REVIEW ARTICLE

CHIMURENGA: THE WAR OF THE TREES

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These two books offer a fascinating journey into the development of an innovative ecological movement which is grounded in an indigenous spirituality. The author, Inus Daneel, is a participant observer in this environmental mission of *African Earthkeepers* set in the Zimbabwean context. His perspective is a Christian one, but those involved in the movement include ecologists and African religionists. One of the presiding metaphors in the books is *chimurenga*, the Shona word for the war of liberation fought in what was then Rhodesia. The word is now deployed in another war of liberation—the war of the trees. The focus of the new *chimurenga* is tree-planting to preserve and enhance the environment so that the balance of life might be restored. ‘We decided to become earthkeepers, tree-planters, healers of the wounded land. So we declared another *chimurenga*!’ (p. 24)

In Britain the ‘crisis in the countryside’ was first presented in economic terms, but has since been understood more holistically to include social and spiritual dimensions and indeed the whole balance of life represented by the production and consumption of food. The *chimurenga* of the *African Earthkeepers* was holistic from the start, a war waged on many fronts: tackling past patterns of settlement and environmental exploitation, engaging with the spiritual-cultural aspects of human
traditions, and working out the tactics of the practical implications for changing the environment through a sustained programme of strategic indigenous tree-planting. However Daneel would like to see *chimurenga* being waged on a worldwide scale. His watchword and challenge is a reworking of Jesus’ Great Commission: ‘It takes little imagination to realise that we are fast reaching a point where tree-planting as a major earthkeeping activity must become the concern of all the people of all the nations of the world.’ (p. 20)

In the first volume, the author divides his narrative and reflections into three parts. Part one traces the rise of the earthkeeping movement, part two explores the traditional beliefs and practices of earthkeeping and part three offers a critique. His personal involvement in the movement and in the worldview and practices of traditional ecology gives the account a dynamic feel. Thus, in part one Daneel acknowledges both the struggles and the joys of the emergence of the movement; he describes the process by which the *chimurenga* of the trees came to be focused by the question of drought and ecological degradation. He traces the rise of the earthkeeping movement in both its traditional religious dimension, focusing on the Mwari cult and the role of spirit mediums in ecological aspects of traditional culture and their involvement in the war of liberation, and the African Independent Churches (AICs) whose mission of prophecy and healing is broadened by the challenge of the drought to include the prophetic commitment to the healing of the land through tree-planting.

The organisational expression of the movement takes form in the Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists (AZTREC) and the Association of African Earthkeeping Churches (AAEC). They cooperate under the umbrella organisation Zimbabwean Religious Research and Ecological Conservation (ZIRRCON). It is the fact of cooperation that gives this movement additional significance and points towards the search for a common perspective shared by traditionalists and AICs. Daneel explores the commonalities in parts two and three. Part two unpacks the development of a new myth—the *chimurenga* of the trees—and its creation through the traditionalists’ religious practices.

In part three, which discusses the African religious values grounding these practices and ecological concerns, Daneel begins to relate the African worldview and the Christian perspective. He has already acknowledged that some AIC church leaders, especially during the war for independence, saw an emphasis on Christ as a compromise with white man’s religion. The role of the Spirit and work of God as creator was an easier emphasis in that context and time. But there is a common-