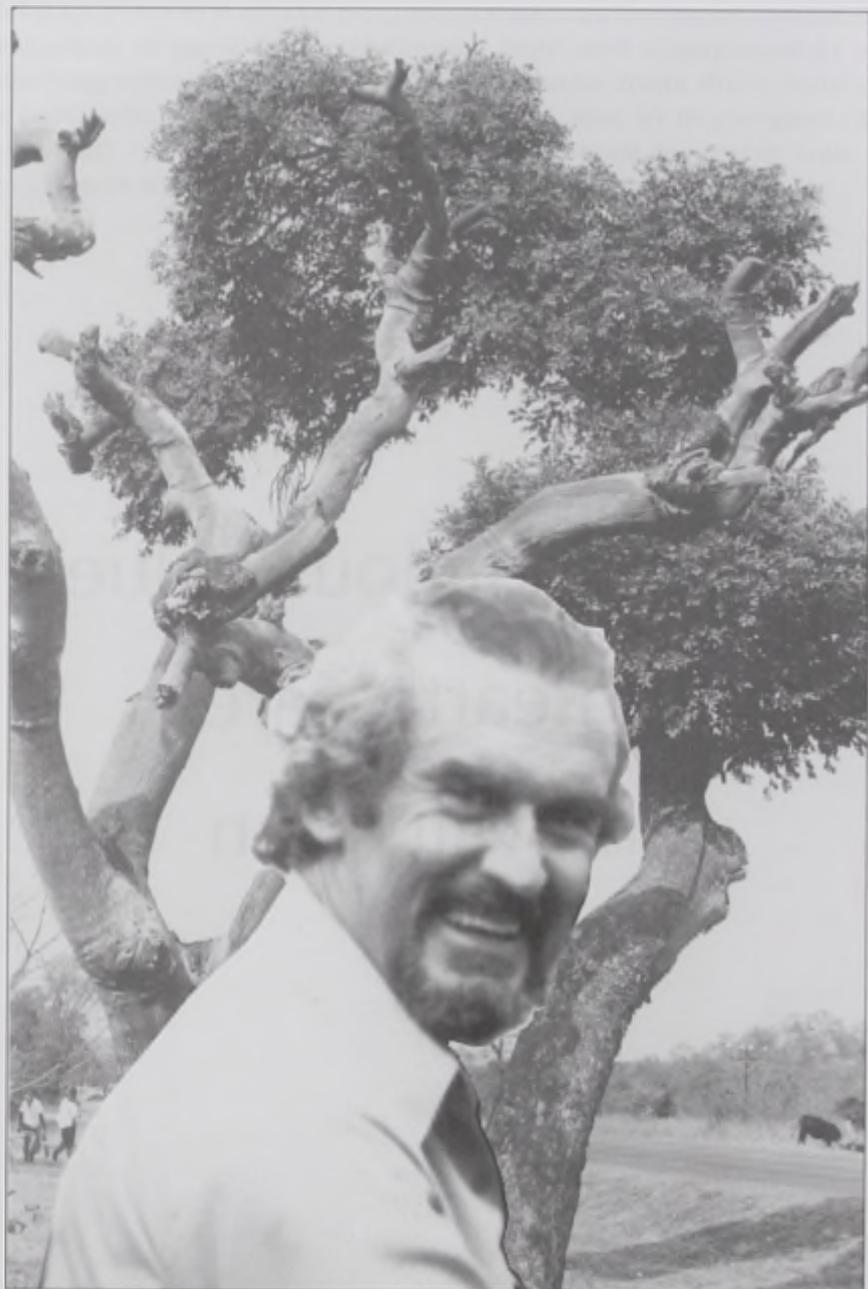


PART 3

African religious values
and earth-care:
an evaluation



Muchakata Daneel

Environmental custodianship and earth community

ZIRRCO's contribution so far has been but a drop in the ocean, if one considers the magnitude of environmental problems worldwide and the requirements for responsible stewardship in Zimbabwe. Yet ZIRRCO has managed to place environmental concerns fairly and squarely in the liberationist tradition of peasant society. Its declaration of a war of the trees has revived the sentiments and unifying forces of *chimurenga* to give special historical meaning to the struggle of liberating the agriculturally depleted, beleaguered soil. Earth healing endeavours form a platform which pays tribute to the heroes who fought colonialism, and simultaneously creates opportunities for heroic exploits in a new struggle, which largely explains the fascination and staying power of ZIRRCO's cadres of green fighters. Pragmatic and exploitive motives are no doubt present in the ranks of ZIRRCO's earthkeepers. After all, who in peasant society does not want a steady income to supplement the vicissitudes of subsistence farming? And which villager in a denuded environment will not want to capitalise on firewood or timber for building and carpentry in accessible woodlots? But much more than mere pragmatism must be at work for these same people to persist year after year with time-consuming afforestation projects even when black frost wipes out their seedlings, entire woodlots are decimated by livestock starved for good grazing, and any number of hitches thwart outright success. Our movement indeed employs cool-headed agro-economic reasoning for waging a war of afforestation. But its long-term sustainability and success will continue to lie in the people's love of the land and their willingness to sacrifice and suffer in their attempts to restore that which essentially spells 'home' to them.

Despite the geographic limitations of its contribution and the relative lack of Western-style ecological expertise, ZIRRCO has managed to

strike a healthy balance between instructive conscientisation and earth-healing action. Not satisfied with rousing meetings, conferences and workshops – valuable and indispensable as these occasions may be – the movement has engaged in decisive action from the outset. Thus it created a tangible guideline or ‘myth’ for itself, symbolised by nurseries and woodlots, on which it could build and which in itself provided an example and motivation for continued earth-healing action. ZIRRCO’s staying power and future growth hinge largely on this combination of convincing action and inspired teaching.

To evaluate ZIRRCO’s contribution purely in terms of ecological achievements is to misunderstand the religio-cultural mould in which all its activities are cast. AZTREC and the AAEC have been vehicles of traditional and Christian contextualisation, of the idiom in which earth-keeping concern was expressed. Are they succeeding in setting a new religio-cultural course for environmental endeavour? In trying to answer this question – specifically in relation to African religion, since AZTREC was focal in this volume – we have to consider a few related questions as well: What is the significance of African religion for ecological action in the ‘global village’? What can we learn from it and how can it shape our attitudes as we are increasingly drawn into a religiously pluriform league of earthkeepers from many parts of the world? What, moreover, are the theological implications of the ZIRRCO model of traditionalist and Christian counterparts sharing ecological mission? My answer to these questions is not a thoroughgoing theology. I merely offer some observations which I consider significant for an eventual theological evaluation.

6.1 Traditional custodians of the land and religio-ecological innovation

The most outstanding feature of AZTREC’s work is the ability of the traditional custodians of the land to *appropriate and revitalise* Africa’s age-old religio-ecological values in a modern programme of environmental reform. AZTREC has demonstrated convincingly that where the authority of the traditional leaders (chiefs and mediums) is still relatively intact, they are capable, once motivated and empowered, of mobilising rural society for large-scale environmental programmes. Appropriation and revitalisation of traditional values, as we have seen, are based on

holistic worldviews, but are much more than a mere reversion to, or revival of, the old religio-cultural order. Through AZTREC's persistent ecological engagement, the spirit guardians of the land are now seen not only as insisting on observance of customary ecological laws to preserve the holy groves, but as demanding a much more aggressive and geographically extensive process of healing and clothing the barren land through reforestation and related programmes. In other words, the religious dynamics of inspirational interaction between the living, the living dead and the creator God are currently informing and initiating new but still basically indigenous patterns of ecological curative action to remedy humanly inflicted imbalances and destruction.

How, then, is the traditionalist appropriation of the old religious order, the building on old foundations, introducing innovative change? I mention a few significant examples. First, the *mafukidzanyika* tree-planting ceremonies resemble the *mukwerere* rain rituals in their dependence on the guardian ancestors of the land. Yet the ancestral demands have changed in that the right-mindedness that they demand in return for mediating abundant rains and good crops involves more than just the traditional respect and veneration symbolised by libations and ritual addresses. In the new ritual context they in fact require their living descendants to create the actual conditions for good rainy seasons, namely ample vegetation achieved through reforestation. This is an entirely novel notion in a belief system that traditionally required only the conservation of abundance, which nature itself could keep regenerating before the problems of overpopulation, land pressure and deforestation got out of hand. What is happening, in a sense, is that African rural society's growing knowledge, acquired from modern education, about ozone depletion, the hothouse effect of deforestation and air pollution and its possible impact on climatic cycles, is being meaningfully related to the African cosmic order, which is still kept in balance through mystical sanction and appropriately ritualised human response. The environmental viability and success of AZTREC lies in 'modernising' the mystical sanction of the ancestors within an earth-keeping praxis which in some respects transcends traditional conservationist customs, without alienating people from their ecological roots.

Second, even the mystical spirit world appears to be regrouping in AZTREC's version of the war of the trees. As in the war years, the senior guardian ancestors of chiefdoms and districts are collaborating in the

spirit war council (*dare rechimurenga*) presided over by Mwari. Such change is evident in the broad representation of spirit hierarchies at tree-planting ceremonies, where the parochial ward and chieftaincy interests reflected in *mukwerere* rain rituals acquire wider significance in a regional and national perspective. The involvement of Mwari, the oracular deity, in particular underscores this trend. AZTREC pilgrimages to Matonjeni strengthen our traditionalist constituency's awareness that their struggle has national, even universal, implications. Such widened horizons bolster sustained ecological commitment.

In the third place, traditional perceptions of evil are imaginatively applied to environmental destruction in the development of an indigenous ethos aimed at ecological repair. The will of traditional authorities in AZTREC to impose drastic sanctions on environmental trespassers – as also happens in the AAEC – surfaces in the stigmatisation of such offenders as *varoyi venyika* ('wizards of the land'). Customary law has always included punitive measures against *varoyi* because of the threat they pose to the wellbeing of individuals and society. Hence branding wanton tree-fellers and cultivators of riverbanks as *varoyi* creates a situation in which effective disciplinary measures can be taken against transgressors of an emerging green ethos.

The traditionalist model of earthkeeping developed by AZTREC is certainly worth considering for the development of inculturated environmental strategies elsewhere in Africa. It enables traditional authorities to harness African cosmologies and worldviews for sustained ecological action. Through its mobilisation of grassroots communities in afforestation programmes, AZTREC has achieved what the Forestry Commission of Zimbabwe, by its own admission, has not been able to do, despite its greater financial stability, salaried staff and other resources. In my view AZTREC convincingly demonstrates that the institution of the chieftaincy, including spirit mediumship, is capable of orchestrating comprehensive environmental reform in Africa. For the chiefs and mediums to contribute their own ecological creativity, they require a platform that is organisationally and financially independent of government and environmental institutions.

6.2 African religious values and earth healing

This study has attempted to probe the cosmological roots and belief

systems of the Shona as a motivating force in the mobilisation of inculturated earthkeeping. The insight it generates may be significant for the development of a relevant eco-theology or environmental ethic in the global village. Numerous anthologies comprising contributions from all parts of the world reveal acute awareness among academics of the value of the 'primal' religions, alongside other world religions, for a radical rethink of the prevailing anthropocentric ethic in industrial consumer societies with its devastating impact on natural resources. I mention a few examples of the role attributed to 'primal' religions in current ecoliterature, with a view to replacing this anthropocentric ethic, understood as an emphasis on human wellbeing at the expense of non-human life and the resources of the earth, with an ethic of responsibility and respect for all creation:

In *Ecotheology: voices from south and north* (1994:6) the editor, Hallman, states:

We are in the early stages of a profound conceptual shift in theology that will move us far beyond stewardship theology as a response to human exploitation of God's creation ... Even if we now talk more in terms of responsibility than domination, our approach is still a management model in which we humans think we know best. *By breaking open that conceptual prison, feminist theology and insights from the traditions of indigenous peoples are both critically important groundings for the emerging eco-theology ...* (my italics).

A collection of essays entitled *Worldviews and ecology: religion, philosophy and the environment*, presents a wide range of religio-ecological worldviews, all recognising the need for a new global environmental ethic and interreligious cooperation, should we wish to solve the critical issues facing us in the late twentieth century (Tucker & Grim 1994:12). Characteristic of this book is the recognition of plurality, the premise that '*no one religious tradition or philosophical perspective has the ideal solution to the environmental crisis*' (Tucker & Grim 1994:11). Instead, it advocates an inclusive, holistic approach which integrates all religio-ecological concerns with modern scientific development in the interest of the entire earth community. In his essay, 'North American worldviews and ecology', John Grim (Tucker & Grim 1994:52) underscores the positive implications of such views for primal traditions when he concludes that 'the religious values within the

lifeways (that is, the functional interaction of cosmology and culture) of Native American Peoples, which have extensive similarities with other global indigenous peoples, serve to enrich the ecological dialogue in assessing the importance of functional cosmologies, environmental ethics, and appropriate rituals for renewing human-earth relations'.

