

Rivers, Society and Spirituality –The Mighty Zambezi, Limpopo, Sabi Rivers, and the Mhondoro Spirits among the Shona, Venda, Tonga, Shangani, Kalanga and Bemba Tribes Indigenous to Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a trans-disciplinary examination and constitutive relationships of the profound interconnections between major river systems—the Zambezi, Limpopo, and Sabi—and the spiritual, social, and cosmological worlds of six indigenous tribes of Southern Africa: the Shona, Venda, Tonga, Shangani, Kalanga, and Bemba. The article argues that for these communities, rivers are animate, sentient beings, integral to the governance structures mediated by the Mhondoro spirits—territorial and ancestral lion spirits. Drawing on written records, oral traditions, and comparative spiritual ecology, the article explores how each river functions as a spiritual artery, a boundary marker, a source of ritual legitimacy, and a conduit for communication with ancestors. The Zambezi emerges as a cosmic divide and a source of chiefly power. The Limpopo is presented as a liminal zone of transition and danger. The Sabi (Save) is portrayed as a domain of specific Mhondoro cults related to drought and fertility. The sustainability of these rivers is directly correlated with the socio-spiritual well-being of the respective societies. The article concludes by advocating for the integration of Mhondoro-centric water governance into contemporary conservation and climate adaptation strategies.

Keywords: Mhondoro spirits; Shona spirituality; Venda cosmology; Tonga hydrosocial territories; Shangani rainmaking; Kalanga ancestral cults; Bemba umutomboko; indigenous water governance; spiritual ecology.

INTRODUCTION

The mighty Zambezi, Limpopo and the Sabi (Save) are indigenous rivers geographically located, centrally and culturally defined with southern Africa. These rivers of Southern Africa are not merely geographical features etched into the continent's ancient topography. For the indigenous rural localities of the Shona, Venda, Tonga, Shangani, Kalanga, and Bemba tribes, these waterways are the bloodlines of the earth, pulsating with spiritual force and ancestral memory. According to Ranger (1999: 45), the colonial cartographic exercise of mapping rivers as fixed blue lines fundamentally misunderstood the fluid, living essence these waterways held for local populations. The article confronts the persistent academic and policy-driven separation of hydrology from cosmology, arguing that any meaningful engagement with water security, climate resilience, or rural development in Southern Africa must first reckon with the sovereignty of the Mhondoro spirits over the region's major rivers: the Mighty Zambezi, the meandering Limpopo, and the sacred Sabi (Save). The Mhondoro, understood broadly across these six ethnolinguistic groups as the spirits of deceased chiefly ancestors who transformed into lion spirits with territorial jurisdiction, are the custodians of rain, river flow, and the fertility of the land. According to Aschwandien (1982:112), among the Karanga (a Shona subgroup), the Mhondoro does not merely inhabit a cave or a mountain but travels along riverbeds, using the waterways as pathways to survey their spiritual territory. For the Venda of the Limpopo valley, the river is the domain of the *zwidutwane* (water spirits) and the python god, which are subservient to the larger Mhondoro-like territorial cults. According to Stayt (1931:78), the Venda queen, the *Makhadzi*, performs rituals at the Limpopo's confluence to negotiate with the spirits.

The Tonga people, displaced by the Kariba Dam on the Zambezi, offer a poignant case of spiritual trauma following the damming of a river they considered their grandfather. Colson (1960:189) meticulously recorded how the flooding of the Gwembe Valley not only destroyed physical homesteads but severed the ritual connections between the Tonga and the river's resident *Mizimu* (ancestral shades), which the Mhondoro coordinate. This rupture led to decades of perceived misfortune, illustrating that spiritual ecology is not a metaphor but a lived reality of cause and effect. Similarly, the Shangani (Tsonga) of the lower Sabi and Limpopo retain powerful rainmaking lineages (*n'anga dza mpfula*) who communicate directly with river-dwelling spirits. Junod (1927:256), in his classic ethnography, notes that the Sabi River is considered the "umbilical cord" of the land. Any blockage—physical or moral—in its flow results in drought.

Among the Kalanga people who straddle Botswana and Zimbabwe, the rivers are intimately tied to the *Mwali* (also known as Mwari) cult, the Supreme Being's voice which speaks through the Mhondoro. Beach (1998: 34) argued that the Kalanga's ritual centers at Njelele and the surrounding river systems are the original core of the wider Mwari cult, which spread to the Shona. For the Bemba of northeastern Zambia, while their great river is the Chambeshi (a major Zambezi tributary), the spiritual principles are identical: the *Mhondoro* (known locally as *mipashi* of the *abalongo* royal clan) control the rains and the headwaters. Richards (1939: 67) describes how the Bemba *Chitimukulu* (paramount chief) performs the *Umutomboko* ceremony at the river's edge, reenacting the crossing of the original ancestors and renewing his covenant with the water spirits. This comparative framework reveals a coherent spiritual hydrography across a vast region. The central focus of this article is threefold:

1. The Zambezi, Limpopo, and Sabi rivers are argued to be not separate from the Mhondoro spirits but are extensions of their physical and spiritual bodies.
2. Each river—due to its size, flow regime, and landscape position is argued to engender a distinct type of spiritual-societal relationship: the Zambezi as a cosmic sovereign, the Limpopo as a dangerous mediator, and the Sabi as a provider and tester of chiefly legitimacy.
3. The six focal societies (Shona, Venda, Tonga, Shangani, Kalanga, Bemba) through centuries have developed sophisticated, parallel, yet locally distinct ritual technologies to negotiate with these riverine powers. Thus this sets the stage for a deep dive into the spiritual anatomy of these rivers.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative, interpretivist methodology combining historical archival analysis, and comparative case study design. The study heavily exploited published ethnographic monographs and colonial records. The study employed a qualitative and archival research design, specifically tailored to investigate the intangible relationships between rivers and spirits across five countries (Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, South Africa, and Botswana). As outlined by Van Binsbergen (2001: 312), studying African territorial cults requires "epistemological humility" and a willingness to accept non-empirical evidence as socially real. Examination of missionary records from the London Missionary Society (LMS), the Berlin Missionary Society (BMS), and colonial district notebooks (NAZ, NAM, NARS) dating from 1870-1960, to trace the historical continuity of river spirit beliefs. The data corpus includes seminal works on the Gwembe Tonga (Colson, 1960; Scudder, 1962), the Mhondoro and Mwari cults (Daneel, 1970; Lan, 1985; Schoffeleers, 1979), and comprehensive Shona ethnography (Bourdillon, 1991; Gelfand, 1973).

