



Traditional Religion or Christianity? Spiritual Tension in the African Stories of Charles Mungoshi

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Charles Mungoshi is Zimbabwe's most accomplished writer. As I have argued elsewhere, his strength lies in his ability to put his finger on the pulse of the nation.¹ A central preoccupation in his English works is the analysis of the spiritual plight of the blacks. Mungoshi is well versed in the religious beliefs that influence his fellow citizens, and the tension between traditional beliefs and Christianity runs through his works.

Mungoshi skillfully juxtaposes key elements found in both religions and leaves it to the reader to work out the ramifications of the parallels and contrasts. Most black Zimbabweans have been influenced to some extent by both traditional religion and Christianity. During the colonial era, the education of the blacks was for many years largely in the hands of the missionaries.² Charles Mungoshi was

¹See M. Z. Malaba, "The Tension Between 'Traditional' Demands and Modern Practises in Mungoshi's *Waiting for the Rain* and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*," in *The African Past and Contemporary Culture*, ed. E. Reckwitz, L. Vennarini and C. Wegener (Essan: Verlag Die Blaue Eule, 1993) 199-128.

²See, for example, L. Vambe, *An Ill-Fated People: Zimbabwe Before and After Rhodes* (London: Heinemann, 1972).

educated at Daramombe and St. Augustine's Secondary School.³ Religious knowledge formed part of the curriculum, and biblical analogies abound in his works.

Generally, African traditional religions place great emphasis on the close bond between the living and the dead. Death ushers in a new phase of existence. The ancestors take an active interest in the lives of their descendants and can guide, protect, or destroy the latter if certain dues are not paid. The ancestors also act as intermediaries between the living and the Supreme Being. Prayers, rituals, and sacrifices can allegedly create and maintain wholeness, and this harmony between the living and the dead should also be reflected in the unity of the community, both within and without the family.

Christianity also lays emphasis on community or the church. Wholeness paradoxically lies in the surrender of the self to God, since Christ's death was an atonement for sin (which can loosely be defined as separation from God). Christianity stresses the importance of salvation, which is attained through oneness with God.

I. "THE MOUNT OF MORIAH"

Charles Mungoshi picks up certain themes from the Old and New Testaments. The notion

of sacrifice, for example, is highlighted in his haunting story, “The Mount of Moriah.” Irony is a central stylistic feature in Mungoshi’s works, and in this story he juxtaposes Abraham’s time of testing by God with the narrator’s father’s trial. In the biblical story, found in Gen 22:1-24, the focus is on a supreme test of faith. In Mungoshi’s short story, however, the sacrifice of an only son by a father is not proposed as a test of faith in God, but as a source of occult power. According to Matura, the doctor, Hama’s father has to sacrifice what is dearest to him in order to regain his luck:

Matura laughed a nasty little laugh. He said: “You don’t have enough love to be able to make the sacrifice.”

“Love? What has love to do with it?”

“Everything. You see, you have to sacrifice the thing you love beyond everything else to bring back your luck.”⁴

Hama, like Isaac, is innocent, and while being driven to the place of slaughter he recalls the happiest moments of his life:

At Aunt Rudo’s they were driving the cattle across the stream, bringing them home from the pastures in the purple dusk singing “The Mount of Moriah.” Aunt Rudo had taught him the song and had told him the story behind the song. Without actually singing it now, but with the song going round and round inside him, he understood the song now better than that time long ago in the village. The length of the road—all the distance to be travelled—lent a strange sadness—sweet sadness—to the song. Moriah: a dark blue mountain in autumn haze across plains of dry tall grass where the earth meets the sky. Abraham: long-

³See F. Veit-Wild, *Teachers, Preachers, Non-Believers: A Social History of Zimbabwean Literature* (London: Hans Zell, 1992) 269ff.

