"MHONDORO: SPIRIT LIONS AND SACRED FORESTS"

Bruce Byers

> "We will advance deep into the undergrowth of mythology and ritual, of symbolism and belief."
>
> —David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*

Following a narrow track we pushed in through the thornthicket. Huge baobabs, as big as the round thatch and mud huts clustered under them, rose from the heavily gullied land, their smooth trunks shining silver and pink in the hot noon sun. Using aerial photos as a map, Nick Dunne and I were trying to get to a point on the east bank of the Musengezi River at the northern end of the largest remaining fragment of forest in this part of northern Zimbabwe.

Finally we reached the top of the riverbank, parked the Toyota Land Cruiser on a steep incline, and put a couple of rocks under the wheels to keep it from rolling. We were about to eat lunch when a man in a torn khaki shirt and dirty blue shorts appeared, coming up from his small, handwatered vegetable garden by the river, which was heavily fenced with brushwood against cattle and goats. He was curious and friendly, especially after we shared one of our warm beers with him. His name was Jeremiah Manhango, and his English was not bad. Jeremiah warned us immediately not go into the thick forest just south of here:

"If you do you can get lost. A lot of rain may come and fall on you, even now, in the dry season. Or you can get eaten by a lion. There is a big white snake in there. It doesn't bite you, but if you see it, you'll go mad!"

This forest was one of three places sacred to Mbuya Nehanda, an important ancestral spirit of this part of the Zambezi Valley, Jeremiah told us. This area is the home of the Korekore people, a subgroup of Zimbabwe's largest ethnic group, the Shona. As is true in many central African cultures, belief in ancestral spirits and their power to influence everyday life is a central tenet of Shona religion. Jeremiah had moved here with his family from central Zimbabwe in 1971, as a boy of fifteen. Even though he was an immigrant, and not a Korekore, he was still a Shona, and he respected the sacred places of the local people, he said.

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I was here in the Muzarabani District with Nick Dunne, a young white Zimbabwean who grew up on a citrus farm in the south, near Beitbridge. Trained as a botanist, he now worked for the Zambezi Society, an environmental organization based in Harare. "ZamSoc," as its members often call it, promotes the conservation of nature and biological diversity throughout the Zambezi River Basin.

Here in the communal lands of Muzarabani, ZamSoc was interested in some remaining patches of a unique type of dry tropical forest. Most of the trees found in these forests lose their leaves during the dry season that lasts from May through November. At ground level is a thicket understory, dominated by an acacia that grows in a viney tangle and has wicked, backward-curving thorns.

This type of dry, thicket forest is rare, found only along a few rivers flowing into the Zambezi from the south, especially along the Musengezi River. The forests have an unusually large number of trees and woody climbing vines, which botanists call lianas, and many plants that are unusual or rare in Zimbabwe grow in them. What Nick was most excited about, however, was that here, species common in several different types of forests and woodlands were all growing together in one place. He had the idea that this was some kind of relict community of plants, left over from the last Ice Age when the climate was wetter here. In fact, he liked to call these forests "witness stands," and argued that if they are protected, they could be helpful in understanding long-term climate change in this part of Africa.

The Zambezi Society was also interested in conserving these forest patches because of evidence that they are important in maintaining elephant movements in this part of the Zambezi Valley. Elephants move through these forests as they travel between the Mvuradonha Mountains and the Zambezi River to the north, and they sometimes linger here, especially during the dry season when wild *musawu* fruit are ripe. In 1998 a group of about ten bulls spent three months hanging around in several forest patches near where we had met Jeremiah.

We knew from aerial photographs taken between 1960 and 1993 that these forests once covered more than twice as much area as they do now. In the last forty years some forest patches have been completely cleared. Others have been reduced in size as villages and fields eat into their edges. Once-continuous forests have been fragmented into several smaller patches in some cases.

Because of their botanical uniqueness, their role as elephant habitat, and the threat of further forest loss, the Muzarabani forests had a high priority for conservation, according to the Zambezi Society. About a year earlier, Nick had approached the Muzarabani District Council and explained its interest in conserving the remaining patches of forest along the Musengezi. The District Council members said they were interested, but not much had happened, and ZamSoc wanted to move the process forward.

To do so, we needed more information. What did local people think of these forests? What would it take to keep the rest of them from being cut down? When we met Jeremiah Manhango we were just beginning to talk to local residents, traditional religious and political leaders, and modern political leaders who lived near the forests. We had a lot of questions, a lot to learn. Nick's view of the value of these forests—that of a modern, educated, white scientist—was very different than Jeremiah's view, and I wondered whether these two views could ever come together for the common purpose of conservation.

