

## Environmental Preservation in Zimbabwe: A religio-cultural nexus.

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**ABSTRACT:** A remarkable metamorphosis has taken toll on the Zimbabwean natural environment. Massive deforestation has resulted in the climatic change. Veldfires and poor agricultural methods have further deteriorated the natural landscape. Zimbabwe is now experiencing more hot and fewer cold days than before. The period from 1980 to date has been the warmest since Zimbabwe started recording its high temperatures. The timing and amount of rainfall received are becoming increasingly uncertain. The trend now, is reduced rainfall, heavy rainfall and drought occurring back to back in the same season. Most methods that have been proffered to mitigate the challenge of environmental preservation are scientific. Little attention has been given to the religio-cultural contribution in the preservation of natural environment. Regardless of religio-cultural failure to meet the scientific specification; taboos, myths and religious superstitions in Zimbabwe should not be relegated to the dust bin as they have a role to play in preserving the environment. The natural environment which include; soil, vegetation, water, air, mountains and wildlife has received due care and maintenance from a religio-cultural perspective. In most rural areas where people strongly believe in the traditional ethos, the environment is still intact. However, great loss has been observed in places where these religio-cultural beliefs have been neglected. It is therefore my call in this article, that in as much as scientific methods have been employed in the preservation of the natural environment, so must we incorporate the religious and cultural approach.

**KEY WORDS:** *Environment, conservation, indigenous, religio-cultural.*

### I. BACKGROUND

Zimbabwe has abundant natural resources that include arable land, forests, wildlife, minerals and surface and ground water. In some places, particularly in Chirinda forest we still have the indigenous trees. In terms of water, Zimbabwe has 20 million mega litres of annual renewable available fresh water (Ministry of Environment, water and climate, 2012). This water is largely replenished through rainfall and runoff into rivers, streams lakes and reservoirs, aquifers and fresh water aquatic systems such as wetlands.

The natural environment has been utilised by people at an alarming rate due to ignorance of the effects of over-using natural resources. Over utilisation of resources has been due to a sharp increase in population. Just after independence from Britain, there were 8 million people, 1992 population rose to 10 million, 2012 census has put the population of around 13 million. This increase in population is taking place on a land that is not increasing in size. There will definitely be population pressure on the few available resources. This absolutely calls for sustainable development so that the next generation can benefit from the resources available.

From a religio-cultural view, Mbiti (1969) asserts that the world belongs to the spiritual world. Since Africans are very religious, they do everything religiously. They value the land as a sacred place where the spirits dwell. Among the Shona people, the long departed elders are buried in the soil. Therefore, we need to respect the natural environment. Some trees and mountains are believed to be residence of the supernatural. Thus, we do not need to temper around with the natural environment, lest we disturb those who are resting.

The economy of Zimbabwe is agro based. It provides 60% of the total employment and also supplies raw materials to industries (Government of Zimbabwe, ministry of environment, water and climate). Agricultural activities in Zimbabwe use most of the land with more than 80% of the rural population living on agriculture. Current environmental problems include deforestation, soil erosion, land degradation as well as water and air pollution. The Environmental Management Act [Chapter 20:27] was enacted to curb the dangers of environmental degradation.

Regardless of Acts that restrict over-utilisation of resources the problem still continue to haunt even the government of Zimbabwe. On a global scale, Sustainable Development Goals have reinforced the conservation of natural environment. Following a failure to conserve the environment, poverty has remained high in Zimbabwe. Areas that used to be productive in terms of agricultural activities are now yielding very low yield due to poor management of soil. This mainly comes from the climatic change that is now a global concern. Tatira (2000) talks about the sacred values of the Shona people which he grouped into categories. Among the list are; to protect people from accidents, bad habits and good hygienic practices. In conserving water sources, Tatira (2000) further argues that water points are well protected from animals and other pollutants such as tree leaves and dust.

