The role of traditional healers in conflict resolution in Zimbabwe, 1890–1980

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Abstract

This article analyses the historical role of traditional healers *(n'anga/ chiremba)* in conflict resolution in Zimbabwe. Historically, traditional healers occupied a powerful position in Zimbabwean society. Not only were they healers but they also handled social problems and contributed to peace and reconciliation. However, colonial rule in Zimbabwe (1890–1980) ushered in a spirited challenge to the authority of traditional healers. They were ridiculed as fraudsters who perpetuated unfounded superstitions. Colonial legal and justice systems replaced traditional conflict resolution institutions that had been manned by traditional healers. Nonetheless, traditional healers continued to exist underground. Notwithstanding that, their role and contribution to peacebuilding remains on the fringe of academic inquiry. The key question that this article addresses is how and under what conditions traditional healers contributed to conflict resolution at the grassroots level. The article focuses mostly on records of conflict and violence in court cases, underscoring how witnesses' evidence brought attention to the role of traditional healers in reconciliation. It demonstrates the various contexts in which traditional healers' interventions were alluded to but ignored in the state's attempts to administer justice. By digging up obscured and misrepresented evidence of traditional healers' practices in conflict

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resolution in the colonial archive and in-depth interviews, we unravel this understated but most crucial element in the process of conflict resolution in Zimbabwe since 1890.

Keywords: Traditional healers, conflict resolution, peace, security, justice, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Traditional healers[1] played a significant role in Zimbabwe's social organisation. The breadth of the issues they handled gave them significant influence and authority in society. They were consulted by feuding families and during traditional court sessions to provide evidence of wrong doing through divination and related processes and they determined the proper procedures for compensating those who had been wronged. Their historical role in maintaining the social equilibrium essential for the attainment of peace and reconciliation cannot be overemphasised. However, their role and contribution to peacebuilding remains on the fringe of academic inquiry. As Sibanda (2018: 287) posits, "research still needs to be done around the role of traditional healers and diviners and their contributions to issues of peace and conflict management…". Modern peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts rarely acknowledge the role of traditional healers. This begs questions concerning the missing link in Zimbabwe's efforts at reconciliation and peacebuilding. In this article, we provide evidence of the historical role of traditional healers in resolving disputes at the grassroots level. We are inspired by the continued survival of the institution, despite the subversive onslaught by colonial officials and Christian missionaries. We argue that, although non-spiritual conflict resolution processes and peacebuilding efforts were acceptable, they significantly lacked philosophic congruence within the broader colonial Zimbabwean society. They were not compatible with the traditional Zimbabwean spiritual or philosophic world's representation of peace and security. We also ask what was likely to happen or not to happen if traditional healers were not involved in the processes of resolving conflicts.

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[1] In this article, the term traditional healers is used broadly to include spirit mediums and herbalists. See also Chavunduka, G.L. 1986. Zinatha: The organisation of traditional medicine in Zimbabwe. In: Last, M. and Chavunduka, G.L. (eds.). The professionalisation of African medicine, Manchester: Manchester University Press. pp. 29–49.

This article contributes to the discourse on conflict resolution and peacebuilding by exploring how traditional healers mediated disputes, promoted reconciliation and restored harmony within communities facing conflict. The article is enthused by the 2013 Maseru Declaration's Framework for Peaceful Development in Southern Africa which recommends using "indigenous and traditional methods of healing, reconciliation, and alternative dispute resolution" (Maseru Declaration, 2013). By investigating the role of traditional healers in the past in conflict resolution in Zimbabwe, and how their place and role shifted over time, this article contributes to a body of useable historical knowledge that can inform the work of national healing. Using the institution of traditional healers as an entry point, the article notes the changes and flexibility of traditions in response to changing circumstances, and tries to identify the core elements that have persisted across time. The research provokes questions on opportunities for the integration of broader traditional methods of conflict management in national peace processes.

This study builds and expands on a growing body of knowledge on traditional peacebuilding methods in Africa. Among regional scholars on the subjects are Ajayi and Buhari (2014), Olaoba (2002) and Jeater (2020), the latter of whom focuses specifically on Zimbabwe. Using a case study of Yoruba and Igbo communities in Nigeria and Pondo society in South Africa, Ajayi and Buhari argue that traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution promote consensus building, social bridge reconstructions and foster social cohesion and harmony. In contrast, western judicial systems are more punitive and less effective in effecting social harmony. Ajayi and Buhari (2014) examine the major techniques of traditional conflict resolution, particularly mediation, adjudication reconciliation and negotiation. They posit that these techniques offer greater prospects for peaceful co-existence and harmonious relationships in post-conflict periods than the modern method of litigation settlements in law courts.

Jeater (2020) and Olaoba (2002) specifically focus on the role of spirits in reconciliation and peacebuilding processes. Referring to the Yoruba, Olaoba (2002) argues that *gods* and ancestors (the living dead) are called upon to witness or mediate reconciliation processes. Jeater (2020) asks a pertinent question, "Can spirits play a role in peace and reconciliation projects …?" Important in these works are highlights on checks and balances imbedded within the reconciliation processes. As Olaoba (2002) posits, everyone, especially the disputants, was reminded of the aftermath

of the gods/ancestors' wrath if they refused to say the truth or adhere to the verdict of the traditional courts. These works are important in revealing the importance accorded to traditional reconciliation institutions in Africa. Our work interrogates the role of traditional healers within the traditional systems and processes of reconciliation.

