

## Shangwe Music for Spiritual Rituals: A Symbolical Enactment

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**ABSTRACT** Anthropological scholars have discussed various myths. The *Shangwe* community is a 'web' of mythological symbols that are orally active but without documentation. It was intention of this ethnography to explore cultural and biblical symbols embedded in the *Shangwe* mythology in *Gokwe* North District in the Midlands Province in Zimbabwe. The results revealed that *Nevana* sanctified hut housed mythic snakes of various colours and lengths. Only five people had the traditional authorisation to enter the hut using the western door, just as there are five virgins in the Bible. Chiefs, just like the wise men who came from the east in search of the newly born Jesus, have the religious right to sit next to the eastern door which is ever closed. A certain man had the traditional role to stop the rain when it was too much to sustain plant growth. Some of the myths are comparable with certain songs of the *Shangwe* and other cultures. Folktales and song texts reflect cultural heritage. The objectives of this article were two-fold. First, it sought to identify, compare, and discuss traditional and biblical symbolism embedded in four *Shangwe* myths. Second, it intended to examine song texts connected to certain *Shangwe* mythology.

### INTRODUCTION

Anthropological scholars have discussed various myths (Barber 2012; Engelstein 2013; Hodzic 2013). Other academics studied mythology on African rituals (Elsner 2001; Shah and Pettigrew 2009; Snook 2013). Besides, Boyce-Tillman (2013) discussed Western Music Education in the context of Greek mythology. The article aims to document and discuss biblical and ritual songs of the *Shangwe* mythology in *Gokwe* North District in the Midlands Province in Zimbabwe. The fieldwork interviews<sup>1</sup> gathered among informants famed for their indigenous cultural practices showed that the community is entangled in a mythological 'web' that mirror biblical and cultural symbolism. Especially, the *Gokwe* North District is popularly known for its *munyai* (messenger) and the rain spirit, *Nevana*, and his symbolic rainmaking ritual hut called *dumba*, which has two doors. In the *Shangwe* spiritual hierarchy of rain prayers, *Nevana* spirit is believed to be close to their Supreme God, *Mwari*. Tevasiira Samson Marariromba, *Nevana's* medium, discharges his rainmaking ritual process with Gaison Gasura, the *munyai*. In the Zimbabwean *Shona* language, the term *munyai* refers to a person who mediates marriage matters between the in-laws. Yet in the *Shangwe mukwerera* rainmaking ritual setting it denotes a person who facilitates rain problems between the chiefs and the rain spirits.

### METHODOLOGY

The holistic approach is emphasised in studying music-cultures and total participant obser-

vation comes to the fore. Amit (2000: 2) notes that the "totality" of full participant observation necessitates holism. According to Sarantakos (2005), intensive participant observation provides favourable opportunities for identifying unanticipated outcomes. It also exists in a natural, unstructured, and flexible setting. The researcher's personal involvement in *Shangwe* cultural practices that incorporated *mukwerera* rainmaking rituals provided ample time to study its anthropological and ethnomusicological symbols. For Titon and Reck (2009: 542),

*The subject of our musical ethnography is the aspect of the music-culture that is being represented; the topic of your musical ethnography enables your analysis and interpretation of your subject.*

The ethnography was based on six informants who have prominent roles in the *mukwerera* ceremonies. Face-to-face interviews, audio-video filming, tape recording, and the researcher's full participant observation were the most appropriate means of collecting data from elderly culture bearers.

The results of ethnography revealed that the *Nevana's* hut is unique since it is the only round hut with two doors found in the entire Midlands Province, yet an ordinary round hut has one door. As will be discussed later, biblical and cultural symbols are implanted in four myths chosen for this article. *Shangwe* mythologies are still active but they exist without a written record. Here, the term mythology is defined as a legend interwoven with unproven symbolic information. This particular ethnic culture is one of Zimbabwe's fourteen minority groups whose languages do not

exist in the school curriculum system in order for them to be formally learnt.

