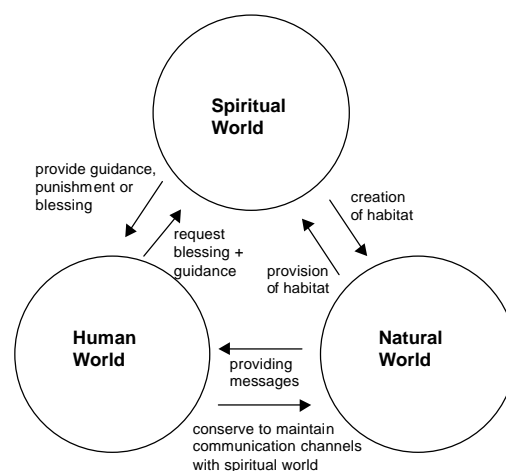


The Three Worlds

Cosmas Gonese

'The Three Worlds' is the name of AZTREC's in-house magazine for indigenous knowledge. AZTREC is a non-governmental development trust that has emerged from a strategic alliance between war veterans, traditional chiefs and spirit mediums. The cosmovision of the Shona people is based on the three pillars of African philosophy: the human world, the natural world and the spiritual world. This article explains the relationship between these worlds and how AZTREC works to support endogenous development and nature conservation.



When the Zimbabwean liberation war ended in 1981, war veterans, traditional chief and spirit mediums joined forces to rehabilitate woods and wetlands and to promote land use management systems based on African cosmovision and indigenous knowledge systems. Because rural African people identify with the social, cultural and spiritual values embedded in their natural resources, these values will suffer when the natural environment does not provide the necessary habitat for the spiritual world.

AZTREC is based in Masvingo province in Zimbabwe. It has about 20 field staff. During the last 15 years it has established 10 village-managed tree nurseries, rehabilitated 10,000 ha of sacred woodlands and wetlands and promoted the production of organic vegetables. In the context of the Compas project, AZTREC will focus on trying to gain a better understanding of

peoples' cosmovision. Of particular interest is the way cosmovision is transformed into daily practice in natural resource management and food production and the role of traditional institutions in this process.

AZTREC has adapted the methods of Rapid Appraisal of Agricultural Knowledge Systems (RAAKS) - a participatory action research - to develop a framework to facilitate the exchange of ideas, experience and knowledge. This article gives a summary of the initial findings of village workshops and interviews with key persons on the subject of cosmovision and the role of traditional institutions in natural resource management.

Shona cosmovision

The Shona people believe that every chieftanship has a sacred place. These locations are chosen as the entry points for large conservation projects. Some

shrines of less cultural significance are being transformed into tourist centres, thus adding economic value to the conservation effort. Shona cosmovision is based on the understanding that the living world is made up of three central pillars: the human world, the natural world and the spiritual world.

The spiritual world

Mwari, the creator of the natural and human world who has existed since time immemorial. His habitat is in the spiritual world. The spiritual world is composed of different spirits that have different meeting places and specific responsibilities, tasks and functions. There are, for example, spirits specialised in war strategies, technology development, rainmaking and human health. Some of the spirits warn people about diseases and problems that can affect the entire nation.

The habitat of the spiritual world is the natural and human world. Sacred places include shrines - certain ecosystems - human bodies and particular species within the natural world. In the animal kingdom lions, baboons, snakes and birds, such as the batteleur eagle, are considered sacred.

In Shona cosmovision the human world heavily depends on special messages from the spiritual world transmitted through these sacred animals, especially in times of crises. For these sacred animals to perform their functions as intermediaries a conducive dwelling place is required and this implies a need for ecological diversity. When diversity has been degraded, these sacred animals will migrate to other places and no longer serve the humans in the area. In the Shona concept, rules and regulations for natural resource management are rooted in the need to sustain channels of communication between the



Photo: Bertus Haverkort

A village planning workshop is concluded with a traditional festival with youth, elders, chiefs and spirit mediums taking part.

spiritual and the human world.

The natural world

Certain places, where the spiritual world speaks through animals and habitats in the ecosystem, are considered sacred. Ancient monuments like Great Zimbabwe, Njelele and Mabweadziva and their natural surroundings, for example, are regarded as communication points where the voice of God can be heard. People are not permitted to hunt wild animals, fell trees or collect wild fruits for sale. In these areas certain laws have to be obeyed: particular clothes have to be worn, rituals have to be performed to show respect, laws of totemic relationships have to be observed and killing or eating your totem animal is forbidden. There are also prohibitions on incest and adultery. The conservation of natural resources is understood to be law and if this is violated the voice of God will leave the place.



