

# Experiencing the Sacred

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## Abstract

The primary concern of this research is to investigate sacred places utilised for moments of silence by Shona people when they seek mystical experience with their ancestors. Emphasis will be placed on the traditional wisdom of mysticism. It is no exaggeration that knowing and appreciating the beauty of nature (aesthetics) can draw one closer to God. Essentially, the aspect of silence is the involvement of God in people's daily lives. In this presentation, we seek to analyse mystical experiences among the Shona. The fundamental cultural changes in Shona society are forcing us to consider the position of sacred places and moments of communion with ancestors. These are the privileges of studying cultural dynamics.

**Keywords:** sacredness; Shona time; sacred places; spirituality; religion

## Introduction

Many societies and cultures recognise sacred places and moments. Such places and moments form part of formative encounters that influence their world-views and general orientation of life. It is our view that mystical experience is an important part of the cultural heritage of a people. In the paper, we posit that mystical experience with the ancestors, as is the case with the Shona people of Zimbabwe, is a process that can only be understood in a religio-cultural context and bears direct bearing on the means to reach God. Hence, this paper provides insight into the places and moments of mystical experience with ancestors and God (*Mwari*) among the Shona people of Zimbabwe.

Sacred places and moments in the Shona context are cultural signposts that help to understand and read the ethnic, territorial and social lay of the land (Dawson 2009, vii). These places and moments are manifestations of the spirituality of a group of people. Hence, they represent the identity of a people and their spirituality. In addition, sacred places and moments represent a connection with the ancestors. It is imperative that when



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one is in a sacred place, he/she should receive blessings or request to be blessed. Rudolf Otto claimed that sacred places have an eerie quality, i.e. *numen* (Devereux 2010, 12). In a spiritual sense, a sacred place is the origin of humanity's association of selected places with holiness. A sacred place is literally an awesome space. This is demonstrated when Shona people offer prayers to ancestors and to God at holy places.

## **Method of Approach**

It is our purpose in this paper to set out the results of our research in terms of phenomenology and history of religious perspectives. The paradigm used in this research is qualitative. As Markham and Ruparell (2001, xi) argue, the phenomenological approach aims at objectively using putatively neutral criteria which transcend the personal and cultural. African theologians have been encouraged to apply phenomenological tools when investigating African indigenous spiritualities. John S. Pobebe has argued that the phenomenological approach is helpful for collecting the basic data of African indigenous religions and that it constitutes an analytical description (Pobebe 1979, 21). Emefie Ikenga-Metuh also maintains that applying insights from phenomenology will minimise the problem of portraying African traditional religions negatively. Ikenga-Metuh is persuaded that the academic study of religion in Africa would attain a sharper cutting edge by adopting the phenomenological method (Ikenga-Metuh 1984, 15). In Zimbabwe, many research students have embraced the phenomenological approach in the quest to do justice to African traditional religions (Chitando 1998, 100). Although a number of Western theorists have criticised the phenomenological method for not going beyond descriptive accuracy (Flood 1999; Wiebe 1999), it remains a useful approach in an African context.

## **The Rationale of Research**

The aim of the research is to provide a theological ground for African cultural values that are essential to inculcate for Christian contemplation. The Shona people of Zimbabwe are the majority ethnic group in Zimbabwe. The Shona are concentrated in the north, south and eastern regions of the country. Before Christian evangelisation, the Shona had their traditional places, objects, songs and times. The experience in North Africa has shown that when faith is not home-grown, it can be easily discarded in the face of challenges. The Christians in North Africa easily abandoned their faith for Islam. As Islam is a fast-growing religion, we seek to show how Christians can inculcate their traditional sense of silence for Christian life. This sort of perception leads Christians to experience Christian faith with a sincere heart. Inculturation is a major theme for theologians in Africa, where Islam poses a major threat to Christianity. Thus, inculturation represents a form of evangelisation and catechesis in Africa in contemporary times.

In conclusion, we develop a way of integrative Christian mysticism based on traditional Shona mystical apprehension of sacredness. This is done with critical openness to any

relevant information which is within reasonable reach. In spirituality, the findings are formation-oriented because they integrate principles, practices and insights that become relevant to practical events and problems with which people are faced in their everyday life. In this case, reflection is not divorced from lived reality in the present. The scientific information helps to form and reform one's life. It transforms the subject. It also helps in transformation and a fruitful relationship with ancestors and God.

