

ENVIRONMENTAL REFORM

A NEW VENTURE OF ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND

M.L. Daneel

The hypothesis of this treatise is that in modern Zimbabwe the traditional custodians of the land—in other words, the environmentalists of African society as it evolved over the centuries—still have the authority and leadership potential to mobilize rural communities on a massive scale in communal programs of environmental reform. This hypothesis is based on the ecological endeavours, mainly in the field of afforestation, by Shona traditional authorities in the context of AZTREC (Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists) in Masvingo Province over the past six years.

By way of introduction I sketch the background to the religiously defined environmental duties of the traditional authorities and their relation to government. Political issues are mentioned only in passing, as the objective is to place AZTREC in its religiocultural and historical context rather than write an exhaustive treatise on chieftaincy, local government and the state relations. The formation and activities of AZTREC are then described in order to demonstrate the blend of old and new in this movement's ecological contribution. Finally, some tentative observations are made about the relevance of the Zimbabwean case study to environmental concerns in the wider context of Africa.

The Earthkeeping Roles of Chiefs and Mediums in Historical Perspective

Environmental duties

The traditional custodians of the land have always been the chiefs and the senior spirit mediums. Their tribal political and concomitant land-keeping authority derived from the founder ancestors of the tribe who ruled over geographically

© Copyright 1996 – M.L. Daneel.

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND

M.L. Daneel

demarcated areas dating back to early periods of conquest and settlement. These ancestors are known as the *mhondoro* (lit. 'lion') and their popular designation as *varidzi venyika* (guardians of the land) clearly reflects their mystical 'ownership' and tutelage over the communal lands to which their particular tribal group lays claim. The Shona chief derives his representative authority from these guardian spirits by descent, and the medium (*svikiro*) through direct identification as the officially called and recognized mouthpiece of one of the senior spirits. Because of this mystical legitimation the chief and senior medium of a chieftaincy exercise their powers in close cooperation; the chief as judicial authority via the tribal or chief's court (*dare*), and the medium as mouthpiece for direct revelations from the founding ancestor of the territory, and hence the wielder of considerable political authority. This link of both chief and medium with the senior regional ancestors symbolizes the essentials of a holistic African world-view in which the living and the living dead, the creator-divinity and all of creation are inseparably linked in a seamless totality on one continuum. The implications are that both chief and medium are key religious figures in society and that their ritual functions relate specifically to the environment, as the maintenance of the equilibrium between a healthy environment and the well-being of the humans living there is considered to be the guardian ancestors' prime concern.

What, then, are the land-keeping functions of chief and medium? First, both of them are charged to uphold the ancestral rest-day (*chisi*) in their territory. This secures the goodwill of the ancestors, which is essential for soil fertility, abundant rains and good crops. While the medium can act as a kind of roving disciplinary agent by expressing ancestral disapproval of *chisi* transgressions, chiefs and their representative headmen ritually placate the guardian ancestors on behalf of those peasants who, in an agricultural emergency, seek to 'buy the rest-day' (*kutenga chisi*) with a pot of beer in order to work on the lands on that day (Daneel 1971: 83, 90).

Second, in preparation for annual rain rituals (*mikwerere*) at the onset of the rainy season, the chief encourages his headmen to collect finger millet from the villagers, to brew beer and sweep the graves of senior ancestors. The *svikiro*, in turn, in trance-like spells of revelation, communicates to tribesmen any ancestral complaints about misuse of the land, pollution of water sources or similar environmental abuses which arouse the displeasure of the spirit guardians, and so may result in drought or late rains. During the *mukwerere* ritual (Daneel 1971: 121f) the chief or representative headman addresses the most senior ancestors of the ward, requesting them to present the plea for rain to the creator god, Mwari, recognized as the ultimate owner of all creation and therefore also the rain-giver. Whereas this ritual recognizes all the most potent spirit forces in the Shona cosmology in direct relation to agro-environmental concerns, both chief and medium act as important ecologists, directly involved in the life-giving rhythm of

the seasons.

Third, both chief and senior medium in certain tribes are involved in procuring divine protection for the environment by maintaining annual contact with the oracular divinity, Mwari, at the shrines in the Matopo hills. In western, central and southeastern Zimbabwe, where the high-god cult is still very influential, the district's cult messenger (*munyai*, plur. *vanyai*) collects Mwari's gifts from tribesfolk before travelling to the distant shrines. Prior to his or her departure the *munyai* reports to the chief's court to discuss the district's environmental and even tribal political requirements, in order to report these to the creator god. The chief may want to complain about governmental interference in chieftaincy succession issues or the curtailment of the chief's land-allocation powers, while the medium has to obtain the approval of the regional spirits for the *munyai*'s visit to the shrines. Thus the send-off of the *munyai* is a kind of judicial and ritual affirmation of ultimate spirit control over politics and the environment, of the close interaction between regional spirits and creator god in these areas, and of the integral connection between political stability, mystical approval and environmental control. On returning from the shrines the messenger reports to the chief's court whether the divinity is prepared to provide rain and has communicated oracular directives for local government. This reinforces the holism of environmental control and highlights the significance at district level of the offices of chief, medium and *munyai* in this respect (Daneel 1970: *passim*, 1971: 86f).

Fourth, the chief's environmental duties are most clearly evident in his responsibility for the preservation of the holy groves in the chieftdom. These are called *marambatemwa* (literally 'refusal to fell [the trees]') and are usually on mountainous terrain, sometimes comprising entire mountain ranges, where the graves of the senior tribal ancestors are located. A recent survey in Masvingo Province has indicated that all chieftdoms contain several holy groves, many of which still have intact closed canopy forests. Traditionally the state of these groves symbolized the socio-ecological well-being and stability of the entire community. Without a well-kept *marambatemwa* in honour of the local lineage progenitors, and through them the senior guardian ancestors of the land, community life was incomplete, if not unsustainable and futureless. Honouring the mystical owners of the land was tantamount to environmental protection. The ritual officiants responsible for the enforcement of ecological laws at each shrine would be the chief or headman and the spirit medium(s) of the *mhondoro* ancestors buried in the grove.

Some of the most common shrine laws are the following. Only the guardian chief or headman acting as shrine keeper (*muchengeti*) is entitled to a limited annual quota of firewood from the grove for personal use. In those groves where fruit gathering is allowed, respect for the trees requires that only fruit lying on the

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND

M.L. Daneel

ground can be collected. In most groves no hunting is allowed and a hunted or wounded animal entering the grove is safe from pursuit. Rock rabbits are protected at all times since they are the sentinels of the ancestors. Certain species of snakes, such as the python, are associated with the *njuzu* water spirits (Daneel 1971: 128) and as such protected. Their presence in a grove is a reminder that the pollution of fountains is strictly forbidden. Respect for the *njuzu* spirits means respect for the springs, pools and rivers where they live, and hence the protection of water resources. All in all, therefore, the finest sentiments and practical rules of traditional ecological stewardship are concentrated in the holy groves, ensuring the protection of vegetation, wildlife and water resources. All the seen and unseen forces of society have roles to play in securing this protection: the chiefs, that of levying heavy fines in their courts for tree felling and hunting; the guardian ancestors, that of meting out mystical punishment to trespassers through mental disorder or death; the spirit mediums, those of personally policing the groves, preventing Western utensils from being taken near *njuzu* fountains and springs, and bringing to book illegal tree-fellers; and the community, that of ostracizing defiant offenders in their wards.

The centrifugal force of *marambatemwa* laws spreads throughout the chiefdoms, informing a common environmental code for the whole rural peasant society and strengthening the ecological authority of chiefs and mediums. The code includes rules for the protection of certain species of trees. For example, no *muchakata* (wild cork tree) may ever be chopped down, not even in maize fields, as it is closely associated with the ancestors, its dense and durable foliage symbolizing the ancestors' protection of their living descendants. Both humans and animals are nourished by the *muchakata's* fruit. Certain species of wild fig trees (*miwonde*) are protected, as they harbour the spirits of poor and unhappy people in their branches. The *mudziyavashe* (lit. 'heat of the king') represents the best firewood available and was in the past reserved for royalty. Commoners, however, could fell this tree if they provided the chief with a sacrificial beast, which was then offered to the guardian spirits to obtain permission for felling the specified tree. The *mubvumira* ('acquiring of permission') or wild syringa is also protected because its presence at new homesteads is seen as a sign of ancestral approval when young tribespeople wish to establish new living quarters or villages independently of their elders.