For McNaughton (1982: 487), “Everywhere in Africa knowledge and power are integrally linked”. There is secrecy enmeshed in the *Nevana* hut and Middleton (1973: 300) corroborates that secrecy functions,

*as part of social process and change in the structure of society; as a means to political power; as a way to attain whatever the people consider to be the absolute truth that is not known to ordinary men but only to Divinity.*

According to Nooter (1993: 55), secrecy has two attributes. Secrecy has the ability to conceal and reveal meanings entrenched to the extent that the people will eventually know the truth and begin to appreciate the symbolism of secrecy. Secrecy is “rooted in the most basic experience of what it is to live as one human being among others, needing both to hide and to share, both to explore and to beware of the unknown” (Bok 1982: 281). For Piot (1993: 353), secrecy, “the intentional concealing of information”, is part of everyday life and it is the discourse among the Kabre of northern Togo (West Africa). On a similar note, *Nevana*, the *Shangwe* rain spirit also guarded his secrecy to induce rain. The only unique aspect of myths associated with this particular spirit is the concept of biblical and cultural parallelisms which are directly comparable with certain songs. Jensen and Raphael Patai also confirm the conception of biblical-African “parallels” (Isaac 1964: 87-98).

A puff-adder is renowned for its faithfulness to live at one chosen habitat. The *Karanga* in Zimbabwe attribute a faithful wife to a puff-adder. Apart from that, when a farmer finds a puff-adder in his field, the snake is a sign of good harvest. Since the snake remains loyal to one place, the *Karanga* belief is that the farmer will keep the wealth he obtains from the field. The puff-adder is regarded as *divisi*, meaning herbs used to increase the harvest (Aschwaden 1989). Amongst the *Karanga*, the puff-adder is an important symbol carrier. The snake symbolises rain and fertility. Its skin markings are associated with rain. The puff-adder’s alternate patterns of light and dark chevron resemble a sky covered with clouds (Aschwaden 1989). Aschwaden made great contributions on the puff-adder symbolism. The research unpacks the mythological symbolism of the snakes that abide in *Nevana*’s hut.

Since the *Zame* rain shrines in Matabeleland in Zimbabwe are vital to human life, they are

considered as sacred places. These places are directly linked to Matopos where *Mwari*’s voice used to be heard. In this regard, water is the “origin and spring of life. *Mwari* is the creator and this is also why it comes from the rocks of Matopos. Water is seen by the *Karanga* as the earth’s God-given fertility. Water is truly life”, it stays elsewhere, and “God, *Mwari* is water” (Aschwaden 1989: 193). He is the provider of fertility and sender of rain. Aschwaden made sound contributions to the interpretation of water. He was not yet aware that the *Shangwe* have a rain spirit dwelling in their community. The same society is associated with certain myths and cultural elements of even other ethnic groups.

From the African perspective, all human beings are too young to speak to *Mwari* directly (Gombe 1952; Gelfand 1959; Chimhundu et al. 2000). The underlying African principle is to respect whoever is bestowed with traditional authority. Weber (1962) makes it known that the community acknowledges long-established power despite gender identity. By virtue of that the society owes great honour to such a person. A typical example is reflected in one the *Shangwe mukwerera* rainmaking song with song texts *Nhai mbonga! Chii chinoridza?*<sup>2</sup> According to the informants, *mbonga* is a *Shangwe* virgin lady who does not customarily marry. A certain chief offered her daughter as a *mbonga*, to the *Nevana* priest in order to live with him. The lady prepared the food for the rain priest. One of the researcher’s informants, Evina Marariromba, said the last *mbonga* passed away in 2004. In addition, the *mbonga* interpreted misfortunes such as thunder and lightening for the community during the rainy season as reflected by the stated above song texts. Chiefs, who are the highest symbols of authority in the *Shangwe* community, owed the lady great honour. From the interviews, the status of the *mbonga* was envied by many girls in the *Gokwe* community. The informants even compared her position with that of nuns from the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe (Ngara 2012).

