

Revival and reinterpretation of traditional ecology

Traditional African ecology, like everything else in Shona society, is inseparably linked with traditional religion. Environmental protection is sanctioned by the creator God and the guardian ancestors of the land. Trees symbolise ancestral protection and/or various forms of continuing ancestral involvement in the community of the living and their habitat. Birds and animals are considered a legitimate food resource for humankind. But strict rules were laid down for the protection and survival of all species and, as was poignantly illustrated during *chimuren-ga*, certain animals and birds are considered to be direct emissaries from the spirit world to the community of the living. Water resources were protected through the prohibition of riverbank cultivation and elaborate rules regarding the prudent use of marshlands, springs and fountains. In the event of abuse, mystical retaliation could be expected: animal predators or snakes threatening human life at the site of the spoilt water resource, or the departure of benevolent water spirits.

The traditional 'nature reserves' were the holy groves (*marambatemwa* or *madambakurimwa*). Here the close proximity of chiefly burial sites and surrounding tracts of sacred land – sometimes encompassing large mountain ranges with thickly wooded slopes – epitomised the sanctity of creation and the guardianship of apical ancestors, mandated by the creator deity, over all natural resources. In the *marambatemwa* all trees and plants, all wildlife and all water resources fell under the mystical tutelage of the senior spirits and whatever guardian animals and reptiles – *mhondoro* lions (real or psychic), baboons, leopards, snakes – they chose to use. This guardianship was exercised in close cooperation with their living representatives: the chiefs, tribal spirit mediums and ward headmen. Harvesting of natural resources in such groves, if any (for example the felling of limited numbers of fuelwood trees, game

cropping or the use of water resources), was strictly controlled by the chiefs and mediums, following ritual interaction with the guardian spirits. Often it was a special prerogative of the chiefly house.

Factors such as population growth (and its corollary, increased pressure on communal lands), acculturation and the erosion of customary values, Christianity's deprecation of traditional religion, modern land husbandry and the curbing of the judicial, land allocating, and hence ecological powers of chiefs, have greatly weakened the motivation for communal ecological control, or it has been assigned much lower priority in the struggle of peasants to survive in an environment of diminishing resources. In some cases traditional holy groves have become virtually extinct or have been limited to smaller patches of land as increasing numbers of tribespeople had to be accommodated in the congested tribal territories. In other instances the breakdown of customary law and tribal authority simply led to a gradual invasion of holy forests, resulting in unchecked tree felling, land clearing and hunting.

Yet all was not lost. Traditional ecology has all along formed an integral part of the religio-cultural heritage and identity of Zimbabwe's African people. Despite considerable neglect of customary law in some instances, and ineffective implementation of ecological strictures in others, African wisdom regarding the environment remained a force in peasant society. Many chiefs and headmen stubbornly insisted, against seemingly insurmountable odds, on the protection of the *marambatemwa* in their areas of jurisdiction. Far from being swept aside by the processes of modernisation, political change and much-vaunted agro-economic progress, or merely voicing nostalgia for the good old days, they kept functioning as religio-cultural custodians and protectors of the earth. Hence, with the advent of AZTREC, a core of traditional leadership was available, ready to appeal to the same spirit powers in the ecological crisis as the guerrilla fighters and spirit mediums did during the struggle for Independence.

But AZTREC's green revolution was not simply a revival of traditional religion and ecology, as the *mafukidzanyika* tree-planting ceremonies described in the previous chapter seem to suggest. Things have indeed changed. Some chiefs, for instance, are committed Christians and a number of spirit mediums participate in church life. Thus their appeal to the guardian ancestors of the land in the war of the trees may be

intended not so much to promote traditional religion and renewed dependence on the old spirit world, as to stimulate the ecological responsibility and activity exemplified by the ancestors in the old order. In other words, revival of the old system involves reinterpretation, even of the interaction and equilibrium between the living and the living dead, and the attribution of new meaning to traditional beliefs and practices in a changing situation. As the institution which empowers chiefs, mediums and other traditionalists to wage the ecological war on traditional lines, AZTREC is responsible for assessing this somewhat uneven process of revival and reinterpretation of the old order, guiding it along lines considered appropriate by the participant chiefs and mediums themselves, and relating it meaningfully to existing ecological programmes in the country.

AZTREC's activities and plans already reflect traditional conservationist sentiments and values attributed to trees and wildlife. Some of these, and their relevance for modern ecological warfare at Africa's grassroots, will be discussed in terms of AZTREC's threefold ecological objectives.

5.1 Trees

5.1.1 Religious significance

Traditionally it was the responsibility of chiefs and headmen to delineate areas in their territory for cultivation, grazing and tree felling. The senior spirit mediums played a crucial role in monitoring and policing the harvesting of fuelwood, communicating ancestral approval or disapproval, and bringing trespassers to trial in the chief's court. Both chiefs and mediums were responsible for the perpetuation of customary conservationist laws, peculiar to their own territory and reflecting the specific wishes of their apical ancestors. As environmental custodians they did not hesitate to uphold and strengthen the fairly common belief that trespassers in forbidden territory would be chased away by ancestral *mhondoro*, leopard or whatever animal or reptile the ancestors chose to scare off wayward tribespeople.

Originally, Shona traditionalists maintain, virtually all large trees (*miti mikuru*) were protected, as they belonged to the *samarombo* – ancestors who were believed to dwell in tree branches. Special permission, which entailed the chief's ritual supplication of the *samarombo*, had to be obtained prior to felling such trees. If this was not done, tree felling

meant fighting the *samarombo*, thus disturbing the equilibrium between the living and the deceased in the local community. To avert the wrath of the *samarombo* or the *midzimu enyika* (ancestors of the land), trespassers were fined by the chief. A fine consisted of a sacrificial goat or cow and beer. If, however, the ancestors – through persistent affliction of the community – rejected the conciliatory ritual conducted on behalf of the community by the chief and *svikiro*, the ecological offenders would be ostracised. Hence the protection of *miti mikuru* was a distinct feature of traditional ancestor veneration.

Different species of trees have their own religious connotations. Some of the better known ones in Masvingo Province are the following:

- The *mubvumira* (from *kubvuma*, literally 'to approve'; wild syringa, *kirkia akuminata*) symbolises ancestral approval of the coming of age of their agnatic kin and the consequent geographical expansion or segmentation of villages in the land under their guardianship. For instance, when the head of a family is informed by an adult son that he wishes to build his own homestead within the confines of the existing village or to establish a new village in the ward, a cutting from a *mubvumira* tree is planted by the father at the proposed new site. If after some months the cutting shows signs of healthy growth, it is interpreted as ancestral approval of the son's ability to take responsibility for his own household and of the site he has chosen. Building of the *musha* (homestead) can then commence. If the cutting does not grow, it means that either the site is disqualified, or the ancestors consider the move premature for a variety of reasons. Thus observance of the *mubvumira* practice indicates dependence on ancestral guidance in significant matters of family growth, village expansion and the safeguarding of village life.
- The *munyanharadze* (*lonchocarpus capassa*) symbolises the antithesis of social harmony. It is the tree that nobody wants – the embodiment of evil, the cause of destructive social discord. Men forbid their wives to use *munyanharadze* as fuelwood or to bring it near the homestead for any other purpose, as the wood is considered to cause illness, jealousy, hatred, even death. Should either spouse deliberately bring *munyanharadze* wood to the household, it is usually taken to indicate desperation or malicious intent in a family feud. It could also be an indication that the angry party considers the mar-

ital relationship to be beyond repair and wishes to terminate it.

