

**Religion, Health, and Healing
in the Traditional Shona Culture of Zimbabwe**

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This paper describes the traditional Shona health and healing practices of the Zimbabwean people by exploring the philosophical, clinical, and theological issues surrounding the healing practice. It is through understanding and appreciating the traditional Shona people's worldview of sickness or disease that one can comprehend the thinking behind the traditional Shona healing practices. In Zimbabwe, people visit the traditional healers, the prophets from "Churches of the Spirit," hospitals, and clinics for medical treatment. Diseases or sickness are viewed not only as physical or psychological but also as religious issues. Thus, religious beliefs and values play a significant role in the traditional ways of treatment. Rituals, symbolic representations, dreams, and herbal therapy are some methods that have a central place in the traditional Shona healing practice. Along with the physical, social, emotional, and mental nature of human existence, the spiritual, transpersonal, and ecological aspects are highly regarded.

Introduction

When I was thirteen years old, my dad became sick. He was having a hard time sleeping because he was plagued with headaches; he could not concentrate, and his body was weak. I remember my dad being sick for so many months that he had to be granted sick leave from his teaching position at a school. After six months of receiving treatment at the local psychiatric hospital, my dad did not show much change in his conditions. Therefore, my

dad's brothers and sisters requested permission to take him from the hospital and seek help from a traditional Shona healer. The request was granted. Visiting the traditional healers for treatment is common in the traditional Shona culture. Families visit the traditional healers in search of a holistic and complete cure. When my dad came home after his stay at the traditional healer, he was feeling better; somehow, he was cured. Growing up, I had no idea how my dad had been healed from his sickness.

My grandmother once told me a similar story that took place in her village in Manicaland Province. The story involved a teenager called Mushe who became sick immediately after the Zimbabwean second liberation. Nineteen-year-old Mushe had participated in the liberation war, and he had been sick ever since he returned. His family was confused and concerned. He was feeling dizzy, experiencing nausea, and complaining of persistent pain throughout his physical body. He was having sleepless nights due to strange dreams. After some time his family decided to consult a traditional healer who told them that Mushe's sickness was of a more spiritual nature. His nightmares might have been a result of him having witnessed death or of him having killed people; the family was supposed to do something about it. The healer worked with Mushe and his family. Mushe was up and going in no time, my grandmother said.

I was puzzled by the ways in which my dad and Mushe got well. However, learning about the traditional Shona worldview later provided a framework for understanding what happened to my dad and Mushe. My goal in this paper is to discuss the traditional Shona worldview in so far as healing practices are concerned. The aim is to help the reader to gain an understanding of the traditional Shona worldview regarding health and healing.

The Three-Tiered Health System in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has a three-tiered health system. Zimbabweans visit the traditional healers, the prophets from "Churches of the Spirit,"²¹ and western style hospitals and clinics for health and healing. For instance, my paternal family observes the traditional Shona practice, while my maternal family observes the Christian faith-healing practices. In this paper, I focus on the traditional Shona practices where religion and spirituality constitute key elements of the health and healing practices. In the traditional Shona practices, wellness is derived from the cultural understanding of the role of family, community, and the spiritual world in human welfare. Diseases are considered by the Shona culture to have physical, mental, social, spiritual, and supernatural causes. Cure extends beyond physical symptoms to address social and spiritual aspects, too. Despite the presence of western-style medical systems and Christian faith healing approaches, Mushe's family and my dad's family consulted the traditional Shona healers.

Statistical research reveals the great prevalence of traditional healers in Zimbabwe. In 1985, the number of traditional healers stood at 8,122 (one for every 575 people in Zimbabwe) compared to only 800 registered medical practitioners.²³ Further research in 2001 adds an even more

startling figure: “45,000 traditional healers compared to 1,400 medical doctors in Zimbabwe.”⁴ Most rural communities do have a traditional Shona healer. I find this presence even within my own family; looking at my family genogram, I am aware that my father’s deceased elder sister was a traditional Shona healer who was also married to a healer. Some hospital clinicians also do not see a conflict between science and traditional practices; therefore, they suggest that patients visit traditional healers if they so wish. Who then are these traditional healers, and what role do they play in the health and healing system of Zimbabwe?