Chimhundu et al. (2001: 1144) affirm the concept of honouring those in authority when they say: “*Kukwira gomo hupoterera*”<sup>3</sup>. As a result, if a young person requests anything from any elderly person directly, the person is regarded as lacking humanity (Battle 1997). The same concept of humanity is also portrayed by the chiefs and the rain priest when they ask for rain from

God, *Mwari* but biblical and cultural symbolisms are characteristic of their traditional commutation system. Nyambara (2001) discusses land distribution in the *Shangwe* community. A year later, Nyambara published another article in which he explains various connotations that are associated with the origins of the term “*shangwe*” (2002:288). Ngara (2013), in his article entitled, *Gender and Sexuality, a Reflection on Rainmaking Songs*, presents a discussion regarding roles demarcation prevalent in the *Shangwe* spiritual realm and the world of the living. Nyambara and Ngara made profound contributions to the study of the *Shangwe*. This paper comes with a symbolic dimension. It fills this gap by answering the question: How do four *Shangwe* mythologies and song texts mirror biblical and intangible cultural heritage, respectively?

#### DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The qualitative data for this anthropological-ethnomusicological study will be presented and examined under four subheadings that follow immediately.

##### *Dumba*, the Rain Spirit’s Hut

There are sixteen round huts at the actual *Nevana*’s homestead and the rain spirit’s *dumba* is the seventeenth. All of them are mud plastered and have grass thatched roofs. These huts are built in a crescent shaped design. The *Nevana*’s rainmaking sacred hut, *dumba*, occupies the western side of the design. Its grass thatched roof is supported by spaced poles leaving large gaps that are covered with thatching grass. In other words, the *Nevana*’s hut has a grass wall. The informants told the researcher that the hut was the only one in *Gokwe* North and *Gokwe* South districts with two doors and let alone the Midlands Province. One of its doors faces the eastern side and the other one the west (See Figs. 1 and 2 in the Appendix). The western door is smaller than the eastern one. The two doors are made of thin poles. Since the rain priest passed away in 2004, four people namely, three of his seven wives, and Gaison Gasura have the traditional authorisation to enter in the hut through the western door. The eastern door is ever closed. All the chiefs sit next to the eastern door when they come to request rain, collect various grain crops and to participate in *mukwerera* song-dance performances.

They sing specific songs such as *Changu chakasara nani?*<sup>4</sup>

The culture bearers informed the researcher that the above mentioned song is sung by the rain spirit, *Chinamakwati* when it is in control of its medium. For the *Shangwe*, this rain spirit is the lead singer of the song. In the *mukwerera* rain rite context, *Chinamakwati* would be sending the message that he has accomplished his duty to provide rain. In the informants’ mind frames, *Chinamakwati* would be wondering why the *Shangwe* are sending rain prayers, yet it is raining. The song texts imply that the *Shangwe* should now go and work on their fields.

In the researcher’s view, this song is comparable with a *Karanga ngano* (folktale) about a boy called *Chinamakwati*, who was able to call rain by singing: “*Vakuru vava muno vasina mano, voti Chamatowo pfudze mombe. Ndondodzipfudzepi wuhwa kwangu. Ndera ndera ndera hoye.*”<sup>5</sup> In short, African folktales of this nature are mirrors through which one may interpret the communication systems that exist between the world of the living and the spiritual realm. In other words: African folktales and song texts are interpreted as intangible heritage which require preservation for future generations to derive benefits.

*Nevana*’s sacred hut and its contents are central to the *mukwerera* rainmaking ceremony. There are many snakes kept in the hut. The four who still enter into the hut are not allowed to wipe any snake that might wriggle past their feet when they are inside it. These snakes are just given water to drink from a wooden plate with a stirring stick placed in it. The same plate and its stick were used by *Nevana* medium during the rainmaking ritual process. The *Nevana* family members strongly believe that they are not supposed to kill any snake which they might see moving on their yard.

