



# Women and Ecology in Shona Religion<sup>1</sup>

ISABEL MUKONYORA

*University of Zimbabwe  
Harare, Zimbabwe*

FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF MEN AS THE OFFICIAL GUARDIANS OF THE LAND AND lineage,<sup>2</sup> women are unimportant in the pre-Christian religious heritage of the Shona peoples of Zimbabwe. Despite the roles they fulfilled in the ancestor belief system (e.g., as diviners and spirit mediums), women were and still are perceived as subordinates to men. This is reflected in literature produced by anthropologists who have drawn their conclusions on pre-Christianity among the Shona from observations made at rituals held in honor of the patrilineal ancestors. According to Bourdillon, for instance, there is a male focus in traditional Shona religion. Furthermore,

<sup>1</sup>Editor's note: See the comments on this article in the editorial to this issue, pp. 223-224 above.

<sup>2</sup>J. M. Schoffeleers, ed., *Guardians of the Land: Essays on Central African Territorial Cults* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo, 1978).

ISABEL MUKONYORA, D.Phil. (Oxon), is a lecturer in the Department of Religious Studies, Classics and Philosophy.

*The Mwari cult of traditional Zimbabwe has commonly been interpreted as describing a God of the patriarchal family and ancestry. However, an investigation of the relation of Mwari to the earth, where women function as creative agents, produces new dimensions of African traditional religion. Since Christians in Zimbabwe have given the name Mwari to the biblical God, the fuller view of Mwari has important ramifications for Christian theology and ministry.*

The Shona kinship system is basically patrilineal, which means that kinship through males is stressed over kinship through females....When a Shona man or woman wishes to show respect to another, he or she uses traditional clan names inherited from that person's father (rather similar to English names). These names clearly distinguish groups of patrilineal kin who are related through the male line and consequently have the same clan name.<sup>3</sup>

Men, therefore, are not only the dominant group in society, their ancestors are key to our understanding of the traditional Shona religion insofar as it is concerned with the ancestors.

Given this pre-Christian religious heritage, it seems difficult to write about women in Shona tradition. The men in traditional Shona society might be said to have constructed a religious language in keeping with a view of themselves as the people who matter the most before the ancestors. David Lan tries to summarize the position of women as people whose domain is "the household and the garden." He writes:

She ventures into the bush to collect vegetables when there is no other food in the house. While their presence *en masse* is required at the major ceremonies, there are no individual roles open to women except as mediums of lineage ancestors. Very few women become mediums of the royal ancestors.<sup>4</sup>

As the *vatorwa*, the ones from outside the lineage in a system of exogamy, women remained a stage removed from the religion of the ancestors, even if they sometimes fulfilled important roles. *Madzitetete* (aunts) and *madzimbuya* (grandmothers), for example, brew the beer for drinking at ritual gatherings. They advise daughters about womanhood, officiate at marriage ceremonies, and as a mechanism for demanding respect, women can threaten the lineage with *ngozi* (avenging spirit), which the Shona fear can be unleashed on the family to cause suffering and death.

Sometimes women function as spirit mediums. Mbuya Nehanda gained respect among the Shona as a "heroine" spirit-medium for a ruling lineage.<sup>5</sup> While she was, indeed, a woman, the importance of her gender is reduced, because, under possession, Mbuya would have been perceived as a mere channel of communication of the ancestor spirit of her patrilineage. Nevertheless, Nehanda and other female spirit mediums gained respect among the male members of the lineage who, to this day, sometimes have to listen to these women's advice in running the affairs of the family. Moreover, as an expression of the gratitude of the patrilineal family to the woman as child-bearer, the custom of giving *mombe youmai* (motherhood cow) goes on to this day. According to Chitando, this celebration of fertility forces women to become child-bearing machines; therefore, *mombe youmai* might be a form of thanks but not a mechanism of giving authority to the woman.<sup>6</sup> Hence, it

<sup>3</sup>Michael Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to Their Religion* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo, 1987) 21-22.

<sup>4</sup>David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (London: James Currey, 1986) 31.

<sup>5</sup>Ruth Weiss, *The Women of Zimbabwe* (Harare, Zimbabwe: Nehanda, 1986) 31.

<sup>6</sup>Ezra Chitando, interview by author, University of Zimbabwe, November 1998.

remains difficult to write about the role of women in the traditional Shona world except as subordinates to men.

