M. L. DANEEL

The God of the Matopo Hills

An Essay on the Mwari Cult in Rhodesia

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The God of the Matopo Hills
Communications 1
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I wish to thank the representatives of the Free University, Amsterdam, for granting me paid leave to engage in a prolonged period of field work; the Netherlands Foundation of the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO) and the Afrika Studiecentrum, Leiden, for financing my entire research project, of which this paper reflects one facet. Without the generous grants of the latter two institutions it would have been impossible to undertake such long trips as was necessary, first of all to foster over a long period of time, such relations with the local messengers (vanyai) of the High-God, Mwari, and other tribal authorities essential for a reliable introduction to the cult-centre, and secondly to visit Matonjeni itself.

I am also indebted to my former tutor at the Free University, the late Prof. J. H. Bavinck, for drawing my attention to the missiological significance of the traditional concepts of God and to Prof. J. F. Holleman of the University of Leiden for encouragement in the field and critical comment while writing this paper. Mr. J. M. Bidima of the Institut des Recherches Scientifiques du Cameroun deserves a special word of thanks for drawing the map and diagrams.

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To Vondo,
the Matonjeni messenger, whose valuable assistance enabled me to conduct an investigation at the cult centre.
Munyai Vondo Mukozho, the Matonjeni messenger from Gutu, clad in his official attire which he wears during the annual feasts at Matonjeni.
There are several reasons why this paper should be published well in advance of Mr. Daneel's forthcoming major comparative study of Independent African Churches in Rhodesia, which was the principal subject of his 2½ years of field research (1965–1967).

Although the Shona High-God concept will undoubtedly again receive attention in his main study as an integral component in the triangle of interaction between traditional religion, Mission Churches and Independent Churches, it is presented here as a central theme with some challenging variations.

Daneel's brief sojourn at Matonjeni has yielded some remarkable results. Social anthropologists and other European students of African life and thought in Rhodesia will agree that the mere fact of having gained admission to the ancient shrines in the Matopo Hills may already be counted as a major achievement of research diplomacy and a rare proof of African trust and goodwill. Only a few have been accorded this honour. But Daneel is, as far as I know, the only one not only admitted at the shrines but actually addressed by the 'Voice of Mwari' from the sacred cave during a ceremonial consultative session on matters of serious import. The fact that he also managed to tape record the session (with the knowledge of some of the cult officials) adds to the value of this 'scoop'.

Daneel is a missiologist and not a trained anthropologist; but he is a born fieldworker of rare quality, fluent in the vernacular (he was born at Morgenster Mission) and with the kind of
personality which facilitates rapport. He 'went down well' in every African (church) community he selected for his research in spite of their mutual rivalry. Yet it took him eighteen months of careful and patient preparation before he was permitted to accompany one of Mwari's 'messengers' on the long journey to Matonjeni. Even then it is doubtful whether he would have been taken to the cult's cave and instructed by the 'Voice' itself had it not been for two circumstantial factors. Daneel describes only one of these, the controversy about an important chieftainship in his area of research and the hope of some traditionalists to further their own cause by utilizing the services of this trustworthy European. It is a good example of the not uncommon experience of field anthropologists finding themselves subtly manipulated as a useful card in a local political power game.

The other incident Daneel does not mention, but it makes too good a tale to be left untold. After so many months of patient waiting he had gained access to the priests' colony at Matonjeni, but the days passed without his being at all certain that he would achieve the purpose of his visit, to pay his homage at the cave's mouth and be addressed by the God's 'Voice'. As the principal officials delayed their vital decision, depression deepened and tension became almost unbearable. In a private letter to me he confessed that he finally became obsessed by an overwhelming urge to do something, anything to break this tension. Then he overheard a remark, 'There is the hawk which has caught so many of our fowls', and he saw the bird perched on a rock some distance away. Here was a heaven-sent opportunity to prove himself. His own childhood had conditioned him to life in the African bushveld. It was the sort of life in which, from a very early age, a boy learns to handle firearms as a matter of course, and he soon tends to look upon his sporting rifle not merely as a prized possession and a useful tool to bring down game, but as a trusted companion, a friend in need, and a source of solace and inspiration. So he eagerly reached for it as he stood up. He took a 'resting' aim over a three stump. He was a good shot and, moreover, had a telescopic sight on his rifle. Under normal conditions it would have been a comparatively easy shot, but
his nerves were taut, and when he pulled the trigger and the report reverberated among the silent high-domed rock formation the bird flew unharmed into the air. At that moment he had the shattering feeling that he had gambled and lost. Yet his reflex reaction was to throw up his rifle and send a second shot after the bird which was now soaring swiftly overhead. It dropped like a stone, shot through the neck. Every rifleman of any experience will know that, especially with the restricted field of vision of a telescopic sight, this was a sheer 'fluke' rather than a remarkable feat of marksmanship. At any rate, to the small gathering of watching and astounded cult officials it must have appeared as a miracle, a clear sign of divine intervention. General excitement relieved tense indecision, and Daneel was taken to the cult's cave shortly afterwards. This incident deserves a footnote in a textbook on anthropological field methods – with the caution, 'to be applied only under divine supervision.

Daneel's analysis of the Shona High-God concept is a penetrating one and, to those who like myself worked in the field some twenty years ago, perhaps somewhat surprising. Gone is the impression, then unmistakable, of a vaguely defined Power, once the Creator of all, but long since retired from the scene of His creation into obscure remoteness – or in J. V. Taylor's words, 'pushed through the skylight and lost sight of. The picture presented by Daneel is quite different, that of a Deity no longer remote, but actively watchful, adaptive to change, and even politically minded. Yet it is a convincing picture, emerging with increasing clarity from the history of culture contact and the conflict between old and new, indigenous and imported, in social, religious and political life. It shows on the one hand a partial fusion of rooted tradition and foreign importation; on the other hand a search for and tenacious clinging to intrinsic values representing a people's own identity and dignified self-image.

By Daneel's own admission this paper cannot be regarded as an exhaustive study. The Mwari cult has, especially during the last decade or two, received a good deal of attention from scholars of different disciplinary hues, and Daneel has, of course, made use of their findings. The value of his own con-
tribution lies, first, in his critical attempt to provide a more comprehensive appraisal of the present-day concept and influence of this High-God with His old and newly acquired attributes; secondly, in his observation of the cult's operation and organization (including his analysis of the perpetual kinship relationship* between its Rozwi and Mbire functionaries) in a situation of religious and political contest; and thirdly, in his narrative of his unique experience at Matonjeni.

The last mentioned part may raise the eyebrows of sceptics reading some passages of the dialogue between 'Voice' and white visitor. The God of Matonjeni, the sustaining Power of resilient tradition and custodian of an ancient but faded glory, urging tolerance and peaceful black-white settlement at this tense stage of political polarization, seemingly oblivious of pent-up black frustration? How much of the ceremonial performance was cleverly staged for the benefit of their personally likeable but possibly naive visitor, a polite but ambiguous response to his own obvious goodwill and courtesy, a carefully prepared show to satisfy his curiosity, yet meant to deceive him but not his African friends?

It is difficult to say, for no God speaks publicly but through the mouth of mortal persons and there are few manifestations of organized religion without an element of stage play. Moreover, even the most hostile intergroup relations can be cross-cut by friendly inter-personal communication. Nor was Daneel so naive as to be easily deceived. He was aware that to some extent he was being utilized for tribal-political purposes, and he knew the vernacular intimately enough to probe the value and deeper significance of some of the terminology employed. Some of the 'Voice's' statements are clear even to the ears of uninitiated listeners. But others, and the more portentous ones, must be interpreted within a certain frame of reference, understood by the majority of Africans but by very few Europeans. They hinge on the analogous use of a few kinship terms which, if kinship is used as a frame of reference, are indicative of relative status and of the legitimacy of positions of super- or subordination. The references to these usages and Daneel's

* Daneel does not use this anthropological phrase, but his analysis of this situation is clear.
analysis of them make fascinating reading. It begins with Mwari’s reference to His ‘white sons’ in a warning to the Ndebele King Lobengula (then preoccupied with raiding and killing neighbouring Shona-tribes) that the Europeans were about to invade the country from the south. Repeatedly other mention is made of Mwari’s alleged references to His ‘black and white sons’ Probably a better English rendering would have been ‘children’, for in general statements it is highly likely that the vernacular vana (sing. mwana) would have been used instead of the specifically sex-differentiating term vanako-\textit{komana} (male children) * Neither term indicates any differentiation in rank: at this early stage black and white are equal in their common status as ‘children’ in Mwari’s social order of human family. Later, however, the appellations of the whites changes. The fiction of a common frame of kinship is retained, but within this fundamental scheme of reference a ‘lineal’ division is introduced between black and white ‘kinsmen’, and the whites are now being classed as Mwari’s ‘sister’s children’, vazukuru. The implications of this change are complex but can be understood by those who have a knowledge of the patterns of relationship and of differential rank and authority in the Shona kinship system. Daneel gives attention to this aspect towards the end of his paper. White and black are now related as vazukuru to vasekuru. In actual kinship this implies a classificatory ‘joking relationship’, in which the muzukuru enjoys a privileged position among his vasekuru, being permitted to tease and banter, to use their property without asking, in short, to indulge in a freedom of behaviour not granted to any other class of relative. This is one side of this complex relationship. The other side is that, in spite of very considerable licence, a muzukuru should not abuse his privileges, he cannot succeed to his sekuru’s position and status within the latter’s lineage hierarchy, nor inherit his estate. Above all – and the Shona are probably more explicit on this point than most other Bantu tribes – there remains the fundamental premiss of the sekuru’s senior position and status in the relative rank situation

* In a personal communication Daneel admits that his informants, when speaking of Mwari’s references to ‘black and white sons’, used vana.
among kinsmen. These basic principles are common knowledge to all Shona speaking peoples, that is, the great majority of the Rhodesian African population. Cast in these terms of fictitious kinship relations between white and black in the country, the God of the Matopo Hills on the one hand recognizes the present reality of the whites' privileged position in his country; on the other hand, in the idiom of his people, he gives warning that no vazukuru, however privileged, can deny their vasekuru's fundamental claims to seniority and ultimate authority in the socio-political order in which they live together. It is a statement loaded with political meaning and as subtle as it is profound.

Leiden, October 1969

J. F. Holleman

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Of all the southern and eastern African tribes the Southern Shona have the most elaborate cult for worshipping and consulting the Supreme Being. For centuries they have believed in Mwari as the final authority behind their ancestors, a High-God who was perhaps less directly involved in the affairs of individual lives than the ancestors, but one who could be consulted on matters of communal import. Far from being a remote deity, Mwari was believed to control the fertility of Shona occupied country, to give rain in times of drought and advice on the course of action in times of national crisis. Thus the pre-Christian belief in a Supreme Being contributed considerably towards shaping the destiny of the Shona people.

Unlike that of some of the other African tribes the Shona conception of God was not that of a disinterested deus otiosus, isolated from His creation in an abstract remoteness. His first concern was with the tribe as a whole, not with its individual members. Especially in times of national crisis His presence was felt to be very real and His commands entailed both moral and 'political' obligations. The main attributes ascribed to this deity are clearly reflected in the many traditional names which missionaries found to be present in Shona religion when they arrived towards the end of the last century.

*Mwari* is the most commonly used name. Its origin, according to Shona tradition, dates back to the time when the Mbire tribe – from whose ranks came the Mwari-priests – migrated from the Tanganyikan lake regions.\(^1\) The name
'Muali', still used in the vicinity of Kilimanjaro, designates God as the 'sower' and therefore as the God of Fertility. It seems that the Mbire tradition about their own past lends support to von Sicard's view that there is a definite relationship between the Muali of Kilimanjaro and Mwari of the Matopo hills. This assumption is strengthened by the fact that Mwari, too, is primarily concerned with the fertility of crops and women. His interests in tribal politics only dates from the time when the ruling Rozvi tribe had begun to exploit the cult as a centralized 'intelligence service' and as a means of consolidating their own dynastic rule over the surrounding tribes. The political significance of the cult emerged even more clearly when the oracular element within the cult was fully developed in the Matopo hills, near present-day Bulawayo.

As the God of crop Fertility, Mwari is first and foremost regarded as the rain-giver. Political issues may occasionally, under the stress of circumstances, become the major topic of 'discussion' when delegations visit the oracular shrines, but up to this day His 'messengers', who move between their home districts and Matonjeni, still regard the petition for rain as their major assignment. When they approach the caves they all use Mwari's most popular praise-name, Dzivaguru (great pool) which has a direct connotation with rain. As Dzivaguru or Chidziva chopo (the little pool that is always there) Mwari can be relied upon to provide His people with rain. When this God manifests His presence in the loud thunderclap after a period of drought the Shona rejoice at the prospect of rain with the exclamation: Dziva! Dzivaguru!

Mwari is both male and female. The terms Dziva, Mbuya (grandmother) and Zendere (the young woman who is regarded as Mwari's emanation) represent the female aspects of this ambivalent deity; the male is revealed in Sororezhou (Head of the Elephant, and as such: Father), Nyadenga (Possessor of the sky) and Wokumusoro (the One above). As a female, inseparably involved in this existence, merged in the pool with its darkness and mystery of fertility, this is the God of below. As a male this is also the owner of the skies, the God of light, the Father of creation who manifests Himself in lightning or the shooting star from above.
Musiki (from kusika: to create), Musikavanhu (Creator of mankind) and Muvumbapasi (Founder of the land) are the most commonly used terms to indicate the Supreme Being as Creator. The verb kusika basically means to make fire by rubbing two pieces of wood together. Prof. van der Merwe therefore suggests that the Shona idea of creation might be to produce something new by using something that had existed before. God as Creator is further qualified in relation to His creation by the interesting terms: Matangakugara (lit. You who sat or settled first) and Mawanikwa (You who were found to exist), which makes Him an eternal being, existing before anything else. Generally the act of creation is only vaguely described. Present-day Shona traditionalists, when interviewed in this connection, will refer to the impressive rock formations in the country, or even the Zimbabwe ruins, as special manifestations of God's creation rather than to explain the how of God's initial creative acts.

The interpretive concept emerging from these names is that of an ambivalent God, both immanent and transcendent. Being ever present in His own creation He stands in direct relation to the life-giving water and to the power present in all forms of magically manipulative objects. His pervading presence in creation evokes an almost pantheistic conception because a strong demarcation line between Him and His creation does not exist. As Taylor puts it, "no distinction can be made between sacred and secular, between natural and supernatural, for nature, Man and the Unseen are inseparably involved in one another in a total community." It should be stressed, however, that this concept of an immanent deity coincides with the Shona's intuitive awareness of His presence rather than with a rationalized projection of His being. Mwari, in the final analysis, is not 'abstract power', void of anthropomorphic attributes. Neither does He become an 'It' because of His close association with the belief in dynamism, as Driberg asserts in respect of East African traditional religion. Mwari's close association with the apex of the ancestral world has contributed both towards His anthropomorphic image and has made Him the transcendent God, the One Above. Had it not been for the oracular shrines He may have become as remote as some of
the other African highgods, of whom Taylor writes: “beginning in this world as part of the ‘human’ hierarchy of the living and the ancestors they the gods are eventually, as we might say, pushed through the sky-light and lost sight of.”

Mwari was not totally lost sight of. In the composite picture of Shona traditional religion He did become the Personal Being beyond and above the hierarchies of ancestral spirits, accessible to man only through the mediation of the senior tribal ancestors (mhondoro), or through His messengers who came from afar to the Matopo shrines to hear Mwari’s pronouncements about the community of man. To the individual, who in everyday life had to depend on his family ancestors for his well-being, this God of fertility was the transcendent being who spoke far off at Matonjeni; or who, as Wokumusoro, occasionally manifested Himself in vivid lightning, driving clouds or shooting stars. Private prayers were directed to the family ancestors (midzimu yapamusha), and these judged whether they could give direct solace or whether such petitions should be forwarded to the senior tribal spirits and ultimately to Mwari. Mwari entered the routine life of the tribal community mainly by way of oath and invocation. During traditional family, rituals His name is hardly ever mentioned. Only during the annual rain-rituals (mukwerere), when the elders invoke one of their apical lineage ancestors on behalf of the village communities they represent, will there be a reference to Mwari vaMatonjeni. Then the senior tribal spirit is asked to transmit the plea for rain through the hierarchy of “those [ancestors] whose names we have forgotten”, to the great ‘Mambo’ behind them. The use of this name, which was the prerogative of the Rozvi kings, reflects how closely Mwari has become associated with the royal ancestors. One can take for granted that some of the antropomorphic attributes ascribed to Mwari derive from those of the divine rulers of the Rozvi empire. But this again does not imply that Mwari is a deified ancestor”, though it does lend support to Cullen Young’s assertion that “no approach to any appreciation of indigenous ideas regarding God can take any path but through the thought area occupied by the ancestors.”

This somewhat construed concept of the Shona High-God
becomes more meaningful when it is viewed against the historical background of the Shona, the role played by the cult officers during the 1896–7 Rebellions and, ultimately, when the cult is considered in its presentday setting. An historical survey reveals, for instance, that the loyalty of the Shona to their High-God in previous centuries inspired their passive yet successful resistance to early missionary endeavour. 13

Prof. Ranger points out that the effectiveness of their resistance ceased after the Rebellions, when traditional religious functionaries had failed the command of Mwari to rally both Shona and Ndebele powers in an all-out effort to drive the early European settlers from the country. 14 The suppression of the Rebellions did not, however, mark the end of the activities of the Mwari cult. In spite of the expansion of missionary work all over Rhodesia since the turn of the century, and the numerical strength of nominally affiliated Shona Christians in most rural areas in comparison with the minority groups of practising traditionalists, the cult with its complex of ritual headquarters at the Matopo hills near Bulawayo, continued to exist. At present, religious activities seem to indicate even a ‘revival’ of the cult.