The article relied on court cases in colonial Zimbabwe and oral evidence obtained from interviews. Court cases are part of the extensive collections of the historical manuscripts of the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ). Within the colonial archive, the research focused specifically on records of conflict and violence in court cases, highlighting how witnesses' attention to traditional reconciliation processes was not recognised in the processes of white-law administration. It demonstrates multiple contexts in which, for instance, spirit intervention was invoked. Not only was this ignored in the state's attempts to administer law, peace and security but it was also criminalised. Consequently, these court cases carry snippets of traditional conflict resolution processes during the period covered by this article. By digging up concealed and misrepresented evidence of traditional healers' practices in conflict resolution in the colonial archive and in-depth interviews, we unravel this understated, but most crucial element in the process of conflict resolution in Zimbabwe since 1890. This archival method is not without its weaknesses. The court cases filed at the NAZ represent the selection and omissions of the archivists. Regardless, the material provides us with a starting point in comprehending the dynamics of conflict resolution at grassroots level in Zimbabwe. Archival evidence was complemented by oral interviews conducted in various districts in Zimbabwe with traditional healers and spiritualists, traditional leaders and others involved in grassroots dispute resolution and reconciliation.

For a comprehensive understanding of the role of traditional healers in resolving conflicts, we start with an appreciation of the Zimbabwean traditional cosmology and the social and political institutions derived from them. Then we situate the role of traditional healers within various institutions to prove their value in societies, even though not recognised by colonial authorities.

2. Zimbabwean traditional cosmology

The role of traditional healers in conflict resolution in grassroots Zimbabwean societies can be better understood within the framework of

the Zimbabwean worldview. Zimbabwean traditional societies strongly believed in *mhondoro* (spirits of departed kings who started dynasties) and *midzimu* (family ancestral spirits). *Mhondoro* and *midzimu* were believed to be mediators between *Musikavanhu* (Supreme Being) and the living (Taringana and Nyambara, 2018:46). They were the spirits of the dead who continued to take part in the affairs of the living. *Mhondoro* and *midzimu* were revered and consulted for guidance and protection. Their wisdom and blessings were sought in various aspects of life, including conflict resolution. Thus, traditional Zimbabwean communities were deeply rooted in some form of theocratic governance, where traditional leaders ruled with authority from the *mhondoro* and *midzimu.* Apart from these ancestral spirits, Zimbabweans strongly believed in alien spirits *(mashavi)* (Bourdillon, 1976:147). Alien spirits were believed to be 'workers' invited by ancestral spirits of a given family to 'work' *(kushava)* for the prosperity of the family through diverse gifts, such as healing and treating various ailments and conditions, foretelling and luck (Chavunduka, 1986). *Mhondoro, midzimu* and *mashavi* were generally the good spirits that were believed to protect individuals, families and communities from evil spirits, such as witchcraft spells, and to ensure their prosperity in their economic endeavours and social harmony (Taringana and Nyambara, 2018).

The relationship between *midzimu/mashavi* and the living was governed by specific *chivanhu* (covenants), the basis of traditional religion that spelt out the conditions for a harmonious relationship between the spirits and the living beings. These covenants were critical in shaping the social institutions that defined Africans in general and Zimbabwean society in particular. They defined and framed the African worldview, human motivation, moral compass and social processes in the structure of an African personhood. Owing to this mysterious connection between the living and departed ancestors, traditional healers occupied an important position in Zimbabwean society by providing the much-required link between the departed ancestors and the living (Bourdillon, 1976:149). They were mediums of communication between the living and the ancestors due to their capacity to access the spiritual realm, communicate with ancestors and convey the messages either way.

Traditional healers, particularly *masvikiro* (spirit mediums), policed communities according to the covenantal relationship they entered into with their guiding ancestors. They were the custodians and overseers of

cultural traditions *(chivanhu). Chivanhu* was always a point of reference in the process of resolving conflicts. In most Shona communities of Zimbabwe, for instance, the centrality of chivanhu in defining social order is captured in maxims or epigrams such as: *"Chivanhu chedu chinoti …"* (our tradition says …) and *"ichi ndicho chivanhu chedu …"* (this is our tradition) (Humbe, 2020: xiv). Thus, the Zimbabwean worldview is critical in projecting the importance of traditional healers in the fabric and social order of Zimbabwean traditional societies. As Hagg and Kagwanja (2007:11) note, specific cultural, social, economic and environmental conditions are key assets to be revered in peacebuilding and the reengineering of civic order. These phenomena have a bearing on the operations of the spiritual world which, in the long run, have an influence on peace in a society.