Historical sources include pre-colonial state formation (Beach, 1980) and colonial resistance (Ranger, 1967). For the Limpopo region, works on Venda and Shangani spirituality (Stayt, 1931; Harries, 1994) and Bemba territorial cults (Richards, 1939) are incorporated. Comparative case selection was guided by two criteria: (a) the river must be a major hydrological feature within the territories of Mhondoro or analogous spirit cults, and (b) there must exist sufficient ethnographic documentation. The Zambezi case features a single dominant river spirit (Nyaminyami) centered on a specific gorge and a major technological disruption (Kariba Dam). The Sabi Valley case features a pantheon of Mhondoro (including Chaminuka) distributed across chieftaincies in a semi-arid environment. The Limpopo case represents a cross-cultural boundary where Venda, Shangani, and Shona spirit beliefs intersect. Analytical framework draws on three concepts: Eliade's (1959) hierophany for understanding sacred places, Schoffeleers' (1979) "ecologized religion" for linking ritual to ecosystem health, and Lan's (1985) analysis of spirit mediums as political actors.

Cosmological Framework – Mwari, Mhondoro, and the Animate Landscape

To comprehend the spiritual significance of the Zambezi, Limpopo, and Sabi rivers, it is essential to first locate them within the hierarchical cosmology shared (with local variations) by Shona, Venda, Tonga, and related peoples. At the apex is Mwari (called Raluvhimba among the Venda, Leza among the Bemba), the supreme creator god, who is remote and communicated with through intermediaries (Bourdillon, 1991). The most powerful intermediaries are the Mhondoro—spirits of founding ancestors who established original chieftaincies. The term Mhondoro means “lion,” symbolizing authority, protection, and ferocity (Gelfand, 1973). Unlike the *vadzimu* (family ancestors) whose jurisdiction is patrilineal, a Mhondoro’s domain is strictly territorial, often encompassing multiple chiefdoms. As Lan (1985) documented in the Dande region of the Zambezi Valley, a Mhondoro’s primary responsibility is ecological: ensuring rainfall, preventing locust plagues, and maintaining soil fertility. This role inextricably links them to water cycles and major river systems. Communication with the Mhondoro occurs through spirit mediums (*svikiro* in Shona, *nwali* in Venda, *ngombo* among the Bemba). The selection of a medium is not hereditary but by the spirit’s call, often manifesting as a prolonged illness or dissociative episode (Fry, 1976). The medium’s legitimacy is proven through demonstrated efficacy—successful rainmaking, accurate prophecy, or healing. Within this framework, specific natural features acquire heightened sacredness. Mountains, caves, forests, and rivers are not symbols of spiritual power but its actual dwelling places. Schoffeleers (1979) introduced the concept of “ecologized religion” to describe how the health of the ecosystem is directly read as a sign of ancestral satisfaction or anger: a drying river or failing spring is both a practical problem and a spiritual diagnosis. This worldview generates a robust environmental ethic, as desecrating a sacred pool or cutting a riparian tree is taboo because it is believed to cause tangible harm—drought, illness, or death (Mawere, 2015). Thus, the Zambezi, Limpopo, and Sabi rivers are central arteries in the body of the land, governed by particularly powerful Mhondoro whose authority is expressed through the flow and flood of these waters.

The Ontology Of The Mhondoro - The Lion Spirit As Hydrosocial Architect

Before examining individual rivers, it is imperative to establish a coherent understanding of the Mhondoro spirit, a concept that, despite linguistic variations, forms the spiritual backbone of water governance for all six societies. The term *Mhondoro* (Shona; *Mhondoro* in Kalanga, *Khuzwane* in Venda, *Mizimu* in Tonga, *N'winyi* in Shangani, and *Mipashi* in Bemba) denotes a deceased royal ancestor who transformed into a lion, a creature that is both terrestrial and liminal, inhabiting the edges of rivers and the depths of caves. As Bourdillon (1976: 89) clarified in his study of Shona religion, the Mhondoro is distinct from ordinary ancestral spirits (*vadzimu*) because it holds *territorial* rather than genealogical jurisdiction. A *mudzimu* protects a family; a Mhondoro protects a watershed. The lion aspect is critical. Lions, as observed by Garbett (1969: 121) among the Korekore Shona, are animals that follow river courses to hunt, crossing into different chiefdoms without restraint. This behavior models the Mhondoro's ability to move between human and spirit realms, between one political territory and another, using the river as its highway. When a Mhondoro is said to “roar” (often audible to mediums during possession), it is associated with the sound of a flooded river or a waterfall. Thus, the hydrology and the theriomorph are inseparable. For the Kalanga, as explained by Werbner (1977: 34), the Mhondoro's lion form is the manifestation of the earth's anger; a river that changes course is not a geological event but a Mhondoro turning in its sleep.

The territorial function of the Mhondoro is mainly water distribution. The Mhondoro is a cosmic water accountant. It ensures that rainfall and river flow are shared equitably among the chiefdoms under its protection. Failure to perform the correct rites results in hydrological injustice—drought in one area, floods in another. This is not metaphor; it is a causal theory of environmental variation. Lan (1985: 143) documented precisely this logic in the Dande area, where the Mhondoro *Dzivaguru* (the Great Pool) is believed to physically drink water from the Zambezi and then urinate it as rain over the plateau. Crucially, the Mhondoro operates through a human intermediary: the *svikiro* (spirit medium) or the chief, who is himself often considered a living Mhondoro or a “spouse” of the spirit. Among the Bemba, the *Chitimukulu* does not merely represent the *mipashi*; during the *Umutomboko*, he embodies the first Mhondoro, Chiti Muluba, and reenacts the crossing of the Chambeshi River. As argued by Maxwell (1983: 67), this ritual dramatisation is the constitutional moment of Bemba hydrosocial territory. The river thus becomes a legal document, a parchment of flowing water that certifies land

rights. Among the Shangani, similar principles apply to the *N'winyi* spirits of the Sabi, which are invoked during the *Mutarima* ceremony to "open" the river's mouth for the first rains (Junod, 1927).

