**Can spirits play a role in peace and reconciliation projects? Perspectives on Traditional Reconciliation in Zimbabwe**

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Abstract

There is a long history of traditional spirit-oriented systems of reconciliation and healing in Zimbabwe. However, under white rule, this work was often misrepresented and persecuted, and it became marginalised and driven underground. In Zimbabwe today, diverse views on reconciliation, reparation, justice and national healing are producing rich but frequently conflicted initiatives around ‘traditional’ and ‘community’ reconciliation. The article considers some of the contradictions and pressures facing the newly-constituted National Peace and Reconciliation Commission and the different approaches to ‘spirit-led’ trauma healing work from three grassroots organisations: Heal Zimbabwe; Tree of Life; and the Centre for Conflict Management and Transformation. The article indicates how religious, cultural and political affiliations influence participants’ openness to traditional and spirit-led forms of reconciliation; and how this, in turn, constrains how perpetrators, victims and reparation are defined by those working in this field. It highlights how an attention to history can help to open up constructive conversations about traditional reconciliation and dispute resolution, including the role of spirits, in peace-building and trauma healing today. Rather than identifying specific practices as ‘authentic’ traditions, the article suggests that a continuity of community/cultural *approaches* can inform contemporary national healing initiatives in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Zimbabwe; peace-making; spirit beliefs; reconciliation; intangible cultural heritage

Can spirits play a role in peace and reconciliation projects? The dominant global models of peace building and post-conflict reconstruction exclude the supernatural, and often for good reasons. But there are growing moves, in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, to explore indigenous forms of peace-making, which may include spirit beliefs and practices. This article demonstrates how religious, cultural and political affiliations influence participants’ openness to traditional and spirit-led forms of reconciliation in Zimbabwe; and how this, in turn, constrains how perpetrators, victims and reparation are defined by those working in this field.

The new constitution of Zimbabwe in 2013 included provision for an independent National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC), which finally began its work in January 2018. However, political violence continues in Zimbabwe. Consequently, the NPRC cannot operate as a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)-style post-conflict national unity and justice initiative. Instead, on the one hand it attempts to identify suitable forms of redress for past violence; and on the other, it runs workshops to build violence-prevention strategies into current political processes.

The Special Advisor to the President’s Office on National Healing has encouraged the NPRC to take note of Section 11d of the 2013 Maseru Declaration on a Framework for Peaceful Development in Southern Africa. This advises governments to use ‘indigenous and traditional methods of healing, reconciliation, and alternative dispute resolution’ as far as possible in development and peace building programmes. As an historian, my involvement has been to highlight how an attention to the past can help to open up constructive conversations about traditional reconciliation and dispute resolution, including the role of spirits, in peace-building and trauma healing today.

**A brief history of spirits, peace and conflict in Zimbabwe’s past**

This article initially provides a brief overview of two historical processes: firstly, how spirit-based reconciliation systems became conflated in the white state’s criminal law systems with witchcraft practices, and were driven underground by prosecutions and Christian educators; and secondly, how grassroots concerns about spiritual harm came to the surface during the liberation struggle and are now forcing themselves onto national peace-building initiatives. My research has focused on one particular form of spirit-based reconciliation that various agencies now think might have something to offer. The article explores how this form of spirit-based reconciliation is itself contested by the various stakeholders in the NPRC’s processes.

There is a long history of traditional spirit-oriented systems of reconciliation and healing in Zimbabwe. In particular, I have been interested in *ngozi* spirits, which are part of Shona-speaking cultures. *Ngozi* force the families of perpetrators to reconcile with and recompense the families of deceased victims. They do this by carrying out escalating acts of violence against the perpetrator’s family, often across generations, However, under white rule, reconciliation and spiritual/‌psychosocial healing work was at worst persecuted and at best dismissed as mere ‘superstition’, with the result that it became marginalised and driven underground.

The white people who began systematically to occupy the territory now named Zimbabwe from the late 1880s became overtly hostile to local spiritual leaders during the late 1890s. The state had concluded that these spiritual leaders were the instigators and co-ordinators of a concerted military attempt to drive the white occupiers off the land. However, this political imperative to attack indigenous spirit systems was complemented by less rationalist concerns. Whites could, at times, be quite frightened by inexplicable events that seemed to point to the reality of witchcraft. As E. Kenny, the Native Commissioner for Gutu District, warily observed at the end of a long dispatch detailing rumours and reports about an ongoing witchcraft cleansing movement, ‘At present all I can say is that something mysterious is taking place, and I cannot say, from the information I have, that any sedition has been preached’.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the face of so much that was ‘mysterious’, white administrators and law makers could not tell the difference between, for example, *ngozi* cases, and witchcraft cases: all forms of spirit practice were regarded with some degree of suspicion.

The settler authorities offered a number of justifications for wanting to see beliefs about witches and justice-spirits disappear from the African communities. On one level, there were humanitarian concerns about the violence meted out against those accused of witchcraft. To paraphrase Spivak, white men wanted to save Black women from Black men. Certainly, there was a lot of violence associated with witchcraft accusations. Initial accusations were often accompanied by an outpouring of violent anger: ‘[he] called her a witch, burnt her hut, and chopped her with an axe’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Beyond this, the due process of formal accusation, with its need to administer poison or extract confession, could be brutal.

