

# **Shona Belief Systems: Finding Relevancy for a New Generation**

by

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## **Abstract**

This paper interrogates the Shona cultural traditional belief systems with the hope of finding some important aspects which can be beneficial to the present generation. The paper acknowledges that not all Shona traditional belief systems are helpful to the present generation. It argues further that there are some vital lessons to be learnt from some of the traditional beliefs for posterity. There are definitely issues within the Shona belief systems which seem to go against human rights. However, most of the issues, if properly analyzed; are evidently for the protection of human rights and are still relevant in the present social, economic, religious and political environments. The fact that generally the Shona beliefs, like many other cultural beliefs elsewhere, derive their authority from the supernatural realm which make them effective in controlling human behaviour within Shona communities. The breach of a belief mostly triggers a supernatural punishment, not only for the offender but for the whole community where the offender resides. This makes the observance of beliefs self-mandatory where beliefs touch on human rights, environment, justice, morality and a host of other issues that regulate human relations. The beliefs become effective in checking against untoward behaviour. The paper, therefore, contends that the Shona traditional beliefs are very important in regulating behaviour. This discourse briefly dwells on the three belief systems of ancestral spirits, witchcraft and alien spirits and this selection is representative and relevant for this discussion.

## Introduction

The Shona people have a host of psychological positions in which they hold a conjecture or premise to be true. Hence, a belief system which helps them keep the behaviour regulated through certain prohibitions. Belief systems across the world generally have certain prohibitions which should not be breached by the adherents. If such prohibitions are breached, normally supernatural consequences befall on the culprit, and in most cases on relatives, and at worst, on the whole community, including domestic animals (Tatira, 2010 & 2011).

Wotogbe Weneke quoted in Omotoye (2011:181) speaks out clearly that, “Spiritual forces are realities in man’s existence, of which, it can be argued, that the spiritual side of man seems the most important as it appears to rule a man’s life.” The Shona beliefs are linked to the spiritual realm and as such are bound to regulate their lives in the same way as observed in the quotation. If we are in agreement that beliefs have an overbearing influence on man’s life, it is legitimate to investigate them in order for one to have a deeper understanding of the people, their culture, customs and traditions.

The importance of the beliefs in any human endeavour can be uniting or disintegrating because of differences in their belief systems. People have done exceptionally well when propelled positively by their belief systems and vice versa. The central role played by belief systems in human existence has seen various scholars studying the beliefs from various angles namely, philosophical, sociological, psychological and anthropological to mention but a few. Among recent scholars who have investigated belief systems and their implications to the modern society are Moore-Thomas (2008); Matshali (2009); Webb (2012); Naipaul (2010); Zauditu (2007); Ogunbile (2002), Murray (2008); Koepping (2007); Sabar (2010); Wiegink (2013); Jenkins (2011); Oladipupo (2010); Chabal (2009); Hugo and Wiegink (2011); de Boek (2007) and Ranger (2006). The list is endless but this will suffice to show a recent ignited interest in human belief systems.

Naipul (2010) makes an anthropological thrust in the study of African beliefs while Zauditu (2007) and Oladipupo (2010) engage a philosophical perspective. The former touches on the topics of African Epistemologies, Eco-criticism and Female Spirituality while the latter on witchcraft as a fact or fallacy. Jenkins delves into the psychological dimension of witchcraft.

The Shona people in Zimbabwe have a strong belief system. When the missionaries arrived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with their Christian belief systems, they ignored the fact that the Shona people had their own belief systems.

It is not surprisingly that these beliefs are still prevalent among Shona people because they play spiritual-social function where the missionaries failed to stop Shona people from having such beliefs with the view of eradicating the beliefs completely from the communities.

This phenomenon of resilient belief system is also captured by Roberts (2009:113). Roberts writing about the belief system of the African-American opines that a belief system can be explained “as the creative embodiment of cultural knowledge important to black survival and well-being in the society.” He went on to say, “Of the factors that influenced the transformation of African religion in the United States, none was more important than the imposition of conditions and situation that allowed for widespread adverse health conditions and social discord to become endemic among Africans enslaved in America. The existence of these conditions that threatened the physical, social, and spiritual well-being and survival of Africans enslaved in America proved opportunistic in facilitating their ability to transform and retain important aspects of their religious cultural heritage, especially these aspects that they had traditionally embraced in dealing with physical and social issues in their community from traditional-spiritual point of view” (Roberts, (2009). Therefore in the case of the enslaved Africans, their religious beliefs helped them to cope with stressful and dehumanizing conditions. We would like to see how the Shona belief system helps them to cope with their situations. Thus, following paragraphs will concentrate on the three selected Shona belief systems and a short exposition related to their application.