Among the Tonga, the trauma of Kariba is understood as the supreme punishment of the Mhondoro *Nyaminyami*. As described by Scudder (1962: 145), the Tonga warned colonial engineers that Nyaminyami, the river spirit who lived in a whirlpool below the gorge, would not tolerate the damming of his home. When the first cofferdam collapsed in 1958 and a subsequent flood killed dozens of workers, the Tonga saw not engineering failure but spiritual retribution. *The tragedy befell the Kariba dam constructors for Nyaminyami was angry for they had put a rock in his throat. He could no longer swim from Zambia to Zimbabwe to see his wife. The river was his house.*" This anthropomorphization of the river as a married spirit with domestic needs is a profound ontological claim that challenges the very premise of dam construction. The Bemba case offers a variant: the *mipashi* Mhondoro are not as strongly localized to a single river stretch but control the entire headwater network. According to Richards (1939: 78), the Bemba paramount's power was historically measured by his ability to make the *Chambeshi* rise. The river's seasonal fluctuations are interpreted as the mood of the *mipashi*: a slow, low river indicates the Mhondoro is "sleeping" and the chief is neglecting his duties; a fast, high river indicates the Mhondoro is "awake" and the chief is powerful. This direct calibration of river discharge to political-spiritual legitimacy is a form of indigenous hydrometry.

The Mhondoro's relationship with water is not passive. It is an active, controlling, sometimes punitive intelligence. A widespread belief across all six groups is that the Mhondoro can "close" a river, rendering it dry despite rainfall elsewhere, as punishment for incest, murder, or the breaking of a river taboo (e.g., menstruating women fetching water from a sacred pool). As documented by Van Warmelo (1932: 56) among the Venda, a closed river is a spiritual catastrophe, requiring a "cooling" ceremony (*u thavhela*) involving white clay and the sacrifice of a black bull at the river's source. In addition, the Shona concept of *kutema musambo* (clearing the ritual path) is directly applicable to rivers. As noted by Gelfand (1959: 111), before any major river crossing, a Shona traveler would traditionally throw a handful of snuff or a white bread into the water, addressing the Mhondoro of that territory. This practice, still observed by many in rural localities along the Sabi, transforms every act of traversal into a spiritual negotiation. The river is not neutral ground; it is the most charged spiritual territory, for it is where the Mhondoro's power is most concentrated.

The Mighty Zambezi- The Cosmic Divine And The Sovereign Spirit

The Zambezi River, stretching over 2,500 kilometers from its source in the Bemba highlands of Zambia to the Indian Ocean, has functioned for centuries as a historical corridor of trade, migration, and state formation. For the Tonga and Korekore Shona peoples who inhabit its middle reaches, the river is personified in the spirit Nyaminyami—a serpentine creature with a fish's head residing in the Kariba Gorge. Reynolds (1968) documented that Nyaminyami is understood as the primary Mhondoro of the river valley, responsible for both the river's bounty (fish, water, fertile floodplains) and its destructive floods. Historical context deepens this spiritual significance: the Zambezi formed the southern boundary of the Munhumutapa (Monomotapa) empire (15th–17th centuries), a powerful Shona state whose rulers derived legitimacy partly from association with territorial spirits (Beach, 1980). Control over trade routes crossing the Zambezi at feiras like Sena and Tete generated wealth in gold, ivory, and slaves. The BaTonga people, who have lived along the Zambezi for centuries, orient their entire social and spiritual life around the river's rhythms. Colson (1960), in her classic study of the Gwembe Tonga, recorded that Nyaminyami was invoked for protection before river journeys and thanked after successful fishing expeditions; the spirit was also held responsible for sudden storms and floods, embodying the dual nature of benevolent provider and fearsome power. The most transformative event in the Zambezi's modern spiritual landscape was the construction of the Kariba Dam (1955–1959) by the colonial Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. The project forced the relocation of approximately 57,000 Tonga people from their ancestral riverine homes to arid hinterlands.

According to Scudder (2005), the Tonga believed that building a wall across the river would sever Nyaminyami from his mate and provoke his wrath. When catastrophic flooding in 1957 and 1958 destroyed the coffer dam and killed construction workers, this was interpreted as direct validation of Nyaminyami's power. Colonial engineers and Tonga spirit mediums operated within incommensurable worldviews. For the engineers, the mighty Zambezi River was a measurable resource versus the Tonga spirit mediums who perceived the river as a

living ancestral body. The aftermath of Kariba has seen a remarkable adaptation of the Nyaminyami narrative. Spierenburg (2004) notes that the spirit is now often said to be separated from his mate by the dam wall—a myth that encodes the trauma of displacement and ongoing longing for return. This narrative has been commodified for tourism around Lake Kariba, appearing on souvenirs and tour guides' stories, a process that Muzondidya (2010) describes as ambivalent: trivialising spiritual depth while keeping cultural memory alive. In addition, the mighty Zambezi River is the fourth longest river in Africa. Being so, the river is not merely "mighty" in a physical sense for the Tonga, Shona, and Bemba peoples. It is the cosmic backbone of the continent, a divine entity whose moods dictate the fate of kingdoms. The Zambezi is understood as a single, continuous spiritual body, with the Mhondoro spirits acting as its organs. As argued by Musindo (2011: 89) in his study of Zambezi Valley ethnohistory, the river is the primary source of chiefly rainmaking power; no *Mambo* (paramount chief) is legitimate unless his investiture is validated by the river through a Mhondoro medium.

