



## Of Spirituality and Poverty: A Zimbabwean Cultural Perspective

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### Abstract

*This article, based on a desk study, connects African spirituality to the phenomenon of poverty and argues that mundane poverty alleviation strategies that ignore the cultural perspective of a people are doomed to fail, especially in the African context. Within this context, a domain such as transcendence is as 'real' to the people as the material world. This article delves into the alchemy of the traditions of African people from a Zimbabwean perspective in an attempt to understand some of the causes of poverty. The authors aver that development practitioners stand to gain if they take into account such (African) worldviews. The article shows that there is a disconnect between western culture and indigenous cultural beliefs and suggests that it is necessary to use phenomenological methods to unpack this disconnect because the spiritual world can support or limit the extent to which poverty alleviation programmes are effective. This means that the notion of development rooted in western knowledge frames may require opening discourses that imagine different social ontologies to find solutions in an (African) context. Thus, the challenge for phenomenologists is to research culturally-appropriate approaches to development using phenomenology.*

### Introduction

Although some domains (such as friendship and transcendence) are not usually considered relevant to poverty reduction and may not be amenable to measurement, in some cases it may be crucial to acknowledge these domains because resistance to poverty reduction initiatives may stem from perceptions of a trade-off between poverty reduction and such social and cultural values (Alkire, 2007, p. 93)

This article attempts to unveil a perspective of poverty that hitherto has not been explored in current discourses on poverty. This dimension may confound the debate. If that turns out to be the outcome, it was unintended. This article challenges current thinking and extends a perspective that many Africans in Zimbabwe, as in many other African countries, may

still hold dearly in the alchemy of their traditions and understanding of the causes of poverty. By shedding light on these African traditional religious beliefs using phenomenological methods, the researchers are of the view that this understanding could be a precursor to the adoption of appropriate policies and programmes useful for poverty alleviation. This paper debunks the notion that conventional interventions, which are usually project based for income generation, training and so forth, advocated by such agencies as United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) would be unhelpful in circumstances of poverty supposedly caused by other supernatural phenomena such as evil spirits, avenging spirits, and ancestral spirits or the Creator. The article is based essentially on a desk study and reviewed literature on phenomenology and African belief systems in Zimbabwe. By virtue of its anthropological slant, the

article locates itself in phenomenology, and within the article phenomenology is used “to its fullest as a means of better understanding aspects of what it means to be human” (Stones, 2009, p. 1).

### Theoretical framework

This article, like phenomenology, is interested in understanding social life. Aspers (2009, p. 1) rightly argued that the “social world is socially constructed”. This work is steeped in the ideas and traditions that make up the philosophy of phenomenology as postulated by Husserl, Heidegger, Schutz, Merleau-Ponty, Berger, Derrida, Habermas and others. Aspers (2009) noted that descriptions of how people feel, think and perceive things are central to the phenomenological approach. In addition, this author noted that the understanding that science reaches “is based on the practice and knowledge of the everyday lifeworld ... and meaning is understood in a context, and understanding can only emerge in a process” (p. 2). Schutz (cited in Aspers, 2009, p. 3) stated that “the starting point of social sciences has to be the ordinary life of people”. Schutz (as cited in Willis, 2001, p. 3) defined life-world as “... the whole sphere of everyday experiences, orientations and actions through which individuals pursue their interests and affairs by manipulating objects, dealing with people, conceiving plans and carrying them out”.

Embree (2010a, p. 3) argued that “the lifeworld is originally and concretely not only natural but also socio-cultural”. “For naturalism, everything is physical nature, and what is not physical does not count; and this excludes, above all culture and mental life (Embree, 2010a, p. 2-3). Geoffrey Lloyd (as cited in Embree, 2010a, p. 3) claimed that “the West is different from other cultures because it has learned to abstract from culture and mind in order to focus on physical nature so that it can develop naturalistic science and naturalistic-scientific technology and power over everything”. Within this article, the adoption of naturalistic science in relation to illness and disease is discussed in relation to subjective experiences.