Moreover, it is common knowledge that a woman only enjoys respect in her lineage provided she is someone else's *mutorwa* (stranger) through marriage. A divorced woman is unwanted at her husband's home and accepted with reluctance in her patrilineal home. Her children are regarded as the property of her husband and his ancestors.

So, when I suggest below that women have a key role in giving meaning to traditional Shona religion, I am referring to a particular strand of Shona religiosity widely known as the Mwari religion. Arguably, women's experiences of being in the world and their aspirations to transcend the world of men are reflected in the Mwari religion despite the tendency in earlier studies to deal with the religion as an extension of the ancestor belief system. I will try to demonstrate the role of woman in the Mwari religion, having first addressed the problems that arise from the portrayal of the Supreme Being Mwari as an ancestral territorial spirit power.<sup>7</sup>

#### I. THE MWARI CULT AND THE MASCULINE GOD

In portrayals of the Mwari religion as a "cult" used by the royal ancestors of the Rozvi to establish the Monomotapa Kingdom,<sup>8</sup> some of the feminine features of this religion became suppressed and others distorted. For example, Gelfand suggests that the "high God or Deity reached such exaltation, filling people with such awe" that Mwari became "an indifferent God—too big, too almighty to be a personal God."<sup>9</sup> Gelfand's attempt to explain the absence of references to Mwari at rituals for the patrilineal ancestors as a way of exalting Mwari beyond the world does not explain clearly the differences in orientation between the broader concerns of the Mwari religion and the ancestor belief system. Daneel tries to link Mwari to the ancestors:

Mwari was not lost sight of but, in the composite picture of Shona traditional religion, He did become the Personal Being above the ancestral hierarchies through the mediation of a senior lineage.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of this process of bringing together ideas about Mwari and the ancestors, people often talk about a divinely ordained Rozvi king. Daneel writes that the cult of the king became closely identified with the Rozvi people, and its sphere of influence spread with expanding boundaries of the Rozvi confederacy.<sup>11</sup> In discussions about the first uprising against colonialism (*chimurenga*), Mwari is believed to have ad-

<sup>7</sup>Schoffeleers, *Guardians of the Land*, 44-88.

<sup>8</sup>The majority of discussions of the Mwari religion make it a religion which first becomes known through the expansionism of the Rozvi dynasty. See, e.g., M. L. Daneel, *God of the Matopo Hills: An Essay on the Mwari Cult in Rhodesia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970) 22.

<sup>9</sup>Michael Gelfand, "The Religion of the Mashona," *Journal for the Native Affairs Department* 33 (1956) 27-31.

<sup>10</sup>Daneel, *God of the Matopo Hills*.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 22-23.

vised people to fight the colonialists in a liberation struggle for self rule.<sup>12</sup> This gives the impression that Mwari is an ancestor figure exalted to the position of the Father of all lineages. The benevolence of such a God is shown through inspiring people to fight for the possession of territory.

Consequently, the Mwari cult, as it has been widely called, is sometimes portrayed by Gelfand as a belief system concerned with the interests of the patrilineal group rather than with any individual as a personal God. Gelfand goes further to say that the Mwari belief system came about through “geographical expansion” of a ruling lineage.<sup>13</sup> Bourdillon concurs, remarking that Mwari’s interests are “too broad for him to concern himself with private individuals and their problems.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Beach, the Mwari cult became known during the time of the Rozvi dynasty in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In other words, at some stage in the history of the Shona people, Mwari surfaced as the God of the ancestors of a particular lineage and protected the territorial interest of that group. Otherwise, among the Bantu in general, Beach maintains, the high god was widely known as *Mulungu* and not by the name Mwari.

Daneel makes the different observation that in East Africa the word *Muali*, from which the Shona “Mwari” might have been derived in the Bantu language, is used to designate a fertility God. As far as Daneel is concerned, the *Muali* belief system is comparable to the Mwari religion, at least insofar as it is concerned with fertility.<sup>16</sup> For our purposes, whatever the origins of the Mwari religion, as a territorial cult for a particular lineage concerned with mastering the control of other peoples and their lands we might say there is a male focus to the Mwari belief system.

It is important, however, to note that Murphree and Bourdillon found Shona people among whom Mwari is *deus remotus* (a remote god), while the ancestors intervene in the day-to-day affairs of the family.<sup>17</sup>

The Shona rarely speak about the high god and in most Shona country no attempt is made to communicate with him or to influence his actions either by imprecation or ritual.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, beliefs in Mwari are not uniformly honored among the Shona. Ranger suggests that a distinction be made between two interrelated but different religious systems, the spirit mediums and the Mwari cult particularly associated with

<sup>12</sup>Isabel Mukonyora, “The Fulfilment of African Religious Needs through the Bible,” in *Rewriting the Bible: The Real Issues* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo, 1993) 249-259.