- The *muzhuzhu* (*maytenus senegalensis*) represents the protective powers of the ancestral spirits against the onslaught of wizardry (witchcraft and sorcery). After a burial relatives of the deceased place *muzhuzhu* branches on the new grave mound. These branches confirm the presence of family ancestors and confuse witches who may wish to feast on the deceased's corpse. Thus the corpse is safeguarded against desecration. In order to protect live family members against wizardry attacks, *muzhuzhu* pegs are driven into the ground around their houses. This is apparently done to harness the anti-wizardry, magical attributes of the tree and to raise the vigilance of the ancestors who are believed to guard over their living descendants at night by literally 'standing at their door' (*kumira pamukowa*) while they sleep to ward off witches and wizards – hence a symbolic gesture of right-mindedness and reliance on ancestral surveillance secures their mystical protection.
- *Muzeze* (*peltoforum africanum*) branches, which are adorned with bright yellow flowers during the rainy season, are used for purification after burial rituals. Handling a corpse is contaminating and could cause the contaminated person to be afflicted with dream visitations from the deceased's lonely spirit before it is elevated to ancestral status in the *kugadzira* ritual (Daneel 1971:101f). Thus it is essential that all parties who have handled the corpse, touched the possessions of the deceased, and prepared or filled the grave, participate in the concluding rite, during which purificatory water is sprinkled on individuals from *muzeze* branches. This not only washes away contamination, but also cools (*kutonhodza*) the heat or anger of the deceased who may have been upset by his/her untimely demise.
- *Mukamba* trees (red mahogany; *afzelia quansensis*) are closely associated with ancestral benevolence. These sturdy, drought-resistant trees, whose bright green leaves always provide ample shade and whose solid wood provides craftsmen with material for treasured sculpture and expensive furniture, symbolise social wellbeing based on constant ancestral care. Some tribespeople used to establish their homesteads near *mikamba* trees or planted a few *mikamba* near their houses in the belief that the trees would ward off illness, conflict and all kinds of tribulation. To appease disgruntled ances-

tors, pots of beer would be placed for one or more nights under a specially selected *mukamba* tree, which in due course could become a family shrine.

- Like the *mukamba*, the *muonde* (wild fig-tree; *ficus capensis*) symbolises benevolent ancestral presence. Being a useful fruit tree, it is not chopped down under any circumstances. Such an act could be seen as arrogant rejection of ancestral compassion. The *muonde*, through ancestral goodwill, provides a dwelling-place for alien *zvirombo* spirits who have nowhere else to go. Disrespect for, or interference with, a *muonde* tree could cause trespassers and their relatives to be afflicted by *zvirombo* spirits who, as a result, may choose the culprit's homestead for its new abode. Such *zvirombo* spirits, as well as evil or vengeful spirits, are exorcised from their hosts by a *nganga* under a *muonde* tree. Thus these trees also symbolise the liberating powers of the ancestors, powers which can neutralise afflicting forces, once the correct attitude of mutuality between the living and living dead is demonstrated ritually.
- The *muchakata* (wild cork tree; *parinari curatellifolia*) is the ancestral tree most commonly used for ritual purposes. Of all the 'big trees' it is the one which is always left untouched when bush is cleared for crop cultivation. In a sense this species is sacrosanct, untouched even by agricultural expediency, which sometimes justifies the felling of some of the 'holy trees' mentioned above. It is generally agreed in the communal lands that only madness, in the sense of complete alienation from the accepted mores of society and the spirit world, could cause people to chop down *muchakata* trees. For this tree, more than any other, symbolises ancestral care and protection. Its dense, evergreen foliage provides the shade which labourers in the fields cherish when the sun's heat becomes unbearable. It is in the *muchakata*'s shade that beer parties, social gatherings and court (*dare*) sessions are held. The *muchakata*'s fruit, moreover, is eaten by human beings, domestic animals and small game such as duiker and steenbok. Rain rituals (*mikwerere*) are conducted under *muchakata* trees, where senior lineage ancestors are addressed in temporary pole enclosures (*rushanga*) around the *muchakata*'s trunk. These enclosures indicate the willingness of the guardian ancestors' descendants to show them respect and provide them with dwelling places.

Muchakata trees which have been used for *mukwerere* purposes are shown great respect because of the possible presence of *midzimu*. Even when dead and withered these trees are not felled. While I was doing research in the Chingombe chiefdom in the Gutu district in the 1960s, a Zionist friend who was thatching the roof of my house decided to remove an old rain ritual *muchakata* near his cattle kraal. The tree was leaning in one direction but fell in another when he chopped it down. One of its branches pierced his skull and instantly killed my friend, who must have thought that he was on the 'safe' side of the falling tree. The entire community, Zionists included, was convinced that the senior ancestors had made the tree fall in the wrong direction to punish the man who had axed down their dwelling place. Even if the barren branches of a dead *muchakata* cast little shade, one simply does not tamper with a shrine where the *mhondoro* spirits of the clan or tribe have rested.

- *Makonde* trees (*euphorbia ingens*) are planted close to houses, as they also represent ancestral protection, particularly by diverting lightning during heavy thunderstorms.
- The *mudziyavashe* (literally 'heat of the chief'), also called *mupembere* (*combretum molle*), is considered the best fuelwood tree in Zimbabwe because of its compact wood, slow-burning, firm embers and relative lack of smoke when properly fired. Because of the scarcity and popularity of this tree, stringent customary laws reserved it primarily for tribal dignitaries – hence the name 'heat of the chief'. Whenever commoners wanted to fell a *mudziyavashe* (known among irreverent whites as the 'toilet paper tree' because of the qualities of its large leaves), they had to approach their chief, from whom they could 'buy' the tree of their choice with a sacrificial goat and ancestral beer. The chief would then conduct a special ritual to notify the guardian ancestors of the agreement. In this way ancestral guardianship over a species which could easily have become extinct in communal areas was recognised and heavy fines were imposed on violaters of this law.

As a child at Morgenster mission I had observed that among all the missionaries only one person consistently burnt *mudziyavashe* firewood on his hearth on cold winter nights. That was old Revd A A Louw, pioneer missionary of the DRC among the Shona and patriarch

to an extensive network of mission stations, schools, hospitals and clinics. In later years, when I learned about the special significance of this tree in traditional Shona ecology, I found it appropriate that in his old age the widely honoured 'chief of the mission' should have been warmed by the 'heat of the chief' on chilly nights. Perhaps my enchantment with the old man's pioneer missionary stories while watching the fading glow of *mudziyavashe* embers lingered long enough in my own life to eventually trigger an overriding concern with the propagation of a more comprehensive version of the DRC missionaries' essentially pietistic message of soul salvation: the salvation of all creation.

In addition to the trees listed above a wide range of wild fruit trees are also associated in varying degrees with the land's guardian ancestors. The *mushuku* (wild loquat), for instance, is often found in large numbers on wooded mountain slopes in holy groves. These may be harvested only sparingly for fear of incurring the wrath of the *midzimu* at the depletion of their own 'food supplies'. Where *mushuku* woodlands have been cleared for settlement, people living there often complain about offended *mhondoro* spirits making their lives miserable.

The persistence of these beliefs and their impact on the preservation of traditional ecological systems call for further study. AZTREC's concern for indigenous trees has, however, helped trigger discussion in traditionalist circles about both the cultivation of the 'holy trees' of old and renewed application of ancestrally inspired ecological laws. It appears as if the war of the trees has brought into the open many long-observed ecological values and ancient beliefs. The explicit identification of ZIRCON-AZTREC's key figures with such values is a clear indication of our confidence in their recruitment and mobilisation potential. The use of tree names by the combatants in the ecological *chimurenga*, to be discussed below, is likewise expressive of Africa's abiding wisdom about the sanctity of creation.

5.1.2 Tree symbolism and *chimurenga* nicknames

During Zimbabwe's liberation struggle the guerrilla fighters used nicknames which they either chose themselves in order to identify with skills or qualities required on the war front, or which were conferred on them by fellow fighters after feats in combat. A major consideration was

anonymity in order to protect their families. A few examples of names used by prominent fighters who had operated in Masvingo Province are: Chakarakata (too difficult for the enemy to swallow), Batai Magidi (hold the weapons), Pfumo Yeropa (spear of blood), Shamhu (the whip, cracked at the enemy), Gondoharishayi (the eagle which does not miss when it swoops on its prey), Subcheka (the sub-machine-gun which mows down the enemy), Big-brain (used to outwit the enemy), Devol Devosa (the evil destroyer) and Jesus (the African liberator). In the war of the trees key figures followed suit, in this instance using tree or tree-related names to add drive and meaning to the struggle.

The most obvious and appropriate nickname was that of *Marambatemwa* (literally 'refusal to have the trees felled'), which I personally gave to senior spirit medium vaZarira after I had heard her urging people to honour and protect the traditional holy groves during a *mafukidzanyika* ceremony. Living up to her new name, which soon became current throughout the ZIRRCO-AZTREC movement, *Marambatemwa* became a veritable crusader for the holy groves, making it the main theme of her speeches at all the tree-planting ceremonies she attended. In the process she taught her audiences the historical background of some of the major Duma shrines, made the guardian ancestors associated with the shrines come alive, narrated instances of ancestral retaliation against trespassers who had felled holy trees, and generally propagated the restoration of customary law to protect the surviving holy groves. Conjuring up in the minds of people the lush forests of wild loquat (*mashuku*) trees and clear streams from unpolluted fountainheads, she was presenting at least one ideal which AZTREC's earth-clothing revolution could realistically pursue and achieve.