During my study of the Southern Shona Independent Churches in the Gutu, Bikita, and Victoria Tribal Trust areas 15 (from January ’65 to June ’67) it became abundantly clear that the term Mwari vaMatonjeni (the God of the Matopo hills), a popular designation of the Shona oracular deity, had still a very real meaning for the majority of people living in the rural areas, both young and old. It is common to hear that “it is at Matonjeni, at Mabweadziva [the rocks of the pool] that the voice of Mwari, speaking to His people, can still be heard”

It should be stressed that our treatment of this subject is necessarily limited and without any pretence to provide an exhaustively descriptive account and analysis. For a thorough analysis of the influence of the Mwari-cult in the contemporary socio-religious structure a full-scale field study is needed with a special focus on the shrines at Matonjeni. My own visits to Matonjeni were too brief for such a comprehensive approach. Much had already been published on the cult by missionaries 16, scholars of religion 17, historians 18 and District Commis-
sioners. From the available material thus presented, a fairly accurate picture of how the cult had functioned in the past can be constructed. But the recorders have always been hampered by the secretive and exclusive nature with which the cult was shrouded, partly because it was driven ‘underground’ after the Rebellions. Commissioners were aware of ‘messengers’ moving between their administrative districts and Matonjeni, but they had to rely on the information of informants in their districts for an assessment of the cult’s influence. Prof. van der Merwe, Dr. von Sicard and Prof. Gelfand paid visits to the shrines, but none of them had been allowed to attend a ritual at the caves where the voice of Mwari could be heard. Nor do they furnish us with sufficient material for a clear perception of the cult’s present organization at the ‘headquarter’ and priest-colony. Their admirable accounts do not include full descriptions of the ritual activities conducted at the caves. It appears as if they have observed and described Matonjeni from those distant places where they could interview the local ‘messengers’ of Mwari (vanyai) and the male (hossanah) and female (mbonga) cultists dedicated to Mwari in their youth and not at close quarters for any length of time.

A five days stay in the Wirirani priest-colony of Chokoto at Matonjeni and the attendance of only one full ritual, achieved after two years of regular contact and negotiations with the Mwari messengers of the Bikita and Gutu districts, obviously could not provide me with sufficient information to fill fully the gap in our knowledge of Matonjeni. It did, however, contribute towards a deeper insight into the kind of message that Mwari still conveys to His people over a wide area in Rhodesia. It also provided some answers to questions concerning the cult’s present day organization and influence on tribal politics.

This study consists of two main parts: first a brief historical account dealing with the development of the cult through the centuries, which provides perspective to the information obtained. Secondly, a descriptive evaluation of the cult in its contemporary setting. My own findings are mainly incorporated in the latter section, which includes such aspects as changes in the concept of God through the influence of Christianity, the
cult's organization and its present range of influence in the country, its relation to the emerging forms of religious leadership in the Shona Independent Churches, and finally, the cult's significance in the field of tribal politics.
The Mwari Cult in the Past

According to Rozvi tradition the cult officers, who first introduced Mwari in the country south of the Zambesi, belonged to the Mbire tribe. Chief NeMbire is believed to have migrated from the vicinity of Lake Tanganyika with his own and several subordinate Karanga clans early in the fourteenth century. Linguistic and material evidence also confirms early contact with Central and Western African tribes. The cult must have attained wide recognition amongst the scattered tribes south of the Zambesi at an early stage because, when the Rozvi made their first attempt in the fifteenth century to unify these tribes, the cult’s headquarters were frequently visited by messengers (vanyai sing mu-) from the distant chiefs. These headquarters were then conveniently situated at Great Zimbabwe, the seat of the Rozvi monarchs. Mwari himself is believed to have called the Rozvi monarchy into being. According to Abraham, the present spirit-medium of Chaminuka (one of the widely recognized Shona ancestral heroes) stated that Dlembewu, the first Rozvi Mambo(King), was the son of chief NeMbire’s grand-daughter, who some believed to have been impregnated by Mwari himself. Whatever the beliefs in this connection, it is apparent from most sources that the Mwari cult played an important role as a centralizing religious authority at Zimbabwe and later at Matonjeni, before the Nguni invasions broke up the Rozvi confederacy. While the kings of the Rozvi – the recognized ‘Prussians’ of the Shona tribes – administratively controlled their loosely affiliated vassal states, they relied on the
Mbire priests to conduct cult ceremonies at the ‘Temple’. Like the Israelite tribes depending on the Levites for their priestly functions, so the Mbire, although political vassals of the royal Rozvi, became the acknowledged guardians of the Mwari shrines and ritual functionaries of the Shona tribes belonging to the Rozvi confederacy. In this way the cult became closely identified with the Rozvi people, and its sphere of influence spread with the expanding boundaries of the Rozvi confederacy.

The importance of the cult, when its main shrine was still at Zimbabwe near present-day Fort Victoria, is aptly described by Blake Thompson and Summers. “Zimbabwe was a religious centre. All the miscellany of buildings on the Hill and in the valley were attracted here because of the special sanctity of the site. Some were undoubtedly royal buildings, other administrative buildings or even trading places, but they crowded round the sacred area as King, Parliament, Government, trade and commerce all crowd round the royal church at Westminster Abbey.”

Rituals were probably conducted at the ‘Eastern Enclosure’ of the Acropolis’ and within the ‘Temple’. Karl Mauch, who came upon the ruins in 1871, obtained a description of how the ritual ceremonies had been conducted. Every second year after harvest time, a big meeting was held at Zimbabwe. A black cow was offered to Mwari at the Acropolis’ with a request for rain. In addition, two head of cattle were slaughtered, one for the feasting priests and the other for the wild animals in the veld. The carcass of the latter would be left in a bush near the Temple and if signs of scavengers could be found at a later stage, it was believed that Mwari and the senior tribal spirits had accepted the offerings. During the ritual a priest entered a special cave on the Acropolis, where a pot of beer had been placed for the occasion. The beer was then sprinkled at the mouth of the cave, and a plea addressed to Mwari that He keep his people healthy. When the priest ultimately reappeared from the cave he would greet the people outside with the assurance that the One Above would take care of all their needs.

The hierarchically structured cult organization resembled that of a chief’s court. “The addressing of petitions to one official, the issue of edicts by another, a secret intelligence ser-
vice and a numerous court were common form.” 28 At the central shrine the highest priestly offices were those of ‘Eyes’ (Maziso), the ‘Ear’ (Nzewo) and the ‘Mouth’ (Muromo). With regular reports coming in from the various districts of the confederacy these offices became of vital importance for the interpretation of messages and the transmission of Mwari’s commands to the messengers. Presumably the Rozvi exploited and elaborated the cult for political purposes. According to Father Devlin, the office of the Eye was “the most powerful because it was the most effective link between the temple and the people; it controlled the external organization of the cult.” 29 By reserving this office for one of their kinsmen the Rozvi rulers could use the valuable ‘secret intelligence service’ to serve their own ends. In this way they were able to combine religious authority with political sovereignty over their vassal states.

At Zimbabwe the Mwari cult was syncretized with another form of religion, which had been more fully developed in the northern territories of the Munomotapa dynasty. 30 This was the mhondoro cult, which was primarily concerned with the approach of senior tribal spirits through an officially recognized spirit-medium (svikiro). The principal mhondoro at Zimbabwe was Chaminuka’s and although this Shona hero-spirit originally had no connection with Mwari, it somehow became the spiritual ‘Son of Mwari’ or at any rate was regarded as having directly emanated from God. 31 Chaminuka’s medium, according to Abraham’s informants, used to reside within the ‘Eastern Enclosure’ of the Acropolis where he communicated the messages of his close associate Mwari to the outer world, and also “interpreted the squawkings of Hungwe, Shirichena, Shiri yaMwari – the Celestial Fish eagle, the Bird of Bright Plumage, the Bird of Mwari – on its annual visit to the shrine, as pronouncements of the deity.” 32 Abraham may be correct in suggesting that the soapstone birds, found on the partition wall of the Enclosure, support the verbal tradition of Chaminuka’s role at Zimbabwe. It is also possible that these birds, some of which have a crocodile carved onto the base of their supporting columns, were the symbolic representations of the Godhead himself. 33 When it is considered that Mwari was and
2. Cave entrance at Wiriani shrine – Matonjeni. Photographed from a distance with tele-lense, since approach of shrine during day-time was prohibited.
4. The Rozvi mhonga-svikiro, MaMoyo, who acts as Mwari's 'Voice'
still is primarily concerned with rain, that the coming of the rains was annually heralded by the arrival in the country of hundreds of njerere birds, and that the major Matonjeni shrine, where in the past the Shona delegations asked for rain, is named Njelele, presumably after the ‘rain-bringing’ birds, the idea of Mwari being symbolically represented in the form of a bird does not seem far-fetched.

Whatever the real meaning of the Zimbabwe birds and their possibly religious significance, it is clear that the function of the spirit-medium was prominent in both the Mwari and the mhondoro (i.e. Chaminuka) cults. The development of the Mwari concept into an oracular deity, which only reached its completion after the main shrines had been shifted to the Matopo hills, may in fact have been stimulated by the partial integration of both cults. Syncretizing the Mwari cult, however, never led to a complete identification of Mwari with Chaminuka or the other tribal spirits. Mwari remained the Creator and originator of the earth, on whom Chaminuka and those under him depended. The influence of the Mwari cult amongst the Southern Shona, especially the Karanga, was so strong that the mhondoro-type of cult never attained the same kind of prestige as it had among the northern tribes. Of the spirit-mediums in the Mutapa kingdom, Ranger writes that they played an important political and ritual role. “They at once guaranteed and limited the power of the king, just as mediums at the tribal level guaranteed and limited the power of the chief. In this way the senior mediums acted as a centralizing and stabilizing factor.”

Ranger’s interpretation of the evidence leads him to the assumption that a distinction should be made between two interrelated but different religious systems: the spirit mediums particularly associated with the Mutapa kings; and the Mwari cult particularly associated with the Rozvi kings. Yet Abraham’s theory, that the two systems originated from one coherent system of belief and practice, seems tenable when it is argued that the main components of both systems are not mutually exclusive, but complementary parts of an integrated religious whole, developing along historically different lines. In the north the role of the spirit-medium dwarfed the high-
god cult, while in the south the Voice of Mwari, though not silencing those of the tribal spirits, came to dominate them. This distinction is borne out clearly in the greater authority of the local spirit-medium in the north when it concerns chieftain succession issues, than the one in the south.

Whether the transfer of the main Mwari shrine to Matonjeni, some 200 miles further west, coincides with a shift of Rozvi administrative headquarters after they had succeeded in occupying the Matopo country, or whether it came as the result of an independent Mbire initiative, is not altogether clear. Simon Chokoto, the present high-priest of the cult at Wirirani, describes this move without any reference to the Rozvi. "Mwari created Zimbabwe and allowed His people to dwell there", he tells us. "So the Mbire, who are the original Karanga people, worshipped there for a long time. When the country round Zimbabwe became over-populated, after the arrival of a new tribe, the Rusani, Mwari spoke to His people and said: 'Come and stay here at Matonjeni!' Our forefathers heeded the message and came over here. This happened before the Ndebele invasion."

When the Rozvi empire was at its peak, the cult, then in possession of several major shrines in the Matopos, consolidated its wide influence. Its political significance, too, grew as it became increasingly important for affiliated Shona chiefs to demonstrate their loyalty to the Rozvi kings. One of the ways of doing so was by regularly sending messengers (vanyai) to Matonjeni with pleas for rain, to consult Mwari on successions to chieftainship and to dedicate mbonga's and hosanna'h's from the far off districts to the service of this God. In a sense Mwari now became the God of the priests and chiefs.

Some of the Shona chiefdoms were drawn into a more direct affiliation with the Rozvi monarchy than others, and were consequently also more closely linked with the Mwari cult. The Gutu chief was one of those who, through circumstantial factors in the period preceding the Ndebele invasion, had achieved a privileged status in relation to the ruling Rozvi tribe. Since Gutu is the area with which I was mainly concerned and as its present relation to Matonjeni forms one of the focal points of this study, the events that led to their special 'partnership'
are worth mentioning. The first incident concerns Mabwazhe, the forefather of Chaurura, whose house had become the dominant tribal political power in the Gutu district in recent years. Mabwazhe migrated with his brothers from Musana in the north and settled in what was to become the Gutu district. They belonged to the Rufura tribe. The older Rufura brothers, Munyikwa, Nemashakwe and Nendanga, settled in the tribal wards they had subdivided amongst themselves, while Mabwazhe stayed with Chasura, his maternal uncle (sekuru). It was Chasura who taught Mabawazhe how to use powerful medicine against his enemies. By tying a strip of bark around an object, representing a tribal ward (dunhu) and applying a special kind of medicine, he could cause all the inhabitants of the ward to fall ill simultaneously. Mabwazhe turned the medicine against his instructor. Having doctored all the wild fruit trees (mishuku) in his uncle’s dunhu he invaded the territory with Chisvina, his younger brother, at a time when the inhabitants were incapable of resisting. This was only the beginning of many similar invasions. The surrounding chiefs, Chiwara, Mawere, Mukaro and Norupiri were forced into an alliance with Mabwazhe, who kept expanding the borders of his ‘paramountcy’. He became well known for the use of his magical quiver (mukutu) which he strapped to his head when he led his men in the field.

The Rozvi Mambo at that time had a troublesome rhinoceros in one of his districts, which none of his hunters could kill. It had mauled several people on their way to a certain plain (bane) to fetch fire wood. There was only one man who, they believed, could face the animal. So Mabwazhe was called to kill the ‘beast of prey’ (chikara) with his poisoned arrows. Having done so, the hero was carried to the headquarters of the Rozvi king. On his arrival the king shouted, “The beast was killed by ‘Chinamakutu’ (the one with the quiver) and he must be rewarded!” Due to this nickname Mabwazhe’s paramountcy was subsequently called Gutu (derived from mukutu). The Rozvi king supplied him with wives as a reward for his feat. One of these bore him a son, Goronga, who in turn fathered Chirambamuriwo, the grandfather of Chaurura. Mabwazbe’s friendship with the Mambo led to close ties with the
priests at Matonjeni, who in turn started to exert considerable influence on the succession of Gutu chieftains, through the Voice of Mwari. Of the Gutu delegations, who were then annually sent to Matonjeni, the majority were kinsmen of Mabwazhe and later of Chaurura. They seem to have acquired a position of authority in relation to the Mwari high-priests, due to their special standing with the Rozvi. Mukozho Vondo, the present munyai of Gutu to Matonjeni, traces his descent through the house of Makuwaza to Chaurura. But for his loyal friendship and his influential position at Matonjeni (due to the above-mentioned historical background), my stay at Matonjeni may very well have proved fruitless.

The second incident concerns Kariwara Marumbi, a famous female rainmaker. She obtained her rain-making powers from her father, who was a blood relative of Shoshangane, the powerful Gaza ruler north of the Sabi river in the early nineteenth century. Having started her rain making activities not far from where Shoshangane had his 'capital' in Ndau territory, she soon became well-known in the eastern districts. She lived at Melsetter and Buhera before she finally settled in the Gutu district at the request of Chief Gutu. During a period of serious drought, Marumbi was summoned to Matonjeni, where she was forced into a 'rain making competition' with another reputed rainmaker. Her songs are reported to have caused five days of continuous heavy rain. As a reward she was offered part of Matonjeni country by the Rozvi rulers, which she refused. Instead, she went back to Chief Gutu who allowed her to stay with her relatives at the foot of Mt. Rasa in the Nyamande sub-chiefdom. Marumbi's regular visits to Matonjeni and her country-wide fame served to strengthen the ties between Gutu and Matonjeni. Her spirit is still widely believed to hover near Mt. Rasa; but she is also said to maintain a direct relationship with the God at Matonjeni.

Chagonda, the oldest son of Marumbi's youngest brother, Neusaka, became influential enough in the region surrounding Mt. Rasa to have the descendants of Marumbi called after him. The Chagonda people, also called vaRasa, became the wife-providers (vatezvara) of Nyamande's Rufura kinsmen in whose chiefdom they lived, but they were refused an independent
ward with their own ward-headman (sadunhu). In the ensuing political struggle between Chagonda and Nyamande, which continues to this very day, several other powers were brought into play, one of which was the Voice of the Matonjeni God, more than 200 miles away. Matonjeni's involvement in this 'nhumbi yaMarumbi' dispute, demonstrates the continuation of this religious centre's influence in tribal politics, of which the roots are to be found in the pre-Ndebele past.

The Ndebele invasion of the 1830's spelled the end of a long period of Shona prosperity under the Rozvi kings. The Rozvi were driven from their stronghold and scattered all over the vast territories they had previously controlled. While regular raids by Mzilikazi's armies (impis) caused much disruption amongst the Shona tribes, it did not totally uproot the authority of the Shona chiefs, nor did it interfere too much with Shona religious institutions. The shrines of Matonjeni were allowed to operate under close surveillance. Visits by delegations from remote chiefdoms continued. The Ndebele kings themselves, being foreigners to the country and being dependent upon its spiritual guardians, honoured Mwari, whom they called Mlimo, with annual gifts and requests for rain. Under its new political masters the Mwari priesthood adopted a tolerant attitude. Their God had merely obtained an additional name, and if the occasion demanded He would even use a new language when communicating with the Ndebele visitors at one of His caves. Although the cult was still concerned with the local politics of distant Shona tributaries, its political function was modified considerably during the Ndebele reign. In a highly centralized state, where the king himself represented power and final authority, there was no need for the cult as a politically coordinating mechanism. Only with the weakening of the Ndebele monarchy during the last days of Mzilikazi, and after the death of his son, Lobengula, when the Ndebele armies had been defeated by European forces, was the cult "able to manifest its old vigour and its emissaries able to travel through the whole area of its influence." 40

That the Mwari-cult had remained essentially a Shona institution between the years 1830 and 1890 is evident from the attitude of the priests towards King Lobengula. When the
pioneer settlers of the British South Africa Company started moving across the Limpopo in 1890, the Voice of Mwari is reported to have said to Lobengula: “You who are so busy killing people. You are a little man. Climb on top of a high hill and see these people who are coming up. See their dust rising in the south. My white sons whose ears are shining in the sun are coming here.” To the Shona the arrival of Mwari’s ‘white sons’ meant a radical curb in the tyrannical power of the Ndebele invaders. They therefore welcomed the white man’s arrival. At the disintegration of the Ndebele monarchy in 1893, the Mwari priests did nothing to rally the Shona chiefs in support of the Ndebele against the newly established Administration of the Company.

The picture quickly changed, however, in the few years preceding the 1896–7 Rebellions. With full freedom of movement the priests and messengers of Mwari stepped up their activities between districts and Cult centres. Mwari’s ‘white sons’, who had been regarded as liberators, soon revealed themselves as rulers who posed a threat to the kind of existence the Shona and Ndebele had been used to in the past. They were soon regarded as the common enemy, to be resisted by the combined efforts of both Shona and Ndebele. In this respect the Mwari cult organization functioned as the most valuable centralized source of information and the most effective system to coordinate action over a wide area. Company administrators underestimated the Shona in these years. To them the militant Ndebele were a potential danger. They regarded the scattered Shona tribes with their perpetual rivalries and boundary disputes as a disintegrated people oppressed by the Ndebele. According to them the Shona chiefs were incapable of united action, because they seemingly lacked a centralized authority. An organized, and in many ways well planned, revolt proved them wrong.