Traditional Healers and Their Methods

Normally, the vocation of traditional healer runs within tribal families and is practiced for the benefit of the community. Traditional healers inherit their spiritual gifts and skills from either or both sides of their paternal or maternal ancestral lineages. To maintain good relationship with these ancestral spirits, the traditional healers periodically make sacrifices and offerings to those spirits. Generally, traditional healers come in four different types: the diviner, whose duty it is to make a diagnosis; the herbalist, who prescribes and treats ailments; the traditional midwife; and the exorcist, who plays a large part in freeing people from troublesome and evil spirits. Traditional healers have knowledge of herbs, roots, and even fruits that can prevent, protect, or cure diseases and pain. When people visit the traditional healers, the first requirement for healing is to have confidence in the healer. Those seeking help should believe in the traditional healer’s supernatural powers, the healer’s ability to deal with the unseen mysterious forces, and the healer’s ability to convey messages from the spiritual worlds.

These traditional healers use various methods and techniques such as divination, cleansing rituals, protective amulets, and herbs to cure and heal. For instance, if the sickness is supernaturally caused, then the healer uses rituals apart from herbal medicines. Dreams also carry a whole range of significance in the traditional Shona healing practices. People may draw insight and new meanings through the dreams, and some traditional healers are gifted in helping people interpret dreams and use the gathered knowledge towards healing. Most of the treatment techniques and methods are psychosomatic. They focus on the cultivation of higher emotional states and an awareness of the spiritual realities.

Unfortunately, like any other health delivery system, the traditional Shona system is susceptible to abuse and to unscrupulous practitioners. The Zimbabwean National Association of Traditional Healers (ZINATHA) has therefore been established to act as a watchdog, and every traditional healer is obliged to register with the association.

The health and healing system sees both personal and communal responsibility as vital in matters of life, illness, and suffering. In the cases of both my dad and Mushe, the traditional healers had to deal with the patients and, at the same time, work with the families. Illnesses and suffering are seen not only as caused by outside agents such as microorganisms, accidents, or unhygienic

practices but also as involving spiritual factors. They can be indicators of a state of disharmony in one's body, family, society, or the spiritual world. Thus, the healing approaches include familial, societal, and spiritual aspects. The traditional healer interviewed my dad to establish the facts leading to his illness. He explored what my dad had been doing with respect to his unseen but present ancestral spirits and whether he had been carrying out his duties towards his family, both nuclear and extended. The traditional healers use various approaches including rituals, dream work, symbolic representations, and herbal treatment.

Religious Culture and the Causes of Misfortune

Apart from looking only at the symptoms, the traditional healers explore what unfolds at the deeper levels of situations and how the situations could have been prevented or could now be handled. There is a proverb in the Shona tradition which says, "Something has killed the owl; it cannot just be the wind." This means that, apart from the observable signs, there are always some underlying and unforeseen causes of disease and misfortune. Hence, in cases of illness, an exploration of the sociological, spiritual, and psychological situations is done to see what might be the cause of the physical suffering. This viewpoint goes well with David Westerlund's classification of the causes of illnesses. Westerlund outlines three categories of causes: the natural, the social, and the religious.⁵ Religious causation refers to suprahuman causality that originates from spiritual powers such as God or spiritual forces. For instance, aggrieved spirits may intrude in human affairs to perpetuate corporate kin interests and to reprimand those who have broken expectations. We see such a case in the story of Mushe. Disgruntled guardian spirits can also withdraw their protection, making an individual vulnerable to forces of evil that can cause suffering. When the ancestral spirits withdraw their protection, people carry out pacification, confession, compensation, and symbolic conciliatory rituals to restore health, relationship, and order.

The other two types of causation are social and natural. The social cause refers to human causality, which includes relations between living human beings. Quarrels and conflicts with other people may cause people to become sick. Lastly, natural or physical causation refers to the effects of insects, germs, natural substances, forces, or conditions, such as certain weather conditions.⁶ These are the illnesses that "just happen" or are part of the order of things, such as the death of a very old person or an affliction with readily recognized symptoms and signs. In most cases nothing can really be done to remedy the natural causes. If the correct cause is identified, the correct remedy is prescribed and the calamity disappears. Such was the case with my dad and Mushe.

