

The Ceremony of Mishashe (Green Vegetables) held in Mashonaland

M. Gelfand

*Department of Medicine, University College of Rhodesia,
Salisbury.*

The ceremony which is being described was held on 14th January, 1968, some 80 miles to the East of Salisbury in the tribal trust area of Chiduku in the village of Tambatsoka. Here Muchetera the medium (*svikiro*) of the great tribal spirit of Chaminuka lives. So powerful is this spirit considered that it is accepted by many Africans living far from the medium's home. A similar ritual takes place in other parts of the country, and although the ceremonies vary slightly in detail their object is the same. It is to thank the *mhondoro* or *vadzimu* of the larger family lineage for the edible greens (*muriwo mutsva*) in their gardens which have grown as a result of the onset of the rains several weeks previously.

The Shona people of Rhodesia pray to and remember two main groups of spirits, the clan (tutelary) spirits often referred to as *mhondoro*, and the *vadzimu* of the individual or nuclear families. These spirits have their origin from once-living men and women, but on death their spirits assume supernatural powers. Each clan living in what is now known as the Tribal Trust Area had its origin in a founder whose spirit upon death has become elevated to a high position in the spirit hierarchy. The spirit (now called the *mhondoro*) looks after the clan's interests, such as the bestowal of rain and good crops. The family spirits (*vadzimu*), composed of the dead grandparents or parents of smaller family units or lineages, protect these small units from disease and evil, and they generally ensure harmonious living among its members.

Pumpkin leaves and other green plants may not be eaten before the thanksgiving ceremony has taken place. Certainly no medium (*svikiro*) of a family spirit (*mudzimu*) or a tutelary spirit (*mhondoro*) would disobey this injunction.

After the ceremony of *mishashe* two other rather similar rituals concerned with crops and rain take place. In April there is the harvest ceremony of *rokudyazviitsva* when the *mhondoro* of each district (*nyika*) is petitioned to send good rains and to bless its people with bountiful crops. The ritual of *mishashe* is usually a shorter one than those held in April and September since no beer is taken to the sacred *muhacha* tree (*Pari-nari curatellifolia*). Sweet beer is brewed and edible greens are added to it and the mixture given to the people to drink.

Usually the ceremony (*bira*) for green vegetables (*muriwo mutsva*) begins the night before with dancing and the playing of *mbira*. The medium becomes possessed with the *mhondoro* spirit. The acolyte welcomes the *mhondoro* saying "you have come *Chungamire*. We want to give you *musumo* (the first pot of beer) for the *bira* so that your people may eat new vegetables (*muriwo mutsva*)."
The acolyte then takes some leaves of the pumpkin and maize plants, mixes them with medicine (*mushonga*) and places them in a wooden plate. The medium pours a little sweet beer (*hume*) into the plate, mixing it with the leaves and medicine. He stirs the mixture, drinks a little and then instructs the acolyte to add more sweet beer to the plate and give it to the

people to drink. Everyone present drinks a little from the plate. Then all the people dance to the tunes of the *mbira*. The medium of the tribal spirit and other mediums present become possessed during the evening. At about nine or ten o'clock, after a short prayer by the possessed medium, the beer is handed round and music and dancing continue until the mediums are depossessed again.

DESCRIPTION

We arrived at Muchetera's village at about nine in the morning of the day of the ceremony. My party was ushered into a large circular brick building, known as *banya*. The roof was still in the course of being repaired, so the sun shone through it. Muchetera, the medium of Chaminuka, dressed in his black vestments, sat on a reed mat near the centre of the circular wall. Next to him were his *nhakwe* (tobacco container) and a clay pot of beer covered with a wooden lid. To the right of him and similarly dressed sat Whafanaka, his acolyte. On his left were a group of women and children seated on the ground. Three of them had black or blue clothes wrapped round their waists. They later turned out to be mediums, and when they became possessed their heads and shoulders were covered with these cloths. To the right of Muchetera and Whafanaka, and occupying most of that half of the *banya*, were the males — adults of different ages and a number of youths and young boys. Many were covered with black garments and two of the men were in a state of possession. Every now and then one of them uttered a sudden grunt or noise which attracted everyone's attention.