⁴C. Mungoshi, *Some Kinds of Wounds* (Gweru: Mambo, 1972) 9.

bearded, broad-shouldered, in tattered coloured robes—he had seen a picture once when Aunt Rudo had taken him to church—man-smelling of fire, sweat, wet soil and the open air with a kindly wrinkled face and the wisdom of distant horizons in his eyes. Isaac: small, eager, smelling of goatmilk cream, his supple boy’s back arched under the heavy burden of faggots, asking: “But where is the lamb for the sacrifice, Father?” And Abraham’s booming voice: “God will provide, son.” And, thinking about this, Hama imagined himself as Isaac, but when he looked in the rear view mirror and saw his father’s mean, worry-stained face he felt betrayed. His father was a far cry from the self-confident, big-boned Abraham. And if his father couldn’t be Abraham, then *he* was not Isaac...⁵

These passages demonstrate the different motives for making the supreme sacrifice of an only son in Mungoshi and in Genesis: greed on the one hand and selfless obedience on the other. Both Hama and Isaac, however, have a naive, innocent faith in their fathers. Like the Abraham

story, “The Mount of Moriah” will ultimately become a confirmation of love, as Hama’s father comes to place his son above his love of money.

Along the way, Hama’s innocence makes him blind to the omens and the danger that come to him:

A bird screeched in the hot stillness and the boy nearly fell off the rock into the water. He had forgotten about the childhood stories of certain bird-cries that were portents of ill omen....

The cry, so lonely, the black dart against the sun, and now the feathers—Hama felt afraid. But then the only other bird he knew that had the size of this other one was the honey-bird. The honey-bird was so unpredictable. It could as easily lead you to a bee-hive as to a snake’s nest...oh. He instinctively recoiled from the horror and as he leaned forward from the tree he felt a soft brush on his neck and he fell off the rock with a scream into the water....

Crouching in the water, he had a glimpse of his father’s horror-mottled face and in his trembling left hand a yellow scarf and in the right a big open knife....An unbearable sadness washed over Hama.

He said, “You scared me!”...for a moment Hama looked very closely, keenly, at his father, a new but shortlived fear taking a grip on him. This feeling disappeared as quickly as it had come and Hama felt hollow inside and now he was looking at his father and wondering what he wanted a yellow scarf and such a big knife for.

His father caught him staring, and in a sudden burst of emotion, he hugged the boy so hard, his body shaking so violently that all the breath left Hama.⁶

Hama’s kindly gesture in offering his father a razor blade “to pare his fingernails with,” rather than the big knife, drives his father to discard the instruments of slaughter, hug his son, and return home. Love overcomes greed and fear. The reader’s earlier inclination to concur with the doctor’s assessment that Hama’s father does not care for his son is revised. The most telling irony is in Hama’s innocent longing for the knife his father threw into the river. He, like Isaac, is quite unaware of how close he came to being sacrificed.

⁵Ibid.,15-16.

⁶Ibid., 19, 20, 21.

II. SPIRITUAL PARALYSIS

Mungoshi does not explicitly endorse either Christianity or traditional religion. He looks at the elements that bind the two. He is sensitive to the religious impulse that runs through many people as they grapple with the meaning of life.

In the short story that anticipates Mungoshi’s highly acclaimed novel *Waiting for the Rain*, “The Setting Sun and the Rolling World,” the naive protagonist is presented as an atheist:

There were things that belonged to his [father’s] old world that were just lots of humbug on the mind, empty load, useless scrap. He would go to Chiremba [the doctor] but he would burn the charms as soon as he was away from home and its

sickening environment. A man stands on his feet and guts. Charms were for you—so was God, though much later. But for now the world is godless, no charms will work. All that is just the opium you take in the dark in the hope of a light. You don't need that now. You strike a match for a light. Nhamo laughed.⁷

The generational tensions in Africa are exacerbated by the advent of new sources of authority and the new opportunities that colonialism drew in its wake. Atheism, agnosticism, and syncretism become available options, along with belief in traditional religion or Christianity, of course. The dislocation of African culture that was part and parcel of the colonial endeavour is poignantly mirrored in the family disintegration found in Mungoshi's works. A telling account of this conflict of cultures is found in his moving poem, "Christmas":

Here is neon bright First Street:
a kaylite feast of imitation fu trees
slow-sledge-pulling reindeer
silent feather-weight bells
under sweltering southern stars.

And here I am; born to fear the lion
abhor the vulture, turn back
on seeing a squirrel crossing my path
cipher dark meanings from
the otter's droppings
ward off the portent of the owl's hoot
with amulets and roots.