Photo: Bertus Heverkort

Spirit medium, the intermediary between ancestral spirits and the living.

The human world

In the human world every person has a personal spirit. Spirit mediums are a special category of human beings, transpired by the spirit of a dead person. In this way important ancestors can communicate with living beings, appoint the chiefs and give them their guidance. There are different levels of spiritual authority ranging from the continental and regional to the national, ethnic, tribal, clan, sub-clan, family and individual. Each has a spirit.

Within the human world, there are traditional leaders such as chiefs and sub-chiefs, who represent a particular area.

Usually the new chief is appointed by the spirit of the one who initiated the clan by having many children. The initiator reverts as a spirit through one of his descendants. The descendant is then considered to be a spirit medium. A group of councilors or headmen are under the chief and these may inherit the chieftanship when a chief dies. Below this category of councilors are the village heads or kraal heads who are responsible for land administration. They are considered to be representatives and receive advice from the spiritual world via a spirit medium.

One of the objectives of the RAAKS exercises was to determine the degree of influence various individuals had on the management of natural resources. The figure below summarises the results of this exercise. The chiefs together with their kraal heads and elders, and the spirit mediums who direct these persons in particular have the greatest amount of influence. Ordinary farmers and the 'master farmers' who have received special agricultural training in high - external - input farming and intensive support by the extension service appear to have less influence than the organic farmers.

Management of natural resources

According to the Shona people, the ancestral spirits are the owners of human kind and are responsible for their well being. The spiritual world owns both human society and nature because this is where the spirits have their habitat. God is supreme in this hierarchy. When one is concerned with conserving natural resources, one has to include traditional institutions because they work together with the spirits. Today, at the Great Zimbabwe monuments traditional bylaws still function, although some violation does take place, for example, when traditional shrines are not looked after according to traditional rules. Tourism intervenes with the traditional management of these shrines.

The majority of cultural activities are performed at shrines such as the Great Zimbabwe monuments. At these shrines rituals must be performed on the vicinity of specific tree species like the Muchakata (*Parinari curatelifolia*), for example. The traditional institutions are responsible for ensuring that these tree species, that are believed to be the habitat of spirits, are preserved.

Each of the spirits in this spiritual world has a special mandate. In general, when a spirit possesses a human being, he goes into trance and in this state begins to relate the message he has received. The spirit would summon the chief to come and collect instructions. In the case of natural resource management, the spirit transmits the rules and regulations governing the way sacred natural species and places should be conserved. At the same time the consequences of violating these

rules are made clear and those who defy them know they face the risk of drought, disease and conflict.

The spirit also gives instructions about how the ritual or ceremony should be organised and performed: who should brew the traditional beer, what grain seed should be used for brewing, who should attend the ritual, what should be worn and carried to the site and who should be in charge. It is important to note that if these guidelines are not strictly adhered to, the spiritual world will not accept the ritual and it will have no effect. After consultations with the spirit world have been completed the chief assembles his elders and tells them what has happened. They in turn will hold meetings with their people and try to enforce these laws.

Endogenous development

From an African perspective conservation is not simply to ensure balanced biological diversity. It also helps to preserve the relationship between the human, natural and spiritual world. In the African perspective, traditional institutions are the custodians of all cultural activities. They are responsible for ensuring that rituals and ceremonies are performed in accordance with the strict procedures, rules and regulations laid down by the spiritual world. In this respect traditional institutions do not need to be taught about conservation. What they require is political, economical and social support to preserve their capacity to co-exist with nature.

AZTREC wants to support the management of forest areas and water resources by the traditional institutions. Field workers must first establish a relationship of confidence with village chiefs, elders and the headmen of different clans. The advice of spirit mediums is sought in order to identify the villages and areas where initiatives to counter desertification should be undertaken. By attending traditional ceremonies and showing respect for traditional leaders, field staff comes to know more about indigenous knowledge. Use is made of the symbolic function of drumming, music, festivals and the design of objects. When planning locations for reforestation and wetland rehabilitation, sacred places are respected. Village activities are planned with elders, women, young people and village leaders. Decisions are taken by chiefs who consult the ancestors through spirit mediums. After this decision making process has been completed and traditional rituals are performed in the village. Traditional beer is brewed, the paramount chief invited and spirit mediums and government agencies are involved.

