondoro I met charged me a considerable sum for the interview and demanded triple that amount if I took any pictures. I didn't. Eavesdropping on a group of three n'angas debating some very important topic, I found they were incensed at not receiving more lucrative travel allowances for attending an AIDS prevention lecture. I've met scores of traditional medicine men in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Namibia hawking their roots, powders and bottles. I finally bought some brown powder guaranteed to cure head colds by making me "sneeze it out of my head." I sniffed it up my nose as directed and immediately became even more sick for a week. So my fascination with African spirits and magic had waned until I met 105-year-old GogoAmbuya (great-grandmother) Jessie Basira Magadu, popularly known as "Dr. Jessie."

Dr. Jessie moves slowly now: She has cataracts and her back is stooped with age, but her mind is still very agile as she banters with guests. She can no longer see her herbs and roots, but her keen sense of smell tells her which is which. As the first traditional healer to be recognized by the colonial government in the 1920s, Dr. Jessie was allowed by the district administrator to come into the local hospital to treat Africans. And lines of sick people queued outside her small wooden shed for her herbs, which she gathered in fields close to what is now

downtown Harare. Dr. Jessie even remembers hearing lions roaring in the distance while she collected her herbs.

"My mother was a traditional healer," Dr. Jessie began, pausing as her granddaughter, Ruvimbo Mujeni, translated. The old woman wanted to explain how the healing spirit had come to her mother. "She was taken by a whirlwind into the Pungwe River, into a cave. Everyone said: 'Don't cry, she's not lost.' After a few days, my mother came out of the cave. Her's were special herbs, (the knowledge) has never been shared with others." As a young woman, after her mother died, Dr. Jessie fell very ill. This was a common pattern among n'angas, signifying a healing spirit, a shave, wanted to "come out" in Dr. Jessie. Once she accepted the spirit, the same that possessed her mother, she recovered and began to heal the sick with great skill.

Asked to describe her most difficult case, Dr. Jessie shook her head. She asked me how she could pick out just one after treating thousands of people. There are tales of her helping infertile women conceive, controlling leprosy, curing epilepsy, easing chronic stomach problems and rehabilitating madmen brought to her in chains.

"One man came crying to me, saying his wife had given birth but the placenta wouldn't come out," Dr. Jessie recalled. "So I went to the hospital with my



Dr. Jessie with her magic whisk.

medicines. I put in the herbs and it came out right then. But they couldn't pay me, so the man went to the place where horse betting is and won. Then came this man, walking down the street with a sewing machine he'd bought on his head. He put it down in front of me, saying: 'This is your cow!'" Dr. Jessie chuckled deeply to herself, shaking her head. She said other grateful patients have brought sewing machines. An Indian merchant gave her a house. Sometimes older men and women stop by to leave money, telling her: "I was born from your herbs!"

After decades of a satisfying career healing others, Dr. Jessie has one last unfulfilled desire of her own. She wants to pass on her knowledge to another in her family. "Like an old carpenter keeping his tools, I think she keeps her herbs and charms hoping that someone will learn to use her tools of the trade," said granddaughter Mujeni, who has a master's degree in sociology and works as a consultant for various non-governmental organizations in Zimbabwe. "I think that's what keeps her alive." As her grandmother left the room to fetch baskets of charms and amulets accumulated during a lifetime of practicing magic, Mujeni confessed that Dr. Jessie deems her the most suitable apprentice to learn the secrets of healing herbs. "I think it bothers Granny that I don't want to know," Mujeni said. "But I have a career."

The old woman returned with an elaborately woven pannier containing small gourds filled with sticky liquid, cowrie shell necklaces, animal horns guaranteed to bring a person back home when asked politely and many other wonders. Dr. Jessie called it all her "chemist's shop." Mujeni stroked the old basket, admiring the craftsmanship. "That's what I want!" she said. "I wish I could have that basket!" She quickly amended her impulsive wish. "I mean, I'd put it on a shelf to look at, not use the medicine." Picking up a whisk made from the tail of a cow, Dr. Jessie fluttered a blessing over Mujeni's head. From deep in her throat, the healer murmured a monologue to the spirit inside herself. For just a moment, when Mujeni lowered her eyes in respect, the granddaughter and grandmother looked like kindred spirits.

Unusual people with exceptional skills in Shona culture are thought to have been born as average persons. Then the spirit of a **muroyi**, **mhondoro**, **n'anga** or **shave** makes the person fall ill as a sign that it wants to live again through the individual. As Dr. Jessie explained, when a person agrees to receive the spirit, the illness disappears. Once accepted, a spirit remains in a family to be passed on to the next generation. I can't help thinking that when her grandmother dies, Ruvimbo Mujeni may fall ill soon afterward. Despite her degree and promising international career, Mujeni may end up with the basket, the fly whisk and the healing spirit. She may not plan on becoming a traditional healer, but Mujeni might change her mind someday. Some of the most amazing occurrences in life are unplanned. Or are they?

Sincerely,