One of the female informants, Evina Marariromba, told the researcher that they do not look up when they get inside the hut. In response to the question why they do not kill the snakes the woman said: “It is the ancestor who will be just walking around.”<sup>6</sup> It is an established belief among the *Shangwe* that the snakes are *nyokadzimu*, meaning ancestral spirit mediums. Therefore, they do not kill any snake they might see moving around the yard. When the researcher enquired more about the snakes, she simply said that they had various colours and she mentioned

two functions, rainmaking and fertility. The researcher asked the six culture bearers to explain the rainmaking and fertility symbolism but that did not yield any result. The informants could not confide such information since it was their cultural treasure that should not be divulged to outsiders. However, Evina just said: "The snakes for the spirits are wise"<sup>7</sup>, implying that the snakes are an insignia of wisdom. Similarly, Genesis 3 verses 1-7 tell us that Adam and Eve were cheated by the serpent to eat the fruits from the tree of life that was in the midst of the Garden of Eden. Soon after consuming fruits, they began to see that they were naked hence they looked for something to cover their sexual organs. Shortly, they became wise. The serpent was a symbol of wisdom.

The fact that the *Shangwe* do not kill snakes often seen wriggling on the *Nevana* yard triggered the researcher to ask the question: Do you kill snakes in your neighbourhood? The answers were: "Do you see that *Nevana* forest? There are snakes in it. Even our children do not kill them when herding cattle. They know that they are ancestral snakes"<sup>8</sup>. The researcher concluded that the *Shangwe* belief in snakes as spirit mediums worked positively in conserving natural resources such as snake species.

The eastern door is epitomic to the wise men from the east. The wise men were in search of Jesus when they heard about His birth (Matthew 2 verses 1-12). The chiefs who sat on the eastern part of the *Nevana* hut are a symbol of wisdom since they are the ones who collect information on rainmaking and distribute among their subordinates. The five people who were allowed to enter into the hut were representative of the five wise girls (Matthew 25 verses 1-13). The biblical analogy reminds the researcher of one the church choruses with these texts: *Vasikana vane gumi tavaona. Vashanu vacho vakangwara...*<sup>9</sup> The song commonly features during most church services in Zimbabwe. It is directly comparable with the five wise girls who were the holy ones waiting for the coming of Jesus Christ. The *Nevana*'s hut epitomises the Holy of Holies since only pure people entered it. Any sinner who would enter into The Holy of Holies would surely die. The eastern bigger door represented the wider path which leads the sinners to hell (Matthew 7 v 13 and Luke 13 v 24). The researcher observed that the eastern door was smaller than the western one. The smaller western door re-

mind the researcher of the narrow road which leads to heaven and a small number of people who follow that road (Matthew 7 v 14). The grain crops presented to the chiefs were meant to teach them the concept of sharing whatever the little they might get in life. The same concept was illustrated by Jesus when he fed five thousand hungry people on five loaves of bread and two fish (Matthew 14 verses 18-20 and Mark 6 verses 35-44).

### The Rain Priest: A Symbolic Interpretation

The *Shangwe* rain priest, *nyusa*, was called Tevasiira Samson Marariromba and his first *munyi* (messenger) was Gaison Gasura. Despite the locally feared spirits called *masengu*, the rain priest and his first *munyi*, were the only two people who had the religious authorisation to go to *Nyanhekwe* Hill. Since Tevasiira Samson passed away in 2004, no one ascends the sacred hill to this day. The priest would ask his *munyi* to stay at the foot of the hill. He would get at the top of *Nyanhekwe* where he requested rain from God, *Mwari* through his ancestral spirit, *Nevana* who possessed him. Having finished communication, Tevasiira Samson would then descend the hill to fetch the *munyi*. According to informants, it used to rain before the two arrived at home. Consequently, they would get home dripping wet. This mythology is analogous to one of the *Karanga* rainmaking songs entitled *Tonaiwa nemvura tichibva Zame*.<sup>10</sup> *Zame* is one of the rain shrines found in Matopos hills in Matabeleland South Province in Zimbabwe where the *Karanga* go to ask for rain from *Mwari*. According to the culture bearers, the same song is also sung by *Nevana* priest on his way back from *Nyanhekwe* Hill where he asks for rain from *Mwari*. In their interpretation of the song, the *Shangwe*, just like the *Karanga*, believe that the rain priest's foot marks are not supposed to be seen when he or she returns home. Their local thinking is that the foot prints must be erased. The precipitation is a clear testimony that the community's rain dilemma has been received by the God, *Mwari*.