Prof. Ranger gives us an excellent account of the role of the religious authorities during the Rebellions. He makes it clear that the Ndebele ‘high priest’ and the officers of the Mwari cult played an important role as co-ordinators in the organization of the Rebellions, but he rightly asserts that they did not, in fact, provoke the rebellions; “they did not command or
persuade men to perform actions which they were otherwise unready to perform, but rather they embodied and set the seal of ritual approval on the decision of the community as a whole. Their general involvement in the risings was in itself an indication of the total commitment of most of the traditional society to them” (my italics). 43

At the outbreak of the Rebellions there were at least four major shrines, with an intricate system of connections between the families supplying the officers of the cult. Mwari or Mlimo's Voice could be heard at each of these shrines. These were situated at Njelele, whose sphere of influence stretched mainly to the south and west of Bulawayo; Matonjeni, with its messengers in most of the chiefdoms of western and southern Mashonaland, some of them coming from as far afield as Chipinga and Melsetter; Mangwe, which primarily influenced the Kalanga people of south-west Matabeleland; and the shrine of Inyati, with the districts north-east of Bulawayo as its main sphere of influence. The Mangwe shrine did not participate in the Rebellions. On the contrary, it used its influence to keep the Kalanga people out of it, and even warned some of the settlers and missionaries of the coming danger. From the other shrines Mwari's voice carried a different message. In 1896 it was heard to instruct His black children to cast the whites out of the country. Were the whites not responsible for the severe drought and rinderpest of the preceding years? Were they not the ones who had ignored Mwari, by neglecting to make peace with the land, thus causing these punishments to be brought down on the country? The Mwari officials are reported to have said: “These white men are your enemies. They killed your fathers, sent the locusts, caused this disease among the cattle and bewitched the clouds so that we have no rain. Now you will go and kill these white people and drive them out of our father's land and I [Mwari] will take away the cattle disease and the locusts and send you rain.” 44

The importance of the Mwari cult in providing the rebels with sufficient religious sanction for action, in co-ordinating Ndebele and Shona movements during the initial stages of revolt and in continually relaying Mwari's advice to outlying districts, is clearly illustrated in the roles played by some of the
main cult officials. Mabwani, the most influential cult priest at Matonjeni, was in close touch with Umlugulu, the Ndebele 'high priest' and leader of the Ndebele rebels. They lived near one another, so that it was possible for Mabwani to convey the course of events from the Ndebele camp, via the Voice of Mwari, to the vanyai of other districts. When the inhabitants of Belingwe rose in a united effort to drive out the white man in March, 1896, their action was probably inspired by Mabwani, rather than by the Ndebele. Belingwe had hardly any Ndebele inhabitants at the time. Mkwati, on the other hand, was a Mwari munyai from Inyati who, prior to the risings, settled at the caves near the last centre of the Rozvi Mambos at Thaba zi ka Mambo. Within a few months time he had a popular, if temporary, shrine in operation. Its connection with the old Rozvi headquarters enabled Mkwati to appeal to the past glory of the Rozvi empire, a factor which, as Ranger suggests, was of greater significance in bolstering Mkwati's influence amongst the Shona rebels than his allegiance to the Ndebele leaders, Umlugulu and Mpotshwana. Mkwati's close associates were his wife, Tengela, herself a Rozvi, who had joined him at Njelele, and Singinyamatshe, a well-known hos-sanah from the Bulawayo area. As the 'wife of Mwari', Tengela promised divine support to the Ndebele if they attacked the settlers near Bulawayo. Singinyamatshe represented Mkwati in the field as commander of the forces. With his close associates in the field and the messengers moving between them and himself at Thaba zi ka Mambo, Mkwati could 'transmit' Mwari's orders to the rebel forces for retreat or attack. Malema, a young man who was taken prisoner during the rebellions, later gave evidence about his role as a messenger to Thaba zi ka Mambo after each major move in the field. His report illustrates how military operations were directed from the cult cave. Of his visit to the shrines after the defeat of the rebels at Umgusa he said, "I told the Mlimo the message I had been given by the indunas and I told him that the whites had gone on to the Shangani. The Mlimo, who was invisible, spoke from the cave and told me to return to the impi [army] and tell them to follow the white men as far as Shangani."  

In Western Mashonaland the messengers of Mwari played an
active role in organizing the risings after they had been to the cult caves in May, 1896. From the Charter district, Bonda, together with several emissaries from Chief Mashiangombi of the Hartley district, visited the Thaba zi ka Mambo shrine to consult Mwari. The Native Commissioner of Hartley was warned about these movements but attached little importance to them. Two weeks after Bonda’s return, “the Native Commissioner was dead, killed near Mashiangombi’s kraal in the first outbreak of rebellion in Mashonaland. This outbreak was stimulated by the return from Thaba zi ka Mambo of Tshiwa, Bonda and Mashiangombi’s emissaries, bringing with them the Mangoba regiment to incite the MaShonas into rebellion.” While the Ndebele impi stayed at Mashiangombi’s kraal, Tshiwa and Bonda, who were both vaRozvi, carried Mwari’s messages further afield. Sympathizing chiefs aided Mwari’s messengers, while those chiefs who remained neutral or loyal to the Administration were subjected to threats and punitive raids.

At a later stage Bonda was used as a go-between when Mkwati and Kagubi – the latter, a spirit-medium who had inspired the central Shona chiefs to join the risings – made an effort to revive the Rozvi kingship. This was the last desperate attempt at concerted action, at a stage when some Shona chiefs were already considering peace talks. As in the case of the Ndebele surrender, it again transpired during these last minute negotiations with the Rozvi chiefs that the priests and emissaries who refused to accept defeat appealed to the ‘Voice of Mwari’ as the final uncompromising authority. Had Mwari not said at Thaba zi ka Mambo that he would kill all Africans who made peace, and that the fight should continue?

The prominent role played by the Rozvi tribal and religious authorities throughout the rebellions was a clear indication that the Rozvi people had not lost all their military and religious prestige of the past. To the Southern, Central and Western Shona tribes, the close association of Rozvi supremacy with the central cult shrines was more than just a living memory. Had the Administration been aware of this it would not have underrated the Shona, and the administrative errors which gave rise to much discontent before 1896, could have been avoided.
One of the Native Commissioners admitted after the Rebellion, "We knew nothing of their [the Shona] past history, who they were or where they came from, and although many of the Native Commissioners had a working knowledge of their language, none of us really understood the people or could follow their line of thought. We were without a sufficient knowledge of their belief in the Mondoro or Mwari." 

Once the major rebel leaders had been imprisoned or eliminated one may have expected a decrease in the cult's activities after the final suppression of the rebellions. But Mwari's messengers from Western and Southern Mashonaland continued to have close contact with the main shrines in the Matopos. For obvious reasons Native Commissioners kept a close watch on their movements between their districts and the Matopos. In their records between 1900 and 1923 there is ample evidence that they did not discount the possibility of renewed local outbursts of violence at Mwari's behest. In 1915 the Superintendent of Natives at Salisbury commented, "I do not wish to pose as an alarmist (but) those well acquainted with the natives of this territory know how easily their superstitions can be worked on by a bold and clever witch-doctor, and if the Mlimo in the Matopos and Nyanda were to persuade them to rise, they would, I believe, do so." When the Administration of the British South Africa Company was replaced by Responsible Government in 1923, Mwari's orders that people should hide grain in the hills caused grave concern in official circles.

The Ndebele, who had dissociated themselves from the Mwari cult during the Rebellions, adapted themselves to the new political climate before the Shona did. In 1923, when the Shona still relied on the Mwari cult to voice their protest, the Ndebele were already making use of written petitions to oppose the idea of Responsible Government. This does not mean that the Ndebele had stopped sending messengers to the Mlimo cult shrines. They in fact continued to do so, with the marked difference, however, that their petitions were mainly confined to pleas for rain and fertility. To them, in contrast with the Shona, Matonjeni and Njelele had achieved national political importance only for a short period during the risings. After all,
Mkwati’s appeal invoked the glories of the pre-Ndebele past and not the prestige of a defeated Ndebele king who had once invaded the territory and subjected the Shona peoples.

After the change to Responsible Government a spirit of despondency made itself felt in the inner circles of the priests. They had failed in bringing about the change they had envisaged. The Shona, it seemed, had lost faith in the power of their traditional God to rid the country of the white settlers. Many people were turning to the emerging Independent Churches, whose religious leadership was soon to become a direct challenge to the traditionalists. Once the chiefs started turning to Christianity, the traditionalists were confronted with the threat of a complete loss of political influence. Their mood of despondency is best illustrated in some of the phrases of one of the cult songs:

Ay, the unburnt pot [the white man] has spoilt the world
Yelele, the unburnt pot just handles the world, twisting it,
Yelele, we are troubled
Yelele, the God who is in heaven has given us his back;
The God who is at the roof has thrown us away like dogs,
Yelele, the Mwali in heaven has given us his back. 51

In spite of the feeling that Mwari had turned His back on them, the cult officials retained part of their former influence in the majority of Karanga tribes (Southern Mashonaland) and several other Shona groups to this day. They even regained a good deal of political influence with the rise of African Nationalism in the early 1950’s.
2. The Mwari Cult in its Contemporary Setting

Before turning to the cult's present organization and political influence, we should first pay attention to the conceptual change of the Shona High-God which began to take shape after the arrival of the Europeans.

a. Conceptual Change

Christian missionaries of this century were faced with a highly syncretized traditional concept of God. The Mbire God of Fertility had attained additional female and sexual connotations through the influence of the Tonga tribes in the Zambesi basin. Rozvi influence contributed towards the personification of this deity who became less remote through His interest in the political cohesion of His people. As the senior tribal spirits could be approached through their *svikiro*, so Mwari could eventually be consulted at His shrines. European presence had temporarily turned Him into a militant God, whereafter He assumed, in addition to His rain making activities, His present role as champion of traditional law and custom. As a conservative force He became the ultimate bulwark against foreign influence and His messages, as we shall see later, form the source of inspiration for the passive resistance which still characterizes the 'Shona way of life' in this modern era of acculturation.

When the missionaries translated the Biblical Message into
Shona, they found 'Mwari' the most suitable term to use for God (Elohim), the Father. It was undoubtedly the most effective term to use, but the traditional associations were so strong, that some of the pre-Christian attributes were simply transferred to the Biblical God in the minds of many nominal or active Christians. On the other hand, the influence of the Christian concept of God penetrated the circles of non-Christians, to the effect that the idea of a personal God involved in everyday life, became more prominent. Even at Matonjeni there are traces of the further syncretization of an already syncretic God. When Simon Chokoto, the high priest, was asked about Mwari veChikristu and Mwari vaMatonjeni, he said, "They are one, because God is one. The difference is that of worship because the Bible belongs to the Europeans, whereas we worship here in Chikaranga. Jesus was a Son of Mwari just as we are all sons of God. We do not mention the name of Christ here at Matonjeni because Mwari, the Lord of this place [Changamire vepano] is directly spoken to." Indeed, in the Matonjeni context Christ is regarded as a great European 'Mhondoro' who, like Chaminuka, stands as Mediator at the apex of the ancestral hierarchy.

But in addition to fitting the Christian God into the traditional pattern, as Simon does, the Christian concept affects the traditional one as well. This is clearly illustrated in the now common description by traditionalists of Mwari as Holy Spirit (Mweya Mutsvene). God, as ancestor-like Spirit, is in fact awarded an essentially new attribute. The dimensions of the traditional Mwari are again being increased, as happened in the past. Restricted to the role of Creator of the Mbire at first, He became the same for the Rozvi and Ndebele in the course of time. Now that the Europeans, His 'white sons' have come, He is regarded as 'owner of the whole country' (mwene venyika yose) and therefore 'owner' of all people. One of the main differences between His 'white and black sons' is that the white sons, as late-comers, are classified as 'sister's sons (vazukuru)' in Mwari's i.e. the Shona over-all 'kinship system' This places them, in the eyes of the Matonjeni God, in a slightly inferior position in relation to their 'vasekuru', i.e. Mwari's black sons. 52
A certain amount of confusion and divergence of opinion concerning the Christian and traditional God continues to exist in church circles. The following discussion with Elisha and Bebura, two active Church of Christ members, and Joël, a Zionist, reflects their complete differences of opinion, partly due to the divergent attitudes of the Mission and Prophetic Churches, as regards the traditional religious background:

*Question*: What is the relation between Mwari and the *midzimu* (ancestral spirits)?

_Elisha_: The *midzimu* are down here; Mwari is in heaven, but he cooperates with the *midzimu*. Mwari said: 'Nobody comes to Me without a mediator (*murevereri*).’ Our mediators are our parents. Even when still alive they mediate on our behalf through their deceased forbears. The important thing is that they know us.

*Question*: What is the difference between Mwari the Father and Mwari vaMatonjeni?

_Bebura_: The two are one (*vari vamwe)*!

_Joël_: No! they are definitely not alike. I disagree there. Mwari vaMatonjeni is of the world (*nyika*) only, because there is only one real God. Mwari vaMatonjeni does act, but He has no power to stop a person from dying. The real Mwari can stop any danger from befalling you until your time is full.

*Question*: Where does the similarity lie between the two Gods?

_Bebura_: As we see it, the Bible says: Honour your father and your mother so that your days will be numerous on this earth that your God, Jehovah, has given you! Therefore it is understandable that they [our parents] will one day say: ‘My child, you must brew me some beer and honour me in this way!’ If I refuse there will be no prosperity and blessing awaiting me and my family at our doorstep. We cannot disobey them. Most people follow the orders of their deceased parents. Therefore the laws of both the *midzimu* and Mwari must be followed.

_Joël_: It is of no use to worship the ancestors (*pira midzimu*).

_Elisha_: If you pray (*namata*) to the ancestors they do not fail to come to your aid, since they know you and they also understand God. God is no fool and He allows you to honour your
father and mother.

Joël: The Bible only refers to your obligations towards your parents when they are still alive!

Bebura: Who told you so? If your parents die and ask something from you, won't you consent?

Joël: They don't speak to you after death. What really bothers you is something evil. The *midzimu* are evil spirits (*mweya yakaipa)*.

**Question**: Does Mwari co-operate (*batidzana*) with Matonjeni practices?

Elisha: God is Spirit and He said: "Nothing happens beyond My knowledge." So He will not allow Mwari vaMatonjeni to do what He pleases without His own consent as God the Father.

Bebura: Whom did our fathers go and consult at Matonjeni? Were they not given rain for their requests?

Joël: Mwari vaMatonjeni is *like a witch*. He can only operate after he has asked permission from the real God. [This comparison derives from the belief that a witch must first persuade the protecting *mudzimu* of a family to 'open the door' before he or she can enter a house and do harm to the inhabitants].

Bebura retorts angrily: Joël, don't get lost by comparing these things with witches! Remember what happened to Sha-rara. He did the same thing and died soon after in hospital.

Elisha: It is all the same. People without a church drink beer, while there is not a single church without beer-drinkers. It is like catching fish. If I catch a bream or a barber the spirit inside both is the same. The one God is down here and tends to the things of this earth, while the other is in heaven and tends to the things up there. The one up there is reached by the one down here, because the latter mediates for us with the one up there."

The kind of distinction made by Elisha and Bebura is representative of a great many Christians in Mission Churches. Few of them would declare the traditional God to be non-existent or totally powerless. They either identify the two Gods or see them in close cooperation, or else they speak alternately of both deities as one Being or as complementary agents each acting within his own sphere of responsibilities. The general
picture that emerges is that of Mwari the Father who is all-powerful and above this world, and of Mwari vaMatonjeni in a somewhat subordinate position but still giving rain and fulfilling an additional mediating function. There has been a shift of authority to the One in heaven. In the temporal realm the God of Matonjeni has not lost His validity. To the traditionalists it would therefore seem that their Christian contemporaries are not eliminating Mwari vaMatonjeni but reducing Him to a role similar to that of the supra-tribal and mediating spirit, Chaminnuka. If so, the traditional spiritual hierarchy of mediation is not supplanted by something new, but simply extended through the interplay of both traditional and Christian concepts. Individual petitions can very well go straight to God the Father during church worship and private prayers, but can in fact also be forwarded through the family ancestors and tribal spirits to Mwari vaMatonjeni, and from there ultimately to Mwari Above (Wokumusoro).

Bebura’s comment about the similarity of the deities reveals the close link between Mwari and the ancestors. His first reaction is not to equate the attributes of the traditional and Christian God, but to derive their similarity from their common relation to the ancestors. The Fifth Commandment in the Old Testament is interpreted as condoning the traditional religious obligations to the ancestors. In this way the mediating function of the mizimu is justified and retained, even within the church. Joël, on the other hand, advances a much less compromising point of view, which is typical of the Zionists and of members of the prophetic churches generally. His derogation of the Matonjeni God as a witch and his denunciation of ancestor worship reflects the radical attitude of most Zionist groups, whose attack on traditional forms of worship often culminates in the identification of Mwari vaMatonjeni with Satan himself.

b. Cult Organization and Range of Influence

Prof. Gelfand’s description of Matonjeni leaves one with the impression that Mwari’s Voice is no longer to be heard at
Matonjeni and that the rain rituals at the shrines now mainly consist of the annual ceremony when Mwari is asked for rain. In 1963 he visited Sinyeyo, the ritual officiant at Dula rock, who told him that, after his (Sinyeyo's) father died, the Voice was no longer heard at the face of the rock. Of the shrines still in operation Gelfand mentions Dula, Majuba and Tskoko. He furthermore suggests that the mediums who are in attendance at Dula are either Ndebele or Kalanga.

In the light of Gelfand's information, Dula cannot be regarded as Matonjeni proper, at least not as the central Matonjeni shrine of the Rebellions, because the central cult is still in the first place a Shona institution run by Mbire Shoko descendants and attended by delegates from Mashonaland. Moreover, the Voice has never ceased to speak at Matonjeni. Dula may be linked to the central shrine at Matonjeni in a way similar to which the shrines of Njelele (now partly defunct), Mazwawe and Maguhu today stand in relation to Wirirani. The priest colony at Chokoto's village, popularly referred to as Wirirani, no doubt represents the major present day cult complex at Matonjeni. In the mountains surrounding Chokoto's village there are no less than three shrines where the Voice can be heard regularly. One is at Mt.SaShe (lit. 'keeper of the Lord'), where important matters are discussed and at which Mwari prefers to speak to Rozvi delegations. The other two minor shrines are at Seni-Seni and Pada, where matters of a more individual nature, for instance, the request of a nganga for curative powers, are dealt with.

