

perhaps, all gave little encouragement to the missionary when it came to the acceptance of Christianity. The African of that time realised that the white man's education was vital to him. But the white man gave it on condition that he was allowed to preach. The missionary did not realise that these people had a religion, and felt he must provide them with a faith and at the same time he offered them the benefits of schooling and a technical education. The African was pleased enough with the education and many became true converts to Christianity, but the great bulk of them, I believe, availed themselves of the opportunity of being taught, but did not accept the Christian faith. To-day, therefore, it is difficult to know exactly what is the position. There is no doubt a strong nucleus of good Christians, but the majority, although introduced to Christianity, are far from being Christian at all and a small minority, probably about 30 per cent., still believe in and practise their own faith.

The Shona religion can be divided into two separate parts—the religion of the community, group or tribe and the religion of the individual and his family. The problems of each are different. The tribe is concerned with rain, crops, food and with political stability. Rain, for instance, does not affect one person, but the whole community. Therefore the tribal spirit or *mhondoro* has as one of its main functions the bringing or withholding of rain. It is also intimately associated with fertility of the soil and good crops and more particularly in former days with the selection of the right chief.

But an individual has other problems and thousands of people have different needs with which the tribal spirit is not concerned, and so the individual looks to the spirits of his dead parents or grandparents for help in these matters. These family spirits guard the family unit, and if their protection is withdrawn a member of the family becomes ill or dies, or an evildoer or witch is permitted to enter the village and cause havoc and destruction. It is important, therefore, that the body of a deceased parent should be properly buried and the correct rites performed after death. This spirit may show its presence at any time by demanding certain tokens, and if these are refused or not given correctly the spirit elder or *mudzimu*, as it is called, shows its anger by bringing illness or tragedy to that family. Thus if a group wants rain they go to the tribal spirit, but if an individual wishes for something he seeks his spirit elders.

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## The Mashona and Their Religion

BY

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Many people do not appreciate that the African has a systematised faith and one still hears the statement that he has no religion. Even Africans who profess the Christian faith have told me that the person who believes in the Shona religion is good and that the man who practises it is as good a "Christian" as the one who goes to church.

As a rule people are not reticent about their faith, and if it is threatened or inroads are made on it the individual soon protests and is quite definite about how far he is prepared to submit or compromise. But for some reason not clear to me the Mashona have been very quiet about theirs. Unlike the white man, they have not made a point of explaining that they have this faith, and had they done so in the first instance the story here in Africa might have been a very different one.

The Mashona, like all other Central African tribes, were keen on education. Coillard was welcomed by Lewanika and honoured by Mochudi. Mzilikazi favoured Moffat and his followers because they had a civilisation and a learning to offer, but these chiefs, except Khama

The Mashona believe in a number of spirits or *mhondoro* who look after different areas in the country. They belong to a hierarchy which functions rather like a government department. At the head is the chief *mhondoro*, then come the provincial ones who control each district, and finally those in charge of sub-districts. All are concerned with the same functions and the carrying of messages ultimately to the chief spirit. For ordinary matters the group may approach the small *mhondoro* in their district, but when a problem concerns a large section of the country they seek the provincial *mhondoro* or even the one at the top. These spirits are all in friendly communication with one another and the rivalry and battles between each other that we read about in Greek mythology do not seem to exist amongst them. Chaminuka is generally accepted as the chief spirit in central Mashonaland and Dzivaguru in the Mount Darwin area.

For long I have not been clear about the relationship which exists between the *mhondoro* responsible for a particular region and the family spirits of the chief ruling over it. There is no doubt that the medium of the *mhondoro* is not related to the chief, for this individual may be any person in the tribe or belonging to another Shona group. On the other hand, I have now satisfied myself that the tribal spirit and the *mhondoro* belong to the same family and totem because it is said that when the first important person and founder of the tribe died, his spirit appeared as the *mhondoro* or tribal spirit of that region and possessed another person as its medium, but one of his children became the chief and so followed the line of subsequent chiefs. In other words, the ruling chief of any district becomes the nephew or *muzukuru* of the *mhondoro*. I have also learnt that all the people and chief of a particular clan have the same totem as its tribal spirit and thus every individual claims to be distantly related to the founder of the tribe and his spirit. Nevertheless, the relationship between the ruling chief and the tribal spirit is believed to be closer and more direct.