Since Gaison Gasura was one of the two male informants from *Nevana* Village, the researcher had the opportunity to ask him if he had an occasion to ascend *Nyanhekwe*. He confessed that his uncle never gave him the chance to go up with him. On a similar note, Jesus Christ used to leave His three disciplines Peter, James, and John (Mat-

thew 17v 1 and Mark 9v 2) at the bottom of Mount Sinai each time he climbed at the top of the hill to talk to God. Basing the analogy on these two incidences, the researcher concluded that the rain priest, Tevasiira Samson Mararimomba, just like Jesus Christ, had secret knowledge which he never disclosed even to his closest members. In other words, secrecy is a well-designed mechanism targeted at the concealment of wisdom so that in the end one retains supremacy in society.

### ***Mweziko, the Rain Stopper***

According to the informants, the rain sometimes falls so heavily that crops find it difficult to grow well and they eventually dry up. When such torrential rains persist, *Nevana's* second *munyai*, *Mweziko*, travels from his home at night and walks quietly past *Nevana's* homestead, destined to a particular tree that is at the edge of the yard. As soon as he gets near that tree, he takes off all his clothes, and climbs up the tree naked. Once upon the tree, *Mweziko* shouts: "The rain is too much! The crops are withering!"<sup>11</sup> He then silently comes down the tree and draws a line on the ground. *Mweziko* picks up his clothes to put on and returns to his home quietly. In the next morning, the clouds will just disappear. The crops will begin growing properly. *Mweziko* is still responsible for stopping the rain up to this day.

Drawing analogies from *Shangwe* beliefs, their rain spirit moves in the clouds at certain instances. In their local belief, they describe the sky as: *The sky is dressed. The sky is undressed*<sup>12</sup>. The sky's *dress* refers to the clouds and the *undressed* one is the clear sky. Similarly, *Mweziko's* clothes designate clouds. His naked body is not only an imitation of a clear sky, but it is a sign of humility and the *Shangwe* community's vulnerability to hunger. As the *Nevana* rain spirit sees *Mweziko* from the clouds above, he becomes shy to look at his naked body and he withdraws the rain. *Mweziko* marks the end of precipitation and the beginning of evaporation.

The above mythology is comparable with one of the *Shangwe* rainmaking songs entitled *Chamandidanira popo*?<sup>13</sup> According to the informants, this song is sung by a rain spirit in possession during the *mukwerera* rainmaking ceremony. The ritual participants would have invited the rain spirit during the ritual to enlighten them on possibilities of rain in that season. Upon pos-

session, the rain will start pouring down heavily. Consequently, the rain spirit's singing will be sending signals of wonder why the ritual performers and participants would have made an invitation yet it will be raining. In the *Shangwe* mind framework, they would have disturbed the spirit who was busy inducing rain in the clouds. Symbolic songs of this nature are also means through which one may be able to understand how African communities interact with the spiritual world. Therefore they are intangible inheritances which need to be preserved generationally.

The line drawn by *Mweziko* on the ground is a carbon copy of the rain bow. The rain bow is the covenant that God, *Mwari* will not destroy the earth again by floods (Genesis 9 verses 11-19). In brief, *Mweziko* drew the line to remind *Nevana* spirit to tell God that He was about to break the covenant which He [God] signed with Noah that He was not going to destroy the world by floods again. In a nutshell, the *Shangwe* follow their long established traditional hierarchical mode of conveying pleas to *Mwari*.

### **The Dove Symbolism**

The dove myth is very important among the *Shangwe*. The informants told the researcher that if a man or a child comes across a dove cooing and turning around along the path, the person will immediately return home to tell the mother about the bird. The children are taught the dove symbolism from youth. Among the *Shangwe* and even the *Karanga*, there is a song entitled *Inodya ichirira njiva*.<sup>14</sup> It is sung at various occasions. Young children normally sing it as a game song. It also features during a grain threshing ritual called *jakwara*. In this context, its main purpose is to energise the threshers.