Tu Wei-ming, again, calls for a rethink of the Enlightenment heritage, its positive contribution to humanity and its negative consequences for the world's life-support system. He contends that the Enlightenment emphasis on individualism, reason and progress has undermined the idea of community. In the joint spiritual venture of moving beyond the Enlightenment mentality and creating a new world order, the priority is 'to articulate a universal intent for the *formation of a global community*' (Tu Wei-ming 1994:25; my italics). To this end three kinds of spiritual resources need to be mobilised:

- the ethico-religious traditions of the modern West
- the religions of the non-Western axial-age civilisations
- primal traditions

Tu Wei-ming singles out some of the features of primal societies. Their detailed knowledge of and close identification with the environment could be helpful for the development of new attitudes and worldviews. Their rituals of bonding in interpersonal relations and consequent sense of community make for participation in creation and respect for the transcendent, as opposed to dominion and exploitive manipulation. Hence, in contrast to anthropocentric manipulation and exploitation of nature, 'primal consciousness emerges as a source of inspiration' (Tu Wei-ming 1994:28).

In conclusion, Tu Wei-ming (1994:28) quotes Ewert Cousin's remark that we should face the ecological crisis with 'the earth as our prophet and the indigenous peoples as our teachers'. The ongoing hermeneutic responsibility of interpreting both prophecy and message remains. Dialogue is essential if the modern West is to fully perceive the significance of such interpretation.

Positive as all these appraisals of 'primal' or 'indigenous' religions and their significance for the development of a global environmental ethic are, we are left with the problem of generalisation and application when one moves from local rural contexts to global industrialised ones. I agree with the call to have the earth as prophet and the indigenous

peoples as teachers. But how do indigenous peoples' rituals for the renewal of human-earth relations (Grim) gain recognition in consumer cultures in which economism (McDaniel 1995:150) and individualism are the main tenets of urban religion, at the expense of bonding rituals? And exactly what inspiration is conveyed by the primal consciousness which could or should help modern society recapture a sense of community (Tu Wei-ming)? I do not profess to have complete answers to these questions. Neither do I, as an outdoor, rural person, have adequate tools to gauge the relevance of the AZTREC story for urban society. Nevertheless, because of a shared destiny and common humanity in the global village, the AZTREC experience and its religiosity have validity and impact beyond its own geographical confines. Narration of the experience, as I have attempted in this publication, may in itself be a challenge and an inspiration in the common quest of earthkeepers worldwide to heal the earth. To this end I shall highlight and evaluate some of the values of African religion as they surfaced in the AZTREC experience. Although I hesitate to suggest universal application of locally contextualised values, it may be helpful if in some instances I briefly indicate the shaping influence African religion has had on my own existence, steeped as it still is in the Western culture and life style. In so doing it is just possible that my brief outline of a few religio-environmental themes (sense of place, sense of community, renewal of human-earth relations, and awareness of divine presence) will crystallise into meaning in the reader's globally related, if totally different, context.

6.2.1 Sense of place

McDaniel (1995:194) correctly distinguishes one of the characteristic attitudes in 'traditional native paths' as 'authentic spirituality (which) lies in being bonded with, and indebted to, a specific geographical place or life-community, on which our survival depends and which partly forms our own spiritual identity'. He draws on the American Indian awareness of the relationship between personal spirituality and specified locality to illustrate the direct correlation between the development or shape of our own inner beings, our souls, and our loyalty or bond-ness to local places. 'We find ourselves,' he says, 'when we come home to our local bioregions, when we let them form us and make us more human' (McDaniel 1995:197). Or: 'We make contact with the

Great Spirit when we know and love where we are' (McDaniel 1995:195).

This spirit-related sense of place contrasts sharply with what the same author calls the culture of 'consumerism' and 'indoorism'. Indoorism contributes to a mentality which isolates 'nature' as something 'outside' – to be enjoyed occasionally, but essentially remote from indoor life – and establishes indoor experience as normal reality. To many Christians religion in such a culture is text-based and human-preoccupied, in the midst of sermons which 'stress human-divine and human-human relations at the expense of human-Earth relations' (McDaniel 1995:196). Consumerism, in its turn, emphasises material progress and upward mobility as if these are morally justifiable trends, regardless of the alienating implications for a sense of self and of place.

These negative features of predominantly urban cultures are challenged by 'traditional Native ways':

In the first place they invite us to have more worship services outside, in the great cathedral of the open sky, where we can honor our kinship with the animals and the wild plants. Equally important, however, they invite us to recognise that our spiritual identities are partly formed by the very geographics and life communities in which we are situated (McDaniel 1995:196).

McDaniel's observations are similar to those I made in my earthkeeping encounter with African religion, particularly as regards the definition and function of religious values within a specific geographical space. It is not coincidental that the Shona people's overriding concern during the political liberation struggle and in our current war of the trees was and still is the lost lands. This concern is rooted in a religiously inspired sense of place. The land is the people, the animals the plants, the entire earth-community – unborn, living, dead. In other words, the land is the totality of known and unknown existence. Invasion of the land by foreigners and destruction of its resources for human gain or 'progress' make the people living there rootless serfs and aliens. Through internal and external displacement, they lose touch with the dwelling places of their ancestors, hence with their own cultures and history. In the dried-up riverbeds, the deforested plains and dwindling wildlife they sense a loss of that which shaped their inner beings, their souls. Thus recapturing the land politically and restoring the land environmentally are

integral processes in the individual and group experience of spiritual rebirth, revival and growth.

To rural Shona it is not the local village or chiefdom which spells 'home'. The village is too limited a setting for the lineage or extended family group to acquire full significance. The chiefdom, again, encompasses too wide a geographic region for individuals to be intimately associated with all of it. 'Home', therefore, is the local ward (*dunhu*) with its cluster of villages, its ruling council of interrelated kraalheads under the tutelage of the ward headman (*sadunhu*), and the extended network of relatives: uncles, aunts, grandparents, in-laws and their respective nuclear families, all living within walking distance of each other in the same locality.

In the ward all adults know the geographical delineation of the 'spirit province', in which the spirit medium of a senior lineage ancestor has considerable jurisdiction over ward-political and ecological issues. Everybody knows where the important graves of clan elders are situated, graves which link the history of generations of relatives, immigrants and clan members to the actual land of the *dunhu*. Every member of this 'home' recognises the *mibvumira* 'approval' trees near the homesteads of kraalheads – trees which represent the history of village segmentation and growth, and the sanction of the senior ancestors for such development. Here everybody knows where the *muchakata* trees grow, in whose shade the annual rain rituals are conducted. All the villagers of the ward know which trees mark the seasonal history of their own place: the seasons which brought either rain and good crops, or drought and suffering. As they move around the familiar home territory, they know where to linger to feel spirit presence in the rustle of tree leaves. They know, too, at which stream or river to listen for the drum-beat of the *njuzu* spirits in their aquatic world when rain is coming.

The holy grove (*marambatemwa*) – whether it contains only the graves of recently deceased senior lineage ancestors of the ward or those of the founding ancestors of an entire chiefdom, and therefore represents several wards – epitomises the holistic nature of the Shona sense of place. To those living on and from the land the holy grove enshrines the ancestrally sanctioned codes of ecological responsibility; and its closed-canopy forests, abundance of fruit, wildlife and running fountains symbolise the wellbeing that the earth community could enjoy if

the Creator and forebears are honoured by the living as the guardians of creation. The ritually reinforced codes which protect the abode of the ancestors – their fruit, mushrooms, shade trees, birds, rabbits and antelopes – provide the incentive for *dunhu* villagers to heed the rules laid down by ward and village headmen for grazing, tree felling, river bank cultivation, and so forth in their own place.

Thus membership of *dunhu* society and involvement in the subsistence economy of Shona peasantry have a built-in spiritual dimension, informing all peasant activities. Whatever one's formal or institutional religious persuasion – be it Christian, Islamic or whatever – tilling the soil or keeping livestock on the land of a ward community involves belonging. This requires the kind of interaction with the Creator, as well as the deceased keepers of the soil and their living representatives, that etches itself upon the soul. One cannot, for example, desecrate the weekly *chisi* rest day of the ancestors by tilling the soil and hope to escape retaliation from either the guardian ancestors of the soil or the peasant community of the *dunhu*.

Rootedness in such a rural Shona 'home' inevitably qualifies the religiosity and cultural tradition of generations of families. Mention was made of the Chagonda clan's special relationship with Mount Rasa in Gutu East (supra, p 211–212). As descendants of the famous rainmaker Marumbi, whose rain-making stones affirm a close link with the rain-giving deity at Matonjeni, the successive generations of Chagonda people see themselves as the mediators of rain, not only for their own ward but for the entire region. To the extent that they please Mwari and their ancestors by protecting the vegetation and animal life on the slopes of their sanctuary, Mount Rasa, they contribute to the equilibrium between the living and the spirit world which is necessary for good rainy seasons. At the foot of Mount Rasa the villagers recognise the abiding presence of mountain acacias covering the mountain slopes, the early morning calls of guineafowl and pheasants, the flight of eagles and the warning sounds of rock rabbits high up on cliff ledges. All these are symbols of spirit presence, signs of spiritual wellbeing and promises of life-sustaining agricultural stability, as long as the mountain and its resources are not abused. Here respect for the ancestors and their individual histories is equivalent to love of place, which to the Chagonda ward community means awareness of mountain presence and responsibility for its environs.

Likewise, for the Duma ward communities living in the vicinity of the holy groves at Mounts Vinga, Vumba and Vunjere in the south (supra, pp 212-213), their heritage of mummified ancestors – warriors, rulers and sages – blends with a tradition of shrine keeping, the ritual expression of which reinforces environmental constraints. Caring for the holy mountains, as a means of venerating the apical Duma ancestors, strengthens tribal affiliation and bondedness to that part of the earth which has sustained them and their forebears for centuries. As suggested before, respect for the holy groves and the ancestors they represent, together with the actual state of the *marambatemwa*, determines the motivation and will of ward communities to love and keep the soil of their 'home'.

As has happened elsewhere in Africa, the Shona's earthbound religious values have been eroded by various factors. Population growth, coupled with restrictive land legislation, has exacerbated the pressure on the land, deforestation and scarcity of fuelwood. As a result it became impossible for kraal and ward headmen – whose powers, like those of chiefs and spirit mediums, were curtailed under colonial rule – to impose the old ecological codes of conduct. Many *marambatemwa* were desecrated as kinsfolk, desperate for land and a stable supply of fuelwood, cleared the bush in previously forbidden areas. This was not just an unwanted invasion of the cherished 'home' territory of ward dwellers but also an abuse of the symbols of their inner worlds of reverence and veneration. Survival on limited and overexploited land, it seemed, became the norm instead of peaceful wellbeing in a balanced interplay between peasants, ancestors, the land and their life-giving Creator.

Following the development of industrial economies, labour migration and urbanisation undoubtedly exacerbated the alienation of former peasants from their rural homes. Plagued by the same 'demons' of consumerism and indoorism that beset Western industrialised cultures, city-dwelling Shona inevitably faced change in relation to 'place'. The continuity provided by the familiar face of the land and its alternating seasons yielded before the stresses of competition in the urban marketplace. The extended family group in its known geographical locality in the *dunhu*, moreover, made way for a socially more isolated and individualistic urban 'home'.

Nonetheless the change in religious values appears to have been less

dramatic than one may have expected. I have always been struck by the rural rootedness – spiritual, economic and ecological – of Shona urbanites. Even second- and third-generation city-dwellers tend to maintain their ties with and their religiously defined responsibilities for their home villages in the communal lands. Their relatives keep farming the family fields and many of them return home periodically when family or ward rituals are performed. City life therefore remains an economically induced adjunct, while the prospect of eventual retirement in the rural home community makes the harsh urban realities bearable. Even though they develop a new dependence on the money earned in town, a new house in a suburb, social ties in urban clubs, associations or churches, still the rural sense of place and ritually defined obligations to the upkeep of the earth community in the home setting persist. To many it becomes a cherished value in the midst of economic flux, a value to be preserved and to fight for.

It was the tenacity of this earthbound religious value and the attitudes it generated in the lives of my Shona friends, as it surfaced in both the political and environmental liberation struggles, that struck a chord in my own existence. Personally, I had pleasant memories of an adventurous childhood at Morgenster, a sense of security derived from the mission station where my parents worked for nearly 40 years. I at least had a fixed home base, a somewhat idealised sanctuary and anchorage, during many years of life and travel abroad. But thoughts of Morgenster were an inward sentimental trip, treasured for its ongoing value in my own life but with no real obligations beyond self. It was only when I was confronted with the reality of the lost lands as they figured in the lives of countless guerrillas, elders and displaced villagers during and after *chimurenga* that my own sense of place acquired firmer contours. As I became more aware of the comprehensive significance of *marambatemwa* for the Shona's sense of place and home, reflected at each AZTREC tree-planting ceremony in the mediums' supplications and the nostalgic pleas for environmental repair by chiefs, headmen and councillors, my own earthbound faith grew into expanding vision, action and commitment.