It is also essential that when a medium becomes possessed, even if he hails from a district far removed from that of the *mhondoro*, he must come and reside in the area over which the influence of its *mhondoro* holds sway.

#### FAMILY SPIRIT

Three times a year the people gather at different places to thank their *mhondoro* or tribal

spirits for the good crops or rains they have received. In January they thank them for the green crops, in April for the millet harvest and in September they hold the biggest ceremony of all to ask the *mhondoro* for good rains. In times of drought they go direct to the medium of the rainmaker (the *mhondoro*) to find out why rain was withheld.

Now it is important to realise that each *mhondoro* spirit selects a medium or host through whom to contact the tribe. Thus, whenever communication is to be made with the people, it speaks through its medium, who is then in a state of possession. The spirit always selects the same person, and when he or she dies it finds another host. The medium becomes possessed generally in the presence of special music, and at that time his spirit can be asked questions or it may speak on its own, giving advice to the tribe.

Every medium has his own acolyte or *nechombo*, who is present at all ceremonies and acts as a liaison officer between the medium and the people. He puts the questions to the medium when the latter becomes possessed. For every ceremony held to praise the *mhondoro*, beer is specially prepared and placed in the sanctuary. Some of it is blessed and left for the spirits themselves as a thanksgiving. The sanctuary of the Mashona is of interest, as it consists simply of a *muhacha* tree surrounded by a palisade of poles. The beer is placed at the foot of the tree. Before going to the *muhacha* tree the people gather in a large hut where, in the presence of music, the medium becomes possessed. Here the people may be told what the future has in store for the community or the spirit may be asked questions about tribal affairs. It is generally asked about the prospects of a good rainy season. After this everyone proceeds in procession to the sanctuary or *rushanga*, as it is called. The medium enters the palisade with his acolyte, who blesses the pots of beer and the rest of the people remain outside the palisade.

I have not known the Mashona pray to God as we know Him. They believe that there is a Creator *Mwari* who made the earth and all that is in it, but he is very far removed from tribal matters and indifferent to individuals. They admit, however, that Chaminuka and the other spirits are in communication with him. There is no need, they say, to pray to him, for if they have the blessing of the tribal spirits it is as good as his.

THE SPIRIT ELDERS OF VADZIMU  
(Singular, *Mudzimu*)

The Shona does not pray regularly as we do, but offers a prayer to the spirit elders occasionally. And then the prayer is made by the head of the family. For instance, the eldest brother prays to the spirit of his grandfather on behalf of a younger brother. If a child is sick and the illness has been caused by his mother's *vadzimu*, she does not pray to her spirits herself, but her father does, or if he is dead her eldest surviving brother offers the prayer for her. Prayers are said only when indicated, and this is decided by the *nganga* ("doctor"). He is therefore the individual's contact with the spirit world whenever a family problem arises. By throwing his bones or whilst in a state of possession the *nganga* contacts his own spirit, which then communicates with those of the family and learns which one of them has been offended and, if so, what is required to propitiate it. Thus the doctor informs the family when a prayer is needed and whether a sacrifice or present is desired. In this there is a big difference between the Christian religion and the Shona one. In the former anyone can pray directly to God at any time, but the Mashona pray only when the spirit of the *nganga* decides that it is indicated. But it does not follow that the family always accepts the decision of the *nganga*. Very often they are dissatisfied with his ruling or not quite convinced, and then they seek a second opinion from another *nganga*. Only then if they are satisfied are the requirements fulfilled. The Shona has much greater freedom in the choice of his priest than the Christian, but he also has to pay for their service each time he requires it.