From the *Shangwe* interpretations, the dove signifies a visitor. Consequently, if it is a woman who would have seen the dove, she would begin to prepare for the inevitable visitor. In the event that it is a man who had come across the dove, he would inform his wife to get ready for the guest.

Luke 1: verses 11-38 announce the births of John the Baptist and Jesus and the dove symbolism. In both instances, Gabriel mentions the Holy Spirit saying to Zechariah, ". . . and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit" (verse 15), and then to Mary who was still a virgin, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you" (verse 35). Still in Mat-

them 3 verse 16 and Mark 1 verse 10, the Holy Spirit is identified as a dove. During Jesus' baptism, Luke says, "And the Holy Spirit descended upon him in a bodily form, as a dove" (3 verse 22). According to Larkins (1981: 14), Gabriel reminds us that: "The dove is a bearer of good news". The dove continues to be a sign of heavenly presence, now symbolising the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

### CONCLUSION

Biblical and cultural symbols are entangled in *Shangwe* mythology. These symbols are evident in mythological works executed by the rain stopper and priest. The rain spirit resides in a sacred hut of its own kind. Furthermore, the same shrine is home to various snakes of symbolic functions. Since the snake symbolism is imparted in young people from youth, this belief is positively increasing the number of snakes in the *Nevana* neighborhood. It is an affirmative development on the conservation of nature. There are certain songs that have some relationships with myths and the rainmaking ceremonial rite. Folktales and songs form part of heritage which is passed on generationally.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

On the whole, rain spirits are believed to reside in places such as mountains, hills, rivers, trees, and caves. The ethnography revealed that rain spirits can also dwell among family members but in hallowed symbolic ritual huts. The researcher then suggests that academics need to find out other shrines that exist among minority cultures. *Shangwe* belief systems have a positive impact in safeguarding nature. Given this, the researcher would like to propose that academics at tertiary institutions which offer anthropology as a discipline, should work towards designing a curriculum on African beliefs and nature preservation. In general, ethnomusicologists discuss ritual songs of various ethnic groups. It was established from this study that there are certain songs connected to mythology and rainmaking rituals. It is recommended that there may be need to investigate how other African cultural practices are related to myths and music. The findings of the study also revealed that song texts reflected the wisdom on tangible heritage. It is then suggested that research may be conducted

on African rituals that are still passed through oral means in order for them exist written records.

### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Compiled from Evina Marariromba, Gaison Gasura, and Obert Marariromba and Kwuti Takavadii, Phineas Maenzani, and Silindeni Makunga, Nevana and Kufahazvinei villages, 25 and 27 June 2010, respectively. (Transcriptions in author's possession)
- <sup>2</sup> Hey the unmarried lady! What is making noise?
- <sup>3</sup> To climb a mount in a meandering way.
- <sup>4</sup> Who remained with mine?
- <sup>5</sup> Elderly people who are here do not have wisdom. They ask Chamatowo to herd cattle. Where am I going to herd them. *Ndera ndera hoye*.
- <sup>6</sup> Ndisekuru vanenge vachizvifambira zvavo.
- <sup>7</sup> Nyoka dzimu idzi dzakangwara.
- <sup>8</sup> Unoona sanga raNevana iro? Mune nyoka dzirimo. Chero vana vedu havadziurai pavanodziona vacifudza mombe. Vanoziva kuti inyokadzimu.
- <sup>9</sup> We have seen the wise ten virgins. The five are wise. Implying that the other five are not.
- <sup>10</sup> We are being soaked by rain on our way from Zame.
- <sup>11</sup> Mvura yawandisa. Zviyo zvava kuoma.
- <sup>12</sup> Denga rakwidibira. Denga raoma.
- <sup>13</sup> What have you invited me for?
- <sup>14</sup> The dove coos whilst eating.

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## APPENDIX



Fig. 1. The western door



Fig. 2. The eastern door