3. Traditional healers and the institution of traditional leaders *(chiefs and headmen)*

Drawing on Zimbabwean traditional cosmology, traditional healers are seen to have played a central role in the institution of traditional leaders. Pre-colonial Zimbabwe was rich with diverse institutions and mechanisms for preventing and/or settling disputes before they escalated. The institutions could monitor situations that had the potential of causing conflict and they issued early warnings that fostered peace in these societies. Among these institutions were traditional community councils presided over by chiefs, headmen and village heads (Mbwirire and Dube, 2017). Embedded within the services provided by these institutions in promoting peace and harmony were traditional healers in their various categories – including spirit mediums, diviners and magicians (Bourdillon, 1976:149). These institutions were highly revered; their practices were passed from one generation to another through various forms enshrined in socialisation modalities. As subsequent sections of this article elucidate, most of the procedures followed by these institutions were affected by colonialism and modernity. However, some elements remained.

Chiefs and headmen councils are among the oldest institutions of justice, reconciliation and peacebuilding in Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in particular (Mbwirire and Dube, 2017:225). Owing to the theocratic nature of traditional Zimbabwean communities, traditional leaders ruled with a mandate from the *mhondoro* (territorial spirits). As such, they always needed guidance from traditional healers (spirit mediums and diviners)

who interpreted the will of the spirits to them (Abraham, 1963). To that end, traditional leaders did not have authority by themselves. They were rather the physical objects used by territorial spirits who governed their people. For that reason, chiefs and headmen were installed by *vadzimu* (ancestors) through traditional healers (Chavunduka, n.d). Traditional leaders were the guardians of fundamental values of life, strength, vitality and well-being and were therefore under constant check by traditional healers. Prosperity of the land was attributed to the good relationship between *vadzimu* and traditional leaders, especially chiefs. Crop failures owing to droughts or any other calamities were attributed to the chief having offended territorial spirits (Bourdillon, 1976:111). That alone was sufficient to prove the source of power and influence that traditional leaders had over their communities, particularly their close association with the spirits.

Zimbabweans' sense of power, authority, peace, law and security transcends beyond the physical. Traditional leaders (chiefs and headmen, among others) drew their authority from *vadzimu vedunhu* (ancestors of their areas of jurisdiction). They understood their authority and rulership as a mandate from the spirits of the land – *mhondoro* (Taringana and Nyambara, 2018:46). In that same understanding, conflicts were not seen solely as disputes between individuals or groups but were understood as manifestations of broader spiritual and social imbalances. It is against that background that the traditional healers mediated between the physical and spiritual realms, possessing the ability to communicate with ancestral spirits and divine forces. They had the power to diagnose the root causes of conflicts and provide remedies that restored harmony within communities. Traditional healers, thus, provided a line of communication between the spiritual realm and traditional leaders.

For this reason, traditional healers occupied a respected position in the socio-political and economic organisation of communities. Just as they were able to comprehend the will of the supernatural, they would interpret it to the community. They became the custodians of the norms and values that guided the community's social organisation and development. As bearers of the will of the spiritual realm, by default they became integral to resolving any conflicts arising among people and to enforcing rules as dictated by the ancestors (Ajayi and Buhari, 2014:141). Thus, traditional healers were involved in almost every aspect of the community – political, social and economic. For this reason, traditional

healers enjoyed significant prestige and status in society. Not only were they medical specialists, but they also dealt with a wide range of social, economic and political problems affecting societies (Chavunduka, 1986:30). They were religious consultants, legal and political advisors, marriage counsellors and social workers. They were social workers because their work was, ceteris paribus, a calling, and failure to do according to their call would result in punishment from their ancestors and or the *alien spirits* using them (Taringana and Nyambara, 2018:47).

Important events, such as the installation of chiefs, rain-petitioning ceremonies and community rites, were presided over by traditional healers who communicated the will of the ancestors to the leaders. *N'angas* (traditional healers) advised chiefs in making important decisions, such as declaration of war or declaration of peace and they led warriors to the battlefront (Savanhu, 2019). Thus, in one way or the other, chiefs relied heavily on traditional healers for the excises of their authority over the communities they governed. The office of the *n'anga* was deeply integrated into the traditional judicial systems. Traditional healers were consulted to assist during the trials of civil and criminal issues by providing evidence of wrongdoing (through ordeals and divination), determining the processes of compensating the wronged and presiding over reconciliation processes at the courts.

All social, economic and political problems that society encountered were almost always interpreted spiritually. Conflicts and unrest were mostly interpreted as punishment for wrongdoings committed by members of the community, for example, spilling of innocent blood, defiling sacred places, incest and failure to appease *midzimu yenzvimbo/mhondoro* (territorial spirits), among other transgressions (Garbert, 1963:141). Before attempting to resolve any conflict among people, the same people had to be reconciled to the spiritual powers of the land; they had to be reconciled with the land. Traditional healers supplicated on behalf of the community and appeased the angry spirits for the restoration of peace and prosperity (Garbert, 1963:143–144). Thus, because almost everything had a spiritual explanation, traditional healers were key in reconciling the people, the land and the spiritual world.