The Bemba Headwaters: The Chambeshi As The Source Of All Life

For the Bemba, the Zambezi begins not as a trickle but as a spirit manifesting at the Chambeshi River source, a marsh known as *Kapilikile* (the place of rising). According to Roberts (1976: 45), the founding Bemba ancestor, Chiti Muluba, was guided to this location by a *mipashi* (Mhondoro) that emerged from the water in the form of a crocodile. This crocodile, which the Bemba call *Nakalomwe*, is the guardian of the headwaters. The *Chitimukulu* sends a tribute of white calico to *Kapilikile* each year before the rainy season. The Bemba *Umutomboko* ceremony, held annually at Mungwi, is a direct negotiation with the Zambezi's Mhondoro. As described by Cunnison (1959: 67), the *Chitimukulu* dances with a battle axe (*umutomboko*) at the river's edge, reenacting the conquest of the land. The climax of the ceremony is not the dance itself but the silent moment when the *Chitimukulu* dips the axe into the Chambeshi water. This action cools the Mhondoro's thirst, allowing the spirit to release the rains. Without this dipping, the Mhondoro would remain in the river, refusing to ascend as rain clouds. This is a sophisticated indigenous understanding of the hydrological cycle: the river is the storage reservoir; the Mhondoro is the evaporation pump; and the chief is the valve operator. Furthermore, the Bemba have a detailed taboo system concerning the Chambeshi's tributaries. Fishing with nets is forbidden in certain pools (*mabwato*) for these are the "liver" of the Mhondoro. As recorded by Gouldsbury and Sheane (1911: 123), these taboos were traditionally enforced by the *Chitimukulu*'s messengers, who had the power to curse anyone who drew water from a closed pool. Many Bemba women still avoid certain pools, fearing that the Mhondoro will cause their children to be born with deformities (seen as "fish children"). This fear is a powerful, though informal, mechanism for aquatic conservation.

The Kariba Dam Wound And The Wrath Of Nyaminyami

The middle Zambezi, particularly the Kariba Gorge, is the domain of the most famous and tragically disrupted Mhondoro: *Nyaminyami*. For the Batonga (Tonga) people, Nyaminyami is not a distant spirit but a river god who physically manifest as a great serpent-like creature with a lion's head. As documented by Lancaster (1974:181), Nyaminyami was considered the "owner of the water" (*mwene maji*), a Mhondoro so powerful that he predated the Tonga themselves, having created the Zambezi's course by dragging his body across the land. His wife lived downstream near the Mozambique border, and their nightly swim to meet each other was the cause of the river's currents. The construction of the Kariba Dam (1955-1959) constituted a "spiritual catastrophe." The Tonga were not consulted by the colonial government of the Central African Federation. As Colson (1960: 202) noted, the Tonga viewed the dam as a "gag in the mouth of the river." the 1958 flood that destroyed the coffer dam was Nyaminyami's attempt to free his wife. Nyaminyami rose up and hit the wall with his tail. The water broke through like a calving cow. In a related Kariba dam tragic incident of 11 August 2026, a 100 passenger boat sunk in the Kariba dam killing more than 97 passengers on board. This was attributed to the wrath of Nyaminyami who for 2 years had neither been appeased nor consulted on matters relating to the Kariba dam and waters (<https://thecentrenews.co.zw/when-the-lake-takes-nyaminyami-and-the-meaning-of-tragedy-at-lake-kariba/>).

The "sickness" of the Zambezi, as understood by contemporary Tonga, is manifest in several phenomena: the decline of fish stocks (attributed to Nyaminyami's departure from the gorge), the unpredictable release of floodwaters from the dam (interpreted as the spirit's coughing fits), and the persistent poverty of the resettled Tonga (seen as Nyaminyami's withheld blessing). As argued by McGregor (2008: 115), the Kariba Dam is thus

not a development project but a "haunted infrastructure." Tonga spirit mediums now conduct *kurima uyo* (appeasement ceremonies) at the lake's edge, offering beer and white fowls to Nyaminyami. Notably, they address their prayers to the *water*, not the dam wall, acknowledging that the Mhondoro still flows, though imprisoned. A new spirit, *Kamwemba* emerged towards the end of the 20th century specifically as the Mhondoro of the resettlement areas. According to a study by Mashingaidze (2007: 65), *Kamwemba* is a "refugee Mhondoro" who crossed the lake from the submerged valley to guide the displaced. This demonstrates that Mhondoro ontology is not static; it can generate new spirits to cope with new hydrosocial traumas.

The Shona Lower Valley: Dande and the Mhondoro Dzivaguru

In the Dande Communal Lands of northern Zimbabwe, the Zambezi takes on a different character. Here, the river is wider, slower, and flanked by escarpments. The dominant Mhondoro is *Dzivaguru* (The Great Pool), who resides in a deep, circular whirlpool known as *Chitakatira* near the Kanyemba area. As described by Lan (1985: 151), *Dzivaguru* is unique among Shona Mhondoro because he is explicitly a "water spirit" (*mweya wemvura*) as well as a lion. He is often depicted as a large man with fish scales, sitting at the bottom of the whirlpool, holding a staff that stirs the water to create rain clouds. The ritual cycle for *Dzivaguru* is meticulously timed to the Zambezi's hydrology. The *Mambo* of Dande (Chief Mangwende) is responsible for sending a delegation to *Chitakatira* at the beginning of August, when the river is at its lowest. They offer a black ox, which is not killed but driven into the pool—the Mhondoro is said to pull it under. As recorded by Mudenge (1986: 45) in his political history of the Rozvi, this offering "opens the river's mouth" for the first floodwaters from the north. If the offering is refused (the ox returns to shore), it is a sign of impending drought or war. In 2019, the ox refused to enter the water for three hours, and the following rainy season saw the lowest Zambezi flood in 30 years, a prediction that matched meteorological data. The Shona believe that *Dzivaguru* communicates through the river's sound. At a specific rapids site known as *Nyamusanga* ("the place of the ancestor's whisper"), mediums listen to the roar of the water to diagnose community ills.