In the process of inner change, sketched in the first chapter of this book, I started to consider Morgenster mission and the mountain on which it is situated as my *dunhu* home community, with its own holy grove, its well-kept graveyard housing missionary ancestors who had

influenced my life and those of the people still working there, and its *marambatemwa* forests of wild loquat and acacia trees on mountain slopes. At tree-planting ceremonies my anger and frustration at the relentless denudation of the mountain's face by squatter intruders enabled me to relate to the chiefs' and mediums' nostalgic laments over the nakedness of their own home territories. During weekends at Masvingo my academic indoorism of reading and writing made way for regular pilgrimages to the mission. For quite a while I felt no need to see friends in the community of living people there, but preferred to relate to the diminished forests, granite hills, rivulets, birds and the ancestors I had known so well as a child. Often I stood on the holy ground of my own place, communing with and sensing the presence of the men and women now resting in the small graveyard. Part of me was battling with a transition from pietistic faith with its heavy emphasis on soul salvation and individual spiritual growth – the strategy of my Protestant missionary ancestry at whose graves I stood – to a more earthy faith which sought peace in relating the good news of redemption and resurrection to all the earth. Somehow I needed spirit affirmation to initiate a mission of earthkeeping, to set a new course – a course deviating from, yet augmenting, the original course of mission marked out by the forebears of my *dunhu* home community. I had to reinterpret the inspirational message from the ancestral cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1–2) of the mission, to seek the face of Christ the Earthkeeper, and then proceed along the new course with the benediction of the pioneer missionaries who had given spirit content to my sense of place in childhood. It was quiet where I stood among the tombstones, smelling the fertile soil and mouldering wild loquat leaves, hearing the distant call of bulbuls.

I was still mystified, seeing only in part, observing a dim image in a mirror (1 Cor 13:12). But in communing, sharing, the love of place was confirmed and waxed strong. I knew that *sekuru* Louw, pioneer missionary and founder of Morgenster, would applaud our attempts to cultivate and plant *mudziyavashe* fuelwood trees. He had taught me the value of these trees in my boyhood. He was still teaching me. I remembered how Cinie Malan, his wife, had written a list of indigenous trees in the vernacular in the back of her Shona grammar book, one of the earliest developments of Shona as a written language. She could have listed cultural or religious key terms. What made her decide on trees?

Did she anticipate the eventual need for an earthkeeping mission? Then there were the resting places of Coen Brand, leading educator, and Dr Tommie Steyn, MBE, famous eye doctor of Zimbabwe, both of whom had taught me, together with their own sons, to love the bush. They had once seen the same beauty on Mount Mugabe that I was looking at. Through my eyes and senses they were still seeing and feeling the environs of our home right now. There was peace about the earthkeeping mission after we had spoken ...

Having related to the earth community back home, I felt free to develop a ministry of earth healing, for in Christ all things hold together (Col 1:17). Now I could operate further afield, with the inspirational back-up of a home base, just as my missionary ancestors had developed educational and medical networks throughout Masvingo Province from that same base. I had to revise my own sense of place after all the talk and research about Zimbabwe's lost lands. I had to contextualise for myself the cosmic holism of my Shona friends, find the *dunhu* community of my youth, and internalise the religio-ecological values of both worlds before I could shoulder the kind of environmental responsibilities which the escalating war of the trees entailed.

Although I kept travelling alone to Morgenster for this kind of eco-spiritual experience, these pilgrimages were never isolated, mystical events. My sense of place was in transition, informed by the values of fellow Shona earthkeepers as they themselves were rediscovering their own relatedness to the earth in their own home communities. Most of them had an advantage over me: they had deeper roots in the lands of their forebears, going back several generations. Moreover, unlike me – an alien missionary not expected to have a lasting environmental responsibility at Morgenster – they, traditionalists and Christians alike, all had ongoing ecological duties in their *dunhu* home territories.

What I did share with the Christian communities of the AAEC was the attempt to give Christian content to the ancestor-related sense of place that we encountered in our AZTREC counterparts and detected within ourselves. I understood and respected the eco-spiritual ways of AZTREC chiefs and mediums. But I had to find my own mode of communion with the Christian ancestors who had influenced my understanding of creation and spirituality in my youth. There are indications that fellow Zionist and other AIC tree planters were and still are going through

similar processes of reinterpretation. In the final analysis it appears as if participation in the war of trees has brought about a general awareness among our earthkeepers – irrespective of religious affiliation – of our primordial ties with the earth. All of us still share the primal vision with our non-Christian forebears, the intuition of being bonded with the entire earth family, the universe and its Creator. This awareness exacts humility and faith. Then, by rediscovering and taking greater responsibility for one's individual roots in the soil, the broader perspective of earth-care, beyond the local situation, starts unfolding.

6.2.2 Sense of community

A cornerstone of the Shona understanding and ordering of community is the pervasive interaction between the living and the living dead. Existentially this is the most consistent and demanding, and ritually the most comprehensive, component of Shona – if not all African – religion. Without the ancestors, life, in all its passages, joys and vicissitudes, is just not possible. The ancestors, like their living descendants, play a vital role in society and have a definite impact on community life. Theirs is an extension of life here and now. The two spheres of life – the seen and the unseen – are interdependent. If the ancestors' benevolence and protection against evil forces are forfeited, the meaning and stability of the societal group are at risk. By the same token the equilibrium of ancestral existence in the spirit world is disturbed or spoilt if they are not remembered, honoured and respected by their living kin in prescribed rituals.

This interdependence is manifest in both family and wider lineage or ward rituals. If, for instance, the union of a new couple is to be blessed, the procreative powers of the bride's matrilineal ancestors must be ritually recognised by including a *ngombe youmai* (motherhood cow) in the *roora* (bride price) paid by the groom's wife-receiving relatives. If this is not done, barrenness or miscarriages are often attributed to the omission and the anger of the spirits of the wife's mother or grandmother, who have a legitimate claim to the motherhood cow. Ritual amends for the omission highlights the significance of two interacting kin groups – the wife-providing and wife-receiving lineages – respecting each other's privileges and responsibilities for the sake of in-group harmony. It also illustrates the ongoing responsibility of the living towards

the spirit world and the spirits' obligation to maintain order among families through mystical intervention.

Another example of how the core of community life is ritually reinforced is the *kugadzira* (literally 'to set right'), the home-bringing ceremony in which the spirit of a deceased relative is elevated to the status of ancestorhood (Daneel 1971:101f). If the home-coming spirit is the head of a family, the deceased's name-bearer officially receives both the name of the father – a ritual which suggests close identification with, if not living personification of, the departed person – and full responsibility as ritual officiant for the extended family in its relations with the ancestral world. In the course of the ritual the entire family situation (outstanding debts, land issues, unsettled conflicts, *roora* payments, individual problems, health, etc) is reviewed in the presence of the new name-bearer and, by implication, of the spirit who, on becoming a proper *mudzimu*, accepts mystical protective responsibility for the family. Different groups of participant relatives – aunts, uncles, in-laws, sons and daughters of the deceased – publicly address the name-bearer and indicate how they propose resolving unsettled family problems.

The *kugadzira* ritual therefore entails a thorough stocktaking of family affairs. Mystical involvement in family life is reaffirmed; the kinship code of behaviour, represented by the family ancestors, is reinterpreted and applied to pertinent issues in the presence of all interested parties. A sacrificial beast, the *gono guru* (great bull), is dedicated to the home-coming spirit in anticipation of future family rituals. Subsequent illness or misfortune among relatives will trigger the next round of ritual activity (including the sacrifice of the *gono guru*), and the close interaction of kin, the living and the living dead, will once again be demonstrated publicly. Rituals of this nature certainly serve to strengthen close family ties. The mystical dimension of ancestral presence and activity imparts indisputable authority and stability to the inner dynamics which holds the family group together.

Similar deference is shown to the apical ancestors of the ward or chiefdom when multilineal communities meet for the seances of senior spirit mediums at *mukwerere* rain rituals. Tribal political or ecology-related rituals in the wider family context are therefore marked by the same mystically reinforced sense of community. At these ceremonies the regulation of community life in relation to agro-economic activity,

the state of the environment and the rhythm of the seasons – according to customs upheld by the senior guardian ancestors – are up for review. Assessments are made of the observance of *chisi* (ancestral rest days), proper care of water resources and observance of the rules for the use of arable fields and grazing areas. Serious misdemeanours may be referred to the chief's court, which reflects the interwovenness of eco-religious praxis and customary law. The ancestors' perception of the way in which their descendants keep the land influences the nature of their mediation with Mwari, the Shona high-God, and the kind of rainy season that can be expected.

In rural communities, structured according to a worldview of a seamless totality of interacting forces (humans, wildlife, the seasonal forces of nature, the Creator, etc), a ritually determined agenda for earth healing is already functioning. Ideally, therefore, a true sense of Shona community entails a code of earth stewardship. Processes of modernisation, acculturation and land pressure have eroded these values and impaired their application. Yet the AZTREC story shows that the underlying sense of community has survived in Shona society and that it still provides a mobilising focus for earthkeeping. The interplay of religious motivation and ecological commitment in this context requires further consideration:

6.2.2.1 Ancestors and their living descendants

It is virtually impossible to isolate the interpersonal relations between ancestors and descendants from the cosmic sphere within which they function. If one scrutinises the personal aspects of these relations for a moment, however, a few characteristic features emerge. For the community of human beings (dead and alive) to be complete and harmonious, *interdependence and reciprocal responsibilities* are essential. Recognition of this condition requires mutual respect, honour and love on both sides of the divide. Ancestral influence has a stabilising effect on community life in that ritual procedures elevate and give substance to *kinship obligations*: they consolidate family ties when the *midzimu yapamusha* (home ancestors) are venerated, and earth community ties in the widest sense (human-environmental relations in particular) when the *varidzi venyika* (guardians of the land) are called upon. Ancestral insistence on *ritual repetition*, through visitations to individuals in dreams or visions or through divination and revelations by spirit mediums,

ensures regular consideration of traditional codes of behaviour in nuclear and extended kin groups. To a large extent, therefore, the ancestors represent the communal conscience of society. They jealously guard the proven traditional mores, but also guide the development of a newly contextualised ethos when necessary.

How do these built-in religious values and constraints in Shona society enhance earth-care?

First, since its inception AZTREC has manifested group features that were essentially different from what one would normally find in a secular, Western-oriented environmental organisation. The insistence of chiefs and mediums on ancestral presence, evidenced in ritual addresses and snuff offerings at all meetings, fostered the growth of a *closely knit family of earthkeepers* functioning from a common base of ancestral sanction and inspiration. Against the background of *chimurenga* history it made sense to qualify environmental stewardship as ecologically liberating action. But in essence the movement developed as a *territorial cult* in which a wide range of regional spirit powers, collaborating with each other and with the Creator, give direction to the healing cause of their living descendants.

Traditional religious values also influence the Christian component of our movement. In some respects AIC congregations resemble extended Shona kin groups. Even though the ancestral mores are replaced by biblical codes of behaviour and the source of inspiration for church life is professed to be the word of God and the guidance of his Holy Spirit, interaction with a christianised version of the unseen spirit world persists. Environmental stewardship as developed by the AAEC therefore has both a biblical foundation and an existential worldview, the holism of which is still informed by traditional African notions of community. Responsibility for the earth is taken by the nuclear family (AIC congregation), the extended family (all the congregations and circuits forming a particular church), and the multilineal ritual group (the full complement of AAEC-affiliated earthkeeping churches). Ancestral directives are replaced by the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Even ZIRRCO's daily executive meetings, efficient as they may be in directing the earth-keeping struggle, reveal the same traits: those of a new kin group of committed people ordering their activities in compliance with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a guidance sought each morning in group Bible

reading and prayer. This pattern of group-integrating spirituality in the cause of earth healing derives in part from my own pietistic Protestant background. But there is no denying the profound impact of the traditional earthbound piety of AZTREC's chiefs and mediums on our entire movement. Their spirit-driven commitment to earth-care calls for communion of all earthkeepers with each other, with their own communities and with the entire earth community. Their wisdom reaches back to past generations, consolidating and giving permanence to our earth-keeping struggle. Their openness, in turn, to learn from the wisdom preached by their AIC counterparts illustrates the religious flexibility of the emergent kin group of green activists, despite the conservative influence of the ancestors.

Second, the interdependence between the living and living dead is highlighted in communications with the guardian ancestors in beer libation ceremonies at all of AZTREC's *mafukidzanyika* tree-planting ceremonies, and in spirit mediums' guardianship of new woodlots. To the casual observer this may appear to be a superficial throwback to traditional rain rituals. The deeper meaning of this form of communion, however, is that it counteracts individualistic exploitation of the land. Discussions with the ancestors about the condition of the environment strengthen the earthkeepers' awareness that their healing struggle benefits the entire community: the ancestors, because improvement of their dwelling place enhances their quality of being and care for the living; the living, because better farming conditions counteract poverty, suffering and insecurity; and the unborn generations because their lives, hopes and future hinge on a healthy creation. Ritual interaction with the wisdom and roots of the past at tree-planting ceremonies shows recognition of the mystical powers undergirding the green struggle and willingness to engage in corporate action for the common good rather than for individual gain.

This reverence for the ancient African keepers of the land at ceremonies where natural resources are being renewed should convey a message of hope to the global fellowship of earthkeepers. For it suggests that the brazen, exploitive excesses found in all human cultures – particularly in 'progressive' economism, self-seeking individualism and consumerism – can be replaced by altruistic earth concerns. What is needed is to rechannel Western performance-oriented attitudes by considering the cosmic history of the earth; recognising the relatively

late appearance of human beings on planet Earth; and respecting all the ancestors of humankind who appeal to their fellow pilgrims as stewards of the earth. Thus a new sense of cosmic community which seeks to balance human use of creation with service to it is indeed possible.