Changing roles during and after the colonial period

Their geographical spheres of influence of both the chiefs and mediums were drastically curtailed during the colonial era. White usurpation of indigenous land eventually led to a divisioning which left 46.5% of agricultural land in white hands and 46.6% with the African population, the latter outnumbering the former

in a ratio of 20:1 (Mandaza 1987: 168).

This divisioning, effected through the Land Apportionment Act (1930), Land Husbandry Act (1951) and Land Tenure Act (1969), obviously alienated the traditional African ecologists from the holy groves situated on white farms. Traditional land tenure was badly disrupted. As Holleman observed of the colonial government's centralization policy:

The geographical nature of the land received first consideration, the recognized boundaries of chiefdoms second, but those of the tribal wards (Shona: *dunhu*) hardly any consideration or none at all. (Holleman 1969: 55)

Yet to the Shona the *dunhu* is home (Daneel 1987: 198).

Another disruptive move was the introduction, through the Land Husbandry Act (1951), of Licences to sell tribal lands. Said Holleman:

The act completely ignores, if not deliberately rejects, the customary basis of African land tenure, by introducing the principle of individual and negotiable rights to strictly demarcated registered holdings. (Holleman 1969: 61)

Such legislation, though later repealed, obviously militated against Shona 'communal tenure', in which any individual's right to land was as secure as that person's membership of the community (Holleman 1969: 62-63). It also abrogated the hereditary rights of chiefs and headmen to allocate land to kinsmen or 'foreigners' (*vatorwa*) on the basis of authority derived from the ancestral guardians of the land.¹

Opinions about the roles and stature of chiefs in relation to colonial administration vary considerably. David Lan judges, on the basis of his observations in Dande in northern Zimbabwe, that during the colonial period

... the chiefs had become minor civil servants with the powers of constables. As such they were subject to the wishes of their masters, the native commissioners, and no longer to those of their ancestors, the *mhondoro*, or of their people. (Lan 1985: 138)

¹ This brief overview of the changing roles of chiefs is based on Manley (1995).

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND

M.L. Daneel

This is an inaccurate assessment, verging on caricature, of the admittedly conflicting loyalties of chiefs. In Masvingo Province, for instance, a combination of several reasonably enlightened district commissioners and influential chiefs led to a much more diversified picture. Despite a degree of subservience, due to their dependence on government stipends, quite a number of chiefs openly opposed district administrators' attempts to interfere with customary chieftaincy succession procedures. Allegiance to local government did not necessarily imply chiefly disregard of *mhondoro* demands. Particularly in the field of ecology they generally continued applying the rules of *chisi*. They kept fighting for the preservation of their holy groves against the odds arising from population growth and the resultant scarcity of firewood. And many of them, together with their mediums, strove to maintain regular contact between their district and the oracular shrines in the Matopo hills. In rural society, even though they were compromised to some extent as government employees, their status by and large remained that of dignified fathers of their people. Although they could not present all the needs of peasant society to the authorities, and were severely criticised for this, their powers — both political and mystical — were not reduced to those of constables, as Lan claims.

Politically much less compromised than the chiefs, the senior district mediums were more vocal in their criticism of colonial land usurpation. Particularly when in trance, they voiced disapproval of land apportionment, threatened mystical retaliation and in some cases berated the chiefs for not sufficiently representing the land-related cause of their subjects and the senior guardian ancestors. Lan (1985: 140) maintains that during the liberation struggle the people in Dande "shifted their political allegiance from the chiefs of the present to the chiefs of the past, the *mhondoro*, who could of course only be made available to them by their mediums." Whereas some chiefs became suspect as government collaborators and 'sell-outs,' the mediums moved from token resistance against colonialism to active cooperation with the guerrilla fighters. Acting on behalf of the guardian ancestors, they supported the guerrillas in the all-out drive to liberate the lands lost to colonial conquest. With their considerable political influence they played a vital role in uniting the fighters and rural society in a common cause (Lan 1985: 148). Spearheading a veritable renaissance of traditional religion, the spirit mediums conveyed the directives of the spirit war council (*dare rechimurenga*) to the guerrillas. These directives directly affected guerrilla war tactics. In addition the mediums played prominent roles in purging society from the perpetrators of wizardry (*uroyi*), which in the wartime context meant collaboration with the enemy.

One should, however, not generalize too rashly about the contrasting *chimurenga* roles of chiefs and mediums. It is known that during the war years a number of chiefs in Masvingo Province distinguished themselves as staunch supporters of the

cause. Although a few chiefs, such as chief Negovano, were killed by the fighters as sell-outs, there were others, such as chief Ziki in Bikita district, who supported the guerrillas so strongly that the latter considered moving him and several other chiefs to the ZANLA camps in Mozambique lest they be exposed and imprisoned by the Smith regime. My own research in this province revealed, moreover, that a number of chiefs and mediums jointly collaborated with the fighters at night, and that the guerrillas at the time accepted the chiefs' dilemma as civil servants, provided they were convinced of their basic loyalty to the struggle.

Immediately after Independence central government stripped the chiefs of most of their judicial powers. They were permitted only to arbitrate in domestic disputes and to serve on the newly instated village and ward development committees, but they did not have full local government recognition of their mystically derived environmental authority. Thus for several years they were powerless to control or effectively oppose the land abuse and deforestation which accelerated during the post-war years.

Ironically, the decline of the chiefs' powers after Independence also undermined the political authority of the senior spirit mediums, despite the prominence they had gained as virtual war heroes during the *chimurenga* years. This phenomenon highlights the interdependence of the two institutions, both of which are legitimated by the land-keeping authority of the guardian spirits. The chiefs were frustrated at their powerlessness in the midst of the environmental destruction in their districts; and the mediums, who had been told towards the end of the war that after Independence they should rest, found it hard to accept being sidelined in matters of national significance. Together they were aware of the paradox: the lost lands, having been recaptured politically, were still being lost ecologically at an alarming rate. In the new political dispensation theirs was an identity crisis caused by their diminished authority in local government, which threatened the perpetuation of their customary status and influence in rural society.

In recent years, however, central government has reviewed the position of chiefs and is gradually reincorporating them officially into rural administration. Currently all chiefs are ex officio members of the elected rural councils. Together with headmen and kraalheads they advise the councils on applications for land, after which the allocation is implemented by agricultural experts. In addition, some of their former judicial powers were restored in the course of 1993. But, as we shall see in the next section, the chiefs and mediums decided to launch new ventures in environmental reform, well beyond the scope afforded them in this field by local government.

The Founding of AZTREC

AZTREC (Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists) was born from a period of intensive field research in the mid-eighties. At the time, investigating the role of religion in the liberation struggle, I was in close touch with ex-combatants, chiefs, mediums and African Independent Church leaders. Endless discussions about the military struggle to recapture the lost lands led to consideration of land and environmental issues. Successive ravaging droughts were attributed by the traditional authorities to the dissatisfaction of the guardian ancestors. According to mediums who had played key roles during *chimurenga*, the main complaint of the ancestors was the omission of ZANU politicians to give sufficient public recognition to their guidance and protection during the struggle. The rain, it was suggested, would come once President Mugabe and senior cabinet ministers had travelled to Great Zimbabwe and Mwari's shrines in the Matopo hills to officially 'show' the ancestors the land they had recaptured. In addition the *varidzi venyika* were apparently dissatisfied with rampant deforestation, particularly in the resettlement areas, and with the government's land redistribution program. Implicit in such criticism was the frustration of chiefs and mediums at the curtailment of their political authority. In a sense the ancestors were retaliating on their behalf. They were feeling despondent about their inability to enforce effective environmental control.

In this context both traditionalists and Independent Church leaders were eager to form a national ecological association. As most of our original research discussions had revolved around *chimurenga*, it was felt that the new movement should take on the character of a liberation struggle, an extension of *chimurenga* into the field of ecology. Thus, in the drafting of constitutions and the mobilization of a green force, the War of the Trees was declared as the first phase of a struggle based on the same religious tenets and holistic African world-view as the struggle for political independence.

