In his book published in 1965, Professor Gann remarked that once the Ndebele and Shona risings of 1896-7 against the regime of the British South Africa Company had been suppressed, spiritual resistance among the Shona and Ndebele “collapsed like its military equivalent” and traditional institutions “tended to fall into some disrepute amongst Africans, especially in Mashonaland where so many chiefs and spirit mediums were compromised by the Rebellion”. 2

In this article, I propose to show that in point of fact, the very opposite was the case and that the Shona in particular put up a very spirited resistance to Christianity after the suppression of the two risings. In Matabeleland, however, the opposition to Christianity was not as marked as in Mashonaland and some of the Ndebele chiefs became early converts to Christianity. In this regard, I propose to discuss the African response to Christianity as introduced by one of the most important missionary societies operating in Southern Rhodesia today, namely the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society.

The Wesleyan Methodists arrived in what later became the British colony of Southern Rhodesia in the wake of the occupation of the country by the forces of the British South Africa Company in 1890. The first party, consisting of the Revs. Owen Watkins and Isaac Shimmin, arrived at Fort Salisbury on September 29, 1891. Like other missionary societies, the Wesleyans were soon granted large areas of land by the British South Africa Company on which to begin their
missions. Between 1891 and 1897, the Methodists founded several mission stations, including Hartleyton, Epworth, Nengubo and Kwen- da in Mashonaland and Tegwani in Matabeleland.

During the early period, the Methodists made very few converts among the Shona and Ndebele. This was because the Shona and Ndebele had a religion of their own to which they were deeply attached. Between 1891 and 1897 the Methodists did make some converts among the Shona and Ndebele but whatever success they had achieved in this regard was largely destroyed by the Ndebele and Shona risings of 1896-7. After the suppression of the two risings, the missionaries expected that military collapse would also lead to spiritual collapse among the Shona and Ndebele. Their expectations proved unfounded.

I will now turn to the African response to Christianity in Southern Rhodesia between 1897 and 1914. I will begin with the response of the African chiefs and their people to Christianity in Mashonaland.

In Mashonaland, many of the chiefs were strongly opposed to Christianity. One example of this was at the Nengubo mission station where Chief Nengubo led the struggle against the new faith. So strongly opposed to Christianity was Chief Nengubo that in 1898 he requested the government for permission for him and his people to move away from the mission station; this was granted and the chief and most of his people moved and settled some twelve miles away.

Chief Nengubo's opposition to Christianity was widely shared in what later became the Nengubo Circuit. In 1905, for example, it was reported that the vast majority of the people of the Nengubo Circuit, "have no present intention of renouncing their heathen practices and will not even allow their children to be instructed. They are bound by the strongest ties to the past... In moments of despondency we often feel that the present generation will die as it has lived, without good and without hope".

The chief's opposition to Christianity was also manifest at the Kwenda mission. In 1898, for example, Chief Kwenda was reported

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3 Shona religion has been the subject of several books by Professor Michael Gelfand. For details, see for example his *Shona Religion*, Cape Town: Juta 1962; for details on Ndebele religion, see for example A. J. B. Hughes and J. van Velsen in H. Kuper, Hughes and van Velsen, *The Shona and Ndebele of Southern Rhodesia*, London: International African Institute 1954.


5 S/M/S/A/B. 1890-1899, Mashonaland and Rhodesia District Synod Minutes, 1898.

6 S/M/S/A/B. 1900-1905, Rhodesia District Synod Minutes, 1905.