## **A Brief Background of Shona People**

Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in the southern part of Africa, between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers. Beach (1980, 1) writes: "South of the Zambezi river in Southern Africa, the land rises to a great plateau, over three thousand feet high in most parts." It borders South Africa to the south, Botswana to the west, Zambia to the north, and Mozambique to the east.

According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reports (August 15, 2011), by July 2011, Zimbabwe had a population of 12 084 304. Approximately 60 per cent of the population lives in rural areas (Taringa 2006, 3). The Shona and Ndebele are the two major ethnic groups. There is no unanimous agreement among scholars on the actual percentage of Shona in the country. Taringa (2006, 3) argues that the Shona tribe is 65 per cent of the population. On the other hand, Ngara and Porath (2004, 189–209) state that the Shona are 80 per cent. In the *Columbia Electronic Encyclopaedia* (2010, 1–4) it is argued that "some 82 per cent of the population belong to the Shona ethnic group." However, the *International Debates* (2008, 5–15) states that Shona speakers constitute 75 per cent of the population. Despite the numerical discrepancies, it is clear that Shona form the majority of the population of Zimbabwe.

## Shona Traditional Spirituality

This section presents a synopsis of Shona spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Spirituality is part and parcel of Shona culture. Ancestor veneration forms the foundation of Shona traditional spirituality. It dominates their thinking pattern to such an extent that it shapes their culture, social life, politics and economic life. Since Shona spiritual life is closely bound with the traditional way of life, it is important to study their mystical experience.

From a traditional point of view, Shona people knew and believed in ancestors who carry their petitions; ancestors that lie in the deep and unknown recesses of the past (*vatisingazivi*). As for the god *Mwari*, Gelfand (1972, 123) contends: “For the Shona always speak of an indifferent God—too big, too almighty—far removed from the family and community affairs of the Shona.” The Shona people turn to their ancestors for their daily wants and problems. Private petitions can only be made to the ancestors who either transmit them to the unknown or can act upon them directly. A person can approach ancestors through the sanction of the family and tribal spirits who make their own supplications in the invisible realm, while the messengers such as *manyusa* or/and *mahosana* (i.e. spirit mediums responsible for rain-making) transmit the tribute and petitions of the people to Mabweadziva/Matonjeni in the Matobo hills (Fortune 1973, 12). Thus, Shona spirituality sheds light on the people’s understanding of ancestors through economy, culture and politics. These elements are intertwined in ways that are difficult to differentiate one from the other. Because of this, ancestors constitute the nerve-centre of any Shona society. In the same line of thought, Gundani (2011, 307) argues: “Fundamental among its set of beliefs was the cult of royal ancestors (*mhondoro*) and ritual consultation of territorial spirits.” Although this spirituality has no written scripture, it survives through oral tradition and cultural practices. In

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1 We have opted for the term spirituality because the Shona did not initially have a religion. The term “religion” itself is contested. Initially, no scholar acknowledged the existence of religion in Africa. As Chidester (1996, 11) writes: “The initial comparative maneuver under intercultural conditions was not most often denial, the assertion that people had been found who lacked any religion.” Early European settlers claimed that they had found people who had no religion. “The same absence was reportedly observed in southern Africa by travellers and traders, by missionaries and government officials, throughout the nineteenth century” (Chidester 1996, 13). So when did Africans become notoriously religious? Certainly, it was a result of colonial containment. European colonialists believed that Africans had to be converted and have a religion. The term was later adopted for Africans as a containment term to impose the Western concept of God after 1852. From scholars like Ninian Smart (*The Religious Experience of Mankind*, 1976, 16) and William James (*The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, 2002, 29–30), religion is understood as a person’s expression of relationship with God. However, spirituality is about people’s way of life. The Shona have always had a way of life, whether religious or non-religious, constructive or destructive. One can live without a religion but not without spirituality. However, religion can become spirituality when it becomes a way of life. As a way of life, a person can die for, with and by it. The Shona spirituality is essentially ancestral-centred.

other words, annual commemorations and story-telling enable young generations to be socialised into Shona spirituality. Shona spirituality is made visible through day-to-day living.

