

# Oratory in mhondoro ritual spaces in northern Zimbabwe: “Traditional” authority, power relations and local political structures

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## 1. Introduction

The present paper is based on the author’s fieldwork data and on secondary sources. Field data is restricted to Angwa and Masoka wards in the Mbire District, although the conclusions may well extend to all Dande Communal Land.

In this area mediums act as ritual “pockets” (*homwe*) for ancestors of royal lineages, who, through possession, mediate community disputes and intervene in everyday affairs at assemblies framed by ritual action. These lineage ancestors who recurrently reappear in a new medium when the previous one die, are known as mhondoro. In the Zambezi Valley these mhondoro assemblies constitute an institutionalized system of counseling, deliberation, decision-making, and mobilization of social action. This paper will explore the structure and procedures at these meetings, the performance of the participants, and the relationship with rural local authorities and the state.

The paper starts by briefly contextualizing the area. The next section concentrates on the mhondoro councils, ritual practices, and the importance of certain kin networks. The last section links these ritual practices to the practices of traditional authorities.

## 2. Mbire District. Political division of land, and some socio-economic considerations of Dande Communal Land, and of the Angwa and Masoka wards in particular

Residents in Angwa and Masoka wards are mainly Makorekore Shona, followed by a minority Tembomvura community and some immigrant Karanga households. Mbire is constituted by a total amount of 17 wards to which Angwa (ward 2, also named Chisunga ward after the local chieftaincy) and Masoka (ward 11, also named Kanyurira) belong. The Mbire District is also known as Dande Communal Land, which stretches along the Mid-Zambezi Valley from Kanyemba (at the Zambezi River in the North) to the Muzengezi River near Mahuwe (in the East). Each mhondoro has a territory over which he has jurisdiction. Boundaries of these territories do not correspond to ward boundaries. The latter delineate villages and are linked to the administrative functions of the chief and headmen. Mhondoro boundaries are usually rivers, streams, cliffs, etc, and they are beyond both administrative boundaries within the state, and state boundaries.

The Mbire District (formerly Guruve North) is still one of the most underdeveloped, while at the same time one of the richest in natural resources (wildlife) in Zimbabwe, and its north-westernmost part, Angwa and Masoka (but also Kanyemba) wards are usually

portrayed as remote and marginal communal areas in the Zambezi Valley<sup>1</sup>. This area falls under the Mbire Rural District Council, established in 2007 and based in Mushumbi Pools.

Despite poor soils, scarce rainfall, lack of draught power and high levels of crop raiding by wild animals, most residents from Angwa and Masoka rely on smallholder agricultural production for both subsistence and cash income. No mechanical tillage is widespread, and cultivation is chiefly done by hand<sup>2</sup>, which restricts the extension of land that farmers can work each season. In addition, there is a strong bias toward cash agriculture amongst government extension workers operating in the Zambezi Valley. Thus, in Angwa, cotton has become increasingly favored as a cash crop and eighty-five per cent of ward residents are involved in cotton production<sup>3</sup> (Welford, L. 2002).

Cultivation takes place both during the rainy season and during the dry winter months: in the rainy season on upland fields (*munda*), and in the dry winter months in river-side gardens on the rich alluvium soils of the Angwa River<sup>4</sup> (*matoro*) using residual water from the river sands. While *munda* cultivation is based on cotton, maize, and sorghum production, riverbank gardens are sown with horticultural crops and fruits. *Matoro* or dry season stream bank cultivation is especially important as a survival strategy against the extremely harsh weather conditions of this area where the evaporation rate is very high with respect to average annual precipitations (Hasler, R. 1996). The hunting of wild animals (although criminalized) for consumption, exchange and sale, as well as foraging and fishing are also part of the local uses of resources, which contribute to livelihood strategies in this part of Mbire District.

Further, through the CAMPFIRE<sup>5</sup> program, Angwa and Masoka residents benefit from the cash dividends derived from professional hunting activities both in Dande Safari Area (DSA) and in Communal Land.