Another dimension of white concern was the suspicion that punishments for spiritual offences involved a measure of community retribution, which compounded the initial injustice (in whites’ rationalist eyes) of the witchcraft accusation. Jesuit missionaries working in the Ndebele kingdom in the 1880s, for example, reported on one case where,

The executioner walked with [the wife] awhile, talking in a friendly way; then, suddenly, he gave her a blow on the head with his Kerrie. The poor woman fell down dead. The child which she carried on her back and the two others who followed her were killed in the same manner. The corpses of the victims, left unburied, became the prey of wolves and jackals.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Confusingly for whites, *ngozi*’sattempts to enforce compliance from the family of the perpetrator to get justice for the family of a victim could similarly entail terrible consequences for the perpetrator’s family, although no human agency would be held culpable for this.[[4]](#footnote-4) The observation that families, or other groups, were subject to community-level punishment for witchcraft recurred in white accounts of witchcraft accusations throughout the twentieth century, until by the 1950s, it is difficult to distinguish between genuine African claims of community responsibility, and white *expectations* of such claims. (for example, ‘Macharangwada’, 1932, 9; Gelfand, 1947, 76-80; 1954, 59-61). Ethnographers had decided that Africans understood civil rights only in collective terms, and not in terms of individual agency: “was there such a thing as a groupless person?”, ventriloquised the Native Commissioner and Cambridge-educated ethnographer Roger Howman (1951, 90). It seems that communal attacks by spirits were not clearly understood by the whites as conceptually and cosmologically distinct from humans carrying out punishment against the families of witches.

Primarily, however, the reason why the white state wanted to eradicate spirit-based systems of justice was because they provided a direct challenge to European post-Enlightenment systems of power. Whites had the confidence to rule because they told themselves that they were bringing a system of ‘civilisation’: ‘the superior peoples, in their unceasing progress, draw after them the inferior’. (Hone, 1909, 49).[[5]](#footnote-5) Charismatic leadership threatened white claims to power: ‘this man is believed by the natives to be possessed of supernatural powers, & therefore has great influence amongst them…they cling to the belief that he has the power to make rain’.[[6]](#footnote-6) So the white state attempted to eradicate diviners, including their work of distinguishing between the actions of witches and those of *ngozi*. In Spivak’s terms, ‘the discourse of what the British perceived as heathen ritual is sublated (but…not translated) into what the British perceive as crime.’ (1988, 300) This assault on indigenous modes of thought was enforced through harsh physical punishment. In Melsetter District in 1896, even before witchcraft accusations had been outlawed, a man was imprisoned for one month with Hard Labour, for inflicting harm in the administration of emetic.[[7]](#footnote-7) In 1900, a man was imprisoned for four months with Hard Labour, simply for employing a diviner in a witchcraft accusation case.[[8]](#footnote-8) The persecution continued unabated through the century.

The relentless assaults on the spiritual elements of justice in African communities did take their toll. On the one hand, there is evidence that Africans began to stop talking to whites about spirits and witches in their justice systems: court records show initial readiness to discuss cases in full spiritual terms, but this noticeably declines as awareness of the law grew. Witnesses talked openly about witchcraft accusations that dated from the time before the white occupation (‘this was before the whitemen … came into the country’), but were wary of suggesting that accusations had been made more recently.[[9]](#footnote-9) Indeed, very soon the only circumstances in which an African witness voluntarily mentioned witchcraft to a white official were those in which the complainant (often a woman) wanted to prejudice the official against someone else (often her husband) by claiming that that person had made a witchcraft accusation. The officials rumbled this tactic and tended to dismiss such claims.[[10]](#footnote-10)

On the other hand, the due processes by which a witch might be identified, or an *ngozi* mollified, were driven underground. The need to act circumspectly in the administration of justice began to distort the process; key elements began to atrophy. Of course, it is difficult to trace these things in the archives, but nonetheless it is striking how, by the mid-twentieth century, the triple process in identifying and prosecuting a witch – first, establishing a case of witchcraft; secondly, an ordeal ritual to identify the witch; thirdly, the witch being required to confess or accept a token of acknowledgement – seems often to have been telescoped into a much more limited ritual. Criminal law hearings from Belingwe and Bulawayo in the 1950s suggest a dilution of the process: no evidence regarding tokens, ordeals, confessions or the presence of all those connected to the matter. Instead, a single divination, in the absence of the accusee, was apparently deemed adequate to indicate a witch and justify punishment for witchcraft.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Meanwhile, ethnographic accounts of *ngozi* rituals to appease the *ngozi*, stop its persecution tactics, and settle outstanding wrongs between families were similarly increasingly presented as accounts of an atrophied ‘superstition’ about a ‘vengeance spirit’. It is clear, in retrospect, that actual practices continued, and were transformed, away from white view. But it is difficult to trace the processes of transformation. We know, for example, that at some point between the early twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, the principle that *ngozi* should be settled by payment of a young woman as a wife, in preference to any other form of settlement, began to take hold. But so far, we have not been able to trace with any certainty when and how this happened.