Apart from the belief in ancestors, the Shona also believe in a Supreme Being who is, however, unknowable (*Watisingazivi*). This being is the final authority above and beyond the ancestors. Gundani (2011, 308) states that at the top of the spiritual hierarchy was the god *Mwari*, described in eco-centric names like *Zame* (the unreachable horizon), and anthropomorphic names such as *Mariga* (all-powerful), *Chikara* (an awesome one), *Mutangakugara* (the pre-existent one), *Musikavanhu* (Creator of human beings). These varied names carry anthropocentric attributes of *Mwari* and reflect how *Mwari* relates to people. The concepts are descriptive and help us understand the nature and functions of the Supreme “Unknown” Being. Fortune (1973, 2) argues: “... *Mwari* was closely associated with the chieftainship.” This understanding is augmented by Daneel (1971, 80–81), who argues that the Shona concept of the Supreme Being has never been polytheistic. The various names designating the Supreme Being reveal a variety of functions and do not suggest the existence of many deities.

However, Dachs and Rea (1979, 9) argue that the concept of God in Shona religion is foreign to them and the concepts were actually created by the early missionaries. Inspired by A. C. Hodza, Fortune (1973, 10) posits that the missionaries were led to choose the name *Mwari*, as the Shona equivalent to God, largely through a misinterpretation of the ritual at the shrines of the Matonjeni. Fortune further states that “Delegation used to go from all over the country to Matonjeni to offer tribute, and pray for rain and fertility in crops, flocks and families.” This is evidence that the Shona had a belief in a spiritual being with power over the sources of life. This understanding led to the decision to use the name *Mwari* for the Christian God (Fortune 1973, 10). Revisiting the theory of Van Oordt (in Dachs and Rea 1979), who posits that the concept of *Mwari* originated from Mt. Kilimanjaro, Dachs and Rea (1979) argue that the concept is probably alien to the Shona. According to J. F. van Oord (in Van der Merwe 1957), *Mwali* is derived from the Arabic “Allah” due to the Islamic cultural influence along the coast of Africa (Van der Merwe 1957, 41). As such, the concept of God among Shona is still debatable. What might exist is the faith in a Shona Supreme Being. Nevertheless, the concept of *Mwari* is not rationally grounded in Shona spirituality.

Of note is that, in Shona spirituality, *Mwari* is creator (*Musikavanhu*) all-powerful, unseen and unknowable. Only ancestors can hear him/her speaking. Hence, the living can only reach God through ancestors; “Being above all, the Creator is not concerned with personal, family or clan affairs” (Fortune 1973, 12). He has less direct involvement in the individual lives than ancestors. However, while *Mwari* is associated with rain and fertility-related matters, there are times when he/she is consulted about matters of national import (Gundani 2011, 307).

## **Sacred Moments and Places among the Shona**

In treating Shona sacred moments and places, we shall classify them under three groups: domestic domain, community, and regional cults. Although we can put them into categories, this does not mean they exclude each other in content and application. In fact, sacred moments and places are inclusive of one another.

The domestic domain falls under the responsibility and control of parents and elders who run families. Headmen and chiefs are, however, responsible for the wider community and region or chieftaincy. Hence, the latter feed into the regional cults that attract a larger community approximate to the civil district. Although Chitakure (2016, 143) contends that all people have sacred places, in contemporary times such an approach seems to ignore that there are atheists and agnostics who do not value some of these places. The term “sacred place” has a long history in the phenomenology of religion (Post 2010, 17). It was considered by Mircea Eliade in his *Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959). “For Eliade the sacred was defined by space, time and cosmology” (Spicer and Hamilton 2005, 2). Eliade drew on Emile Durkheim’s identification of the bipolar distinction between the sacred and the profane as characteristic of all religious beliefs. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that both scholars used Latin *sacer* and *profanes*, which originally had a primarily spatial meaning. “*Sacer* denoted that which was sacred, and could be used of both objects and places” (Spicer and Hamilton 2005, 2). On the other hand, *profanes* referred to the area outside the sacred place (*sacrum*).