Unfortunately it was impossible to determine to what extent the shrines of Mangwe and Inyati, previously mentioned in connection with the Rebellions, are still in operation. At Matonjeni there was no mention of these shrines. It is possible, however, that the Dula shrine described by Gelfand bears some relation to that of Mangwe, which would account for the predominance of Ndebele and Kalanga delegates at this (the Dula) shrine.

The officials of the Matonjeni shrine complex (Wirirani, Njelele, Mazwawe and Maguhu) keep in regular touch with each other through jointly attending the annual rain feasts, as well as by the interchange of hossanah's and spirit-mediums.
Thus the messages of Mwari can be partly controlled over a wide area. During my visit to Chokoto's village, Makomana, the son of Hobo, was resident there. His mother was an mbonga and his father the paternal uncle (babamukuru) of Chokoto's father. As an hossanah (male dedicated to Mwari) from Plumtree district, he first lived at the Njelele shrine since 1940, before he moved to Wirirani in recent years. Makomana is only one of several relatives of Chokoto's who have lived or are still living in the distant shrine communities. In this way Chokoto gained access to inside information about the continuous ritual procedures within the total network of shrines, and could thus exercise a certain amount of control.

Chokoto's own colony of priests comprises four adjacent villages. The headmen are: Simon Chokoto, who had recently inherited his deceased father's position; Usingaperi Peura, a muVenda and Simon's muzukuru (uterine 'grandchild' since Peura's father, Tope, married a sister of the senior Chokoto); Machonda, Simon's brother-in-law (mukuwasha); and one of his maternal uncles (sekuru). All four are interrelated. As muzukuru and mukuwasha, both Peura and Machonda belong to the 'wife-receiving lineages' in relation to Chokoto's, which places Chokoto in a senior position as far as kinship relations are concerned. On the other hand, the 'joking relationship' between him and his sekuru would render any threat to his authority by the latter harmless. Each of the four men has a ritual office in the Mwari cult. Simon is the high priest (mupinzi vebasa: lit. the one who controls the work), and Peura the keeper of Matonjeni (muchengeiti veMatonjeni). The other two belong to the junior cult ranks of hossanah and jukwa dancer, whose privilege it is to dance in honour of Mwari during ritual ceremonies.

Next to Simon and Peura, the other important ritual officers at the apex of the cult hierarchy are the following: Simon's younger brother, Adamu, the 'second priest' (mufambiri) who, as the high priest's representative is sent on errands (kufambira) further afield; Kombo, their oldest sister, who acts as high priestess; MaMoyo the second wife of the deceased Chokoto who, as spirit-medium (svikiro) represents Mwari's Voice in the cave; and Simon's wife, who attends consultations at the
cave as the spirit-medium’s ‘understudy’ and future representative of the Voice.

Adamu, his sister Kombo, their families and MaMoyo live at the homestead of the deceased Chokoto near the main shrines at Mt. SaShe. This is where visiting *vanyai* are housed. When delegations from the outlying districts arrive with their gifts for Mwari, the two leading kraalheads, Simon and Peura, are summoned to Chokoto’s homestead, where discussions with the *munyai* take place in the presence of the above-mentioned officials (junior cult officials do not attend these meetings). Peura, as oldest male officer and keeper of Matonjeni, presides over such meetings, while MaMoyo (the ‘Voice’), the priests and priestesses listen attentively to what the *munyai* has to say about the conditions in his own *nyika* (chiefdom or country).

When the *munyai* is taken to the shrine after sunset or in the early morning before sunrise, the women have already taken their places at the cave. One is not supposed to know that MaMoyo is in the cave, and she is well hidden. Kombo, the priestess and main interpreter of Mwari’s messages, is seated together with Simon’s wife within view at the mouth of the cave when the men arrive. After taking off their shoes the men approach the cave in single file. Simon leads the way, followed by Peura and the visiting *munyai*, with Adamu in the wake. They sit down in order of their authority near to Kombo, with their backs to the cave, facing in an easterly direction; the direction from which Mwari came to install Tandaudze, His son as first Priest. On these occasions the name Mwari is never uttered, but God is addressed by His praise-names: *Dziva!* *Mbedzi!* *Shoko!* Once Mwari has acknowledged the arrival of the cult officers and the *munyai*, by greeting the delegation from the cave, the *munyai* is asked to present his gifts. These are passed from hand to hand to the mouth of the cave where Kombo is seated. Once Mwari has acknowledged the arrival of the cult officers and the *munyai*, by greeting the delegation from the cave, the *munyai* is asked to present his gifts. These are passed from hand to hand to the mouth of the cave where Kombo is seated. Communications can now start in all earnest. Mwari’s high-pitched voice, coming from the cave, speaks in ChiRozvi, the old dialect of the Rozvi kings. Kombo then interprets the message into Sindebele; Simon, with the aid of Peura, further translates it into Chikaranga if the *munyai* happens to be a MuKaranga. During the whole ceremony Kombo is regarded
as the closest to Mwari in her capacity as high-priestess. She is called ‘grandmother of the country’ (*mbuya venyika*), and is imputed to be ‘the mother of all the people’, because in her ritual role she is somehow looked upon as the ‘wife of Mwari’ Simon, as *mupinzi vebasa*, respects Kombo in this capacity. Once the Voice is heard, he allows her to speak first before he takes the initiative. The whole flow of the conversation sometimes stalls at this juncture, because Simon and Peura must decide which parts of the *munyai’s* speech and replies are essential enough to relay to Mwari. Simon’s wife and Adamu are observant onlookers.

There is no doubt that Simon, Kombo and to a lesser extent Peura, hold the positions of power in the cult. I have not heard Blake and Thompson’s distinction of Eye, Ear and Mouth being applied to their functions, but it is possible that the Voice in the cave is actually the Mouth, Kombo and Simon the Ear, and Peura the Eye. If so, the main authority would lie with the Ear, since this is the office traditionally inherited in the priestly Mbire lineage. Of great significance is the fact that Peura, the keeper, is a muVenda and MaMoyo the Voice, a muRozvi. 57

Here we find the links with and continuation of the historical past, because even before they migrated to the southern parts of Rhodesia and northern Transvaal, the Venda had been closely associated with the Mbire tribe and regularly sent delegations to the Matonjeni shrines. Though their messengers now visit Matonjeni less frequently than before, we see that some of their kinsmen are still actively involved at the cult shrines.

MaMoyo’s position raises the question whether the Rozvi are still exerting much influence over the Mwari cult. One might even ask if hers is not the key position at Matonjeni because, being the Voice, she impersonates Mwari, being identified with Him in her ritual capacity. In the same way as the ordinary spirit-medium of an ancestral or tribal spirit ‘become’ the spirit when he or she is possessed, so MaMoyo ‘becomes’ Mwari when she speaks with Mwari’s Voice in the cave. Her position, however, is not quite the same as that of the ordinary *svikiro*. In the first place her role is a secretive one, which is never publicly mentioned and indeed is actually supposed.
not to exist, for the people are told that it is Mwari Himself who speaks from the cave. In the second place, she is promoted to her position as the Voice because of her status as the wife of the high priest, and not because the Spirit had proclaimed her as his ‘mouthpiece’ in the manner ancestral or mhondoro spirits ‘call’ their mediums. In the third place, she falls under the jurisdiction of her ‘acolytes’ – Simon and Kombo – a situation unlike that of the ordinary svikiro-nehombo (spirit medium-acolyte) relationship in which the svikiro wields the power. On the other hand, the authority of the Mbire priest and priestess is not absolute. They hold MaMoyo in high esteem, because as a member of the royal Rozvi lineage she represents the age-old association between the Mbire and Rozvi tribes. The Rozvi dominance of the past is therefore not completely lost. Mbonga women, sent to live at Matonjeni, are still predominantly Rozvi. These women become the wives of the priests, keepers and sometimes of the messengers. This on the one hand guarantees Rozvi continuity in the important office of mbonga-svikiro at the shrines and on the other perpetuates the ancient kinship group-pattern of mutual obligation and privilege between the priestly Mbire and royal Rozvi. It also preserves the slight ‘subordination’ of the wife receiving (Mbire) lineage over the wife-providing (Rozvi) lineage in the basic Shona pattern of affinal kinship relations.

The secrecy shrouding the cult, and the Ndebele influence of the past century, makes it difficult to unravel the connections between the officiating clans. Having lived in Matabeleland for so long, the priests all speak Sindebele, have intermarried with Ndebele, and adopted Ncube as their clan totem, which they say is the Ndebele equivalent of Shoko (monkey). Popular writings of recent years, in which the cult is sometimes superficially portrayed in its Ndebele guise, are somewhat misleading. Musosa Kazembe’s interesting narrative of the ‘Voice of the Zimbabwe God’ 58, for example, includes no reference to the original Shona name of this deity. Mwari is only referred to as the ancient God of Zimbabwe, Mlimu. Kazembe furthermore speaks of the high priestess as Nkumbo Ncube and of her priestess sisters as Fakubi and Mankazana, all Ndebele names. Nkumbo Ncube is, of course, Kombo Shoko.
to her Shona delegates, and Mankazana is the Rozvi *mbongan-svikiro*, MaMoyo, who is Kombo’s deceased father’s second wife, and not her sister, as Kazembe infers. Another report of the annual rain ceremony at Matonjeni presents Kombo as Mdigene Ncube, the rain goddess who ‘communes with the Ancestral spirits on the subject of rain’ 60 This is obviously a distortion of the proceedings at the Wirirani shrines of Matonjeni and of Kombo’s ritual office, but it may very well be the true reflection of a first impression which this mysterious cult makes upon a casual observer. Simon Chokoto, when I asked him about the Ndebele influence on the cult, shrugged his shoulders and said, ‘We live among the Ndebele and we speak their language, but the customs (tsika) we honour and the laws of worship we obey at this place, are those of our Mbire Shoko forefathers. We are Vakaranga! There is not a single Ndebele who holds high office here at Matonjeni.”

How then did the Mbire manage to retain control of the Mwari cult and what pattern did they follow in the appointment of new officers? According to Simon, Mwari himself had appointed Tandaudze and his descendants as the legitimate priests of His work (see diagram 1). “Long, long ago,” he says, “Mwari arrived in this part of the country from the east [mabvazuwa: where the sun comes from] in the shape of a human being. He was passing through as the ‘owner of the world’ (Mwene venyika) to see His people. Tandaudze, His son, accompanied Him. All the people came out to see the two of them and they said to each other, “Look at Tandaudze, the ‘man of the people’ (munhu vavanhu)!” When Mwari moved on, Tandaudze stayed behind. The people honoured him as the ‘owner of Mwari’s work’ (mwene vebasa veMwari) because he had come to do the work of Mwari. They built him a house to live in. He married Chikudu, who helped him with the work of Mwari. Through her it was made known that Mwari wished the Tandaudze descendants to continue with his work. So Nyamazana, Tandaudze’s son, succeeded his father.”

Simon is not sure of the ancestors between Nyamazana and his father Chokoto, but nevertheless states that his father was a grandchild (muzukuru) of the now remote ‘son of Mwari’ and that he had lawfully inherited his office as high priest at
Diagram 1. The Priestly Lineage

Matonjeni. Chokoto Sr. had two wives: Mai vaDuwe, the mother of Jonas, Simon and Adamu; and MaMoyo, his second wife, who had lived at Matonjeni as a mbonga since her youth. Mai vaDuwe assisted Chokoto and his older sister, who was the high priestess before she died. Before her death this priestess let it be known that she wished her brother's daughter to succeed her. In the previous generation we thus find the picture of Chokoto officiating as mupinzi vebasa – high-priest, assisted by his sister as high priestess, mbuya venyika or mwene vebasa (owner of the work). Peura, his brother-in-law was keeper of Matonjeni and his first wife was the Voice. High-priest Chokoto, had married only one mbonga, but Peura had several mbonga wives, some of whom are still living in Unisingaperi's village. Usingaperi, Peura's son, today looks after the mbonga wives he 'inherited' from his deceased elder brother.

Upon the death of Chokoto Sr. his son, Jonas, who had
already married an mbonga woman, was installed as high priest. The official initiation took place during the kugadzira ritual, which was conducted on behalf of his deceased father. His sister, Kombo, was meanwhile acting as 'priestess-in-training'. Although her paternal aunt (vatete) had died, she had to wait for the kugadzira ceremony of her own mother, Mai vaDuwe, before she could be officially installed. When Mai vaDuwe died she was succeeded by MaMoyo as the Voice, while Simon's wife (Simon having meanwhile replaced Jonas) became her understudy. This was the situation when I visited the shrines in 1967. Kombo was already acting as high-priestess, but was awaiting the official appointment because Mai vaDuwe still had to be 'gadzwa'd'. Jonas had been disqualified as high priest because he had tried to introduce some changes in the cult of which Mwari did not approve. Simon, aided by Adamu, took his place. Simon's wife is not an mbonga but a spirit-medium within her own lineage. If the Matonjeni pattern is strictly followed, however, one can expect Simon sooner or later to add an mbonga to his household, and preferably a muRozvi.

The pattern of succession, which enabled the Mbire Shoko to retain the two major priesthood offices in their own ranks clearly emerges. Senior son inherits from his deceased father, while his sister inherits from her paternal aunt (vatete), a position which only becomes official after her own mother's death. Wife of senior son (in his capacity as high priest), preferably an mbonga of Mwari and often a muRozvi, succeeds to the position of Voice after the death of previous high priest's wife. The office of Keeper, attached to the priesthood clan through intermarriage, also devolves from father (Peura Tope) upon senior son (Usingaperi Peura). MaMoyo's present role in the cult, as the only remaining member of the 'previous generation', Simon's role as high priest when his mother was still speaking from the cave, and Jonas's disqualification, show that the outlined pattern is probably seldom complete on the same generation level, and that there is enough flexibility within the cult to disqualify lawful successors who do not comply with Mwari's laws.

Looking at the Wirirani community as a whole, we find, next
5. Marinzezi, the oldest living paternal aunt (vatete) of the agnatic descendants of one of the senior Hera houses in Chingombe, dedicating finger-miller (rakweza) to the senior tribal spirits, and beckoning them to inform Mwari vaMatonjeni that the beer-brewing preparations for the mukwerere-ritual had commenced.
6. Hera ritual officiant about to pour out beer on the grave of senior ancestor during mukwerere ritual (1966). This is one of the few exceptions when Mwari vaMatonjeni is explicitly mentioned during a traditional ritual in a distant ward (Chingombe – more than 200 miles from the cult centre at Matonjeni).
to the senior cult officials, a great number of junior functionaries. In the four villages there are at least sixteen mbonga women. MaMoyo estimates the total number of mbonga women living in or near the communities of the total shrine complex at Matonjeni at more than sixty. The majority of them come from Belingwe, Gusvini to the north of Bulawayo, from the southern Venda and also from the Victoria district. They are largely members of the Rozvi (Moyo), Venda and Kore Kore clans and become the wives of the priests, keepers, hossanah’s or their kinsmen. The kinsmen of Chokoto and Peura who participate in the cult, are hossanahs, jukwa dancers and sangoma dancers. 65

More should be said about these offices to clarify the composite picture. Both mbonga and hossanah are dedicated by their parents to Mwari while they are still young. As female and male ‘children of God’ they are given to Mwari, not in the first place on the grounds of good moral conduct, but as a result of their parents’ special ‘inspiration’ by Mwari himself. 66 Once at Matonjeni, these children of God are subjected to special taboos concerning the use of food and their relation to the opposite sex. It seems that the majority of parents who dedicate their children to Mwari are either the vanyai of the outlying districts themselves, or those who are in close contact with these messengers and therefore well informed of the wishes Mwari expresses at the oracular shrines.

Within the priest colony both mbonga’s and hossanah’s have special duties while they are still young. The former must sweep the entrance of the shrines and tend to the patch of land allotted to them, and the latter must learn to dance in honour of Mwari. These dances take place at the priests’ homesteads during the two monthly ceremonies in honour of Mwari, or during the big annual festivals in October. An hossanah can also be sent on special errands to a distant district, on which occasion he is expected to dance at the village he visits. When the mbonga becomes a mhandura (girl of marriageable age) she is regarded as ‘Mwari’s wife’ and He decides what should happen to her. In the case of MaMoyo, Mwari is reported to have said at the cave: ‘Chokoto, there is My wife; you take care of her!’ Mwari determines the bride price (roora) as well,
a factor which enables the Matonjeni priests to exert their influence over *mbonga* women who are married off to men living in other areas.

By the time she gets married an *mbonga* girl is well acquainted with the activities of Matonjeni. She now becomes the medium (svikiro) of a senior tribal spirit of her home district, or of one of the numerous Matonjeni *midzimu*. During the rain ceremonies all those *mbonga*s who live elsewhere come to Matonjeni to participate in the dances. On these occasions they become possessed and speak on behalf of the tribal *mhondoro* or lesser ancestral spirits (*midzimu*).

The *hossannah*s may also represent a tribal spirit of their home district, or become possessed by *sangoma* or *jukwa* spirits. Several *hossannah*s are the hosts of *jukwa* spirits only. These spirits are believed to have emanated directly from Mwari, since they are not, like the *midzimu*, the spirits of deceased human beings. They are therefore the spirits without clan names (*mitupo*), living close to Mwari and popularly referred to as the 'water spirits' (*mweya yemvura*).

Once past child bearing age, the *mbonga* reaches the third and most important phase of her life. As *muchembera* she is now allowed to brew the sacred beer for the ritual ceremonies, and if she happens to be the high priest's wife she becomes eligible for the highest position an *mbonga* can achieve – that of the Voice itself. I have the impression that only after child-bearing age, can a priest's wife become the Voice. Should MaMoyo die before Simon's wife reaches this stage, it is possible that another *mbonga* in the Wirirani community may temporarily assume her duties in the cave.

The Matonjeni community as a whole emerges as a replica of the Spirit world (see diagram 2). Mwari and his close associates are directly represented in the priests' colony in a like manner as they are believed to exist in the spirit world. This becomes clear on the days of ritual festivities when the closest possible identification with the spirit world is achieved. This identification is ritually enacted on a massive scale, then the Voice in the cave 'becomes' Mwari Himself, the possessed *jukwa* dancers 'are' the rainbringing *jukwa* spirits themselves, and the *mbonga-svikiros* speak to the people as the *mhondoro* and
A. Supra tribal spirits associated with the royal dynasties of the past, e.g. Chaminuka

B. Tribal spirits (*mhondoro; midzimu venyika*)

C. Family spirits (*midzimu yapamusha*)

D. Sub-chiefs and ward headmen of ruling lineage (*vachinda*) in chiefdom – future tribal spirits

E. Commoner inhabitants of the chiefdom (future *midzimu*)

F. Spirit-mediums (*masvikiro*) representing some of the main tribal spirits

*Diagram 2. Interconnections between Spirit World, Cult Community and Ritual Outpost.*
other tribal spirits who live near Mwari. Each important spirit has his counterpart in the realm of the living. Although the whole hierarchy of spirits may never be fully represented during a ceremony at any one time, some of the most important ones are always present on such occasions. The very presence of mbongas at Matonjeni ensures that regular contact with remote districts is being maintained apart from the annual visits by the vanyai. Considering the present-day continuation of the mbonga-system with its large number of mbonga women still living at Matonjeni or in far off districts after having spent their youth near the shrines, the cult's present and potential influence over a wide area is likely to be considerable.