According to a survey conducted in 2008 by LGDA, the population in Angwa ward is approximately 9,146 and in Masoka about 2,348 (Mbire Baseline Survey, 2009). According to the same data, 40% of boreholes in Angwa ward are non-functional due to lack of maintenance. This means that in Angwa 9,146 people have to share 16 functional boreholes, which means a ratio of 572 persons per borehole. The situation in Masoka ward is even worse for 2,348 persons have only one hand-pump borehole to provide their

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<sup>1</sup> "Floods render roads impassable", *The Herald*, 18 February 2011. "7 survive croc attacks, one amputated", *The Herald*, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Only more affluent households, typically Karanga immigrant households, can afford to hire a tractor or have access to cattle and donkeys for ploughing (Cutshall, C. R. and Hasler, R. 1991; Welford, L. 2002)

<sup>3</sup> Even though it has been shown that small-scale cotton farming in the Zambezi Valley, which from the mid-eighties began to shift from food to cash crop production, has not contributed to an economic development of the population. On the contrary, it made farmers extremely dependent on international cotton companies and global prices (Chizarura, L. 2002) in a market where they cannot compete.

<sup>4</sup> Stream bank cultivation is also practiced on the floodplains of the main tributaries of the Angwa River.

<sup>5</sup> Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources.

drinking water<sup>6</sup>. In contrast to the rest of Mbire District, there is no cattle in the north-westernmost part. Livestock in this area consist almost exclusively on goats and chickens. In terms of formal education, almost a quarter of heads of households have never been schooled and only about 20% of the population has had four years of secondary education (*ibid*).

### 3. Mhondoro ritual oratory and assemblies

For the purpose of this panel, firstly, mhondoro meetings will be examined as assemblies framed by ritual action<sup>7</sup>; and secondly, we will treat mhondoro ritual praxis by singling out only those aspects relevant to our discussion.

Language, gestural performance, and the use of space during ritual cannot be dissociated if one is to understand how these assemblies produce their effectiveness. As some authors have stressed, words and formalized speech “are dependent on the directional movements that make up ritual” (Parker, D. 2000). Accordingly, ritual effectiveness and control are thus negotiated and gained not through utterances primarily, but through the participants’ spacial orientation and positioning within which these utterances are niched, that is, through performative practice (*ibid*). In what follows, although we are here stressing procedures and social dynamics instead of ritual analysis<sup>8</sup>, we shall consider the three mentioned aspects constitutive of ritual action as applied to mhondoro assemblies.

#### Language and the practice of formalized speaking

Mhondoro oratory combines both formalized speech elements and everyday speech. Mhondoro formalized speech (in the local MaKorekore Shona dialect) is characterized by an extensive use of analogies, metaphors, proverbs, neologisms, and ideophones. However, the oratorical skills of the individual mhondoro may vary considerably, as well as those of the speakers amongst the audience. Referring to objects that did not exist in the past, ritual speakers give some contemporary words different meanings (e.g., using “tortoise” for car, or “leaf” for a sheet of paper); a polisemy that is understood but not employed by the audience outside the assembly, and that would be incomprehensible for ChiShona speakers from another area. Certain mhondoro terms seem to be archaic words that are understood by everyone in the community but are, nowadays, increasingly limited in their use to elders alone. In general, ChiShona speakers unfamiliar with the local practices of these ritual assemblies would only partially understand much of mhondoro terminology (both its connotation and denotation).

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<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, Masoka ward has been portrayed by some authors as a particular example of good governance based on the criteria of an efficient management of local community-based resources (Taylor, R.D, and Murphree, M. W. 2007).

<sup>7</sup> The acception of the word “assembly” as “a group of people gathered together in one place for a common purpose” (Merian-Webster Dictionary, 1996), “whether religious, political, educational or social” (Random House Dictionary, 2011), may well apply to mhondoro gatherings, which we shall treat here as ritual assemblies or councils. These mhondoro councils are locally called *dare*.

<sup>8</sup> A contextualized analysis of ritual action and ritual specificity is detailed in the author’s forthcoming PhD thesis (Sicilia, O. 2012).

The standard speech acts that take place at the ritual setting are always initiated by the mhondoro. An assembly conventionally starts by the ritual greeting of the mhondoro to the audience either individually or as a whole (or combining both as attendants arrive in small groups), and by their greeting to the mhondoro in reply. Most of these formalized greeting forms are differentiated from everyday greetings in the way speakers address each other, and are used only in these ritual gatherings.