Place and time play a dominant role in Shona spirituality. However, these are not homogeneous. Some places and times are qualitatively different from others. Among the most visible aspects of Shona religion are sacred places and moment. These were neither built nor voted for, but selected from nature through association with the history and myths of a clan (Holm 1994, 1). These are fundamental elements of Shona spirituality. They are at the centre of Shona people’s view of ancestors, God and the world.

### **Sacred Moments and Places in the Domestic Domain**

Local cults are determined by residential nearness. According to Schoffeleers (1978, 9): “People occupying villages or village groupings have cults of their own operating on behalf of these small groups.” The distinguishing character is that members are in close social contact, and that participation in rituals tends to be informal.

#### *Imba Yamai (Mother’s Hut)*

The kitchen and all that it is connected with, is associated with sacredness by the Shona. The kitchen houses the hearth, shelf, utensils, pots, and so forth. Marking the entrance to the kitchen is the *chikumbaridzo* (*stoep*), which symbolises the spiritual axis. The umbilical cords of the children born to the woman associated with the kitchen, are buried

under the *stoep*. Hence, when Shona people say “*pane rukuvhute rwangu*” (the place where my umbilical cord was buried), they will be referring to the *stoep* of their mother’s kitchen. It is this place that unites each Shona person with the whole family, including the ancestors.

At the centre of the kitchen is the hearth where the fire is lit, and family members sit around it for warmth. It is also upon the hearth that the mother prepares food for the family. Right in front of the hearth, and in a straight line from the *stoep*, is the *chikuva* (shelf) where plates, cups, and ladles are neatly arranged. The shelf is constructed above a raised platform called *chikuva*. The latter resembles an altar and is treated by the Shona as a sacred place. Ordinarily, the kitchen is treated as a mini temple where the family offers sacrifices and offerings to ancestors. The head of the family presides over this alter whenever the family venerates its ancestors. Such veneration includes *mutambowebira* (ancestral atonement and propitiation rites), *kurova guva* (ancestor induction rites), and *marovoro* (marriage rites), among others.

The main hut is also the place where the mother, as custodian of the family home, brings people together through meals and drinks. Special utensils including the sacred axe (*gano*) and sacred plates (*ndiro dzevadzimu*) are kept in the kitchen and reserved for special traditional functions. Among the Shona, meals are sacred because ancestors partake in them. Hence the kitchen is the sanctuary of a woman. Even the husband is prohibited from removing utensils from it when its custodian is no more. Such an act is considered to be anathema (*kupisira guva*). In the event of misunderstanding between husband and wife, a wise wife would seek refuge in the kitchen shelf (*chikuva*). A husband would not dare touch a wife who has sought refuge there. This is because the community punishment for such offenders is very severe. Interestingly, the name *chikuva* literally means a small grave. It is the place where members of the family commune with the dead and commemorate the great deeds of their ancestors. While the kitchen is the place where the family performs ritual songs and dance in honour of the ancestors; it is also the place where family members exercise silent moments in prayers to the ancestors.

### *Danga (Kraal)*

According to the Shona, domestic animals are a blessing from their ancestors. Cattle and goats are used for propitiation and atonement rites. The bull dedicated to the ancestors (*gono*) is the symbol of family fecundity and fertility. The kraal and the bovine wealth associated with it is believed to be safeguarded by *mhondoro* spirits. This *mhondoro* (lion) is believed to be a re-incarnated senior ancestor in the form of a lion. However, this lion does not kill the animals or people. It protects the family. For this reason, the kraal is a sacred place where members of the family also spend silent moments in memory of the ancestors. The Shona have a saying, *Kufa kwehosi inosiya imwe* (Every leader has a successor). Hence, when the family slaughters the *gono*, they

are required to replace it with another. Such dedication rites are accompanied by contemplative silence followed by song and dance in honour of the ancestors.