During the 1950s, articles about witchcraft almost disappeared from the ethnographic writings in the *Native Affairs Department Annual*. Nonetheless, subsequent events show that beliefs in witches and *ngozi* remained robust and were significant in the developing nationalist struggle. Communal exorcism rituals seemed to become more frequent. In the early 1970s, as the nationalist war began to heat up, published accounts by whites about spiritual cleansing observed how entire communities might be condemned: ‘breaches of what may be called the moral code might cause the death, not only of the delinquent, but, in certain circumstances, of other quite innocent persons to whom the resultant contagion had been transmitted’. (Fleming, 1972, 100) There was also growing attention to the heritability of ‘the power of evil’ and how the spirit of a witch might inadvertently be inherited. It was the responsibility of the heir to take steps to be ‘exorcised’: ‘any witch is a witch by choice, and therefore responsible for her evil deeds.’(Acquina, 1973, 54) This indicates a telling shift in discourses of culpability. Individuals and communities might be contaminated by witchcraft, not because of any specific indications or divinations of evil-doing, but simply because they were members of a group that had failed to take steps to be publicly recognised as *not* guilty. The outlines of subsequent forms of communal political violence were beginning to be sketched in.

In 1985, David Lan published *Guns and Rain*,his influential study of the co-operation between spirit mediums and the guerrilla armies. He made an explicit link between the treatment of witches and the treatment of ‘sell-outs’ who betrayed the nationalist forces to the Rhodesian authorities:

The killing of witches, those sources of absolute evil…, is a necessary cleansing of this world to force the new one into existence but it is also an attempt to eradicate sell-outs who betray the guerrillas and bring down the all-too-real force of the army on their heads…[This] helps to explain, I think, some of the brutality that characterised many of the contacts between guerrillas and their enemies. (Lan, 1985, 200-01)

Lan’s work was researched and published after the war ended. There are few clear-cut links between witches and sell-outs in the literature produced during the war. Nonetheless, a rank-and-file white police officer, forced into a military role by the war, similarly saw a connection between witches’ harvesting of body parts; the nationalist armies; and spirit mediums, albeit with the guerrillas, not the sell-outs, equated with witches:

In the normal sort of run of our police lives…[we] had to investigate a lot of those ritual murders, things like that, very often. It became involved in the war; I mean a lot of it was just plain torture. The terrorists used to come in, they used to cut people’s lips off with pliers and all sorts of things and shoot them. They used to go to what they called a svikiro, that’s like the Witch Doctor. They used to go and get hold of him and tell him that he would be shot if he didn’t have spiritual influence on the local tribe against us. They were very involved in that sort of thing. (Shelley, 2009)

Again, it is difficult to know how far this is an interpretation after the event, perhaps influenced by the ubiquity of Lan’s analysis. However, a white soldier similarly saw something supernatural in the cutting off of lips:

The [government] produced these magazines, the photographs of a woman who’d had all her lips cut out because she passed on information to us, [but] you actually couldn’t fight the brutality of terrorism with white man’s magic, doesn’t work. (Shute, 2009)

All of this created a complex legacy. The need for ‘national healing’ has been influenced on the one hand by a state legacy in which spirit-based traditions were not perceived as respectable, Christian or rational; and on the other hand by an awareness that spirit traditions were at the heart of the struggle and directly relevant to some of the atrocities and punishments that took place during the liberation war.

After the liberation war, researchers noted the emergence of spiritual rituals intended to heal the psychic damage it had caused. The churches offered exorcisms and rituals of spiritual renewal. Terence Ranger noted in 1992 that, ‘healing rituals developed in almost all Zimbabwean churches after the war’ (Ranger, 1992, 705). Elsewhere, rituals rooted in indigenous spirit beliefs flourished. During the 1980s, Richard Werbner recorded the rise of *sangoma* rituals in urban Matabeleland that paid particular attention to messages from the dead, warning people against forgetting the past. Heike Schmidt noted *ngozi* and *chikomba* rituals in the Honde Valley, which drew attention to the forms of ongoing hurt. The Catholic Justice and Peace testimony also noted ex-combatants troubled by *ngozi* spirits, who came to identify the families of those they had killed, to whom they should pay compensation. Pamela Reynolds discovered that many children were turning to traditional healers for help with post-war trauma, *ngozi* cases and spiritual healing (Reynolds, 1990; 1996).

Ranger situated these rituals, both church and non-church, in a broader concern for national healing. It was not only troubled spirits of the dead, but the troubled spirit of the land in total, that had to be appeased – to be made peaceful:

African Zimbabweans had a different relationship [from whites] to the land which they were fighting to claim as their own. One could fight for it, spill blood on it in a just cause, but thereafter both the fighter and the land itself must be cleansed. The customs and institutions…operating…to hold together rural African society, could be suspended during a guerrilla war but could not go on being suspended without dreadful cost to individuals and collectivities. (Ranger, 1992: 704)

In September 1992, there was an unofficial but widely-attended healing ceremony for the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) war dead, at the Pupu shrine in Lupane, a site that also marks Lobengula’s vanquishing of the Alan Wilson patrol in 1893. The ceremony became an event of national as well as individual spiritual healing, with interventions from mediums representing the voices of spirits commemorating the war dead going back even earlier than 1893. There were hopes that this would become an annual event, but despite the importance of the shrine in nationalist history, there was no further national spiritual healing there.