Traditional healers, particularly spirit mediums, were central to resolving succession disputes among traditional leaders. Succession disputes were among the major sites of conflict and division among traditional Zimbabwean communities. Owing to the Zimbabwean worldview that

derived authority to lead from *mhondoro* and tribal spirits, the processes of resolving succession disputes involved the same spirits who had the right and power to enthrone leaders. Indeed, at every given time, claimants to the throne had or sought the backing of *mhondoro* and the tribal spirits. The process leading to the resolution of the Hwata chiefly succession dispute from the late 1950s to the late 1960s evidences the centrality of traditional healers in dealing with succession disputes. The dispute among the Hwata people emerged from the appointment of one Henry as Chief Hwata XII in 1959 (Chavunduka, n.d). The title had been vacant for almost eight years after the death of Chakuchichi (Chief Hwata XI). Samuel, son of Chakuchichi, had been the acting chief during those years. The dispute split the clan into two factions; one faction was in favour of the appointment and the other, led by Samuel, was against it. To resolve this, a spirit medium for Nehanda, the *mhondoro*, was consulted and, during the ritual, the appointment of Henry as substantive Chief Hwata was nullified (Chavunduka, n.d). Although the conflict later created two chiefdoms, one led by Henry and the other by Samuel, it was clear from the intervention of the *mhondoro* through the spirit medium who the legitimate chief was.

4. Traditional healers and liberation struggles in Zimbabwe

The role of traditional healers, particularly *masvikiro,* during the first and second wars of liberation *(zvimurenga)* in Zimbabwe is well documented. The First *Chimurenga* War of 1896–1897 was led by the famous spirit mediums Mbuya Nehanda, Sekuru Kaguvi Mukwati and Chaminuka. Today, these are iconic names in Zimbabwe's political and cultural discourse, with their names inscribed on buildings and roads, and effigies erected (Kaoma, 2016). These spirit mediums used traditional cultural symbols and the *Musikavanhu* cult to mobilise and direct rebellion against colonial authorities. They also provided an ideological framework for social revolt. The uprising was suppressed by the use of unparalleled brutality and torture of prisoners of war and civilians. Christianity was also instrumental in suppressing African resistance. For example, before Kaguvi was hanged in 1898, he was forced to shun his traditional religion and convert to Christianity. After baptism, he received a new name, Dismas (Chavunduka, 2001:5). Another direct involvement of the spirits

in active politics was noted in the Mapondera revolt of 1901 as well as the 1917 Makombe war against the Portuguese (Chavunduka, 2001:5).

There are interesting narratives concerning the role of spirit mediums during the *Second Chimurenga* (1965–1979). For instance, in Murewa district in Eastern Zimbabwe, one of the battlefronts during the war, when the Rhodesian forces came to attack, families believed that the ancestral spirits manifested through spirit mediums to signal danger and give hiding instructions to them. Among the liberation war fighters, traditional healers provided instructions on when to attack, when to retreat and how to navigate the forests as they waged the war (Jani, 2022). They also prescribed special rituals and conditions to ensure victory. Important was the belief that the ancestors detested the shedding of innocent blood. In this case, spirits, particularly ancestral spirits, were deemed agents of peace and prosperity of their respective families and communities. They were believed to be key agents of peace and reconciliation processes.

5. Traditional healers and conflict resolution in families

Traditional healers were also key to resolving family disputes – intra-personal and or interpersonal – of different categories, including witchcraft accusations, adultery, murder, marital issues, paternity disputes and theft. Although the family structure was the primary level at which different types of disputes were resolved, traditional healers were consulted to provide their services whenever there was a need. The key actors at this level were the family elders, heads of family, uncles *(madzisekuru)* and aunties *(madzitete)*. They handled different types of conflict depending on the nature of the dispute, such as marital issues, health, poverty and economic issues (Madlome and Chauke, 2019:134).

Underscoring their deep trust in traditional healers as a strategic social institution for the promotion of social harmony in families, various informants during the trial of the prominent traditional healer, Gesifani, in the Melsetter district had this to say:

> I have known the Accused since Gungunyana's time. He was then known as a bone thrower and lived in our District. His bone throwing was only to divine matters about the Spirits and he had nothing to do with smelling out Witchcraft. I was not present at Munirirwa's kraal when Gesifan threw the bones … Yes, I have consulted the Accused. He threw the bones for me about a child of mine who was sick. He told me that I would have to get a fowl and devote it to the Spirit. The child

> recovered. I believe unhesitatingly that the accused can communicate with the Spirits by throwing the bones … Yes, if anyone died I would consult the accused to find out why the Spirits had caused the death, and if anything dedicated to the Spirits was stolen by someone and the probable thief was accused and taken before the Doctor, he by throwing the bones could determine whether the accused party were the thief or not (NAZ: D3/3/1: 1900).

In support of the importance of Gesifani, the healer, one Mehlowana averred that:

> … I have often known him throw the bones about the Spirit. He is a great Doctor, the people are in the habit of consulting him. In case of a death, he is usually consulted. He throws the bones and discovers why the Spirits have killed the person and what should be done to propitiate the Spirits (NAZ: D3/3/1: 1900).

From this, traditional healers dealt with a broad range of issues that could potentially cause conflicts and anxiety in grassroots Zimbabwean societies. Importantly, they appealed to the spiritual causes of all conflict and administered corrective measures.