### *Graves*

In discussing the Shona moments of silence, it is important to deal with the sacredness of graves. Masoga and Nel (2014, 71) stress that gravesites are sacred because of their historical and cultural significance. The sacredness goes beyond what is buried in it. The Shona consider graves sacred because they bear the remains of the ancestors. According to Mbiti (1991, 149), graves "... are often treated as religious places" and they are at times used as shrines. It is an exaggeration, however, to argue that "Shona religion is based on the grave" (Taringa 2006, 204). However, the Shona pour a libation of beer and tobacco on the grave when inducting the spirit of the deceased to the "land" of the ancestors (*nyikadzimu*), just as they do at the *chikuva*. For this reason, observing silence at the graveyard/cemetery is an act of deep respect and reverence for the ancestors. Some even believe that failure to maintain silence at the graveyard could result in some misfortune such as drought and epidemics. Silence at sacred places is based on both ancestral reverence and a belief in ancestral vengeance.

### *Animals*

The Shona people recognise some animals as sacred. These animals are either sacred by virtue of their nature or because they have been dedicated to ancestral spirits (Chitakure 2016, 150). According to Taringa (2006, 205): "The Shona, like many other African people, recognise that spirits operate in the human world through animals, birds and fish." Each Shona group has an animal it values as its totemic animal. These include hippo, water-python, fish-eagle, antelope, lion, elephant and buffalo, among others. These animals are associated with the founding of a clan. Members of the clan are forbidden to eat the animal associated with its founding. One is expected to show reverence to the totemic animal by bowing down to the ground. The elderly women usually ululate and recite the totemic poem (*chidawo*), which traces the background of the clan and asks for protection and favours. Men usually kneel down praising and asking for blessings from ancestors and God. Most importantly, Shona people abstain from eating meat from the totemic animal. In addition, it is taboo for people of the same totem to marry except after a ritual to sever the relationship (*cheka ukama*) has been performed.

### *Meal Times*

There are certain taboos associated with eating food. It is a common practice that the Shona encourage the young to keep quiet when eating. Clem (2012, 1) opines: "Quiet is observed during meals and meals are eaten while everyone is seated down." A meal is not merely a meal, but is like a ritual in which the ancestors partake. The young show respect to the elders by allowing them to eat first before them. The elders are the representatives of the ancestors. In this way, the father or mother is in charge of the



family meal ceremony. Partaking of meals is generally done in the mother's hut. If by any chance, something spills onto the floor, elders say: "The ancestors have enjoyed themselves." Hence, every meal is an occasion for the family to commune with the ancestors.

### *Memorial Services (Nyaradzo and Kurova Huva)*

This Shona memorial service is usually held after a year. Nevertheless, the Christian memorial services are held from a few weeks after death. Lately, a new term for the memorial service has emerged, namely "Celebration of life service" (Mataranyika 2010, 1). Planning for a celebration of life ceremony takes a bit of time, yet it can be a wonderful way of expressing one's love and affection in a meaningful and commemorative way.

Memorial services are occasions for members of the family and relatives to sit, talk, eat and drink while remembering the life of the deceased. Everybody now knows and realises that what has happened is irreversible; and all that is left are memories of the deceased (Mataranyika 2010, 1). A memorial service is a time to honour and cherish the memory of the departed, a time to celebrate their life in a way they would have been happy with if they were alive. It is not a time for mourning. Shona people celebrate the life of their departed ones taking into account family values and the deceased's preferences and beliefs. Those whose beliefs are rooted in African cultural tradition will celebrate the life of their departed over a night of traditional song and dance in a ceremony called *kurova guva* or *chenura*, with traditionally brewed opaque beer in abundance (Mataranyika 2010, 1).

The preparation for a memorial is a sacred enterprise. Close relatives of the deceased abstain from sexual intimacy until the ceremony is over. The old women and very young girls prepare beer and some partake of the food for the celebration. During this period, the family members promote family unity and harmony among both the living and the departed.

### **Community Rituals**

There are community rituals which function for the whole community rather than for actions within it (Schoffeleers 1978, 2). These are meant for the wellbeing of the community, fields, livestock and other interests. They are usually organised on the basis of location, tribe, or clan. People who participate in community rituals share the same culture, language and history. The traditional chief heads this function.