In this development the facilitating and financially empowering agency was ZIRRCO (Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation), the institutionalized and extended version of my research team. This body took responsibility for the founding and development of two sister organizations, one for traditionalists and the other for African Independent Churches. The former started in 1988 as the Association of Zimbabwean Spirit Mediums (AZSM), before it was renamed AZTREC. Currently this association represents a powerful green force comprising the majority of traditional authorities (chiefs, headmen and mediums) and many ex-combatants, mainly from Masvingo Province. The Association of African Earthkeeping Churches (AAEC) was founded a couple of years later and today comprises some 120 member churches, mainly prophetic AICs, with an overall membership of some 2 million

adherents throughout Zimbabwe. Each of these two movements, which together represent the largest non-government environmental body at the rural grassroots in Zimbabwe today, has its own governing executive and religious identity, traditional and Christian; their headquarters, together with ZIRRCO's, are situated in Masvingo town.

The first president of AZTREC was Cde Haurovi Chinovuriri who, during *chimurenga*, acted as senior liaison officer between the spirit mediums and ZANLA high command in the Chimoio battle camp in Mozambique. His vice-president was Cde MuDende, former guerrilla fighter and spirit medium in the Gutu district. Subsequently two influential Duma spirit mediums of *chimurenga* repute, Cdes Pfupajena and vaZarira, filled these top positions. Former guerrilla commanders hold key positions on the executive from time to time. In recent years a number of chiefs have become prominent, Chief Murinye from Masvingo South being patron of the movement. This stalwart protagonist of the cause has been nicknamed Muuyu (baobab tree) by AZTREC members, in recognition of his solid and reliable contribution.

From the composition of the AZTREC executive it can be seen that key figures of the political liberation struggle have in fact regrouped, this time in the ecological field. Cooperation between chiefs and mediums at executive and annual conferences, moreover, illustrates a continuation of their traditionally defined and politically interrelated authority in religio-ecological affairs, irrespective of possible disjunction between some of them during the war. To the mediums who were supposed to 'go to rest' after *chimurenga*, AZTREC was a new awakening and an emergence from relative obscurity. To ex-combatants it offered a means of job creation for frustrated former fighters, many of whom had received little reward for their efforts at the war front. And to the chiefs, who were fighting an uphill battle to regain their traditional land-allocating and civil judicial powers in local government, this was an opportunity to demonstrate their authority and leadership publicly and with a measure of innovative autonomy. Thus AZTREC affords its traditionalist members not only an opportunity to engage in meaningful earth-healing activities, but also to gain government and national recognition through these activities at the grassroots of rural society.

Constitutionally AZTREC has three earthkeeping aims: afforestation, protection of water resources, and wildlife conservation. A brief survey of its efforts to attain these objectives gives some idea of the significance of traditional religio-ecological beliefs and leadership in meeting modern environmental demands.

AZTREC's Environmental Activities

Afforestation

The War of the Trees has been focal in the activities of both AZTREC and the AAEC. Some two million trees have already been planted in more than 1,000 woodlots. Ten nurseries in various districts of Masvingo Province cultivate between 50,000 and 100,000 seedlings each year. Further expansion of the ZIRRCO afforestation campaign should lead to the production of over one million trees per year. Tree planting is undertaken on a massive scale by mobilizing peasant communities to plant their own woodlots in the vicinity of stable water points. A variety of trees are planted: fruit trees for personal and commercial use; exotics, like blue gums, for building operations; indigenous trees for firewood and restoration of forests; lukina for cattle fodder; and the slow-growing kiasa and red mahogany as a long-term investment for the benefit of coming generations. ZIRRCO and its sister organizations currently cultivate larger numbers of indigenous tree seedlings than any other institution in Zimbabwe. The Forestry Commission has expressed its surprise and appreciation at the ability of the movement to engage large numbers of rural people in the planting and nurturing of trees.

There are several reasons why AZTREC's afforestation drive has been successful. The tree symbolism that formed part of traditional ecology, for instance, is manifested in the nicknames given to key figures in AZTREC. This shows the movement's identification with the healthy environment of the past, the state to which the land has to be restored. As *muuyu* (baobab), our patron Chief Murinye represents the ageless, unwavering spirit needed in this never-ending struggle. As *muchakata* (wild cork tree), I represent the ancestral symbol of protection—in this instance the financial protection of the fund-raiser. Spirit medium vaZarira, a former president, is known as *Marambatemwa* (the one who refuses to have trees felled) because of her insistence that the custom of conserving holy groves should be strengthened or reintroduced. The regular use of these names resuscitates the old green laws in a modern setting. Probably the most important factor of all is the innovative use of indigenized religiocultural tree-planting ceremonies which affirm the customary roles of chiefs and mediums.

Ritual tree-planting

In the rural areas all tree-planting ceremonies are ritual events, modelled largely on the traditional *mukwerere* rain rituals (Daneel 1971: 121-128). Like the *mukwerere*, AZTREC's *mafukidzanyika* (lit. 'earth-clothing') ceremonies focus on

the barren environment and the need for rain—in this instance to enable newly planted seedlings to survive and grow. Accordingly they are held at the same point in the seasonal cycle, the rainy season. Preparations for an AZTREC earth-clothing ceremony are very similar to those for a *mukwerere*, with villagers providing finger-millet for brewing beer. Elders related to the chief or headman in whose area the ceremony is held contribute one or more sacrificial beasts for the occasion. Thus the old custom of the entire community contributing to the ritual, thereby showing respect to the guardian ancestors, is upheld.

Although the tribal dignitaries—the chief, medium and headmen—control the improvised *mafukidzanyika* ceremonies, a broader spectrum of tribal authority is represented than in the orthodox *mukwerere*. Both ceremonies emphasize *lineage unity* (Daneel 1971: 127), that is, the involvement of the regional spirit hierarchy. But through the presence of the local chief, a contingent of headmen, and usually a number of visiting AZTREC chiefs from elsewhere in Masvingo Province, the actual ritual unit has a much wider spiritual representation than present-day rain rituals arranged by village or ward headmen. Since the participants in these rituals frequently include cabinet ministers, provincial officials and representatives of Forestry, Natural Resources, Education, Parks and Wildlife, it is clear that the ritual ambit of the ceremony is expanded from the regional tribal level to a provincial multi-tribal, if not national level. The more comprehensive ritual unit makes the participants aware of the interrelatedness and interaction of various spirit hierarchies in a common cause. Thus a kind of multi-tribal 'ecumenism' is established, a reminiscent of the *chimurenga* war council of the spirit world, in which regional concerns were transcended by provincial and national ones.

But the more comprehensive spirit unity at no point obscures the role of the guardian ancestors of the region where the ceremony takes place. In the ritual addresses to the ancestors preceding tree-planting the apical regional ancestors are mentioned by name; and they are relied on to mediate between their living descendants and the traditional creator god, as in all *mukwerere* supplications. After all, after the ceremony the local villagers remain responsible to the local guardian spirits for faithfully fulfilling their duties in the newly planted woodlot by watering the seedlings, protecting them against domestic animals and providing other forms of aftercare. The wider 'ecumenical' perspective therefore derives not so much from the ritual address of specific ancestors as from the creation of a new ritual context, which—through numerous conscientizing speeches, feasting, dancing and work in the new woodlot—integrates the local spirit order with that of the nation in pursuit of a liberated environment.

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND
M.L. Daneel

Mystical union: a condition for ecological combat

At the start of each *mafukidzanyika* ceremony there is a presentation of beer and snuff, together with a ritual address of the land's guardian ancestors. These addresses illustrate the nature of ritual union between the living and the living dead, the closing of ranks in combat against environmental destruction.

The following are excerpts from spirit medium vaZarira's ritual address during a tree-planting ceremony in 1988 in chief Negovano's territory in the Bikita district:

Now that we come to address our ancestors we do so in the knowledge that the ancestors are the land, the ancestors are the water, the ancestors are the *sadza* [porridge] we eat, and the ancestors are the clothes we wear. Without the ancestors we will be without water, without food, without clothes. Our entire well-being will be lost without them.... Thus today we want to place our own spirits with those of our ancestors, together with our [tree-planting] activities in the land. We cannot act on our own without informing them. If we do so, we would be transgressing. Then all the trees we plant will die....

