

Traditional Medicine in Modern Zimbabwe By Gordon L. Chavunduka. Harare, University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1994, ix, 115 pp., ISBN 0-908307-40-3, Z\$36.

In the 'Preface', Professor Gordon Chavunduka says his book on traditional medicine in Zimbabwe was written in 'response to a call by nurses, modern doctors, students, teachers, administrators, traditional or indigenous healers and many members of the general public for an accurate description of the role and work of African traditional healers in modern Zimbabwe' (p. v). The book meets this purpose admirably. It offers a clear and succinct description of traditional healers' current positions. It is well written and will be accessible to a broad readership. The author is well placed for the task: he has been the President of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA) since it was formed on 13 July 1980 (soon after independence); he has trained as a traditional healer; and he has, as a Social Anthropologist, conducted four studies of traditional practitioners.

If the 1992 estimate was correct that Zimbabwe has one traditional healer (including traditional midwives) to every 250 persons (p. 54), then Chavunduka is informing us about the activities of a large sector of the population. It is fitting that we should know about the basic tenets of their beliefs, their training, the hierarchy among them, and their specialities. They are of the people and have effects on the people. Chavunduka observes that despite colonial attempts to suppress the traditional medical system, it has continued. Indeed, he is moderate in his account of colonial discouragement of, and Christian disrespect toward, those who work within that system. He could have made much more, for example, of the resignation of the Dean of the Mutare Cathedral in protest over the appointment of the author to the Board of Governors of St Augustine's School (p. 15). The Dean objected to the appointment of 'the Head of the Witch-doctors' Association'. He wrote 'It appeared to me, and still does, that Scripture clearly points out that God's people can have nothing to do with "supporting" things clearly shown to be contrary to the Word of God ...' (p. 15). Given a century of racism, war and oppression by representatives of a purportedly Christian foreign state, that is surely an extraordinary cause for resignation.

The autobiographical sections are fascinating: perhaps Chavunduka will expand these one day. He documents his own involvement in healing, his training, his role in securing (in 1981) legal recognition for traditional healers, and his firm stand in the face of a barrage of criticism. He ties his personal account to the history of ZINATHA and is refreshingly honest about the problems with which he has had to deal (p. 27) and the lack of success within the organization in certain areas (p. 21).

The chapter entitled 'Traditional health practitioners' gives the results of a survey of practitioners showing, for example, that 54.8 per cent are women; that most earn from their healing less than Z\$30 a day; and that many undergo long apprenticeships of an informal nature. Many interesting aspects of healing are touched on in the book including the observation that research is difficult (p. 32); that all healers specialize (p. 37); that

ritual is flexible (p. 82); that spirit possession can be an illness (p. 85); and that ritual can help solve social problems (p. 86). These and other points are worthy of more extended discussions.

The most controversial ideas are those contained in the last chapter on 'Witchcraft and sorcery' in which Chavunduka sets out to solve the conflict between traditional practitioners (who agree that witches exist and cause illness) and modern health practitioners (who see their job as eradicating the belief in witchcraft). It is surely correct to call for a re-definition of witchcraft in the Witchcraft Suppression Act of Zimbabwe (Chapter 73), passed in 1889 as it is quite plainly wrong and offensive to traditional healers. In the Act, witchcraft is defined as, 'the throwing of bones, the use of charms and any other means or devices adopted in the practice of sorcery' (p. 103). Chavunduka comments

As a matter of fact, this definition, which has remained unchanged to this day, says nothing about witches and witchcraft. Throwing of bones is a means of divination, that is to say, a means by which a diviner or health practitioner determines, or attempts to determine, who or what caused an illness or other misfortune complained of by an individual or group of individuals. Another widely employed means of divination is spirit possession. Illnesses or misfortunes are not always attributed to witchcraft. There are other possible causes of illness such as ancestor spirits, angered or aggrieved spirits, bacteria and germs. Many charms have nothing to do with witchcraft. A large part of the traditional healer's practice is concerned with prescribing remedies and preventive charms. Some of these charms confer or are believed to confer immunity against specific type of illness or to protect the individual against misfortune. Other charms confer or are believed to confer positive benefits such as physical strength, attractiveness to the opposite sex and other desirable qualities. There are other charms that are believed to protect an individual or a group of individuals against witchcraft (p. 103).

Further he says that the legislators failed to distinguish between witchcraft and sorcery. Chavunduka wants the law to countenance witchcraft accusations. There are, he says, three types of witches: those who inherit the spirit of witchcraft from a kin member; those who are possessed by the spirit of a stranger or alien; and those who are made witches by other witches through apprenticeship. It is the last type that most concerns him as he hypothesises that their type of witchcraft may be objectively valid (p. 99). He says that, 'Cases of witchcraft obsession that I have studied indicate that sponsored witches practise their art using methods of sorcery' (p. 99). Chavunduka says that there should be a law against witchcraft and sorcery; that it is the duty of the courts to protect individuals from violent or non-violent reactions to accusations of witchcraft or sorcery; and that the courts should help to control witches and sorcerers because their activities can make people sick or can kill them. The book ends with his assertion that traditional healers attend to illness caused or believed to have been caused by witchcraft and many people are cured.