When we were seated the medium asked the acolyte to give us a calabash (*mukombe*) of sweet beer, which we drank. After some minutes Muchetera turned to a pot on his right covered with a wooden plate, lifted the plate and poured some of the contents of the pot on to it. After he had filled the plate the acolyte took it round at random to different people in the congregation — old and young, male and female without regard to seniority. He held the plate up to the individual's mouth whilst the recipient drank a little from it. Then he took it to the next person and so on until the plate was empty when it was replenished from the pot beside the medium. The distribution of the vegetables and sweet beer took about half an hour, by which time the pot was emptied of its contents.

The next stage in the ceremony was reached with the playing of music. The *mbira* players took up their position — men and youngsters, together

with Muchetera the medium; six of them sat in a line, with a few men to the side and behind them holding rattles in their hands. The music began and the women and children came up to dance. I was struck by the joy in the faces of all the participants. The number of dancers varied greatly in each musical session. A group of women, three or four men, or at times, a group of men and women would dance before the *mbira*. Impressive too were the women mediums who became possessed whilst dancing.

The tunes and songs varied a good deal. The first song was called "Nyamatopa" (blood of meat) because it had been sung many years ago by the people after Chaminuka was killed by the Madzviti (Matabele warriors). It was during the playing of this song that women started to become possessed, kneeling or convulsing their bodies, uttering loud sounds when possession had taken place, and leaving the dancing area for a while to return later and continue the dance. The second song, called *mutamba*, was played in the days before Chaminuka was killed when the *mbira* were at the height of their glory. Small boys took part very gracefully in this dance. The third song was described as *shumba* and whilst it was being played a fully possessed woman danced in front of the *mbira* players and then left the *banya*.

The men who play the *mbira* are referred to as *vamaridzambira*. About midday it was clear that the ceremony was drawing to a close and Muchetera and one of the elderly mediums still possessed, walked out of the *banya*. I followed closely behind them. They went down a narrow footpath surrounded by dense bush and both began to become depossessed. First Muchetera stretched out his hands towards the sky, almost like a bird with its wings fully extended about to set off in flight. The entire stage of depossession lasted less than 30 seconds and just as it was ending I noticed the elderly medium about to undergo a similar performance and was able to take a good photograph of him in this state. As soon as they were depossessed they removed their black cloths (*jira*) and rejoined the dancers as if nothing had occurred.

COMMENT

The ceremony of *mishashe* illustrates well the main features associated with any Shona religious ritual. The function of any such ceremony is to draw the members attending it into contact with the spirits in whose honour they have gathered. The whole purpose is to awake in the heart of every person a feeling of happiness and a sense of being supported and protected through their

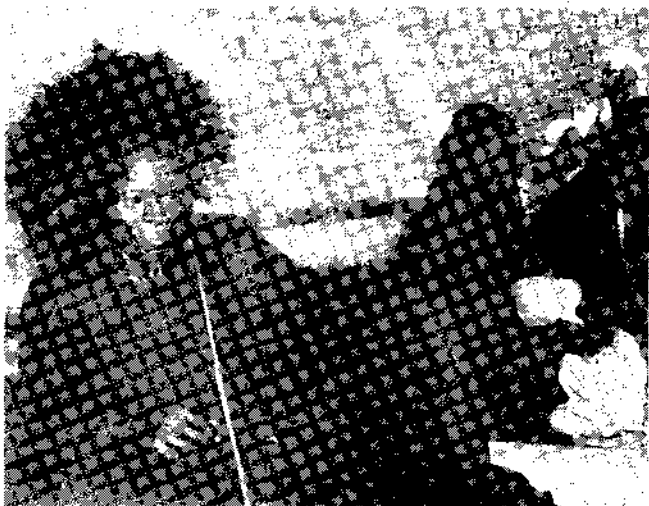


Fig. 1--Muchetera, the main medium, who is possessed with the spirit of Chaminuka. On his left are two young women mediums.