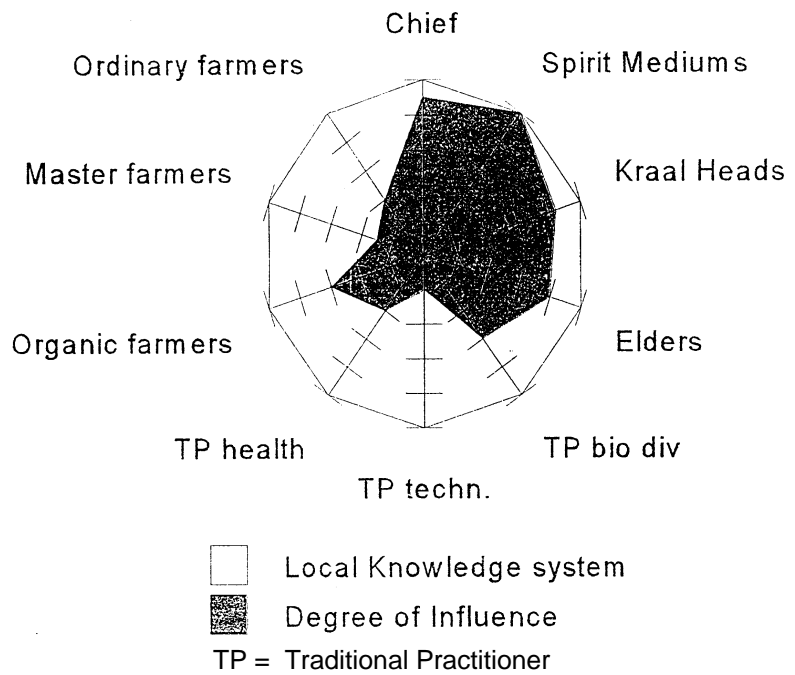
The appropriate rites to appease the ancestors are performed when trees are planted and wetlands are being rehabilitated. Experience shows that communities take good care of trees planted in the tra-

ditional spiritual context and that their survival rate is high. Activities at village level include tree nurseries, tree planting, gardening and water management. Village centres are built where traditional tools, indigenous seeds and spiritual objects can be collected, preserved and demonstrated.

Endogenous development implies strengthening traditional institutions and as such is a political rather than a technical activity that leads to better management of natural resources by the people themselves. When communities agree on what is needed to promote their natural environment, projects supporting this process may be perceived as being driven by the spiritual world rather than an outsider-driven phenomenon. Understanding the range of perceptions related to the need for natural resource management may well be one of the keys to successful field activities.



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Natural Resource Management knowledge system septagram: Degree of influence

Leadership and inspiration In Memoriam Shri Purushothama Rao

It is with great sadness that we announce the death of Shri Purushothama Rao of Thirthahalli, Shimoga District, Karnataka, India on 18 September 1998. He was the dynamic leader of Krishi Prayoga Pariwara (KPP). He has worked ceaselessly for the cause of his fellow farmers for the last 30 years.

Mr. Rao, as a practising farmer, was once a staunch follower of modern agricultural techniques with their emphasis on chemical fertilisers and pesticides. With time he realised the limitations of this approach and turned to organic farming. He was particularly concerned with the rejuvenation of Indian traditional (vedic) agriculture and sought to recover its spirit and interpret it for the modern mind. He developed a successful package of practices, called the Five Samskaras, which implies the rejuvenation of soil, seed, water, air and human beings. He believed that the cow was the basis of all these refining activities. Cow products like urine, dung, buttermilk, butter and *ghee* (clarified butter) were used to achieve a revitalised agriculture. His particular stress on *Agnihotra* resulted in the acceptance of this ritual by the farming community. *Agnihotra* is an ancient Indian ritual in which unbroken rice grains, smeared with cow ghee, is offered to the Fire God twice a day exactly at sunrise and sunset, while chanting specific *mantras*. Experience has convinced farming families that the practice helps the growth and health of their crops.

Mr. Rao seemed to have spiritual insight and people honoured him by calling him *Krishi Rushi* - a sage of agriculture. He founded *Krishi Prayoga Pariwara*, a fraternity of experimental farmers. Mr. Rao was also instrumental in establishing the *Sanjeevana Agro-Research Foundation*, a research and training institute for the advancement of a modernised agriculture that is rooted in traditional values and wisdom. On his death, he benevolently donated all his assets and belongings to a trust to be formed in his name and spirit: *Mr. Purushothama Rao Memorial Agricultural Research Trust*. His wishes were that the trust should carry on his efforts and dreams. We humbly pray the Lord Almighty to grant a peaceful rest to his great soul and grant us the power to carry on his unfinished tasks.



Photo: Bertus Haverkort