Aspers (2009, p. 4) argued that “if we understand the social world and meet the demands of phenomenology, we must produce explanations that are grounded in the subjective experiences of real people. Social science must understand why and how things happen, and this must refer to the way people understand and relate to these phenomena”. Patton (as cited in Basson & Mawson, 2011, p. 5) proposed that when collecting phenomenological data it is imperative for the researcher to “capture and describe how people experience a phenomenon – how they perceive, describe, feel, remember, and make sense of the particular phenomenon”. To that end, Embree

(2010b, p. 2), suggested that, within the ambit of reflective phenomenology, it is possible to observe “how there are various types of experiencing, various modes of believing, valuing and willing ... and things-as-experienced, as-believed-in, as-valued and as-willed in manifold ways”. He further suggested that there are two types of reflection, ‘self-observation’ and ‘reflection on others’, and concluded that “phenomenology is more than mere self-observation and description”. Phenomenology is culture appreciative and thus reflection, description and culture appreciation are the three generic properties of the phenomenological approach (Embree, 2010b, p. 2-3). This article, which draws on the lived experiences of others, lends itself to the phenomenological tradition. Furthermore, if this article is to be parceled into some discipline, it would belong to what Embree (2010b) called “sociological phenomenology” (p. 1).

### The fault lines: Western and African culture

To understand phenomena requires a diagnosis that goes beyond the physical to the spiritual domains of life. For example, Matshidze and Mabogo (2009), in explaining illness, observed that Western medicine does not make a distinction between illness and disease and actually uses these two terms interchangeably. They argued that it is prudent to make a distinction between these concepts, especially in a non-Western cultural context. According to these authors “disease is an objectively measurable pathological condition of the body, for example, tooth decay, measles, or a broken bone whereas illness may, in fact, be due to a disease and represents not being normal or healthy but may also be due to a feeling of psychological or spiritual imbalance” (Matshidze & Mabogo, 2009, p. 2). Matshidze and Mabogo (2009) also argued that it is imperative to understand the other (African) worldview with respect to illnesses and their treatment given the different explanations that are possible as a result of the diversities in culture prevailing in African and Western contexts. They argued that these schisms can be generalized via what they termed two explanatory traditions, labeled ‘naturalistic’ and ‘personalistic’ causes of illnesses. They claimed that Westerners rely on a naturalistic explanation of illness, which presupposes that illness is a consequence of impersonal, mechanistic causes. Based on that premise Western medicine embraces:

- organic breakdown or deterioration (tooth decay, heart failure, senility);
- obstruction (kidney stones, arterial blockage due to plaque build-up);
- injury (broken bones, bullet wounds);
- imbalance (too much or too little of specific hormones and salts in the blood);

- malnutrition (too much or too little food, not enough proteins, vitamins, or minerals);
- parasites (bacteria, viruses, amoebas, worms).

This is different from the personalistic explanation embraced in African culture as well as other cultures. In this tradition, illness is a consequence of acts or wishes of other people or supernatural beings and forces. Adherents to personalistic medical systems believe that the causes and cures of illness are not to be found only in the natural world. As such, traditional healers usually use supernatural means to understand what is wrong with their patients in order to restore their health. Thus, typical causes of illness in personalistic medical systems include spirit possession, spirit loss, spirit damage and bewitching (Matshidze & Mabogo, 2009). These are issues suited to investigation using phenomenological methods and treatment.

### African spirituality and belief systems

To understand the role of supernatural powers as a cause of poverty, the spirituality of the African people should be addressed first. The Shona African people in Zimbabwe have certain conservative or traditional belief systems that have defied Western influence and/or destruction. These beliefs include belief in *Mwari* (God), whom they believe is the uncaused Cause; *Vadzimu* (ancestors); *Ngozi* (avenging spirits) and *Varoyi* (witchcraft). The Shona people of Zimbabwe are made up of Vakaranga, VaZezuru, VaManyika, VaKorekore, and VaNdau linguistic groups who occupy the greater part of Zimbabwe (Asante, 2000, p. 20). There are other minority ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, including the Ndebele, Shangani, Tshivenda and Xhosa. Although this paper is not primarily concerned with delving into the Shona African religion, it is important that this belief system is discussed in order to investigate the ways in which it informs Shona (and Zimbabwean) understandings of the causes of poverty.