## **Ancestral Belief**

In interrogating the Shona belief system, we are to begin with the ancestral belief which is part of other beliefs held by the Shona people. The Shona believe that there is a God which they give different names as *Mwari* (God), *Musikavanhu* (The creator of human beings), *Nyadenga* (The owner of skies or one who resides in the sky), *Mutangakugara* (The one who originated before anyone else) and *Chirozvamavi* (The one who blesses and withholds blessings). Tatira, (2010: 37) writing about the Shona religious beliefs observes, “Contrary to all these views, [that Shona worship animals, plants and other objects] the Shona people view *Mwari* (God) as someone who is up there and one who is very senior, as a result he should not be bothered with less important issues. The Shona believe that they can communicate with God through their ancestral spirits. According to their belief, it is improper to by-pass the ancestral spirits, and communicate directly with God. In fact, like the Asante ethnic group of Ghana (Boaduo, 2011) believe that such an address will be disrespect and ignored by God.”

The Shona belief in ancestral spirits in relation to God is aptly put by Clive and Peggy Kileff (1970:44), “Shona-speaking people are monotheist and their religion is complicated by the fact that although they believe in God (*Mwari*), they also believe that their lives are controlled by the ancestral spirits (*vadzimu*). This brings us to the ancestral belief.

The Shona people strongly believe in hierarchy and breach of hierarchy is not taken kindly in day-to-day affairs of the Shona people. Even mundane issues of life are expected to follow a certain hierarchical order. Take for instance a member of the Shona society arriving at a village gathering, he/she has to pass his/her greetings to the senior members through the junior members of the gathering. This hierarchy issue is evident in a family setting.

There are issues which children have to tell the mother for onward transmission to the father. Other issues go to the father through certain relatives say the father's younger brother. The son tells his father of his intention to marry through his father's younger brother. It is a serious violation of the cultural protocol to go direct to one's father with such an issue. This violation warrants a heavy fine which is paid to the father for having disrespected him.

Therefore, God is considered to be up there, and should, therefore, not be approached directly, the Shona people reason. The perceived distance between God and His creation is aptly put by Burnham (2000:25) as follows; "... the Creator is distant, unconcerned with the affairs of mankind, except indirectly via animal and spirit emissaries." The ancestral spirits are believed to be the guardian of the people and land. There are believed to be territorial spirits which guard the whole locality and such spirits are communicated to only through the chief who is responsible for the territory. What it means is that the territorial spirits are responsible for the general peace of the locality. Such spirits when offended, say by spilling of blood in their territory, sexual incest, and other cultural bizarre acts, they are believed to be able to punish the inhabitants by drought or cattle diseases. The chief priest to these spirits is the chief who is supposed to see that people live in peace.

## **Supernatural Belief**

This belief of supernatural punishment by the territorial ancestral spirits helps people to strive to live in harmony with each other. The chief is supposed to find the culprit and publicly punish him/her before a cleansing ritual is performed. If blood is spilled in the land, the chief appeases the spirits together with his subjects. Such ritual brings the chief and the subjects together and helps them to remain united. The fact that the chief is believed to be both a secular as well as a sacred leader helps him to have control over his subject therefore helping fostering stability. Some would be quick to say that such an arrangement promotes dictatorship but this is obviously not true. The Shona chiefs rule by consensus and not by decree. It is the council of elders that presides over issues while the chief in most cases only pronounces the verdict (Tatira, 2010).

The belief in territorial spirits helps to check human behaviour at a territorial level. For this reason, the Government of National Unity of Zimbabwe (GNU) included chiefs in their Organ for National Healing and Reconciliation. This organ was put in place to help reconcile people who were left bitter enemies due to the atrocities perpetrated on them during the period preceding the Zimbabwe Presidential Elections in 2008.

The chiefs are important as they represent the secular and sacred authority. The secular authority can be undermined but the Shona believe that the sacred authority can never be undermined since the ancestral spirits will fight back in a supernatural way. The inclusion of chiefs helped significantly in eradicating political violence among members of different political parties. The chiefs emphasized that spilling of blood should be avoided as doing so would anger the territorial spirits thus bringing catastrophes. This belief and the power of the chief helped people to live in harmony thus human development was enhanced as people channeled their energies to production rather than fighting each other.

## **Family Ancestral Spirits**

There are family ancestral spirits which are believed to oversee the lives of particular family. These are not responsible for the entire territory but are believed to have domain over people of the same family. These spirits, like the territorial spirits, are believed to be able to punish the errant members of their family. This happens because the Shona believe that if a person dies, it is not the end of his/her life and influence. They seem to believe that a dead person is more powerful and influential than a living person. In the Shona people's belief system, the dead person transforms into a *mudzimu* (ancestral spirit). This spirit is both benevolent and malevolent depending on the behaviour of the living members towards each other and towards the spirit itself.

