RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN ZIMBABWE

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Introduction

There are several commonly-held beliefs about religion in Zimbabwe. One is that Christianity represents the dynamic part of Zimbabwean religion. So-called 'African Traditional Religion' certainly 'survives'—and was drawn on, for instance, during the liberation war. But this was part of a backward-looking cultural nationalism rather than of the contemporary development of Zimbabwean society. Another is that this African Traditional Religion is divided between a number of very distinct cults—the priests of the oracular cave shrines of the High God, Mwali, in western and southern Zimbabwe, being very different from the mhondoro mediums, possessed by the spirits of hero ancestors, in the north and east; and both being very different from divination and witch cleansing and herbalism. The third is that Christianity itself is equally clearly divided between ex-Mission Churches, with their emphasis on schools and clinics and 'development', and African Independent Churches, with their emphasis on prophecy and spiritual healing.

None of these beliefs could have survived the presentations made at the Britain Zimbabwe Society Research Day on Religion in Zimbabwe. The whole of the morning was devoted to developments within ‘Traditional Religion’, climaxing with a contemporary prophetic movement which is now sweeping across the southern half of the country. It was also devoted to borrowings and interactions between the different cults, and between all of them and Christianity. The afternoon focussed on Christianity and on the spiritual experiences and theologies shared across the spectrum of ‘mission’ and ‘independent’ churches. In particular, the papers emphasised
the pentecostal character of much Zimbabwean Christianity, whether of Anglicanism in Gokwe, or 'American Methodism' in Manyikaland, or in the Mai Chaza church, or among the Apostles.

During the day, therefore, most of the dividing lines were eroded if not abandoned. As Leslie Ntroyi proclaimed in his presentation on the Mwali shrines in the Matopos, it was now impossible to exclude this or that idea or activity as 'inconsistent' with the essential nature of the Mwali cult. The cult certainly was largely concerned with order and fertility but many of its adepts and spokesmen had also been involved with guerrillas and nationalist politicians; it certainly was concerned with universal issues but individual ailments and problems were diagnosed at some of the shrines; many Mwali pilgrims and office holders had been, or still were, members of Christian churches; and while ancestral possession was not important among the priesthood dedicated to a Creator God, mhondoro mediums were nevertheless closely connected with them. Interaction, even syncretism, was the order of the day.

But at the same time the impression given at the end of the day was not one of random interaction. Religious ideas, movements and organisations maintain vitality by drawing upon common sources of experience and inspiration, and by borrowing from each other. These processes ensure that all parts of the Zimbabwean religious spectrum are fully 'contemporary' and fully 'modern'. But they do not result in a mere mish-mash or jumble of ideas. The distinct character of different religious systems persists; the variations/interactions/syncretisms are systematic.

**Religion in the Zambezi Valley**

The fascinating presentations made in the opening session of the Research Day suggested that these processes of interaction and of systematic variation are not new ones. They clearly took place in pre-colonial Zimbabwe as well as happening today. The session dealt with the north-eastern part of the Dande region in the Zambezi Valley. The Dande is well-known in religious anthropology. Kingsley-Garbett has written about its network of Korekore spirit territories and its hierarchy of mhondoros; David Lan's best-selling master-piece, *Guns and Rain*, is set in the Dande. But the presentations did not directly concern the Korekore,