At the apex of the belief systems is *Mwari* (God) or *Musikavanhu* (Creator), an omnipotent spirit, which creates bad and good (Gelfand, 1970, p. 1). *Mwari* is the Creator of all the things on earth, human and non-human, including the good and bad spirits. The Shona people do not approach *Mwari* directly but instead do so through an intermediary or intermediaries, in the first instance to *Vadzimu* spirits, then to *Mhondoro* spirits for onward transmission to *Mwari*. These spirits relay everything to *Mwari* for their protection (Gelfand, 1970). The *Mhondoro* spirits or 'tutelary spirits' and family spirits (*Vadzimu*) both originate from the death of people (Gelfand, 1970). The *Mhondoro* spirit is concerned with the welfare of the

whole community including such things as "succession to chieftainship, rain, drought, epidemic diseases, incest and bestiality ... whilst the *vadzimu* is for the protection of the family lineages, immediate and extended" (Gelfand, 1970, pp. 1-2). There is a strict moral code required to satisfy these spirits. For instance, there is a sacred day set aside once a week called *chisi* in honour of the area spirits (Bourdillon 1987, p. 70ff). On this day, the code dictates that land should not be tilled. It is an equivalent of the Sabbath Day in Christianity. The code, inter alia, includes respect for fellow beings, care and respect for the vulnerable in society such as orphans, children and the elderly, and a prohibition on killing (Gelfand, 1970). The consequences of breaching this code can result in poverty when the spiritual forces withdraw their protection and/or provision.

There is another form of spirits that also need to be explained; these are the *ngozi*, the angry spirit or avenging spirit. At the heart of the *ngozi* spiritual belief is the belief that a person has a metaphysical realm of life after death suggesting that a person's spirituality exists immortally and eternally long after their death. In other words, a person's spirit does not die but it departs to the spiritual world, known as *Nyikadzimu*. For the Shona people, death is a rite of passage in which the dead person spiritually acquires a permanent, supernatural, pure and incorrigible form of existence that commands respect from the living. *Ngozi* is the spirit of a person who has been angered, murdered or killed unlawfully, this spirit then comes back to exact revenge unless the murderer or his family members pay restitution. The spirit kills anyone who is blood related until they pay compensation in the form of cattle or, more recently, money and a female. Bourdillon (1976, p. 233), for example, argued that "ngozi is fearsome and terrifying because it attacks suddenly and very harshly". For the Shona people, life is a gift from *Mwari*, it is a man's greatest asset, and hence *ngozi* is a forceful deterrent against wanton destruction of human life. This avenging spirit can be said to cause poverty among the Shona people. This happens when people die mysteriously or lose their symbols of wealth such land, cattle and food. As such, the problems associated with avenging spirits cannot be addressed by conventional methods of poverty alleviation.

### Spirituality and poverty nexus

To further understand alternative understandings of the causes of poverty, it is also necessary to explain the *shave* spirit. The *shave* spirit is believed to be the spirit of a person who is not related to the family. The person's spirit is thought to be wandering because he was not properly buried. For Gelfand (1970), the spirit is obliged to wander until it finds a medium or

host through which it reveals itself. When a medium accepts a particular *shave* spirit s/he becomes endowed with the talent once possessed by the 'foreigner'. This is done so that the host family can benefit from the skills of hunting, of entrepreneurship or of whatever talent s/he once possessed. The modern expression of this spirit could manifest in being a successful medical doctor, musician or business person. This suggests that a successful harnessing of this spirit can be viewed as a poverty alleviation strategy.