I guess the real reason I was poking around in these thickets was to explore some thorny issues in my professional field. I had come to the University of Zimbabwe for a year as a Fulbright Scholar, both to teach and do research. Because I'm an ecologist by training, most people assumed I saw things the way Nick Dunne and other conservation biologists do. But in fact I was fed up with the arguments I'd heard so often from my colleagues at home: that conservation means putting fences around natural areas and keeping people out, or that people should care about "biodiversity" because all species, no matter how tiny or seemingly useless, have "intrinsic value." Here in Zimbabwe those arguments seemed naive and completely impractical.

On the other hand, I was skeptical about the mainstream view in wildlife conservation circles in Zimbabwe, which was that unless poor rural Zimbabweans saw cash flowing into their pockets from natural resources, they would have no incentive to conserve them. The assumption was that economics was the only thing that could influence people's behavior toward nature. But if local people really considered these forests sacred, and protected them because of that belief, it meant that money isn't everything, even to poor people. It suggested that traditional religious beliefs might still be a powerful motivating force for conservation.

We drove west from Muzarabani the next morning along the base of the Escarpment. This is spectacular country. The Zambezi Escarpment is the southernmost section of the Great Rift Valley of Africa, and here the Rift rises like a rampart from the flat floor of the Zambezi Valley to the high plateau of central Zimbabwe, a jumbled wall of cliffs and hills a kilometer high. Massive tectonic forces involved in the breakup of the ancient supercontinent of Gondwanaland are recorded in the rocks, and the movement of crustal plates is still ripping the continent apart here. If the Great Rift were a giant serpent lying stretched across eastern Africa, with its tail dipping into the Red Sea at Djibouti, the Mvuradonha Mountains that brooded above us now would be its head, its eyes those cliffs on the side of Banerembezi, the highest peak, staring down on the forests of Muzarabani.

For the first few kilometers north of the Musengezi River men were working on the road, getting it ready for asphalt, and it was all torn up. After that it was good, smooth gravel. We crossed the Kadzi River into Guruve District, and soon reached Mahuwe, a busy hub of dusty shops and people waiting for buses to take them either north—deeper into

the Valley, and the past—or south—up the Escarpment toward Harare, and the modern world.

Nick and I were looking for Phanuel Rupiya, a farmer and district councilor from Mahuwe. Rupiya's house was just off the road about a kilometer north of town. No one was at home in the cluster of round, mud-plastered, thatched huts that Rupiya calls home. A young mother in a compound nearby pointed us into the cotton and maizefields, where she said Rupiya's wife was working. We walked along a path for fifteen minutes or so, until we heard voices. It was Mrs. Rupiya, picking cotton with a friend. But no, she had not seen her husband for a couple of days. He went off toward Mushumbi Pools to evaluate some projects—maybe for NORAD, the Norwegian Development Agency, she thought. He might be back tomorrow, but she didn't know for sure.

So we walked back to the Land Cruiser, parked in the shade of a scraggly *musawu* tree loaded with green fruit, and spread out our 1:250,000 scale topographic map on the hood. We had hoped to get Rupiya's help in pinpointing the sacred sites he had been learning about. Now it looked like we needed to lay Plan B. Just then a huge truck loaded with baled cotton groaned up the dusty road from the direction of Mushumbi Pools, bound for the climb up the Escarpment to Guruve and beyond. It slowed in front of Rupiya's road, and a couple of men jumped down with their dufflebags. We continued to look at the map. As the men walking toward us got closer we recognized one of them as Phanuel Rupiya from his unique newsboy-style cap, made of leather that once was rust-colored, but was now dark from sweat and dirt. We had found Rupiya after all. The other man was Rupiya's friend Everson Tauro. Tauro, shorter and heavier than the lanky Rupiya, wore a thin mustache and goatee.

Rupiya invited us to talk in the shade by his round mud and thatch house. The door was locked, and his wife, still in the cottonfield, apparently had the key with her, so he climbed in the open window and handed out a folding metal table and five tiny wooden chairs, the size they use in kindergarten classrooms in the U.S., painted bright orange. We sat in the tiny chairs, spread out the topo again, and started to mark sacred sites on the map. Rupiya had been doing simple anthropological fieldwork in the Muzarabani Communal Lands, getting a few dollars a month from the Zambezi Society. He would put his bicycle on a local bus, take the bus to the area where he wanted to work, and then pedal around talking to people about sacred places nearby.