Chief Murinye is known as *muuyu* (baobab tree). The name suits the sturdy patron of AZTREC well. Down in the lowveld the *muuyu* seems to endure all droughts. When other resources fail, elephant can still find moisture and nutrients in the baobab's bark and sometimes even a surprise reservoir of water hidden high up in the hollows between forked branches. Hence the baobab stands for reliability and endurance, for survival and care of the needy in times of adversity: the giant father of the bush, undaunted by harsh circumstances. These are the qualities which AZTREC values in its patron.

Lydia Chabata, the *svikiro* with green fingers who helped launch the

first nurseries of indigenous trees, was called *muchecheni* (the wait-a-bit thorn tree; *ziziphus mukronata*). This thorn bush can be a hunter's nightmare in moments of danger. Its hooked thorns do not let go easily and will keep captive anyone who is unfortunate enough to get tangled in its branches. In Lydia's case it symbolised tenacity and her purposeful 'hooking' of people for the war of the trees.

Hardiness and unflinching commitment to the struggle are symbolised by the *murwiti* (black ebony, one of the hardest woods used in carpentry), the *mupani* (*colophospermum mupane*, which provides the most durable fencing poles in the lowveld) and *mukurumbira* (*pterocarpus angolensis* or *mabvamaropa*, literally 'that which produces blood'; the sought-after Zimbabwean teak or *kiaat*, used to make beautiful furniture). A traditionalist in the Chivi district where our first *mupani* woodlot was established chose to be called *mupani*, while a hardened veteran from Gutu district who remained undaunted by the opposition of the Gonese faction became *murwiti*, as tough as black ebony. The late Leonard Gono, our former field operations manager, who uncomplainingly worked long hours (often whole weekends), settled for the name *mabvamaropa*, the highly valued *kiaat*. Although his motive was not the symbolism of blood, the name fits, for Leonard was the one person in our team who sometimes worked until the blood flowed! He survived a serious accident while on duty and did not budge an inch when threatened with physical violence by a member of the opposing party. Thus the treasured qualities of Zimbabwean teak were manifested by one of our most respected colleagues.

Marcelle Manley was engaged for several years in postgraduate empirical research on the changing political and religious roles of tribal chiefs in the throes of modernisation in Zimbabwe. While living in Masvingo she participated in numerous tree-planting ceremonies and became fascinated with the *muonde* tree (*ficus capensis*), the colour and texture of its branches and its lush foliage even in times of drought. In a barren landscape the *muonde* stands out as a symbol of femininity and fertility. In a sense, therefore, *muonde* is a decidedly female name – well taken in Shona society as the nickname of the lady from the south. Although her choice of the name was not influenced by the *muonde*'s religious significance, it was appropriate that this is the tree under which exorcism takes place and where alien spirits find a dwelling place. For Marcelle was fully accepted in Shona rural society as a well-



Plate 41 Earthkeeper Muchakata assists with tree planting and then celebrates the establishment of a new woodlot of trees with spirit medium vaZarira Marambatemwa and Chief Murinye (patron of AZTREC)

intentioned *mutorwa* (alien) – in ancestral terms, welcome to settle in the branches or shade of the *muonde*. Besides, her research in rural areas necessarily entailed some ‘exorcism’ of the spirit and comforts of Western city life!

I myself from the outset adopted the name of *muchakata* (wild cork tree), not to invite the ancestor veneration for which the tree is known, but to show respect for traditional custom and to cater, as the *muchakata* does, for the needs of both humans and animals. Protection in this instance implies shade and rest for the fighters of the green revolution: my attempts to help provide some financial security and ecologically relevant policies to sustain the fighting cadres, just as the ancestors – approached under the *muchakata* during rain rituals – are expected to mediate rain and thus agro-economic sustenance in a rural subsistence economy. Perhaps the paternalist in me subconsciously prompted the choice of this name, seeking to secure a kind of sacrosanct status in a position which can be highly controversial and, because of its exploratory nature, open to harsh criticism. Reassuring as the symbolic qualities of a tree which is not felled under any circumstances were to me during the period of fierce strife with the Gonese faction, the image is certainly not intended to connote indispensability. For, like any other tree, the *muchakata* has a time to come and a time to go: it, too, eventually dies and withers away. This knowledge does not weaken my green convictions but rather provides the light-heartedness required on an uncharted pilgrimage.

Key figures in the AAEC also use tree nicknames. Revd Solomon Zvanaka settled for the *muzambiringa* (grapevine) because of the image of Christian unity presented in the New Testament description of Christ as the vine (John 15). As a conciliatory figure Revd Zvanaka, ZIRRCO's current director, is indeed a promoter of unity among AAEC adherents. Bishop Machokoto, former president of the AAEC, goes by the name of *mushuku* (wild loquat), the image in his case connoting ample provision for the AAEC churches he was leading, for in a good season Mwari provides a rich harvest of delicious *mishuku* to thousands of people throughout the province. Bishop Marinda, general secretary of the AAEC, maintains that his family name of Marinda (literally ‘graves’, that is keeper of the ancestral graves) indicates adequately the involvement of his agnatic kin in keeping royal Duma graves over many generations. As ‘grave-keepers’ the Marinda family tradition includes guardianship of

holy groves, the difference in the AAEC context being that the bishop is a fellow keeper of the modern *marambatemwa* – the woodlots planted by participant churches.

Claver Gwizhu, keeper of ZIRRCO's administrative headquarters, sees his functions in the green struggle as best illustrated by the *munyi* (*berchemia discolor*). The *munyi* with its yellowish brown fruit provides sustenance for both people and domesticated animals. In the same way Claver, who cooks for all the delegates to meetings at my house, selflessly provides our most basic needs. Thus *Munyi* is an unsung hero of the green battle front. His unassuming wisdom makes him a valued personal adviser on many issues affecting ZIRRCO's work.

For all their genuine meaningfulness, these nicknames obviously do not have the same significance that nicknames had in the life-and-death situation of the national liberation struggle. Nevertheless, the use of tree names in our earthkeeping activities makes us more aware of our rootedness in traditional ecology and our kinship in a new struggle. It enables us to be much more observant of the qualities of individual trees than before. It also encourages frank comment on the character traits we observe in each other which correlate with, and are fostered by, identification with the trees of our choice. It nurtures a growing sense of our communion with creation – seeing trees and plants not only as an exploitable resource but as brothers and sisters whose sanctity requires respect. Such awareness instils humility to counter the arrogance caused by a perverted sense of human dominion over creation.

All this is not a reversion to traditional 'animism' (the notion that all creation is animated by magical or spirit forces), as our reconsideration of customary beliefs concerning the interaction between certain tree species and the ancestors may seem to indicate. Rather, our attitude entails attributing recognisable and inspiring cultural value to our ecological struggle, a way of contextualising our quest. The keenness of fellow earthkeepers to identify tree species and to engage in searching discussions about the flora and fauna of our country as we ceaselessly travel the countryside on our many errands – planting trees, monitoring woodlots, managing nurseries, conducting workshops – is a direct result of dreaming this new dream, living a new myth as we listen to the whispers of our friends, the trees.

5.1.3 Sacred groves (*marambatemwa*)

Sacred groves abound in Africa and Asia. A survey conducted by the World Resources Institute in Ghana reports:

(M)ost (sacred groves) were established centuries ago as dwelling places for traditional gods and are the sites for such important socio-cultural events as religious worship and festivals, burials, secret society meetings, and lifecycle meetings. Sacred groves are usually small in size, but large in number; together, they constitute an unknown but significant percentage of the remaining natural forests in West Africa that in most cases are not officially protected. In some countries, they may constitute the bulk of the remaining closed-canopy forest. Sacred groves are one example of how traditional religious or sociocultural practices lead to environmental preservation or sound resource management (Dorm-Adzobu et al 1991:23).

The WRI study focused mainly on a one-acre sacred grove in the Malshegu area in northern Ghana, which beautifully illustrates how traditional religious beliefs and practices can function as a key to the protection and management of local natural resources. In the face of Christian expansionism the Malshegu community had preserved their sacred forest in honour of the local deity, Kpalevorgu, believed to be dwelling there. For more than 300 years the forest was conserved through the application of traditional ecological rules.