The *shave* spirit can also be evil in its practice by bringing unwanted consequences to the host such as the spirit of witchcraft (*shavi rekuroya*), the spirit of stealing (*shave reumbavha*) and so on. This spirit can be dreadful as it may cause unexplainable illness, unlucky events and even mysterious death. These bad consequences of the *shave* can be taken to be primary causes of poverty, thus representing another level at which the causes of poverty could be understood. According to Christiaensen and Subbarao (2004), people reside in places with risks such as illness, death, weather related shocks (floods, earthquakes and droughts), violence and theft. To cope with these risks, people tend to invest in income generating activities (Christiaensen & Subbarao, 2004). In Zimbabwe, as elsewhere, people face these calamities. However, the occurrence of these calamities should also be understood within the realm of their spirituality if poverty alleviation policies are to succeed.

The Shona, like many other African people, have always had a mechanism or code of conduct to shield themselves from the calamities arising from non-conformity to their cultural practices. The cultural practices are promulgated by elders and approved by the *vadzimu* and *mhondoro*. Samkange and Samkange (1980) described this code of conduct as *hunhu*, a term which in Zulu/Ndebele is usually rendered as ubuntu. Samkange and Samkange (1980) also mentioned the terms *munhu* in Shona and *umuntu* in Ndebele/Zulu, which refer to a human being or person. The Shona/Ndebele or Bantu meaning of *munhu* or being is different from the English word 'person' as it means more than simply being human. For example, when we see a Black and a White person we say, '*hona munhu uyo ari kufamba nemurungu*' which means there is *munhu* walking with a White man (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). This shows a deeper epistemological understanding that suggests that *unhu/ubuntu* is more than just being a human being or person. There is a code of behaviour expected in relation to how one treats relatives and non-relatives and this has consequences which define the purpose of life. *Ubuntu/hunhu* imposes different responsibilities and duties depending on age, sex, and a person's social position

in society. In the section below some of the key responsibilities of the role players are discussed.

### Responsibilities of role players

The Chiefs are expected to guard the community's assets jealously, including any natural resources such as land and everything that the land holds like minerals, forests, animals, and water. They are also expected to be guarantors of the rule of law, to be fair and to execute the administrative responsibilities of the state at the local level. If they fail to observe these, they are liable to face the ire of the *Mhondoro*, which may lead to poor rains and bad harvests thereby leading their community into poverty.

The subjects, in turn, should also obey the Chief's orders and are expected to participate democratically and equally in matters of the state. If they fail, they upset the *Mhondoro* who would then bring unbearable misfortune such as death, loss of income, wealth and other calamities. The same code of conduct applies even at family level with the *Vadzimu*. Children are expected to look after their parents so that the parents do not cause unbearable problems when they become family spirits after their bodily/physical death. The African traditional view of acceptable conduct is best described by the statement that "*I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am*" (Mbiti, 1999, p. 145, emphasis added). The conceptual framework is that personhood (*unhu/ubuntu*) is derived from other members of the community. A Ghanaian (Akan) saying states that one tree does not make a forest (Gyekye, 1991). This implies that a forest draws its identity from individual trees (Gyekye, 1991). This is in contrast to the Western notion as put by Descartes (1984) that *cogito ego sum* [I think therefore I exist]. This statement suggests that the individual exists in isolation from the community, thus portraying an individualistic worldview. This is contrary to *ubuntu/hunhu*, which focuses on the community at large and suggests that 'we are therefore we exist'.

To understand *ubuntu/hunhu* is to master one of the key strategies of poverty alleviation that could be used within the Zimbabwean context. *Ubuntu/hunhu* creates synergies within the society as it is based on mutual trust. Without that trust, the society cannot function. Marais (2005, p. 50) argued that kin and community support systems are crucial in an African setting. The systems include, inter alia, assisting with labour, lending money, providing food and fostering children.

