

**Ever wondered what the traditional beliefs of Zimbabwe's Shona-people comprise of? Read on and pray that God will reveal the right Way, the full Truth and the new Life to every Shona!**

## **Shona Traditional Religion**

### **God the Creator**

According to traditional Shona belief, the world and all that exists began with God, the Supreme Being and Creator. He is often referred to as Mwari ("The Great One" or "He who is"), Musikavanhu ("the One who created people") or Nyadenga ("the Great Spirit that lives above in heaven"). The Shona does not believe God to have a shape or form such as a human being, but rather sees Him as a Spirit who inhabits heaven but who is also present on earth.

It is believed that God made all and everything that exists and that He is somehow involved in the everyday lives of people. He is responsible for good but also for bad in the world, and can give happiness or bring sudden destruction to an individual. It is believed that a human being cannot really reason or argue with Mwari, and the concept of an individual living in a close personal relationship with God (as found in Christianity and Judaism) is therefore not accepted.

### **Ancestral Spirits**

Because God is regarded as being largely inaccessible to the individual, the vadzimu (ancestral spirits) plays a very important role in the Shona's religious life.

It is believed that when an individual dies, his or her spirit wanders until it is invited to return home and protect its descendants. This is done during the kurova guva ceremony when beer is poured over the grave and the spirit asked by the relatives to "come home" and protect them. However, only an adult individual who has children of his own can become a family mudzimu (plural). The vadzimu are believed to live in an invisible community parallel to the community of the living, which enables them to watch over the living and be aware of everything that happens in the lives of their living relatives.

Two groups of vadzimu can be discerned – the mhondoro who are believed to be the spirits of the founders of the clan or tribe, and the vadzimu, believed to be the spirits of the individual's deceased patrilineal and matrilineal ancestors. The mhondoro or tribal spirits are therefore mostly concerned with the clan or tribe as a whole and would traditionally be approached in matters such as drought, warfare, succession of chiefs, etc.

The family vadzimu not only controls the lives of their descendants to a large extent, but also act as intermediaries between them and God on all matters concerning everyday life. Although the vadzimu helps and takes care of the family on the one hand, they can also be angered or offended easily, especially when certain customs, rituals or traditions are not kept by the living. They would then punish the offenders by causing sickness or other problems in their lives.

## **Evil Spirits**

When a mudzimu becomes extremely angered or seeks revenge against someone, it is known as an ngozi or evil spirit. Typically, the spirit of someone who was murdered is believed to become an ngozi who would revenge his murder on the murderer and his or her family.

Such an attack would be far fiercer and more savage than the punishment a mildly angered mudzimu would bestow on a descendant who offended it by neglecting a custom or ritual. The ngozi may attack its victim in various ways, causing serious sickness, death or disaster in the family.

In such a case, the offended mudzimu or ngozi has to be appeased by first discovering the cause of its anger and then doing restitution by prayer and offerings (beer, animal-sacrifice, etc.).

## **Wandering Spirits**

Another type of spirit Shonas traditionally believe to have an effect on their lives, are the shavi (plural mashavi) or wandering spirits.

These are foreign spirits from outside the family – spirits of strangers who died away from their homes (and who was therefore not granted the proper burial rites). The

spirits of people (children or adults) who die without any descendants of their own also becomes mashavi who roams until they find a person from another family whom they can possess to express their ego and identity. Another kind of mashavi are called majukwa – the spirits of ancestors that no one remembers and honors any more.

## Spirit Possession

The Shona believe that it is not enough for a spirit to merely exist, but that it is essential for a spirit to be known to exist, to be acknowledged and remembered by its descendants and to have a way of expressing its ego and identity. Although the family mudzimu is incorporated into the family vadzimo during the kurova guva ceremony and thereafter venerated and honored as a member of the family, all spirits (vadzimu, ngozi and mashavi) manifest themselves through living persons by ways of possession.

When a spirit selects an individual to possess, the individual becomes ill or has strange dreams. This will continue until the person consults an *n'anga* (witchdoctor) who will reveal that a spirit that wants to possess him or her causes the sickness or dreams. If the individual accepts the spirit, a ceremony is prepared during which the spirit “comes out” and introduce itself and its intentions. If the person accepts and welcomes the spirit, it would remain with him or her and the person would become the svikiro (medium) for that particular spirit.

In this way, the possessed individual could receive special powers or abilities that it did not have before. For instance, it is believed that each shavi has a particular skill or talent such as artwork, hunting or healing. When a person becomes the medium for a shavi skillful in healing, that person would then become a skillful healer.

It is believed that when a mudzimo wants to possess one of its family members, that individual will die if it refuses to accept the mudzimo. The chosen one may, however, ask the mudzimo to choose another of its descendants – something that he may or may not decide to do. If the chosen individual is a Christian, prayer to Jesus Christ and/or exorcism will free them from the power of the mudzimo or shavi.

## Witchdoctors (N'anga)

The Shona believe that, ages ago, there were families among them who had the ability to heal the sick and help those suffering from misfortune. These special abilities

or gifts were passed on through the vadzimu from one generation of descendants to the next. This means that a chosen individual could become possessed by a mudzimo that will empower him or her with the talent of an n'anga (witchdoctor).



ABOVE: A traditional witchdoctor.

The Shona recognizes several kinds of n'anga or witchdoctors. Firstly, there are herbalists who specialize in herbs that are sold to customers to treat a variety of illnesses or misfortunes. These n'anga are generally regarded as "good", although they have the ability to cause harm by using poisonous herbs.

The second kind is bone-throwers or soothsayers that cast bones (literally a variety of "magical" items such as pieces of rock, bones, wood, hair, etc.) to reveal the unknown. They are consulted on a variety of issues, such as determining the cause of a sudden illness or crisis or advice when an important decision has to be made. If the problem is the result of witchcraft, the n'anga will use the bones to identify the witch or guilty party. If the problem is caused by an angered mudzimo or avenging ngozi, the spirit must be placated by prayer and sacrifice.

The most feared n'anga are those magicians who could use magic to protect or harm people. They could for instance be hired to strike a house with lightning or inflict pain or death on an enemy. They can also be hired to cast spells to protect someone who is under attack from a mudzimo, shavi or the magic spells of another person.

## Witches (Varoyi)

The traditional Shona religion does not provide for the existence of Satan or demons. However, varoyi (witches, plural muroyi) and the ghosts under their command are seen as responsible for a lot of evil that takes place in this world.

Just as the talents or powers of a *n'anga* is passed on from one generation to another by a mudzimo, the evil powers of a muroyi is also passed on by ways of *spirit possession*. Unlike the *n'anga*, however, varoyi are almost always women.

It is said that a muroyi travels at night (usually naked on the back of a hyena) to visit the people she wants to harm. To bewitch someone, the muroyi first misleads the persons guarding family vadzimo to think she comes as a friend, and then proceed to cast spells to cause the victim to fall into a deep coma. She then sends her zvidhoma (ghosts) into the house to beat or even kill him or her.

Witches are believed to create ghosts to serve them by calling the spirits of children they have killed and forcing them to eat their potions. They are said to practice a variety of spells and magic, but always with an evil intend. For instance, their so-called "black medicine" causes permanent physical disorder instead of healing. Some of their rituals include the use of dead bodies and even cannibalism. Witches often meet in covens to practice rituals together and keep "familiar" such as owls or snakes which they sometime send to carry evil to unsuspecting victims.

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