[To the ancestors] You venerable ones, go and tell Negovano. You, Negovano, lift to your forefathers this action taken by the council of spirit mediums in your land. Let them inform Musikavanhu [lit. 'creator of the people', traditional name for god] of the work of the children, the council of mediums.... We ask for dew. Make us dew...that dew [rain] which came in the past with such abundance. We kneel for it in all earnest.... See us, our forefathers, and let the good things of the past return.... You, our ancestors, have been returned to power. The reason for your return is the soil itself, because the entire country has become barren. So, Negovano, we request today that you will wipe out our footprints with rain.... Oh, great Zhame, place our request before Musikavanhu, you of the rocks of Mwari.

On 22 December 1990, at an AZTREC tree-planting ceremony in Chief Nhema's area in Zaka district, a tribal elder, speaking on behalf of Chief Nhema, addressed the regional ancestors as follows:

We have gathered here in your honour, our ancestor, father Nhema. Your children want to clothe the earth [*kufukidza nyika*], for it is naked.... We ask for rain because your children are being scorched by the heat of the sun. Give us the coolness

of water! ...This land is barren because we have been chopping down all the trees....

You, *mhondoro*, have no wilderness left in which to dwell. We want to restore the forests to cover the naked land. [Beer libation and snuff offered at this point.] Pass our plea, oh Nhema and Pfupajena, to the unknown ancestors. You, our ancestors, also pass our plea to Musikavanhu so that the trees we plant will be watered sufficiently to survive....

In both these ritual addresses the reaffirmation of mystical union between the living and living dead feature as a premise of the ecological struggle. True to the Shona worldview, major environmental endeavour cannot be attempted without the guidance and approval of the mystical forces regulating land issues. The ancestors are presented as the instigators of AZTREC's afforestation drive. According to vaZarira, tree-planting without their inspiration and guidance would be futile.

In the ritual context recognition of the powers of the guardian ancestors remains dominant throughout. VaZarira's portrayal of the *midzimu* as actually being the land, the food, the rain and the clothes of the people poignantly underscores the indispensability of ancestral power for the achievement and maintenance of human well-being. No harmony or equilibrium between nature and humanity is conceivable without the ritually enacted union of all members of society — deceased, living and unborn. The enactment of this union to persuade all mystical forces, ancestral and divine, to preserve and restore socio-ecological well-being represents an implicit rejection of exploitive individualism as offensive and destructive. This reflects the assumption in the ritual context of the pervasive presence of the ancestors.

Ancestral presence also provides an ethical dimension. It is to the guardian spirits, whose privilege it is to rest in the shade of tress in the holy groves (*marambatemwa*), that public confessions of guilt about environmental destruction are made by the ritual officiants, acting on behalf of all participants. In a sense, therefore, the ancestors are the ecological conscience of their living descendants. They provoke confessions of guilt and instill resolve to remedy the situation, since they are the original custodians of the land whose prerogatives are denied by wanton destruction of 'their' forest. Their own well-being is threatened by the irreverence of their living descendants who no longer heed customary ecological laws nor show ritual respect. A direct result of such neglect is the barrenness of those areas where the *mhondoro* used to dwell and the resultant disappearance of these spirits, which leads to drought and agricultural decline.

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND

M.L. Daneel

Ritual officiants are only too aware of this sorry state of affairs. Their ecological concern surfaces in laments and nostalgia for the past when there was abundance, when the holy rivers flowed and wild life abounded in the forests. VaZarira fervently pleads for the restoration of the past. But her nostalgia and pleas to the ancestors do not stagnate in passiveness or fatalism, as if a new order can only be ushered in by god and the spirit forces. On the contrary, her communion with the ancestors reflects determination to fight the War of the Trees and to involve all her fellow tribespeople and fellow Zimbabweans in the struggle. In other words, confessions to the ancestors about ecological guilt convert into resolve and remedial action. Significantly, too, the speeches of tribal dignitaries and the tree-planting activities which complement the *mafukidzanyika* addresses to the ancestors reflect the growing conviction of AZTREC participants that all is not lost, that an ancestrally instigated and directed 'war' can still turn the tide of environmental degradation.

Chiefs and mediums in the ritual context

The *mafukidzanyika* ceremonies repeatedly illustrate that in the views of key functionaries the chiefs and mediums operate in concert. Tree planting is the business of the ancestors and their custodial function in the world of the living rests squarely on the shoulders of those who represent them by way of descent and religious vocation. Healing the land presupposes the strength of unity amongst the leading land-healers.

Said Cosmas Gonese, former general secretary of ZIRRCO-AZTREC, at a tree-planting ceremony:

The arrangement of our association is for the chiefs and *masvikiro* to take the initiative against deforestation, because they represent the customs of our ancestors, they have the [ecological] knowledge to instruct the young, and they have the authority to prevent destruction. Their aim is this: Let the holy places of the past once again be honoured as holy! Let the places where trees were felled be restored!

Significantly, this prominent ex-guerrilla assumes unity in the purpose, status and authority of chiefs and mediums in leading the afforestation drive. In his view, therefore, the controversy regarding the unequal contributions of these tribal authorities to the liberation struggle (see above) does not apply to the new *chimurenga* for a liberated environment. They are equally important and interdependent. Their efforts, moreover, are not those of isolated, religiopolitical professionals, but are fully integrated with the efforts of the people, the *povo*.

For, as Gonese insisted in the same speech, the restoration of the land and the return of lush forests depended on "you, the people".

During *mafukidzanyika* ceremonies the chiefs and village councillors also emerge as a unified force. Councillor Mutingwende said at a ceremony in Negovano's chiefdom:

We, the councillors, will help chief Negovano to determine which sites in our wards are suited for special care [woodlots]. The kind of strict control applied during the war should again be exercised! Each person should know that his own contribution is important for the protection of the land.... We want the spirit mediums to return [to this woodlot] from time to time, to encourage us and satisfy themselves about the growth of these trees.

Mutingwende's words corroborate the general trend, namely that *mafukidzanyika* activities assume and promote cooperation between chiefs, councillors and mediums. Tree planting transcends tribal political rivalry between them in the ritually affirmed presence of both the spirit world and representatives of central government. The councillor openly supported the ecological authority of chiefs and mediums, in an envisaged conservationist war, regulated once again by *chimurenga* structures.

In the ritual context of *mafukidzanyika* ceremonies both chiefs and mediums act as ecological conscientizers and mobilizers of the people, but they do so in different ways. The mediums, as religiohistorical experts, focus more on ritually expressing the unity between tree planters and mystical forces; the guardian ancestors' directives for conservation; and the religiopolitical history of the country, the 1896 rebellions and particularly the 1966-1980 *chimurenga*. The chiefs, in their turn, take stock of the details of ecological degradation in their chiefdoms. They interact with the councillors in determining where trees are most needed and what future afforestation strategies should be adopted. They call on villagers, young people and school children—the latter often complementing tree-planting ceremonies with programs of 'green' choir singing and poetry recitals—to take full responsibility for seed collection and nursery and woodlot development, in conjunction with ZIRRCO-AZTREC. The chiefs, then, can be described as warlords or green guerrilla commanders concerned with practical battle strategies in the War of the Trees. Capitalizing on the combination of religious fervour and ecological resolve evoked by the mediums, the chiefs give substance to the battle cry, condemning deforestation and soil erosion. Inventive chiefs like Murinye of Masvingo district, add variety to an emerging vocabulary of commitment by helping to coin new slogans such as: Forward the War of the Trees! Down with

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND

M.L. Daneel

the tree fellers! Forward the protection of our soil! Down with the use of sledges [causing erosion gullies]! Forward ZANU-PF and AZTREC! Down with the axe! Let the land-destroyers receive instruction!

