Nahoreka and Shona Spirituality, Prophecy, Culture and Security: Rethinking the Ancestral Guardian of the Shona People in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Nahoreka, the founding ancestor and guardian spirit of the Budya (shona dialect) people of Mutoko in north-eastern Zimbabwe, occupies a central place in the spirituality, political culture and collective memory of the Shona-speaking peoples of Zimbabwe. Through the female spirit medium known as Charehwa, Nahoreka has for generations been consulted on rain, succession to the chieftainship, the protection of the land and the welfare of the community. Yet in the 21st century this body of knowledge is increasingly dwindling, contested and misunderstood. There is a dearth of integrated scholarship that examines Nahoreka as a living system that links spirituality, prophecy, culture and security of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. The article draws on secondary data analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, theses, oral traditions recorded in published sources, newspaper reports and policy documents to explore the meaning and significance of the Nahoreka tradition. Afrocentricity provides the theoretical lens of the article. The analysis reveals five themes: Nahoreka as founding ancestor and guardian of a sacred landscape; prophecy, the spirit medium and the regulation of political authority; ritual, taboo and culture as foundations of social order; spirituality as an indigenous architecture of security; and contemporary threats and opportunities. Drawing from Afrocentricity, the article argues that the neglect of the Nahoreka tradition reflects the enduring dominance of Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies that reduce African spirituality to superstition. The article concludes by recommending the recognition of spirit mediums as custodians of heritage, the protection of sacred sites, the integration of Budya oral history into heritage-based curricula and the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into community security and disaster-risk planning.

Keywords: Nahoreka; Shona spirituality; spirit mediums; prophecy; Budya; human security; Afrocentricity.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Africa possesses some of the oldest and most resilient religious traditions in the world. Much of that heritage is carried not in written scripture but in ancestral memory, ritual and the voices of spirit mediums. Among the Shona-speaking peoples of Zimbabwe, the living and the dead are understood to form a single moral community in which ancestral spirits (*vadzimu*) protect families, while the great territorial or royal spirits (*mhondoro*) guard the land, bring rain and watch over the political order (Gelfand, 1977; Bourdillon, 1987). The most widely known of these spirits, Nehanda, Kaguvi and Chaminuka, have entered the national narrative of Zimbabwe through their association with the First Chimurenga of 1896–97 and the liberation war of the 1970s (Ranger, 1967; Lan, 1985). Less well known beyond Mashonaland East, but no less important to the people who honour him, is Nahoreka, the founding ancestor and guardian spirit of the Shona people of Mutoko.

According to Budya oral traditions, Nahoreka led his people from Mhingari, in what is today the Tete Province of Mozambique, in search of land with reliable water, and settled in the granite country around Mount Mutemwa which was then ruled by Makate (Sheub, 2000; Marwizi & Mangudhla, n.d.). Traditions recall that Makate possessed powerful medicines that repeatedly defeated Nahoreka's warriors, until Nahoreka gave his sister, remembered variously as Chingate, Nyamungate or Njapa, in marriage to Makate. She learned the secret of his power, carried away his horns and ritual paraphernalia, and returned to her brother, who then overcame

Makate (Sheub, 2000). From that moment, the Budya trace their sovereignty over Mutoko. After his death, Nahoreka is believed to have become the guardian spirit of the territory, speaking through a female medium known by the title Charehwa, whose approval was historically required before any Mutoko chief could rule (Mutwira, 1982; Berlyn, 1972).

Despite this richness, the Nahoreka tradition occupies an ambiguous position in the 21st century. Colonial administrators and missionaries treated spirit mediumship as superstition and, at times, as subversion, while the postcolonial state has alternately celebrated and instrumentalised ancestral spirits for political purposes (Ranger, 1985; Fontein, 2006). At the same time, the expansion of Pentecostal and other Christian churches, urbanisation, formal schooling and labour migration have weakened the transmission of ancestral knowledge between generations (Shoko, 2007; Mawere, 2014). The Mutoko ruins, associated in Budya tradition with Makate, remain underdeveloped and little known as a heritage site. Court ccases involving people who use the name Nahoreka to claim authority over chiefs show how the tradition can be appropriated outside its proper cultural context (Nehanda Radio, 2014).