If one observes the cult as an uninitiated observer from a distant administrative district, its influence seems limited to the sporadic visits of the munyai, who reports back to the chief the utterances of the Voice at the cave. But an analysis of the munyai's office as it still functions today sheds some light on his obscure but far reaching influence. Taking Vondo Mukozho, the munyai from the Gutu district, and Chihiya from Bikita (also called Chirisamuru, after one of the Rozvi Mambos, when acting in his ritual capacity) as examples, we see that both of them belong to the chiefly lineages of their respective districts. Chihiya traces his descent via the ancestors of the present Rozvi chief, Jiri, to the Rozvi Mambos; and Vondo his, via Makuwaza and Chaurura to Mabwazhe, the founder ancestor of the present Rufura tribe in Gutu. As kinsmen of acknowledged local rulers they are regarded as the true representatives of their tribal communities. This pattern is not, however, followed in all cases because trusted non-clansmen (vatorwa) can also, in exceptional circumstances, be selected for this important position. A set of seemingly conflicting rules determines the appointment of a munyai. Vondo claims to have been appointed by Machingambi, one of the former Gutu chiefs, but he also stresses that in order to become a munyai, one must be specially called from Matonjeni. "Inheritance," he says, "plays no role in the appointment of the new munyai," but it is obvious that he regards his son as the future successor to his office. Whatever the guidelines followed in the process of installing a new munyai, once officially recognized, he
becomes part of a well organized cult system, the influence of which stretches over a very wide area. Simon Chokoto estimates that well over forty vanyai still annually visit Matonjeni. The majority of them come from the Southern Shona districts: Belingwe, Shabani, Chibi, Victoria, Gutu, Chilimanzi, Ndanga, Bikita (all of these districts fall in what one can culturally define as the Karanga speaking block of Shone tribes); and from further east: Melsetter and Chipinga, in Ndau territory. Others come from districts north of Bulawayo, from the west as far as Plumtree, from Gwanda and further southwards from the Venda inhabited territories north and south of the Limpopo. MaMoyo and Peura confirmed Simon’s estimate of the geographical scope of their influence (see map). Concerning the irregularity of the Venda messengers from the south, Peura dryly commented, “They only run up here when a severe drought has convinced them that Mwari is angry.”

The task of a munyai includes the collection of gifts for Mwari throughout the entire district ‘under his care’. This is done in various ways. Sometimes a chief will call a meeting of vachinda (subchiefs and ward headmen) and order them to collect money from their kraalheads, or else circular letters will be sent out to the different wards to inform sub-chiefs that the munyai will visit them shortly. Each kraalhead is supposed to collect a few pennies from the head of every homestead under his jurisdiction. The total sum per village consequently is relatively low and often does not exceed 2/6, but Vondo assures me that the gift taken to Matonjeni on behalf of the whole district usually amounts to about £30. For his service Vondo himself receives £12 a year, in addition to travelling allowances. More important than the amount of money collected – evidence primarily of a communal recognition of Mwari as ‘owner of the country’ – is the regular contact between Matonjeni messenger and ward-heads over such a wide area. While on his rounds, the munyai sometimes stays for several days in one tribal ward where he will visit traditionalist kraalheads, attend court (dare) sessions and instruct people on the procedures of rain rituals. The latest messages of Matonjeni are thus conveyed to the widely dispersed inhabitants of a district through direct and personal contact, which according
to African standards has always been the best form of communication. The munyai thus becomes one of the most important agents, next to the traditional diviner-herbalist (ngang'a), for keeping the traditional rituals operative, and to give the traditionalists a sense of unity over and above the tribal boundaries within which they live.

As a result of his regular travels the munyai becomes one of the best informed men on inter- and intra-tribal affairs. This first-hand knowledge not only furnishes Matonjeni with reliable information, but makes the munyai a particularly suitable counsellor at the chief's court in his district. Between the years 1963 and 1966, a period of interregnum when Gutu had an acting chieftain, it was evident that the munyai was heavily relied upon to give advice during court sessions. Acting chief Munyonga on occasion refused to open a court session on the Nyamande-Chagonda dispute until munyai Vondo was present. In this specific case it seemed as if the munyai's authority was even greater than that of the acting chief. Teacher Chagonda, representative of the Marumbi descendants living near Mt. Rasa, was of the opinion that munyai Vondo Mukosho 'is bigger than the chief. He is the man who is known to all of us and also to the people at Matonjeni. He knows the history of Marumbi better than the acting chief and is capable of directing matters in our dispute with Nyamande.' When Machingura, the new chief Gutu, was installed in May 1967, Vondo assessed his own position as messenger as follows: "Machingura respects me as munyai, because as far as rain is concerned I am in charge of the whole chiefdom (nyika). If I don't go to Matonjeni it will not rain properly. Machingura will soon come and ask me to take good care of the chiefdom. Only if he follows Matonjeni's laws faithfully, will he rule successfully." Pretentious though Vondo's statement may sound it nevertheless expresses the deeply rooted traditionalist point of view concerning sound leadership. It also reveals the munyai's confidence in the unassailable authority of his office and its close relation to that of a tribal chieftain.

Under normal circumstances the munyai undertakes two trips per year to Matonjeni: before the rainy season commences and after the harvest. Having visited the wards of his district,
Vondo meets with the chief and the principal Gutu spirit-medium in September (see diagram 2) before the rainy season is due. The purpose of this meeting is to show the tribal spirits how much zvipo (gifts in the form of money) has been collected. Chief Gutu passes the money to the svikiro when the latter is possessed by the tribal spirit (B) he represents, with the words, “We show you the gifts collected by your children.” The spirit replies: “I thank you my children. Go and present your request at Matonjeni! I will lead the one who goes there.” Afterwards the svikiro hands the money back to the munyai, who never leaves for Matonjeni until he has thus been officially assured of the tribal spirit’s approval and guidance. It is believed that the tribal spirits have already informed Mwari about the local situation by the time the munyai arrives at Matonjeni. They are the main informants who keep Mwari abreast of the shortcomings of their descendants. In turn Mwari tells the munyai at the shrine in what way the people entrusted to him have sinned and why the rains are withheld from them as a form of punishment. From the outlying areas an indirect link with Mwari vaMatonjeni is therefore established by the principal svikiro through his contact with the tribal spirit before the munyai leaves for the cult centre. But Mwari does not ‘reply’ through the tribal spirit. His response is heard only at the cult’s shrine.

Apart from the tribal spirits there are two more ‘silent’ but accepted links in the spiritual chain between Matonjeni and a particular chiefdom. The one is that of the jukwa dancer who becomes possessed by the Matonjeni water spirits during one of the numerous small mukwerere rituals annually conducted throughout the chiefdom. But Mwari does not actually convey messages through these spirits although they are believed to be very close to Him. The other is that of the nyusa spirits of deceased vanyai who, after death, are believed to continue moving between Matonjeni and their home districts.

Although the important September-October visit is not necessarily planned to coincide with the annual rain ceremony, it often does. In such a case the usual two-day stay of the munyai may be extended and Vondo participates in the dancing festivities. If the music contains the correct rhythm he becomes
possessed by the same \textit{sangoma} spirit which enabled him to practise as a diviner-herbalist many years ago. Should he return to Gutu with an important message from Mwari, as happened in 1966, Chief Gutu calls a meeting of all the leading \textit{vachinda} in his chiefdom. On this particular occasion it was made known that Mwari had commanded a change of the
traditional ‘resting day’ (chisi). Instead of resting from their work on the lands on Thursdays, as was originally laid down by the tribal spirit, the Gutu people were required to rest on Wednesdays, which is the day of rest at Matonjeni. It is significant that this change was accepted without opposition, because such an order might well have been interpreted as being con-
trary to an early regional, ancestral law. I am not sure whether the motivation behind this move was related to a large scale effort by the Matonjeni priesthood to co-ordinate the different resting days within the districts under their sphere of influence, but the acceptance of this instruction in Gutu demonstrates the good-will between Mwari and tribal spirits, His overriding authority, as well as the far reaching influence He continues to have in matters concerning 'His' land.

The second visit of the munyai, after the harvest "when the people," according to Vondo, "are eating of the crops ripened by Mwari's rain", is of no less importance than the first. Mwari must be thanked for the rain received lest He become angry and retaliate with severe droughts. In former years maize cobs were taken to Matonjeni, but nowadays a small gift in cash as a token of thanksgiving will suffice. Often though there is a departure from the normal procedure if by January it is clear that the rains have been late in coming. What one can call an 'emergency trip' is then undertaken to Matonjeni. Before leaving his district with more zvipo, the munyai may first undertake a short visit to some of the nearest tribal wards to make sure that beer is being brewed for mukwerere rituals. For if the ancestors had not received enough beer during the course of the year, much rukweza (finger-millet) beer must be brewed for rain rituals, and the munyai is expected to report on these activities at Matonjeni. This type of visit clearly illustrates the co-ordination of traditional religious activities in remote areas, with a centralized agency. Mwari, as the preserver of traditional customs, wants to know and must be informed whether the necessary obligations to his demanding but subordinate spirits further afield, are being fulfilled.

For an assessment of present-day cult influence in the country one needs to examine the role played by the munyai and the sequence of mukwerere rituals. If we take Chingombe (see map), one of the sub-chiefdoms in the Gutu district and some 200 miles away from the cult's centre, as an example, the statistical data at first sight suggest a minimum of traditional religious activities. More than 80% of the adult population, including the majority of kraalheads, claim membership of the Mission (41.5%) and Independent Churches (40%). In the
whole area of approximately ten by twenty miles there are seven Dutch Reformed and one Catholic school, part of the achievement of about seventy and twenty years respectively, of Reformed and Catholic missionary activity.

It should also be stated that munyai Vondo lives in Gutu West, thirty miles from Chingombe and that Munyonga, the acting chief until 1967, was a staunch Zionist church member from whom one could not expect active participation in or stimulation of traditional rituals. In spite of all this, at least thirty mucwerere rain rituals took place, in the Chingombe chiefdom alone, between December 1965 and February 1966 (See plate 5 and 6). One ritual often includes the active participation of three to four kraalheads as well as the majority of their kinsmen. With so many kraalheads still taking the initiative regarding these rituals, it is evident that these are far from a dying practice, in spite of the impressive figures of nominal church affiliation. Since the essence of this ritual is a plea for rain through the tribal spirits to Mwari vaMatonjeni, its perpetuation points at a persistent belief in Mwari's rain making capacities. Had these ceremonies taken place in a period of severe drought, it could have been ascribed to the pressure of exceptional circumstances, but this was not the case in 1965–66. It rather seemed the normal pattern of ritual activity as determined by the turn of the seasons. In spite of the acting chief's inactivity as regards the collection of zvipo for Matonjeni at that particular stage, and in spite of the munyai living far away, the majority of kraalheads still collected gifts for Mwari in 1966. The contributions that year were less than usual, but this was the result of the discontent of the people about the prolonged struggle for the succession of the Gutu chieftainship, and not of a breakdown in cult organization.

Several kraalheads make use of their powers of land allocation to force unwilling Christians in their villages to contribute towards Mwari's zvipo. Those Christians say that they do not resist for fear of losing their lands, but maintain that they do not believe in Mwari vaMatonjeni. Yet there are many Christians who do believe in the Matonjeni God's ability to give or withhold rain, and in His power to cause destruction through
lightning, or through the battaleur eagle (*chapungu*) in the fields and among the stock of those who do not honour His and the ancestors’ *chisi* day.

Judging from my own observations and reports from other tribal wards in the Gutu and Bikita district, the Chingombe area can be regarded as fairly representative of those Shona and Ndebele territories where the influence of the Mwari cult is still evident. Much depends of course on the local *munyai*’s influence and his personal zeal. Vondo’s dedication to his task, coupled with his persuasive personality, in all probability contributed towards a resurgence of the cult’s influence in the Gutu district. It is conceivable, too, that the cult’s influence is even stronger in such territories as Chibi and Belingwe, where several *vanyai* operate in the same district and, being comparatively closer to the cult’s centre, are able to visit Matonjeni more regularly.

*Mwari vaMatonjeni* has remained the God of the rural people. To those who live on a subsistence level and are therefore dependent on a rain-giving God for their crops, and to those who are involved in the intrigues of tribal politics, the God of Matonjeni still matters a great deal. In the bustle of town life this need is less felt, and although townsmen generally know about this deity one can often hear them remark, “*Mwari vaMatonjeni* is the God of the ‘old men’ (*vakuru*) in the tribal lands.” It now seldom happens that a woman travels from the African township at Fort Victoria to Matonjeni in search of *‘chibereko’* (lit: fruit; i.e. the power of bearing children), as townsmen recollect to have often happened in the past. An organized *munyai* system does not exist for this urban community. But it should be noted that, as the ‘Nyanga Association’ (Herbalist Association of Africa) gained in popularity in recent years, *nganga* delegations are sent out regularly from all the Rhodesian towns to the annual meetings at Bulawayo close to the Matopos. At Fort Victoria alone there are at least six recognized members of this Association, who are in contact with their senior officials at Bulawayo. Judging from a recent press report, the journeys of individual *ngangas* to Matonjeni are now to some extent being replaced by delegations of the Association, who are sent to ask Mwari for the powers of
healing. Of the 1967 ritual ceremonies at Matonjeni it is stated that “members of the Nyanga Association had played an important part throughout the ceremony. They have reported their work, which was welcomed, and were promised healing powers. The Nyanga delegation was led by the association’s president, Mr. M. C. Chakari” 72 In this way possibly a new and indirect kind of representation for townsmen is being created because the influence of the town nganga, as the ‘revivalists’ of traditional religion, is considerable. To them the God of Matonjeni is in the first place the ‘owner’ of healing power, which means that among the urbanists the rain-giving God of the rural areas is presented in yet another guise.

c. Conflict with Mission and Independent Churches

The persistent influence of the traditional concept of God within Mission church circles has already been referred to. At Matonjeni the Christian God is fitted into the traditional thought pattern, and Christian worship is tolerated as a different approach to essentially the same divinity. Mwari vaMatonjeni, being a conservative God, at first strongly reacted to European customs, especially those introduced in Mission schools. In the course of time, when it became clear that education did not necessarily eliminate traditional culture and that church membership in practice seldom implied a complete break with the ancestral world, Mwari adopted a new, if somewhat ambiguous, attitude.

What was this new approach? The Matonjeni priesthood came to realize that they should adjust at least part of the cult to the new circumstances. In the new order the benefits and inevitability of education could no longer be denied. Vanyai consequently stopped carrying anti-education and anti-mission messages. Provided the ‘new way of life’ did not interfere too much with the traditional institutions of tribal government, and as long as they could freely continue to play their vital role as rain-emissaries, they were satisfied. Both Vondo and Chihiya live close to Dutch Reformed Mission stations and show no overt signs of antagonism. Their children attend
Mission schools as most other children do, and they are both on cordial terms with the missionaries. Though they know that missionaries do not approve of traditional religion, they probably even hope for some form of recognition of what they themselves regard as their ‘co-operative’ and important roles. Are they not the guarantors of rain, upon which even the missionaries, those recognized educators of their children, are dependent?

This adaptive approach is confined to the outlying regions, however, and this bears out the ambiguous nature of Mwari’s concessions. He must also retain his traditional identity! Therefore foreign influence must be controlled and drastically curbed at the cult centre itself. Whereas school education for the African youth has on the whole been accepted, Mwari has imposed some pretty severe restrictions as regards His ritual officers at Matonjeni. A few years ago, at one of the Wirirani shrines, He laid down the rule that the descendants of Chokoto should live at the Matopos. This oracular instruction is interpreted to imply that future priests should not leave the Matonjeni ‘stronghold’ in pursuit of education higher than the minimal qualifications obtainable at the nearest Lower Primary Mission school.

These orders of Mwari are strictly adhered to, in the Wirirani community. For instance, of the eighteen adults living in Simon Chokoto’s village, only one claims nominal affiliation to a church, and it is significant that teacher Aron, Simon’s muzukuru (father’s sister’s son), together with one of Chokoto’s relatives who is regarded as an active church member, has moved to another village. Those women who had been active church members prior to their joining the Wirirani community, have all stopped going to church.

The average educational qualifications of villagers is very low. As regards the priestly ranks themselves, Jonas reached sub-standard B, Simon standard 1 and Adamu standard 2, which means respectively two, three and four years of elementary education. High-priest Simon stated: “We did not attend school for many years because Mwari told us that the children of Chokoto were to stay here and tend to his work.” As the future ‘wives of Mwari’ the mbonga women have little need to
attend school. Few of them have ever had any school education at all. Once they identify themselves with the Matonjeni priesthood they become part of a community governed by conservative forces and their daily activities are devoted largely to the constant brewing of beer for the frequent ritual dances in honour of Mwari.

As a rule, missionaries are unaware of the subtle influence of the Mwari cult. The routine life at a mission station usually prevents their having direct contact with those who actively support the cult in the rural areas. They may even be misled by the accommodating attitude of the local munyai, whose affability may easily lead them to believe that the cult has broken down completely and virtually lost its effective force. Yet on occasion the unexpected behaviour of a person at a Mission station more than 200 miles from Matonjeni suddenly draws the attention of missionaries and gives them an inkling of the fact that the tenacious demands of the Matonjeni God are still a grave reality in the lives of those closely linked with the cult.

In 1965, for instance, it happened that a married woman, Mai J., dedicated as an mbonga to Mwari when she was still a child, was taken up in a Protestant Mission community in the Victoria district. During a prayer meeting she became possessed by Matonjeni spirits and, jumping up, tried to strangle one of the praying African girls. During the subsequent eight hours she had intermittent spells of spirit possession. The lady missionary, who tried to exorcise the evil spirits and stayed with her throughout this period, later wrote: “They seem to be three demons… One Sindebele speaking, who calls himself ‘Dawulamanzi’ and comes from Bulawayo. He is a man and very strong and ferocious. This kind is called ‘Changoma or Sangoma Spirit’ They kill. He finally left for good. Another spirit seemed to be a Zionist, for this woman attended that church for about 12 years. This spirit would say, ‘Hosanna, Hosanna, Amen, Hallelujah!’ etc. We cast him out. But one very persistent one I think has not gone. He speaks Shona from Matopos near Bulawayo. His surname is ‘Shoko’ – he is from Mwari of Matonjeni – and he was sent to fetch her to be Mwari’s wife, because when she was a young girl she was promised to Mwari as his wife. This demon sneers at you or
at the Word of God; and sometimes he laughs or cries and he dislikes the smell of Europeans. At times he glides like a snake. This one is called Jukwa by the Vakaranga. This spirit said he often tried to harm me but found it impossible.