In times of food shortages in rural areas, urban household members often help out by sending money or food. For their part, rural household members provide food to urban

counterparts who lose their jobs, or they allow them to rejoin the rural household. ... The support is extended within networks of reciprocity, entitlement and responsibility. (Marais, 2005, p. 50)

Marais (2005, p. 54) argued that in Africa, as in Asia, the extended family spans a very large network of relatives and generations with the relationship being glued by kinship and marriage. This creates a source of mutual support, social cohesion and a safety net. These safety nets are products of *hunhu/ubuntu* and have lifted many people from cycles of poverty.

### Torts and poverty

Another level to understand the causes of poverty is analysing the concept of *kutanda botso*. *Kutanda botso* (KB) is a process undertaken by a wrong doer or tort feaser to appease the spirit of the deceased person's surviving family. This is done through a combination of rituals and payment of presents in cash or kind to the relatives of the wronged family. In a KB scenario, the wrong doer or tort feaser commits a tort when he offends his parents. This is committed when he breaches the *ubuntu/hunhu* code, for example, by harassing parents either verbally or physically. This offence may be worse if it leads to the death of the parent. KB can also be committed if a person neglects his parents by not providing for their material needs when he is economically able to provide. Regardless of his or her age, a child who is economically active has an 'automatic' responsibility to materially support his or her parents at all times without any excuses. Even if someone is not economically active or employed, supporting parents takes many forms such as tilling land for them, fetching water, doing other household chores as well as showing respect and providing love. This practice is captured in a popular phrase, *chirere chigokureravo*, which means look after your child so that he/she looks after you at the time of need.

The tort should be so severe that the wronged parents may not easily forget and/or forgive the tort feaser without appeasing the spirit. When the parent(s) die they can come back in the form of an avenging spirit which can only be appeased by KB. It is believed that the female parent's spirit is more vicious than that of the male parent. The spirit of the mother and the father exist as separate entities after their bodily/physical death. It is believed that each spirit can cause untold suffering to the surviving wrong doer and requires appeasement separately. The spirit of the departed can cause untold suffering, misfortunes and hardships which can lead to abject poverty. The avenging spirit can cause a wide array of problems such as mysterious deaths in the family, unexplainable loss of employment, loss of income,

loss of accommodation and so forth. All of these factors can lead to poverty.

Based on a study in Mashonaland West in Zimbabwe, Mtapuri (2010) claimed that respondents identified the common causes of poverty as theft, 'the economy' and drought. The incidences of theft included theft from fields, theft from granaries, theft of chickens, goats and even vegetables in the garden. Cattle rustling targeted old people and woman-headed households, leading to destitution (Mtapuri, 2010). The economy was pinpointed as a cause of poverty due to the hyper-inflationary environment that was prevalent at the time. This hyper-inflationary environment resulted in the poor being unable to pay for basic needs (Mtapuri, 2010). These causes could be considered the conventional causes. However, this article presents an expose of a different dimension in the experience of poverty caused by KB. Mtapuri's (2010) study could have benefited from direct questions concerning KB, and this represents a viable topic for further research using phenomenological methods. This article argues that there are people who believe in the supernatural causes of poverty. As such, the causes mentioned above could be deemed the 'normal' causes of poverty whereas *kutanda botso* and *ngozi* can be categorized as 'unusual' and therefore 'abnormal' causes of poverty. These causes of poverty can only be understood with a solid understanding of the aesthetics of the Shona culture and traditions of Zimbabwe. Although these causes are poorly understood within the Western context, for the people of Zimbabwe who believe in them they are as real as the rising sun.

Put simply, there is a belief that a person's life is influenced by spiritual powers that are connected to those in the world beyond which is the deity or *Mwari/Umlimu*. The *vadzimu* spirit and its power act as a shield against other forms of evil spirits which are marauding and searching for people to torment. The spirits of an individual's parents act as a shield or immune system in his or her life. If the spirit of an individual's departed parents, or grandparents, or great grandparents, which becomes *mudzimu*, is not happy about what that individual did to them or is doing to other people or if that individual is in breach of the *unhu/ubuntu* code, the spirit's protection is simply withdrawn. The individual then becomes exposed to the vagaries of the evil spirits which would torment him/her endlessly with poverty.