Holtzclaw, Jones and Miller (2000) posit that, people have always used the natural resources. But an increase in human population has a negative impact on the environment. People compete with each other and with other living things for earth's limited resources. As a result pollution of the natural environment becomes a norm. Pollution is any change to the environment that has a negative effect on living things.

Environmental conservation is therefore quite crucial in Zimbabwe since the population is rising rapidly. The next generation must enjoy the benefits of the present natural resources. The conservation of natural resources has a bias towards the modern and scientific ways. Although modern and scientific ways are in place to conserve the natural environment, it is equally important to give a critical glimpse to the indigenous religio-cultural perspective. Environment has been defined as consisting all man's surroundings which include; animals, plants, land water bodies, the air and even the soil. Since some animals are extinct there is need to preserve them for the next generation. From this observation then, the researcher has been persuaded to articulate the conservation of the environment from a religio-cultural standpoint. Africans therefore believe in certain sacred phenomena as a way of working towards the creation of ecological ethics. These include omens, taboos, totemism and myths which combat environmental degradation.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are to highlight the value of religio-cultural contribution in the preservation of the natural environment. This is because most contributions in the preservation of the environment have been identified mostly in the scientific arena with less attention on the traditional ways. Little has been proffered in regards to the religio-cultural contribution. Religious and cultural methods of conserving the environment have been for a long time regarded as archaic. No meaningful recognition has been put to them in as far as environmental conservation is concerned. But alas! There is quite a lot that can be drawn from traditional ways of life in protecting the environment for sustainable development. It is the purpose of this article therefore to explore these methods and seriously employ them for the benefit of our natural environment for sustainable development. Most importantly, the study intends to offer natural ways of preserving the environment which are cheap in terms of their costs rather than modern methods which are a challenge to implement in rural areas of Zimbabwe.

## III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The neglect of religio-cultural ways of preserving natural environment for sustainability has been an issue of major concern. Most people are failing to implement the modern and scientific methods which are beyond the reach of many particularly in rural areas. It is the gist of this paper to explore these methods for the benefit of future generations.

## IV. METHODOLOGY

This article is framed within a qualitative paradigm. The approach was chosen because it proffers respondents' voices and it is more interpretive. In this discussion, interviews, observations and document analysis will be made use in gathering data. Interviews were preferred because they have follow up questions which can help in coming up with more information. The relationship between the researcher and participants is less formal thereby opening room for more information to come up. This eventually gives data that is rich and diverse, reflecting the true reality of the participants' experiences (Kikwala Study Group, 1994). Participants have the opportunity to respond more elaborately and in greater detail than is typically the case with quantitative research. Through observations, the researcher will keep a penetrating eye into events that will be unfolding in the preservation of environmental resources.

### Population and sampling

The study was carried out in Mutoko district where the researcher resides as a secondary school teacher. Thus for convenience, it was ideal for the researcher to carry out a study in this area as there would be no major cost in terms of transport. Since it is not possible to study the whole population, I did sample five rural communities. I was mostly concerned with how the communities are protecting their environment from degradation and other harmful effects.

## V. FINDINGS

### Water sources

Mutoko has experienced a massive blow in water sources as most rivers which used to support communities are no longer offering the service due to siltation that has been taking place for quite a long time. Most rural families depend on gardening for survival, but unfortunately due to climatic change that has taken place, the lives of people are now at risky following erratic rainfall and dwindling water sources in rivers. This calls for serious conservation of this precious resource for people to continue their economic activities.

This challenge has also been echoed by Tsodzo (1995), he has bemoaned how rivers, particularly the Save river have been marred by siltation. This is a situation that has left many residence in Masvingo struggle to get water for different kinds of activities, such as; agricultural and domestic use. However, his methods for preserving this important resource has alignment towards modern methods rather than the traditional ones.