Third, the ritualisation of earth-care in AZTREC's *mafukidzanyika* ceremonies promotes continuity in tree planting and attitudes of determination and commitment in the tree-planting community. To the extent that appeasement of the earth's guardian ancestors is focal in earth repair, the *personal interaction* between earthkeepers, living and dead, and the entire earth community is enhanced. Ritualisation, moreover, elevates the driving force of earth-care to a level beyond the often controversial motives of leading environmentalists. Once the motivation for action is perceived as mystical or divine in origin, hence beyond dispute, and once the earthkeepers' acceptance of such motivation is consolidated by regular ritual activity, the perpetuation of earth-care is safeguarded irrespective of ecological setbacks and disappointments. Ritualisation of earth healing, whatever the religion practised, promotes holistic perceptions of the human community as an integral part of creation. This kind of respect and love for the earth counteracts the mindless exploitation and destruction of its beauty and resources.

Fourth, ancestral involvement in the protection of holy groves and *dunhu* home territories stimulates compliance with customary ecological codes and the redefinition of ethics in accordance with changing environmental conditions. In spirit medium vaZarira's address to the Negovano senior ancestors (supra, pp 131–134), for instance, one finds explicit recognition of ancestral authority over all land issues, symbolised by the 'ruling staff' dating back to ancient times. It is at the ancestors' behest that new conservationist measures are undertaken: cultivation of seedlings in nurseries, planting of trees in woodlots, protection of riverbanks, springs, game species and so forth. Ancestral bondeness to the earth qualifies the personal ties of the earthkeepers with the soil, rivers, trees, birds and animals. Repeated ritual recognition of the relationship inspires the earthkeepers' code of conduct – a code not neatly defined in individual contemplation, but born from the healing activities of sweating bodies and dancing feet. According to this code, moreover, wanton earth destruction – heedless bush clearing, felling ancestrally protected trees, hunting protected species of game – or refusal to share responsibility for the earth is sinful, an intolerable

'land wizardry' (*uroyi hwenyika*) which disrespects the interwovenness of all creaturely life.

There are actually three distinguishable dimensions of ancestor-human interaction which mould and inform the emergent code of environmental ethics. At the grassroots level where tree planting takes place the ancestors of a specific *marambatemwa* or ward require clearly specified remedial action for local ecological problems. Flouting or transgressing these ancestral directives to reclaim gullies, reforest denuded areas, and not fell trees in certain areas constitutes the evil of 'land wizardry'.

Ethical development also occurs when a body of tribal ancestors are concerned about broader environmental issues, such as seasonal changes, population pressure on the land, politics and land distribution, and the expansion or funding of AZTREC. In the body of earthkeepers such concern is apparent when the chiefs and mediums representing the senior ancestors travel to Matonjeni to confer with Mwari, or when they meet at ZIRRCO headquarters for executive meetings. At this level pantribal elements still operate within a relatively homogeneous cultural framework. Here environmental transgression is broadly defined as the failure of senior government officials to publicly recognise the role of the ancestors in winning back the lost lands, inequitable land ownership by the powerful, and resettlement schemes which fail to relieve population pressure in the communal lands.

The third dimension is more diffuse and multicultural. It is reflected in an awareness that the collectivity which represents our kin group of Shona earthkeepers shares a common heritage with *all* people all over the world, that in the final analysis we are all linked through many generations of ancestors with the first hunters and gatherers of the human family. McDaniel (1995:205), with reference to Jungian psychology, describes such collective awareness of a common past as follows: 'We carry within us memories not only of our people but also of *all* people; and not only of *all* people, but of *all* creatures. In the house of the collective unconscious there are many mansions.' In AZTREC memories from the collective unconscious surface noticeably in the recognition of environmental obligations stretching beyond our immediate surroundings, in growing interest in global environmental issues, in willingness to collaborate with ecologists from abroad who periodically assist our

movement, and in enthusiasm for concrete forms of collaboration with fellow earthkeepers throughout the African continent by means of an envisaged African Earthkeepers' Union. (Plans and prospects for an extended ecological movement in Africa will be discussed in volume 2.)

Incomplete and undocumented as the various dimensions of ancestor-related ethics still are, the significant point is that contextualised codes for earth-care evolve from praxis. Inspiration for and understanding of the task in hand grow in the doing and celebration of earth healing. Herein lies Africa's religio-ecological challenge to Western cultures. The production of 'ecologically correct' literature which does not translate into action is no safeguard against environmental apathy or destruction.

6.2.2.2 *Ancestors and earth community*

The ancestors constantly remind their living descendants that human society is bonded to the cosmos, to the entire earth community. Venerating the ancestors therefore implies communing with and respecting all living and even inanimate creatures. Human pragmatism has often superseded the deeper sentiments in Africa's ancestral rituals. Yet there is a way in which intuition and wisdom have always prevailed, namely in the notion that *ancestor veneration is synonymous with earth-care*. The one presupposes the other. AZTREC's ability, through its chiefs and mediums, to tease out this truth from Africa's 'collective unconscious' and to give it ritual prominence and active realisation largely explain the traditionalist earthkeepers' success in mobilising their people for the green struggle.

Spirit medium vaZarira poignantly expressed this truth when she opened AZTREC's tree-planting ceremony in Chief Negovano's area with a call for ritual union with the ancestors ('placing our spirits with those of our ancestors') as a condition for earth-care. Part of this call was the discerning acknowledgement that 'the ancestors are the land, the ancestors are the water, the ancestors are the sadza (stiff porridge) we eat, and the ancestors are the clothes we wear' (supra, p 131). These words portray the ancestors as kin, both of the human family and of the cosmic community. One is part of the other. Because of this intimate identification, healing the land, purifying the water and protecting creatures are ways of venerating the ancestors, of worshipping the creator God.

AZTREC's *mafukidzanyika* ceremonies ritually affirm the inseparable

wholeness of creation: the interface between Creator, humans, other creatures and the expanse of land and waters. When vaZarira, for instance, introduces a tree-planting event in Chief Nhema's territory, her address to the guardian ancestor, Nhema, first of all links the ancestor with the Creator, Zhame, by referring to the *muonde* (fig tree) where Nhema used to find nourishment prior to his visits to the shrines at Matonjeni. This attests dependence on the sustaining and life-giving Creator. Then the earlier theme of identification between ancestor and earth community is elaborated. 'I want to call upon vaNhema today,' the medium says, 'Whether he is in the cave, up in this tree here, or in the pool of water over there, we ask him to come and witness what his children are doing in his territory ... if you are in the pool, vaNhema, lift up your head and observe what your people are doing in your area' (supra, p 133). Later, as the ritual proceeded, vaZarira led the tree planters in addressing the seedlings as kin. In submitting the seedlings to the soil the spirit medium hands over to Nhema, the ancestor, what he requires. In the ritual context Nhema is the soil, personified.

Thus the *mafukidzanyika* ritual re-establishes the earth community, brings its wholeness full circle, and enlists all its key players. The Creator, whether approached directly or indirectly, is expected to provide sustenance. The guardian ancestors are required to mediate between Creator and living human beings. As part of the cosmos – land, water, trees and all creatures – they are asked to observe and respond to the earth-healing activity benefiting them. Their bondedness to the cosmos anthropomorphises it, thus permitting interaction and meaningful communication. As part of the pool, or as water itself, ancestor Nhema is required to lift his head in recognition of the earthkeepers gathered nearby. The healing action of the human earthkeepers, in turn, is inspired by the Creator, urged by the ancestors and ritually organised by the transformed *dunhu* home community, the extended earth-clothing family. The trees – recognised as kin and addressed when planted – are expected, for their part, to consolidate the healing activity over time by enriching the soil with nutrients, binding it against erosion with their roots, and providing protective shade and nourishing fruit for resting ancestors, living human beings, animals and birds.

The identification of guardian ancestors with all creation remains focal in the *mafukidzanyika* re-enactment of the cosmic cycle. This is the crucial dimension which triggers and gives meaning to tradition-oriented

earth-care. Personifying the earth – water, land, birds, all creatures acquiring an anthropomorphic character – introduces an indisputable element of human respect and responsibility for the earth community as kin. This contrasts with secular Western cosmologies, which tend to reduce the environment and its resources to soulless, exploitable commodities. In its ritual ‘humanisation of nature’ AZTREC therefore appeals to the conscience of a consumer society, locally and abroad, to heed the sanctity of all creation, the ‘personhood’ of all vegetation, birds and animals, so that whatever harvesting, cropping or mining takes place will be done with the respect, gratitude and humility expected in any interhuman or human-divine encounter.

How has this particular religious value of humans recognising and maintaining kinship with nonlingual members of the earth community influenced my own views and attitudes? From observation of numerous traditional rituals among the Shona I have long been aware of a symbolic language which identifies the symbol with what it represents. During a beer libation, for instance, the beer pot which symbolises ancestral presence may be addressed as if it is that ancestor. Outside the ritual context the same beer pot is handled just like any other, a mere earthen vessel, expendable if necessary. In a time of tribulation when family members anticipate some form of ancestral revelation, the appearance of a bateleur eagle – the messenger of the spirit world par excellence – can be sufficient to induce those present to hail the ancestor by name. In those fleeting moments when the observers read the ancestral message in the flight path and wing flap of the *chapungu*, the bird and their ancestor are one. At other times a bateleur may pass overhead and the same people will hardly notice it. Likewise, spotting a lion out in the bush may in one instance cause the observer to hail the presence of a *mhondoro* (literally ‘lion spirit’, that is senior ancestor) and in another not be assigned ancestral significance at all.

AZTREC’s earthkeepers have somehow managed to reinterpret Shona symbolic language in their relationships with trees. Now not only the specific ancestor who mystically sanctioned a new village settlement is identified with the *mubvumira* (ancestral approval) tree (supra, p 198), but a host of living tree planters, individually identifying with the trees as their kin whose names they adopt. *Chimurenga* imagery and constant preoccupation with trees, moreover, tend to make the occasional ritual identification between symbol and what it represents – in this

instance tree and tree planter – more pervasive and permanent. Tree planters become the trees they are related to! They deliberately develop those character traits that they see symbolised in the tree of their choice. In the late Leonard Gono's case he sacrificed himself as *mabvamaropa* ('that which produces blood') for the earth cause. He became *Mabvamaropa*, not only in the ritual context of tree planting but in all of the life he lived. While he fought the killer disease that eventually claimed his life, his resilience matched that of tough kiasat wood. In his old age my adoptive father, Chief Murinye, is increasingly becoming *Muuyu*, the baobab tree, ancient and imperturbable patron of the traditionalist tree planters, more unwavering than when I knew him as a young man, adamant that nobody in his chieftom will ring the bark of a *muuyu* and thereby bring it down. And those chiefs and headmen who call themselves *Murwiti* (black ebony) have noticeably hardened and are applying stricter measures to combat random deforestation. They are polished black iron, black ebony, in their relentless campaign against unscrupulous tree fellers.

To me it has been a novel experience to be called and recognised as *Muchakata*, the cork tree. This *chimurenga* name is often used in jest, as are those of fellow tree planters. Leonard, for instance, reminded me once with a wicked grin that there is also a downside to being called *muchakata*. 'Why?' I asked. 'Because the *muchakata* spreads a pretty nasty smell at the time of year when it sheds its fruit,' he said. This caused great hilarity in the group. Lightness and humour served to strengthen our kinship ties with tree brothers and sisters. I found myself much more alert to the presence of fellow *muchakata* as I travelled up and down the Masvingo-Harare road on ZIRRCO errands. I noticed, and then became attached to, some dense copses of cork trees in whose shade a few kudu bulls often rested. During the drought in the early nineties I felt the pain of my elders as their roots reached for the receding water table in the sandy soil just north of Masvingo. In vain. Slowly they withered and died. They do not have a strong taproot that reaches deep into the soil to keep providing them with moisture when the rains stay away. As a nomad with shallow roots because of endless travel I, too, am vulnerable, forever at risk on unsafe roads. But I also share with fellow *muchakata* the urge to protect and sustain the life of our earth community. When I look at the dense dark green foliage of a healthy *muchakata* I feel encouraged not to quit but to keep

facing and help shoulder the problems of our earthkeeping struggle. *I am Muchakata!* I cast some of the shade where earthkeepers nowadays work and rest. In their talk and laughter and in the cooling wind I feel the numinous, the movement of Spirit where all our labour, pain and joy start. And when our first *marambatemwa* game sanctuaries take shape one day – an ecological impossibility in the most densely populated rural lands of Zimbabwe! – I hope still to cast a shadow where kudu, impala, duiker and klipspringer can rest without fear.