One might think that the spirit elders constantly make their presence felt, but this is not so. As long as a man leads a decent life and carries out a few ritual practices, he is not likely to upset them. But every now and then, for no good reason, one of the family spirits wishes to be remembered. Usually the spirit grandfather desires to have a bull named after him. One of the members of the family becomes ill, the *nganga* diagnoses the cause and the eldest brother of the family provides the bull which is given the grandfather's name. This bull now becomes the guardian of the family. The spirit is pleased and the family can expect to keep well for a long time. After some years, however, the spirit grandfather demands that his bull be sacrificed. Once again one of the members of the family becomes ill and the

*nganga* declares that the time has now come for the bull to be killed. Certainly in former times, but to a much lesser extent to-day, every family group had a bull, the guardian of the family. This ritual sacrifice of the bull is a very important event in their religion. Every sacrifice of a bull to the spirit elder entails the removal of small portions of particular parts of the body, which must be roasted and the spirit thanked by the eldest son of the family for giving them meat. After the roasting the rest of the meat is cooked and then enjoyed by all the people gathered for the ceremony. Finally comes the *muderedzo*, which takes place after every sacrifice. Beer is specially brewed for the spirit and this part of the ceremony may be held several months after the actual sacrifice and concludes the ritual. This sort of sacrifice must be very ancient and is certainly not practised to-day in any modern religion.

Any ritual ceremony at which beer is produced always starts off, when the beer is ready, by the senior male member of the family taking a pot of beer and placing it on the pot shelf or *rukwa* of the hut. He kneels and informs the family spirit that the beer which they are about to enjoy has been prepared in his honour. This is called the *musumo*. After that, those gathered drink the beer and dance and every ceremony ends with a final pot of beer—the beer of *chiparudzwa*.

## COMMENTS

This religion is essentially a rural one. It reflects the life of the Shona on his land, where he is in intimate contact with nature. The rain ceremonies are all related to soil fertility, crops and rain. The sacrifices are associated with his domestic animals and the brewing of beer with his agricultural products. It is in fact a very simple religion which is not a very costly affair. The sanctuary under the *muhacha* tree costs practically nothing and the people gather beforehand in one of their large huts. The most they contribute for a ceremony is some grain for the brewing of beer. I think the religion also gives the women an important part to play in it. Not only are they responsible for the brewing of beer, a very essential part of the ritual, but women mediums of tribal spirits are commonly seen and the social status of such women is very high, as they are accorded the same respect as a man. At the ceremonies themselves they take part in the dancing equally with the men. In the family religion there are a good number of women doctors, even some of the most respected

of all—those who divine the cause of death. A point that interests me is that this type of religion may tend to keep together the various branches of a family, since only its head, the eldest surviving brother, can approach the spirit elders. On the other hand, it may be a disadvantage that the ordinary person does not pray regularly like we can. The ritual is simple and there are no set prayers. The head of the family is really its minister, as he approaches the spirits. He feels that he is taking a leading part in the ceremony which he knows well. After a few ceremonies have been attended anyone knows the ritual and thus all are familiar with it and do not require a specially trained person to interpret it for them.

What interests me, too, is that the people can give vent to their feelings much more easily at these ceremonies. They are mostly happy occasions in which the people can express their joy in the simple dances, which probably suits their temperament better than our more staid services. One of the great disadvantages of the Shona religion, I think, is that it is difficult to fit into urban life unless it could be greatly modified. Sacrifices would have to be abolished, as this ritual could hardly be practised in a township. Also in urban areas the people are no longer in such close touch with nature. Those bred in towns would not fully appreciate the significance of the ceremonies in the same way as those who have grown the crops themselves and realise the effort that has gone into the making of the beer or the sacrifice of a bull.

This religion is fast breaking up, and in less and less areas are the rites carried out in full. There are, of course, several places in which the diehards are determined to keep their ritual intact and hope that their children will carry on after them, but I am sure many of them realise that time is against them. The growth of industrial cities has been one of the main reasons for the decline of their religion. Also the more erudite the men become, the less they appear at these ceremonies. I still think that the bulk of the people believe in their ancestral spirits and possibly in the powers of the rain-makers. Many of them still admit that they look to their guardian spirits in times of trouble. And a great number still turn to their own doctors when faced with a serious problem. Recently a fairly well-educated African—who is a Christian—told me that he was somewhat puzzled by the attitude of European Christians towards their dead. He knows full well that

they are taught to pray to God and that there is no ancestral worship. Yet any day of the week he sees Europeans taking flowers to the cemetery where they see that their family graves are kept clean. As the sweeping of the ancestral graves forms a very important part in Shona ritual, he considers this proof that the Europeans too pray to their dead and try to please their spirit elders.

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