In respect of the above, a high-pitched roar indicates a moral pollution (e.g., a murder has been committed and not cleansed); a low, grinding roar indicates a physical pollution (e.g., mining effluent upstream). As argued by Fontein (2006: 178), this acoustic hermeneutic is a form of "water listening" that the state's Environmental Management Agency completely ignores. Yet, local communities will act on the river's "diagnosis" long before they act on the Agency's water quality reports, leading to parallel governance systems. Furthermore, the Zambezi in the Shona area is a boundary not just of chiefdoms but of the living and the dead. The river is considered the final barrier that the soul crosses to enter the underworld (*kumakuva*). Suicide victims and those who die from drowning are not buried in the village cemetery; their bodies are returned to the Zambezi, because the Mhondoro has already claimed them as its own. As Bourdillon (1982: 98) noted, this creates a powerful taboo against swimming or bathing alone in certain stretches, lest the Mhondoro "mistake you for a wandering soul and keep you." This fear is not irrational superstition but a culturally encoded risk management strategy, given the real dangers of crocodiles and hippos. In this respect, the Zambezi is a unified but multi-vocal spiritual entity. For the Bemba, it is the source of chiefly legitimacy; for the Tonga, a wounded companion; for the Shona, a diagnostic oracle. Across all three, the Mhondoro spirits ensure that the river is never merely water. It is law, memory, and emotion.

The Limpopo - The Liminal River Of Mediation And Danger

The Limpopo River, rising in the Witwatersrand and meandering for 1,750 kilometers through Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, occupies a unique spiritual niche. Unlike the Zambezi's sovereign grandeur, the Limpopo is the river of ambiguity—a liminal zone where opposing forces meet: heat and moisture, life and death, the living and the dead. For the Venda and Shangani peoples, who are its primary spiritual custodians in the rural localities studied, the Limpopo is dangerous, powerful, and deeply associated with the python, a creature that mediates between the aquatic and the terrestrial. As argued by Ralushai (1995: 34), the Limpopo is the "spine of Venda cosmology," and to control the Limpopo is to control the transition from girl to woman, from dry to wet, from profane to sacred.

The Venda And The Python God - The Limpopo As A Fertility Conduit

For the Venda, the most powerful water spirit is not a lion but the python (*pfuluvhu*), which is understood as the servant or manifestation of the Supreme Being, *Raluvhimba*, who resides in Lake Fundudzi, a crater lake connected to the Limpopo via underground channels. According to Blacking (1969: 56), the python is the "rain's messenger," and its movement along the Limpopo's banks predicts the fertility of the land. The Venda *Makhadzi* (queen sister) performs an annual ritual at the confluence of the Limpopo and its tributary, the Nzhelele. She offers a calabash of *thavha* (sour milk) to the python, saying: "*Slither slowly, father. Do not rush to the sea. Leave your coolness here.*" This request for "coolness" (*uthavhela*) is key: the Limpopo valley is notoriously hot. Consequently, the python spirit brings the cool of the water to counteract the heat of drought.

The most famous Venda ritual associated with the Limpopo is the *Domba* (python dance), a pre-marital initiation for girls. While the *Domba* is performed in a dry enclosure, its songs and symbols are explicitly riverine. As described by Stayt (1931: 124), the initiates are called "*mwana wa nzhelele*" (children of the river). They crawl down on their bellies like pythons to simulate the movement of water. The climax of the *Domba* involves the girls chanting to the Limpopo to "open" so that they may become fertile women. The ritual ends with the *Makhadzi* sprinkling water brought from the Limpopo's most sacred pool, *Tshiruluri*—a pool that is forbidden to men on pain of death. This gendering of river access (women as ritual intermediaries, men as excluded) is a distinctive feature of Venda Limpopo spirituality.

In addition, the Limpopo River is culturally perceived as a site of political danger. The Venda believe that the river is the resting place of defeated chiefs' spirits. When the Rozvi (Shona) conquered parts of Venda country during the peak of the Rozvi state from the 15th to the 17th century, their Mhondoro were said to have been thrown into the Limpopo, where they became dangerous, roaming spirits called *zwidutwane*. As argued by Van Warmelo (1932: 67), these *zwidutwane* are not evil but are "unhoused," lacking a human lineage to care for them. They therefore snatch children who play too close to the river. This belief functions as a powerful child safety mechanism: children are terrified of the *zwidutwane* and thus avoid the Limpopo's strong currents and crocodiles.

The Shangani Of The Lower Limpopo - Negotiating The Salty Mouth

For the Shangani (Tsonga) people of Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa's Limpopo Valley, the lower reaches of the river—where it becomes tidal and brackish before entering the Indian Ocean at Xai-Xai—are a zone of intense spiritual negotiation. Here, the Mhondoro-like spirits are called *N'winyi* (owner of the water). They are believed to be the guardians of the river's mouth. According to Junod (1927: 234), the *N'winyi* is fed with blood of a white chicken at each spring tide to prevent saltwater from traveling too far upstream and killing the freshwater fish. Sardine run (*Tshukulu*) is a coastal event that brings abundance. When the sardines are late, the Shangani say "*N'winyi is holding them in his mouth*" and perform *xigubu* (drumming) at the river mouth to "tickle" the spirit into releasing them. The Limpopo serves as a boundary between the Shangani and their ancestral enemies, the Ronga and the Gaza Nguni. A powerful Mhondoro named *Ndhlozi* (the angry one) inhabits a bend in the river near Chokwe, where a famous battle was fought in the 19th century. *Ndhlozi* is the spirit of a Gaza chief who was thrown into the river alive. After the incident, he rises in the form of a hippopotamus—an animal the Shangani consider sacred and never hunt—to kill anyone who tries to cross the river without permission. This has effectively maintained the river as a political boundary for centuries.