### *Music and Dance*

Traditional music and dance is a mystical treasure for Shona people. As noted by Mbiti (1991, 27): "A lot of African music and songs deal with religious ideas and practices." The main reason is that sacred music is part of traditional spirituality and its liturgical

practices. Shona celebrations are usually accompanied by music and dance. Music expresses their spiritual life. It is a powerful means of communication (Mbiti 1991, 27). When people sing to ancestors, this is a solemn moment. It is a way of praying and praising ancestors. Songs teach and promote solidarity and enrich the Shona culture. Singing is an involvement of the divine in human life. The songs express the good qualities of and the role of ancestors. In the past, there were several choirs (*matendo/makwaira*) in communities that used to sing at solemn occasions like harvesting, weeding, marriage, and funerals, among others.

Shona music consists of primarily traditional songs that have been passed down orally and are meant for religious ritual. There are various kinds of these songs, which include *mbira*, *muchongovoyo* and *mbakumba*, among others. These are thought to have been with the ancestors from the time of creation. There are many instruments that are used for singing, like drums, *mbira* (xylophone), bottle caps, flute, whistle as well as shakers and rattles.

*Mbira* can be an effective solo instrument, but it is rarely played by itself at traditional Shona religious ceremonies. It is ordinarily accompanied by rattle players, handclapping, and singing. Rattles are an important part of music because they are responsible for setting and maintaining the tempo of the singing. In addition, those with the ability and skill to play through the night without breaks are in high demand. Handclapping patterns, called *makwa*, supplied by the villagers, also add additional rhythm. Berliner (1978, 114) notes that the “*makwa* patterns combine in many ways, and usually participants perform at least two contrasting patterns. Since *mbira* music is religious music, it must be played at *abira* (propitiation rites). The music must be continuous and must last through the night, so *mbira* music is cyclical: a single piece can be played for as long as wished. In short, music expresses communal and ancestral fellowship.”

### *Chisi (Holy Days)*

*Chisi* is the day of rest in honour of the ancestors, the guardians of the land. Schoffeleers (1978, 2) classifies this practice as a local cult that has to do with the holding of land. In its literary sense, it is to sit down, to sit still or to be inactive. The *chisi* day of rest is set according to the precepts of each chiefdom. Anything that detracts people from recognising *chisi* is a punishable offence. Thus, the observance of *chisi* articulates the authority of ancestors through the local chief, headman or village head. The chief, headman or village head oversees that people do not work. It is a day of thanking ancestors for the land they have occupied. In addition, in summer, on the first day of rains (i.e. *chinhemera*), people do not work in their fields and gardens. They relax and praise *Mwari waMabweadziva* (God of *Mabweadziva/Matonjeni*) for the rains. In other words, people reflect on the blessing from the ancestors.

## Regional Cults

Regional rituals are cults whose constituency is a territorial group identified by common occupation of a particular land area, so that membership of the cult is in the final instance a consequence of residence. They are territorial groups (Schoffeleers 1978, 5). These territories are under the custodian of a spirit guardian. Schoffeleers (1978, 238) opines that “The spirit guardians are the spirits of important persons from the past, normally early members of the chiefly family, called *mhondoro* (lion), a form they are believed to take when wandering in the bush.” Each of these spirits has a forest shrine where people honour it annually under a huge tree. There are spirit-mediums who mediate between the living and the territorial spirits.

### *Hills, Caves and Mountains*

There are natural phenomena which are linked to a clan, chieftaincy or ethnic group or ancestors. Hills and mountains are deemed sacred because that is where the *madzitateguru emadzishe* (chiefs’ ancestral spirits) were interred. It is the mythological history associated with the hills or mountains that matters. These places can, therefore, be understood within the histories of warfare between so-called Shona groups and non-Shona groups. Due to the sacredness associated with such physical features, before one climbs a mountain or enters a particular forest known to be sacred, he/she should get permission from the local chief. According to Karanga traditional lore in Mberengwa district, in September 1999, Fr. Herman Stoffel (SMB), ostensibly lost his direction in Vuhwa (Bucchwa) mountain, Mberengwa, after climbing it without the permission of elders. Vuhwa mountain is one of the regional cults of the Musaigwa, Dziva clan. He was rescued the following morning by the local headman. The story surrounding this event is that the priest angered the ancestors by despising the size of wild fruits and the height of the mountain. The villagers around the mountain are convinced that the spirits of the mountain were angry and caused the priest to spend the whole night crying for help. This is confirmed by Gelfand (1972, 54) when he writes: “... So strong is this feeling among the Shona that one entering a strange area in a forest, a mountain or a beautiful spot is not allowed to comment on it lest he/she upsets the ancestral spirits (*vadzimu*) of the region.” The places are sacred because they are the abode of ancestors. That is the basis of defining sacredness among the so-called Shona people. Similarly, animals that live in sacred mountains are not hunted. The mountains have the remains of the ancestors, and are thus sacred. In terms of Shona spirituality, sacred places are perceived as embodiments of ancestors. Hence, the spirits of ancestors should not be disturbed. In addition, in the mountains there are caves considered to be sacred (*ninga*) and mysterious (Moyes 2012, 1). The sacred caves draw people closer to God and their ancestors. They were used to protect people from enemies.