Sharing kinship with the earth community has also heightened my own experience of being protected and cared for. The granite kopje next to the Harare road on the outskirts of Masvingo town houses a little colony of dassies (rock rabbits), sentinels of our Shona ancestors. When I drive past them on a trip to Harare, I notice those dark, observant eyes peering knowingly at the road and the passing vehicles. Invariably I stop, watch them and address them: '*Imi varidzi vemugwagwa, mutichengete parwendo yedu!*' (You guardians of the road, protect us on our journey!) Sometimes Shona friends accompanying me are puzzled and a few have questioned my petition from a Christian point of view. I usually explain that as an adopted descendant of the famed hunter Mabwazhe, founder ancestor of the Gumbo people in Gutu, and as a childhood dassie-hunter myself, this is my way of praying to God for a safe journey, a prayer which both Mabwazhe and Mwari will understand. To me the watchful eye of the dassie is God's way of alerting me to the dangers of a road which carries far too many drunken and unlicensed drivers. This is certainly not a magic formula for road safety. There is no absolute safety anywhere in this world. Nevertheless, every time I return from Harare and drive past my dassie family in their granite home, I speak to them, thanking God for a safe journey despite the risks I take through driver's fatigue.

Care in the earth community is reciprocal. I try to protect my dassie kin by seeking the support of the traffic and regular police, who often set up their roadblocks right next to the kopje. Hungry townspeople can easily snare out the entire dassie colony. Establishing a tradition of '*mbira* (dassie) road guardianship' among the users and caretakers of the highway is one way of attempting to secure the future of these little brothers and sisters.

And the *chapungu*? To me the bateleur, with its exquisitely trimmed

black and white feathers, slightly flared wingtips and serene, sure flight, has always been master of the skies. Impatient to settle on a glide path which follows the up-draft of air currents, the *chapungu's* wing flap is short, swift and powerful; the whistling sound can be heard from a distance. But once those pinions are stretched, there is quiet and calm as the eagle wings its way upward and sideways into the skies with graceful ease. If I could fly I would want to fly like *chapungu*. Fascination and fantasy of flight have awakened new respect and awareness of Mwari, here revealed as *Wokumusoro* (the One above) of the Shona through the centuries. It touches my being when I stop my car by the roadside somewhere in the lowveld of Zimbabwe to rid my mind of overload and I watch *chapungu* gliding circles of greeting above me. I watch wingflap and flightpath. If air turbulence causes *chapungu* to make nervous corrections to his flight, I feel warned against the complacency wrought by millions of kilometres of air flight and overland travel. I feel warned from Beyond against taking life for granted. And I proceed with care. But those wings, mastering all air currents, also remind me of the goodness and freedom of liberated life which, despite the poverty and suffering that always surround us, calls for celebration. So my feathered brother writes the good news with wingtips against blue skies – the good news of Christ's salvation of all creation.

My relations with *muchakata*, dassie and bateleur illustrate that they do not have the same ancestral connotations for me as for many of my fellow earthkeepers. Coming from a Protestant Christian background, I have contextualised the meaning of Shona symbolism and my own rootedness in the earth community in a way which makes sense to me as a Euro-African among African earthkeepers. What may strike Western readers as ecological sentimentality or romanticism is to me an existential, instinctive natural theology in the Franciscan rather than the Calvinist tradition. It is fascinating to probe the New Testament meaning of 'in Christ all things hold together' (Col 1:17) through the grid of Shona culture and religion. It is not an easy passage in any framework, for Christ's fulfilment of culture, as I understand it, involves a transformation which keeps qualifying the individual's relations with fellow human beings and with the earth community. Shona religion offers an imaginative way of encountering Christ the Earthkeeper through kinship with, in my case, *muchakata*, *mbira* and *chapungu*. It has given me a glimpse of how many of my Shona fellow earthkeepers perceive Christ's

presence holistically. However, the insight gained from that experience entails a twofold challenge: first, to attempt to translate Christ's lordship over all creation into Shona ecological praxis as a form of healing service to the earth community, as opposed to human domination based on a misconception of humanity as the 'crown of creation'; and second, from within such service to rethink the environmental implications of Christ's salvation for mission. Complex as this may be, it derives not only from scriptural revelation but also from the realisation that God has not left him/herself without witnesses in creation and in the world's religions (Rm 1; Ac 14).

This account of my own experience is not meant to propagate a specific line of religio-ecological action in the global village. I wish through tangible illustrations to make the point that the indigenous religions of this world, and those of Africa in particular, have a potential for reconnecting human society with earth community. Exposure to indigenous religions could enable those of us living in urban consumer societies to rediscover the religious values of our own ancient forebears. Reaching out for their presence could help us to overcome the addictive hold of indoor city life as we redefine our own basic notions of community, develop new kinship ties with mother earth and find the commitment to earth-care which accords with our own convictions and circumstances.

6.2.3 Communion with the Creator

Of all AZTREC's rituals, the communion of its leaders with Mwari the Creator at the cult shrines in the Matopo hills is probably the most profound affirmation of the close bond between Creator, human society and earth community. We have noted that the oracular messages pronounced at the cult caves do not spell out a green vision or a specific ecological strategy for Africa. Nevertheless, in its intensity and reverence for Mwari, the ritual activity expresses environmental commitment, awareness of divine involvement in the life cycle of creation, and the need for ongoing divine-human encounter to spark, empower and legitimate the struggle.

AZTREC's annual pilgrimage to the cult shrines places the earthkeeping quest in both a historical liberationist and a national context. Communion with Mwari as an extension of *chimurenga* evokes memories of resistance in various periods of oppression: first the Ndebele,

then the white invaders. In response to these oppressive forces, Mwari emerged as a god of national crisis who demanded freedom and justice for his/her people throughout Shona territory, who motivated the hero ancestors (Chaminuka, Kaguvi, Nehanda and others) to take up this cause. In line with this tradition, Mwari urged the wartime leaders of ZANLA and ZIPRA, Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo, to unite their cadres against the common enemy and, after Independence, to unite their parties in governing the country. AZTREC earthkeepers feel called by this liberationist legacy to engage the common enemy of earth destruction and to unite all healing agencies, of whatever religious persuasion, in the war of the trees under the spirit guidance of Mwari, the ancestral war council (*dare rechimurenga*) and its spirit mediums.

This combination of national, political, religious and ecological motives makes AZTREC's annual pilgrimage to the Matonjeni shrines meaningful. An essentially conservative African deity, Mwari has all along insisted on the preservation of indigenous beliefs, customs and culture in the face of acculturation and modernising change. Communing with him/her therefore reinforces a sense of pride in Zimbabwean nationhood and in healing service rendered to Mwari's stricken earth, in a manner not always experienced in the hurly-burly of daily life back home. To those who have suffered serfdom and obscurity under the colonial regime, participation in the still semi-secret oracular rituals at Matonjeni – the ultimate bulwark against foreign intrusion and a source of genuine Africanness which has virtually escaped Western contamination – is a spiritually rejuvenating experience of retrieving wholeness in the Creator's presence. Human wholeness in this instance assumes divine recognition of the earthkeepers' dignity, the legitimacy of their quest for social and material wellbeing, and the restoration of life-giving relations between humans and the earth community.

Apart from the emotional satisfaction and inspiration derived from oracular revelations at the cult shrines, AZTREC's Matonjeni visits also illustrate the adaptability of African religion to changing circumstances. Instead of stagnating and declining in the face of social change and aggressive Christian expansion, indigenous religion has gone through a historical process of periodic revival and reinterpretation, resulting in the emergence of a traditional *theologia africana*. Mention was made of conceptual mutations as Mwari was understood to respond and urge resistance to various forms of oppression. There can be little doubt that

oracular involvement in both *chimurenga* periods – the 1896 rebellions and the bush war preceding Independence – engendered and strengthened the image of Mwari as a deity of justice and liberation. AZTREC stands in this tradition through its awareness of national crisis, in this instance not socio-political but environmental, and through its regular visitations, which offer a new angle on the oracle's involvement in a regionally widespread dilemma. In religio-historical perspective AZTREC's contribution lies in interpreting the Creator as an immediate presence, an immanent personal power in creation; perhaps more readily available and sensitive to the needs of peasant society than the God conveyed by the *vanyai* who petitioned for rain in the past.

Not that this contribution implies radical conceptual change. Early descriptions of Mwari (for example W J van der Merwe, *The Shona idea of God*) did not portray the same remote *deus otiosus* character ascribed to some African divinities. As sky-God (*Wokumusoro*, 'the One above') Mwari may in some respects have been perceived as a distant, transcendental Supreme Being. But he/she was also *Watangakugara* ('the one who sat/existed first'), Runji (the 'needle' who 'threaded' the earth with lightning), and Dzivaguru ('great pool', symbol of fertility). The attributes associated with these praise names are those of an anthropomorphic, feminine and immanent being, a Creator bound to and living in creation; a closeness which may also include panentheistic notions of divine power permeating the living and inanimate phenomena of nature. It is possible that both the transcendence of Mwari as *Wokumusoro* and his/her presence in the 'great pool', *Dzivaguru*, are respectively represented symbolically in the Zimbabwean soapstone bird and the crocodile on the stylus below it, a centuries-old relic found at the Great Zimbabwe ruins.¹

Traditionally the conception of Mwari's remoteness as a transcendent being was probably not so much spatial; it was rather a case of the deity being crowded out of people's daily lives because of their overriding ritual preoccupation with the ancestors. Crisis management during periods of national upheaval tended to refocus on the immediacy and active presence of the deity. AZTREC's activities add yet another dimension to this pattern of periodically intensified contact between the oracle and its widely dispersed constituency, and the concomitant resurgence of communal awareness of, and faith in, the Supreme Being's direct involvement in this existence. AZTREC's distinctive contributions

to the reinterpretation of Mwari the Creator's involvement in creation are the following:

First, the *mafukidzanyika* tree-planting ceremonies as ritual improvisations of the *mukwerere* rain rituals assign the Creator a prominent role. Instead of merely requesting the apical ancestors of the region to forward a plea for rain to Mwari at Matonjeni, as in the traditional *mukwerere*, Mwari's immediacy and presence in the local tree-planting context are emphasised. The old route of appealing to the oracular deity via an entire hierarchy of ancestors and through visitations to distant shrines is still acknowledged and upheld. But, as we have noticed in the ritual addresses of spirit medium vaZarira and fellow tribal elders, Mwari is assumed to have drawn close as an insider to his/her own creation. Talking about the Creator as an immediate presence and communing directly with him/her through prayer are highly innovative features. This spontaneous, direct worship possibly derives partly from Christian influence and partly from a sense of urgency in peasant society caused by droughts and other signs of environmental deterioration. At all events, the ease with which such innovation is accommodated and experienced as genuinely consistent with the ways of the forebears indicates the versatility of African religion and its ability to absorb foreign religious influences without losing its identity.

Second, AZTREC's active resistance to random tree felling invokes a responsive and retaliating deity as the source and enforcer of an emergent, if still basically traditional, ethical code for environmentalism. Mwari is not only the Great Pool (*Dzivaguru*) who resists desecrating pollution and erosion-prone cultivation of riverbanks; he/she is also proclaimed to be present in trees. Consequently Mwari experiences anger and pain when trees are felled with a disrespectful, exploitive attitude which disregards the sanctity of creation. In contrast to such abuse, the earthkeepers' address of seedlings as kin during planting ceremonies reflects communal right-mindedness and acceptance of stewardship in the earth community – respect for the guardian ancestors and an imaginative form of worshipping the Creator. Here the immanence of God in creation emerges from a theologising process triggered by action rather than abstract reflection. The liberator God who heeds the suffering of oppressed and deprived people, as *chimurenga* history bears out, now incarnates him/herself in the ecologically stricken land in agony at the abuse of trees, grasses, animals, birds and the soil itself, and demands

justice for the entire earth community. There is simply no place for divine remoteness in AZTREC's earthkeeping world where the abused kin of creation so obviously voice the outrage of a disturbed Creator.

Third, regular visits to Matonjeni by AZTREC delegations instil a new sense of the accessibility of the divinity. Chiefs and mediums in Masvingo Province who wish to make impromptu visits to the shrines, in addition to AZTREC's official annual pilgrimage, may use ZIRRCO's vehicles. Their one-and-a-half-day outings to the shrines, some 300 kilometres from Masvingo town, are very different from the journeys formerly undertaken by *vanyai* on foot over many days. The adventure and hardship encountered by elderly cult messengers on their annual journeys to and from the shrines obviously contributed to the mystique of the cult and helped establish an image of a creator high-God too distant for regular communion with individual tribespeople.

There are indications that the cult has lost some of its exclusiveness and secrecy since Independence. Thus AZTREC is not alone in promoting a new form of cult accessibility in peacetime. Senior politicians and official representatives of political parties visit the shrines more regularly than before. African businessmen from as far afield as Lusaka in Zambia and Johannesburg in South Africa are now known to send delegates to confer with Mwari. Ordinary people with personal requests also frequent the shrines more readily than before and bigger 'gifts' (money contributions) are required by the cult officials for oracular sessions. In some respects, therefore, the cult appears to be becoming commercialised.

Nevertheless, the traditional system of communicating with Mwari is sufficiently unspoilt for the visiting earthkeepers to experience a religious comfort zone, a sense of belonging. As the champion of African cultural and moral values and the maintenance of societal order through the agency of headmen and chiefs, Mwari speaks in an idiom understandable to chiefs and mediums. He/she is the chief of creation! To the chiefs who confront new agro-economic and ecological challenges at a time when some of their land-allocating and judicial powers have been curtailed by government, the Matonjeni oracle represents a sympathetic, politically relatively inviolable forum where they can vent their frustrations. As the God of Africa, Mwari listens and understands. He/she prompts new vision and hope through presence and supportive

affirmation of human and earth needs rather than through prescriptive revelations or guaranteed solutions. Mwari's presence remains an enigma, but at the Matonjeni shrines it is tangible, close, emanating from cave entrances and granite rocks.