These measures restrict human interferences, limit the use of forest products, and protect against natural disasters and other events, including annual bushfires. They have enabled the grove, originally open-canopy forest, to develop a partially closed canopy which is visually striking in the semi-arid surroundings of Malshegu (Dorm-Adzobu et al 1991:4).

Because of this, a higher biodiversity is maintained than was possible in the original open-canopy forest. Only senior cultists attending to the shrine – the *tindana*, a woman custodian of the land, the *kpalna*, a priest, and a few of his aides – are allowed regular access to the grove to commune with the deity on behalf of the community and to collect medicinal plants. Resilient traditional beliefs ensure the protection of the grove. 'Community vigilance rather than formal of active policing is sufficient to enforce the regulations ... and community pressure to con-

form outweigh the short-term benefits of exploiting (the grove's) forest resources' (Dorm-Adzobu et al 1991:20).

The successful conservation work of the Malshegu community has made their grove famous throughout Ghana. Interested people and government officials from Accra travel to Malshegu to pay their respects to the Kpalevorgu deity. The government's NEAP (National Environmental Action Plan), instituted in 1988, recognises the significance of cultural values and religious practices as protective forces for maintaining natural resources. To the extent that the government succeeds in involving traditional institutions in decentralised development planning and implementation, sacred groves can still play a pivotal role in curbing environmental abuse.

However, the WRI document suggests that generally in Africa

... the contributions of traditional religious beliefs and practices, especially at the local level, are neither well known nor fully recognised by governments or the development assistance community, and the implications for policy and programming are not well understood or implemented. Few national donor-sponsored Environmental Action Plans, Tropical Forestry Action Plans, Conservation Strategies, or equivalent country-level planning exercises specifically mentioned sacred groves or develop policy or program actions for improved protection (Dorm-Adzobu et al 1991:25).

These generalised observations apply equally to Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe. There is little evidence that the numerous *marambatemwa* in the communal lands are being singled out in local government development strategies as platforms for launching religio-cultural environmental programmes. Considering the prominence given to the sacred groves in our tree-planting ceremonies and the enthusiasm of the chiefs and *masvikiro* for enhanced protection and/or restoration of their *marambatemwa* through our earthkeeping movement, ZIRRCO-AZTREC is presented with a unique challenge. In the communal lands the sacred groves indeed constitute a large proportion of the remaining closed-canopy forests. Many of them are much larger than the one-acre forest of Malshegu, which appears to be the biggest grove of its kind in northern Ghana. If ZIRRCO-AZTREC were to undertake a systematic survey of *marambatemwa* and inspire chiefs, spirit mediums and district (village and ward) councillors to renew their commitment to the protection

of their sacred groves, this would be a massive stride forward in grass-roots conservation, over and above the introduction of our 'modern' *marambatemwa*: woodlots and orchards.

From a pilot study already conducted by ZIRRCO's research department it is evident that all chiefdoms in the province contain several groves, some well preserved, some partly defunct. Traditionally the ideal seems to have been that each *dunhu* or ward should have at least one such grove, the state of a well-kept grove symbolising socio-ecological wellbeing and the stability of the entire community (humans – the living and the living dead; wildlife; trees; plants; water resources). Without a *marambatemwa* or *madambakurimwa* in honour of the local lineage progenitors, and via them the senior guardian ancestors of the land, community life was incomplete, if not untenable and futureless. The chief ritual officiants responsible for propagating and enforcing the ecological laws concerned, and for communing with the senior ancestors, were the chiefs and/or ward headmen, as well as the spirit mediums of the senior ancestor(s) buried in the grove. Contravention of a shrine's laws, for instance through tree felling or hunting, was punishable with heavy fines or, in the case of severe mystical retaliation, ostracism of the offender from the ward community.

Only the chief or ward headman, that is the keeper (*muchengeti*) of the shrine, is allowed a small annual quota of trees from the grove for personal use. In exceptional cases a small clearing for crop cultivation is also allowed. In some instances collection of firewood is prohibited and young women are forbidden to use the secret footpath leading to the shrine's graves lest they suffer from excessive menstrual bleeding. In those groves where fruit gathering is allowed, respect for the fruit trees, especially the *mushuku*, requires that only fruit lying on the ground may be collected. No sticks or stones which might damage the trees are to be used. If a party of people moves through a *marambatemwa* the use of more than one footpath is forbidden, lest one of them falls prey to mental disorder or their dogs are killed by leopard, lion or baboon – the animal guardians of the grove. In most groves no hunting is allowed and a hunted or wounded animal entering the grove would be safe from pursuit. Where a communal hunt is allowed once or twice a year within the boundaries of a grove, only the least threatened species of animals or birds may be killed. Rock rabbits are protected at all times since they are the ancestors' sentinels. Certain species of snakes are

associated with the *njuzu* water spirits. Their presence in the grove is a reminder that the pollution of fountains is strictly forbidden. Ancestral guardian animals and reptiles seldom harm people fatally, but their presence deters trespassers. Each grove has its own tradition of stories of trespassers being scared off by animals, snakes and/or psychic phenomena, much of which is aimed at reinforcing grove prohibitions. Vigilant grove keepers see to it that firebreaks are cleared annually to protect their sanctuaries against bush fires.

A cursory glance at Gutu district alone shows that holy groves are both numerous and significant. The Rufura people, for instance, have quite a number of *marambatemwa* on Gutu's commercial farms. These they no longer control, but the tribal elders still consider them important. In the communal lands Mount Jerimanda and Mount Gona are the most important because of the grave sites of famous Rufura dignitaries of the past. Strict ecological rules are still in force. Yet the aquatic drums and the voices of ancestors and water spirits heralding good rains have become quiet as climatic conditions generally appear to deteriorate.

The largest *marambatemwa* in Gutu is Mount Rasa in the east. This is a real *gomo* (mountain) – not just a hill – in Zimbabwean terms. It has a circumference of several kilometres; thickly wooded slopes; many important graves; secret hiding places which hold the histories of ancient battles, the Ndebele raids, etc; and caves where hyena and the occasional leopard still dwell. Under the auspices of the ruling Rufura, the vaRasa people under chief Chagonda – descendants of the legendary rainmaker Mai Marumbi – are the main keepers of this grove. In the 1960s, when I was doing research in Chingombe, Marumbi's medium, then still a young man, was patrolling the forested slopes of Mount Rasa daily to protect the grove and prevent tree felling. For many days at a time he did not return to his homestead, demonstrating his disapproval of the increasing encroachment of wood-gatherers at the foot of the mountain as fuelwood became scarce in the surrounding areas.

Chief Chagonda's court was pressing for a full chieftainship at the time. It was also attempting to retrieve the famous 'possessions of Marumbi' (*nhumbi yaMarumbi*), which were said to be in the unlawful possession of the Munyaradzi people. These possessions included the famous rain stones of the Rasa rainmaker, which established a special relationship between Rasa and the oracular shrines at Matonjeni where the stones

had originated. As the stones were required to bolster the political authority of the Chagonda people and give clout to their grove-protecting activities, the implication at that point was that Mwari the creator God was directly empowering the struggle against environmental degradation in one of his/her ancestral sanctuaries.

This raises the question of the connection between Mwari, the ecological and oracular deity, and the main sacred groves in the territories where the cult's influence is felt – a subject which has received little attention from researchers. Considering the close ties between Mwari and the senior tribal spirits, it stands to reason that environmental protection of the grove sanctuaries where the tribal spirits dwell would also be Mwari's direct concern. If this is so, the origin of *marambatemwa* laws goes back to both creator God and local tribal progenitors, a fact which may well emerge from a careful study of the oral histories of sacred groves and their connection – either direct or via the regional *munyai* (cult messenger) – with the Matonjeni shrines.