### Taboos and myths

In a bid to conserve this important natural resource people in Mutoko have maintained the cultural taboos and myths. They believe that water pools are sacred. This is because they are the abode of mermaids, departed spirits and animals (Mukamuri, 1995). The Budyia people of Mutoko believe that these animals keep water bodies on behalf of underworld (*vari pasi*). If one abuses water they may be drowned in the pool by these animals. Water bodies are regarded to be of great importance since spirits are regarded to be residing in there. This explains why some water bodies should not be despised by people when passing comments. To add on, it is a taboo that deters people to swim in other sacred pools as this would anger the mermaids who reside in these water bodies. The use of detergents when washing is prohibited near water sources as they would contaminate the water. Black containers especially those that contained soot are not allowed to be used when fetching water. All these practices are meant to maintain the water in its purest state rather than to pollute the water source which will result in diseases.

In the same vein some myths are there for the conservation of the certain trees. The wild fig tree is considered sacred by many societies all over Africa because people offer sacrifices to their ancestors under a fig tree (Mbiti 1996). As asserted by Gombe (2011) other sacred trees in the African Indigenous Religion are *Muhacha* and the baobab. These trees are used for religious purposes; that is to make offerings, sacrifices, prayers and used as communication stations with the spiritual realm. There are also other trees used by traditional healers for instance the guava tree and lemon tree. Other trees are well respected for their roots, barks and leaves which are used by traditional healers. In Mutoko, they have gone further in protecting other trees by prohibiting people to use them as firewood. The main reasons put forward is that these trees are smoky and thus not ideal to use for firewood.

### Sacred forests

Moreover, there are sacred forests known as Dzimbabwe where religio-cultural rituals are performed. These forests are strictly preserved. They are still in their natural state. Tree cutting for firewood and other domestic uses is prohibited in these forests as it is believed that one will anger the spirits. If the spirits are angered misfortunes will follow you all the days of your life until you pay a beast (cow) to the chief.

In some places, such sacred forests are traditionally called *rambatemwa* (which literally means forests that cannot be cut). This is because ancestral spirits rest here. They are passage-way and habitat of *mhondoro* (ancestral spirits in the form of animals). The Shona consider it morally wrong to cut trees in these places. Firewood and building material is fetched from places other than these sacred places. So some animals and plant life are protected in this manner.

Some trees with religious significance are *mubvumira* (*kirkiaacuminata*) used to ritually mark the establishment of a new homestead, and *muzeze* (*peltoforum africanum*) whose branches are used for ritual purification after burial. In his research Mukamuri found that the following trees also have religious significance. Fruit trees such as *mushavi* and *muonde* meeting places for rain-asking ritual (*mukwerere*).

From an interview with Mr Katsande a resident in Mutoko - he postulated that there are a lot of sacred trees in Zimbabwe which are believed to be residence of the spiritual beings. In Mhondoro there is a famous tree known as *Mutiusinazita* (nameless tree). This tree cannot be easily identified as it constantly changes time and again. Green trees are believed to be the residence of alien spirits. Thus, people are not encouraged to cut these trees down. Violation of this myth will result again in misfortunes in people's lives. Related with this idea is *Muhacha* tree. It was believed that in the past when elders wanted to appease the spirits would go to under *Muhacha* tree and begin to pour beer under the tree. The practice is still being practiced in Mutoko even in the present day. It explains why in Mutoko area there are plenty of *Muhacha* trees. The people have managed to protect these trees from unnecessary deforestation.

### **Totemism**

Totems have been defined by Durkheim as collective symbols that represent both god and society. Gombe (2011) and Durkheim concur that totems are based relatively on plants and animals e.g. lizard, lion, elephant, buffalo etc. Totems according to Gombe (2011) were symbols of material expression or something else. He talks about totems originating from a great ancestor of Africa who had many wives. Due to the need for marriage brothers and sister separated on the basis of their totems. So totems were invented so that they could marry their sisters.