The state did not respond positively to these initiatives. While on the one hand there was a growing confidence in African culture, on the other hand there was a determination to be seen as a ‘modern’ African state. Those demanding a public and national-level spiritual healing were at best disregarded, as at Pupu; and at worst, treated as hostile to the state. For example, Ambuya [Grandmother] Sophia Tsvatayi Muchini established herself at Great Zimbabwe as a medium of Ambuya Nehanda, the spirit whose earlier manifestation had become iconographic, as a symbol of resistance to white rule in the mid-1890s. In 1980, Ambuya Muchini called for a national ceremony at the Great Zimbabwe historical monument, to thank the ancestors for independence; and a separate ceremony to settle the spirits of the dead comrades and cleanse the surviving veterans. Her calls were ignored, her dwelling at Great Zimbabwe destroyed, and, as a result of the ensuing violent fracas, she and her underage children were all arrested and imprisoned for murder in 1981 (Pekeshe, 2016).

**Justice, Reconciliation, and Cultural Heritage**

The readiness of the current Zimbabwean government to include indigenous methods of reconciliation in the work of the NPRC may therefore come as something of a surprise. But ‘African’ reconciliation initiatives have become much more fashionable over the past two decades. The most highly-publicised examples of ‘culturally-African’ state-led reconciliation programmes have been the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa (1996-1999) and the *gacaca* community courts in Rwanda (2002-2012). The TRC was distinctively African in that it sought restorative rather than retributive justice. The *gacaca* courts took this a step further and used indigenous legal forums as well as indigenous jurisprudence. The TRC was a very centralised process, while the *gacaca* courts were devolved to a more local level.

Both of these initiatives won some qualified support in international circles as transitional justice programmes rooted in local, rather than universalist, systems of justice. (UNSC, 2004; Huyse & Salter, 2008). However, neither engaged overtly with *spiritual* interpretations of harm nor healing, despite these elements being so important to the people whose testimonies were being heard. (Krog et al, 2009, makes this case powerfully regarding the TRC). In the eyes of the global NGOs and the institutions that offer assistance (in funds and kind) for national reconciliation projects, these spirit beliefs and rituals are not the proper work of state governments.

Even the TRC and *gacaca* courts did not escape mistrust within the international community towards these local forms of justice. Commentators expressed concerns about ‘invented traditions’ that romanticise grassroots systems of justice, at the expense of a true commitment to human rights:

The notion of local justice needs to be handled with care: what passes for harmonious, indigenous customs are more often than not “invented traditions” designed to promote social control and political ideologies. (Waldorf, 2006, 6)

Domestic courts have been thought to lack a universal awareness of human rights; to be partisan; to be susceptible to profiteering; to have gender and generational biases; to be controlled by victors with scores to settle. (Pankhurst, 1999, 243; Kaufman, 2005, 74; Thomson & Jazdowska, 2012, 90) Commenting on Rwanda’s experiment with the *gacaca* hearings on human rights abuses during the genocide there, Amnesty International acknowledged the value of grassroots community participation, but expressed anxieties that:

Gacaca may become a vehicle for summary and arbitrary justice that fails defendants and genocide survivors alike…Amnesty International is principally concerned with the extrajudicial nature of the gacaca tribunals. The gacaca legislation does not incorporate international standards of fair trial. (Press release, 19 June 2002)

The concept of ‘transitional *justice’*, in itself, then, raises difficult issues regarding power relationships at the international, national and local level.

In Zimbabwe, it seemed easier to focus on the ‘African’ path of reconciliation. Yet even ‘reconciliation’ is highly political in Zimbabwe, particularly now that Emmerson Mnangagwa is President. He is widely represented as the ‘architect’ of the Gukurahundi massacres, an episode soon after independence in which civilians, largely but not exclusively Ndebele people, were massacred by a branch of the national army closely associated with Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) party. In both European and African systems of justice, reconciliation has normally been predicated on *some* form of justice, whether restorative or punitive. As Donna Pankhurst has noted:

Justice and reconciliation are fundamental to peace-building, but there is no adequate theorising of how these relate to each other … [R]econciliation is generally a more domestic affair in which the roles of members of the international community should be limited to supporting what emerges from within societies. (Pankhurst, 1999, 254)

Nonetheless, reconciliation does take us beyond the strict legalism of human rights concerns with justice. International definitions of Human Rights are strictly legalistic, oriented towards punishing transgression, secular, and vested in the individual; informal practices of justice in sub-Saharan Africa tend to be flexible, reconciliatory, spiritual and vested in groups defined by a common bond (usually kin). (PRI, 2000) Reconciliation allows us to focus on local rather than international mechanisms of transition.

This makes it even more striking to note how the NPRC’s predecessor, the Organ on National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration (ONHRI), consistently failed to engage with (never mind connect with) the grassroots. (Mashingaidze, 2010; Thomson & Jazdowska, 2012; Bratton, 2011) Its consultations, limited as they were, remained within the ‘magic circle’ of other civil society groups. In this respect, it reflected a common trait of transitional justice practitioners, ‘many of whom assume that social change is led by state or state-like institutions through the rule of law.’ (Baines, 2010, 415) But if the NPRC is to succeed, it needs to connect with reconciliation at every level of society. In the absence of effective national-level initiatives, we must look to how people at the grassroots, faced with their neighbours on a daily basis, develop informal mechanisms of reconciliation.