The Duma people in particular are noted for their elaborate traditions of sacred groves. In Gutu South, in Chief Chiwara's chiefdom alone, there are at least four major shrines with surrounding wooded groves. In earlier centuries the embalming or mummification of Duma royalty took place at these shrines and selected families of shrine keepers (for example Bishop Marinda's family) evolved their own histories of shrine protection from one generation to the next. The Vinga shrine on Mount Vinga is the most important, as it contains the graves of Dumbukunyuka and several other Duma dignitaries. This shrine is a symbol of Duma unity. In periods of crisis, such as war or drought, Duma chiefs used to consult the medium of Dumbukunyuka at this shrine. The Vumba shrine comprises a large *mushuku* forest adjacent to Mount Vumba, a forest which is believed to be protected by a large *njuzu*-affiliated snake which lives in a pool near the top of the mountain. Third in order of importance is the Chiunga grove, the place where Dumbukunyuka lived and died. Whereas Pfupajena was the courageous warrior-conquerer who expanded the boundaries of the Duma realm, Dumbukunyuka was the wise leader with prophetic insight who stabilised Duma hegemony and outwitted his foes. When the Rozvi eventually killed him, he is said to have disappeared underground and to have risen after some days at a place where his tribespeople could collect his corpse for its final passage to the Vinga shrine. The fourth shrine grove is that of Mount

Vunjere, named after NeVunjere who lies buried there. Because of its dense growth, it was used by the ZANLA guerrillas during *chimurenga* as a safe refuge for regrouping, nursing their wounded and spells of rest. Situated within the woodlands of the Vunjere farmland, which the bushfighters declared a liberated zone towards the end of the struggle, the Vunjere grove became a base from which extensive guerrilla operations were launched.

Like most other *marambatemwa*, each Duma grove has a rich history of mystical enforcement of protective laws which underscore its sanctity. These histories emphasise the resentment of the ancestors at alien intrusion, for instance, the refusal of the whites to respect traditional mores. At the Vumba grove it is said that white mineral prospectors who entered the area without permission were chased away by spirit voices. They apparently fled in such a hurry that they left half their equipment in the area and never returned to retrieve it. A contingent of white-led RAR soldiers who, during the liberation struggle, climbed Mount Vunjere at night to lay an ambush for the guerrilla fighters are said to have been chased off by a leopard sent by NeVunjere, as they were intruders who had not approached the grove's medium prior to entry. In this instance the retreating soldiers dropped several weapons, which were subsequently put to good use by the guerrilla fighters. Other narratives allude to ancestral disapproval of Christian exclusivism. At one of the groves, for instance, a troop of guardian baboons threatened and scared off a group of African Apostles (*vaPostori*) who had climbed the mountain to fast and pray for rain.

Nowadays, the *marambatemwa* are increasingly under assault. Foreign rule and growing land pressure have eroded customary law and traditional ecology. The mood of frustration and powerlessness is noticeable in this comment by kraalhead Marinda, the Duma grave-keeper:

- Today many people simply ignore the laws of *marambatemwa*. They have even desecrated the graves and strewn some of the ancestor's bones around at the holy grave sites. I asked for such misbehaviour to be reported in the newspapers. But it was no use. Ever since the arrival of the whites the application of these laws started to deteriorate. Chief Chiwara was not always of the correct lineage (due to the colonial administration's interference) and could therefore neither go to the elders' graves nor enforce the appropriate laws. So people

started to hunt in the Duma *marambatemwa* without even informing the chief!

Against the background sketched here, what can ZIRRCO-AZTREC do to help Zimbabweans preserve and/or restore their ancient religio-ecological sanctuaries, groves which together comprise a large area of open- and closed-canopy natural forest of great biodiversity? My proposals at present are the following:

- A *systematic survey* of all *marambatemwa* in Masvingo Province should be undertaken. This should include each grove's *history of origin* (that is the roles of tribal progenitors and rulers), as such histories reveal tribal identity and aspirations which have a bearing on ecological motivation. In addition, the histories and myths regarding grove protection and the establishment of ecological rules are important for future policy making. An expert demographic and botanical assessment of the size of groves, species of protected trees and plant life, and the nature of the damage, if any, already done will be a useful indicator of the value (in terms of biodiversity, medicinal plants, seeds of rare tree species, provision of a primary watershed for the surrounding area, etc) and the reparability of each grove.
- On the basis of such a survey the ZIRRCO-AZTREC executive could determine which of the major shrines in the province should receive special attention and support. The selection could be guided by the chiefs and mediums of each district who, as keepers and advisers, have intimate knowledge of the groves in their respective areas. Selection of a limited number of groves, preferably at least one in each ward or chieftom whose tribal elders are active in AZTREC, should be followed up with intensive community discussions in the vicinity of selected groves, so as to assess the popular will to resume or increase community action for ecological grove protection and/or restoration. Such discussions should include as many ecologically interested parties as possible. This will give a fair indication of the willingness of modern agro-ecological institutions – Agritex, Forestry, Natural Resources Board and others – to collaborate with chiefs and mediums; the latter's continuing authority to develop new strategies regarding those traditional institutions for which they are responsible anyway; and the response of communities to AZTREC's institutional activities. Of great importance will be the discussions between tradi-

tional authorities and school communities, to see if the youth can be mobilised for eco-cultural involvement. Traditionalists and Christians, too, can discuss joint participation, to see if the latter can become meaningfully involved without feeling that their Christian identity and loyalties are being jeopardised.

- Once *consensus* is reached, *specific objectives, rules and programmed action can be determined and implemented*. For instance, deforested areas in selected *marambatemwa* can be rehabilitated through reforestation, with local communities taking responsibility not only for the actual tree planting but also for establishing indigenous tree nurseries from which they can draw seedlings for their own annual restoration programme. Temporary fences could be put up to visibly reinstate *marambatemwa* boundaries in participant communities. At the same time cuttings of *miti mikuru* (the big trees, for example *mukamba, mukurumbira, mupfura*) can be planted all along these fences so that a cordon of traditionally significant trees will demarcate grove boundaries once the fences are removed.
- Such activity could *reinstate natural forest and game sanctuaries in the communal lands*. For example, if ZIRRCO-AZTREC can persuade Forestry and Parks and Wildlife to assist with preliminary feasibility studies, it should be possible to launch a joint project of transforming at least a few of the largest sacred groves in the country into state-subsidised, tradition-oriented nature sanctuaries. Such a scheme would accommodate both the state's wildlife objectives, supervised here by Parks and Wildlife yet basically controlled by grassroots communities, and traditionalist religious sentiments of drawing inspiration and guidance from the local guardian ancestors. I can imagine the whole of Mount Rasa being declared a nature sanctuary. Parks and Wildlife may be willing to organise and supervise the reintroduction of various species of small game and bird life. Forestry could help with the planning of reforestation, and the Chagonda elders (chief, headmen and *svikiro*), together with other chiefs and mediums whose tribal lands border on Mount Rasa, could be empowered to mobilise, maintain and police local community action.
- A balanced combination of state support and grassroots action could elevate the major *marambatemwa* in the communal lands to a level

of national significance, as genuine symbols of ecological hope and efficiency at the epicentre of environmental devastation and soil depletion caused by overpopulation and the consequent overuse of all natural resources. Such nature reserves could become religio-cultural centres of African achievement, variously interpreted by participant workers or observers in terms of their own individual religious persuasions, yet springing from their common African roots.

5.1.4 Planting indigenous trees

The heartbeat of AZTREC's ecological programmes so far has been its nurseries and woodlots, spread fairly evenly over all the districts of Masvingo Province, with Chiredzi and Mwenezi as recent additions. From an early date the chiefs and mediums declared their wish that we should continue planting exotics, such as eucalyptus, tipuana tipu and lucaena, but that the emphasis should be on indigenous trees, the 'trees of the people' (*miti echivanhu*). So, with the assistance of spirit mediums, tribal elders and school communities, the pairs of nursery keepers appointed to each nursery collected seeds, prepared the required potting soil in polythene bags and started cultivating a wide variety of tree seedlings.

It is difficult to determine to what extent AZTREC key figures' explicit support of the *varidzi venyika* (guardian ancestors of the land) was decisive in the choice of indigenous trees for the war of the trees. As neither Forestry nor the traditional authorities had ever planted indigenous trees to any significant extent, there was no obvious example to go by. However, the tribal elders were inclined to choose the types of tree which would satisfy their own, often neglected, religio-cultural needs and those most likely to meet with ancestral approval. Thus it was no coincidence that, for our very first indigenous tree nursery developed at my house, spirit medium Lydia Chabata of her own accord chose ancestrally significant trees such as *muzenze* and *mukamba*, as well as *mushuku* (wild loquat) and *mutobge* (custard apple), both of which she claimed would produce food for the ancestors to eat. For my part, I insisted on extensive cultivation of the acacia species – *msasa*, *mutondo* and *muvuzhe* (mountain acacia) and in particular the *mudziyavashe* – to establish the prospect of large-scale fuelwood production, one of our main priorities. Thus AZTREC's choice of indigenous species was determined by a mixture of traditional religious and practical motives.