The family spirits are believed to listen only to the most senior member of the family. This means that the senior member of the family becomes a priest for a particular family. This hierarchy helps to keep the younger and more adventurous generation into check. The younger members are supposed to respect, and obey their elders thus enforcing harmony across generations. If one hurts the elderly, by not looking after them, the ancestral spirits might cause one to lose a job. This belief might seem outdated but it must be footnoted that it is still strong and relevant not only among some of the Shona people but also among other Africans. Sabar (2010), reports of the existence of the belief of fear of misfortune if people fail to look after their parents among the Ghanaians and other migrant African workers in Israel.

In countries where social security is poor or non-existent as in many African countries, such belief becomes vital as it helps the affording younger generation to look after their ill-affording elderly parents and close relatives. The obligation turns out to be both social and spiritual.

The Shona people also believe that their family spirits are always with them as long as they keep to good morals. This attitude helps the Shona people at least to strive to do honourable things so that the ancestral spirits will continue to protect them. Students and potential job seekers have their confidence boosted by the belief that ancestral spirits are always there to protect and assist their members. However if such view is taken without the teaching of the importance of hard work it can lead to laziness. To check on this, the Shona people have a saying which goes, *Mudzimu unobetsera anozvibetserawo* (The ancestral spirit helps the one who helps himself/herself).

The last thing that makes the ancestral belief important and relevant is the high social status it bestows upon women. Contrary to the popularized view that Africans, Shona people included, have a proclivity to abusing women, the Shona people through their belief protect woman against abuse. This does not mean that there are no abusers of women among the Shona, what we want to clearly articulate is that there are beliefs which protect women against abusers. The woman members are believed to be physically weaker than their male members in Shona society thus we have beliefs which protect them against men. The maternal ancestral spirits are believed to be more ruthless than the paternal spirits if they are aggrieved.

The ill-treatment of a mother is believed to be met by a severe punishment when such a mother dies. This will be discussed in detail when we discuss the issue of avenging spirits. The Shona say, *Mudzimu wamai unouraya asi wababa unongorwadza chete* (The ancestral spirit of a mother kills but that of a father only torments). This obliges the Shona people to treat female members, in this case, their mothers with respect and dignity lest if they die aggrieved, they will fight back.

### **Avenging Spirit (*Ngozi*)**

The Shona believe that an innocent person if murdered, he/she comes back to fight as an avenging spirit. The spirit of the deceased would fight back by killing members of the person who murdered him/her. After having finished the blood relatives of the murderer, the avenging spirit is believed would finally kill the murderer. The reason while the deceased spirit does not attack the murderer at instance is meant to torment the murderer by letting him/her witness the death of his/her close family members. As you might notice, the belief scares the Shona people into committing murder. Statistical evidence have shown that because of this belief, the Shona people are less prone to violent crimes as compared to other group of people who do not hold this belief. In Zimbabwe where death sentence is passed for first degree murder, committing of murder is not only avoided due to death penalty but also due to the reason that it is also considered to be a crime against the spirit of the deceased which would destructively fights back.

What it means is that through socialization, the Shona people are taught that if such a crime is committed, one would have committed it for the whole family. The fact that one is sent to jail does not exonerate other family members from vengeance. This belief helps people to control their temper. It is not uncommon to hear a Shona person saying *Usarova mukadzi, anofa ukatitorera ngozi*: (Do not beat a woman lest she dies and fights back as the avenging spirit). This belief helps to promote violent free homes. Even accidentally running over a person with a vehicle is considered by the Shona people as a thing which can arouse the deceased person's spirit to fight back. Human life among the Shona is highly regarded because of the belief in avenging spirit. Not surprisingly, when a Shona person runs over a person, he/she tries by all possible means to have the particular life saved. This is surely done out of love of mankind but more so out of fear of the avenging spirits.