The spirit refused to leave Mai J. and threatened to make her so sick and cripple that she would ultimately have to be sent home. "So I refuse to let her go home since these are all plans by the evil spirits," concludes Miss H. 73

In this specific case the efforts of a missionary to dispose of a Matonjeni spirit led to a direct confrontation with the basic and deeply rooted resistance of those closely associated with the cult. Several years of life in a mission community, and twelve years of membership of a Zionist church whose prophets are known for their exorcistic activities, were not enough to silence the demands of the Matonjeni spirit to an ex-mbonga who had unsuccessfully tried to escape from the binding vow of her parents. Important as it may be, the case of Mai J. remains a rare exception. The Protestant missionaries' leniency in practice (in spite of the rigid church laws which condemn traditional religion) is not in the first place marked by deliberate efforts to counter the old spirits, but rather by the lack of a direct confrontation with the traditional religion in sermons, and the telling absence on church records of disciplinary measures against church members who participate in traditional rites. 74 The Roman Catholic accommodation to the Shona ancestral rites, which implies even greater leniency and less overt opposition than is the case in Protestant circles generally, undoubtedly meets with approval at Matonjeni.

A much more dangerous challenge to the Matonjeni cult, however, is posed by the Independent church leadership of the prophetic type. Bishop Samuel Mutendi's Zion Christian Church has been a thorn in the flesh of the traditionalists ever since he introduced the new movement in the early 1920's. He had his headquarters (Zion City) at Bikita up to 1967, and his main sphere of influence extends into the territories where the Mwari messengers are still operating (see map). The messengers soon discovered that the uncompromising attitude of this prophetic leader left them no room for co-operation. Not only did he launch a deliberate and frontal attack upon the tra-
Zionist Bishop Mutendi, one of Matonjeni's major opponents, blessing the seed with his holy staff during a Mbeu Vungano.
The Zimbabwe bird and crocodile, possibly symbolizing the male and female attributes of the Shona High-God, respectively (photograph reproduced with permission from the National Archives of Rhodesia).
ditional religious institutions, but in many ways supplanted the old religion. Most unforgivable from the traditionalist point of view was Mutendi's claim to be a descendant of the Rozvi Mambos. He traces his descent through the house of Makuwa, Mudengedzerwa and Chirume Mushavi to the famous Rozvi kings, Dlembewu and Chirisamuru. As a relative of Mudzinganyama, whom the rebels wanted to install as Rozvi Mambo during the Rebellions in an effort to revive part of the old confederacy, Mutendi in fact likewise appeals to the Rozvi past to reinforce his own position.

Mutendi's leadership is itself based on his mediating function as the 'man of God' (munhu vaMwari). He is regarded by his followers as the special representative of God and Christ, a belief making for an intimate and direct relationship between him and his subordinates. This type of semi-Messianic leadership leaves no room for the kind of mediation provided by the ancestors. Zionist leaders are aware of the very real threat which the traditional system of mediation poses to the loyalty of some Zionist members to their bishop. This was revealed in the sermon of Evangelist Judah, Mutendi's son-in-law, at Zion City in 1965: "It is impossible not to mention the name of this man [Mutendi's]. The inner power compels one to do so. If we do not really believe that he was sent by God, it is because of the evil spirits of our forebears. Our refusal to subject ourselves completely to his authority is caused by the spirits of our forefathers working in us."

Mutendi himself is fully aware of the complications of this deep-rooted belief in the power of the ancestral spirits. He therefore often touches on this subject during Passover festivities, when followers from all over the country are present. In 1965, for instance, when he preached his final sermon before he administered the sacraments, he launched an attack upon the ancestors: "A family under Satan's guidance [referring to Mwari vaMatonjeni and the ancestors] has no peace. You must therefore cast away all that was practised by your forebears. They believed in and worshipped their midzimu. This kind of worship is the same as believing in demons and such shavi spirits as the Madanda, Majukwa and Zvipuna. Cast away all these things and believe in Him who is in heaven."
If he had confined his attacks on the ancestors to occasional outbursts during sermons, the traditionalists would not have reacted so strongly, but Mutendi also sufficiently adapted the prophetic practices within his church to the nganga's traditional divinations to make visits of his followers to the nganga superfluous. The Zionist prophets' diagnosis of illness runs parallel to those of the nganga, for in both cases the causes of most maladies are ascribed to the interference of ancestral and alien spirits, or to the perpetration of witchcraft. But the Zionist therapy deviates from the traditional pattern because the exorcism of evil spirits (and to the Zionists, ancestral spirits, too, fall into this category!), baptism in Jordan and prayer is prescribed, instead of the traditional propitiation of the ancestors. This form of adaptation met with considerable success. It became one of the major attractions of the Zionist movement, and a set-back to the traditional diviners who found many of their clients defecting to the popular prophets.

Mutendi was shrewd enough to supplant the rain ceremonies as well. His followers are forbidden to participate in the mukwerere rituals. Instead of relying on the munyai, each Zionist congregation sends a delegation to Zion City during the October conference, called the Mbeu Vungano (lit: 'seed conference'), with a special request for rain. The Mbeu Vungano gives Zionist members the chance of having the seed, soon to be sown in their fields, blessed by their leader (see plate 7). Mutendi thus replaces yet another of the nganga's traditional ritual functions. But more important still are the intermediary services relating to rain. As the vanyai present Mwari vaMatonjeni with zvipo when they ask for rain, so do the delegates of Mutendi's congregations at Zion City. In the same month when Mwari's priests, mbonga's and hossanah's dance at the Matonjeni shrines, Zionists from all over the country dance at Zion City. During the dances this 'representative of God', Mutendi himself, sits at a table surrounded by hundreds or sometimes thousands of his followers. In a competitive spirit the delegates of each district dance in front of Mutendi and place their zvipo - a £ 1 note at a time - on the table. When the delegates of one district stop dancing there are some £ 15 to £ 20 to be counted, registered in a book and stored away; thereupon the
next delegation begins to dance. Thus presenting the 'man of God' with their concrete request for rain, delegates trust that their God will favour them with sufficient rain for the crops of the coming season.

Mutendi's prestige as a rainmaker enhanced his popularity with Shona chiefs and proved to be an important factor in drawing fourteen of them into his fold, which is a greater chiefly adherence than any of the other Independent churches in Rhodesia can lay claim to. Amongst these Zionist chiefs are the senior chiefs (*She venyembe huru*: chiefs of the big emblem) of Gutu, Victoria, Nuanetsi, Bikita, Ndanga and Nyashanu (Buhera). This shows the geographical scope of Mutendi's influence in those chiefdoms where also the Mwari cult still exerts a strong influence. Chief Mazuru, for example, joined the Z.C.C. in March, 1965, after Mutendi had 'made rain' in his chiefdom. Acting on the advice of a Mutendi prophet in his chiefdom, he requested the Zionist bishop to conduct a meeting at his homestead. According to Chief Mazuru: “The man of God told us that his footprints would be obliterated (*kudzimwa*) by rain after his departure. It happened as he had predicted. I believed in this man’s miracles and became a member of his church. Several of the people in my chiefdom were convinced too, so Evangelist Titos and myself baptised 28 new members last Sunday.”

The Zionists in turn fully exploited the testimonies of the chiefs to impress on others the unique qualities of their leader. Several months later Evangelist Judah was still preaching about the meeting at Mazuru’s. At Chief Ziki’s homestead in Bikita district he addressed approximately 500 people on the 6th of June as follows: “Some time ago we travelled to Mazuru’s. At Chief Ziki’s homestead in Bikita district he addressed approximately 500 people on the 6th of June as follows: “Some time ago we travelled to Mazuru’s. Many people had gathered there owing to the invitation of Mutendi’s God. Chief Mazuru himself stood up and declared Mutendi to be ‘above’ (*pamsoro*) all people. He gave Mutendi the title ‘Chibge chitedza’ i.e. the Formidable One [lit: a slippery rock] On Monday, as we left, heavy rains fell. Perhaps you people here in Bikita heard the thunderclaps. All the people were convinced that our God is the real one. Again Chief Mazuru said that this man is above all people – Africans and Europeans!”
The prophetic type of church leadership to some extent also usurped the role played by the Matonjeni messengers in the tribal political field. Instead of consulting Mwari vaMatonjeni, chiefs began to rely on praying prophets to ‘keep them in office’ when they found their positions to be in jeopardy. In his home district Mutendi himself became one of the key-figures in the boundary dispute between the Rozvi and the Duma tribes. When the Rozvi chief Jiri went to court in 1965 against the Administration (District Commissioner, Provincial Commissioner and the Minister of Internal Affairs) in protest against the latest adjustment of the inter-tribal Rozvi-Duma boundary, support and initiative came from Zion City and not from the distant ‘owner of the land’ (Mwene venyika) at Matonjeni. Tribal political involvement of this kind turned the Independent Churches into suitable ‘half-way houses’ supplying refuge to the chiefs. They stood between the traditional religious authorities and the extremist nationalistic factions. These churches did not wholly replace the traditional religious institutions, but they did supply a more modern type of religious organization, partially recognized by the European authorities and yet free from the control of white missionaries. At the same time they did not resort to those radical forms of political resistance adopted by the nationalist parties. In these ‘half-way houses’ the chiefs could participate in a more subtle resistance of their people against the infiltration of foreign influence, without jeopardizing their positions in relation to the European Administration on whom they were dependent.

Once the chiefs started joining Mutendi’s church in those areas where the Matonjeni influence was still a potent force (see map), the vanyai found themselves faced with a new threat. The Zionist chiefs did not altogether cease sending zvipo to Matonjeni, but their loyalty was being divided and they increasingly tended to look to Mutendi for rain. So the vanyai could no longer fully rely on the support of their Zionist chiefs when it came to collecting gifts for Matonjeni in their chiefdoms.

Mwari vaMatonjeni was not slow in reacting to Mutendi’s rain making claims. Chihiya (Chirisamuru), the munyai from Bikita, was repeatedly warned at the shrines of the Zionist
danger. In February, 1965, when he reached Matonjeni, he was
told by Mwari: "You people in Bikita believe in Mutendi's
power to make rain. I do not like this and I shall send but
little rain for the next six months. If you want rain, go and
ask Mutendi! Let us see if he succeeds. I will punish the people
because the Zionists call me Satan!" When the munyai from
the Jena chiefdom in Victoria South arrived soon after Chihiya,
he was asked why Chief Jena did not stop his people from
becoming Zionists. Speaking for Jena, the munyai replied:
"They simply join and I cannot stop them." He was then
chased from the caves and "Mwari showed great anger indeed."

These reactions reveal the resentment of the traditionalists at
Matopos and in the Bikita district and are summed up in the
frequent remark, "He [Mutendi] breaks up the country (uno-
putsa nyika)!" They believe that Mutendi is wrong in attacking
ancestor worship, that he is an impostor interfering with Rozvi
tribal disputes, that he robs Matonjeni of its rightful gifts and
that — most unforgivably — he identifies the Matonjeni God
with Satan. Chihiya, who himself carries the ancestral Rozvi
name of Chrisamuru, went so far as to repudiate Mutendi's
royal descent: "He is not a real muRozvi, he was adopted by
Chief Jiri when his father fled from Chipinda where the people
tried to kill him." Mutendi's tribal political rivals in Bikita,
who dispute his claim to ward headmanship, shared Chihiya's
views, and Mwari's messages enabled Chihiya to unite some of
the traditionalist malcontents into a pressure group against Mu-
tendi. In the prolonged boundary dispute between the Rozvi
and Duma tribes, Chihiya and many other Rozvi actually sided
with Mukangangwi, the Duma chief, against the Rozvi chief
Jiri. But they were actually moved more by their desire to get
rid of the powerful Zionist bishop, whose colony was situated
right inside the disputed area, than by their opposition to Chief
Jiri.

The bitterness during the past few years often erupted in
small incidents between the two camps. Mutendi's house was
once set on fire, whereafter he fortified his newly built western-
styled house and the huts of his fourteen wives, by a surroun-
ding wall of which the entrances are guarded day and night.
Although Chihiya's friend, Gotohori, who helps him with the
annual collection of the Matonjeni gifts, lives near Zion City, he refuses to go near Mutendi’s homestead.

When the Zionists offered to compensate him for a few acres of his lands, which would enable Mutendi to make a short road between his settlement and the nearest main road, he stubbornly refused. Chihiya expects to become a martyr in the struggle against Mutendi. This reveals the kind of radical convictions and emotions generated by this conflict. In 1965, after a bad season with little rain, Chihiya declared: “I am the [traditional] religious leader and I shall be sacrificed for Him [Mwari vaMatonjeni]. My blood will flow for the people, just as Jesus’ blood flowed. Jiri and Mutendi will kill me because they have no food or water. Neither have the MaDzviti [Ndebele]. They already say the rain has gone because of me, Chirisamuru, who told Mwari of their bad deeds.”

In contrast to the prophetic movements like Mutendi’s, the Ethiopian-type of Churches provoke much less antagonism from the traditionalists. By adapting their creed and practices to Shona religion and custom in many ways, they are acceptable to the vanyai and traditionalist chiefs. Rev. Sengwayo, the President of the African Congregational Church, who lives in the Chipinga district, will never publicly attack ancestor worship. He acknowledges rather than rejects the mediating function of the ancestors and allows his followers to consult traditional diviners. The very name by which his church is best known in the Southern Shona districts characterizes the group as favourably disposed towards traditional custom: Chibarirwe, derived from kubara or kubereka, (to give birth), literally means ‘that which was born for us’ Broadly speaking the name means ‘heritage of our fathers, that which had not been derived from others, our very own’ These customs of the fathers, which are preserved within the church, are inextricably interwoven with pre-Christian religious notions.

In Chingombe area the tolerant attitude of the two Chibarirwe evangelists towards ancestor worship attracted a great number of kraalheads since this church was introduced into the chiefdom in 1950. Kraalheads could now join a ‘church of their fathers’, enabling them to honour their duties and obligations both to their traditional religion and to the Chibarirwe church.
When the rains failed towards the end of 1965, kraalhead Mafudza of the Hera tribe, who is ‘mutongi’ (judge) in his Chibarirwe congregation, collected finger-millet (rukweza) from all the family heads in his village, regardless of their denominational affiliation, and brewed beer for the ancestors. As the ritual officiant he led a delegation of elders to the graves of the deceased members of the house of Mheresi. Having presented the ancestors with beer and snuff, Mafudza addressed them: “You Mafudza, speak to Maruma, and Maruma, speak to Mheresi! Mheresi, present our plea to Nyashanu!” (Nyashanu is the founding ancestor of the Hera tribe, who is believed to be in direct contact with Mwari vaMatonjeni. As intermediary for his people he is therefore expected to pass the message on to Mwari.) When asked about his participation in this mukwerere ritual, Mafudza said, “Jesus Christ has no relation with all this, but we could not leave the spirits unattended, because my children [the villagers] were crying for rain. Evangelist Makomo, my church leader, will not judge (tonga) me because the people told him to leave me in peace so that I may accommodate the fathers [gadza madzibaba] in order to bring rain for them.”

The Chibarirwe evangelists justify their tolerance by saying that the tribal elders (vakuru) want to belong to a church, but do not fully understand the difference between church and traditional practices, and it would therefore be meaningless to discipline them. In their leniency one finds the crux of the Chibarirwe adaptation as well as an element of typical Shona philosophy. Faced with a situation of conflict, these people seek compromise rather than radical alternatives. Mwari vaMatonjeni no doubt looks down upon this church with an approving smile.

d. The Mwari Cult and present-day Politics

With the upsurge of African Nationalism in the last two decades, traditional religion received a new impetus. “Nationalist leaders,” says Ranger, “discovered that it was possible to appeal to the great supra-tribal spirits or to the heroes of the risings,
because they had been in a real sense forerunners in attempting to create, by however ephemeral means, a larger society. 177 As their prestige rose with the nationalist tide, much of the former confidence in the Mwari cult was restored on a national level. The cult had never quite lost its tribal political significance; but now its influence was effectively extended into the wider political arena through its exploitation and courting by nationalist leaders. One may rightly speak of a revival of the cult.

The cult’s colony at Matonjeni found itself faced with new demands, and Mwari had to advise on matters more important than those presented Him by His regular messengers. In 1954 a delegation of trade unionists from Bulawayo, some of whom were to play a leading role in the nationalist parties, visited Matonjeni to consult Mwari in connection with a proposed strike. 78 Years later, in 1965, when Joshua Nkomo, leader of the banned Z.A.P.U. (Zimbabwe African Peoples’ Union) was confined to the camp for political prisoners at Gonakudzingwa, Mrs. Nkomo visited the priests’ colony. She was accompanied by Jabavu Mpofu, a trade union leader, who helped her to provide a black cow and much beer for the ritual ceremony. When she was taken to the oracular shrine, Mwari told her, “Do not fear for your husband. I will look after him. Things will be settled very soon. But go now and speak to the white man peacefully.” 79 Apart from Mrs. Nkomo many others have come to Matonjeni in recent years. The increasing popularity of the cult was demonstrated by the mass attendance of hundreds of Africans at the October rain ceremony in 1967. On this occasion three black oxen were ritually slaughtered – a practice which seemed to have died twenty years earlier!

We may take for granted that the Matonjeni God, as a champion of the African cause, is sympathetically disposed towards the African nationalist cause as a whole. An exact assessment of the cult’s present influence in the political parties and of the true nature of Mwari’s messages is impossible. Much of what is said and done remains obscure and the reasons for secrecy at a time when the radical nationalists are at war with the present Government are self-evident. But part of the answer may lie in Mwari’s suggestion to Mrs. Nkomo, that Africans
should negotiate peacefully and refrain from violence. If this is so, and I have some reason for accepting this attitude because of the cordial reception I myself received at Matonjeni, then Mwari presents himself as a more 'diplomatic deity' than the militant one of the Rebellions! It would not be surprising if the aftermath of the Rebellions had influenced the Matonjeni God into steering a safer course. Mwari knows that His messengers are being watched in times of political upheaval. The relationship between His 'black and white sons' proves to be more complicated than before the Rebellions. Several of Mwari's 'white sons' have to some extent 'made peace with the land' during the past half century inasmuch as they have actually sent gifts to Matonjeni. European farmers in the Victoria district are known to have sent their farm-hands to Matonjeni in dry periods, and on a few occasions European Government officials have urged the African local Councils in their districts to assist the vanyai with funds. 81

Nevertheless Mwari remains the conservative Shona God who can be highly critical of His 'black and white sons' when He deals with less contentious matters in the field of tribal politics in the rural Shona communities. His statements on the 'nhumbi yaMarumbi' dispute and on the succession to chieftainship in Gutu illustrate this point.