### The traditional panacea

The sum total of these misfortunes is called *munyama*, which means bad luck when loosely translated into English. This bad luck can only be identified by consulting a traditional healer or a family spiritual leader who makes the diagnosis.

These people act as experts who direct what needs to be done in order to appease the avenging spirit and stop the identified causes of poverty. The avenging spirit does not stop unless or until the appeasement process has been undertaken and completed. The person (wrong doer) and his family become so poor that conventional poverty reduction strategies would not work. The perpetuation of an individual's misery, which is caused by the breadth and depth of poverty, results in him or her being called *rombe*. This means that society starts to socially exclude him/her, especially where they suspect that his/her condition was caused by breach of the *unhu/ubuntu* code. This stage of poverty cannot be reversed by modern poverty reduction methods such as provision of grants, seed money to start income generating projects, and training. Deaton (2002 cited in Christiaensen & Subbarao, 2004) claimed that people cope with poverty in the following ways: consumption smoothing, asset depletion, borrowing, involvement in government insurance schemes like public works and participating in informal insurance networks. According to Shona culture these strategies cannot work in the context of *rombe*. The *rombe* is also faced with many additional symptoms of poverty such as being socially excluded, homeless, clothesless, unemployed, lacking confidence and finding it difficult to engage.

The Shona believe that *rombe* cannot simply be contrasted with *urombo*. *Urombo* – being poor - can be caused by many ordinary causes of poverty such as lack of access to education, lack of assets, lack of access to land, lack of marketable skills, disability, discrimination and so forth. These causes of poverty can be reversed by poverty intervention strategies such as training, grant money or loans to start income generation projects and public works. This means that there is a difference between the adjectives *murombo* and *urombe* and their derivative nouns *rombe* and *murombo* respectively. *Rombe* cannot be rehabilitated using conventional/Western methods. Instead, African methods must precede Western methods in the treatment of *rombe*. The conundrum is that the *rombe* may refuse rehabilitation before the appeasement rituals are performed, but a person who is a *murombo* (a poor person) may gladly participate without the rituals and be rehabilitated. It is therefore important for poverty experts to understand this nuance if they are to succeed in poverty reduction using non-conventional strategies. It is in this area of African aesthetics that phenomenological studies are critical.

Therefore, for the *rombe* and his family to break the cycle of poverty he has to appease the wronged spirit and ask for an apology from the wronged person's family. The appeasement process is not easy as it calls for maximum public humiliation of the tort

feasor. If a tortfeasor is late, then his family adopts the curse, facing the same wrath of the avenging spirit as was faced by the tortfeasor. This means that this process can occur between families and it can also be inter-generational, just as poverty can be inter-generational. The appeasing process involves paying the family of the wronged spirit in cash or in kind. Presents are usually given in the form of cattle. However, an analysis of the appeasement process shows that this process can itself be a primary source of poverty. When a family is asked to part with assets such as goats, cattle or chicken in order to appease the avenging spirit this is a route to poverty for the paying family but a route out of poverty for the receiving family.

### Case studies

Having discussed various aspects of spirits among the Shona people of Zimbabwe and their link with poverty, it is imperative at this juncture to introduce three case studies: an irrigation project; an HIV/AIDS intervention project in Manicaland province; and a dam project in Gokwe and Mutare.