These developments raise important sociological, anthropological and cultural questions. The Nahoreka tradition is not merely a collection of legends; it embodies knowledge about cosmology, leadership, gender, ecology and the protection of the community. It speaks directly to contemporary concerns about security, understood not only as the defence of territory but as food security, environmental security, social cohesion and the legitimacy of leadership (UNDP, 1994). The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) recognises the institution of traditional leadership and charges traditional leaders with promoting and upholding the cultural values of their communities, while the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2024) has introduced a Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework for 2024–2030 that seeks to place heritage at the centre of education. These developments provide an important policy context in which to reassess the place of Nahoreka in Shona society. The article is organised as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature, after which the theoretical framework and methodology are presented. The findings are then presented and discussed together under five themes, followed by the conclusion and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Shona spirituality

Shona spirituality has conventionally been described in terms of a hierarchy that links a distant creator, known in different regions as Mwari, Musikavanhu or Chikara, to human beings through the mediation of ancestral spirits (Gelfand, 1977; Bourdillon, 1987). Mbiti (1969) argued that African religion permeates every aspect of life, so that there is no formal separation between the sacred and the secular, and that the departed who are remembered by name, whom he called the living dead, remain active members of the community. Bourdillon (1987) distinguished between family ancestors, who are concerned with the welfare of their descendants, and the *mhondoro*, the spirits of founding chiefs, who are concerned with the land, rain and the chiefdom as a whole. Daneel (1970) documented the oracular cult of Mwari in the Matopo Hills, showing how a high god could speak to a wide region through shrine officials, while Garbett (1977) showed that Shona spirit cults formed regional networks that sometimes cut across political boundaries. Spirit mediumship is the institutional core of this system. A medium (*svikiro*) is a person, often chosen through illness or unusual experience, through whom an ancestor is believed to speak; when possessed, the medium's words are treated as the words of the spirit itself, sometimes interpreted by an assistant (Gelfand, 1977; Bourdillon, 1987). Lewis (1971) placed such phenomena within a comparative anthropology of possession, while Chavunduka (1994) showed that healers and mediums remain central to health-seeking in modern Zimbabwe. These debates are directly relevant to this article, for Nahoreka is a *mhondoro* whose authority is territorial, political and ecological at the same time.

Nahoreka and the Budya of Mutoko

Literature on Nahoreka is limited but very significant. Berlyn (1972) published an early account of the keeper of the spirit of Nahoreka in the colonial administrative journal *NADA*, describing the medium's seclusion and ritual authority. Mutwira (1982) examined the impact of colonial rule on the people of Mutoko between 1885

and 1906 and reported that no Mutoko chief could rule without the approval of the medium of Nahoreka. Sheub (2000) recorded the narrative of Nahoreka learning his enemy's secret as part of the mythology of the Shona. Mushishi (2010), in a doctoral study of Budya traditional religion, argued that aspects of that religion protect rights to life, security, food, dignity and health, while identifying gendered inequalities. Popular sources add further detail. Marwizi and Mangudhla (n.d.) report that the Budya travel to Charehwa in times of drought, that the medium lives in seclusion and enjoys privileges comparable to those of chiefs, and that the sacred grove of Dzimbahwe, believed to hold the spirit of Nahoreka, may not be cultivated or cleared. Beach (1980) places the Budya within the wider history of Shona state formation and migration, and Mudenge (1988) situates the north-east within the history of the Mutapa state.

Prophecy, spirit mediums and political authority

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the political role of spirit mediums. Ranger (1967) argued that the mediums of Nehanda, Kaguvi and Mkwati provided coordination and ideological legitimacy for the military uprisings of 1896–97, an interpretation that later scholars debated but did not abandon. Fry (1976) showed that spirit mediums among the Zezuru articulated consensus and protest, giving voice to collective grievances. Lan (1985) demonstrated that in the Dande area of the Zambezi Valley, guerrillas of the liberation war sought the support of *mhondoro* mediums, who conferred legitimacy on the armed struggle by identifying the guerrillas with the ancestral owners of the land. Ranger (1985) made a similar argument for Makoni district, linking peasant consciousness to ancestral claims to land. Kriger (1992), however, cautioned that rural support for guerrillas was shaped by coercion and local conflicts, which suggests that the spiritual dimension should not be romanticised. Spierenburg (2004) showed that in post-independence Dande, mediums continued to contest state land reform in the name of the ancestors, while Fontein (2006) showed that at Great Zimbabwe, spirit mediums and heritage authorities contested the meaning and management of a sacred landscape. Charumbira (2015) examined how the memory of Nehanda was constructed and reconstructed in the making of Zimbabwe as a nation.