Paramount in the conscientizing speeches of the chiefs is the theme of the barren earth, the rampant destruction in their own areas. Chief Gutu, for instance, regularly uses the AZTREC platform to denounce the desecration of the holy groves. He claims that the disappearance of forests on the holy mountains is the reason why, at the onset of the rainy season, one can no longer hear the aquatic drumbeat of the spirit world in the rivulets of Mount Jerimanda, once a sure sign of the country's prosperity. At one ceremony Chief Mukaro of Gutu South described the barren land there as follows: "We have no poles left for building houses, no game to hunt, no fish in the rivers to catch as they were all netted out." In Bikita a chief said: "If we do not produce firewood by planting trees we shall ultimately make fire with cattle dung. In some areas this is already happening."

Characteristic of many of these speeches is a near fatalistic sense of desperation. But this does not end in escapism. AZTREC's tree-planting program has rekindled hopes of finding a solution and restoring environmental vitality. Rousing speeches counterbalance laments. "If you people follow the instructions of the chiefs and mediums the land will be built afresh...." "Plant indigenous trees and the barrenness of the land will cease...." At one of the ceremonies Chief Makumbe of Gutu district proclaimed that once the trees were planted "the rains will abound, the *mhondoro* spirits will return and the *njuzu* will re-inhabit the pools." These words express environmental reform in traditional religious idiom. Chief Gutu was quite emphatic that all tree-planting matters should be referred to him rather than to the District Administrator or the police. "I am the one," he claimed publicly, "who, as chief Gutu, control the *zvidoma* [witch familiars], the perpetrators of witchcraft in this district." Gutu's claims hint at the chief's frustration at their curtailed powers, their need for official authority to control more effectively the evil of wizardry (in the form of environmental destruction), and the expectation that through their new forum, AZTREC, they will succeed in their quest for increased political authority.

The preoccupation of the mediums with the ancestors at tree-planting ceremonies, as illustrated in vaZarira's ritual address quoted above, should be interpreted in terms of recent *chimurenga* history. During the war the mediums themselves were instrumental in the renaissance of traditional religion. Through experience, therefore, they are even more aware than the chiefs of the mobilizing potential of this factor in rural society. Against the background of regional guardian ancestors' achievement of prominence in the spirit war council alongside such national hero ancestors as Chaminuka, Kaguwi and Nehanda, their shift towards national

significance is affirmed in AZTREC's rituals. In the mediums' appeal for ancestral authorization of earthkeeping, the ancestors symbolize much more than the localized spirit interests of the old religion. They represent a new black identity and cultural awareness in which people take pride; they represent liberation from colonial oppression, the recent birth of a nation, as well as that nation's ambition for development and progress. That is why vaZarira claims that the ancestors are the land, the rain, the produce of the fields and the life of the people; things which, in an agricultural subsistence economy, spell survival or progress.

Despite the fact that both chiefs and mediums couch AZTREC's ecological objectives in the traditional idiom of the return of the *mhondoro* and water spirits, the aquatic drumbeat when the rivers are full again and so forth, we are not dealing with an antiquated belief system or the nostalgic yearnings of a few traditionalists. On the contrary, tree-planting represents a remarkable blend of old and new, of conservative and progressive elements in Shona society. The mediums project and interpret ancestral inspiration in terms of modern tree-planting techniques. These include the fencing of woodlots, the use of fertilizer, modern means of transport to develop plantations and even the use of pesticides—in other words, the use of Western equipment which, during the colonial era, would have been summarily rejected by the mediums. Just as they did not hesitate to combine traditional ancestral motivation with modern warfare to liberate the land from colonialism, so they now propagate the ecological liberation of nature through modern techniques. Amongst other things their mystical inspiration leads to conscientization programs, in which new instruments — such as the printed word alongside oral tradition — are used. Joint seminars are conducted, for instance, in which AZTREC members and government departments pool ideas and work towards the implementation of modern agroforestry schemes.

Rain-making and the protection of water resources

It is only natural that ritual addresses during tree-planting ceremonies should contain pleas for rain. *Mafukidzanyika*, the clothing of the land, is indeed an improvised extension of the rain-making *mukwerere*. In vaZarira's ritual address quoted above we observe the *mukwerere* metaphor in the request for rain to 'wipe out the footprints of ritual participants.' Traditionally the obliteration of footprints by rain on the day of the ritual or soon afterwards — be they the footprints of delegations to the oracular shrines at Matonjeni (Matopo hills) or those of *mukwerere* participants — is a sign of ancestral and divine approval.

The tree-planting ritual, however, goes a step further than the *mukwerere* rain

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND

M.L. Daneel

ritual. Instead of merely requesting the senior ancestors to forward a local plea to a seemingly remote oracular deity, as is common in rain rituals, vaZarira addresses the deity more directly. Using Duma traditional praise names, such as Musikavanhu and Zhame, god is addressed directly as an insider, one who is present at the ceremony. Without disregarding ancestral mediation, god's traditional remoteness is in a sense superseded, as if he is more directly in charge of AZTREC's earthkeeping struggle than merely via revealed directives from the spirit war council and/or the oracular shrine. Nhema's address, quoted above, though less forthright than vaZarira's, requests rain from Mwari specifically for tree survival. The nurturing and protective function of the deity is required for the green struggle to be successful.

AZTREC's *mafukidzanyika* ceremonies affirm Mwari's traditional role as ecological liberator, that is, as rain-giver, who periodically liberates selected regions or the entire country from crippling droughts. In this respect the creator god's perceived role in the third *chimurenga*, the green struggle, is innovatively contextualized within the age-old traditional religious framework.

Conversely, the green struggle revives and strengthens the institutional structure of the Mwari cult. Spirit mediums use AZTREC's afforestation platform to propagate and resuscitate the old order. On one occasion vaZarira lamented: "Where have the Matonjeni messengers gone? Why do many of them no longer travel to Matonjeni to fetch rain?" Subsequently she said:

Don't be disturbed when I ask for the return of the Matonjeni messengers. This will happen when the government realizes that the spirit mediums, the Matonjeni messengers and the chiefs are one in their work for the benefit of the land.

These words reflect recognition of the importance of unity of purpose and cooperation between the key functionaries of the Mwari cult at the local district level if the holistic interplay of natural forces, earthkeepers, ancestors and creator god is to be maintained for the healing of creation.

AZTREC's recognition of the significance of the Mwari cult for its earthkeeping program not only results in intensified afforestation-cum-rain-making cooperation between chiefs, mediums and *vanyai* at the local district level. It also leads to an improvised extension of the cult. At the conclusion of the season's tree-planting ceremonies all over Masvingo Province, an AZTREC delegation is sent to the distant Matonjeni shrines to request rain for the trees planted, and to report to and consult Mwari, the creator god, on the latest developments in the green struggle. In contrast to the traditional district representation of *vanyai* and a few praise singers at the shrines, the annual AZTREC delegation comprises a much larger

contingent of chiefs, mediums and fellow traditionalists representing an entire province. The AZTREC delegation, moreover, represents an institutionalized new configuration of 'fighting cadres', reports on a different struggle from the earlier one (i.e., the bush war to regain the lost lands) and virtually demands that Mwari reveal another side of him/herself in response to a new set of liberationist requirements.

In the course of Zimbabwe's history, national crises had virtually imposed new forms of oracular intervention on the rain-giving deity at the Matopo shrines. During the 1896 rebellions and the second *chimurenga* (1966-1980) the oracle had emerged increasingly as a deity of war and peace, a liberator god. Now the need for country-wide ecological reform is promoting yet another conceptual mutation of Mwari. The features and oracular messages of the shrine divinity have in fact always been determined by the deepest collective and historically conditioned needs of his/her people. Thus the image evoked by the AZTREC delegation is of 'Mwari, the guardian of the tree planters and their fledgling forests', the one who ultimately directs and controls all ecological conservation, and the liberator from environmental catastrophe.

After the 1989-1990 tree-planting season some 60 chiefs and mediums, a few *vanyai* and several ex-guerrillas visited the Dzilo shrine at Matonjeni to report on the planting of 165,000 trees. It was moving to observe the expectancy of chiefs as they arrived for the first time at the cult center, which was 350 km from their home districts, and whose rich tradition they knew only from their local *vanyai* and fellow tribespeople. Their attitudes at Matonjeni reflected awe, respect and mystification, as if they were about to probe the mystery of their origins, the very heart of Africa. From the secret depths of the shrine cave, the rocks of the pool (*Mabweadziva*), they were to hear for the first time the voice of Africa's creator god. Their War of the Trees was to be protected by Mwari's life-giving rain; to be imbued with mystical significance so as to achieve national, if not universal significance. Psychologically this event became a turning point in AZTREC's history, when the War of the Trees in all seriousness achieved divinely sanctioned *chimurenga* status.