Traditional healers presided over ordeals to resolve conflicts among feuding individuals or families. Ordeals were a test of guilt or innocence by subjection of the accused to conditions where survival or lack of harm was taken as divine proof of innocence. In the absence of evidence, traditional communities relied on their belief systems to prove innocence when one was accused, particularly of crimes that were difficult to prove, for example, witchcraft and adultery. Ordeals, thus, represented the highest court where innocence or guilt was confirmed by spiritual agents (ancestors) through the mediation of traditional healers. Those who felt they were innocent of all the crimes they were accused of would volunteer to go through ordeals to prove their innocence. One Mpesa, for instance, demanded to go through an ordeal in a case where he was accused of bewitching Mubaiwa using a snake. As his son narrated:

> Drawing on the African worldview (see preceding section), the spirit world was believed to be impartial, fair and the last court of appeal. The mystical nature of ordeals proved the existence of the judgement of the *mhondoro/midzimu* in terms of whether an accused individual was guilty or innocent. That was considered evidence enough for further traditional court processes where possible. Ordeals consisted of

> sundry processes, including the use of emetics or purgatives and the hot water tests. Emetics were usually herbal potions which, when taken, caused vomiting. If one vomited, they were presumed innocent while if the potion made one purge and become sick, they were deemed guilty of the crime they were accused of.

For the hot water test, under the supervision of a traditional healer, the accused was asked to dip their hands in a clay pot of boiling water. If they were innocent, their hands would not burn. However, if they were guilty, they would get scalded. It was believed that the water contained supernatural powers. An example of how the hot water test was used in a case comes out in the details reported to the Magistrate court in Mrewa district in 1920. One Wanyanya went through the boiling water test and had this to report:

> One day the accused came to me and said, 'one of the kitchen boys is making love to you'. I denied this and asked who the kitchen boy was. The accused then said I must go through the boiling water test. I said I would not do this and the accused threatened to beat me. The accused put a pot of water on the fire and when the water was boiling, I put my hand into the boiling water. *I was not burnt* [italics our emphasis] (D3/28/4:1920).

This case is a confirmation that the boiling water test was considered an effective process of identifying whether an accused person was guilty or not. The mystery of one placing their hands in a pot of boiling water and not getting their hands scalded because they were innocent is unfathomable. This is why it is necessary to make a sober appreciation of the importance of traditional healers in resolving conflicts within the broader context of the African worldview, the systems that underpinned their worlds and the institutions that emerged from them.

The hot water test was also used to ascertain paternity. In a 1908 Sinoia case, a woman (Marusiya) was made to put her hands in hot water just after giving birth to find out if the baby belonged to the alleged father. The ordeal was performed and she was believed to have passed; her hands were not burnt (NAZ: D3/2/2 1908). These narratives of ordeals can be seen to have been forms of structured violence, particularly against women in a patriarchally dominated society. Nevertheless, the processes underscore the influential role of traditional healers in providing evidence of innocence or guilt for the processes of resolving conflict.

Traditional healers also used emetics as a truth finding mechanism. A typical explanation of how emetics worked was given in one Inyanga district court case in 1915. In her testimony, one Sigiti explained:

> … Sawunyama [a traditional healer] then said, he wished to give me some medicine, which would indicate whether I was a witch. The medicine Sawunyama wished to give me was a concoction of the roots of a tree mixed with water. *A suspected person is made to drink a large quantity of the liquid and if it caused distention of the stomach and the patient is unable to get rid of it at once by vomiting or otherwise, this is taken to indicate that she is a witch, but if she vomits it up, it indicates that she is not a witch* [italics our emphasis] (NAZ: D3/22.2:1915).

As further explained by one Muzaza in a 1921 Inyanga case:

> The accused Machangwe said, we want to make him drink 'Mteyo'. I knew that 'Mteyo' was a potion made from the roots of a tree. These roots are boiled and the water is given to the person accused of witchcraft to drink. If the accused vomits, he is acquitted; if he purges, he is regarded as guilty (NAZ: D3/22/3: 1921).

Another example of how emetics were prescribed as a truth finding mechanism was when one Munzwi was accused of bewitching Nguta's child and an emetic was administered on her. She was found guilty. In a court testimony:

> … Nguta's child became sick and his kraal is a little distance away from mine. Nguta came to my kraal saying I had bewitched his child and thrashed me. I went to complain to the chief Mpungwan[*sic*] who called Nguta and told him he would have to pay for beating me and charging me with witchcraft. Nguta refused to pay and insisted upon my going to a Witch Doctor [traditional healer] living in the Portuguese Territory named Umsongo. When we arrived at the Doctor I was given medecine *[sic]* to drink. The medicine made me retch violently. I then laid down feeling very ill … Nguta returned first saying that he had won his case (NAZ: D3/3/1: 1896).