Spirituality, indigenous knowledge and security

A growing literature links African spirituality to environmental management and community wellbeing. Taringa (2014) and Machoko (2013) argued that Shona taboos and beliefs about sacred pools, groves and hills function as conservation mechanisms. Shoko (2007) showed that Karanga indigenous religion is centrally concerned with health and wellbeing. Mapara (2009) and Mawere (2014) argued that indigenous knowledge systems in Zimbabwe have been undervalued by formal education and development discourse, despite their relevance to sustainable livelihoods. At the level of policy, the concept of human security, introduced by UNDP (1994), broadened security beyond the defence of the state to include economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security, a framing that resonates with African conceptions of collective wellbeing. Mushishi (2010) applied a comparable rights-based lens to Budya religion, but studies that examine African spiritual institutions as security institutions in their own right, with their own procedures for early warning, mediation and protection, remain rare.

Gaps in the literature

Literature demonstrates that Shona spirit mediums are the subject of significant scholarship, but that the Budya and Nahoreka have received little sustained attention beyond brief colonial accounts, a single doctoral thesis and journalistic reports. Studies of mediums tend to focus either on religion or on the politics of war, and few connect spirituality, prophecy, culture and security in a single framework. Fewer still analyse these questions through an explicitly African-centred theoretical lens. The article seeks to address these gaps through a secondary analysis of the existing literature.

Theoretical framework - Afrocentricity

The article is anchored in Afrocentricity, a theoretical paradigm associated principally with Molefi Kete Asante. Asante (2003) defines Afrocentricity as a mode of thought and action in which African interests, values and perspectives predominate, and in which African people are treated as subjects and agents of their

own history rather than as objects on the margins of European experience. Mazama (2001) describes the Afrocentric paradigm as one that places African experience at the centre of analysis and rejects the assumption that European cultural standards constitute a universal measure of value. Central to the paradigm is the concept of location, which refers to the cultural, historical and psychological place from which a phenomenon is viewed. From an Afrocentric standpoint, the problem with much scholarship on African religion is that it has been analysed from a dislocated position, through categories such as magic, superstition and ancestor worship that were derived from European and missionary traditions (Asante, 2003; Mbiti, 1969).

Afrocentricity resonates with a wider body of African decolonial thought. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argued that colonialism operated through the colonisation of the mind, by which Africans were taught to devalue their own languages, cultures and knowledge. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 2018) argued that the coloniality of power and knowledge persists in postcolonial Africa, shaping what counts as legitimate knowledge. Mkabela (2005) and Chilisa (2020) translated these insights into methodological terms, arguing that research on indigenous culture should be grounded in African worldviews and contribute to the wellbeing of the communities concerned.

Afrocentricity is particularly appropriate for this article for three reasons. First, it explains why the Nahoreka tradition has been marginalised: its neglect reflects the long-standing classification of African spirituality as irrational, in which prophecy was dismissed as witchcraft and ritual as heathen custom. Second, the paradigm's emphasis on agency allows the article to foreground the Budya, their chiefs and their mediums as the authors and custodians of their own religious and political institutions. Third, the paradigm has a practical orientation towards cultural renewal, which aligns with the article's concern with revitalisation and with policy developments such as the Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024).

Afrocentricity has attracted criticism, which this article acknowledges. Critics argue that it risks essentialising African cultures and romanticising the past. These concerns are relevant here, for the Nahoreka tradition itself records conquest, the displacement of Makate's people and gendered restrictions on women (Mushishi, 2010). There is a risk that an Afrocentric celebration of ancestral authority could be used to justify the exclusion of minorities, of women or of religious dissenters, or to shield traditional institutions from accountability. The article applies Afrocentricity critically, centring African knowledge and agency while remaining attentive to power relations within African societies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The article adopted a qualitative research approach based on secondary data analysis. Secondary data analysis involves the analysis of data that were collected by other researchers or institutions for other purposes (Johnston, 2014). Heaton (2008) notes that the secondary analysis of qualitative material allows researchers to address new questions using existing data and to synthesise findings across studies and settings. This approach was considered appropriate for the article sought to integrate scholarship from religious studies, history, anthropology and security studies, and to examine a tradition that spans several centuries. The approach aligns with Afrocentric methodology, which encourages researchers to re-read existing knowledge from an African-centred location (Mkabela, 2005).

Data sources and selection

Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, doctoral theses, published oral traditions, national policy documents and newspaper reports. Sources were identified through searches of JSTOR, Taylor & Francis Online, African Journals Online (AJOL), Google Scholar and university repositories, including OpenUCT. Search terms included combinations of 'Nahoreka', 'Budya', 'Buja', 'Mutoko', 'mhondoro', 'Shona spirit mediums', 'prophecy', 'indigenous knowledge' and 'human security'. Sources were included if they addressed the history, spirituality, ritual practice or political role of Nahoreka, the Budya or comparable Shona spirit traditions. Newspaper reports were used only to document contemporary events and

community testimony, and were read critically. Classic works published before 2000 were retained where they remain foundational, such as the studies of Gelfand (1977), Bourdillon (1987) and Lan (1985), and colonial-era accounts were included as historical evidence while their assumptions were critically examined.