**Perceptions of the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission**

And so we come to the present moment. Within anthropologically-inclined academic circles, it is a truism that reconciliation involves spiritual as well as socio-legal protocols. (Gluckman, 1962; more recently, for example, Chicuecue, 1997; Thomas, 1999; Stevens, 1999, 14; Nolte-Schamm, 2006) It is hardly a new insight that modern Africans tend to construct the socio-legal world spiritually, in a way that modern Europeans generally do not. But, given the size of the continent, this generalisation is fairly meaningless as a way of understanding distinct responses to particular political situations. We need to investigate the specific histories and legacies underlying spiritual dimensions to justice in contemporary Zimbabwe.

The classic Shona ethnographies routinely accepted that reconciliation had spiritual dimensions. (Holleman, 1952; Kuper et al, 1954; Gelfand, 1965; Aschwanden, 1982; Bourdillon, 1987) But, surprisingly and significantly, in the literature on transitional justice, almost no-one mentions it. The NPRC has attracted the attention of global advisors as well as grassroots activists. Peace building and conflict prevention create many jobs internationally, and there are plenty of global experts generating peacebuilding strategies and activities that they hope are transferrable across cultures and territories.[[12]](#footnote-12) The UN’s Peacebuilding Support Office, directed by the Peacebuilding Commission, and with the Peacebuilding Fund as its enabler, operates on the principle that peace work is not just about facilitating the end of conflicts, but about putting in place strategies for prevention and for sustaining peace after conflict has ended. The NPRC works broadly within this framework. However, while most of its stakeholders agree in principle that there may be some role for indigenous forms of reconciliation in this, there is no agreement about what these are, or about how the past connects to the present.

At one end of the spectrum, global peacebuilders funded by international NGOs have been providing advice to both government and opposition about how to set up effective reconciliation talks to end political violence. These people talked to me off the record, which is interesting in itself. We tend to think of traditional healers as protective of their secrets and unwilling to talk openly to outsiders; but I found that the global peacebuilders were the ones more likely to keep their practices confidential. These people were professionals, with a very clear idea of what was needed. Their terms of reference were political. They saw their role primarily as facilitating talks that would guarantee the civil rights of political opposition and open the way for multiparty representative democracies. As everyone knows, this will need to include some form of final closure for the festering sore of Gukurahundi. The findings of enquiries into the events have never been published, no compensation has been paid, and there are many reports of unsettled spirits still awaiting justice and a proper burial. In keeping with much international opinion, there was an unreflective assumption that some form of truth/justice/reconciliation commission was necessary.

The global peace-making professionals had protocols at hand (originating, I suspected, in an office somewhere in Geneva), which set out recognised best practice on how to enable successful roundtable political negotiations. When I raised the possibility of including traditional healers in the process of reconciliation, this was met with simple and total bafflement. What had a tourist attraction about local folklore traditions to do with the important business of political negotiation? I was clearly dismissed as a pseudo-academic with an odd bee in my bonnet, and politely but firmly shown the door.

At the other end of the spectrum, ordinary people who had unresolved trauma from decades of war, massacre, displacement and political violence were equally baffled, and angered, by the state’s refusal to acknowledge what had to be done. As one person said to me: ‘Even the government knows that there are *ngozi*. But the person who has been given the task of National Reconciliation is sitting in the office. He doesn’t want to go to Chipinge, he doesn’t want to go to Domboshawa, to go and tell people that, “okay, you’ve got *ngozi* in your family. Please unite as family members to solve this”. He’s just typing on his laptop while sitting in an office in Belgravia.’ (Tapfuma, 2016).[[13]](#footnote-13) National healing, as it is framed by constitutions, NGOs, the UN and other mainstream organisations, touches only a small corner of the ‘nation’ and its processes of ‘healing’. At the grassroots, Shona-speaking people are already using *ngozi* rituals to address post-traumatic stress and to bring together victims and perpetrators as joint partners in a reconciliation process.

Despite this perception of a disconnect with grassroots practices, both the Chair of the NPRC, retired Justice Selo Masole Nare, and the President’s Special Adviser on peace and reconciliation, Prof Clever Nyathi, are keen to support grassroots-level peacebuilding initiatives using indigenous methods. Coming from very different professional backgrounds – Nare was a fiercely independent judge, while Nyathi has academic and practical expertise in post-conflict peacebuilding – they converge in their approach. Their goals have been framed in terms of prevention work, primarily in the form of dispute resolution, rather than in terms of reconciliation and reparation. Both men have been highlighting the value of chiefly courts as a system of dispute resolution. As a starting point for embedding peacebuilding and conflict prevention, support for chiefly courts as a traditional conflict resolution mechanism makes sense. It draws on existing infrastructures and utilises traditions with which both men, of Ndebele origin, are already familiar. The chiefly courts were integrated into the white settler state as a form of indirect rule in the mid-twentieth century. Moreover, these courts have been the subject of many gender-mainstreaming initiatives since the 1980s, and are often more liberal and progressive than is generally recognised. Importantly, this indigenous heritage is not based on ‘superstition’.