The scope of this paper does not permit a detailed discussion of the nature of oracular revelations. Suffice it to say that a wide variety of personal issues, tribal political matters, the preservation of customary laws, rain requests and more recently AZTREC's environmental campaign come up annually for divine attention at the shrine's cave entrance in the deep of night. Mwari invariably responds positively to tree-planting reports, urges greater ecological effort and promises guidance for the future. His/her protection is extended even to the movement's fundraising drive. But the oracle does not prescribe detailed green battle strategies. As during the war years, the details of the actual struggle out in

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND

M.L. Daneel

the country is taken care of by the ancestral war council—in this instance, the guardian ancestors of each district—while the oracle inspires perseverance as a more general condition for ultimate victory.

The link between divine rain giving and afforestation is a new feature in AZTREC's Matonjeni connection. Traditionally rain requests at the shrines arose from the pragmatic motive of securing good crops as well as preserving existing forests and grasslands for grazing. Now the more altruistic motive of healing a barren environment through afforestation projects adds a new dimension and focuses attention on a widening range of agroforestry schemes.

Divine affirmation at Matonjeni of our earthkeeping activities, coupled with action by chiefs and mediums united in a common cause, undoubtedly has a motivating effect. Amongst other things Mwari's involvement as rain-giver stimulates greater awareness of the immense importance of protecting water resources. As a result AZTREC's chiefs are increasingly developing control systems to prevent riverbank cultivation in the communal lands, while the mediums police the remaining fountains, pools and rivulets, still considered to be inhabited by the environment-friendly *njuzu* spirits, to prevent pollution. These activities reflect an emerging ethic which stigmatizes wanton tree felling and water pollution as a form of wizardry (*uroyi*), punishable by fines or, in extreme cases, banishment from the ward or chiefdom where the offense took place. This reminds one of the accusations of wizardry levelled against collaborators with the colonial power during *chimurenga*. AZTREC's dissociation from ecological destruction in this traditional idiom—which connotes in the strongest terms the perpetration of evil against nature and society—is a sure sign that the traditional custodians of the land are existentially committed to the green struggle.

AZTREC has not yet launched into concerted action in the field of water resources to the same extent as it has done in afforestation. Nevertheless it has already proposed, as one of its targets, the rehabilitation of denuded land in the catchment area of Lake Kyle (Mitirikwe). Tree- and grass-planting programs are envisaged in an attempt to help curb siltation of the lake, which should help protect the lowveld cane industry.

Sacred groves and game sanctuaries

(a) The general picture in Africa

Sacred groves abound in Africa and Asia. According to a survey conducted by the World Resources Institute in West Africa, most were established there centuries

ago as dwelling places for the traditional deities and became the sites of important sociocultural events such as festivals, religious worship, burials and secret society meetings.

Sacred groves are usually small in size, but large in number; together, they constitute an unknown but significant percentage of the remaining natural forests in West Africa that in most cases are not officially protected. In some countries they may constitute the bulk of the remaining closed canopy forest. Sacred groves are one example of how traditional religious or sociocultural practices lead to environmental preservation or sound resource management. (Dorm-Adzobu et al. 1991: 23)

The WRI study focused mainly on a one-acre sacred grove in the Malshegu area in northern Ghana, which illustrates how traditional religion can provide a key to the protection and management of local natural resources.

The study, however, suggests that generally in Africa

...the contribution of traditional religious beliefs and practices, especially at the local level, are neither well known nor fully recognized by governments or the development assistance community, and the implications for policy and programming are not well understood or implemented. Few national donor-sponsored Environmental Action Plans, Tropical Forestry Action Plans, Conservation Strategies or equivalent country-level planning exercises specifically mention sacred groves or develop policy or program actions for improved protection (Dorm-Adzobu et al. 1991: 25).

(b) Holy groves in Zimbabwe

The generalized observations of the WRI apply to Masvingo Province. There is little evidence that the numerous *marambatemwa* in the communal lands are being singled out in local government development strategies as platforms for the launching of religioculturally informed environmental programs. The prominence given to the sacred groves in our tree-planting ceremonies and the enthusiasm of the chiefs, headmen and mediums to step up the protection or restoration of their *marambatemwa* through our earthkeeping movement presents ZIRRCON-AZTREC with a unique challenge. In the communal lands the remaining sacred groves indeed constitute a large proportion of the still remaining closed canopy forests. Many of them are much larger than the one-acre forest at Malshegu,

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND

M.L. Daneel

which appears to be the biggest grove of its kind in northern Ghana. If ZIRRCO-
AZTREC were to embark on a systematic program of surveying the *marambatemwa*
and empowering the traditional authorities to renew their commitment to the
protection of their sacred groves, this would be a massive stride forward in ecological
conservation and reform, over and above the introduction of our 'modern'
marambatemwa—the newly established woodlots.

Numerous holy groves are still to be found throughout the communal lands of
Masvingo Province. Those situated in commercial farm areas are beyond the control
of the tribal elders but are still remembered and considered important by them. A
 cursory glance at Gutu district shows that the politically dominant Rufura people
attach the greatest importance to such groves as Mount Gona and Mount Jerimanda,
where their tribal progenitors lie buried.

The largest *marambatemwa* in Gutu, covering an area of approximately six square
kilometers, is Mount Rasa in the Nyamande chiefdom. This mountain has thickly
wooded slopes, many important graves, secret hiding places containing the histories
of ancient battles, and caves where hyena and the occasional leopard still dwell. The
Rasa people, under headman Chagonda — descendants of the legendary rain-maker
Mai Marumbi — are the main keepers of this grove. In the 1960s, when I was doing
research in Gutu district, Marumbi's medium, a young man at that stage, was
patrolling the forested slopes of Mount Rasa daily to prevent tree felling. For many
days at a time he never returned to his homestead, reflecting his concern about the
increased encroachment of wood gatherers at the foot of the mountain as fuelwood
became scarce in the surrounding deforested areas.

At the time headman Chagonda's court was applying for a full chieftainship. Their
rich heritage was reflected in their strife with the Nyamande people over the *mhumbi*
ya Marumbi ('possessions of Marumbi'). These possessions, it was believed, included
the precious rain stones of the famous Rasa rain-maker, which established a special
relationship between Rasa and the oracular shrines at Matonjeni where the stones
originated. As the stones were required to bolster the political claims and authority of
the Chagonda elders and to give clout to their grove-protecting activities, the
implication at that point was that Mwari, the creator god, was directly empowering
the local struggle against environmental degradation in one of his/her ancestral
sanctuaries. Here one finds a possible clue to the origins of the old *marambatemwa*
laws: that they were inspired by both the creator god and the guardian ancestors. If
so, the rain-giving oracle's conservationist influence may have been stronger and
geographically more widespread in the distant past than researchers have thus far
indicated.

The Duma people in particular are noted for their elaborate traditions regarding

sacred groves. In the relatively small Duma chieftdom of chief Chiwara in Gutu South there are no fewer than four major shrines with surrounding groves. In earlier centuries the embalming or mummification (drying of corpses) of Duma royalty took place at these shrines and over the generations specially appointed families of shrine keepers evolved their own histories and myths about shrine protection. The shrine of *Mount Vinga* contains the graves of Dumbukunyuka and a few other guardian ancestors and is a symbol of Duma unity. The *Chiunga grove* is where Dumbukunyuka lived and died. After the military feats of Pfulajena, the Duma warrior, it was Dumbukunyuka who stabilized Duma hegemony through his wise leadership. Together with Vinga, the Chiunga grove therefore represents a landmark in early Duma history. Then there are the shrines of *Mount Vumba* and *Mount Vunjere*, known for their dense *mushuku* (wild loquat) forests and protecting *njuzu*-related snakes.