Data analysis

The selected documents were analysed using document analysis and thematic analysis. Bowen (2009) describes document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents in order to elicit meaning and develop empirical knowledge. Thematic analysis followed the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Codes were generated inductively and then interpreted through the lens of Afrocentricity. Five themes emerged.

Trustworthiness and limitations

Trustworthiness was enhanced by drawing on multiple types of sources, which allowed for triangulation (Bowen, 2009). The use of secondary data nonetheless has limitations. The researcher depended on the interpretations of the original authors, and some sources, particularly colonial-era accounts, reflect perspectives that this article interrogates. Oral traditions about Nahoreka vary between narrators and clans; and the scarcity of academic work on Nahoreka is itself treated as a finding about the relative neglect of his heritage.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The secondary data analysis generated five interrelated themes. Each theme is presented below, compared across the literature and interpreted through the lens of Afrocentricity.

Nahoreka as founding ancestor and guardian of a sacred landscape

Analysis shows that Nahoreka is far more than a figure of legend; he is the founding ancestor whose spirit binds the Budya to their land. In Shona thought, the *mhondoro* is the spirit of a founding chief who continues to own the territory he conquered or settled, and whose permission is required for its fertility (Bourdillon, 1987; Lan, 1985). The Nahoreka narrative of migration from Mhingari in search of water, the struggle with Makate and the acquisition of Makate's ritual power is a charter that explains why the Budya are the rightful custodians of Mutoko (Sheub, 2000). Lan (1985) shows a similar logic in Dande, where the conquering ancestors of the Korekore became the *mhondoro* of the land, while the spirits of the original inhabitants retained a role in its fertility.

The landscape itself carries this memory. Marwizi and Mangudhla (n.d.) report that the Budya regard the stone ruins near Mutoko as Tere raMakate, the former village of Makate, rather than as the home of their own ancestors, while Dzimbahwe, a sacred site nearby, is believed to hold the spirit of Nahoreka and may not be cultivated or cleared. Charehwa, between the Nyadire and Chitora rivers, remains the ritual home of the Mutoko chieftainship. Mount Mutemwa and associated caves are regarded as sacred for Makate is believed to have disappeared into the rock. This layering of sacred places resembles what Ranger (1999) described for the Matopo Hills and what Fontein (2006) described for Great Zimbabwe, where hills, caves and ruins carry meanings that are simultaneously religious, historical and political.

The narrative links the Budya to wider networks of Shona history. Some clans of the Shumba lineage trace their dispersal from Mutoko to areas such as Hwedza, Svosve and parts of Masvingo, such that Nahoreka is elevated and revered among the great founding ancestors of the shona people. Beach (1980) shows that such migrations, conquests and alliances were central to the formation of Shona polities between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that oral traditions of this kind, while not literal chronicles, preserve important historical information about settlement and political change. The tradition is therefore a historical archive as well as a religious one, and it rewards the same careful reading that historians give to documentary sources.

From an Afrocentric perspective, the significance of this theme lies in the recognition that the Nahoreka tradition constitutes an indigenous philosophy of place. Colonial writers typically recorded such narratives as quaint folklore, a dislocated reading in Asante's (2003) terms. Read from an African-centred location, the narrative encodes principles about legitimate settlement, the ownership of land by ancestors rather than by individuals, and the obligations of the living towards the territory. It acknowledges that the Budya were not the first people of Mutoko, which shows that the tradition is honest about conquest and preserves the memory of Makate rather than erasing it.

Prophecy, the spirit medium and regulation of political authority

The second theme is that prophecy, exercised through the spirit medium, has functioned as a mechanism for regulating political authority. Mutwira (1982) reports that no Mutoko chief could rule without the approval of the medium of Nahoreka, and Marwizi and Mangudhla (n.d.) record that the medium, Charehwa, is traditionally an elderly woman of the Tembo totem who lives in seclusion, does not mix freely with the public and enjoys privileges equivalent to those of chiefs. Selous (1893), writing as a colonial hunter-traveller, described the power of what he termed a 'Lion God' over the chief and people of Mutoko, a description that, though filtered through European categories, confirms the medium's political weight in the late nineteenth century.