### *Trees and Forests*

There are trees, forests and insects that are sacred. They fall under providential nature and nourishment. As Taringa (2006, 201) writes: “Trees ... and plants are treated with

caution and consideration.” Just like mountains and rivers, it is a taboo to cut down or destroy a sacred tree or forest. Sacred forests are traditionally called *rambatemwa* (Taringa 2006, 209). Literally, these are sacred groves protected by the traditional leadership from domestic consumption and utilisation. The Shona believe that ancestral spirits rest in these groves. Hence it is taboo to fell sacred trees for firewood and construction poles. Moreover, animals that inhabit the sacred groves are said to belong to ancestors and God, and are protected from domestic consumption. That being the case, when people enter sacred places they should respect everything they see or find there. Thus, one is not allowed to pass bad comments on fruits, insects or anything. This is because ancestors have provided these things for the living. In other words, God and ancestors manifest themselves through these natural phenomena. In our observation, we argue that this helps people to value the relationship that should exist between people and ancestors. The Shona interface with sacred places with reverence, and try as much as possible not to offend the ancestors. For that reason, people do not plough or graze their animals there. Animals that take shelter in sacred trees and forests may not be killed. Hence, Mbiti (1991, 150) states: “Killing them would desecrate the sacred places and might incur punishment from God or the spirits.”

In Shona spirituality, there are certain trees associated with the presence of ancestors. People usually gather or sacrifice around such sacred trees. There is a belief that all large trees belong to the ancestors. On this aspect Daneel (2001, 92) comments: “Virtually all large trees (*miti mikuru*) were protected as they belonged to the ancestors who were believed to dwell in tree branches.” The belief in ancestral spirits living in tree branches is also implied in the Shona keeping silent when they approach these trees. Consequently, such trees cannot be used as firewood. Some trees are associated with medicinal value, while others have nutritional value (e.g. *munhorido*, *muchakata*, *mushuku*, *mukarati*, *mutamba*, and *mupfura*). There are procedures for picking fruits and for felling them. Hence, when the chief declares that it is time to pick wild fruits from *jiri* (wood-lot) they observe certain taboos like not chasing away wild animals, shouting, putting the blame on rotten fruits, or using two hands to pick the fruits.

Among the Karanga, people usually gather around certain trees for spiritual exercises. Such trees include *mushavhi* and *muonde* (fig tree) that are believed to afford worshippers a mystical experience of God and ancestors. Rain-making rituals (*mutoro/mukwerera*), for instance, are held below a *muchakata/muhacha* tree. As a result, such trees are vital for the livelihood of the community because of their religious significance. If one makes a noise near them, one is perceived as offending the ancestors. The local chief is empowered by the community with the authority to punish such offenders. A levy of either a goat or a head of cattle is often charged against the culprit. The goat or head of cattle is then slaughtered for an atonement ritual with the ancestors. As such, silence is recommended in respect of ancestral spirits who are viewed as relaxing. This also applies to some water bodies, which are protected by ancestral spirits.