"Different types of sacred sites exist," Rupiya explained. "Places where traditional beer is brewed during the *huruwa* ceremony, usually under big, old fig trees, are considered sacred. There are sacred forests. And certain rivers or mountain ranges, such as the Mvuradonha Mountains, may be sacred too."

Sacred pools are another type of sacred site. These can be pools in rivers, or springs, or in some cases the shallow seasonal ponds that form during the rainy season. Rupiya had

heard about a sacred pool in the Musengezi River, called Ngwandongwondo Pool, which local people said had been disturbed by a recent immigrant to the area.

"That man put poison in Ngwandongwando Pool to catch fish. The poison killed a python that was living in the pool, protecting it. Now the Musengezi River has changed its course and the pool is drying up."

Some tree species are sacred, including baobab, tamarind, fig, and *marula.*

"If you use the wood from a sacred tree for building a house, or for firewood, in that house you will always see snakes," Tauro explained.

"What about animals?" I asked. "Are there sacred animals?"

"The spirit mediums say the animals belong to them. They have a special name, *vakaranga,* for all sorts of sacred animals—elephants, snakes, kudus, and especially lions. When our chiefs die, their spirits come back in the form of lions, and watch over us—we call them *mhondoro.* They make sure we are respecting the land. The spirit mediums say the forests and thickets are sacred because they keep their *vakaranga* there."

I suddenly realized, listening to Tauro, that these forests may be as much a cultural phenomenon as an ecological one—that, in fact, an interaction between ecology and traditional religion may explain why the forests exist along the Musengezi. The old alluvial soils found along the Musengezi created the conditions required for this type of forest to develop. Because of the forests, wild animals are found here—the sacred animals in which the spirits of the ancestors dwell. Because of the animals, the forests are sacred. And because they are sacred they have not been cleared, at least not completely, not yet.

As a general rule, Rupiya said, sacred things are life sustaining. "They provide food, fruit, or water, for example. The concept of sacredness is closely linked with rain, and the fertility of the land." In our Western worldview we think of "spiritual" and "material" things as very different in kind. To a Shona farmer, that distinction doesn't really exist. Religion is a very practical thing. People must respect nature for a very practical reason: their lives depend on it. It is good to respect sacred places not because of some abstract religiosity, but because people need food, and crops need rain, and only happy ancestors will send good rains.

Tauro and Rupiya talked about spirit mediums, people who can be possessed by the spirits of the royal ancestors, and who can communicate the wishes of those *mhondoro* to people alive today. Today no one is possessed by the spirit of Nehanda, who was a powerful and beloved queen of this part of the Zambezi Valley. Today, without a medium, Mbuya Nehanda is silent.

"There is a woman from the Mt. Darwin area now living along the base of the Escarpment east of Muzarabani. She claims to be possessed by the spirit of Grandmother Nehanda," Rupiya said. To prove she is really possessed by Nehanda's spirit, a claimant must pass a test: she must swim in Nehanda's Pool in the Musengezi River, a sacred pool full of crocodiles.

"If she doesn't get eaten, she must be the real Mbuya Nehanda. We had arranged for a test recently, but she did not turn up. So now we are quite inquisitive whether she is the genuine one." There is another woman from Hurungwe who also claims to be possessed by Mbuya Nehanda, but so far she also has refused to take the crocodile test.

"Chidyamauyu, a famous spirit medium from Muzarabani, and a personal friend of President Mugabe because of his contribution to the Liberation War, went to see the President in Harare to ask the government to recognize the woman from Mt. Darwin as the real Nehanda," Tauro said. "But until she enters Nehanda's Pool, no one will believe she is genuine—even if President Mugabe himself says she is!"

"People now may be becoming too modern, they may not believe this, but the spirits are still strong," said Tauro. To emphasize this point, he told us that not long ago a lion killed more than twenty people in the Omay communal lands, not far from Muzarabani. This lion killed its victims around sundown, and with deliberate irony local people named it *Maskwera sei—maskwera sei* is a Shona greeting, used in the late afternoon, which means roughly, "how was your day?"

When a lion does something unusual, there is always a question of whether it is a normal lion or a spirit lion, a *mhondoro.* In the Shona language a biological lion is called *shumba.* A *mhondoro* is something altogether different. *Mhondoro* often become active, and disturbed, when something in the relationship between the people and the land is not right. They may show their displeasure by killing those who have not behaved properly and respectfully.