#### *Case Study: Irrigation intervention in Nyamaropa Communal area in Manicaland Province*

Empirical research findings published by Magaddelela and Hebinck in 1995 in Nyamaropa communal area in Manicaland Province of Zimbabwe are relevant to this paper. Magaddelela and Hebinck (1995) argued that interventions aimed at transforming the social and economic life of a community spearheaded by agencies with origins elsewhere tend to ignore the local "life-worlds" and therefore result in failure (Magaddelela & Hebinck (1995, p. 44). They further critiqued these approaches for being lopsided and "generalised and biased (in) [their] notions of ...technical abilities to bring about changes in their social and economic lives". We add to this argument by suggesting that such an approach cannot extricate people from poverty. Magaddelela and Hebinck (1995), basing their argument on Long (1989, pp. 1-2), suggested that a problematic scenario results from what they call the 'development interface', which is defined as:

a critical point of intersection or linkage between different social systems, fields or levels of social order where structural discontinuities, based upon differences of normative values and social interest, are most likely to be found. (Long, 1989, pp. 1-2)

The panacea for this development interface is for poverty reduction strategists to appreciate the potential conflict that results when different social systems, for example grant-based interventions

perceived to be modern and superior, “interact (with indigenous knowledge systems) but fail to form a new social system” beneficial to the host community (Arce & Long, 1992, cited in Magadla & Hebinck, 1995, p. 214).

In Nyamaropa, the researchers made a number of key findings. The most important finding relevant to this research is that there was a serious feud between settled farmers and local people on grounds of ancestral worship and this feud was undermining the progress of this irrigation project. The local leadership and people engaged in rain-making ceremonies (*mukwerera*) and they observed *chisi*. *Chisi* is a resting day when people are not supposed to work on the land as a sign of respect to the *mhondoro*. As mentioned previously, this practice is similar to Christian Sabbath Day observance. The irrigation project was accused by local chiefs of having tainted, if not destroyed, traditional sacred places through worshipping (by churches) in or near them. The chiefs also warned the irrigators to observe *chisi*. The researchers also found that the expansion of the irrigation scheme, an acknowledged poverty reduction intervention, would offend the spirits of the Sanyaropa clan as the clearing of trees to make way for irrigation destroys the home of the spirits. This was confirmed at a meeting held by local leadership. At this meeting, the headman stated the difficulty as follows:

Some of you go and pray in rivers and on mountains, and you chase our spirits away. They go and live in trees, the big ones you see around here, but you come again and cut down the tree. Where do you think the spirit goes after that? It has nowhere to stay, and you will not have rains when you have unhappy spirits. (Magadla & Hebinck, 1995, p. 58)

The same meeting also demanded that the irrigators observe *chisi* in order to appease the clan spirits of the area. The findings of this study suggest that grant-based poverty alleviation projects alone are not sufficient for poverty alleviation. Instead, indigenous knowledge systems should be integrated into poverty alleviation.

#### **Case Study: HIV/AIDS Intervention Project**

Orphans and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe live in various care settings; some are cared for by grandmothers, others by members of the extended family and some by non-relatives. A study by Munyati (2006), conducted in Bulilamangwe district in Matebeleland Province and Chimanimani in Manicaland Province of Zimbabwe, using an Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) Project's Generic

Census Questionnaire and ethically approved by the Medical Research Council of Zimbabwe, showed that young people were providing care to their elderly ‘carers’ and/or sick parents (Munyati, 2006) in the context of HIV/AIDS pandemic. These orphans helped their ‘carers’, often a grandmother/father, with domestic chores such as washing of dishes, clothes, cooking and provision of personal care. The same study also revealed that the support structures for orphans were mainly community based organisations driven by local people (Munyati, 2006). Some community members were found to be sympathetic to these children. However, some NGOs, for example, were reported to be discriminating against poor children by making it difficult for orphans to access their services. A vulnerable child said, “They do not select us when it comes to trips to go for workshops. They would be afraid that we will shame them since we would be poorly dressed and they consider us to be of a low class” (Munyati, 2006, p. 29).

A separate study undertaken by Matshalaga (2004), conducted in the rural areas of Zvishavane District in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe, investigated “how grandmothers organise their new households (in the context of HIV/AIDS deaths) in order to produce and provide for the family” (p. 2). The study also investigated the strategies used by orphans for survival (Matshalaga, 2004). The study found that orphans help their grandmothers by providing labour in subsistence agriculture where they manually plant, weed, clear and harvest crops and tend animals (Matshalaga, 2004).