The three points I have raised here may not suggest any dramatic development in the cult's history, besides perhaps enriching and adding a new dimension to the already rich and diversified image of the traditional deity. As an ecologically interested high-God and provider of rain, Mwari has always been the potential or implied guardian of creation. Now, however, he/she emerges explicitly as liberator-earthkeeper, present in and supportive of current earth-care programmes not only during oracular revelations at selected locations in the deep of African nights, but throughout the territory of AZTREC's operations and beyond.

As for my own attendance as privileged participant-observer of the Matonjeni oracle, I have always been deeply moved by the experience. The trip into the heartland of the Matopo hills – past the historic site where Cecil Rhodes and the Ndebele warriors held their indaba towards the end of the previous century, and past an endless array of towering granite rocks framed by green mountain acacias – is in itself a powerful reminder of the God of history, the biblical Creator who promises a new heaven and a new earth.

Then, in the course of an evening in the cult community, one is made aware of the unbroken communion between Creator, people of the now-time and of the distant past, and all the animate and inanimate denizens of the earth. The preparations by dim fire light in a large smoke-filled hut are simple. There is no furniture to speak of; only a low buzz of voices hiding excited expectation, subdued laughter, sharing *sadza* (stiff porridge), wild spinach and water. The sharing of a simple meal in a world warm with welcome and trust is in itself an act of worship. Waiting for midnight heightens expectation, allows quiet for fatigued contemplation in a circle of relaxed faces.

When the priest's call comes, all shoes are removed and all modern gadgets like watches, torches, bangles and tape-recorders are left in the hut as people move out, mute and in single file, to the shrine's cave entrance. There is no impressive, humanly constructed temple, no sculptured images of Mwari or the ancestors, no regalia except the dark cloth worn by the priests and priestesses as a sign of respect to Mwari,

no symbols of human achievement. Communion requires a bare, unpretentious gathering of Mwari's people in his/her presence. As you sit down on stone or soil the moon and an expanse of stars light up the 'temple', a massive overhang of granite rock behind you; in the wetlands below choirs of crickets and frogs remind you of Paul's proclamation to the Athenians: 'God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines/temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything' (Acts 17:24–25). Only here the same truth about God the Creator is enacted with discerning wisdom in a non-Christian ritual: the God of Israel who revealed himself on Mount Sinai did not leave himself without witness in the Matopo hills and on other holy mountains in Africa.

The female voice of Mwari from the cave depths addresses you in an ancient Rozvi dialect, conjuring up the passage of ages and bygone African dynasties. Responses to Mwari's voice express utter respect, piety and dependence. Here, as in Romans 1:20, there is the realisation that 'since the creation of the world his (Mwari's) invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made'. The rock formations from which the voice comes testify to divine power and sovereignty. In addition Mwari speaks not only about the human order, politics and progress but also about rain and crops, the state of the land, its trees animals and all its denizens. Quality of being, justice and peace – Mwari's revelations infer – the entire life cycle of creation is at stake. When the wholeness of the earth community is disturbed by the hubris and avarice of human beings, all of life is threatened. Mwari's judgement of such human failure finds expression in severe drought or individual misfortune, the primary aim of which is not to make human beings suffer indefinitely but to restore, through human endeavour, the broken life cycle of the earth community.

Back in the priest's hut after the encounter with Mwari in the starlit 'temple', another form of human communion unfolds. Rejoicing and abandon replace the seriousness and weightiness of worship as seven drummers draw the returning delegation into traditional dance. Drumbeat and stamping feet honour the ancestors and celebrate the restoration of creation's wholeness. Swaying bodies and glazed eyes also tell a story of abandoning the hurts and illusions of life ... until fatigue takes

over and the dawn sky reddens above inert bodies in the priest's courtyard.

Animated discussions about future earthkeeping activities mark the AZTREC delegates' return trip. To me this is a clear indication that whenever there is genuine renewal of the bond between God and the people of this earth – in whatever religious context – the chances are that there will be a reappraisal of the sanctity of creation and, with it, new patterns of commitment to earth-care. This is the inspiring yet unassuming message of Matonjeni to the earthkeepers of a religiously pluriform global village: seek ye first the kingdom of God, in communion with the Creator of all the world, with each other and with all the living or voiceless denizens of creation, if there is to be abundance of life, justice and peace on earth!

6.3 Mission impossible?

ZIRRCO's earthkeeping endeavour qualifies as 'mission' in a twofold sense.

First, the entire movement is characterised by an overriding preoccupation with the implementation of environmental reform. In this sense the war of the trees is the operational method of an ecological mission, whose achievements can be measured in accordance with secular ecological criteria.

In the second place, the mystical motivation and drive behind ecological endeavour qualify the entire process as religious mission, the basic tenets of which can best be assessed in terms of African traditionalist or Christian theological criteria.

6.3.1 Traditionalist mission

Although the word 'mission' was not used in this volume to characterise AZTREC's endeavour – largely because of its loaded and fairly exclusive Christian connotations – it is appropriate to speak of an 'African traditionalist mission'. African religion admittedly lacks the dimension of aggressive proselytising, conversion and recruitment which characterises Christian mission. Yet AZTREC's green warfare resembles Christian mission because, in contrast to normal ATR practice, Mwari is believed to send traditionalists into the world for a purpose wider than the inter-

ests of their own clan or tribe. They, too, measure the relative success or failure of their mission of ecological stewardship in direct relation to the mystical source of their endeavour. Hence the repeated appeal to the ancestral guardians of the land to observe, inspire and recognise the tree-planting work of their living descendants and AZTREC's annual deliberations on the progress and problems of the green struggle at Mwari's Matopo shrines.

AZTREC's use of the term 'mission' has several implications.

First, the experience of a revitalised life cycle between God, humans and cosmos along traditional cosmological lines stimulates a recognisable and acceptable religious revival which heightens meaning and quality of life. To many traditionalist peasants who have had only limited opportunities to rise above relative rural obscurity, involvement in a ritually sanctioned and much publicised enterprise of convincing regional and national significance, is no mean achievement.

Second, the idea of being commissioned by Mwari to engage in environmental mission strengthens the conviction that the process of environmental degradation can be arrested, or even reversed. Such conviction revives the hope in agrarian circles that a viable subsistence economy is still feasible.

Third, religious inspiration contributes to ecological commitment and responsibility in caring for existing projects. I have indicated that mystical directives to restore the land correlate directly with increased involvement in tree-planting ceremonies and give clout to committees responsible for the all-important care of young trees in new woodlots. It is my conviction, even though I do not yet have statistical data to prove this point, that ancestrally driven care and protection of woodlots produces an above average survival rate of trees planted compared with similar grassroots ventures in Africa. The observable success achieved in the field, despite numerous setbacks, conveys the message that the mission is difficult yet possible!

Fourth, the idea of mission enhances sustained commitment. Mystical persuasion keeps alive the realisation that the environmental crisis is a lasting condition, a kind of terminal illness in Africa and the rest of the world. Consequently the struggle to heal the earth, at the behest of Mwari and the ancestors, will continue indefinitely. Apparently there

can be no final battle which settles the score once and for all, as happened at Independence with the ending of white colonial rule and the introduction of a new political dispensation. Success in environmental healing can be achieved and must be achieved. Mission is possible, in that patches of land and earth community can be restored and kept in harmonious balance. But the paradox remains. Success is relative, subject to the exploitive and predatory nature of human beings, in the same way that human health remains subject to destructive and debilitating forces in this existence. At no point is healing final and conclusive. Environmental mission therefore remains, in a sense, incomplete, impossible! In this dialectic between the possible and the impossible the earthkeeper may be tempted into cynicism or fatalism, to abandon a struggle in which victory remains forever unattainable, hence the significance of a mandating and inspirational agency which is considered to understand the earth and the human condition from within, yet also operates from a detached position beyond it. Regular ritual communication and renewal of mandate with this source of inspiration contribute to understanding of the earthkeeping task in hand and to the earthkeepers' perseverance in the face of heavy odds.

The deity at Matonjeni has in some ways always been a commissioning power, in other words a God of mission. Whether Mwari's people were petitioning for favourable agricultural conditions and reliable seasons, for liberation from oppression or for political change and social justice (*supra*, p 29f), they always had to comply with oracular directives in order to attain the desired end. Allied as it is with an emergent Christian ministry in eco-mission, AZTREC contributes to a purposeful extension and elaboration of traditional mission in the cult. Aimed at sustained environmental repair and traditionally perceived justice in the distribution and management of the land, this mission – as interpreted and practised by AZTREC – is likely to become as integral a feature of the Mwari cult as the traditional procurement of favourable rainy seasons.

6.3.2 Christian mission

A vexing problem arises when one tries to assess the nature of ZIRRCO's environmental mission in Christian terms. Is it at all possible for Christians to share a mission of earth-care as closely as the AAEC churches and AZTREC traditionalists are doing, and still retain the true spirit and essence of New Testament missionary outreach? Does

the Christian/non-Christian ecumenism evinced, for instance, in intensive multifaith interaction and dialogue during tree-planting ceremonies and Matonjeni visits – for all the mutual respect for divergent religious identities – necessarily jeopardise the exclusiveness and inherent radicalness of Christian witness? Is it possible to obey Christ's classic commission to his disciples in Matthew 28:19 to go forth, proclaim the good news of salvation and baptise converts in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in a context where the cosmic implications of salvation seem to obscure the call for personal redemption? In other words, does eco-mission shared between Christian and non-Christian partners, as implemented by ZIRRCON, unavoidably result in syncretist compromise at the expense of a Christ-centred focus on conversion, hence an enterprise to be repudiated theologically as 'mission impossible'?

These are questions which I, as a missiologist and the initiator of our earthkeeping movement, have grappled with and continue to ponder. I have often wondered whether my close identification with chiefs and mediums, my support for their visits to Matonjeni and participation in the oracular sessions of the cult (see chapter 4), have at all confused my AIC colleagues and fellow Christians of other denominations, or have hindered rather than furthered Christian witness. There were the times when I wondered whether my inquisitiveness as a researcher had led me deeper into African traditional religion than the missionary in me was strictly prepared for. Addressing the ancient Mwari of Africa during oracular sessions, in particular, filled me with a sense of awe and reverence, but also with trepidation at betraying the Gospel message in the eyes of people inclined towards such an interpretation of my religiously inclusive behaviour.

Be that as it may, and despite my experience during Matonjeni visits of walking a knife-edge between two religious worlds, the challenge of Christian mission, of proclaiming and enacting the good news of Christ's salvific work in this world, was never absent, never obstructed, never entirely unheeded. In other words, ZIRRCON's eco-mission, with its emphasis on interreligious dialogue and joint environmental action, at no point superseded or snuffed out my very real awareness of Christian identity and witness. Christian mission, it appeared, could maintain its Christ-centred focus, its concern for both human and cosmic salvation, even while extending its energies to the field of earth-care and collaborating with non-Christian fellows in mutual respect and trust.

What, then, are the dynamics of this seemingly contradictory religious process? My attempt to answer this question does not profess to be an exhaustive treatise of the theological issues involved. But a few pertinent observations should shed some light on the nature of our Christian mission as it unfolds in the ZIRRCO context. I include them at this point for the sake of those Christian readers who may be alarmed by my positive appraisal of the earthkeeping role of traditional religion to the point of willingness to learn from African indigenous wisdom and cosmology, and for the sake of those who may only read the first volume of this study.

The soteriology of the AICs affiliated to the AAEC has evolved from a preoccupation with the healing ministry of Christ. Salvation hereafter was accepted as integral to the good news, but its manifestation in the here and now, in the form of human healing and liberation from the threatening powers of evil – wizardry in particular – became a central feature of conversion, recruitment and church growth. African prophetic healers became the icons of African Christianity, mirroring Christ the healer to their followers; they engaged full-time in exorcism and related faith-healing activities, and developed their churches as healing colonies. AIC missionary proclamation invariably makes its appeal for conversion in an endless variation of witness sermons, testifying to revelations of the Holy Spirit as manifested in the praxis and history of these churches.

Mention was made of how, during different historic phases with changing needs, this healing praxis was moulded into liberation ministries of socio-economic and political significance (*supra*, pp 36–41; 63–71). Against this background the AICs had little difficulty envisioning earthkeeping as yet another extension of Christ's, and therefore of their churches' mission. Through my own and several AAEC leaders' emphasis on texts like Colossians 1:17 ('in Christ all things hang together') the image of Christ the Earthkeeper, replacing and fulfilling the role of the ancestral guardians of the land (*varidzi venyika*), has emerged quite vividly in participant AICs. The implications for an AIC understanding of ecclesiology and the mission of the church in this world will be discussed in volume 2.