Mai Marumbi, the well known Gutu rainmaker of days gone by, spent the last years of her life with Chinamashabwa, her only son, who was fathered by chief Nyashanu before she settled at Mt. Rasa. When she was killed her 'nhumbi' (magical possessions) were taken by her son, who in turn left them to his descendants, today known as the Munyaradzi people. They have their own sub-chiefsdom under Chief Gutu. As I have already indicated 82, the Chagonda people, descendants of Marumbi's younger brother, Neusaka, claimed independence in Nyamande's sub-chiefsdom. They believe that they can persuade Nyamande only if they possess the magical tools of their paternal great-aunt. But Munyaradzi refuses to hand over this powerful property to his cousins. Eliezer Munyaradzi, a former Dutch Reformed teacher and present possessor of the 'nhumbi', believes that the contested charms will enable him to outdo his older brother in the bid for the Munyaradzi headship. Thus
a deadlock was reached between the Chagonda and Munyaradzi factions. Force could not be used against Eliezer because of the protective nature of the charms.

In 1966, a young man from the Umtali district, where Shoshangane (Marumbi’s uncle) had his headquarters, arrived at Mt. Rasa claiming to be the *svikiro* of Marumbi. When her spirit possessed him, he stated: “I am Marumbi! I want my property. After I was killed my *nhumbi* have not been properly used. That is the reason why your crops are not fed with rain.” Once accepted by the Chagonda people as the legitimate host of Marumbi, the new *svikiro* settled at the foot of Mt. Rasa and from there undertook numerous visits to the acting Chief Gutu (Munyonga), at whose tribunal the dispute was a regular topic for debate. But Eliezer Munyaradzi remained adamant and *munyai* Vondo was sent by Chief Gutu to consult Mwari. The Voice scolded the Gutu people for not settling their problems. It threatened with another bad season if Marumbi was not given ‘her’ possessions. Vondo was permitted to return to Gutu ‘with only one black rain cloud’ – a gloomy prospect for the Gutu intriguers. But Mwari was sufficiently disturbed to send a delegation from Matonjeni to Gutu. Before the end of 1966, Peura, the keeper of Matonjeni, accompanied by Adamu, the representative of High Priest Simon Chokoto, visited Gutu twice, but acting Chief Gutu was reluctant to act on their advice. His own term in office was nearly over and he thought it wiser to pass this hot potato to his successor, rather than to render a final verdict on an issue which would earn him the wrath of the Munyaradzi people. He did not actually discredit the Matonjeni representatives by rejecting their advice, he merely delayed a final decision. As a member of the Zion Christian Church he was not unduly perturbed by Matonjeni’s threat of drought, and this must have irked the cult’s priest and keeper. In acting Chief Munyonga’s eyes, the Zionist ‘man of God’ had proved himself as a rainmaker at Mazuru and could be relied on to counter Dzivaguru’s wrath. Peura and Adamu’s failure to bring the Marumbi issue to a head should be judged in this light. It does not necessarily imply a complete loss of Matonjeni’s political influence in the Gutu district. The fact that its emissaries were accepted in the
Gutu district in an official advisory capacity reflects the con­tinuation of local recognition of an interdependent alliance which dates back to the time when Mabwazhe ‘Chinamakutu’ distinguished himself in the eyes of a Rozvi Mambo.

Two long journeys to Gutu were prompted by more than just Mwari’s concern about the Marumbi dispute. The appointment of a new Chief Gutu was long overdue, and some of the local traditionalists were upset by the prospect of a breach in customary law, or at least their interpretation of it, in the election of a new chief. Mwari’s emissaries were obviously aware that the delaying tactics were coming to an end, and that the prevailing mood in Gutu at that time could lead to the installation of one who was not the senior member of the chiefly lineage and consequently not the legitimate heir. They had therefore come as the champions of old Shona laws.

There is no evidence, however, that at this stage Mwari had already mentioned a specific person to be the successor of the deceased Magaya, who had died as Chief Gutu in 1963.

What did happen after the Mwari emissaries had returned to Matonjeni, was that the local District Commissioner, Mr. Menzies called a big meeting of all the Gutu vachinda (sub­chiefs and ward headmen). The house of Chaurura, which has by far the greater following in the whole district, was asked to forward their nominees. Of the four candidates, Zviracha Gadzingo and Manguwo Machingura were the strongest claimants. Gadzingo’s claim was by common consent the best because it was generally agreed that he was the oldest of the grandsons of Chaurura. He was the brother of Magaya and also of the acting Chief Munyonga, all three of them being the sons of Makuwaza, one of Chaurura’s descendants. It was feared that, if Gadzingo was chosen, the Gutu chieftainship would become attached solely to the house of Makuwaza. Another disadvantage for Gadzingo was the resentment caused by his cousins, who in the past had assisted him in his duties as a ward headman. With a narrow margin on the first vote, Gadzingo was eventually defeated, 17–10, by Machingura in the second vote.

According to District Commissioner Menzies the outcome of the election was “greeted with much genuine enthusiasm and
singing of ‘Baya mabaya’ [traditional song of war].” He was of the opinion that “the losers accepted the result with an equanimity tinged with relief because at least a decision had been made.” The DC is possibly right in concluding that this breach of the seniority principle is “symptomatic of the realization that the Shona succession law cannot always be carried to their ultimate conclusion” and that “in the Gadzingo case we find a shift to an aspect of Shona traditional law, where a man could be termed unfit for the job.” But he is wrong in deducing from the reluctance of the Gutu svikiro to put forward a nominee and the complete omission of any mention of the ‘Voice of Matonjeni’ during the meeting, that the “spiritual influence in the chieftain succession had been nil!” The spiritual influence may not have been manifest during the election meeting itself, but this is partly due to the fact that the svikiro in Gutu and other Southern Shona territories had generally not played as prominent a role in succession issues as among the Kore Kore in the north. Mwari’s influence, on the other hand, lies rather in the subtle canvassing of public opinion before an election, or in the sphere of ritual approval or disapproval (in which case plentiful or little rain would be indicative of Mwari’s pleasure or displeasure) after a decision had been taken. Munyai Vondo could hardly be expected to have spoken out on behalf of Matonjeni during the meeting. Being himself a member of the house of Makuwaza, his partisanship might well under the prevailing circumstances have prejudiced his office as the representative of Mwari. As munyai, he was well informed on the general mood among the Gutu vachinda, and he consequently knew that it would be futile publicly to oppose Machingura on this occasion.

We should now turn to Mwari’s ‘verdict’ on the situation in Gutu, as I witnessed it at the cult shrines. In January, 1967, I accompanied Vondo to Matonjeni. Machingura at that stage had not yet been officially installed as the new chief, and Vondo on this occasion therefore still carried the gifts on behalf of acting Chief Munyonga. This trip did not, in the first place, concern an ‘emergency request’ for rain, as one may have expected to take place at this time of the year, but Mwari was to be consulted on a matter more important to the Gutu
inhabitants, that is, the chieftain succession. Several days of deliberation passed in the priest's colony before I was allowed to accompany the priests to the cult cave. The responsibility for a final decision on my eventual presence or absence at the ceremony was placed on the spirit of the recently deceased Mai vaDuwe, the previous ‘Voice of Mwari’, whom I had met in 1965. She consented, and on a bleak moonlit night Simon Chokoto led us up the slopes of Mt. SaShe in single file. Fifty yards from the cave we took off our shoes and then approached the place where High Priestess Kombo and Simon's wife were already seated, facing the east. We followed suit and sat down with our backs to the cave. 

After we had greeted Mwari with the clapping of hands and loud exclamations of his praise names: Mbedzi! Dziva! Shoko!, Vondo opened the discussion in Chikaranga:

“I am well, Shoko, and I have come on behalf of Chief Gutu. But these days we have no real Gutu [no real chief], Shoko! The acting chief says: ‘Where I rule I try my best, but there is no true chieftainship (vushe) at the moment. So what will I do in such a position?’ The chief said: ‘Go to Shoko where you worship, and give him these £4!’ Then there is another matter your mbonga [referring to the deceased Mai vaDuwe] knows of, namely the European (murungu) who has come with us. She had allowed him to come here, so we brought him along. He has his gift here. It is a black blanket, a black cloth and £ 3, Shoko. He said that he only wants to see how we worship and also how we settle chieftainship problems [gadza vushe venyika: arrange the chieftainship of the land]. That is why I came with him, Shoko. Those are the matters I have brought before you. About the attitudes and behaviour of the Gutu vachinda I will tell you later on.”

High Priest Simon briefly interpreted Vondo's words to Mwari before our presents were passed to the mouth of the cave.

The Voice from behind us (high pitched as if in a trance): “Who is the successor in Gutu?”

Vondo: “It is Gadzingo, Shoko. Gadzingo says: ‘I am the elder (mukuru) but they don’t want to make me chief in my chiefdom. When I [Vondo now speaking as Chief Munyonga] collect the gifts of Matonjeni, the people refuse and say,
'Munyonga, we do not want you to rule us! You are an orphan now and you have had your chance at ruling the country.' This is the 'muromo' [lit: mouth, i.e. message] given to me by Munyonga, Shoko.'

The Voice now entered into a lively discussion with Simon, Peura and Kombo in Sindebele and ChiRozvi. To its further enquiry about the legitimacy of Gadzingo's claim, Vondo reassuringly replied: "Gadzingo is the mukuru who must become chief, but the people have said that they want a muduku [young one]. We have refused on the grounds that Chikaranga laws make no provision for a muduku to become a chief. I have to come and ask you if a muduku can be appointed as long as a mukuru can still be found.'"

The Voice: "These young ones who have been educated, they disobey the Karanga laws! They change the Karanga customs because they pinza (lit: insert) our laws into the European customs. They mix the old with the new! The children (vana) are supposed to build the country, but they are the ones who run to the beer-pots and cause trouble when they come from there. They ruin the country! [Vanouraya nyika: lit: they kill the country]. Gutu actually wants Gadzingo, because it has been arranged long ago that the reign should be in his hands. Go and tell this to Chief Munyonga! Everyone wants the chieftainship, even if they are too young and that is wrong!'"

The whole delegation: "Yes, so it is, Shoko!" — with the clapping of hands and the calling out of Mwari's praise names.

The Voice continued: "Tell the changamire [this word is usually used when dignitaries are addressed; in this case it referred to the European visitor] that the law of this place speaks as follows: 'What has happened at Gutu is wrong. I am now tired of the long drawn out dispute in Gutu. Their nyaya (affairs) never come to an end. People of other chiefdoms come here and have their problems settled, but Gutu carries on without end. It is because this matter is handled by [African] youngsters who make use of European customs [vanobata neChirumbi]. They have thrown away the African customs. Chirumbi hachigadziri nyika! Europeanism does not mend the country! [or, We cannot govern the country according to European ways!]"
"I (Mwari) do not want to speak to these Europeanized Africans. The Europeans are the children of my sister (vazukuru). I love them, but with regard to this law, I have no need for them. I do not want them to approach this place where I live, because they do not act properly. They always fight with the country. Do you hear what I have said?"

Vondo and myself: "Eye! Yes!"

Vondo: "Well, as you say yourself, Shoko, matters are complicated in Gutu. The chief sits down like somebody who forgets. He even forgets to send gifts to Matonjeni. Therefore I [now speaking as Chief Munyonga] have decided that it would be a good thing if this European were to visit Matonjeni. So I told my messenger, ‘Go with this murungu so that he may see for himself what happens at Matonjeni!’ I thought that, perhaps, things will turn out well because I trust the murungu. What he says happens. So I said to myself, ‘Let me send these two men, Vondo and the murungu, because I must honour what customs have been left me by my fathers.’"

The Voice: "I have allowed you, murungu, to come here today, because of Gutu’s wish, but I do not want any other European to come here again. From today on, No! My eyes do not want to see another murungu approaching this place. I have allowed you to come here. You are the first murungu to have come and speak to me and that is enough! One of your ‘relatives’ [referring to the Native Commissioner of Essexvale] once sent me some beer and an ox. A feast was arranged and the ox killed for me. I granted him his request for rain. But I do not want to sit down and speak to him. Handidi! [This I do not want!] These things disturb me. I have allowed only you. If there is anything you want to know in the future you may come again, but you must come with Gutu!"

Myself: "I am very grateful Shoko that you have allowed me to reach this place. I have heard what you have said, so I will go back relieved (ndakasuununguka) and with joy. I have heard what you have said about your law, and I shall remember."

Vondo ‘interprets’ my message: “This murungu says he is most thankful for your kindness, and if trouble arises he will tell Gutu: ‘Don’t kill the people! Go with your complaints to
Shoko, where you have requested rain and have received it. We thank you, Shoko, that you have started giving us rain on the day we came.”

The Voice: “What Gutu has done is good and I am satisfied. I have allowed it once, but if I see another European coming here to see this place I will fight you, Gutu.”

Vondo (after deliberating with Simon): “We shall take your message to the District Commissioner at Gutu and we shall tell him that this thing he plans to do together with the young ones, is wrong. It would break up (paradza) the country and matters will not progress well. We will go as your witnesses to testify before the District Commissioner what has been said at Matonjeni about Gadzingo.”

The Voice: “It is laid down by Karanga law that the chieftainship should be in the hands of the vakuru (elders). The lawful mukuru is the one who can keep the nyika well. The young only cause disunity. They destroy!”

Myself: “Once again I have heard you, Shoko. I know that the chieftainship should be taken by a mukuru. I do not know what the District Commissioner and the Gutu people will ultimately decide, but I will carry your message to them and urge them to follow the old law.”

The Voice: “I greet you! Fambai zvakanaka! (Travel well).”

We arose and left the cave in single file amidst the ululations, of the women, profuse handclapping and resounding Dzivas! and Shokos!

Half an hour later we were all sitting round a fire listening to Vondo's detailed account of what had happened at the cave. At the request of MaMoyo, who had walked into the village a little while after our arrival from the cave, he recounted all that Mwari had said. Nobody showed any surprise at MaMoyo's questions. They all pretended as a matter of course that she had really been absent during the whole ceremony and nobody ever hinted at her presence in the cave during the discourse with Mwari. Like a true svikiro, who is supposed to be ignorant of the message the spirit speaks through his possessed medium, she correctly acted her role as an attentive listener, as if Vondo's narrative was completely new to her. Both of them played their roles exceptionally well, Vondo as
informant and MaMoyo as inquisitive questioner. MaMoyo was in fact finding out whether the munyai had correctly memorized the essentials of Mwari’s message.

Vondo and I returned to Gutu to report to Chief Munyonga and his tribal elders what Mwari had said at Matonjeni. It was evident from Vondo and Munyonga’s attitudes that they still hoped for an intervention from the side of the District Commissioner, and that they did not regard the decision taken at the election meeting as final. As Gadzingo’s kinsmen both of them would have profitted from Gadzingo’s appointment as chief. Munyonga would have become the old man’s representative (mufambiri) and Vondo’s position as munyai would have been further strengthened. This to some extent explains the acting Chief Munyonga’s respect for the ‘customs of the fathers’ referred to at the cave. He was prepared to enlist the help of the traditional religious authorities as well as that of the Zionist prophets in order to retain part of his former influence and prestige in Gutu. Vondo’s own interests in the chief’s succession partly explains why he told Mwari who the rightful mukuru was, why he had (incorrectly) introduced me to Mwari as someone who was involved in this issue, and why he promised Mwari that the two of us would report back to the District Commissioner. But it would be wrong to conclude that Munyonga’s and Vondo’s appeal to Mwari was motivated solely by self-interest. Both of them were genuinely concerned about the way in which the old Shona laws of succession were being applied. During this particular phase of their struggle they seemed to welcome my own interest in the cult, since involvement on my part provided them with an additional means for conveying their protest to the District Commissioner. Mwari’s message, which under normal circumstances is never reported to a District Commissioner, was now used in a last desperate effort to bring pressure to bear on the highest authority in the district.

The odds were heavily stacked against Gadzingo, and his supporters must have known that they were fighting a losing battle. He had been out voted by the Gutu vachinda, which was sufficient indication that the majority of the Gutu leaders were prepared to by-pass the important seniority principle in this
specific case. When Matonjeni’s message reached the District Commissioner, the die had in fact already been cast so that no change was likely. Mwari’s protest, however, came as a surprise to District Headquarters. This itself shows how well the cult’s influence is usually hidden from administrative officials, and it explains why the D.C. regarded the religious factor as insignificant in succession issues.

Although Mwari vaMatonjeni had failed in this case to exert an effective influence in the tribal political field, it does not follow that it has no manipulative political influence. Both the Marumbi and Gadzingo cases were complex and exceptional issues, and neither have yet been satisfactorily settled. Mwari’s advice may still bring about sufficient pressure on Eliazar Munyaradzi for him to hand over the magical property of Marumbi. Mwari’s protest as regards the neglect of customary law may yet become a decisive factor in persuading the majority of vachinda in future to adhere more closely to ‘their fathers’ laws’. For the influence of the Matonjeni God cannot be judged solely by the immediate political effect – success or failure – of His transmitted messages. His is the ancient power of the past and the still active generator of conservative forces which continues to play a role in the political field. He is one of the mainstays of a resistance against the hasty acceptance of foreign influence, and the result of His continued activities manifests itself indirectly in retarded forms of acculturation and political change. Gadzingo, for example, was supported by one third of the number of vachinda, in spite of their own admission that he was incompetent and the general feeling that the monopoly of one house in the structure of chieftainship should be broken. It reflects their Mwari-inspired reluctance to breach customary law, even for the sake of expediency. The purport of Mwari’s message is clear. It underscores traditional values. He did not hesitate to warn His ‘white sons’ that they should stay away from his shrines. They could honour him with gifts if they had requests to make, but to ‘sit down and speak to Him’ was contrary to His laws. He has managed to keep His Matonjeni stronghold relatively free from the infiltration of Western culture and religion. Thus it is fully understandable that the intrusion of a murungu into the holiest of holies at the
centre of the last bastion of Shona nativistic religion should cause grave concern, lest the seclusion, which forms a prerequisite for maintaining the special identity of the cult community, be permanently broken.