These motives became even more varied and comprehensive as more species were added: *mukurumbira* (teak), in addition to the *mukamba*, as a long-term investment in commercial timber; lucaena for both cattle fodder and fuelwood; and all sorts of fruit trees (mango, citrus, guava, pawpaw, peach, etc) for the establishment of orchards in rural areas.

Of late some of our nursery keepers in the Chivi district have been experimenting with baobab and *muonde* (wild fig tree), but the *muchakata*, for all its religious significance, is not cultivated. Perhaps because of successful protection and self-perpetuation it is commonly seen in many maize fields in the province and consequently is not felt to be threatened in any way.

Whatever the tree species selected for cultivation and planting, the prominence in the movement of age-old religious values is evidenced by the constant talk in AZTREC circles about the traditional value of trees, the use at *mapfukidzanyika* ceremonies of various nicknames based on traditional tree symbolism, and the invocation of ancestral approval and protection of all trees planted in AZTREC woodlots. It is even possible that to those rural participants who no longer experience the ancestors as a consistent force in their lives, indigenous trees will increasingly acquire traditional cultural value. Should the envisaged reforestation of damaged *marambatemwa* areas get off the ground, it is likely that the motive for selecting and planting trees will be quite specifically religious. At all events, the correlation in people's minds between the traditional sacred groves and our modern woodlots (also regarded as *marambatemwa*, because of religiously imposed strictures and the controlled cropping of trees under traditional authority) could culminate in the attribution of new religious meaning to AZTREC's 'sacred groves'.

5.2 Wildlife

Because of ZIRRCO's preoccupation with tree planting during the initial phase of its existence, as well as lack of funds and specialist staff, little has been done about its second objective: wildlife conservation. Nonetheless there is considerable enthusiasm for game conservationist programmes in AZTREC and AAEC. At both the executive and the field-training level there is consensus that ZIRRCO should try to raise funds for wildlife research; for a specialised wildlife component in ZIRRCO's

ecological and research departments; for game restocking programmes in the communal lands, as implied in the foregoing discussion of the rehabilitation of nature sanctuaries (*marambatemwa*); and for introducing contextualised game conservation texts, based on customary hunting philosophy and praxis, into the syllabus of our training programmes.

These objectives are somewhat ambitious and their realisation will certainly require more substantial funding than ZIRRCON can rely upon at present. Nevertheless, they reflect the common will of a wide spectrum of African rural communities and are particularly relevant in terms of shifting game conservation responsibility from the bureaucratic, if not elitist, level to the grassroots of rural African society. For this reason alone it is worth considering briefly what we have resolved and planned so far.

5.2.1 Game farming

Soon after the formation of the AZSM in 1988, I introduced the idea of the new movement acting as a link between black and white farmers in commercial farming areas with a view to game farming. The target area at that stage was the Gutu commercial farming community, where I have close ties with a number of farmers, particularly Toy Nel and his family of Chibakwe Farm, who have operated a successful game project for many years.

The idea was to launch game farming on a mutual aid basis in a locality where black and white farmers on adjacent farms could develop a 'cooperative' along predetermined lines of interaction. The AZSM would convene joint meetings to determine the feasibility of each project and lay down the common goals and code of conduct of interested parties. Proposals were worked out and discussed with some of the farmers concerned. Thus it was suggested that Mr Nel and other farmers who had game would help their black neighbours to establish breeding units of impala, kudu, zebra, eland, etc. In return the black farmers would abolish hunting with dogs, combat snaring, and submit – as would the white farmers – to the research and monitoring programmes of the AZSM (now ZIRRCON). It was also suggested that if the necessary funds could be raised, a common game fence should be erected, enclosing a sufficiently large tract of participant farmers' land to allow free movement of kudu and other species of game.

At the time the Gutu chiefs and mediums, together with a number of ex-combatants serving on Gutu's rural development committees, strongly supported the proposals. A progressive conservationist and expert on African custom in his own right, Toy Nel responded positively during discussions with myself and leaders of Gutu's African community. These plans not only made sense in terms of wildlife conservation, marketing and conscientisation, they also were, and still are, valuable ways of promoting rural African ventures in this field. Such projects, moreover, would give ZIRRCO an opportunity to help improve interracial relations through joint activity in farming communities. Delay in the implementation of these plans was not attributable to a change of mind, but simply to a lack of professional staff to undertake feasibility research, fund raising and project implementation.

5.2.2 Traditional hunting laws and reintroduction of game in the communal lands

Despite the paucity of game in the overcrowded communal lands of Masvingo Province, a hunting tradition still exists in rural society. Discussions with tribal elders in particular reveal nostalgia for the past when game abounded in their districts, pleasure in the narration of wildlife and hunting stories, and eagerness to discuss customary hunting codes. In Gutu district the hunting feats of the Rufura tribe's founding ancestor, Mabwazhe – particularly his killing of the rogue rhino in the Rozvi king's territory in the eighteenth century – have attained mythical significance. Courage, fierce independence and economic enterprise among Rufura tribespeople are viewed by many as character traits imparted supernaturally by their hunter ancestor.

Some of the traditional hunting laws inevitably relate to the holy groves. These include the prohibition of killing any animals in such areas, unless an annual hunt is called by the chief as grove caretaker, with the approval of the guardian ancestors. As representatives of the ancestral guardians, the chief and the senior medium are entitled to certain portions of the meat of animals killed in or near a sacred grove. This reveals close interaction between guardian spirits and hunters in the observance of traditional game culling codes.

I have listed some of the most common game laws which, according to chiefs and mediums, existed prior to the colonial period. These include

the restriction of hunting to the winter season, prohibition of killing young animals or females in foal, a quota system for individual hunters, constraints on hunting for commercial purposes, and the entitlement of the chief in the hunting area concerned to specified portions of meat in honour of the guardian ancestors. Birds and animals such as bateleur eagles and tortoises, considered to be 'emissaries' from the spirit world, were protected. Spirit mediums were appointed guardians of threatened species like ant-bears, pangolins and bush babies (Appendix II, pp 295–296).

Quite a number of these customary laws coincide with those currently applied by National Parks and Wildlife in hunting concession areas. Detailed research could well reveal considerable variation in these laws from one district to another. Significant, however, is the persistence of a core hunting code in peasant society as part and parcel of oral tradition. The code ties in closely with traditional religion and, despite the scarcity of game in the communal lands, is still held in high regard, particularly by traditional elders in respect of their sacred groves.

In view of all this I have no doubt about the viability of reintroducing game into the communal lands, starting with some of the larger *marambatemwa*. These can be game-fenced and stocked, following feasibility studies and intensive discussions with rural communities, district councils and the chiefs and mediums of AZTREC. The scheme will differ from the game farming in the commercial areas outlined above in that less land will be available, resulting in smaller game populations. Yet empowerment of traditional elders and rural council members will make such a game restocking exercise an essentially African community enterprise, based on reconsideration, adaptation and application of traditional hunting and conservationist codes. It is conceivable, for instance, that effective anti-poaching and anti-snaring measures could be applied in sacred groves-cum-game sanctuaries because of persistent belief in the mystical intervention of the guardian ancestors – particularly since the chiefs and mediums are bound to publicly declare the imported game the 'property' of the *midzimu*. Game culling could be partly commercialised to generate funds for the upkeep of each sanctuary's infrastructure, but should basically be modelled on customary laws regarding seasonal considerations, protection of rare species, provision of meat to sanctuary caretakers (be they chiefs, mediums or their modern counterparts in district councils) with the

required rituals in honour of the mystical forces involved, and so forth.