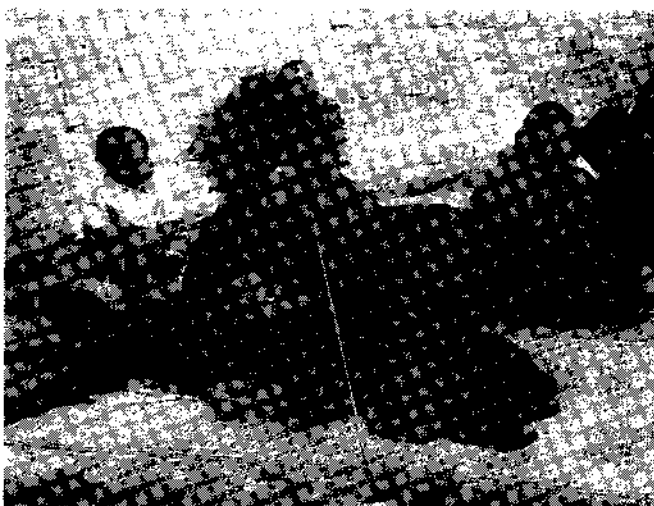


Fig. 2--Muchetera about to take some snuff.



Fig. 3--After blessing the green vegetables, the medium removes the lid of the pot filled with green vegetables and sweet beer.



Fig. 4--Whafanaka, the acolyte of Muchetera, handing the wooden plate of green vegetables to a man, who will take them round to the congregants.



Fig. 5—Whafanaka, the acolyte, pouring out the last portions of the green vegetables.



Fig. 6—A young woman has her share of the consecrated vegetables.



Fig. 7—The congregants display their joy.



Fig. 8—A medium in the process of becoming depossessed.

contact with the dead. Every person feels strengthened through this reunion of the past and present. Each individual must feel completely alone yet at one with the spirit with whom contact is sought. Therefore it is necessary for the medium (*svikiro*) of the spirit to be present and to become possessed. For this to occur music must be played since this is the best means of causing the spirit to enter its medium, especially if the tunes are the ones that were liked by the spirit when it lived on this earth. Beer is always required to lighten the feelings of the congregants. Alcohol releases man's inhibitions and this encourages the feeling of happiness.

In this ritual we meet the I-thou relationship described by Martin Buber through which the participant feels an ecstatic experience (Gelfand 1969). As the tempo of the music quickens in the company of his fellow men he acquires a sensation of delight. He attains spiritual contact with his wife, his family and his parents, alive and dead. In the group, dancing with great concentration, is the medium who is the central figure of the ceremony and who is intensely aware of this. In his ecstasy his mind passes out of conscious control into what we have called the state of possession.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am deeply grateful to Rev. M. Hannan, S.J., for his help.

REFERENCE

GELFAND, M. 1969 The Shona Religion. *Zambezia*, 1, 37-45.

His muscles, particularly those of his neck, stiffen and stand out rigidly like cords. Many who become possessed cry out with a long inspiratory sound which often amounts to a sort of groan.

As possession takes place the person becomes calmer, quivering now and then. From his appearance the onlookers can tell that he is not "quite there". He is in a dream world of his own and yet he appears to follow what is going on around him. As soon as possession occurs his assistant or friend comes up to him and covers his shoulders with his ritual cloth. Now a problem can be put to him and he may answer either in an affected voice or in his natural way of speaking.

In this ceremony we meet the principle of always obeying the requests of the dead. There must be no refusal (*kuramba*), only obedience (*kuterera*) in listening to the words of the tribal or family spirits, that is, in not eating the green vegetables until the first offering has been held at the ceremony of *mishashe*. This ceremony also brings out another feature whereby the dead are remembered (*kutondera*). By remembering the ancestral spirits they are all brought together into one closely knit family union and the living are assured of their protection.