Further, one Mukamana was accused of administering an emetic to one Mangwa to discover whether or not she was a witch. The state accused Mukamana of "wrongfully and unlawfully on the pretence of discovering whether or not one Mangwa, a native woman residing at Bowora's Kraal aforesaid had bewitched one Musekiwa, a Mashona native woman

residing at the Kraal Bowora aforesaid, administered to the aforesaid Mangwa a certain emetic or purgative, the nature of which to the Prosecutor is unknown, thereby rendering himself liable to the penalties prescribed in Section 3 of the Witchcraft Suppression Ordinance aforesaid" (D3/33/2: 1928). Despite the accusations against Mukamana, the traditional healer, Mangwa's testimony reveals the importance attached to ordeals in resolving conflicts that revolved around witchcraft accusations, and the importance of traditional healers in officiating the processes:

> … I know the accused, the accused is a Doctor. Musekiwa told me I was a witch. We had an argument when she said 'you are a witch that is why I am barren'. This troubled me a lot and I decided the question should be settled … According to custom we went into the veldt next morning for the test. When we called the accused, Musekiwa was agreeable, but she ran away when the test was administered. I then went through the test by myself, Musekiwa having ran away. I was given hot water with some medicine in it to drink. The water made me vomit. Accused told me that I was not a witch because the water made me vomit (NAZ: D3/33/2:1918).

Traditional healers were, thus, a critical link in conflict resolution, particularly those involving witchcraft accusations as they officiated the ordeals. Local communities were agreeable to this and looked to healers as arbitrators in these issues. Mangwa's description of Mukamana as a 'doctor' is quite telling as it departs from the usual incriminating slurs such as witchdoctor. The use of the former title attests to the importance ascribed to traditional healers in dealing with disputes in traditional Zimbabwean communities.

Apart from presiding over ordeals, traditional healers provided explanations and answers that promoted closure and relieved individuals from trauma through divination. A case in point is that of headman Matarutsi of Gutu District in 1913 who fell sick for a month. A traditional healer was invited to divine and explain the cause of the sickness. After divination, the traditional healer announced that the spirit of Matarutsi's grandmother was behind his sickness. Matarutsi, therefore, had to appease the spirit and then recovered (NAZ: D/3/46/1–2:1913). Thus, people consulted traditional healers to understand the invisible world. In this case, Matarutsi and his family were relieved by the indication of the cause

of illness and the solution provided. That brought to rest issues of suspicions among family and community members.

Traditional healers also mediated between feuding individuals and families – a key element in conflict resolution. In cases of murder, for instance, the murderer's family suffered vengeance from avenging spirits (*ngozi*) manifesting in sundry misfortunes, including unnecessary death, illness and bad luck among most of its members. Traditional healers were central to and considered the utmost authorities in dealing with these cases (Sibanda, 2018:239). Traditional healers acted as mediators between the spirit of the dead person and the living ones in finding out solutions to the problem. In essence, mediation and negotiation were key processes that traditional healers used to resolve conflicts. In murder cases, they negotiated issues to do with compensation and led the processes thereof (Sibanda, 2018:239). In cases where families had to deal with avenging spirits, the services of traditional healers were required to engage with the spirits of the victim and provide guidance on the best ways to approach the offended family.

Underscoring the mediation role of traditional healers, especially in cases of witchcraft, Ndlovu and Ndlovu (2011:12) submit that:

> The *inyanga* [traditional healer] mediates between the witch and the bewitched to resolve the conflict and enable them to live together without fear or suspicion. The medicine of an *inyanga* removes the misfortune brought about by the witchcraft while at the same time helping the witch to leave the witchcraft. Mediation in witchcraft conflict can only be spiritual; this is so because for a conflict to be resolved there should be confidence from both parties that the mediator can resolve the conflict.

It was the responsibility of both the traditional healer and the family seeking consultation to identify the person responsible for the problem. However, accusing someone of witchcraft has been unlawful in Zimbabwe since 1899 through promulgation of the Witchcraft Suppression Ordinance of 1899, but the practice continued despite that law. Zachrisson (2007:36) asserts that it is no offence to divine and cleanse someone from misfortunes. Furthermore, Bourdillon (1976:139) states that divination by traditional diviners was often accepted as convincing evidence in cases of witchcraft or adultery, and very occasionally were traditional ordeals applied to extract the truth from accused persons.

6. Legitimacy of traditional healers

Concerns were raised about the effectiveness of traditional healers in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This is especially so given situations where the processes of finding and exposing witches exposed communities to manipulation by witch-hunters called *tsikamutanda*. The *tsikamutanda* witch-hunting processes were marred by several forms of abuse, including detentions, torture and extortion of supposed perpetrators of witchcraft (Zachrisson, 2007:38). Further, reports were rampant of spirit healers using 'black magic' to aid their prophetic and healing powers and enhance luck to the detriment of their unsuspecting clients (Mushonga, 2022). From this context, queries mostly revolved around whether traditional healers carried their duties objectively to bring about unbiased resolutions in conflict resolution.

The answer to this concern has two parts. First, just as there were fake prophets everywhere and incompetent doctors, there were also false or incompetent traditional healers. However, societies used their discretion to decide who to approach to solve their problems. Importantly, traditional healers specialised in different aspects of human society. Some traditional healers specialised in treating with herbs while others specialised in dealing with witches and sundry forms of conflict. For this reason, communities approached traditional healers depending on the nature of the problems they wanted to solve. Second, and related to the first, some guarantees of objectiveness were found in authentic traditional healers. As Chavunduka (1986) notes, (genuine) traditional healers did not abuse their power because of fear of their ancestors. This particularly applied to those healers who inherited their healing powers from their family line ancestors.