A scheme of this nature will be complementary to the wildlife management programme run by Campfire. This organisation has successfully introduced the principle of making rural district councils responsible for game conservation and the marketing of big game in cooperation with hunting safari operators, representing overseas and local clients. Once rural communities started reaping the benefits of the new system in terms of improved living conditions (schools, roads, clinics, etc), obtained through their own control of hunting fee profits, peasant attitudes shifted markedly towards public opposition to poaching and protection of game as a marketable resource. Campfire's success has, however, depended largely on proper game management and marketing in communal lands in or near the Zambezi valley, Gwanda and the Beitbridge area, where the survival of adequate game populations has permitted the application of their policy. To restock game in game-fenced sanctuaries where human overpopulation has crowded out most game species – in other words, to create from scratch the conditions for game conservation, management and eventually also marketing – would be a totally different ball game, one which is bound to be more complex and costly to initiate and maintain.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons that the introduction of *marambatemwa* game sanctuaries should be considered. First, the combination of reforestation and game stocking in traditionally sacred areas accords with the holistic religio-ecological worldview still prevalent in a rural peasant society. Religious sanction of such action should provide strong motivation for the kind of sustained communal commitment which could assure success – as evidenced by AZTREC's conduct of the war of the trees. Second, game stocking in communal lands where wildlife has been depleted could help re-establish a form of wilderness experience of which many rural folk have been deprived. Third, communal responsibility for such game sanctuaries could change the attitudes of rural communities from a poaching-snaring mentality caused by deprivation to positive conservationism and controlled commercial enterprise. In other words, the attitudinal change already effected by Campfire as regards the value and protection of wildlife can be extended to areas where this organisation has not yet operated. Conscious interpretation of traditional ecology and hunting laws and building on those foundations will, moreover, give such a wildlife enterprise recog-



Plate 42 Nursery keepers tending indigenous tree seedlings in one of ZIRRCO's rural nurseries



Plate 43 ZIRRCO's Muchakata nursery on the outskirts of Masvingo town, named in recognition of the author's role in founding the earth-keepers' movement



Plate 44 Schoolteachers (top), ex-combatants and headmen (bottom) join hands in the green *chimurenga* of tree planting

nisable cultural roots. This undoubtedly will have the advantage of promoting authentic popular concern and in the process enhance the status and authority of those chiefs, councillors and tribal dignitaries responsible for project implementation. Fourth, the proposed system could become a significant part of the process of balancing privileged, elitist and Western-sponsored wildlife conservation with Western-backed, yet Africanised and grassroots-controlled endeavour. Fifth, properly planned culling, meat marketing and hunting could in the long run offset capital costs and maintenance as sanctuary units progress towards self-support. In the sixth place, the envisaged game sanctuaries could also become valuable conscientisation centres for the youth of surrounding schools (see discussion below).

A considerable amount of spadework has already been done, including preliminary feasibility studies at Mount Rasa and discussions with councillors and communities about the establishment of a game sanctuary at this mountain. Senior officials of the Worldwide Fund in Harare have been supportive of ZIRRCO's proposals and initiatives in this field, and we hope that the combined efforts of these two institutions will soon culminate in the realisation of some of the ideals outlined above. The development of a *marambatemwa* game sanctuary at Mount Rasa could well have far-reaching consequences for the reintroduction of game in Zimbabwe's overpopulated communal lands.

5.2.3 Conscientisation and youth participation

Youths in many rural schools already participate in ZIRRCO-initiated tree-planting programmes. Pupils and teachers help AZTREC and AAEC nursery keepers to collect the seeds of indigenous trees. They attend tree-planting ceremonies and add to such events with recitations of their own original poetry, colourful acting and choir singing – all imaginatively adapted to the theme of environmental rehabilitation. In addition, pupils plant and care for their own woodlots at school. They use ZIRRCO seedlings where school nurseries have not yet been established.

Against this background, the development of sacred game sanctuaries could include the creation of youth clubs for environmental care at rural schools. Interested school teachers could play a key role in this respect. Together with local chiefs, councillors, mediums and any

advisers from institutions like Parks and Wildlife and Campfire that can be coopted, these youth clubs could form part of a task force to help establish and maintain the envisaged sanctuaries. It should be possible to build modest African-style conference centres at the larger sanctuaries, so that the youth clubs in each district would have access to at least one or two centres where ecological conscientisation programmes can be offered over weekends.

Ecological training in game sanctuaries should ideally include some of the following items:

- *Lectures* on environmental issues by teachers, experts from the Natural Resources Board, Parks and Wildlife, Forestry, Campfire, etc;
- Talks on *culture, traditional customs and religious practices* relating to indigenous environmental conservation by tribal elders. This combination of modern and traditional ecology will enable young environmentalists to work out their own ecological contribution innovatively;
- *Films and slide shows* on relevant topics;
- *Debates, concerts and choir singing evenings*, during which youth clubs of different schools can present their own shows on a competitive basis;
- Lessons in *bushcraft* conducted in the sanctuary. These could include walks along set routes to learn to identify indigenous trees and distinguish between edible and poisonous mushrooms and wild fruit, as well as game tracking and the study of bird and game life in the field;
- *Monitoring* tree survival and aftercare of trees planted in deforested areas within the sanctuary, as well as monitoring breeding herds of newly introduced wildlife. This should be done with a view to possible poaching, snaring and illness, as well as the grazing and browsing potential of the sanctuary with due regard to fluctuating climatic conditions. This will foster close identification of the youth with 'their own' sanctuaries and inculcate positive environmental attitudes;
- Where possible, a kind of wilderness experience can be provided in the form of mountain climbing, hikes through thickly wooded areas, game and bird watching and camping in the woods. Campfire ses-

sions at night would provide unique opportunities for accompanying tribal elders to narrate myths, historical events, hunting stories, the feats of hero ancestors and *chimurenga* experiences, and to instruct the youth in religio-cultural matters with which they may be losing touch. This could enrich the lives of young environmentalists, give them the feeling of unspoilt nature and enable them to interpret the processes of acculturation to which they are subjected in relation to their own religio-cultural roots;

- Trail hikes should include visits to *places of historical significance*, such as Bushman paintings, caves where people hid during Ndebele raids in the previous century, *poshitos* (guerrilla hideouts) of the liberation struggle, sites where *pungwe* meetings or combat took place, and so forth. Mount Rasa, for instance, contains numerous grave sites; dwelling places of famous forebears such as Mai Marumbi, the influential rainmaker; the caves of war; caves where hyena still hide during the day; secret alleys supposedly leading to treasure troves deep in the mountain's belly; and so on. The emphasis should be on sites that will appeal to the imagination of the youth and which they can explore. On such hikes the sanctuary caretakers or grave guardians will be able to teach the young about the holy burial sites of their forebears, how they have to behave in the vicinity of such shrines and what the ancestral rules are for the harvesting of wild fruit.

Arrangements have already been made to involve the youth of urban schools (for example Don Bosco and Ndarama in Masvingo town) in wildlife and related programmes along the lines described above. Preliminary discussions with John Toft and other prominent figures in Masvingo's Wildlife Society have led to agreement about ZIRRCO's use of the conference centre in the Shagashe game park for ecological educational programmes over weekends. Bordering on Masvingo town and established mainly through white initiative with European Commission financial support, the Shagashe game park certainly bears no resemblance to the envisioned rural *marambatemwa* sanctuaries. Nevertheless the park is well stocked with eland, zebra, kudu, sable, impala, reedbuck and smaller species like duiker and steenbok. Bird life also abounds. Thus the park is a sanctuary for nature lovers in its own right and can offer urban youth the kind of exposure to wildlife that few of them ever experience.

Once the basic ecological conscientisation programmes are established, we could consider exposing youth and adults involved in ZIRRCO to related environmental projects and wildlife conditions in other parts of Zimbabwe. Visits to the Zambezi valley, to Lake Kariba with its fishing industry, to Dande with its many spirit mediums, and to rural councillors in those areas which participate in Campfire projects will certainly broaden the conservationist insight and vision of ZIRRCO environmentalists, accustomed to the rather sparse wildlife of Masvingo Province.

The incorporation of a Youth Desk into ZIRRCO has been discussed and approved by the executive. Attempts are currently being made to raise funds for this purpose.

5.2.4 The war against poachers

Once the wildlife section of ZIRRCO's ecological department is in place, an attempt will be made to study the overall situation of wildlife conservation in this country. Prevailing conditions in the Chirisa game park in Gokwe, in the hunting camps of the Zambezi valley, and in the Matusadona, Hwange, Gona-re-Zhou, Kyle and Mushandike parks, particularly in terms of game populations and anti-poaching operations by Parks and Wildlife, should be surveyed. This should be done in cooperation with the conservationist and government departments concerned. ZIRRCO requires accurate information in order to define a meaningful role for its members in the protection of endangered game species. From time to time the poaching of rhino (for example the discovery of 13 rhino carcasses in the Gona-re-Zhou park and 17 carcasses in the Zambezi valley reported in December 1988), preventive rhino dehorning measures, the introduction of rhino breeding units and the culling of elephant are discussed at ZIRRCO-AZTREC executive meetings. Participant chiefs, mediums and a number of ex-combatants have shown great interest and motivation to become actively involved in the anti-poaching campaign. It is generally agreed that the war of the trees should be extended as soon as possible to include a war against poachers – specifically rhino and elephant poachers, but also fish poaching, such as the illegal netting of fish in Lake Kyle, the Sanyati Gorge and other locations at Lake Kariba.