Like many other groves, the Duma *marambatemwa* sanctuaries are under assault. Foreign rule and growing land pressure have eroded customary law and traditional ecology. The mood of frustration and powerlessness is noticeable in this comment from kraalhead Marinda, the Duma gravekeeper:

Today many people simply ignore the laws of *marambatemwa*. They have even desecrated the graves and strewn some of the ancestors' bones around at the holy grave sites. I asked for such misbehaviour to be reported in the newspapers. But it was no use. Ever since the arrival of the whites the application of these laws started to deteriorate.... People started to hunt in the Duma *marambatemwa* without even informing the chief.

(c) *Holy groves and wildlife*

Despite the paucity of game in the overcrowded communal lands of Masvingo Province, a hunting tradition still exists in rural society. Discussions with tribal elders in particular reveal nostalgia for the past when game abounded in their own districts, pleasure taken in the narration of wildlife and hunting stories, and eagerness to discuss customary hunting codes. Many of these codes relate to the *marambatemwa*, for the guardian ancestors dwelling there are seen as the protectors of game. Mystical retaliation can be expected if an individual hunter hunts out of season, kills indiscriminately, does not provide the chief with the front leg (*bandauko*) of the animal killed (this in recognition of ancestral 'ownership' of game), or kills threatened species like antbears, pangolins and bush babies.

In view of the traditional religious sanction underlying all customary conservation

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND

M.L. Daneel

laws and the significance of holy groves as geographical symbols of wildlife abundance, I have no doubt that the *marambatemwa* provide ideal entry points for the reintroduction of game in the communal lands. I have already presented proposals to this effect to ZIRRCO-AZTREC, National Parks and Wildlife, Worldwide Fund, Campfire and other wildlife institutions. Feasibility studies at Mount Rasa and a few other groves have been conducted, with reference to game fencing, identification of game species to be restocked, the nature of the likely community response, and a host of related issues.

The conversion of a number of *marambatemwa* into game sanctuaries would have great appeal for tribal elders. It will differ from game farming in the commercial areas in that less land will be available, and hence there will be smaller game populations. Yet through the empowerment of traditional elders and rural council members through the initiating agency, ZIRRCO-AZTREC, this will be essentially an African community enterprise, based on the reconsideration, adaptation and implementation of traditional conservationist codes. It is conceivable, for instance, that antipoaching and antisnaring measures could be effectively applied in sacred game sanctuaries because of the persistent belief in the mystical protection of the guardian ancestors. The chiefs and mediums are bound to declare imported game the 'property' of the *midzimu*. If initial experimentation proves successful, one could consider the reintroduction of threatened species such as the klipspringer, a small antelope which should thrive in the mountainous terrain of holy groves.

A scheme of this nature will complement the wildlife management program of CAMPFIRE. This organization has successfully introduced the principle of making rural district councils, and the grassroots communities they represent, responsible for game conservation and the marketing of big game in cooperation with hunting safari operators, representing mainly overseas but also local clients. Once rural communities started reaping the benefits of the new system in the form of improved living conditions (through, for example, schools, roads and clinics), acquired with hunting fee profits, peasant attitudes shifted markedly towards public opposition to poaching and the protection of game as a marketable resource.

CAMPFIRE's success has, however, depended largely on adequate game management and marketing in communal lands in or near the Zambezi valley, Gwanda and in Beit Bridge district, where the survival of adequate game populations has made the application of their policy possible. To restock game in game-fenced sanctuaries where human overpopulation has crowded out most game species — in other words, to create from scratch the conditions for game conservation, management and eventually also marketing — would be totally different, and would be necessarily more complex and costly to initiate and

maintain.

Nevertheless there are several reasons why the introduction of *marambatemwa* game sanctuaries should be considered. First, the combination of reforestation and game stocking in sacred groves accords with the holistic world-view still prevalent in rural peasant society. The religious sanction for such action should provide strong motivation and commitment — as evidenced by the War of the Trees — to assure success. Second, game stocking in communal lands where wildlife has been depleted could help re-establish a form of wilderness, which many rural people have been unable to experience. Third, communal responsibility for such game sanctuaries could bring about an attitudinal change in rural communities, from a poaching-snaring mentality to one favouring positive conservationism and controlled commercial enterprise. The attitudinal change already effected by CAMPFIRE as regards the value and protection of wildlife can be extended into regions where this organization has not yet operated. Conscious reinterpretation of traditional ecology and hunting laws and building on those foundations will, moreover, give the enterprise recognizable cultural roots. This undoubtedly will have the advantage of promoting authentic popular concern about wildlife and in the process enhance the status of those chiefs, mediums, councillors and others responsible for project implementation. Fourth, the proposed system could become a significant part of the process of balancing privileged, elitist and Western-sponsored wildlife conservation with Western-backed, yet Africanized, collective and grassroots controlled endeavour. Fifth, properly planned culling, meat marketing and hunting could in the long run offset capital cost and maintenance as sanctuary units progress towards self-support. In the sixth place, the envisaged game sanctuaries could also become valuable conscientization centers for the youth of surrounding schools. Against the background of existing youth involvement in the War of the Trees, youth clubs for environmental care could be introduced. Modest African-style conference centers at the larger game sanctuaries could accommodate youth clubs, whose weekend programs should include: ecological education, instruction in bushcraft, antipoaching exercises, tree and wildlife identification hikes, visits to places of cultural and historical significance within the sanctuaries (Bushman paintings, ancestral shrines, caves used as hideouts during Ndebele raids and the liberation struggle, etc.). In this way the earthkeepers and wildlife custodians of tomorrow, who are being deprived of such opportunities in the denuded communal lands, can face the challenge of preserving and rebuilding their environmental heritage within the religiocultural context of their forefathers.

Conclusion: Tradition-Related Environmental Strategies for Africa

Our Zimbabwean environmental case study is characterized by a certain

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND

M.L. Daneel

unevenness. The data on afforestation, for instance, is much more solidly based on AZTREC experience, and its well-established and proven patterns of activity, than the tentative observations about wildlife in relation to holy groves, in which field ZIRRCO-AZTREC's surveys, planning and conference deliberations still require funding for actual project implementation. As a result the projection of possible scenarios and prospects for future tradition-related environmental strategies in the latter field will necessarily be more guarded than those based on established praxis.

The outstanding feature of AZTREC's work is the ability of the traditional custodians of the land to appropriate and revitalize Africa's age-old religio-ecological values in a modern program of environmental reform. It appears that where the authority of traditional leaders, in this instance the chiefs and mediums, is still relatively intact in African rural society, they are capable, once motivated and empowered, of mobilizing that society in large-scale and lasting environmental programs. Appropriation and revitalization of traditional values, as we have seen, are based on holistic world-views, but amount to much more than a mere reversion to the old religious and cultural order. In traditionalist circles the spirit guardians of the land are now conceived of as not only insisting on customary ecological laws to preserve the holy groves, but as urging a much more aggressive and geographically extensive process of healing and clothing the barren land through reforestation and related environmental programs. In other words, the basic religious dynamics of inspirational interaction between the living, the living dead and the creator god is currently informing and initiating new patterns of ecological curative action in an attempt to remedy the cosmic imbalance caused by environmental destruction.

In what way, then, is the traditionalist appropriation of the old religious order, the building on old foundations, introducing innovative change? I mention only a few of the most significant examples. First, although the *mafukidzanyika* tree-planting ceremonies resemble the *mukwerere* rain rituals in their dependence on the guardian ancestors of the land, the ancestral demands have changed considerably. The right-mindedness that they require from their living descendants involves more than the original respect and veneration symbolized by libations and ritual addresses. They in fact require the living to create the very conditions for good rainy seasons, namely ample vegetation achieved through reforestation. This is an entirely novel notion in a belief system which traditionally required only the conservation or protection of existing abundance, which nature could keep regenerating, before the problems of overpopulation, land pressure and deforestation got out of hand. To some extent African rural society's growing corpus of knowledge, acquired through modern education, about ozone depletion, the hothouse effect of deforestation, and the possible impact on climatic cycles, is being meaningfully related to the cosmic order which is still kept in balance

through mystical sanction and appropriately ritualized human response.