<sup>13</sup>Michael Gelfand, “The Spiritual Beliefs,” *Zambezia* 4/1 (1975-1976) 123.

<sup>14</sup>Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples*, 227.

<sup>15</sup>David Beach, *The Shona and Their Neighbors*, 148.

<sup>16</sup>Daneel, *God of the Matopo Hills*, 16.

<sup>17</sup>According to Murphree, the Mwari religion can be distinguished from the ancestor belief system among the Budya. Marshall Murphree, *Christianity and the Shona* (London: Athlone, 1969) 48. Cf. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples*, 277.

<sup>18</sup>Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples*, 277.

the Rozvi kings.<sup>19</sup> In my opinion, the differences in the interpretation of the significance of Mwari among the Shona are not surprising at all. If, as I suggest, the Mwari type of religion originates from the margins of society with female concerns about fertility, the male leaders of the community concerned with the ancestors cannot be expected to have always appreciated the crucial role of the fertility God in giving meaning to human existence. The word “cult” used in earlier studies of the Mwari religion thus adequately describes a phenomenon most probably adapted to the ancestor belief system by a particular lineage group seeking to universalize itself in the context of a kingdom.

Women working close to nature must have provided, from the margins of society, the framework for the proper articulation of a Shona understanding of the fertility God of the earth. When Murphree speaks of a vague concept of Mwari among the Budya,<sup>20</sup> this is because he was asking those members of the community whose religiosity is first and foremost a form of ancestor veneration as distinct from the worship of Mwari. Had Murphree focused on traditional Shona religion as a phenomenon originating in the experiences of the marginalized woman whose core activities are carried out on the landscape she works upon daily, his understanding of the Mwari religion would not have placed Mwari so far away.

This article will try to show that, as a fertility God, Mwari’s attributes correspond with aspects of the culture with a woman focus.

## II. THE WOMAN FOCUS

It would be shortsighted to interpret the Mwari religion exclusively through the eyes of men in a patriarchal society and make it seem as if women were incapable of developing religious insights. As illustrated below, questions about life in an ecological system with rains and fertility as key features tell us something about the basic character of the Mwari type of religion.

For a start, it is arguable that women are the most probable source of a Mwari religion insofar as it is concerned with ecological matters as distinct from questions of controlling the land. The point made by Lan in the quotation above, that while men dominated the affairs of the lineage in the homestead women wandered into the bush “looking for vegetables,” is more significant than he knew. Earlier studies of the Mwari religion not only demonstrated the minimal interest in private lineage matters, but more important, they overlooked the different focus on earth and the high regard for the environment in which women carry out most of their work.<sup>21</sup> Growing crops, looking for firewood, fetching water from wells, searching for wild fruit, fish, and other small creatures highlight women’s constant involve-

<sup>19</sup>Terence O. Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896-97* (London: Heineman, 1967) 18.

<sup>20</sup>Murphree, *Christianity and the Shona*, 48.

<sup>21</sup>It is widely noted in earlier studies of the Mwari religion that the high god is exalted beyond the ancestors. See W. M. J. van Binsbergen, “Explorations in the History and Sociology of Territorial Cults in Zambia,” in *Guardians of the Land*, ed. J. M. Schoffeleers, 47-88.

ment with nature; men had little or no time for this. Put another way, women in traditional Shona culture fulfilled roles that can explain the development of earth-centered myths, folk stories, and associated religious beliefs. This is not to say that men did not wander in the bush, too, for hunting and territorial wars were important ways through which men acquainted themselves with the landscape.<sup>22</sup> But when we consider the daily activities of women on the land in growing crops, looking for water to drink, fetching firewood, spending time by pools and rivers carrying out initiation rites, etc., it is clear that women had time to develop a more intimate relationship with nature than men. Neither is it a coincidence that women were the custodians of *ngano* (folklore stories) used to encourage harmonious relations between human beings and the animals and of myths that accounted for the origins of life on earth.