This arrangement reflects a wider Shona pattern. Bourdillon (1987) and Lan (1985) show that *mhondoro* mediums participate in the selection and installation of chiefs, for the chief rules on behalf of the ancestors who own the land. The medium acts as a check on the ambitions of royal houses, and can withhold rain or blessing if leaders violate the moral order. The seclusion of the medium is itself significant. By living apart, avoiding ordinary social obligations and observing strict ritual rules, the medium is protected from the pressures of kinship, patronage and faction that might compromise her pronouncements. Seclusion thus functions as a guarantee of impartiality, comparable in purpose, though not in form, to the independence expected of judges in modern constitutional systems. In this sense, prophecy is not mere fortune-telling but a form of public speech through which the ancestors comment on leadership, warn of danger and call for correction (Fry, 1976). Ranger (1967) and Charumbira (2015) show how the prophetic words attributed to Nehanda acquired national significance, while Lan (1985) shows that mediums in the liberation war foretold, interpreted and legitimised political change.

Literature also reveals tensions. Courts in Zimbabwe have dealt with chieftainship disputes in which the role of spirit mediums in succession was contested, and with individuals who invoke the names of famous spirits to claim authority. In one reported case, a self-styled medium calling himself Nahoreka was tried for seizing a chief's badge, while the chief insisted that the person was a stranger with no role in his succession (Nehanda Radio, 2014). Such cases indicate that the authority of prophecy depends on its embeddedness in a specific lineage, territory and set of ritual procedures. From an Afrocentric perspective, the issue is not whether prophecy is real by Western standards, but whether communities retain the capacity to authenticate their mediums according to their own criteria, a capacity weakened when the state, political parties or self-appointed individuals displace local custodians. Shona communities have long possessed such criteria, including the testing of a new medium's knowledge of the spirit's history, the endorsement of senior mediums and elders, and the observance of the spirit's taboos (Gelfand, 1977; Lan, 1985). Where these procedures are respected, prophecy remains accountable to the community; where they are bypassed, it becomes vulnerable to manipulation and to the kind of disputes that reach the courts.

Ritual, taboo and culture as foundations of social order

The third theme is that ritual and taboo associated with Nahoreka sustain a cultural order that regulates relations between people, and between people and their environment. In times of drought, the Budya travel to Charehwa to request rain, and elderly women who are past childbearing brew the *mukwerera* beer used in rain ceremonies (Marwizi & Mangudhla, n.d.). Gelfand (1959, 1977) and Bourdillon (1987) describe similar rain rituals across Shona country, in which the community, the chief and the medium jointly approach the ancestors. Such ceremonies reaffirm that rain is a shared good which depends on the collective moral health of the community.

Taboos form part of this order. The Budya forbid marriage within the same totem, an offence punished through a fine known as *makunakuna*, insist on bridewealth, require visitors to the chief to offer a token gift and prohibit the cultivation of Dzimbahwe or the cutting of trees there (Marwizi & Mangudhla, n.d.). Those chosen to clean the sacred site must observe sexual abstinence during that period. Machoko (2013) and Taringa (2014)

argue that such prohibitions protect sacred groves, water sources and wildlife, producing conservation outcomes long before formal environmental law. The chief's granary, *zunde ramambo*, which collects produce for distribution in times of famine, extends this logic into social welfare. Members of the community contribute labour to the chief's fields, and the harvest is stored for orphans, widows, the elderly and households facing hunger. The institution expresses the principle that the chief holds the land and its produce in trust for the ancestors and for the people, rather than for personal enrichment. Ritual, taboo and welfare are thus woven together: the same moral order that governs marriage and sacred places also governs the obligations of the powerful towards the vulnerable. Breaches of this order, whether incest, the desecration of a sacred grove or the neglect of the poor, are understood to anger the ancestors and to endanger the rains on which everyone depends.

The tradition is gendered in complex ways. On one hand, the most powerful ritual office in Budya society, that of the medium of Nahoreka, is held by a woman, and the narrative credits Nahoreka's sister with the decisive act that secured the land (Sheub, 2000). On the other hand, Mushishi (2010) shows that aspects of Budya religion subordinate women, for example through pressure on women who bear only daughters. These findings resonate with arguments by Mapara (2009) and Mawere (2014) that indigenous knowledge is integral to identity and stewardship, but they caution against uncritical celebration. The literature also indicates that women's ritual authority among the Budya extends beyond the medium, since accounts of the chieftainship describe a female office holder whose tenure depended on the approval of both the Mutoko and the medium of Nahoreka (Marwizi & Mangudhla, n.d.). The relationship between gender and sacred authority in Budya society is therefore more complex than either romantic or purely critical readings suggest. From an Afrocentric perspective, recognising ritual and taboo as knowledge rather than superstition restores their rational and ethical content, while an internal critique permits their renewal in line with the dignity of all members of the community.