The traditional Shona healing practices are based upon various Shona cultural-religious beliefs. As Gunda notes, "Religious beliefs and values play a significant role in the health delivery systems of Zimbabwe."⁷ Health and healing practices are interrelated with traditional cultural beliefs. The traditional Shona believe that all around human nature lay broader realities in the form of boundless spiritual worlds. These realities impact human welfare in various ways. Thus, when one

is sick, an evaluation of how one is adhering to the beliefs is done. Access to these broader spiritual realities is achieved by engaging spiritual mediums—through whom the spirits communicate their wishes, demands and prescriptions to the larger society—and performing appeasing, cleansing, conciliatory, or sacrificial rituals. In my dad’s case, the traditional healer helped explore my dad’s adherence to the religious-cultural expectations and his broader spiritual realities. The traditional healer said that my dad, through omission of the religious-cultural values and duties, had offended the ancestral spirits; thus, my dad was required to perform conciliatory rituals. From the traditional Shona worldview, Mushe and my dad fell short of the cultural expectations, and this led them to suffer. Mushe failed to respect human life, while my dad failed to acknowledge the role of his ancestral spirits and perform required rituals.

The Role of Spiritual and Familial Relationships

The traditional Shona believe in the spiritual world; everything in nature originates from One God whom they call “Mwari” (In God Our Lives Belong), “Musikavanhu” (God the Creator of Humanity), or “Samasimba” (God Almighty). Mwari communicates with humanity through the guardian and territorial spirits, who act as mediators between humans and God.⁸ The ancestral spirits appear through the spirit mediums. Interaction with God and ancestral spirits is made possible through performing rituals and ceremonies and connecting with the non-local world through those spirit mediums. The notion of the non-local world and beyond-self experiences is central in this culture. As Bourdillon notes, “The physical world is seen and controlled by a hierarchy of spiritual beings, each with its specific functions, and everything is understood in terms of this structured spiritual world.”⁹ Hence, certain illnesses are viewed not only as physical or psychological but as “spiritual sicknesses,” and they can only be treated by engaging the spiritual world, as in Mushe’s case.

The traditional Shona believe that calamities can be opportunities to make possible connection with the unseen domains. This belief in the presence of spiritual domains is demonstrated by Coppens: “A human being is truly a multidimensional being with several interconnected and interacting ‘natures’ or ‘aspects.’ Taking only one or two of these ‘natures’ into consideration and assuming that we can ‘know the whole’ through reason and our senses is a kind of reductionism which fewer and fewer people are willing to accept today.”¹⁰ The Shona believe that proper healing takes place when the whole is treated. To the traditional Shona, health is not merely the absence of disease but also harmony and correct relationship with the surrounding boundless spiritual worlds. In many cases families make formal addresses to the ancestral spirits while pouring a libation of beer and making pleas for the guardianship of the spirits. Maintaining healthy relationships with the natural and supernatural is always the foundation for healthy living.

Before my father came home from his three-week stay at the traditional healer’s place, the whole family had to go through a cleansing and conciliatory ritual. My dad confessed and com-

municated with his brother and his ancestral spirits through the spirit medium. Both children and adults participated in the conciliation ritual in which my dad and his siblings appealed for protection and continuation of relationship with the broader spiritual realities. Both families were told to brew millet beer, slaughter beasts, and gather their families in order to appease the ancestral spirits. When Mushe's problem had lessened, cleansing and confessional rituals were performed at the family's homestead. His family was requested to participate in a communal reparation ritual. The families of the stranger spirits were invited to the pacifying ceremony. By involving the family, care of the whole results in optimal balance, strength, and resilience within the family system.