The point to be made here is that the emergence of Christ as Earthkeeper and a distinct concern for cosmic healing (that is, ecological

mission) have not detracted from the centrality of Christ the Saviour and the concomitant call for human repentance in the AIC understanding of mission. One dimension enriches and stimulates, rather than stifles or ousts, the other. If anything, the ecumenical interaction between member churches of the AAEC in their earthkeeping mission, together with their ongoing encounter with traditional religion in AZTREC, has stimulated their missionary outreach — both dialogue and witness — to their non-Christian partners. Not all 'green' bishops are prepared to attend and participate in AZTREC's tree-planting rituals. Some of them explicitly state that they do not want to jeopardise their Christian discipleship and testimony in the eyes of their own followers through such cooperation with non-Christians. There are also a few church leaders who, on the same grounds, have resisted the use of tree names as an indication of their involvement in the green struggle. This diversity of views in the Christian camp receives due recognition and respect. Nobody is coerced into ecological partnership with non-Christians.

The majority of AAEC leaders and their followers, however, attend AZTREC ceremonies and are satisfied that united action in the war of the trees in no way exacts a price of religious compromise or syncretist acquiescence. They sit among traditionalist elders, even discuss ancestral directives as transmitted by the spirit mediums, contribute to discussions on the planning of AZTREC projects, and help with the actual planting of trees in the course of day-long *mafukidzanyika* ceremonies. They only withdraw temporarily when the ancestors are being addressed and refrain from drinking sacrificial beer as witness to their Christian allegiance. In this way they feel they are sharing environmental mission and maintaining a respectful Christian presence among their non-Christian fellow fighters. This presence does not intrude offensively on the traditional world of veneration and worship. From my observation of numerous AZTREC ceremonies I am satisfied that the chiefs and mediums on the whole experience this form of religious dissociation by the AICs, not as judgement or personal rejection, but as genuine and acceptable religious differentiation. Consequently a mood of sharing and openness to ongoing dialogue prevails.

The interreligious context is equally relaxed when AZTREC representatives attend and participate in the *maporesanyika* tree-planting eucharists of the AAEC. There is a marked difference, however, in that the Zionist, Apostolic and other bishops leading the service preceding

holy communion take the opportunity to engage in what could be called missionary proclamation. The good news propagated concerns the healing of humans and of the barren earth. Repentance in Christ is requested for both individual soul and cosmic salvation and appeals are made to Christian and non-Christians alike. The ceremony, moreover, blends human and cosmic healing in symbolic activity. After taking the sacrament the celebrants extend Christ's life-giving communion to the earth by placing seedlings in the soil, and soon afterwards partake of Mwari's healing powers through the hands and prayers of faith healers interceding on behalf of the earthkeepers themselves. Some of the chiefs and other AZTREC members who are active or lapsed church members participate in either holy communion or faith-healing ceremonies, or both.

The missionary witness and outreach of the AAEC's tree-planting eucharist qualify and augment the emergent trend of interreligious dialogue. The same chiefs and mediums who commune with the African deity at Matonjeni form part of the audience at AAEC eucharistic celebrations and listen, together with Christian earthkeepers, to Christ-centred gospel preaching. The *maporesanyika* context thus affords Christian earthkeepers an opportunity of witnessing to the uniqueness of Christ's saviourhood, to the exclusive claim that there is no other name by which salvation can be obtained, without adopting an intrusive or offensive stance which could alienate their traditionalist partners. Having helped to set this trend in our tree-planting eucharists, I frequently use the opportunity to convey my convictions about an eco-ministry inspired by Christ and the Holy Spirit in an attempt to establish a truthful dialectic between Christian message and African religion. Thus we have an interface between learning from the ecological religious wisdom of Africa and addressing it from within a contextualised mode of African Christianity – both respectful dialogue and missioning witness. The interreligious encounter leaves scope for the integrity and self-respect of representatives of both religions in the war of the trees and establishes the kind of rapport which allows me to identify with the Mwari cultists at the Matopo shrines without undue risk of being misunderstood by ZIRRCO's Christian constituency.

ZIRRCO's mission is characterised not only by harmonious and mutually respectful interaction. Periodic conflicts contribute to an ecumenically uneven and at times unpredictable process. During joint executive

and conference meetings clashes between AZTREC and AAEC delegates do sometimes occur. Imagine, for instance, our 1994 conference on proposals for changing traditional holy groves (*marambatemwa*) into modern game sanctuaries. The meetings were attended by some 50 chiefs, mediums and headmen sitting in one wing of a hall and the same number of AIC bishops and prophets in the other. When the subject of game fencing holy mountains came up some of the spirit mediums became agitated, and fell into spells of spirit possession and disorderly behaviour as the ancestors started 'coming out' through their hosts to protest against the suggested measures in no uncertain terms. The ancestors objected on the grounds that the proposed fencing would constitute setting up a disrespectful barrier between their mountain dwellings (that is, graves) and their living kin in the villages at the foot of these mountains. In the ensuing commotion the AIC prophets in their turn became excited at what they considered to be the disruptive presence of demons. So they started speaking in tongues to demonstrate the presence of the Holy Spirit and broke into exorcistic songs to subdue and expel the demons in the name and power of the Spirit. Thus a virtual battle of spirits disrupted conference proceedings and brought our afternoon session to a premature close.

Spontaneous debate among individuals and groups of delegates from both constituencies carried on until late that night. Not all of the contentious issues were resolved and they may again cause emotional flare-ups in the future. Yet the eventual willingness to accept opposing convictions and continue with the conference and the struggle in unison despite a lack of consensus on all issues set a trend of understanding and reconciliation which, if anything, has strengthened our movement's collective commitment to earth-care. Such incidents and the lengthy discussions they have triggered among Christians and traditionalists have actually led to lasting friendships between a number of prominent AZTREC chiefs and AAEC bishops. One of the most positive signs of growing collective resolve to overcome the complications caused by religious pluriformity is the insistence of AZTREC's leaders – the chiefs in particular – that the executives of AZTREC and the AAEC be fully integrated. In response, ZIRRCO has insisted on retaining religious segregation at the executive level in official acknowledgement of separate religious identities. Practical considerations and joint ecological programmes however, have led to an increase of combined Christian-

traditionalist executive and other meetings.

In conclusion, some comments about general revelation as a basis for a *theologia religionum* and its bearing on missionary proclamation will further clarify my own and ZIRRCO's ongoing association with the Mwari cult. It was mentioned in chapter 4 that there is some consensus among Christian-oriented AZTREC chiefs and myself that the Matonjeni cult and Shona religion generally are a manifestation of the concern of the Bible's universal Mwari for his people in Africa. Such a viewpoint, reinforced by a periodic respectful Christian presence at the shrines, can easily lead to simplistic identification of Mwari of the Bible with Mwari of Matonjeni, resulting in a syncretised belief system in the cult community and in the AZTREC constituency. This is the risk you take if you want to create scope for meaningful dialogue and joint ecological stewardship from a vantage point of respect for other people's religious convictions. Responsible dialogue from the angle of Christian discipleship should retain its witness character, even as it seeks to shake the attitude of intrusive arrogance and triumphalism which has so often obstructed rather than illuminated the message of God's grace in Christ among non-Christian faiths. The theological background to this viewpoint is as follows.

In the reformed missiological tradition J H Bavinck's theology of religions, to which I subscribe, is one of the most useful and convincing in its bold if humble openness to all forms of religion, as well as its consistently sensitive application of biblical criteria to Christian-non-Christian encounter. Religion to Bavinck is a manifestation of the biblical God's concern for all humanity and therefore a result of God's general revelation. General revelation is not the presentation of divine truth which humans discover through reason, as in natural theology. It is rather a form of personal encounter brought about by God's will, a claim by the Creator on all creation whereby he makes his presence felt in the lives of all humans: 'From age to age,' says Bavinck (in Visser 1997:118), 'He (God) addressed man and called him to repentance and conversion. The history of mankind is more than just a long account of what man has done, created and invited; its deepest mystery is the story of God's concern with man and man's response to God's revelation.'

Bavinck bases his assertions about general revelation on five clusters of biblical texts: Job 33:14-15, about the closeness of God to humans

through visions and dreams; John 1:4,5,9, about the universality of God's light which is not overcome by darkness but enlightens all people; Acts 14:15–17, where, in the midst of all the disparate ways of nations and their distortions of truth in religion, God did not leave himself without witness; Acts 17:26–27, where the search of humankind for God is qualified in the first place by his care for all people; and Romans 1:18–20, which elucidates the process of human suppression of truth despite divine revelation of God's power and divinity in creation.²

To Bavinck Romans 1:18–32 is the biblical cornerstone of an understanding of God's general revelation. In *Religieus besef en Christelijk geloof* (1949) he makes a profound theological and psychological analysis of these texts. Here he finds evidence of God's endless involvement with all human beings³, of human awareness of being touched in some measure by God's revelation, and of the human tendency to rebel and flee from God. Bavinck analyses the human response to general revelation in terms of the suppression of truth (Romans 1:18) and the substitution of God's truth with untruth (Romans 1:25), a process which does not defeat or obscure truth totally as it keeps prodding human consciousness. In Bavinck's (1966:122) own words:

Man has repressed the everlasting power and the divinity of God (Rom. 1:20). It has been exiled to his unconscious, to the crypts of his existence. That does not mean, however, that it has vanished forever. Still active, it reveals itself again and again. But it cannot become openly conscious; it appears in disguise, and it is exchanged for something different. Thus all kinds of ideas of God are formed; the human mind as the *fabrica idolorum* (Calvin) makes its own ideas of God and its own myths. This is not intentional deceit – it happens without man's knowing it. He cannot get rid of them. So he has religion; he is busy with a god; he serves a god – but he does not see that the god he serves is not God Himself. An exchange has taken place – a perilous exchange. An essential quality of God has been blurred because it did not fit in with the human pattern of life, and the image man has of God is no longer true. Divine revelation indeed lies at the root of it, but man's thoughts and aspirations cannot receive it and adapt themselves to it. In the image man has of God we can recognise the image of man himself.

Bavinck argues that although all religions should in principle be meas-

ured in terms of the suppression and substitution of God's truth noted in the first chapter of Romans, the history of religions and missionary experience suggest that they are not in all respects similar. There are 'culminating points' in some non-Christian religions which reveal a greater influence of God – a compassionate divine prevention of complete repression and substitution of the truth⁴ not found in all religions. Bavinck discerns such 'culminating points' in Islam and Buddhism. Greater familiarity with African religion might have caused him to identify a similar culmination point in the African – more specifically Shona – perception of the creator God. Be that as it may, Bavinck's analysis of Romans 1:18f is considered profound by such prominent Dutch missiologists as J van den Berg and J Verkuyl. According to Visser (1997:139), Kraemer initiated this interpretation⁵, but Bavinck worked it out in greater exegetic and psychological depth. Visser discerns similarity between the views of Calvin and Bavinck, but suggests that the latter's approach has a more substantial theological and anthropological foundation.

Barthian theology breathes a different spirit. Aimed as it is at the recognition and retention of the absolute uniqueness of the special revelation through Christ, it opposes all forms of theological relativism and natural theology. To Barth (in Visser 1997:95,143) all non-Christian religion is merely *Angelegenheit des gottlosen Menschen* (an issue of godless people). General revelation exists, he says, but the revelation of Christ illustrated that humans have been incapable of hearing God's voice through this medium. Instead of generating genuine encounter, general revelation leads to idolatry. Non-Christian religion, in this reasoning, represents only monologue. Missionary outreach, in consequence, is a matter of projecting the gospel into an unprepared, empty context. (*Das Evangelium geht ins Leere!* says Barth.)

By contrast Bavinck insists that general revelation establishes a process of dynamic dialogue between God and human beings. The concrete result of this is a 'universal religious consciousness' (Bavinck 1949:11,12; 1966:29,30), traceable in five features which all religions share to a greater or lesser extent: people's sense of cosmic relationship, acceptance of religious norms, the dialectic between activity and passivity, a thirst for redemption, and awareness of a higher power (the Great Unknown) in the background (Bavinck 1949:72–75; 1966:111–112). This positive theology of religions implies that missionary

outreach has to proceed cautiously, in recognition and sensitive understanding of the human-divine encounter and dialogue which preceded Christian presence. All Bavinck's publications on non-Christian religions⁶ attest an attitude of respectful probing of the religio-cultural world in which the gospel message is proclaimed.

Mindful of human rebellion against God and the human tendency to suppress and replace the truth of God's general revelation (Rom 1:18f), Bavinck maintains a precarious balance of sensitive understanding in dialogue with representatives of non-Christian faiths on the one hand, and proclamation of Christ's good news which calls for conversion on the other. The latter dimension is worked out in great detail around two key concepts: *elengchein* (Greek for 'rebuke', 'persuade', 'convince', found in texts like John 16:8, Mtt 18:15, 1 Tim 5:20 and Rev 3:19) and *possessio* ('to take into possession'). Missionary proclamation is an 'elenctic' process, based on the Bible as an 'elenctic' book. It always assumes and connects with the divine-human encounter which has already taken place prior to Christian proclamation, so that existing religious notions can be unmasked (the main connotation of the term *elengchein* in Bavinck's interpretation) and recognition of the flight from God in former religious activities can precede conversion in Christ.⁷

To Bavinck the term *possessio* means the religio-cultural interchange when communicating the gospel and establishing the Christian church. As the church indigenises itself in the local context it does not merely assimilate local culture in a bid for relevancy. That way lies syncretism. Instead, it 'takes possession' of the local culture, cleanses it through confrontation and transformation, and thus develops a visible manifestation of Christian discipleship, sufficiently continuous with the old culture to be recognisable yet essentially different and new.⁸ Although Bavinck does not use the terms 'inculturation' and 'contextualisation' in this connection – these concepts became current in missiological debate at a later date – he provides a solid theological foundation for their emergence and development.