The folklore story about the elephant, the hippopotamus, and the hare highlights the value placed on living in a peaceful world where human beings and animals share the environment. The small but wise hare depends on knowledge and wisdom rather than physical strength. The hippopotamus is unwilling to share the resources of the river with other creatures and depends on his physical strength to protect the river as his territory. The elephant dominates the grasslands and uses his strength to keep the selfish hippopotamus away from the grazing area. The wise hare decides to reintroduce peace and harmony in the environment by challenging the elephant to have a tug of war with the hippopotamus down the river. Upon discovery that the two creatures were of equal strength, the elephant welcomes the hippopotamus to graze outside the river, and the elephant and all the other creatures return to the river to drink water whenever they please.<sup>23</sup>

In Sibanda's philosophical analysis of *ngano* such as this, women use animal imagery to communicate important social values to the young. Although the interest in *ngano* deteriorates as one becomes adult and understands the didactic value of folklore, the values imparted during one's youth contribute significantly to the way the Shona, Ndebele, and possibly many other African people with a similar cultural heritage reason about the world.<sup>24</sup>

Sibanda goes further to say that of an even greater value are myths of creation. These can be distinguished from folklore because they take us beyond social values to provide explanations about the mysteries of the universe, e.g., how the world came into existence and the place of humanity. For example, in the story of *Musikavanhu*, a masculine human figure drops from the sky in his sleep. Upon being awakened by the voice of Mwari beyond, the man finds himself by a pool with another human figure, this time a woman. Once awakened, the woman and man bring into existence the first human family.<sup>25</sup> Although it is more difficult to follow

<sup>22</sup>This is the theme of the book *Guardians of the Land*, cited above.

<sup>23</sup>F. Posselt, "Mashona Folklore," *Journal for the Native Affairs Department* 5 (1927) 35-39.

<sup>24</sup>S. Sibanda, lecturer in epistemology, University of Zimbabwe, interview by author, November 1998.

<sup>25</sup>H. Aschwanden, *Karanga Mythology: An Analysis of the Consciousness of the Karanga in Zimbabwe* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo, 1989) 31-33.

the logic of such a story than that of *ngano*, in which one can see human behavior patterns in the animal imagery, according to Sibanda myths provide a theoretical framework for grappling with mysteries of human existence.<sup>26</sup>

For our purposes, by changing the area of focus in the study of traditional Shona religion from the ancestors to questions about the existence of a universe and the origins of life on earth and the ideals of society, a rather different picture emerges which allows for much to be said about womanhood.

### III. THE RECOVERY OF FEMALE IMAGERY IN SHONA RELIGION

According to Daneel, the most popular praise name for Mwari is *Dzivaguru* (the Great Pool). Sometimes the root word *Dziva* (pool) is used instead. At Matonjeni, located in Matebeleland (Western Zimbabwe) and at other shrines in southern and central Africa, a pool found in a cave marks the ideal place for the worship of Mwari.<sup>27</sup> Besides, rivers and pools were places for women to train each other about their sexuality and carry out initiation rites.<sup>28</sup> A pool of water symbolizes the fountain and origin of life, like the woman's womb, according to Aschwanden.<sup>29</sup> Whether we agree with Daneel's designation of the Supreme Being Mwari as *Dzivaguru* or not, this name is widely associated with feminine aspects of the Mwari belief system. Daneel observed that it was a woman who pronounces *izwi raMwari* from behind a rock located in the shrine. Her title is *Mbonga-svikiro*. If not an elderly woman and ascetic, the *mbonga-svikiro* had to be a virgin woman upon whom an *izwi* (spirit of the hidden God) descends during ritual.<sup>30</sup> As a way of expressing her devotion to Mwari, she is sometimes called "the wife of Mwari."<sup>31</sup> It is even claimed that the *Mbonga* fulfils a role in which she not only impersonates Mwari, but also "becomes" Mwari during ritual.<sup>32</sup> Virgin girls sometimes assisted the *mbonga-svikiro* in looking after the shrine. The girls, called *mazendere* (wives to be), are described by Daneel as "emanations of God on earth," meaning that their presence was symbolic of a divine presence. There is, therefore, a feminine dimension of the Mwari religion that is easy to overlook in portrayals of Mwari as the God of a territorial cult.

In short, the fountain and origin of life symbolized by the pool draws attention to notions of femininity in the background culture of the Shona. Through her labors in and outside the home, the traditional woman among the Shona acquired a deep knowledge of the environment and readily appreciated the importance of water in giving life to plants and sustaining the lives of human beings and animals.

<sup>26</sup>Sibanda, interview.