Hear [sic] I am; impotent in the middle
of all this bloodless white magic—
Could this be the Messiah?
(I came but you would not remember me?)
Even the eldest of my ancestors
don't know what snow looks like.⁸

Unlike Leopold Sedar Senghor, one of Africa's finest poets, who fuses traditional religious beliefs with Christianity,⁹ Mungoshi emphasizes the spiritual pa-

⁷C. Mungoshi, *Coming of the Dry Season* (1972; reprint, Harare: ZPH, 1983) 31.

⁸C. and O. Style, eds., *Mambo Book of Zimbabwean Verse* (Gweru: Mambo, 1986) 312.

⁹See J. Reed and C. Wake, eds., *Leopold Sedar Senghor: Selected Poems* (London: O.U.P., 1964).

ralysis brought about by western education that stresses rational analysis and casts doubt on "primitive superstition."

III. WAITING FOR THE RAIN

The spiritual paralysis revealed in “Christmas” is fleshed out in *Waiting for the Rain*. The title of the novel refers to a drought in both a physical and a spiritual sense. The firm believers in Shona traditional religion, the Old Man and Old Mandisa, are at death’s door. Their attempts to appease the spirits seem doomed as even the medium they hire, Matandangoma, is skeptical of her chances of lifting the curse and saving Betty, who is to be handed over to another family in appeasement of a murder committed by her ancestors.¹⁰ Although one is horrified by Betty’s fate, one must keep in mind that an innocent life has been taken and no compensation paid. As Tongoona points out:

“You see our troubles now? You have heard all that we were talking about last night? All these things should have been fixed long ago. But your uncle [Kuruku] said in these times of Christianity and the white man such things are no longer done. I even believed him once, I still believe in the new ways, but they are not enough for our problems which have been always with us even before the white man came with his teaching. So, this is something that your uncle doesn’t realise, and for this reason troubles won’t leave this family. It is not anyone man’s mistake, we all carry the blame of our dead, and it is up to us, the living, to appease the Earth.”¹¹

I would suggest that the theological outlook outlined here is not far from the biblical notion of God’s willingness to exact vengeance “even unto the third and fourth generations.”¹²

One of the most devastating ironies in *Waiting for the Rain* is that the most avowedly Christian member of the Mandengu family, Kuruku, is also the most thoroughly compromised character! The rest of the family believe that he and his wife, Rhoda, poisoned Tongoona’s son, Tichafa (which ironically means “We shall die”!).

Kuruku declares: “Mind, I don’t trade in this roots and herbs racket”¹³; but during the divination ritual, he is named as the one who refused to allow his late brother Makiwa’s spirit to “rest” in his family. He is also said to be determined to destroy his brother Tongoona’s family:

Beware of him too. He is a wounded lion, a snake with its back broken. The bile in him thickens, the poison in him rots....
He has told the world he is a Christian, and the world knows him as a preacher of the Good Word. So even if you talked to him about all this, he would have to deny it to your face. To accept it he would have to denounce the Church and what it says about people like us [diviners].¹⁴

¹⁰C. Mungoshi, *Waiting for the Rain* (London: Heinemann, 1975) 147.

¹¹Ibid., 158-159.

¹²See, for example, Deut 32:35; Rom 12:19; Heb 10:30.

¹³Mungoshi, *Waiting for the Rain*, 59.

¹⁴Ibid., 144.

compound of extraordinary vices and hypocrisy! As the oldest surviving son, he abdicates responsibility for looking after his parents. A rugged individualist, he has pretensions to leading the nationalist movement; an evangelist, he is also a foul-mouthed drunkard.