Considering the focal role in *chimurenga* of spirit mediums acting on

behalf of the guardian spirits of the land in each district, and their representation of the ancestral war council in uniting and mobilising people against a common enemy, it seems feasible to officially incorporate influential mediums – even if only experimentally at first – in the anti-poaching units of Parks and Wildlife. As many of the *masvikiro* are still convinced of their age-old calling to protect wildlife and pride themselves on their *chimurenga* involvement, they will be only too willing to carry on the fight against those who are destroying our game population, particularly rhino, for personal gain. These men and women are admirably qualified to fulfil a mystical watchdog function, seeking in the process to establish the kind of justice between human beings and wildlife which the guardian ancestors require. In actual fact this is part of the struggle against the destructive *uroyi* (wizardry) of greed! The deliberate introduction of the supernatural realm into this area of African life could help motivate communities to become active in uprooting evil, in this instance through the detection, exposure and ostracism or capture of poachers.

Whenever I have discussed proposals of this nature with individual game scouts (some of whom participate in anti-poaching activities) and senior officers of Parks and Wildlife in Masvingo Province, Harare and the Zambezi valley hunting camps, I have been struck by the enthusiasm such ideas evoked. Game scouts indicated that they would welcome mystical guidance and support of this nature in the decidedly risky struggle against often ruthless and desperate poachers. Some of them were of the opinion that the official inclusion of *masvikiro* and/or AIC prophets in their campaigns could help mobilise greater support in peasant society for their work and integrate specialised game protection with genuine people's movements.

Of course, the implementation of such a project depends on ZIRRCOON-AZTREC's ability to raise the required funds and to convince the Ministry of Environment and Parks and Wildlife that it is worth accommodating a number of *masvikiro* in their anti-poaching units for a trial period.

5.3 Water resources

AZTREC's chiefs and mediums are already actively protecting water resources through the prohibition of riverbank cultivation, strict applic-

ation of customary laws concerning the protection of fountainheads, and the siting of eucalyptus plantations in places where there is little risk of damaging the sponge of underground water reserves. To arrive at realistic and more comprehensive objectives in this field, however, will require surveys of the availability and state of water resources in Zimbabwe's rural areas, and related issues such as the control of fishing and water pollution.

Some projects for AZTREC's future consideration are the following:

- *Anti-siltation measures.* Lake Kyle is one of the major water resources in Masvingo Province, both for Masvingo town and the irrigation schemes of the Lowveld sugar cane industry. Much of its catchment area is being impaired by deforestation, gully formation, lack of contour ridging and harmful cultivation practices, particularly in the Gutu, Zimuto and Masvingo districts through which its feeding rivers flow. Siltation can be curbed through stricter control of grazing and soil cultivation in the communal lands – a task in which AZTREC can assist agricultural extension agencies like Agritex. In deforested areas where squatters have been removed, plantations of indigenous and/or exotic trees could be introduced as part of ZIRCON-AZTREC's annual tree-planting drive, subject to agreement with Masvingo's town council and provincial land-use committees.
- *Gully reclamation.* Peasants in the communal lands are confronted with escalating levels of soil erosion. Gully formation caused by flood water in the fields and water chains is integral to this serious depletion of arable topsoil. Part of the solution obviously lies in supervised improvement of farming methods, such as correct ploughing practices, contour ridging and properly planned soil cover (trees and grass) in and around arable lands. It is conceivable that existing land husbandry programmes could be augmented by experimental projects in which peasant communities take responsibility for the reclamation of gullies by planting not only trees but also different grass species in order to arrest soil erosion. Ridges and small dams can be built in gullies to help curb the soil-eroding flood water.
- *Protection of river banks* against bush clearing, cultivation and gold panning should become a formal priority of the chiefs, spirit mediums and tribal elders who are active in AZTREC. Exposure in news media of major offences could be one means of rendering the pro-

hibition effective and demonstrating the determination of the movement to exercise its ecological watchdog function.

- Ecological staff could assist rural communities with the *planning and implementation of dam building schemes*. In addition to planting woodlots near dams, they could promote bird life and water vegetation, as well as help to stock dams with fish and control netting.
- As the *masvikiro* and chiefs extend their responsibility in this area, they could *reinterpret their traditional water conservationist duties* in terms of preserving the aquatic dwelling places, the underwater cities of *njuzu* spirits in rivers, pools and dams. Thus they could define their tradition-oriented contribution in the modern context more precisely. Youth programmes at the conference centres in the envisaged *marambatemwa* sanctuaries will give tribal elders an opportunity to teach young people about the sanctity of water and the customary rules for the preservation of water resources in specific groves. They will be able to draw on a rich store of *njuzu* stories about rain making, flooding rivers during good rainy seasons, the protection of aquatic medicine resources, and so forth.

Judging by the frequent references at *mafukidzanyika* tree-planting ceremonies to the *njuzu* and the guardian ancestral spirits in connection with rain making and environmental wellbeing, the mystical powers associated with all water resources still exercise a powerful sanction in traditionalist circles for all supportive and protective human endeavour in this field. The *njuzu* spirits, like the tribal ancestors, relate directly to Mwari at the cult shrines of Matonjeni. AZTREC's delegations to the shrines with rain requests to Mwari assume both the support of these water spirits for their visits and divine empowerment of the spirits to interact with human beings to ensure respectful use of life-giving water and the protection of all *njuzu* abodes.

Just as the *mafukidzanyika* ceremonies are evolving from a preoccupation with tree planting, it is likely that new forms of indigenous ritual will develop in relation to water projects. Thus the launching and completion of dam-building projects could well be accompanied by *njuzu* ceremonies featuring traditional *shavi* dances. In this instance the drumming, songs and dancing will serve to strengthen the ties between living beings and a living water world, the commitment of participants to mystically sanctioned laws concerning the use of water and, more

generally, the resolve of our earthkeepers to protect water medicines for human healing and water itself as medicine for the healing of the land.

* * *

In contrast to the previous chapter, this one is not confined to past and current religio-ecological realities and achievements. Considerable attention was given to future prospects, plans which may or may not come to fruition in the actual practice of our movement. As the founder and former director of ZIRRCO I felt entitled to engage in such propositional writing. I did so partly on the strength of many years of close identification with Shona traditionalist friends and the traditional religious insight derived from this experience, and partly because of a need to leave our earthkeeping movement at least a profile of the green dream that is dreaming me. Whereas my proposals are often taken seriously and acted upon by fellow green revolutionaries, the process of reinterpretation, ritualisation and contextualisation itself has a habit of finding its own course – a course following the rutted, unpredictable surface of the land we are trying to heal and the age-old wisdom of the people, rather than the imaginings of an involved yet culturally still alien *murungu*.

Whatever the limitations of my own role in AZTREC, the resilience and adaptability of traditional religion as an ecological motivational force in the modern era are indisputable and something to be reckoned with. My proposals in this chapter in no way represent mere romantic notions harking back to a bygone age. The resurgence of traditional religion as a unifying force during the *chimurenga* period clearly illustrated its ability to adapt and effectively deal with critical situations in modern warfare. Both Mwari, the creator, and the guardian ancestors of the historic past gave mystical directives for the use of modern weaponry against the common enemy. By the same token they are now considered to be inspiring and directing modern ecological warfare. Some of the spirit mediums, for instance, convey ancestral directives on the use of modern fencing materials for the protection of woodlots, while the oracle of Mwari proclaims support even for a modern fund-raising drive on behalf of his/her earthkeepers. Thus, because of the flexibility and continuing importance of traditional religion, there is no reason that the guardian ancestors of the *marambatemwa* will not mystically sanction AZTREC's

envisaged modern wildlife programmes such as fencing of sanctuaries, restocking of game in the communal lands and engagement in anti-poaching operations. Neither is there reason to doubt that a conceptual remodelling of the role of the *njuzu* will lead to modernised ritual which will render the latest water conservationist measures both culturally acceptable and sustainable in Shona peasant society.