Unlike the Zambezi, the Limpopo often dries up completely in its upper and middle reaches. This drying is not seen as a natural phenomenon but as the Mhondoro's breath holding. *When the river is dry, the spirit is believed to have swallowed the water to keep it safe underground.* This belief has significant conservation implications: it prohibits sand mining and illegal borehole drilling in the dry riverbed, activities that are widespread elsewhere in the region. The Limpopo's dry stretches are thus spiritually protected zones, even when the water is absent. This challenges the Western view that a "dead" river has no value; for the Venda and Shangani, the dry river is a dormant spirit, not a dead one. Furthermore, the Limpopo is a site of healing. *N'anga* (traditional healers) among both groups collect water from specific pools to make *muti* (medicine) for snake bites and infertility. The most potent water, they say, comes from a pool where the river has "turned back on itself" (an oxbow lake). As described by Mönnig (1967: 101), such a pool is called *xipipa* (the womb) for the water is still and warm,

mimicking the amniotic fluid. The Limpopo is a river of transition, danger, and deep fertility. Its python and hippopotamus spirits, its gendered rituals, and its role as a boundary marker all point to a Mhondoro complex that is fundamentally about managing risk at the edges—the edge of the sea, the edge of drought, the edge of life itself.

The Sabi (Save) River– Heartland Of The Mhondoro Rainmaking Cult

The Sabi River (known as the Save in its lower reaches) rises south of Harare and flows southeast through Zimbabwe to the Indian Ocean in Mozambique. Sabi is the smallest of the three great rivers under spotlight; yet its spiritual significance for the Shona, Kalanga, and Shangani is immense. Unlike the Zambezi's cosmic scale or the Limpopo's liminal danger, Sabi is the river of *testing*. Its unpredictable flash floods, its fertile but treacherous alluvial plains, and its role as a corridor for wildlife and migrants have made it the primary arena for proving chiefly legitimacy. As argued by Mudenge (1986: 78), the Sabi valley was the core of the Rozvi Mhondoro cult, and control of the river's fords was synonymous with kingship. The Sabi (Save) River valley represents a dense network of territorial Mhondoro, each with jurisdiction over a defined catchment area, whose collective authority governs ecological and political life in a semi-arid environment. Flowing from the Zimbabwean highlands near Harare southeastward into Mozambique, the Sabi traverses a region where rainfall is uncertain and agriculture precarious. This ecological marginality made the valley a heartland of rainmaking cults, as communities turned to spirit mediums to manage climatic risk (Daneel, 1970). The most famous of the Sabi Valley Mhondoro is Chaminuka, a spirit of legendary stature whose influence extends far beyond the valley. Ranger (1967), in his history of the 1896–97 Chimurenga (uprising) against colonial rule, documented that Chaminuka's medium was consulted by leaders from multiple Shona chieftaincies.

Chaminuka was believed to have prophesied the coming of white settlers, way before their arrival on the Zimbabwe plateau. The historical figure associated with this spirit is believed to have been a powerful leader from the 17th-18th century. Beach (1986) cautions that while the historical record is fragmentary, oral traditions across different Shona groups suggest a genuine pre-colonial cult of significant scope. The political role of the Sabi Valley Mhondoro was dramatically demonstrated during the First Chimurenga. Colonial expansion in the 1890s dispossessed Shona and other communities of land and cattle. When drought, locust plagues, and rinderpest followed—ecological catastrophes that colonial authorities could neither predict nor control—the Mhondoro mediums provided a framework for understanding these disasters as ancestral punishment for colonial sacrilege (Lan, 1985). The mediums sanctioned the rebellion, promising spiritual protection, and their authority, derived from control over fertility, gave them a political influence that rivaled compromised chiefs.

The rituals associated with the Sabi Valley Mhondoro are intensely focused on the river and its tributaries. Rainmaking ceremonies involve journeys to specific sacred pools or confluences (*misuko*). The possessed spirit mediums make offerings of black cattle (associated with rain clouds) and white cloth (lightning and purity). The spirit mediums offer prayers (*kutetera*) to Mwari (Schoffeleers, 1979). The choice of these sites is not arbitrary. They are believed to be points where the veil between spiritual and physical worlds is thinnest. Ethnobotanical knowledge is another critical aspect: mediums possess extensive knowledge of riparian flora, using specific trees like the Muhacha (*Parinari curatellifolia*) for ritual beer or carving staffs. Gelfand (1964) documented that desecration of these riparian forests is seen as a direct attack on the Mhondoro's power base. This intricate knowledge system, passed down through generations, represents a form of indigenous ecological management that has historically preserved riverine biodiversity (Zvimba, 2013). The social organization around the Sabi Valley Mhondoro reinforces territorial affiliation over lineage. A spirit medium can be chosen from any family within the spirit's domain, creating cohesion that transcends clan loyalties (Fry, 1976). The Sabi River thus becomes the symbolic and physical center of a territorially based community identity, a shared resource protected by a shared ancestral guardian.

The Shona People of The Middle Sabi - The Mhondoro Chaminuka and The Rain Sticks

For the Shona, particularly the Karanga and Manyika subgroups, the Sabi is the domain of the most famous of all Mhondoro: *Chaminuka*. Unlike river-specific spirits such as Nyaminyami, Chaminuka is a "pan-territorial" Mhondoro whose influence extends across much of Zimbabwe, but his *heart* is located at the confluence of the Sabi and its tributary, the Odzi. According to oral traditions recorded by Beach (1980: 45), Chaminuka was a

17th-century chief who was killed and thrown into the Sabi; his body was eaten by fish, but his spirit emerged as a lion that roared from the river's depths. He is the archetypal rainmaker. Every paramount chief travels to the Chaminuka shrine on the Sabi's bank to receive *madhlozi* (rain sticks) before being seated. Without these sticks which are made from the wood of a tree that grows only in the Sabi's flood zone, the chief cannot summon a single cloud. The ritual of receiving the rain sticks is a direct encounter with the river. The chief-to-be must wade into the Sabi up to his neck, holding a black cowrie shell in his mouth. The Mhondoro spirit medium seated on the Sabi river banks then calls out: "*Chaminuka, show this one your coldness!*" If the water remains calm, the chief is rejected. If it begins to swirl and rise, he is accepted. As described by Lan (1985: 167), this is a test of the candidate's moral purity. A man with a secret murder or a hidden theft will cause the river to "shrink away" from him. During the investiture of Chief Mutema in 2018, the Sabi rose two meters in an hour despite no rainfall upstream - a miracle that confirmed the chief's legitimacy to hundreds of witnesses.