Mbiti (1969) weighs in saying that fierce animals, such as; buffalo and lion are associated with the deity. These animals are considered to be the manifestation in his immanent aspect. Among the Shona people more animals are closely linked with totems. A totem is anything that has a spiritual value such that you venerate that thing. For instance, one can have a totem of lion, elephant, buffalo etc. Some can choose birds e.g. *Hungwe*, some can choose insects like *ishwa*, *mbeva* (mice), etc. and others snake. When one has a totem it means that they must not eat that animal. Thus, by so doing the wildlife is preserved. In Mutoko they actually believe that if you see a python you must not kill it because the territorial spirits dwell in this snake. If you happen to violate this mythical view, it is believed that you will have misfortune in life or there will be deaths in your family. For Mbiti (1969:49-50) a considerable number of societies associate snakes with the living-dead or other human spirits, and as such snakes are given food and drink.

Members of the clan are forbidden to eat the flesh of the totem animal. In some cases the totem can be part(s) of the animal. A person is not be allowed to eat that part, for example, the heart or trunk of an elephant or possibly some inedible part. If one breaks the taboo one may lose his/her teeth or experience some other harm. For example Pongweni (1996) confirms this; the totemic animal has a taboo attached to it or to parts of its carcass such that the totem bearer is forbidden to eat. Infringement of this taboo has certain concomitant magical sanctions, such as loss of teeth or leprosy (*maperembudzi*). This implies that most totemic animals by virtue of taboos attached to their parts are not open to killing. The Shona kill them on special rituals or for using their skin for ceremonial dress for chiefs or when diviners perform rituals for public interest. However, the totem in some sense, is more than names of animals. Events involving the animals are signs from ancestral spirits. Totemic animals have mythical and religious significance. This is why they feature in Shona praise poetry with high veneration.

### **Symbolism**

Some animals are very symbolic, for instance; birds fly higher, closer to the sky. Therefore, they are regarded as part of sacred manifestation. Some birds symbolise that rain is about to come. These include secretary bird, stork (*shuramurove*), swallow (*nyenga nyenga*) Maposa and Tasara (2012). Some animals and birds are regarded to be of great importance in African Indigenous Religion because of the roles they are believed to have played in the past. Chisaka (1999) asserts that the eagle is regarded as important because it was widely followed during the Zimbabwe's liberation struggle when it led the freedom fighters and gave them security against Smith soldiers. This is why it is also the nation's bird. The eagle is a symbol of strength because it strengthened the guerrillas during the war.

There are some taboos that help in the conservation of certain animals. Tatira (2000) opines that if one kills a cat it would resurrect causing problems for the person who would have killed it (*kupfukirwa*). The reason behind this taboo is that one should not just kill innocent and defenceless small creatures. The same reason is proffered on the killing of frogs. It is argued that people must not kill frogs because there would be no rains. Moreover if you kill a fish on a spring, it will dry out. Apart from preserving the wild animals, water bodies are kept safe.

Further, the concepts of taboos contributed to the preservation of certain animals, plants, land and wetlands. Hodza (1983) noted that the violation of taboos of telling folklores in summer or during the day attracted punishment in the form of crops beings being destroyed by pets and animals. One of the myths argue that water that has been used to wash babies must not be disposed everywhere since it angered ancestors. The main idea behind was to reduce land pollution and reduce certain diseases. More so, it was a taboo to urinate in rivers and dams. This was meant to reduce pollution of water sources.

There are animals which are believed to be associated with witches such as owl and hyenas. These animals are dreaded by most people. Therefore, this fear would mean that people are scared to kill these animals for consumption. The same applies to some snakes. It is actually a rare experience to see a snake passing by your compound

### **The sacred land**

The Shona share with most Africans the belief in land as sacred. Land is sacred because it bears the remains of the ancestors particularly in the form of graves of the chiefs. Shona religion is based on the grave. In the central rituals of *kumutsamudzimu* (rituals in honour of ancestors) the point of entry is the grave. In other rituals, libations are poured on the ground. In the land is also buried the umbilical code of a people. It is the abode of the dead and when counting members of the family the Shona always include *vari pasi* (those who are dead). Land is the rallying point because non-human creatures also live on the land. Although non-human creatures do not get buried when they die as humans do, like human beings, they decompose on the land after they have died. As a result, land is respected or sacralised in sayings such as *pasi ratsamwa*, *pasi panodya* (the land is angry, the land eats).