However, this strategy for bringing indigenous methods of peace and reconciliation into the mainstream provision has a number of potentially compromising political implications. Most obviously, government support for grassroots initiatives deflects attention from government culpability, and shifts attention towards local perpetrators and away from analysis of structural and strategic violence. There is no hint of ‘truth’ or ‘justice’ hearings here. ‘Truth’ is not presented as a good in itself, but only where it assists in building conflict resolution mechanisms. Significantly, a strategy based on grassroots conflict resolution does not allow for a proper investigation of Gukurahundi, an absence that led to the Commission being driven away on attempting its first meetings in Matabeleland, where most Ndebele speakers live. Moreover, as Nyathi noted, ‘forgiveness is optional’: this strategy is about future prevention, rather than the past and reconciliation. (see also Tarusarira, 2019) Chiefly courts are about resolving claims, not traumas. As with the TRC and *gacaca* courts, there is no attention either to the spiritual dimensions of reconciliation or to the rituals associated with healing the families of both perpetrator and victim.

The NPRC is an independent body, but its civil service support comes under the office of Vice President Kembo Mohadi. The Permanent Secretary Rev Paul Damasane, who is also of Ndebele origin, approaches indigenous forms of reconciliation rather differently. While both he and Nyathi are aware of the inadequacies of existing recommended models, they have different ways of expressing what they want instead. For Damasane, ritual *cleansing* is essential. He is far more open to the idea of recovering spirit-based forms of reconciliation, whether Christian or traditional. Moreover, he sees this as part of a wider project of cultural renewal, comparable to the role of Shintoism in Japanese spiritual and economic recovery after World War II. As a civil servant, he is playing a longer game, perhaps.

All three of these top-level actors regard peacebuilding as already rooted in existing cultural heritage. While they are open to externally-designed peacebuilding practices – as demonstrated in the NPRC’s UNDP-supported ‘[Building Blocks4Peace’](https://medium.com/undpzimbabwe/building-lasting-peace-one-block-at-a-time-4c307d401f80) campaign in the run-up to the July 2018 elections – they do not see all indigenous systems as redundant.[[14]](#footnote-14) Their sense of the value of these systems is in notable contrast to the approach of those global professionals who understand peacebuilding much more in terms of political negotiation and embedding constitutional rights. Despite a century in which indigenous practices were at best regarded as backwards and at worst criminalised, those practices have persisted.

Nonetheless, two things are notable about the ways they talk about these practices. Firstly, non-spiritual approaches towards conflict resolution are still prioritised over spirit-based rituals of reconciliation and trauma healing. The suspicion that spirit-based rituals are not entirely respectable remains deeply embedded in the state and the academy, notwithstanding the excessive power that various ‘prophets’ have wielded over politicians during times of crisis in the past two decades. It is easier to get funding if spirits are left out of the picture. Conversely, there is powerful resistance from another direction: the Christian churches, particularly the new Pentecostal churches. Rather than denying that spirits are anything other than superstition, these churches acknowledge their power but see them as evil. They mobilise their congregations to oppose the traditionalists and overcome the power of indigenous spirits with the power of the Holy Spirit instead. These churches are politically powerful, and this provides another strong incentive for policy makers to side-step engagement with spirit-based work in national healing and peacebuilding initiatives.

Secondly, there is an a-historical approach to ‘traditional’ practices. The questions that historians ask, about what has persisted, and why, and how far what is seen as having persisted may actually be a more recent invention, are not on the agenda. In practice, although Nyathi and others are reclaiming ‘traditional’ methods of conflict resolution, what they mean is what people *currently* do in the chiefs’ courts. Because these are public spaces integrated into the state, the operations of the courts are broadly the same across Ndebele and Shona courts (despite developing from very different starting points in the 1890s). But other ‘traditional’ methods of reconciliation, based on spirit work, were driven underground and, rather than converging, have tended to diverge even more over the intervening decades. One of the more unexpected experiences I have had in presenting this work was at a University of Zimbabwe History department seminar a few years ago, where my paper and argument were side-lined and forgotten, as the seminar turned into a lively dispute between participants about the correct way to understand *ngozi* and the correct forms and meanings of *ngozi* rituals, with seemingly as many different views as there were participants.

This fissuring of ideas about ‘tradition’ might be seen as a particularly damaging colonial legacy. But alternatively, it might provide an opportunity to change the conversation about what ‘indigenous and traditional methods of healing, reconciliation, and alternative dispute resolution’ mean, towards one that is more deeply informed by history and historical modes of analysis. The Director of the National Archives of Zimbabwe, Ivan Murambiwa, notes that there is potentially a very rich record in the Archives about how Zimbabwe’s Intangible Cultural Heritage (a UNESCO category) has changed over time. Historical research can demonstrate how, over the decades, ‘tradition’ has always reflected the needs and concerns of the present moment. It can thereby shift the current conversation away from how ‘indigenous and traditional’ methods of healing, reconciliation, and dispute resolution should be done *properly*, to how they can once again adapt to meet current needs. Whereas the introduction of *gacaca* courts, for example, was based on a single indigenous *system*, and the TRC used African reconciliation *principles* but ran European-style hearings, Zimbabwe has the opportunity to use an array of practices, all informed by broad indigenous principles of community healing and reconciliation. And, in the view of some of the key organisations currently delivering grassroots reconciliation programmes, these will, necessarily, include some attention to spirit-based work.