It was strongly believed that ancestors would withdraw the healing gifts bestowed upon the individual if offended or, sometimes, they would punish their hosts (Chavunduka, 1986:40). Also, the fear of losing clients prohibited traditional healers from abusing their authority. Thus, there were naturally integrated checks and balances within the traditional conflict resolution processes that were usually handled by traditional healers. A sense of security was, therefore, obtained by believing that precepts laid down by powers beyond the physical were followed.

7. Colonisation and traditional healers

If traditional healers were so important in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, what happened to their influence? The role of *n'angas* in society, and particularly peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes, was conflated by the failure of colonial administrators to distinguish between witches and traditional healers. This was due to the blanket imposition of post-enlightenment European philosophy on Zimbabwean society. The 17th and 18th century enlightenment movement in Europe exalted reason and science as the basis upon which progressive societies should be founded. Spirits, faith and beliefs were castigated as irrational in influencing the social organisation (Kent, 2002). For that reason, anything that showed strong spiritual beliefs was condemned. This was further complicated by Christian missionaries who condemned any belief system other than Christianity. These two seemingly contradictory factors connived to castigate African belief systems, which were mostly mediated by traditional healers. For the colonial authorities, beliefs in witches were unfounded primitive superstitions and, if anything, traditional healers were the witches who had to be stamped out of society. Thus, the distinction between witches and traditional healers was confused.

The endeavours to suppress witchcraft in colonial Zimbabwe were, therefore, more focused on suppressing traditional healers who were misconstrued as witchdoctors (see the Witchcraft Suppression Ordinance, 1899). The term 'witchdoctor' is not only demeaning, but also very limiting. It implies that the preoccupation of all traditional healers was dealing with witches. However, it is clear that traditional healers specialised in dealing with various aspects of society including, among other things, giving political advice and prescribing medicines. Spirit mediums specialised in the political affairs of communities, while herbalists specialised in the medical requirements of communities. In between, healers would also deal with issues of witchcraft, counselling and providing 'legal advice' in the communities.

The colonial government and missionaries considered traditional healers an impediment to access missionary and government healthcare systems as colonial officials frantically sought to establish a new centre of power. They considered the traditional healers rogue deceivers who stood in the way of civilisation, preventing many patients from accessing drugs and surgery services in government and missionary hospitals, and interfering with the state's systems of justice (Gelfand, 1964:20). Also, missionary and

colonial government officials felt that traditional healers encouraged the belief in witchcraft, which was considered one of the greatest hindrances and stumbling blocks in the way of Christian missionary work. Another factor was ethnocentrism. Colonial officials judged Africans using the lenses of their own post-enlightenment (imposed) socio-political order. Africans who failed to act according to western practices were declared ignorant, primitive and superstitious (Gelfand, 1964). Thus, for the colonial state and the missionaries, suppressing traditional healers would free 'innocent Africans' from the tyranny of superstition perpetrated by traditional healers.

For these reasons, several tools were developed and deployed to stamp out reliance on traditional healers for anything, including conflict resolution and medical services. Christian education was formulated and developed in that direction. It was designed to compel Africans to disregard traditional religious ideas and faith in traditional healers (Kahari, 2018). Spirited campaigns were made to force people to prioritise modern methods of conflict resolution that centred on the western court system, and modern medicines and psychological services to deal with diseases and conditions. Any delays in reporting a death or illness to the police or at the nearest clinic or hospital were interpreted as having prioritised traditional healers and would lead to punishment (Simango, 2022). Thus, generally, the suppression of traditional healers was a function of the power struggles between traditional and colonial governance systems, their diverse modalities of social organisation and their interest in asserting their authority.

8. The Witchcraft Suppression Ordinance of 1899

To stamp out *n'angas* and 'suppress witchcraft' from society, the colonial government passed the Witchcraft Suppression Ordinance on 18 August 1899. Any acts of divination traditionally used by *n'angas* to diagnose and offer solutions to social, political and economic problems were criminalised as witchcraft. As the Ordinance stated, "in this Act, 'witchcraft' includes the throwing of bones …" (Chavunduka, 1986). 'Throwing bones' was a contemptuous description by colonial officials and Christian missionaries of the key divination method used by traditional healers in their sacred call to solve societal problems. It was a deliberate attempt to sketch traditional healers as one of the most insensible elements in African society and hence the need to incriminate them. Furthermore, any item that was used by *n'angas* and *masvikiros,* among other types of healers, in the practice of their craft was considered

paraphernalia for sorcery and wizardry. This included snuff, calabashes and attire – leopard skins and claws, beads, feathers and wildebeest tails, among other items (Chavunduka, 1986). Thus, the Act's claim to include "the use of charms and any other means or device adopted in the practice of sorcery" as 'witchcraft' subliminally referred to all that was used by traditional healers as they performed their rites (Chavunudka, 1986).