Local people in Omay suspected that *Maskwera sei* was a *mhondoro,* not a mere *shumba.* They could find something in the behavior of each victim that seemed to explain why each might have been killed. Perhaps one of them cut a tree without permission from the chief, another collected water from a sacred pool using a metal container, while another neglected to share meat with his relatives. The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management sent a team of rangers to Omay to track the lion and kill it as a "problem animal." Local people refused to help them find *Maskwera sei,* an ancestor, *mhondoro.*

Electrical transmission lines finally reached Muzarabani last year. Before that a few people in town had electric lights powered by a big diesel generator, but there was no industry to speak of. Now power flows from Kariba Dam, upstream on the Zambezi, and a new gin for processing cotton has been built in town, its corrugated metal sides a shining symbol of progress. Now that Muzarabani is on the national grid, a local politician is talking about setting up a sawmill in the area. A sign in front of the new gin says: "Bring your cotton to us. Build a better life for your children." People want progress, a better life.

Still, when the new gin was built, construction workers carefully avoided a big old baobab that is still standing inside the high chain link fence around the factory. If the tree

had been cut, according to Chidyamauyu, the local spirit medium, the spirits that inhabited it might have caused problems for the gin or its workers. So it was spared.

Cotton cultivation is expanding rapidly in Muzarabani. For the small farmers here, cotton is the main cash crop, from which they earn roughly half of their annual income of a few hundred dollars a year. The *mopane* woodlands in the area have been extensively cleared, because the heavy soils on which they grow are good for cotton. Cotton also grows well on the alluvial soils where the dry forests are found, and those soils are sandier and easier to plow with oxen than the *mopane* soils. If they weren't sacred, the forests would have been long gone.

Nick and I left Phanuel Rupiya and Everson Tauro sitting in the shade, and drove east along the Escarpment, back to Muzarabani. Now penciled on our topographic map were two dozen sacred sites that Rupiya had identified. We wanted to visit some of those if we could, but that required the permission of the ritual assistant of the local spirit medium, called a *mutape*, who keeps his eye on sacred sites and makes sure they are respected. At Muzarabani we turned north toward Kapembere village, where Rupiya said we'd be likely to find the *mutape*, Mr. Chipendo, "boozing it up" at the village bottle store.

When we reached the Kapembere shops we found that Rupiya was right. Mutape Chipendo was there, drinking beer with the district councilor from Kapembere, Crispen Honde. We explained what we wanted, and they quickly drained their beers and jumped in the back seat of the Land Cruiser. We drove a few kilometers back down the road toward Muzarabani.

Just off the road to the west was the Rukonde Forest, the largest fragment of this type of forest remaining in Zimbabwe. At its widest point Rukonde is about two kilometers across, and extends along the Musengezi River for about five kilometers. We had met Jeremiah Manhango at its northern edge yesterday, and now we parked by a cluster of huts west of the road that belonged to Jeremiah and his kin. The village occupied an alcove cut into the wall of trees, and the forest that used to stand here had metamorphosed into wooden structures—corrals for goats and cattle, racks for drying maize, chicken coops, and the huts themselves.

We walked a couple of dozen meters and stopped at the edge of a gully. On the other side stood the forest. A few candelabra euphorbias, which looked something like giant cactus, rose above an impenetrable maze of thorny vines, and above them stood the trees, forming a tangled canopy of branches over our heads. Councilor Honde said that the *mhondoro*, like to rest under euphorbias during the heat of the day. My neck prickled involuntarily and I scanned the tangle of undergrowth, but if *Maskwera sei* was crouching there now, watching us, I couldn't see him.

Mutape Chipendo searched for a certain plant, picked some leaves, and rubbed them in his hands with a scrubbing motion. The crushed leaves had a faint, acrid smell. A small flock of grey louries flew from tree to tree calling, a slow, sad call that sounded like "go-away, go-away, go-away." We squatted and clapped in a steady, slow rhythm while the *mutape*, Mr. Chipendo, began a chantlike beseeching of the spirits of the place. This went on for what seemed like a long time, but it may only have been a minute or so. When the chanting stopped, we continued to clap until Chipendo stood up abruptly. The spirits apparently knew we were here, and it was safe now to talk.

"A big snake guards this forest," Honde began. "The snake is seen maybe once a year and is so big that when it crosses the road along the edge of the forest, even the buses stop."