Spirituality as an indigenous architecture of security

The fourth theme is that the Nahoreka tradition constitutes an indigenous architecture of security that operates at several levels. At the level of territorial defence, the founding narrative itself is a security narrative: Makate's power lay in medicines and ritual objects, and Nahoreka prevailed through intelligence gathered by his sister, a strategy of espionage and alliance rather than brute force (Sheub, 2000). Later, according to local histories based on archival and oral sources, the Budya resisted the expansion of the Portuguese adventurer Manuel António de Sousa, known as Gouveia, in the 1880s before entering into agreements with the British South Africa Company in the early 1890s (Mutwira, 1982; Beach, 1980). Throughout, the ancestors were understood as the ultimate guarantors of the community's survival.

The liberation war of the 1970s extended this pattern. Mutoko lay close to the Mozambican border and became one of the important operational areas of the war. Lan (1985) and Ranger (1985) show that guerrillas across north-eastern Zimbabwe sought the protection of *mhondoro* mediums, observed ancestral taboos and interpreted signs in the landscape as ancestral guidance. Former combatants have recounted how swarms of bees appeared to shield them from Rhodesian soldiers, an experience they attributed to ancestral intervention (The Sunday Mail, 2022). Bees also appear in regional oral traditions as instruments of ancestral or ritual power, including accounts of rivalry between chiefly lineages in Mashonaland East. Whatever one's interpretation of such events, they show that security was experienced as a relationship with the ancestors as well as a matter of arms. Kriger (1992) reminds us that the war also generated violence and fear within rural communities, and that appeals to ancestral authority could be used to enforce compliance as well as to protect. A balanced reading therefore recognises that spiritual institutions provided morale, discipline and legitimacy to the struggle, while also acknowledging that they operated within a context of coercion and suffering. The rules that mediums imposed on combatants, such as prohibitions on sexual relations, on eating certain foods and on

looting from villagers, can nonetheless be read as an indigenous code of conduct in war that sought to protect civilians and maintain the bond between fighters and the people (Lan, 1985).

At the level of human security, the tradition addresses many of the dimensions identified by UNDP (1994). Rain rituals and the *zunde ramambo* respond to food security; the protection of sacred groves and water sources addresses environmental security; the medium's role in succession disputes contributes to political security by preventing contests that might lead to bloodshed; and the moral order of taboos strengthens community security. Mushishi (2010) explicitly links Budya traditional religion to the rights to life, security, food and health. The attention paid by the community to the behaviour of the rains, the condition of sacred groves and the conduct of leaders amounts to a form of continuous monitoring, in which signs of environmental or moral disorder are noticed, interpreted and brought to the attention of the chief and the medium before they escalate into crisis. From an Afrocentric perspective, this theme challenges the state-centric and militarised conceptions of security inherited from colonial rule, and suggests that African communities possess their own frameworks for early warning, conflict resolution and resilience.

Contemporary threats and opportunities for revitalisation

The fifth theme concerns the contemporary position of the tradition. Literature identifies several threats. Colonial rule undermined chiefly and ritual authority by transferring dispute resolution to district commissioners and courts (Mutwira, 1982), while missionary education taught that ancestral religion was incompatible with Christianity (Bourdillon, 1987). In the present, the growth of Pentecostal churches, which often demonise ancestral spirits, has intensified this pressure (Shoko, 2007). Urbanisation and labour migration have separated young people from the elders and sites through which knowledge is transmitted. Politicisation is a further threat: Fontein (2006) and Charumbira (2015) show how spirits and sacred sites have been appropriated by the state and political actors. Contemporary reports show individuals using the names of revered spirits to make claims about national politics and chieftainship (Nehanda Radio, 2014). Heritage sites associated with Budya history, including the Mutoko ruins, remain poorly developed, with limited interpretation for visitors. Environmental pressures add a further dimension: granite quarrying, which is a major economic activity in Mutoko, together with population growth and land clearing, threatens hills, groves and water sources that carry ritual significance. When sacred places are physically damaged, the rituals and memories attached to them lose their anchor in the landscape. The weakening of intergenerational transmission is equally serious, since knowledge about Nahoreka has been carried largely by elders whose numbers are declining and whose authority is not always recognised by younger, schooled and urbanised generations.