**Grassroots approaches to spirit-based reconciliation**

This paper looks at three such organisations, all working nationally but Harare-based, that, in different ways, are trying to negotiate their relationship to spirits and spirit beliefs in their reconciliation and peacebuilding projects. One such organisation is the [Centre for Conflict Management and Transformation](http://www.ccmt.org.zw/) (CCMT). As its name indicates, this is a mainstream organisation that is rooted in well-established western systems of community conflict management and mediation. It is normally very wary of any overt use of religious or spiritual beliefs. Indeed, much of its work involves mediation between churches and traditionalists at the village level.

However, CCMT is currently working on peri-urban land conflicts, and it is finding that spirits keep intruding into this work. It is not widely known that the compulsory land acquisitions in Zimbabwe in the 2000s and 2010s not only applied to white-owned commercial farms, but also to some communal lands, controlled by local people. Peri-urban growth point expansion has seen land being acquired by the state for allocation to rural district councils (RDCs). This communal land, like the white-owned farm land, was traditionally understood to belong to the ancestors, with each generation having land allocated by the chiefs in accordance with usufruct rights and, inevitably, the political interests of the chiefs and elders.

Many strangers, with different ancestors, have been allocated this land since the compulsory acquisitions. This has inevitably led to tensions and compensation conflicts: exactly the kind of work that CCMT is well placed to address. But the standard procedures for mediation, encouraging disputants to understand each other’s viewpoint and come to a constructive compromise, have turned out to be somewhat beside the point in these land conflicts. The problem, CCMT has found, is that any development programme where local people have been displaced, whether historically or at present, needs to pay attention to spiritual concerns. Even where there is good will on all sides, the difficulty remains: under what circumstances and with what rituals and what compensation does relocation from ancestral lands become acceptable? How can agreements be made about *non-economic* compensation? CCMT, like those working with the NPRC, are finding that there is no single ‘indigenous and traditional method of healing, reconciliation, and alternative dispute resolution’. There is, rather, the need for what historians might call an ‘invented tradition’, rooted in the past but adapted to the present, to satisfy the demands of the spirits from all sides. And so CCMT, like NPRC, is turning to historians to help to identify the outlines of what such a tradition might look like.

Meanwhile, another reconciliation and trauma healing organisation, the [Tree of Life](http://www.treeoflifezimbabwe.org/) (ToL) has taken a very different approach to spirit traditions and their cultural diversity. Founded by Bev Reeler, a wise white woman, ToL is primarily a trauma healing process rooted in sharing stories. Participants may be perpetrators, or victims, or both. There is no judgement about what caused the trauma. This is a deeply spiritual process: for ToL practitioners, if is self-evident that trauma healing involves psychosocial spirit work. However, ToL uses a hybridised invented tradition from which local spiritual traditions, both African and Christian, are consciously excluded. ToL workshops pay attention to ancestors in much the same way as Freudian or Constellations work may pay attention to ancestors, without requiring a belief in ancestral spirits. Reeler is suspicious of appeals to practices ‘in our culture’, which she has observed tend to reinforce the interests of men over women, rich over poor and insiders over outsiders. Moreover, as with CCMT, there is a lively awareness that apparent connection to one spirit tradition might alienate those from other traditions, undermining the possibilities for true healing, forgiveness and reconciliation. Of course, many – perhaps most – participants experience the story work about deep family roots within an ancestral spirit framework. But this is not explicit in the process itself.

However, ToL, too, is seeking some deeper engagement with local spirit beliefs. This is partly pragmatic. Both CCMT and ToL have found that if spiritual matters such as *ngozi* cases are left out of the healing and reconciliation processes, then they continue to fester after the process has ended, and the good work achieved quickly unravels. Mental health and trauma cannot be disassociated from a person’s understanding of their spiritual life. While ToL pays full attention to spiritual experiences, it does not currently have a language with which to express this in ways that recognise indigenous traditions of healing and reconciliation. But again, as with CCMT, ToL is aware that ‘tradition’ is both contested and negotiable. For ToL, too, then, there is now an interest in working with traditional healers and historians, to identify a tradition for the present moment that will enable them to bring such issues into the healing space without alienating other participants.

Finally, this paper considers [Heal Zimbabwe Trust](http://www.healzimbabwetrust.org/) (HZT), whose mandate is to ‘facilitate activities mainstreaming peace-building in the communities and conflict mitigation strategies’. The organisation is closely aligned to the civil rights movements but is far more than simply a pressure group or campaigning organisation. As its Director, Rashid Mahiya, affirmed to me, for Heal Zimbabwe, ‘national healing’ *must* be a spiritual healing. This is not only a psychosocial fact for him, but also a strategic one: spiritual initiatives unite communities that are divided by politics and outmanoeuvre political gatekeepers by appealing to higher forms of unity. The organisation provides workshops and training manuals to help people to use their cultural heritage to effect grassroots healing. Like Rev Damasane, Mahiya emphasises the value of cleansing rituals, which provide a balance between individual culpability and communal responsibility for the political violence in Zimbabwe’s history.