<sup>27</sup>Van der Merwe refers to the Njelele and Dhula shrines in addition to Matonjeni, in "Shona Ideas of God," *Journal for the Native Affairs Department* 34 (1957) 39-63.

<sup>28</sup>Terence O. Ranger, "The Meaning of Mwari," *Rhodesian History* 5 (1974) 5-17.

<sup>29</sup>Aschwanden, *Karanga Mythology*, 13.

<sup>30</sup>Daneel, *God of the Matopo Hills*, 16.

<sup>31</sup>Aschwanden, *Karanga Mythology*.

<sup>32</sup>Daneel, *God of the Matopo Hills*, 22.

It is not surprising, therefore, that up to this day Mwari is viewed as a fertility God to whom people pray for rain. The woman, whose responsibility it was to produce crops for her husband's household, not only wanted to see the rains fall for the crops to grow, she herself was expected to bear many children until *nyoka yemudumbu yapera* (until the "snake" in her womb ceases to produce children). And when a woman fails her husband through infertility, she is compared to a dry rock surface: *Mukadzi asina mwana ruware* (the woman without child is like the dry surface of a rock). Put another way, women are held responsible for the nurturing of life in the environment. If Mwari can be described as the source of life who protects life through enabling women to bear children and letting the rains fall for the crops to grow, then Mwari might as well be described as a fertility goddess.

#### IV. MAI VEDU

In Aschwanden's collection of Karanga myths, the story of *Mai Vedu* draws attention once more to the close relationship between the woman and the environment rather than the lineage.

[Mwari] created the Earth and shaped it like a *rusero* [a shallow round basket used by women for winnowing]. From the clouds he took the water, from the sun the fire, and placed both in the belly of the Earth (*mudumbu renyika*) to make it fertile.

Thus the creative power of God is manifested in Mother Earth, who gives life, as the womb in which life on earth generated. As *Mai Vedu* put it, "I can give life to plants and trees." In reply to her question to Mwari about the source of animal life, God replied, "I gave you power to give life."<sup>33</sup> This gives importance to *Mai Vedu*, although she is dependent on the hidden Supreme Being Mwari, from whom she is distinguished as the creative agent who brings about life on earth. Daneel has concluded that there are two dimensions of Mwari. The male dimension exists above and the female is represented by earth below.<sup>34</sup> What is important here is not the sexuality of the hidden Mwari, but the fact that the gift of life comes through Mother Earth.

In the myth of the male *Musikavanhu* (maker of humanity), the latter drops from the heavens in his sleep. He is awakened beside the beautiful shape of a virgin woman standing by a pool. The woman shape is awakened into a full human being and children are born of her and *Musikavanhu*, the first couple on earth. This not only highlights the close relationship between woman and earth in the Karanga thought pattern, but reminds us of the association between water, woman, and life found in existence by *Musikavanhu*. Also made apparent in the story of *Musikavanhu* is the complementarity of the male and female natures in the making of humanity at creation.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Aschwanden, *Karanga Mythology*, 27.

<sup>34</sup>Daneel, *God of the Matopo Hills*, 16, 44.

<sup>35</sup>Isabel Mukonyora, "The complementarity of male and female imagery in theological language..." (D.Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 1998).

The common interpretation of Mwari as the God of the patriarchal family and ancestry trying to expand its area of influence through the establishment of a kingdom has thus led to a rather narrow understanding of the Mwari religion. Omitted have been issues related to living in an ecological system, where women function as agents in the creative process, generating life through child bearing and through nurturing the life of plants. It is important, therefore, not to underestimate the key role of female imagery in Shona mythology about the origins of life on earth and the tasks that women in a traditional Shona society have fulfilled.

Since the aim of this article is to highlight the religious significance of the ecological system to women, it is appropriate to conclude by drawing attention once more to the widely acknowledged vital role of women in the traditional family structure. As the *mutorwa* (stranger, i.e., from outside the clan) and yet bearer of children, field worker, hunter-gatherer of foodstuffs, and storyteller, the woman might be said to have contributed to the Mwari belief system in a way as yet to be explained in depth.

Today, Zimbabwean Christians have adopted the name Mwari as their name for God, but have done so through the eyes of men. Against the background of preceding discussions about the Mwari cult, it is not surprising that female imagery has become suppressed and the Mwari belief system distorted. It is therefore an important task to learn about the female dimension of the Mwari religion in a world that has become sensitized to women's concerns. ⊕