There are also opportunities. The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) and the Traditional Leaders Act [Chapter 29:17] give legal recognition to traditional leadership and cultural values. The Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024) creates space for teaching local history, indigenous religion and values. The UNESCO (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage recognises oral traditions, rituals and knowledge concerning nature as heritage. Community festivals, oral history projects and cultural tourism linked to the Mutoko ruins could strengthen pride and generate income, provided that sacred knowledge is protected. Digital recording of oral histories, undertaken with the consent and under the control of custodians, could preserve narratives that are at risk of being lost with the passing of elders. Universities and colleges in Mashonaland East could partner with chiefs to document Budya history in the Shona language, ensuring that the tradition is recorded in the words of its own people rather than only in the categories of outside observers. These opportunities resonate with Asante's (2003) emphasis on agency and cultural renewal and with Chilisa's (2020) call for research and practice that serve community well-being.

Sociological underpinnings

Sociologically, the findings show that the Nahoreka tradition functions as a social fact that expresses and reproduces the collective life of the Budya. Durkheim (1912/1995) argued that religious symbols and rituals are collective representations through which a group affirms its moral unity, and rain ceremonies at Charehwa can be read in this way as occasions on which the chiefdom renews its solidarity before the ancestors. Halbwachs (1992) adds that memory is sustained within social frameworks; the narrative of Nahoreka, retold

at ceremonies and in families, anchors Budya identity in a shared past. Weber's (1978) distinction between charismatic and traditional authority is also instructive. The medium possesses a form of charisma that comes from spirit possession, but it is routinised through lineage, totem and ritual procedure, which allows it to legitimise and limit the traditional authority of the chief. The two forms of authority thus check each other. Durkheim's insight that religion is fundamentally social also helps explain why rain is treated as a collective rather than an individual concern: drought signals a disturbance in the moral relations of the whole community. Its remedy requires collective ritual, confession of wrongdoing and the restoration of proper relations between the living and the dead.

A sociological reading directs attention to power and social change. Processes of colonisation, Christianisation, schooling and urbanisation have altered the settings in which the tradition was reproduced (Mapara, 2009; Mawere, 2014). Bourdieu (1977) describes symbolic violence as the process by which dominant groups impose their standards as legitimate, so that subordinate groups come to accept the devaluation of their own practices; the stigmatisation of spirit mediumship as backward can be understood in these terms. At the same time, the tradition is itself an arena of struggle, in which royal houses, mediums, the state, churches and political parties contest meaning and authority (Spierenburg, 2004; Fontein, 2006). This sociological underpinning complements Afrocentricity by showing that the marginalisation of the tradition is socially produced and can therefore be reversed through deliberate social action.

Anthropological underpinnings

Anthropologically, the findings indicate that the Nahoreka tradition is best understood as a system of shared meaning. Geertz (1973) described culture as webs of significance spun by people themselves, and the Nahoreka narrative, the seclusion of the medium and the prohibitions surrounding Dzimbahwe form such a web. Turner (1967) showed that ritual symbols are multivocal; the horns and medicines Nahoreka's sister removed from Makate condense ideas about power, secrecy, gender and legitimacy. Lewis (1971) argued that spirit possession often gives voice to people who are otherwise marginal. The fact that a secluded elderly woman speaks with the authority of the founding ancestor illustrates how possession can redistribute authority within a society. Lan (1985) adds that mediums act as the living link between autochthony and conquest, holding together the histories of different groups who share one land. In the Budya case, the continued remembrance of Makate, the sacredness of his cave and the restrictions surrounding the ruins suggest that the conquered predecessor retains a ritual presence in the landscape. Conquest did not erase autochthony; it incorporated it into a new ritual order in which both founders and predecessors have a place.

Colonial ethnography often portrayed spirit mediums as primitive or dangerous, images that informed policies of control (Ranger, 1967; Bourdillon, 1987). Later scholars, including Fry (1976), Lan (1985) and Fontein (2006), showed that mediums are rational political actors responding to changing circumstances. These debates have encouraged a move towards collaborative research, in which communities act as co-interpreters of their own culture. This shift resonates with the call by Chilisa (2020) and Mkabela (2005) for research accountable to the communities concerned. The anthropological underpinning of this article thus combines an interpretive appreciation of the Nahoreka tradition with critical awareness of how knowledge about it has been produced and used.

Implications for African cultural values

The findings carry important implications for African cultural values. The Nahoreka tradition embodies values at the heart of *unhu/ubuntu*, the philosophy which holds that a person is a person through other persons and which emphasises respect, sharing, communal responsibility and solidarity (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). The *zunde ramambo*, the collective rain ceremonies and the prohibitions protecting sacred places express these values in concrete form. They teach that leadership is held in trust for the ancestors and for future generations, that land is not a commodity, and that the welfare of the weakest is a measure of the community's moral health. The neglect of this heritage implies more than the loss of rituals; it implies the weakening of the values through which communities define responsible conduct.