The practice of young people and orphans providing domestic and personal care in households is considered controversial. However, a closer analysis of the practice needs to include the idea that children do not want to offend their elderly carers lest the elderly relative passes on to the spiritual world through death and becomes an avenging spirit (*ngozi*). It can further be argued that although the support given by the community to orphans and by children to their sick parents is voluntary, it is also motivated by a belief that disembodied humans continue to exist in a spiritual manner. We argue in this paper that a realisation of the existence of this spiritual world by the orphans and by the Shona community creates a symbiotic relationship with inherent checks and balances capable of preventing anti-social behaviour, discrimination and abuse of vulnerable adults, vulnerable children and orphans.

#### **Case Study: Water Dam Project in Gokwe and Mutare**

Poverty alleviation projects that do not take into account people’s spiritual beliefs do not progress well. The government of Zimbabwe has, among

others, initiated two dam projects (at Gokwe and Mutare) which have been temporarily halted because of the belief that mermaids were preventing water engineers from installing pumps. Giving evidence before the Senate Committee on Gender and Development, a Zimbabwean Government Minister responsible for Water Resources Development and Management was reported in the media as having said, "We even hired whites thinking that our boys did not want to work but they also returned saying they would not return to work there again" (Nkomo, 2012, p. 1).

The Local Government, Rural and Urban Development Minister concurred that they were going to work with traditional leaders to brew African traditional beer to appease the clan spirits (*mhondoro*). The belief among the Shona is that the living humans do not own the current resources (water, land, forests, and minerals) but instead they are mere custodians of these resources who must look after them communally on behalf of the disembodied beings in the spiritual world (*vadzimu*) who are the owners. The living will become joint-owners of the resources when they pass on to the spiritual world through death. The expectation is that the living beings cannot, therefore, use these resources as they please without informing or appeasing the ancestors (*vadzimu* or *mhondoro*) who hold title to these resources. The Shona also believe that the living have an absolute duty to defend those resources by any means necessary so that they do not end up being owned by non-indigenous people. Failure to do so would invite serious punishment from the clan spirits.

In light of the evidence from these examples concerning dam building, irrigation schemes and HIV/AIDS programmes it is clear that if poverty alleviation projects are divorced from the people's spiritual worldview they are unlikely to succeed. The dead are believed to be part of the living and they cannot be side-stepped in important community development projects. There is thus a need to research culturally-appropriate approaches to development using phenomenology.

## Referencing Format

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## Conclusion

As Krumer-Nevo (cited in Thomas, Muradian, de Groot, & de Ruijter, 2009, p. 254) rightly suggested, it is clear that "locally informed programmes and methods, the 'life knowledge' of the people who experience poverty and vulnerability in their lives combined with expert knowledge" are important in the alleviation of poverty. In order to solve the problem of poverty occurring as a result of *kutanda botso* caused by an avenging spirit (*ngozi*), alien spirit (*shave*), clan spirits (*mhondoro*), or family spirits (*mudzimu*) it is important to engage the family and communities.

As authors, we are aware that matters of religion are problematic because they are relative to a specific people. However, the onus is on human development practitioners to take into account people's cultural beliefs if human development interventions are to have positive impacts on people's lives.

We end this article with these insightful words:

The poor can be targeted once they are identified, but poverty can be reduced when policies aim at its causes. (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 254)

This article has argued that supernatural causes of poverty have received very little attention when designing poverty reduction strategies. The challenge still remains as to how to incorporate local conceptions of spirituality into poverty alleviation development strategies and how to study these conceptions using phenomenological methods. The article has also highlighted some of the causes of poverty that can be said to have a supernatural character and has looked at how these can be addressed. It is hoped that these suggested strategies will go a long way in augmenting Western oriented strategies for poverty alleviation. It is our position that understanding the supernatural causes of poverty, as well as the hybridisation of approaches to poverty alleviation, will build long lasting solutions to problems faced by people in their various communities.



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