In the eyes of the colonial officials and Christian missionaries, whose preoccupation was dealing with witches and who naively categorised traditional healers as witches, the Witchcraft Suppression Ordinance was targeted more at punishing traditional healers than any other individual. Ironically, it protected witches against anyone who would name them as witches (mostly traditional healers who could divine). Besides the ignorance of thinking that the only occupation of traditional healers was the activity of witches, the Ordinance acted as a haven for witches to operate freely without hindrances. The Ordinance accorded the severest punishment to traditional healers. As the Ordinance stated:

> Whoever having so named and indicated any person as a witch, is proved at his trial under section 3 to be by habit and repute a witchdoctor or witch finder shall be liable, on conviction, in lieu of punishment provided by section 3 to a fine not exceeding five hundred dollars or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding seven years or to whipping not exceeding thirty-six lashes or any two or more of such punishments (Witchcraft Suppression Ordinance, 1899).

Further, individuals who sought assistance from traditional healers or gave advice to anyone to consult traditional healers also had their fair share of punishment from the Ordinance. While the Ordinance claimed to suppress witchcraft, there was no way it was going to effectively impute anyone for witchcraft using the law of evidence: witchcraft was exclusively a private and mysterious practice, the paraphernalia and acts of which were not available for public comprehension. It was an occult. Hence, traditional healers became easy targets, within the colonial authorities' madness and erring construction of African beliefs, because they were consulted by every section of their communities and provided their services openly because they had to interact with people (Chavunduka, 1986). In this case, the law of evidence would implicate them and made them easy to frame.

When the rage of the colonial state against traditional healers gathered momentum from the 1900s, many 'native' police officers were used to trap traditional healers, pretending to be ordinary people consulting traditional healers on pressing social problems, only to be arrested during

the consultation processes (NAZ: D3/31/1: 1921). In some cases, police officers would advise people who would have reported their cases to the police to seek help from traditional healers, only to track down the traditional healers and arrest them (NAZ: D3/31/1: 1930). Many 'native' police officers obtained monetary rewards and promotions for framing and arresting traditional healers (NAZ: S1542 W6: 1936). One such case was the trial of a prominent traditional healer, Gesifani, in the Melsetter District in 1900, where a Native Constable, Ngoma, who previously worked as an assistant to Gesifani, gave evidence to court stating that:

> I am a Native policeman. I know the Accused. I knew him in the days when King Gungunyana lived in this country. He was then known as a Witch Doctor and I used to go around with his bones. I have at different times met people who were going to the Doctor. On enquiry I have invariably found that they were going to the accused Gesifan. To my knowledge the accused has been continually practising as a Witch Doctor (NAZ:D3/3/1: 1900).

Regardless of that suppression, under hibernation, traditional healers continued to perform their roles that promoted community-hood, peace and justice, such as rain making, propitiating territorial spirits and settling disputes. The continued survival of these mechanisms, albeit outside the formal legally recognised channels, pointed to the efficacy of traditional healers to live up to the community needs of the day. As Chivasa (2019) notes, the continued survival of traditional healers as an institution is hinged on their ability to satisfy community expectations.

The incarceration of traditional healers by colonial officials and Christian missionaries divested grassroots African communities of the salient element in enhancing social cohesion, healing, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The result was the existence of broken African societies with hamstrung peacebuilding and reconciliation (Simango, 2022). They were forced to depend on hollow incompatible westernised conflict resolution institutions, the Native Commissioners and the police – hollow because they lacked philosophical resonance with the foundational cosmological framing of African communities. Thus, the spiritual colonisation of Zimbabwe (the most dangerous of all forms of colonisation – geographical, political and economic) was most expressed in the war against traditional healers, the bearers of the oracles that determined socio-political cohesion and economic prosperity, and the most significant institution in conflict resolution in grassroots African

communities. This is considered most dangerous because the curse is self-perpetuating owing to the enduring Christian traditions and effects of colonial education, which continued to depict traditional healers as apostles of the devil and miscreants in a 'modern civilised' society. The suppression of traditional belief systems officiated by traditional healers remains the glaring missing link in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in modern Zimbabwe.

9. Conclusion

In the context of the 2013 Maseru Declaration's Framework for Peaceful Development in Southern Africa, which challenges African nations to adopt and integrate traditional methods of healing, reconciliation and alternative dispute resolution, this article historicises the role of traditional healers in reconciliation processes at the grassroots level in Zimbabwean traditional society. The historical role of traditional healers in conflict resolution in Zimbabwe from 1890 to 1980 cannot be overemphasised. Their importance in proffering solutions to conflict emanates largely from traditional Zimbabwean societies' worldview, which is deeply immersed in spirit beliefs. They were consulted to resolve disputes between individuals, families and even entire communities. They provided evidence of wrongdoing or otherwise during traditional court cases or family councils through presiding over ordeals or through divination. In the context of spirit mediums, they resolved chiefly succession disputes. By invoking ancestral spirits and performing rituals, they aimed to bring about reconciliation and healing. Another related and important aspect was the guidance and counselling that traditional healers provided. They acted as advisors, offering wisdom and insights based on their knowledge of traditional customs, values and norms. Their role extended beyond resolving immediate conflicts; they also sought to prevent future conflicts by promoting understanding, empathy and cooperation among community members. Despite the colonial and missionary influence, and subsequent modernisation, traditional healing practices persisted and continued to hold sway in many communities. This is a testament to their relevance in addressing conflicts within the local context. This historical evidence is important for peace practitioners in Zimbabwe and Africa broadly to rethink the place of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution in peacebuilding processes for sustainable peace in grassroots African communities.

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