Second, even the mystical spirit world appears to be regrouping to accommodate the ecological struggle. As in the war years, the senior guardian ancestors of chiefdoms and districts are banding together in the spirit war council (*dare rechimurenga*), presided over by Mwari, the creator god. Such change is evident in the more comprehensive representation of spirit hierarchies during tree-planting ceremonies, where the parochial ward and chieftaincy interests reflected in *mukwerere* rain rituals acquire new significance in a regional and national perspective. Mwari somehow gives ecological directives as an insider, as opposed to the traditional image of a remote creator beyond and behind the ancestral world. The ritual addresses at *mafukidzanyika* ceremonies, which assume Mwari's presence, and the annual visits of AZTREC chiefs and mediums to the oracular shrines underscore this trend. Ritual improvisations of this nature should, however, not be interpreted as supplanting or superseding the old order. They are creative variations, involving human agency but originally inspired and legitimized by the spirit world itself. As such they strengthen, enrich and extend the old religious order.

In the third place, traditional perceptions of evil are imaginatively applied to environmental destruction in the development of a new ethos aimed at ecological repair. The will of traditional authorities in AZTREC to impose drastic measures against environmental trespasses surfaces in the stigmatizing of such offenders as *varoyi venyika*: the wizards (i.e. destroyers) of the land. Customary law has always allowed for punitive measures against *varoyi* because of the threat they pose to the well-being of people and thus of society. Likewise, by branding wanton tree fellers and cultivators of river banks as *varoyi* (thus proclaiming a new form of wizardry which threatens the agricultural capacity of the land and, by implication, human life), a situation is being created in which effective disciplinary measures can be taken against transgressors of an emerging green ethos. This reminds one of the branding of enemy collaborators as *varoyi* at nocturnal *pungwe* meetings during the war years - a practice which enabled the guerrillas to deal with opponents and dissenters much more drastically than would otherwise have been possible.

Integral to the process of appropriation and revitalisation of essential aspects of African traditional religion is the development of a remarkable earthkeeping praxis. This includes: AZTREC's establishment of major and satellite nurseries throughout Masvingo Province; the cultivation of more indigenous tree seedlings (*miti echivanhu*, lit. 'the trees of the people') than any other agency in Zimbabwe; the provision of the bulk of the trees for planting on the annual National Tree-planting Day, initiated by President Mugabe; the establishment of community-based, multipurpose woodlots; the imposition of stringent measures for the

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND

M.L. Daneel

protection of water resources; and serious consideration, as already mentioned, of the reassertion of the value of holy groves (*marambatemwa*) and the conversion of some of these into communally owned wildlife sanctuaries.

This model of earthkeeping developed by AZTREC is certainly worthy to be considered for the development of tradition-related environmental strategies elsewhere in Africa. I am not suggesting that identical models be applied in other African countries. Differences in history, religio-cultural background, land legislation, and environmental requirements will necessitate considerable improvisation and reinvention. What the AZTREC experience does highlight, however, is that traditional authorities are capable of harnessing traditional cosmologies and world-views to mobilise their people into lasting ecological action. In terms of the mobilisation of grassroots communities in afforestation programmes, AZTREC has achieved what the Forestry Commission of Zimbabwe, by its own admission, has not been able to do, despite its greater financial resources, salaried manpower and other advantages. The introduction, for instance, of the mystical factor has inspired greater determination and vigilance among African communities in the aftercare of trees planted. Although severe droughts and breakdowns in communication have inevitably resulted in the loss of trees, AZTREC's survival rate of trees planted under the guidance of territorial ancestors compares favourably with tree-planting projects elsewhere in Africa (Timberlake 1985). Should the institution of the chieftaincy (including spirit mediumship where applicable) be considered as an instrument of environmental reform in Africa, as well it should, the following considerations are worthy of note.

First, AZTREC functions in conjunction with ZIRRCO as an independent and legally registered Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). Consequently, the participant chiefs are in a position to make an independent ecological contribution in relation to the government and Forestry Commission. Amicable interaction and cooperation with these institutions are certainly characteristic of our activities. But much of AZTREC's religio-ecological creativity and originality derive from the organizationally and financially independent platform that has been created for the chiefs and mediums.

Through their own annually elected president and executive they are in a position to design and implement their own traditionally based environmental programs. They are able to revive customary ecological laws in accordance with their own insight and, on the strength of the green contribution they are making, to negotiate with government officials on their own terms rather than from a position of total dependence or subservience.

Second, through participation in *mafukidzanyika* tree-planting ceremonies in

chiefdoms other than their own, and by helping to plan geographically extended green strategies at executive and conference levels, the chiefs and mediums are developing environmental insight and commitment of provincial and national significance. The assumption of such responsibility is a breakthrough, implying an extension of traditional patterns of jurisdiction, hitherto based on narrow territorial and tribal considerations. If this environmental endeavour can be properly channelled in concert with government and other institutions operating in the same field, the traditional custodians of the land could relate meaningfully to modern processes of development and nation building, with due recognition at the national level.

Third, the chiefs and mediums, because of their traditional religious knowledge and responsibilities, are turning out to be active agents of interfaith dialogue (Daneel 1994: 444f). As the traditional counterparts of the African Independent Church bishops and prophets — represented by AAEC — they provide valuable ideas and proposals about the role of traditional world-views, beliefs, rituals and customary ecological laws in a process of joint orientation about religious motivation for environmental reform. The chiefs in particular, many of whom are Christians as well as active ex officio traditionalists, contribute towards the elimination of religious bias and the promotion of a spirit of tolerance whenever the green struggle requires interreligious planning or action. From what has been said above about the focal roles of chiefs and mediums as custodians of the sacred groves (*marambatemwa*), it follows that they will be pivotal in the development of some of these into sacred game sanctuaries.

Finally, the ZIRRCON experiment has illustrated the significance of empowering rural grassroots society in environmental reform. Such empowerment has meant that key figures in rural society, people of diverse religious persuasions, can relate to government and academic experts in the ecological field, from a platform of strength, their identity widely recognized. This experience suggests that the development of an African environmental forum of continental magnitude—an African Earthkeepers' Union—could well merit consideration. Such a forum should in the first place have extensive representation of key figures from the grassroots or peasant society: chiefs, mediums, AIC bishops, prophets, and so forth. These are the people who actually implement and are dependent on earthkeeping projects, and are invariably absent from academic or government-initiated ecological conferences. A people's forum, hosting primarily grassroots representatives from various African countries, could promote and report on earthkeeping models continent-wide, such as those developed by ZIRRCON in Zimbabwe and the womens' Green Belt movement in Kenya. It could assess and try to influence government policies for the protection of natural resources and related environmental issues. And it could engage in a number of large-scale projects such as the preservation of wilderness areas in the Zambezi valley, large-

ZIMBABWE'S TRADITIONAL CUSTODIANS OF THE LAND
M.L. Daneel

scale afforestation in the Sahel countries, and the reclamation of denuded lands bordering the Kruger National Park in South Africa. The premise of all AEU endeavours should be that the richly diversified religiocultural heritage of Africa inform and motivate its earthkeeping struggle.

References

DANEEL, M.L.

1970 *The God of the Matopo Hills: An Essay on the Mwari Cult in Rhodesia.* The Hague: Mouton.

1971 *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches, Vol. I: Background and Rise of the Major Movements.* The Hague: Mouton.

1987 *Quest for Belonging: Introduction to a Study of African Independent Churches.* Gweru: Mambo Press.

1994 "African Christian Theology and the Challenge of Earthkeeping." In J. Mouton and B. Lategan (eds.), *The Relevance of Theology for the 1990s: HSRC Series on Methodology.* Pretoria: HSRC.

DORM-ADZOBU, C., O. Ampadu-Agyei and P.G. Veit

1991 *Religious Beliefs and Environmental Protection: The Malshegu Sacred Grove in Northern Ghana.* Nairobi: World Resources Institute, Acts Press.

HOLLEMAN, J.F.

1969 *Chief, Council and Commissioner.* London: Oxford University Press.

LAN, David

1985 *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe.* Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.

MANDAZA, I.

1987 *Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition 1980-1986.* Harare: Jongwe Press.

MANLEY, M.

1995 "Land and Soil" (seminar paper, University of Zimbabwe). *Journal for Study of Religion*, University of Natal, forthcoming.

TIMBERLAKE, L.

1985 *Africa in Crisis — the Causes, the Cures of Environmental Bankruptcy,* Earthscan Series. London and Washington, D.C.: International Institute for Environment and Development.