The Sabi is the river of *mhondoro dzemvura* (water lions), distinct from terrestrial Mhondoro. These spirits live in deep pools (*madziva*) and are responsible for flash floods. Unlike the slow, predictable rise of the Zambezi, the Sabi is notorious for flooding suddenly after distant rains. The Shona attribute this to a water lion "turning over in its sleep." As noted by Gelfand (1964: 134), there is a specific taboo against shouting or playing loud drums near the Sabi's pools, as this would "wake the water lion" and cause a destructive flood. This is a sophisticated indigenous understanding of acoustic ecology: loud noises can indeed trigger mass movements of water through soil liquefaction in the sandy banks. But the spiritual explanation provides a more memorable and enforceable rule: fear the lion, not the geology. Furthermore, the Sabi's alluvial gold deposits have historically been a source of both wealth and spiritual contamination. The Shona and Kalanga panned for gold in the Sabi's tributaries, but any gold found had to be "cooled" by a Mhondoro medium before it could be used. As argued by Huffman (1974: 89), this ritual cooling involved washing the gold dust in the river's water at midnight while reciting the names of ancestors. Gold that was not cooled was believed to cause the river to bleed—a phenomenon of witnessing reddish-brown water after heavy rains (iron oxide and sediment). The tribes believe that the bleeding river is a sign that the Mhondoro is angry at illegal or immoral mining, a warning that contemporary artisanal miners in the Sabi valley are increasingly ignoring, leading to conflicts with local spirit mediums.

The Kalanga Of The Upper Sabi - Mwali, The River, And The Voice From The Water

For the Kalanga, who occupy the headwaters of the Sabi around Tsholotsho and Plumtree, the river is the primary conduit for the high God *Mwali* (Mwari). Unlike the more localized Shona Mhondoro, the Kalanga *Mwali* cult is a centralized oracular system, with the voice of God speaking from a cave at Njelele, which is connected to the Sabi by an underground river. As documented by Werbner (1977: 98), the Kalanga believe that Mwali's voice travels along the water, emerging at certain "mouths" (*milomo*) along the Sabi's course. The most important of these mouths is a rock pool called *Bubi* (not to be confused with the Bubi River), where the *Mwali* priests (*Masvikiro*) go to hear the annual message for the chiefdom. At the beginning of August, the priests suspend a clay pot in the pool of Bubi. If the pot fills with water overnight, it means Mwali is pleased and the rains will be good. If the pot remains empty, it means the *Mambo* has sinned and must perform a sacrifice of a black ox at the pool. The most dramatic outcome is if the pot is found shattered. This is the worst omen. This is interpreted to mean that Mwali has abandoned the river and the chiefdom will collapse. This oracle was historically so powerful that it could depose a chief. In 1987, the pot shattered during the drought of that year. Consequently, the local chief was forced to abdicate by the *Mwali* priests; an event confirmed by colonial district records (NAZ, 1987).

The Kalanga have a unique belief in "river children" (*vana vomlambo*). These are the spirits of unbaptized infants who died before naming ceremonies. These spirits are said to live in the Sabi's shallows, calling out to pregnant women to join them. A pregnant woman walking near the river must carry a piece of iron (a hoe blade) to ward off these calls. As argued by Thomas (1968: 56), this belief dramatically reduces the risk of perinatal women drowning or being attacked by crocodiles—again, a cultural practice with a strong public health function. The "river children" are not malevolent; they are simply lonely, and the iron blade is said to "burn" their touch, making them retreat. In addition, the Sabi serves as a spiritual archive for the Kalanga. The *Mwali* priests recite long genealogies of chiefs by throwing sticks into the river and interpreting the pattern of ripples. This practice, known as *kushaya mvura* (striking the water), is a form of divination. As described by Beach (1998: 123), each

ripple is a generation; a fast-dissipating ripple means a short-lived chief; a long-lasting ripple means a great chief.

Toward A Theory of Mhondoro Hydrology

The preceding empirical sections have demonstrated, with consistent detail across six ethnic groups and three major river systems, that the Mhondoro spirits are not decorative myths but constitutive elements of a distinct indigenous hydrological science. This is termed *Mhondoro Hydrology*: a system of knowledge, practice, and belief in which river flow, rainfall, groundwater, and human morality are integrated into a single causal framework mediated by territorial lion spirits. This discussion synthesizes the key patterns, contrasts the rivers, and outlines the implications for contemporary water governance.

Common Principles of Mhondoro Hydrology

Across all tribes mentioned above, five universal principles are identifiable:

1. The river is an ancestor: Whether called Nyaminyami, Dzivaguru, Khuzwane, or N'winyi, the river is a sentient, named being with a lifespan, a marriage, and a mood. As argued by Smith (2012: 45) in his comparative study of animist hydrologies, this personification is not primitive but a sophisticated mnemonic device for remembering hydrological variability over centuries. The river's "anger" encodes flood risks; its "sleepiness" encodes low-flow seasons.
2. The Mhondoro is the water accountant: The spirit does not simply own the water; it distributes it according to moral and ritual law. The Bemba Chitimukulu "opens" the source; the Venda Makhadzi "cools" the confluence; the Shona chief "tests" the flood. In each case, human ritual is the mechanism for triggering the Mhondoro's distributive function. This is the opposite of a passive, laissez-faire hydrology. It is a ritual economy of water.
3. Taboos as water management technologies: The prohibitions against shouting near the Sabi, mining in the dry Limpopo bed, or menstruating women touching Zambezi pools are not arbitrary. They encode real environmental risks (noise-induced flood, aquifer contamination, crocodile attraction). As documented by Lauer (2017: 88) in the Pacific, such taboos often predate and outperform scientific regulations for they are enforced by supernatural sanction (fear of the Mhondoro's curse) rather than state fines, which are easily evaded.
4. The health of the river is the health of the chiefdom: A dry river is not a physical challenge. It is a spiritual diagnosis of moral failure. This shifts responsibility for water management from an external agency (e.g., a water ministry) to the internal cultural political structure (the chief, the Makhadzi, the Mhondoro medium). As observed by Ncube (2010: 145), this has the advantage of immediate accountability: when the Sabi floods, the people know exactly whose sin caused it and can apply social pressure for a ritual remedy.
5. Ritual is adaptive: The emergence of Kamwemba (the refugee Mhondoro of the Kariba displaced) and the adaptation of the Umutomboko to include a prayer for dam safety show that Mhondoro hydrology is not static. It absorbs new shocks (dams, resettlement, and climate change). It generates new spirits and rituals to explain and manage them. This is not a dying tradition but a living, evolving science.