A second implication concerns identity and dignity. Wa Thiong'o (1986) argued that a people taught to despise their own culture lose the confidence to define themselves. The labelling of Shona spirituality as superstition has contributed to such a loss of cultural self-esteem, and to a situation in which young people may know more about foreign belief systems than about the ancestors of their own district. Reclaiming the Nahoreka tradition as knowledge affirms the Afrocentric principle that Africans must view their culture from their own location (Asante, 2003). It calls for honesty: a commitment to *unhu/ubuntu* requires attention to the voices of women and of descendants of Makate's people within the tradition. The Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024) offers an opportunity to transmit these values to young people, provided that elders and custodians are recognised as teachers and that indigenous religion is presented with the same respect accorded to other faiths. Families, schools, churches and the media have a role in presenting heritage as a living source of pride rather than as a relic. What a society chooses to remember reflects what it chooses to value (Smith, 2006).

Relevance of Nahoreka spirituality in drawing a framework for Africa's security and development agenda moving forward

The Nahoreka tradition offers principles that inform Africa's security and development agenda. The African Union's Agenda 2063 envisages a peaceful and secure Africa and an Africa with a strong cultural identity and shared values (African Union Commission, 2015). Three principles may be drawn. First, legitimacy: the requirement that a chief be approved by the ancestors through the medium is a reminder that durable security rests on leaders whom communities recognise as legitimate. Second, prevention: rain rituals, the *zunde ramambo* and conservation taboos are early-warning and resilience mechanisms, anticipating drought and famine rather than reacting to crisis. Third, integration: the tradition treats territorial, food, environmental and social security as one system, an approach consistent with human security (UNDP, 1994). A framework drawing on these principles would integrate traditional institutions into district disaster-risk committees, peacebuilding and natural resource governance, while subjecting them to constitutional standards of rights and accountability. At the continental level, the African Union's emphasis on African solutions to African problems gains concrete meaning when indigenous institutions of mediation, such as those through which mediums and elders resolve succession disputes, are recognised as part of the peace and security architecture. Lessons of Nahoreka from Mutoko could thus inform approaches in other African societies where ancestral and religious institutions remain influential. Such a framework would also treat indigenous knowledge as a resource for innovation, for example in climate adaptation and community-based conservation, rather than as an obstacle to modernisation. In practical terms, this could include the documentation of indigenous weather and drought indicators for use alongside meteorological forecasts, the revival of community grain reserves modelled on *zunde ramambo*, and the protection of sacred groves as part of national climate and biodiversity strategies.

Synthesis

Taken together, the five themes show that the Nahoreka tradition is an integrated system in which spirituality, prophecy, culture and security reinforce one another. Its marginalisation is rooted in colonial and postcolonial hierarchies of knowledge, compounded by religious change, urbanisation and politicisation. Interpreted through Afrocentricity, this marginalisation reflects the persistent dislocation of African knowledge, while the opportunities identified point towards a renewal grounded in community agency and education. The sociological and anthropological readings confirm that the tradition is a living social institution rather than a relic, and that its future depends on whether the Budya themselves, supported by the state, schools and churches, are able to transmit its knowledge and values to coming generations on their own terms.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to examine Nahoreka in relation to Shona spirituality, prophecy, culture and security, drawing on secondary data with particular reference to the Budya of Mutoko and Zimbabwe. The analysis has shown that Nahoreka is the founding ancestor and guardian of a sacred landscape, that the medium Charehwa has historically regulated political authority through prophecy and ritual approval, and that rituals and taboos associated with the spirit sustain social order and environmental stewardship. The tradition constitutes an indigenous architecture of security that links territorial defence with food, environmental and community

security. At the same time, colonial rule, missionary education, religious change, urbanisation and politicisation have marginalised it, while constitutional recognition of traditional leadership, the Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework and international safeguarding instruments offer opportunities for renewal.

The article makes two principal contributions. First, it brings spirituality, prophecy, culture and security into a single analytical frame, demonstrating that dimensions usually studied separately form one system in Budya thought. Second, by applying Afrocentricity, it argues that the neglect of the tradition is not a neutral consequence of modernisation but reflects the enduring dislocation of African knowledge. It shows that African spiritual institutions offer resources for thinking about legitimate leadership, prevention and resilience, themes that are central to contemporary debates about security and development on the continent. Remembering Nahoreka therefore requires more than ceremonial recognition; it requires recentring the Budya, their chiefs and their mediums as agents of their own heritage. For the article relies on secondary data, future research should include primary, participatory fieldwork with custodians and community members in Mutoko.

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