The incident previously referred to, that of ill-treating a mother, by beating her up or by not properly looking after her, is believed to be a fertile ground for the avenging spirit. The ill-treated mother is believed to be able to come back and fight her child. This she does it by making the child insane (*kutanda botso*). Though one might be rich and educated, the Shona believe that if one ill-treats a mother, one would put on rugs because of mental derangement and would move village after village or street after street shouting, *Ndakarova mai, ndakarova mai*: (I used to beat my mother, I used to beat my mother). Children would follow such a person throwing sand on him/her and shouting uncomplimentary statements. Interestingly, there is no avenging spirit for the ill-treatment of a father. This is because the Shona society is highly patriarchal and gives males more leverage in controlling their children. The father if ill-treated, as he is believed to be physically strong, can fight back. If he cannot physically fight back, he would withdraw his family priestly function, that of interceding for his errant son to the ancestors. Worse still, he can make a direct complain to the ancestors to let the ancestral spirits deal with the problematic child. Therefore, we find the belief protecting the parents from abuse of children in different but nevertheless effective ways.

It is now pertinent to conclude our discussion by investigating one of the popular belief among the Shona, that of witchcraft. This belief finds itself lingering in many Africans even though they might have left Africa for overseas employment. Such cases of Africans still embedded in this belief is reported by Webb (2012) when accounts of children of African immigrant workers are abused by their parents and relatives after being accused of witchcraft. Among the African-American, the belief is reported to be prevalent by Roberts (2009) and Murray (2008). Webb (2012:21) reporting on the belief in witchcraft among the African immigrants in Great Britain notes, "British police say they have investigated more than 80 witchcraft based child abuse cases in the last decade and warned that the practice is "far more prevalent" than previously believed. Authorities say that the belief in witchcraft is widespread and gaining in some African immigrant communities in Britain" This shows that the belief in witchcraft does not easily die because of one's distance from home.

## **Witchcraft**

Witchcraft belief plays a very important function in the lives of the Shona people. The author of this paper not long ago, in 2011, wrote a whole book on witches and witchcraft beliefs among the Karanga people, an ethnic group that belongs to the larger group of people called the Shona people.

Essein (2010:535), writing about the centrality of witchcraft among the African people, says, “Witchcraft has been a prevailing belief in African culture and has continually posed problems for the people... Epidemic, diseases, natural disasters and widespread political and social destruction are often connected to witches. People exhibiting unusual personal features, extraordinary behaviour, or excessive power, in other words people who disturb the balance and harmony of power relations, which are so important in African society, are easily accused of being witches.” The observation of Essein is sincere but the interpretation is regrettably erroneous. When Africans and in particular Shona people label a person as a witch, what they mean is that the person might have a bewitching spirit or that a person is extraordinarily different from others. The difference can be in behaviour or attitude.

The latter is meant to correct a person to change his/her behaviour so that he/she joins others in common behaviour. The former, however, is believed to have a spirit which has total control over him/her and such a person if he/she likes to be free of witchcraft might be exorcised. Anyhow in this discussion the argument would not like to enter into the polemics of witches as this would divert us from the focus of the paper.

The belief in witchcraft cuts across social, religious and educational spectrum of most African ethnic groups. Wiegink (2013) reports of this belief among the demobilized RENAMO soldiers of Mozambique. Omotoye (2011), reports of the Yoruba people of Nigeria who were converted to Christianity through the mainline churches, the Methodist, Catholic, Anglican and Baptist but in spite of their conversion and commitment, they still live in fear of witches and other evil forces. The fear of the malevolent forces leads them to be Christians by the day and clients of traditional healers by the night. What Omotoye (2012) observes in Nigeria is true to some Shona people in Zimbabwe. Some Shona people are only Christians on Sundays whilst throughout the week they may patronize the traditional healers. The drifting of African members from the mainline churches to the Pentecostal churches is partly explained by fear of witches of such members. The Pentecostal churches become convenient as they claim to sniff out witches and exorcise witchcraft spirits from its members.

Witchcraft belief among the Shona helps them to explain difficult and stressful situations in life. Without this belief, the Shona people would have had difficult times in coping with the adversities of life. The Shona people explain things they fear as caused by the ancestral spirits, avenging spirits and in most cases by the witches.



A witch can be a male or a female member of the society but the female members are mostly considered to be witches than the males. The male members can be sorcerers and it is believed that there are no female sorcerers among the Shona. It is however important to note that the Shona term for a sorcerer and a witch is one – *muroyi* (one who harms others through evil means). The general use of *muroyi* can also refer to anyone who is hard-hearted or who has evil intention, or an antisocial being. However in this discussion, we will deal with the meaning that considers a witch to be one who has a spiritual power to harm others. This is the most feared type of a witch and the type of a witch which gave raise to witchcraft belief among the Shona.