Land belongs to the ancestors. In African Indigenous Religion everything in the universe is intimately associated with the ancestors who are the living dead. As put forward by Mbiti (1969) Africans are notoriously religious. Everything is linked to the spiritual realm (religious), the preservation of environment therefore is spiritual. If the environment is not looked after properly the spiritual world is angered. Thus it is important for the Africans to preserve their natural environment. The universe is seen as a replication of the most high (Daneel, 2001).

### **Mountainous Environments**

Outstanding mountains hills are generally regarded as sacred and are given religious meaning. In Mutoko there are several mountains that are very religious. There are taboos and myths which are related with these mountains. Elsewhere in Zimbabwe, Matopos Mountains were once believed to be the manifestation of God. High mountains are 'closer' to the sky than ordinary ground. In that sense, it is easy to associate them with God. This idea is further reinforced by Cox (2001) who talked of high mountains as the axis mundi. The assumption is that when you offer sacrifices and prayers in these mountains they will easily reach to the Supreme Being.

In indigenous religion some forest mountains such as Nyangani Mountain and other places are regarded to be sacred. Gelfand (1972) argues that so strong is the 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 upsets the ancestral spirits of the regions. Anyawu (1981) asserts that the Shona worldview implies the African concept of pan-vitalism. This is the belief that everything in the universe has life. The world is not lifeless and material. For the Shona it is alive hence the reason why the Shona affirm that there are spirits in the trees, forests, mountains and rivers. For them life force permeates the whole universe. Matter and spirit are almost inseparable reality. The Manica post week 6-12 August 2004 narrates about a 19 year old LovenessBhanu who went to Nzunza Mountains. She angered the spirits of the mountains by despising the size of sweeping brooms and as a result disappeared.

People in Mutoko are strongly attached to their natural environment such as the tree, animals and mountains. There are several places such as Charehwa and Nyamuze where there are protected areas. There are myths associated with wanton deforestation in these places. It is believed that if you cut trees in these areas, you may be visited by baboons at your home area. These protected areas are known as Dzimbahwe. It is in these areas where the elders go and ask for rains during years of drought. If it happens that there are challenges in the society, they also go there and ask for advice from the spiritual realm. Fauna and flora in these areas are well protected. This will then foster an idea of maintaining the natural environment for sustainability.

### **Inter-dependence with environment**

Moreover, the relationship between people and nature is interdependent. Chitando(1996) asserts that hunting was regulated and commissioned by the custodians of the land- Mhondoro. They had a policy that no hunting could be permitted or undertaken in November (*Mbudzi*). This is because the month was associated with breeding. In the case of trespassing the prohibition which was meant for sustainability *vadzimuvaisumwa* (informing ancestors). Ancestors were informed through snuff which was sprinkled under a tree. The process of informing ancestors was relevant because not everyone was allowed to go and hunt in the forests if they were not related to the people of that territory in terms totems. This was a way of preserving the wildlife. In the words of Mbiti (2001), humans are not the masters over nature to exploit it without feeling or treat it without respect. Instead people are one with nature, responsible towards nature, able to communicate with nature and the chief of nature.

Tatira (2000) maintains that when an act that breaches a taboo triggers a reaction supposedly at the supernatural level, there are severe consequences associated with that. Thus, it is very important to teach the little ones not to violate the religio-cultural myths and taboos. Fear must be instilled in the little so that they would strive for sustainable development. As they grow older, they will be enlightened on the purpose of these taboos. Without

this fear of the unknown, young people are generally adventurous, full of doubts and questions, and like experimenting with things. To curb the excessive desire to venture out, there is a ready consequence for each prohibition.