The Trust’s approach provides an alternative way to think about the objection that grassroots reconciliation initiatives put attention on individual perpetrators while allowing the government to continue to ignore its culpability. In its handbook on *Exploring Indigenous Transitional Justice Mechanisms in Zimbabwe*, HZT notes that while trauma healing tends to focus on individuals, and state/NGO/human rights interventions tend to focus on communities, *ngozi* cases address individual, kin and community as multiple levels of intervention and interaction. Because spirits are attached to individuals and kinship groups simultaneously, they allow a different way of conceptualising the social units where reparation, reconciliation and healing take place. They require the individual offence to be acknowledged, but hold the larger community to account. Individuals cannot hide behind the collective, but neither can the collective wash its hands of culpability (HZT/ZIMCET, 2016: 16). However, HZT warns that if practices such as *ngozi* reconciliation are mainstreamed, practitioners should be wary of the dangers of western taxonomising and regularising/regulation, as happened with *gacaca* courts: ‘the mechanisms remain key in ensuring that justice is domestically rooted and owned by local communities for sustainability of peace and justice’ (HZT/ZIMCET, 2016, iv). It is precisely because spirits cannot be contained by laws and processes, and spirit beliefs cannot be frozen into top-down directives, that spirit-based justice offers opportunities for grassroots ownership of reconciliation in the present state of ongoing upheaval and transformation.

**Conclusion**

Spirits can be invoked in multiple ways and at multiple levels of post-conflict peacebuilding, community level mediation and psychosocial trauma healing, and it is of course unwise to generalise. Because all these interventions are highly political, so, too, are any interventions that turn to ‘indigenous and traditional methods of healing, reconciliation, and alternative dispute resolution’. What this article has aimed to do is highlight the value of an historical approach to traditional and spirit-led forms of reconciliation. This examination shows how global peace-making professionals, the leading actors associated with the NPRC, and three different organisations working on healing, reconciliation, and alternative dispute resolution, each have different ways of understanding the role of indigenous systems in these processes. An attention to history can help to open up constructive conversations about traditional reconciliation and dispute resolution, including the role of spirits, in peace-building and trauma healing today. Rather than identifying specific practices as ‘authentic’ traditions, the article demonstrates that a continuity of community/cultural approaches can help to inform the development of contemporary spirit-led national reconciliation and healing initiatives in Zimbabwe.

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1. All archival reference numbers are to the National Archives of Zimbabwe

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2. Rex v Ndiriwenyu, 26th June 1900, D3/1/1 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 7th April 1881. *Diaries of the Jesuit Missionaries at Bulawayo, 1879-1881*, Publication no. 4 of the Rhodesiana Society, Salisbury, 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. With the caveat that sometimes witches could harness the power of *ngozi* for their own ends. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Of course, there were many divisions within the white community regarding what they actually meant by ‘civilisation’: see Jeater, 1993: 35-63 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. NC Melsetter to Chief Native Commissioner (CNC), 31st August 1897. NUE2/1/1: 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R v Nguta, case 31/1896, 8th December 1896, D3/3/1 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. R v Munrirwa, case 85/1900, 23rd November 1900, D3/1/1 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Matanudzi v Tshimata, 12th July 1909, NVC 3/1/1. Cases with similarly-worded caveats from Melsetter include Ngochini v Makoso, 26th January 1911, S1069: 203; Bowerimwe v Chikukwa, 20th October 1911, S1069: 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For example, NC Melsetter Monthly Report, 31st December 1900, NUE 2/1/3: 499; Complaint of Tshitekero, 13th August 1907, NVC 3/1/1: 189; Complaint of Mungukwai, 19th January 1910, NVC 3/1/1: 372; M’tewa v Magwekana, 16th April 1914, S1069/2: 83 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. R v Chiyanyu, PE194/51, 30th July 1951 with R v Dzingai, PE333/51, 26th June 1951, both in S2006; R v Kisi, PE 231/51, 31st August 1951, S2006; R v Zaba, case 113/1956, 5th April 1956, S3216/17, with R v Arthur Lantern aka Nkosana, 14th February 1956 and R v Joe, Kapenda & Marakana, 8th February 1956, S3216/10 and 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Try putting ‘Peacebuilding Tools’ into your favourite search engine. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Chipinge is a district in the far south east of Zimbabwe, associated with high concentrations of traditional healers (partly a legacy of a charismatic chiefship linked to a powerful tree shrine there, and partly a legacy of its sharing a border with Mozambique, where traditional healers could live beyond the Southern Rhodesian criminal law but not lose touch with their client base within the territory). Domboshawa is the closest rural communal area to Harare. Belgravia is a district of Harare where many of the embassies, international NGOs and think-tanks are based. The sharing of the name with a district in London associated with extreme wealth, foreign expats and conspicuous consumption is not inappropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. <https://medium.com/undpzimbabwe/building-lasting-peace-one-block-at-a-time-4c307d401f80> Accessed 7 Aug 2019 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)