"A python?" I asked. African rock pythons are the biggest snakes in Africa, up to six meters long.

"No, it's not a python—it's much bigger than that! As big as that tree," Honde said, pointing to a tree a foot in diameter. "People are afraid of the big snake."

"No one is supposed to settle to the west of the road between Muzarabani and Kapembere, in the edge of Rukonde Forest, because of its sacredness," Honde said, and in the old days no one would have done so. Many houses now lie to the west of the road—the village of the Manhangos.

"The chief has asked these people to move, and even asked the District Administrator to make them pay a fine," Honde said. "They haven't, but the D.A. won't make them pay, and the chief won't evict them. It's a big problem."

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We left Rukonde and drove north, with Chipendo and Honde directing from the back seat. When the track we were following dead-ended in a cotton field we got out and walked toward a circle of trees surrounding Chikampo Pool, another sacred site on Rupiya's map. The pool was shallow, about an acre in size, and a well-worn path crossed its edge. A group of women and girls appeared, walking home from the fields. One pushed a wheelbarrow overloaded with three bags of newly picked cotton.

The water of Chickampo Pool is used to brew ceremonial beer for the *huruwa* ceremony, a rainmaking ceremony that comes at the end of the seven-month dry season, in October or November. The purpose of *huruwa* is to enlist the help of ancestral spirits in bringing good rains. In the past, when traditional rules were followed, the pool held clean water throughout the dry season, Honde said. To protect the water, certain things are not allowed. Washing with soap is taboo, for example, and only traditional wooden or gourd containers—nothing metal—can be used for collecting water, for fear of scaring or poisoning the spirits of the pool. No livestock are supposed to drink here, only wild animals,

some of which may be *mhondoro* or other ancestral spirits. Traditional rules strictly forbid wheeled vehicles near the pool.

"People are no longer respecting this place," Chipendo complained. "They should not be pushing a wheelbarrow through here! This wouldn't have happened in the old days!" Hoofprints indicated that lots of cattle and goats had been here to drink.

"This is the Number One Sacred Spot in the area," Honde said, "even more sacred than the Rukonde Forest!" I didn't ask why, but guessed it had something to do with the role of the pool in the *huruwa* ceremony, and of that ceremony in keeping the ancestors happy and bringing rain to the living.

A rising tide of immigration and settlement makes it difficult to maintain respect for these sacred places. Only about a fifth of the inhabitants of the area now are long-time residents, the rest are recent immigrants. In the past decade small-scale cotton cultivation has expanded rapidly, pulling land-hungry immigrants from the high plateau of Zimbabwe, where cotton doesn't grow. The new gin will only increase the pull.

"New immigrants don't know the sacred places here, and even if they know, they don't respect them," Honde said. "The ancestral spirits here aren't *their* ancestors."

"What would be the solution?" I asked.

"Put a fence around this place!" the councilor said.

"Really?" I asked, taken aback to hear him propose a technical solution to what I thought of as a social, not a technical, problem. I had once heard a traditional leader speak against fencing sacred sites, saying "Spirits don't want areas to be fenced. They don't like metal, they don't like wire." But Honde said at least a fence would keep the livestock out, and it would indicate that this was a sacred place.

We walked slowly back to the Land Cruiser, and I wondered what would happen to this pool, these forests, to the elephants, lions, and other wild animals who still live here, among these villages and their fields of maize and cotton. What are the prospects for the future? Can these people really preserve their traditional beliefs in the face of the rapid cultural change that is happening here? And if they do, will the belief that certain forests or pools are sacred really protect them in the face of technological and economic changes that are coming? I didn't know for sure what would happen, but I did know that many people still hold strongly to the traditional beliefs, and that those beliefs *had* conserved these forests until now. And I suspected that the Shona worldview I was learning about could help build a bridge to a new view, a practical conservation ethic locally-grown from ancient roots.

The bare branches of the big trees around the pool shone in the late afternoon sun, wound with lianas thick as giant snakes. A two-wheeled wooden cart came down the

track toward us, pulled by a pair of trotting donkeys. An empty metal oildrum bounced on the cart.

"*Maskwera sei*?!" The driver greeted us with a big smile—"How was your day?"

Obviously his day had satisfied him so far. He was driving his cart to the sacred pool to fill his drum with water.

From:

THIS SACRED EARTH

Religion, Nature, Environment

SECOND EDITION

EDITED BY

ROGER S. GOTTLIEB

2004

Routledge

New York and London