The underlying assumption is that the Shona people identify some aspects of nature as positive and vital parts of religious life particularly providence and soteriology. Because there is kinship between ancestors, human beings and nature there is a sense in which the Shona worship nature. In the myth of creation we learn that humans and nature descended from the same ancestors. So in relation to kinship the Shona emphasize appropriate restrictions or taboos for relating to nature.

There is strong belief among the Shona in sacred forest/mountain forests. In most cases these are sacred groves. This is where they have the burial sites of their chiefs. Daneel's(2001) finding is correct that sometimes sacred graves encompass large mountain ranges. These places are therefore the habitat of ancestral spirits. So all aspects of nature and plants are preserved.

Taringa (2014).Among the Shona rocks, bodies of water and mountains are also personified as living beings. For example before climbing particular mountains or entering particular forests one must ritually ask its permission. Most aspects of nature are perceived as kin, endowed with consciousness and the power of ancestral spirits. Trees, animals, insects and plants are all to be approached with caution and consideration. This is why Nyajeka using data among the Shona, argues that "life is an organic web. The living and the dead are united. The spiritual and the manifest worlds flow together in a circle".

The Shona share with most Africans the belief in land as sacred. It is ancestral land. Land is sacred because it bears the remains of the ancestors particularly in the form of graves of the chiefs. Shona religion is based on the grave. In the central rituals of *kumutsamudzimu* (rituals in honour of ancestors) the point of entry is the grave. In other rituals libations are poured on the ground. In the land is also buried the umbilical code of people. It is the abode of the dead. When counting members of the family the Shona always include *vari pasi* (those who in underworld). As result land is personified in sayings such as *pasi ratsamwa*, *pasi panodya*(the land is angry, the land can kill). As we have noted above ancestral spirits and chiefs own the land. At the installation of the chief holds in a clenched fist soil mixed with the body fluids of the late chief/ just soil from his grave.

Further the chief also authorises through ritual the gathering of wild fruits in forests regarded as sacred. He also, as we shall see in the discussion below prohibits the cutting of certain trees and the hunting of certain animals and the pollution of certain water bodies. There is need to, however, note at the outset that each Shona group/chiefdom has its own restrictions and taboos towards particular animals, trees or water bodies according to its religious belief system and values related to its historical development.

The Shona associate other animals that are not totemic animals such as the owl, tortoise and hyena with bad omen. Killing such animals is believed to be bad omen because the Shona believe these animals to be familiars that witches use. This leaves other species open to killing. Sometimes they are killed in large numbers.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The relationship between African indigenous people and the natural environment cannot be easily separated. There is a close tie that binds the two. In as much as it is ideal for people to benefit from the environment by exploiting it for their benefit there is also need to guard jealously the environment so as to prohibit extinction that may come along with over exploitation of the environment.

As have been observed, there is quite a lot that can be done from an African religio-cultural perspective to preserve the environment. These include; taboos, myths and the sacred ness of the environment of its own. These myths and taboos have been there since time immemorial, however, it is the modern world through science that has tried to erode the significance of these cultural practices in conserving the natural environment. It can be ascertained that these myths have stood the test of time and their role in preserving the environment is quite phenomenal particularly in most rural areas in Zimbabwe.

It can be recommended that that is need to upgrade and re-value the significance of the religio-cultural practices in preserving the environment for sustainable development. There has been more emphasis on scientific proven methods to protect the environment and neglecting the most important Shona cultural practices. There is also need for responsible government offices to incorporate the religio-cultural ways in promoting the environment. Moreover, Non-Governmental Organisation who come in the country particularly looking at the conservation of the environment should not only look at the western methods but should make a retrospect into the indigenous people and see how they used and are still doing in protecting the environment.

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