The Role of Rituals

Performing ritual ceremonies brings comfort and ensures a sense of belonging, thus strengthening the individuals and the communities. In the cases of my dad and Mushe, performing rituals was part of the treatment process. Through the rituals they both attended to that which extended beyond the physical into to the social and spiritual aspects of reality. Through the ritual ceremonies, the patients and the families were able to communicate with their ancestral spirits. This is why, in the years that followed, my dad required our family to partake in traditional rituals at home as a way to maintain relationship with the boundless spiritual worlds. Participating in these rituals made my dad feel better. In Mushe's case, a traditional ritual was performed to facilitate a dialogue between Mushe, his family, and the stranger spirits that were haunting him.¹¹ The stranger spirits were believed to be pre-occupying Mushe's mind and affecting his day-to-day functioning. Since these stranger spirits were foreign, there was no need to fight the aggrieved stranger spirits. Instead, the family was to have a ritual to acknowledge the presence of the stranger spirits, embrace the spirits, and find out what they wanted. The rituals helped thwart the power of the stranger spirits, improve Mushe's coping, enhance his healing, and effect his recovery.

To the Shona tradition, rituals have the power to help patients and families disengage from the negatives and intentionally focus on the creation of positive emotional states. For instance, offering sacrifices to ancestors demonstrates respect for the ancestral spirits, ensuring protection from the spiritual entities and creating a sense of security. As Daugherty asserts, "When we have a thought or feeling, the brain responds by releasing corresponding neurochemicals. The parts of the brain that are involved in emotion are rich receptors for those chemicals. The chemicals produced through our feeling states and emotional attention eventually dictate who we are at any given moment."¹² Mushe's distress affected his thoughts and feelings; thus he was asked to perform some rituals for emotional-somatic discharge and cognitive awareness of what was happening. The rituals that the two families participated in purified and discharged adverse thoughts, and in so doing, restored balance and positive inner experiences. The physical problems were connected to spiritual and psychological well-being.

Finally, in this paper I have presented a brief overview of the traditional Shona health and heal-

ing practices. I have highlighted the significance of the Shona worldview for health and healing. I have discussed the role of the traditional healers as well as the methods and techniques they use. Even though, the western methods of healing are available, thousands of traditional Shona Zimbabweans still use the traditional healing practices and report benefiting from them. The traditional Shona healing techniques and approaches are anchored in the wider religious-cultural belief system; thus, they serve the needs of the Shona people. The dominant Shona worldview affirms that physiological or psychological disorders have social, natural, and religious causes; hence, health and healing practices should address the diseases according to all these causes. The traditional Shona healing practices help people identify and address the root and source of their suffering, thereby freeing patients from being trapped in sicknesses. Healing practices do not only involve administration of herbs or other physical treatments; they also involve rituals, sacrifices, dreams, symbolic representations, and family and community support. The social and spiritual orders are significant dimensions in the maintenance of personal and community health. The Shona healing practices offer profound insight and self-understanding to the patients and families affected, thereby reducing stress and ameliorating physical and psychosomatic disorders.

Notes

1 Most commonly, these are Independent Churches known as “*Chechi dzemweya*” or African Pentecostal Churches; these are fully founded and administered by indigenous Shona people instead of being established by missionary groups.

2 Pamela Reynolds, *Traditional Healers and Childhood in Zimbabwe* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996), xxvii.

3 Ibid.

4 Cassandra White and Krista Dandurand, “Traditional Healers,” accessed June 22, 2010, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~cewhite/tradhealth.htm>.

5 Magesa Laurenti, *African Religion*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 172-173.

6 Ibid.

7 Masiwa R. Gunda, “Christianity, Traditional Religion, and Healing in Zimbabwe.” *Swedish Missiological Themes* 95, no. 3 (2007).

8 Guardian spirits are family oriented while territorial spirits are clan/community oriented. Both are called ancestral spirits.

9 Michael Bourdillon, “Themes in the Understanding of Traditional African Religion.” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 10 (March 1975): 71-87.

10 Peter Roche de Coppens, “A Theory of Human Nature and a Model of the Psyche: A Holistic Approach,” accessed on July 10, 2010, http://www.cittadinocanadese.com/decoppens/engl/A_THEORY_OF_HUMAN_NATURE.htm.

11 These are spirits that are not related to the individual’s family; they are foreign spirits with an intention or a demand.

12 Alane Daugherty, *The Power Within: From Neuroscience to Transformation* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2008), 85.