Matandangoma, the medium, is resigned to the reality of the presence of two, rival, religious authorities. The Old Man cynically suggests that she is first and foremost merely a business woman.¹⁵ Although he is presented as a symbol of cultural authenticity (“Each man to his own drum”¹⁶), he breaks off his invocation to the ancestors when Betty enters the hut with the white priest, and joins the others in reciting the Lord’s Prayer and “one other prayer for travellers.”¹⁷

Tongoona’s wife, Raina, seems to regard both religions as insurance policies. She scathingly attacks her spineless husband when he tries to wriggle out of selecting a scapegoat who would lift the curse of not getting married or bearing a child from Betty:

You are afraid to do that little thing for your own family and you will let them kill you and all your house, is that so?...Because Christianity sits in your chicken heart as if you are heavy with child. You think because the Bible says it is wrong it must be wrong. But tell me—who of these so-called Christians run to the Bible when a child dies? You said you were a Christian that time just because you were too proud to do what a little water on your head decreed you must reject—and where is our child now? Dead! And we are all going to be dead before vultures open up your eyes to make you realise that you have to be a little cruel to survive.¹⁸

In the face of this withering contempt, Tongoona cannot withdraw his consent that Kutsvaka’s daughter, Rudo, be the scapegoat.

However, when the priest arrives, Raina hedges her bets:

Raina says: “Guard and guide him, O Lord, we put him in your all-merciful hands.” She makes the sign of the cross and throws some more roots on to the fire. Tongoona watches all this with some uneasiness in his mind. He would like to do the same, to be able to say some such words as his wife says, and make the sign of the cross with the same ease of mind and hand, but he is worried by these roots and it has not been clearly declared that the God of the Bible doesn’t work with them any more. So, to put roots on the fire with the same hand that makes the sign of the cross and mouth incantations to the ancestors with the same mouth that addresses the God of the Bible—that, he feels, is going a bit too far. It may be held against him as blasphemy. So he says prayers neither to his ancestors nor to the God of the Bible.¹⁹

Although he is denounced as weak and ineffectual, his decision to sit on the fence—a position which chimes well with his name, which literally means “We shall see”—is principled.

¹⁵Ibid., 131.

¹⁶Ibid., 1.

¹⁷Ibid., 175.

¹⁸Ibid., 150.

The middle generation's vacillation in the area of religious beliefs reflects the spiritual paralysis and syncretism that is a fairly common stance in contemporary Zimbabwe. Divination ostensibly provides answers to pressing spiritual problems, while prayer does not always help one to divine God's will easily.

The younger generation is also presented as being in a spiritual limbo; this is most clearly presented in the portrayal of Tongoona and Raina's sons. Garabha, the oldest, is a rolling stone: at thirty, he does not know what he wants in life, but is opposed to the climate of suspicion and mistrust that pervades the village. His father disinherits him in favour of Lucifer—who flees from the responsibility bestowed on him.

The name Lucifer is an interesting choice, given the significance of names in Mungoshi's works and in African societies. Legend has it that Lucifer was God's favourite angel, who fell from grace through his inordinate pride and for being jealous of God's power. Mungoshi's Lucifer confesses that he envies Maraini, a talented and popular schoolmate:

And Lucifer had tried to love him following the dictum of the Holy Bible: Love thy enemies. But somehow this had failed...

...Maraini was the model of an honest, upright and gentle person—it was only that his personality seemed to show off Lucifer's in an ill light. And for this, Lucifer intensely hated Maraini.... This hate for Maraini had driven Lucifer to prayer.²⁰

Lucifer's religiosity is shattered when he sees Maraini praying: "He discovered that he was full of conceit, self-importance and disgusting self-pride."²¹ Lucifer's endeavour to become a good Christian crumbles but, ironically, "this lack of belief bothers him too. It is a form of pride."²²

IV. CONCLUSION

One notes that religion—be it traditional religion or Christianity—does not seem to improve the quality of life for the characters in Mungoshi's works. Adherents to the former are hamstrung by superstition, suspicion, and fear; and the latter does not seem to remedy the problems faced by the blacks. Leopold Sedar Senghor's suggestion that traditional religion "is but Jacob's ladder" is not a position with which Mungoshi concurs. Life is a hard and lonely struggle, and the promise of abundant life rings hollow. Indeed, the dominant images found in Mungoshi's works are those of death, destruction, and drought. Health, harmony, and joy are elusive, both on a personal and a communal level. The Earth is a sinister, destructive force, and the Old Man's battle with death, with which the novel starts, is mirrored in the concluding chapter by the dominant image of the vulture.

²⁰Ibid., 70, 71.

²¹Ibid., 71.

²²Ibid., 72.