Through witchcraft belief, the Shona people are able to explain and cope with sickness such as cancer, HIV/AIDS and mental illness. Tatira (2011:20) observers, “According to the Karanga people, [a tribe of the Shona] sickness is natural. But it ceases to be natural when it threatens life or when it lingers for too long without healing. When illness threatens life it becomes no longer natural, therefore the Karanga people go to a diviner. This diviner is believed not only to prescribe medicine for healing the sick, but most often unveils the cause of illness.” This explains while some of the Shona people do not take HIV/AIDS and cancer as natural. If there are natural, there should go away, the Shona people reason. Most people diagnosed with the diseases though they may get western medical treatment, they might believe or pretend that they are victims of witchcraft.

A critique would be quick to say that the belief is retrogressive and irrelevant when it comes to the aforementioned diseases. What one needs to understand is that HIV/AIDS is both a medical and social disease so is cancer. The AIDS victims have in not a few cases been blamed and stigmatized for being reckless and permissive. This stigmatization eats a lot on the victim that one might fail to respond positively to drugs. In such circumstances people feel comfortable and acceptable if they hide in witchcraft belief. There are some who genuinely believe that AIDS/HIV and cancer are a result of witchcraft. They get solace in the belief that they are haunted by the witches. There are, however, others who save face in a society which does not take illness like AIDS lightly and hide in the belief in witchcraft. They pretend to be victims of witchcraft so as to get sympathy and maximum support from relatives.

Even other relatives who know that the sick person is lying that he has been bewitched, they pretend to be going along with his/her belief in order for them to assist the sick person to come to terms with his/her new condition. It is common knowledge that when people are ill, they need support and sympathy and sometimes need a scapegoat. In Shona culture, this has helped people to cope with such life threatening diseases while at the same time taking their medication.

Witchcraft belief as a scapegoat to life challenges has been used by many Shona people to cope with these life challenges. It is not surprising that a Shona person relieved of his/her duties for incompetence might genuinely believe the spiritual aspect to have played to his/her dismissal. The dismissed person would reason that why was he/she dismissed, he/she is not the only incompetent person in the company or that which made him/her incompetent was a result of witchcraft. Though the belief has a disadvantage of lack of self-accountability, it helps in that the person's self-esteem remains high. All psychologists are in agreement that once one's self-esteem is high, one can reach greater heights. The beliefs help to preserve such self-esteem and a person can end up successful in life.

The Shona people, especially those who stay in the villages, in the rural areas where witches are believed to abound are very much afraid of witches. These people live in relatively crowded areas where domestic animals are likely to stray in other people's fields and destroy the crops. Children ought to take extra care not to let their animals destroy the neighbours' crops. If such animals destroy a witch's crops, the witch is believed would fight back through witchcraft in the dark hours of the night. This belief helps children to keep their animals away from other people's fields. Because of this, people end up having adequate food supplies hence food security is enhanced.

Quarrels are also checked in the rural areas because you do not know who you quarrel with. It is a common belief that when you quarrel with a witch, the witch will supernaturally fight back. It is not uncommon in the villages that people are discouraged to pick up quarrels with other people so as to avoid the risk of being bewitched. In such an environment, we experience tranquility, though some can argue that it is artificial tranquility but for the Shona, it has proved to work for posterity.

Lastly even barrenness can be explained in terms of witchcraft. For the Shona, bearing children is a social duty which is almost obligatory. One cannot decide not to have children and get away without social censure. People young and old will have a say on those who negate their procreation function. Not to have a child in the Shona worldview is not only unfortunate but traumatic. Where one finds that he/she is barren yet at the same time the Shona society does not only forbid adoption but has no such vocabulary for it in their culture, the barren person finds it difficult to cope with his/her situation. It is only when barrenness is explained in terms of witchcraft that society tends to be sympathetic and supportive. Therefore, witchcraft belief functions to help out in many unbearable situations in the Shona people's lives.

In taking audit of the Shona beliefs, definitely there are lessons to be learnt by the new generation. The new generation can benefit from the values of respect, especially of elders, solidarity and common vision as espoused in the ancestral spirits belief. In the belief in avenging spirit, values of human dignity are espoused while that of witchcraft fosters the ideals of perseverance and peace with others. All these values if put into practice by the present generation the world would be a better place to live.

## Conclusion

This paper has discussed three basic Shona belief systems which are ancestral belief, avenging spirits and witchcraft. Yet, despite all the thinking postures in which the Shona value trust or confidence, these three have been singled out because they are fairly capable of representing Shona philosophical, sociological psychological and anthropological world-views. Thus, this presentation has managed to show that the selected belief systems of the Shona are neither retrogressive nor irrelevant because they provide important lessons that can be used today, because it helps people cope with their day-to-day challenges.

Through the values, as espoused in the beliefs, the present generation can derive important lessons for life on human dignity, respect of each other, peaceful co-existence with each other and the environment, perseverance and humility. All such attributes are vital for a health society.

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