As a former student of Bavinck's⁹ I have always been impressed by his penetrative insight into non-Christian religions, combined with compassionate yet humble concern for the proclamation and enactment of Christ's good news in their midst. From all I heard and saw of this

remarkable theologian it was clear to me that as a 'transparent' Christian he managed to fuse convincingly his practical missionary vocation (in Indonesia and the Netherlands) and his academic missiological reflections as they appeared in his numerous publications. His influence on my own ministry among the Shona Independent Churches and traditionalists was enduring and far-reaching.¹⁰ Building on the main tenets of Bavinck's missiology, I have of course developed some emphases of my own and contextual insight peculiar to the African situation.

I mention only a few of these. First, it is important in Christian mission to realise that the confrontational elenctic of unmasking the flight of humans from God even as they seek him applies as much to Christians as to non-Christians. The Gospel is a two-edged sword which exposes the hubris and limitations of individuals of all religious persuasions, of both message bearers and their audiences. Christian triumphalism, therefore, only has legitimacy as an expression of God's sovereignty and grace; never as a claim to the inherent merit or superiority of a particular form of human faith. Second, Bavinck's *theologia religionum* assumes the presence of the triune God of Scriptures in all religions, a theological position which enables one to qualify Christ-centred elenctics as an expression of fulfilment theology. This is not the fulfilment of relativism which accepts all religions as building blocks in a global religious 'monolith', with Christianity at the apex, the 'crown' of all religions. Instead, it refers to the revelation of Christ incarnate whose presence in this world ushers in a new dispensation, fulfilling the old order by way of sustained encounter and change. Third, I have attempted to study the historic process of Christian confrontation and transformation of African religion in the mission strategies of Shona Independent Churches,¹¹ using some of the interpretive tools provided in Bavinck's theology. In doing so I was able to uncover the inherent *theologia religionum* in the faith-healing ministry of AIC prophets, where interreligious dialogue and 'unmasking' of old precepts in the name of Christ and his Spirit are integral to a spontaneous, Bible-oriented attempt to inculturate or contextualise the church in Africa (Daneel 1974, chapters 3, 4).

Given this theological framework, how does one explain sustained collaborative involvement in the non-Christian cult at Matonjeni? Is it possible to combine the roles of participant observer (researcher), fellow

earthkeeper (partner in ecology), and messenger of the good news (Christian missionary) in a situation where mutual respect and sensitive understanding between myself and cult officials appear to preclude any form of rigorous elenctic discourse?

In all honesty, my natural inclination is to advocate the continuance of the old cult. Aware of its significance in Zimbabwe's liberation history and its sustenance of the rich religio-cultural heritage of its African constituency, it seems only fair to me that it should continue rendering a service which keeps people in touch with their religious and historic roots. Against the backdrop of colonial intrusion and Africans' resultant cultural alienation through an imported 'civilisation', it is difficult not to be supportive of the Mwari cult, even if this does not tally in all respects with my Christian convictions.

If one considers the cult theologically as a product of God's general revelation, as an institution which unwittingly suppressed and replaced the true revelation of God's power and divinity in creation, it becomes even more difficult to adopt an attitude of sheer confrontation as if one is dealing with flagrant evil. I have found it more correct to treat my priestly hosts at the shrines with due respect, to conduct my inquiry with genuine interest in their beliefs to the point of learning from them, and to inform them openly about my conviction that in talking to their Mwari during oracular sessions, I was addressing Mwari, the Creator and Saviour of all creation as I have learnt to understand him from the Bible. I have related to the cult officials as partners in our common quest for the wellbeing of the earth community and as fellow pilgrims in this world, who have already heard and absorbed on their own some aspects of Christ's special revelation through the gospel message and who therefore share with me the elenctic process of being addressed in the light of Christ's lordship, irrespective of our different beliefs and religious affiliations. In conversation it was apparent that we could accommodate our religious differences without having to judge or withdraw from each other as fellow human beings created by God.

Engaging in elenctic discourse as a privileged attendant at secret cult activities for purposes of observing and understanding the deeper soul of Africa remains complex and stressful. The chances of being misunderstood, of being seen as just another pretentious intruder who seeks to impose his 'superior' religion (against the sensitive historical back-

ground of Mwari's opposition to the white conquest of Africa) were and still are very real. Mission impossible? Humanly speaking, yes. But there is a way, however subtle or unexpected, in which Christian witness emerges, even in the most unlikely circumstances. After all, acceptance of the Christ figure renders all believers emissaries, missionaries, whether they acknowledge this or not. Thus it happened in 1967 towards the end of my first visit to Matonjeni, the morning after attending the oracle, that I felt compelled to invite the entire cult community to share in my religious life as I had shared in theirs. My invitation accorded with the African custom of reciprocity. All the key figures and their families attended.

I read from Acts 17 – Paul's discourse with the Athenians at the Areopagus – about the 'unknown God' behind their religious practice. Identifying with my audience, I did not attempt any form of preaching but discussed the revelation of Christ, who came and was present as the fulfilment of all our religious groping, both Christian and non-Christian. I remember explaining the light which we had already received through God's revelation in creation, a light which we were incapable of perceiving in full. We know yet do not know. Nevertheless, the closeness of the Mwari we had sensed all along enabled us to develop religious practices. These were like fires at night which provided us with some light and warmth for survival ... until daylight came, illuminating all the earth, in Christ's revelation and resurrection. I explained the resurrection of Jesus on similar lines to Stephen Neill's (1991:66) observation: 'not simply as the resuscitation of a single man, but as the rebirth of the entire universe; what the gospel offers (as a result) is not a new understanding of self in an unchanged world but an invitation to adventure in a world in which all things have become new'.

In explaining Christ as the fulfilment of all religion, I pointed out that he could not possibly be the *mhondoro* (senior tribal ancestor) only of the white race, comparable to Chaminuka, the hero ancestor of the Shona, as popular opinion at the cult centre seemed to assume. As Son of the Mwari of all creation and heir to all power in heaven and on earth (Mt 28:18) he was the *mhondoro* of all races on earth. He favoured no race above others, had wrought salvation for all and invited discipleship. In conclusion I did not press for conversion. But I felt relieved that after several days of intense involvement in the religious affairs of the cult, I could share something of my own religious convictions and allegiance

with people who then for the first time had trusted a white man to enter their own holy of holies.

The response to my message and prayer was warm, appreciative. Gone were the first five days of tension and uncertainty in the cult colony when it was still unclear whether Mwari would allow the presence of a white man at the shrine. (For a description of the eventual breakthrough, see Daneel 1970:10–11) There was friendship and an invitation for me to return. In missiological perspective, a new adventure in interfaith dialogue and elenctic encounter was underway.

During subsequent visits to the shrines, without and with ZIRRCO delegations, I have refrained from lengthy biblical expositions. Elenctic encounter, I realised, also takes place during discussions at the shrines about divine revelations and cult practice, when there is opportunity to explain similarities and dissimilarities between Christian and indigenous African beliefs. Witness, on the other hand, can be even more effective when maintaining a regular presence at the shrines, caring about the people there, taking their religion seriously without indulging in confrontational dialogue whenever the opportunity arises, and saying a brief Christian prayer over a meal shared with a priest or priestess. When Jonas Chokoto, chief priest at the Dzilo shrine, died recently I was out of the country and could attend neither his burial nor his home-bringing (*kugadzira*) ceremony. Nevertheless, in honour of our partnership in earthkeeping I later accompanied a delegation of chiefs and mediums to the shrine and helped them plant a number of fruit trees at the late priest's homestead (plates 39, 45 & 46). I personally planted a tree at the head end of Chokoto's grave and addressed him as friend and fellow believer in the presence of cult officials and his son who had succeeded him. Somehow I had to give public recognition to the inner peace, piety and quiet dignity I had observed in this man's life – qualities which reminded me of the good news of Christ's new dispensation of life and light.

Yes! Christian mission alongside non-Christian partners is possible. The route is uneven, uncharted, full of surprises and at times discouraging. Because we only see in part in this existence (1 Cor 13:12), it is sometimes difficult to read our theological compass. We make mistakes. But because of Mwari's grace and the sheer adventure of life itself, the challenge is worth facing.



Plate 45 Religious empowerment of and interaction in the war of the trees, 300 km away from his chiefdom, Chief Murinye – patron of AZTREC – discusses the nature of fruit trees with the successor-son of the late high-priest of the Mwarì cult, Jonas Chokoto. An AZTREC delegation planted fruit trees around the Chokoto homestead in honour of a religious earthkeeping partnership



Plate 46 Claver Zunde, guardian of the ZIRRCOM research centre in Masvingo, assists spirit medium Tovera with tree-planting at the Chokoto home-
stead next to the Dzilo shrine. In this situation Tovera's carved bird symbolises the mystical unity and power of the creator God and guardian ancestors in mobilising the green struggle

NOTES

- 1 If the Zimbabwe bird was indeed originally intended as an image of Mwari, my guess is that the bird of prey, which it appears to be, is a *njerere* (brown hawk or kite) and not the *hungwe* (fish eagle), as is often claimed by Zimbabweans. My reasons for this deduction are threefold: first, although the brown kite does not have the majestic appearance of a fish eagle or bateleur, it is more closely associated with rain. At the onset of the rainy season these hawks fly together, often in large numbers, and feed on flying ants. Their presence to many peasants connote the benevolence of Mwari as rain-giving God. Second, Mwari's main shrine in the Matonjeni region is called Njelele. If the term derives from the Shona *njerere*, it could imply recognition of the symbolic link between the divinity as rain-giver and rain-messenger bird. Third, the connection between Mwari and *njerere* has not

escaped AZTREC's earthkeepers. Spirit medium vaZarira Marambatemwa, for instance, considers *njerere* 'messengers of Mwari'. Their presence in the skies, she says, is a reminder of Mwari's care, through rain, of his/her people.

The crocodile below the Zimbabwe bird, in turn, could well symbolise Dzivaguru, the God of mystery beneath the water, giver of fertility. Since female witches often have crocodiles as familiars, it is possible that the dangerous, capricious or judgmental side of the divinity is implied by this symbol.

Considering oral tradition, which specifically refers to centralised religious rituals at Great Zimbabwe in the distant past similar to those still practised at Matonjeni, the symbolic link between African notions of a supreme being and the Zimbabwe bird may not be far-fetched. My observations in this connection are admittedly speculative. Yet they raise significant questions: Are the similarities between symbolic images of divinities in 'primal' or 'indigenous' religions in various parts of the world indicative of a religious heritage common to all humanity – in Jungian terms, a 'collective unconscious', which could explain such similarity? Or, in Christian terms, is it possible that general revelation in nature, alluded to in Romans 1:19f, gives rise to similar perceptions of God, regardless of the relative isolation of emergent religions from each other in their historic development and of the distorted interpretation caused by human limitations? I do not pretend to know the answers to such questions. But by asking them I come a step closer to understanding my own fascination and identification with the Mwari cult and other aspects of African religion. At a deeper, inexplicable level of self lurks an understanding of the Creator written in the soaring flight of an eagle or hawk, and in the mysterious depths of pools, rivers and oceans.

- 2 For a detailed description of Bavinck's exegesis of these texts in terms of general revelation see Visser (1997:118f). This excellent dissertation on the life and mission theology of Bavinck provides a concise yet comprehensive tool for interpreting one of the most inspiring and wide-ranging missiologists of our time.
- 3 See Bavinck (1949:123, 124, 127, 163, 167; 1966: 118, 120); as in Visser (1949:120).
- 4 Bavinck (1949:126,174).
- 5 In his missiological classic *The Christian message in a non-Christian world*, (1969:126) Kraemer says of Romans 1: 'God works in man and shines through nature. The religious and moral life of man is man's achievement, but also God's wrestling with him; it manifests a receptivity to God, but at the same time an inexcusable disobedience and blindness to God.'
- 6 See, for instance, his *Christus en de mystiek van het Oosten* (Kampen, 1934); *Christusprediking in de volkerenwereld* (Kampen, 1939); *The impact*

of Christianity in the non-Christian world (Grand Rapids, 1945); and *The Church between temple and mosque* (Grand Rapids, 1966).

- 7 Bavinck develops 'elentics' as a subdiscipline of missiology. The name in itself connotes his appraisal of the confrontational nature of Christian/non-Christian encounter. (See Bavinck 1954:234, 245.) Throughout his elentic approach the revelation of God in Christ remains focal (Visser 1997:243).
- 8 For a brief analysis of Bavinck's use of the term *possessio*, see Visser (1997:248–259).
- 9 I was the last student to complete my doctoral examination in missiology under his tuition, prior to his death in Amsterdam in 1964.
- 10 A few days before Bavinck's death he requested my presence in his hospital room. There he blessed me with laying-on of hands and prayer, as an Old Testament patriarch would bless a son. His prayer for my envisaged ministry in Africa has carried me through many spells of questioning, even despair, in a mission which at times appeared 'impossible'.
- 11 See my *Old and New in Southern Shona Independent Churches*, vols 1–3 (1971, 1974, 1988).