### *Sacred Water Bodies*

Of all the key sacred objects, water is perhaps the most ubiquitous. Almost everywhere, the Shona have sacred pools, rivers, springs and waterfalls. Sacred water bodies are associated with water spirits, which the Shona believe to be endowed with healing powers. According to Devereux (2010, 20): “The ancient Greeks placed their healing centres and oracle temples at water sources.” Evidence exists that the Shona believe that wells, springs, rivers and other water bodies have been in existence from time immemorial. Among the sacred water bodies are wetlands (*madekete*), springs (*zvitubu*) and sacred pools (*madziva anoyera*). These water bodies are associated with autochthonous ancestral spirits. Shona people, as a rule, approach sacred water bodies with reverence. Thus, when fetching water, people should maintain silence at *madziva anoyera*. Furthermore, they should avoid gossiping or despising others. When fetching water people should use clay pots or gourds and not metal or plastic containers. Shona people believe that these places are protected by the ancestors (*varipasi*). Ancestors are also believed to manifest their presence at sacred water bodies through animals such as python, *njuzu* (water spirit) and snails, among others.

### *Sacred Time*

In Shona spirituality, time is neither homogeneous nor neutral. There are intervals of sacred time, on one hand, and ordinary time, on the other. Sacred time involves spiritual activities. Sacred time could be a season, month, week, day or hour. It represents liturgy and re-actualisation of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, for example the creation of people and earth (Eliade 1959, 69). Sacred time is recoverable and repeatable. It neither changes nor is exhausted. The time was created and sanctified by God. Ancestors are the custodians of sacred time.

### *Mwedzi Wembudzi (November as a Holy Month)*

The traditional calendar of the Shona is based on the movement of the moon. Hence, the Shona calendar has 13 months in a year. The Shona believe that ancestral spirits rest during the month of November, known as *mwedzi we mbudzi*. During this month everything with links to the spiritual and ancestral world of Zimbabwean tradition temporarily ceases to function because ancestors will be resting. Mutinhima (2015) writes: “According to African [sic] tradition, this is the month that the ancestors do not deal with earthly issues but deal with Musiki, God, on various issues tabled before the ancestors during the course of the year.” In this way “Cultural ceremonies such as *biras*, *kurova makuva* or even traditional marriage rites are regarded as taboo during this month” (Mukunguta 2014). Talk about ancestors taking a rest does not, however, mean that the spiritual realm ceases to exist during this period. November is a month of regeneration for animals. Hence, it is taboo among the Shona to slaughter goats (*mbudzi*) or to marry during the month of November. It is also taboo to perform cultural and religious rites such as *kurova guva*, *bira*, among others. Thus the Shona have come up with an eco-theology and an eco-spirituality that aim to preserve and protect nature as

part of nurturing a sustainable eco-system, where human beings are but one of multiple actors in the universe.

## **Mystical Implications of Silence at Sacred Places and Times**

This paper has analysed how the Shona experience the presence of ancestors at sacred places and times. At face value, one can affirm that Shona spirituality necessarily provides a mystical experience of the sacred. There is also a view which implies that the Shona plan to practise such silent attitudes in a way that equals a religious attitude. The problem is that, while theoretically the Shona maintain silence at sacred places, their religious acts are often underpinned by ambivalent attitudes of reverence and fear. However, not all animals, plant life or water sources are sacred. The Shona believe that some trees and animals are inhabited by ancestral spirits. This attitude has had negative consequences on some species. Thus, some species have been respected more than others. However, not all aspects of nature play a vital role in their beliefs about a mystical union with the sacred. Hence, some aspects are treated with less care, while others are treated with utmost reverence. However, considering the fact that Shona spirituality is based on a clear distinction between the sacred and the non-sacred, one would be at pains to call it animistic.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed experiencing the realm of the sacred among the Shona of Zimbabwe. The life of the Shona has a clear distinction between the sacred and secular spectra. From their spirituality, there are places and times when people experience the sacred. These places and times are celebrated at different levels. Such sacred places and time either exclude or include one another. There are domestic family rituals, local community rituals and regional cults. The experience of the sacred is a moment of close relationship between the living, ancestors and the unknown. At other times, it is possible to conclude that Shona experiences of sacred places are spiritually helpful because they are based on a mutual relationship with ancestors. This experience generates a sense of belonging to the family, chief and the clan. The horizontal relationship with one another nourishes the vertical dimension of the relevance of the ancestors. There are taboos and beliefs used to maintain silence at sacred places. The Shona experience of the sacred safeguards their morality, politics and economic development. Therefore, Shona spirituality is undergirded by respect for nature because the latter literally and figuratively nurtures both the living and the dead (*vari pasi*).

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