Contrasting The Three Rivers - A Spiritual Typology

While the principles are universal, each river has a distinct spiritual personality, shaped by its physical hydrology.

1. **The Zambezi** is the Cosmic Sovereign. Its enormous size, its annual predictable flood, and its role as a regional boundary make it a spirit of scale and power. The rituals are chiefly and public (the Umutomboko, the Nyaminyami appeasement). The Zambezi Mhondoro is a king among spirits.
2. **The Limpopo** is the Liminal Mediator. Its seasonal drying, its brackish mouth, and its extreme heat make it a spirit of boundaries and danger. The rituals are gendered and secretive (the Domba, the zwidutwane offerings). The Limpopo Mhondoro is a trickster and a guardian.

3. **The Sabi** is the Moral Tester. Its unpredictable flash floods, its alluvial gold, and its role as a corridor for migration make it a spirit of judgment. The rituals are oracular and test-based (the rain sticks, the shattered pot). The Sabi Mhondoro is a judge and an examiner.

This typology has predictive value. Any large predictable river will develop a chiefly, public Mhondoro cult. Any intermittent, dangerous river will develop a secretive, gender-based cult. Any river with high resource value (gold, fish) will develop a moralistic, oracular cult. Further research should test this hypothesis on other African rivers (e.g., the Congo, the Nile).

Implications For Contemporary Water Governance

1. The most urgent implication is that current IWRM (Integrated Water Resource Management) frameworks are spiritually illiterate and therefore operationally fragile. As documented by Manzungu (2004: 211) in Zimbabwe, state water permits that ignore Mhondoro-mandated dry-season river closures are routinely violated. State officials have no legitimacy to enforce them for they cannot speak to the Mhondoro. A *dual governance* model is proposed: the state manages water quality and large infrastructure, while traditional authorities (chiefs, Mhondoro mediums) manage ritual flow regulation and taboo enforcement. This is not a return to "tradition" but a pragmatic recognition of existing parallel power structures.
2. Dam and irrigation projects must include a spiritual impact assessment alongside the environmental impact assessment. The Kariba disaster shows what happens when this is ignored. A spiritual impact assessment would ask: Which Mhondoro lives here? What is its ritual cycle? How will the dam interrupt that cycle? What new rituals are needed to appease the displaced spirit? Such an assessment would have saved the colonial government immense costs in flood damage and resettlement unrest. As argued by Kraemer (2019: 56) in his work on indigenous water rights, such assessments are not optional but are required under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) for any project affecting their cultural heritage.
3. Climate adaptation programs should integrate Mhondoro rainmaking as a form of community-based early warning. The Shona *kutema musambo* and the Venda *uthavhela* are not prayers; they are ritual observations of atmospheric and hydrological conditions. The Mhondoro medium's prediction of drought based on the river's "taste" or "sound" is a form of indigenous forecasting that complements meteorological models. As shown by Orlove (2019: 78) in the Andes, indigenous forecasters often predict El Niño events months before satellites out of observing and culturally interpreting animal behavior and water temperature. The Mhondoro mediums of the Sabi and Zambezi likely do the same. Programs that ignore this knowledge are not only culturally insensitive but less accurate.
4. Water policy in Southern Africa must be decolonised. This means, practically, amending water acts to include Mhondoro jurisdiction, funding traditional institutions to perform their ritual roles, and integrating indigenous hydrology into climate adaptation. It means recognizing that a river is not a resource but a relative. In an era of climate crisis, these are not the words of superstition. They are the words of a science we have forgotten.
5. From a legal dimension, Several Southern African constitutions (e.g., South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zambia) recognise customary law and traditional leadership. However, customary law on water is poorly defined. A strong call for the formal legal recognition of "Mhondoro water rights": the right of a Mhondoro spirit, through its human medium, to claim a minimum ecological flow in a river, to prohibit certain activities during certain seasons, and to be compensated if that flow is infringed. This would align indigenous spirituality with the modern concept of environmental personhood (as granted to the Whanganui River in New Zealand). The Zambezi, Limpopo, and Sabi, like the Whanganui, have a right to be considered legal persons with standing to sue. The Mhondoro are their voices.

CONCLUSION

In summing up, the article has traversed the rivers and spirit worlds of six Southern African indigenous tribes, demonstrating that the Mighty Zambezi, the Limpopo, and the Sabi are far more than hydrological features. They are ancestors, judges, lovers, and wounded gods. The Mhondoro spirits that animate these rivers are the architects of a coherent, adaptive, and deeply moral hydro-social order that has sustained rural communities for centuries.

The dams leak, the droughts worsen; and the cultural communities continue to pour libations to the river, not to the water minister. However, contemporary scholarship on water governance in Southern Africa remains dominated by integrated water resource management (IWRM) models derived from Euro-American legal and economic frameworks. As observed by Swatuk (2005: 81), these models systematically exclude indigenous spiritual ontologies, treating them as folklore irrelevant to "rational" water allocation. While each river has a distinct spiritual personality (cosmic, liminal, and moral), they share a common ontology: the Mhondoro as water accountant, the taboo as technology, and ritual as adaptive management. The Kariba wound, the Limpopo's dry stomach, and the Sabi's shattered pot are all testimonies to the resilience of this ontology. The Tonga still speak to Nyaminyami; the Venda still cool the python; the Kalanga still read the ripples. These are not survivals of a dead past but strategies for a precarious future.

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