As a reason for His order that the Europeans should stay away from His shrine, Mwari mentions what He regards as their gravest error: that of always 'fighting with the land' By introducing new laws and customs they caused disruption instead of 'mending the country' (kugadzira nyika). In His eyes Europeans are also responsible for the education of the young ones (vaduku) who 'disobey' the Karanga laws. This reaction against education and European influence does not concern the contribution of the varungu in all other fields; it is directed specifically against the deterioration of tribal political and religious values and institutions. There is a strong feeling at Matonjeni that, had it not been for this foreign influence, the young ones would still be respecting the old laws and the authority of their tribal elders. Then there would not have been this problem of half educated youngsters who are neither able to find jobs in the cities and towns, nor fit into the pattern of rural society any longer. In the final analysis Mwari resents the dominant authority of the European Administration, which seems to make it easier for young men with new ideas about the qualities and sources of leadership, to challenge the hereditary leadership of their seniors. Thus the culprit behind the vaduku, (i.e. all Africans guilty of neglecting their own customs, and of mixing old and new) is the white man himself.

But Mwari is not only critical of the Europeans. He also speaks of His love for them. This may be hard to believe under the present circumstances of strained political relations between black and white in Rhodesia. Admittedly there is ambiguity in the words, 'I love them, but as regards this [traditional] law I have no need for them', for it is another way of saying: 'I recognize the white man as part of the human family, but he does not belong here. In view of His overriding criticism of European influence on African customs in His country, the question arises whether Mwari's affable attitude towards the white man was not merely a temporary and tactical gesture, prompted by the very presence of a murungu at His shrine.
Yet there is the remarkable usage by the Voice of Matonjeni (and by the ritual officers during interviews) of the kinship term *vazukuru* (sing. *mu-*) with reference to the European occupiers of the country. This means that, by imputation, He refers to them as His 'sister's children'. In order to understand the subtle implications of this reference we have to turn to the pattern of Shona kinship relations. The *sekuru* (maternal uncle; lit. 'grandfather') – *muzukuru* (sister's son) relationship is the most cordial and intimate relationship between relatives because it is the least dominated by the seniority principle. Prof. Holleman has pointed out that 'the *muzukuru* will treat his *sekuru* with a mixture of deference and equality, obedience as well as authority, depending upon the circumstances.' The Shona themselves refer to it as *ukama okutamba*, a 'playing relationship'. Yet it is the *sekuru*, i.e. Mwari vaMatonjeni – and, due to the basic concept of lineage unity, also His black sons – who rank as 'seniors' in this relationship. Mwari's *vazukuru* are in the privileged position of being treated with greater forbearance than He would treat His own sons. Should the *muzukuru* disrespectfully forget that he is the 'junior' and thereby abuse his privileged position, the *sekuru* and his sons (*vasekuru* all) are entitled to bring considerable pressure, if not legal action, to bear on their *muzukuru*.

The words of the God of Matonjeni can now be better understood. Mwari has indeed accepted the presence of the 'white *vazukuru*' among the kindred of His Rhodesian community, and He has granted them the customary privileges of His house and yard. But the *vazukuru* did not act in accordance with the prescribed tribal code of proper conduct. They not merely freely used their *sekuru*'s possessions, as they were entitled to do, but they actually alienated large parts of the land which He (Mwari) owns, and which His black sons controlled by virtue of their common descent and inheritance. Worst of all, the 'white nephews' denied their *vasekuru* the fundamental respect and dignity to which the latter are entitled according to age-old custom. Hence, in spite of tolerance, Mwari's rebuke to the whites from the shrines of Matonjeni.

To those who understand the vernacular idiom the *political implication* of Mwari's message is both subtle and profound.
For at the very stronghold of traditional religion the wish is expressed that black and white, in so far as they have become interdependent, should co-operate on the basis of mutual respect, tolerance and equal conditions. The co-existence so envisaged, should be safe-guarded by the kind of stability provided by the Shona kinship structure, thereby excluding any muzukuru's reversal of the fundamental balance of authority and power which, in this basic relationship between kindred, lies inherently in favour of the vsekuru.

With this brief sketch the story of Matonjeni is far from having been told. The impact of the cult's influence in the various districts still needs to be studied in greater detail before conclusions can be drawn. The relations between the central shrine at Wirirani and the other shrines near Matonjeni also need further examination, and for a more definite evaluation of the religious and political influence of the cult in the remote districts, the roles of vanyai and the mbonga women, their own standing in relation to local chiefs and vachinda, and the status of their relatives in local communities, need to be determined.

Nevertheless certain aspects have become clear. The priestly Mbire Shoko tribe have managed to retain their age-old status and office in the cult. They represent the final authority in the central cult community, assisted by the Rozvi and Venda. Although the close affiliation with the Rozvi, which dates back from the time of the latter's political sovereignty and partial control of the cult, is still acknowledged and kept alive through the presence of Rozvi mbonga in the cult community, they no longer control the cult's external activities. Their prestige is still an important factor in the political field – which the Mbire priests fully acknowledge – but the Rozvi cult officers are subordinated in the cult's leadership hierarchy, and their sphere of authority in the central cult community is determined by the priests. It is possible, however, that junior cult officials of Rozvi descent may, at times of political crisis – as was the case during the Rebellions – take the initiative, and actually determine the tenor of Mwari's messages so as to provide divine sanction for a course of action proposed by them.
The Mwari cult today still represents the most centralized traditional religious agency in Rhodesia. With the mbongâ system intact and manyai from all over Central and Southern Mashonaland, from various Ndebele and (to some extent) Venda districts, regularly visiting Matonjeni, the cult's influence is still widespread. Judging from the roles played by Vondo and Chihiya, the cult runs a most effective information and communication service. There is probably not a single African community in the country so well informed of internal politics over such a wide area as is the priest colony at Matonjeni.

Mwari has presented Himself in various roles in the past. As an oracular deity He has remained primarily the God of Fertility. In the towns and the cities He may increasingly become the God of the powers of healing through the influence of traditional diviners; or as the 'owner of the land' by the appeal of nationalist leaders to the pre-European past.

At Matonjeni some Christian attributes have been added to the Mwari concept, such as a stronger emphasis on the personal relation between God and His people, and the idea of sanctity which, for example, prescribes the removal of shoes at His shrines. But it should be stressed that, in spite of these changes, He remains the conservative Shona God who looks with disfavour upon those Independent African and European Mission Churches who repudiate His existence. He is at war with those Christian groups who reject ancestor worship and discredit the traditional diviner.

The continuation of mukwerere rituals in all the districts where His manyai operate, the annual collection of gifts and the change of chisi days at His instructions are evidence of the Matonjeni God's influence in the realms of both traditional religion and the Christian Church. His messages are conveyed to proscribed African political parties and seem to indicate that He seeks ultimate African ownership of the land, but only by means of peaceful negotiation with the white 'vazukuru'. In the tribal political field His influence may be obscured and have only an indirect effect at the local level, but at the shrines His direct concern with local tribal government is evident. Psychologically the latter aspect is vital, for the cave rituals provide a forum for the manyai, as representatives of their
respective chiefdoms, where they can vent their frustrations at the heedless pace of change in their tribal societies. At Matonjeni they can appeal to the God of their fathers, who listens understandably to their anguished and sometimes bitter lament. At Matonjeni they can take heart again when the Voice boldly translates into imperative and *sacro sanct* terms the very criticisms they themselves have uttered.

Should any District Administrator, however, still believe that the ‘religious influence concerning chieftain succession issues in my district is nil’, he would be wise to heed the remark made by one of his earliest predecessors, ‘Wiri’ Edwards, shortly after the Rebellions of 1896 and 1897: “We were without a sufficient knowledge of their belief in the Mondoro or Mwari.” 89
Notes

1. For an analysis of the background factors that could have influenced the development of the Shona concept of Mwari, see W. J. van der Merwe, (1957), 2–5.
2. H. von Sicard, (1944), 139.
3. Ibid., 150.
4. Ibid., 178. According to von Sicard, "Dziva ist das entscheidende Sexualtotem der Karange Stämme." See also C. Bullock (1927), 80, 97.
5. W. J. van der Merwe, (1957), 8.
6. Gelfand states that he had not yet come across a single Shona myth describing the origin of the cosmos. "The maShona," he says, "do not relate myths appertaining to the genesis of the world."
7. J. V Haylor, (1963), 64.
12. T. C. Young, (1950), 38.
13. Of the failure of the Portuguese missionaries amongst the Shona in the 16th century, a Jesuit historian wrote as follows: "What was the result of these hundred years of devoted effort? Almost nothing. It is one of the most complete failures in missionary history. During these years when the missionaries were struggling to Christianize the Zambesi valley and the north-east of Mashonaland, Xavier's work on the Fishery Coast on the Southern tip of India was being continued, and Christianity remains vigorous to this day. Japan too had its converts during these years. None of these regions bears comparison with this part of Africa, where, though there were
no notable external trials, the Christian faith which had been taught so long and so devotedly, perished so completely and so soon.” Quoted from T. O. Ranger, (1967), 25. Prof. Ranger convincingly argues that the Shona resistance to Christianity was due to “a manifestation of loyalty to their own concepts of society and the divine” Ibid., 25.

15. The former ‘Native Reserves’
16. The best-known publications are those of the Dutch Reformed missionary (now Professor in Missionary Science at Stellenbosch in South Africa), W. J. van der Merwe, and the Swedish Lutheran missionary, H. von Sicard. See References.
17. Especially Prof. Gelfand, one of the leading observers in the field of Shona traditional religion. See his ‘Shona Religion’ and ‘An African’s Religion’
18. A splendid analysis of archival material is to be found in Ranger’s ‘Revolt’ and in his article on the Rebellions, in ‘The Zambesian Past’
19. Franklin (NADA, 1932).
20. See, for instance chapter 3, in Gelfand, (1966). To my knowledge Dr. Kingsley Garbett, who had done research among the Kore Kore, was once introduced and welcomed at the Matonjeni cult community, but he left the country before a study in depth of the ritual itself could be made.
21. See both van der Merwe’s and Gelfand’s accounts of Matonjeni.
22. Clan name: Shoko, i.e. monkey; sub-clan name: Vudzijena, i.e. white hair.
24. Ibid., 33.
27. See R. Summers (NADA, 1952), and van der Merwe, (1957), 24–25.
30. D. P. Abraham, (1959), and (1966), 32.
33. If so, the soapstone birds have remarkable parallels in some of the Eastern religions, where the male and female aspects of one deity are symbolically represented in the carved forms of both bird and watersnake, respectively, the one placed on top of the other in similar fashion as the Zimbabwe bird is placed above the crocodile (see plate 8). For the symbolic representation of male and female aspects of the divinity in Eastern religions, see for example, H. Schärer, (1946). Von Sicard is of the opinion that the original Mwari concept has been introduced

34. African hawk eagle.
36. Ibid., 18.
37. Clan name: Gumbo, i.e. leg; Sub-clan name: Madyirapazhe, i.e. you ate outside. These names seem to qualify the Rufura tribe as a group of people who had done much travelling on foot, in the past.
39. 'Nhumbi yaMarumbi' literally means 'the property of Marumbi' These possessions include garments, insignia and a highly treasured magical pebble which represents Marumbi's rain-making powers.
41. Cape Times, 10th July 1896, in Ranger, (1967), 144.
42. Ranger, (1967, p. 31), indicates, however, that several observers overestimated the role of the pioneer settlers as protectors of the vaShona. Jameson, for instance, wrote of the delight of the unfortunate Banyai to welcome the coming of the white man in force sufficient to put an end to this murder and slave raiding. When the settlers arrived in 1890 the Shona existence, according to Ranger, was certainly not threatened. He states: "There was certainly no question of their being exterminated without white protection or being forced to emigrate from the paramountcies which still formed the total and sufficient objects of their ambitions."
43. T O. Ranger, (1966), 96.
48. The Chartered Company was slow in adopting a reliable native policy which would safeguard the African's rights. Rhodes and Jameson were too busy with their plans for future expansion to the North during the first years of Company rule, to pay enough attention to the installment of an effective department of Native Administration. As a result there was little control over the numerous clashes between the Shona chiefs, traders and prospectors. The latter often came into conflict with the Shona chiefs because of their basic assumption that Lobengula's concessions to the Company automatically pertained to the outlying districts of the Shona chiefs. This basic error
caused much resentment among those chiefs who regarded themselves as independent of Lobengula's rule.


50. Superintendent of Natives to Chief Native Commissioner, 24th April 1915, National Archives, N 3/33/3.


52. For a brief analysis of the political implications behind ‘Mwari’s incorporation’ of the Europeans in His over-all kinship system, see pp. 83–85.


54. J. F. Holleman, (1952), 44, on the relation between wife-providing and wife-receiving lineages, says: “Those members of our wife-receiving lineages who belong to a generation below the level of connection between the lineages, become our vazu-kuru (grandchildren) in contrast to the older generation who are our ‘children-in-law’ (vakuwasha).”

55. Mwari himself is believed to remove the gifts, which are placed in such a position that none of the delegates can witness this act without turning round. Tradition has it that those who had disobeyed Mwari’s law, by turning round in the effort to ‘see’ Mwari, were struck with blindness.

56. The role of interpreting Mwari’s utterances is an important one. It places the three main functionaries – Kombo, Peura and Simon – in the position of elaborating on certain aspects, or of adding emphases which they deem necessary. In this way they control to some extent the nature of the message which is being transmitted.

57 Clan name: *Moyo*, i.e. heart; Sub-clan name: *Mondizvo*. This latter name is probably derived from ‘*Moyo ndizvo*’ i.e. the real Moyo, thus indicating the real royal Rozvi clan.

58. Mkwati, for example, who was a munyai, was assisted by Tengela at Thaba zi ka Mambo during the Rebellions. She was a muRozvi and had been given to Mkwati at the Njelele shrine. Vondo Mukozho, the present munyai from Gutu, has forwarded a request at Matonjeni, for a mbonga wife. According to him Mwari sometimes allows His mbonga women to be married to vanyai who had served Him well.


61. I visited her in the Essexvale hospital in 1965, on my first trip to Matonjeni, shortly before her death. Not knowing that she was to die soon, she invited me to visit the shrines after her recovery and she also gave me instructions about the nature of the gifts that I should bring with me.

62. Her father was a munyai from Belingwe who had dedicated her to Mwari when it became known that Mwari was asking
more ‘wives’

63. ‘Kugadzira’ is the ritual concerned with the ‘bringing back home of the deceased’s spirit’. The spirit is regarded as dwelling in the wilds after death, and only after the kugadzira is the deceased re-established in the lineage hierarchy, consisting of the living and the dead. On this occasion the spirit attains full ancestorhood, with his or her duties and privileges devolving on the senior son or senior daughter. For an account of the jural implications of this type of ritual, see paper of M. Fortes, (1965).

64. Both high priest and high priestess are generally referred to as ‘mwene vebasa’ (owner of the work) which clearly bears out their position of authority.

65. The Sangoma is regarded as an exceptionally powerful spirit, of Ndebele origin.

66. Mbang MaMoyo describes this inspiration as follows: ‘Mwari anongodana nokupinda pamoyo yomunhu, i.e. ‘Mwari simply calls and enters the heart of a person’ (which leads to dedication of the child).

67. According to the 1962 census, Gutu with its 125,000 inhabitants counts as one of the most densely populated districts in Rhodesia.

68. See pp. 28–29 and pp. 73–74. The Chagonda people have been opting for their own ward-court, operating independently of Nyamande’s tribunal. They believe that they can only bring their tribal political struggle to a successful conclusion once they have regained possession of the magical implements of their famous paternal aunt, Marumbi.

69. A junior or family svikiro only represent spirits of a lower order (midzimu yapamusha), whose influence is limited to close relatives. These spirits are ‘further removed’ from Mwari than the tribal spirits.

70. The term ‘nyusa’ is often used for a living munyai, but in the Bikita district a distinction is made between a living munyai and his spirit as a nyusa after death.

71. The figures are based on a random sample survey, covering 20% of the total population in Chingombe, with its 110 villages and 8 to 9,000 inhabitants.


73. Private letter of miss H. to E. 11th April, 1967. The person concerned preferred not to have her name disclosed because of a controversy concerning the exorcism of spirits in the ranks of her own denomination.

74. An analysis of more than 500 cases of church discipline, applied to members of the Dutch Reformed Church at Alheit Mission in Chingombe (between 1958 and 1966) shows that adultery, beer brewing and polygamy were the main offences. Not a single case involving ancestor worship was treated; and
one only concerning a church member who had visited a 

nganga.

75. Although Mutendi’s leadership resembles that of Shembe and Lekhanyane in South Africa, whom Sundkler classifies as Messianic leaders (Sundkler, 1961, p. 323), I prefer to use the term ‘semi-Messianic’ because of discernable Messianic tendencies, that do not, however, usurp the position of the historical Christ in the thought-world of the prophetic leader’s followers as completely as has often been assumed.

76. Mheresi is the clan ancestor at the apex of the local Hera spiritual hierarchy in Chingombe.

78. Ibid., 383.
81. The former District Commissioner of Gutu personally urged the District Council to contribute to the Matonjeni zvipo from their own funds. The D.C. at Essexvale sent one black ox and forty gallons of beer for the rain ceremony in 1966.
82. See pp. 28–29.
83. Personal interview in 1967
84. I was warned beforehand that turning round to face the cave while Mwari is speaking is strictly prohibited. Way back in Gutu some of the tribal elders had told me that I ran grave risks of being blinded even without trying to observe Mwari’s actions at the cave.
85. Up to this stage no direct mention had been made of the Gutu succession issue. By presenting me to Mwari as someone who was interested in the vushe issue, Vondo was actually venturing beyond our own personal agreement. His objective was to get me involved in the chieftain succession struggle, which in the ritual context could mean a change of status from observer to that of participant. This in turn would justify my presence at the cave.
87. A heavy thunderstorm had nearly washed away our camping kit during the first night of our stay at Matonjeni.
References


Bullock, C. The Mashona, Cape Town, 1927.


Franklin, ‘Manyusa’ in NADA, Salisbury, 1932.


Summers, R. ‘Carl Mauch on Zimbabwe Ruins’ in NADA, Salisbury, 1952.


After the repression of the Rebellions of 1896-1897 in Rhodesia, in which the cult officials of the traditional African High-God played a vital role, ritual activities at the cult centre in the Matopo Hills acquired a secretive nature. Thus the admission and presence of a European in the cult community for several days was a novelty, his attendance of and participation in an oracular session at the cult caves an ‘event’. This essay analyses the information recently obtained during this ‘event’.