The following are summarized the most common forms of address used in the meeting. Participants address the male mhondoro as *teteguru* (ancestor, paternal great grandfather) or *manduhwe* (a respectful form similar to “sir”), and the few female mhondoro as *ambuya* (female ancestor, great grandmother). These three terms are replying forms to the mhondoro. Conversely, the mhondoro address male attendants as a group by the term *vashaka*, and female attendants as *zepa*. Both terms are only used in ritual exchange and not in everyday speech. Women may also be addressed individually as *amai* (mother). A group of male living descendants of the local mhondoro present at the assembly, is addressed by the mhondoro hosting the gathering (and those invited) as *machinda*. Other forms are just plural (you [people]), addressing everybody indistinctly at the assembly. The audience may also be addressed by the mhondoro in reported speech (when they talk to each other) as *vapenyu* (the living). Single individuals (both male or female) are often addressed by a kind of nickname given to that person by a particular mhondoro. The totem may also be used by the mhondoro to address men men<sup>9</sup>. Further, the mhondoro addresses the medium (his/her own medium or another mhondoro’s medium) by the word *homwe* (pocket)<sup>10</sup>. At bigger councils where a group of mhondoro gathers together at the ritual place of one of them, they address each other using kinship terms defined by their relationship. The most senior mhondoro in the genealogy is addressed by his mhondoro descendants as *teteguru* (ancestor).

During the assembly, verbal exchanges between the mhondoro are not always directly addressed but mediated through another mhondoro or an assistant<sup>11</sup> that acts as middleperson repeating the whole message again, even if both mhondoro that do not talk directly to each other are placed at such a distance that the message would be perfectly audible.

Thus, mhondoro who stand in a father and son (or daughter) relationship never address each other directly but through a messenger that will pass each other’s statements or questions in reported speech. This is the only kin category whose members are not able to exchange verbally without mediation. This ritual rule has a correspondence in the use of space and of physical interaction or proximity, as we shall see later on. Further, junior mhondoro are usually obliged to convey the message of his immediate senior (typically

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<sup>9</sup> The totem can also be used as form of address amongst men, and by women towards men in every day speech. However, the totem is never used to address a woman since it is only patrilineally inherited.

<sup>10</sup> If a mhondoro addresses his/her own medium, the possessive pronoun is never used. E.g., instead of saying “my *homwe*”, this would be expressed by “the *homwe*”, meaning, “the one I’m possessing now”.

<sup>11</sup> Within the lineage we are dealing with (the Nyamapfeka descent line) assistants to the mhondoro or *mutape* are always men.

in the case of two brothers) to the most senior mhondoro in the genealogy, even if the mhondoro for whom he takes the role of a messenger (here his elder brother) is ritually able to directly communicate with the most senior one (here Nyamapfeka, the lineage-founder).

The ritual attendants communicate with the mhondoro as a rule directly and only occasionally the mhondoro's assistant may intervene, conveying the messages in the way described.

A "joking relationship" is at play amongst certain mhondoro kin categories. Whilst grandparents and grandchildren stand in a "joking relationship" which affects their verbal interactions at the assembly, there is by contrast avoidance speech between those mhondoro in a father and son (or daughter) relationship, and who consequently never "joke" together. To joke versus not to joke means not only that the parties involved are allowed to talk to each other directly without the intervention of a mediator, but that they are also allowed to challenge each other verbally, and to contradict each others' statements and decisions especially juniors versus seniors (which never occurs between younger and elder brothers, where as a rule seniority dominates).

At bigger mhondoro councils, when a group of them gather for deliberation, both speech styles, namely, "joking relationship" and avoidance speech, co-exist. The effect of this system of communication in deliberative contexts is a stress on hierarchy and authority, those mhondoro who can "joke" are in a better position than those who cannot. Thus, those mhondoro in the genealogy classified as "joking relatives" (in our case chiefly grandparents with grandsons) as a rule enjoy free discourse, without the speech formality and restrictions that govern those classified as "avoidance relatives" (in our case fathers and sons) which as a consequence will influence whose mhondoro decisions have more chances to be brought forwards.

### Body, gesture, and directional postures

During the meeting, verbal exchanges between mhondoro and participants are regularly accompanied by the hand clapping by both men and women. They signal respect (typically at ritual greetings) from someone in a hierarchically lower position to one in a higher<sup>12</sup>, but they also signal verbally silent approbation and approve of the mhondoro's statements, opinions, and decisions. Thus, attendants also clap hands when leaving the *dendemaro* after the mhondoro has closed the meeting and left the arena, and when addressing a question, opinion or statement to the mhondoro during deliberations. Women may ululate as well to signal praise, agreement, or support to the ancestor.

At the assemblies as part of the transformations undergone by the medium through possession, his everyday voice turns into the mhondoro's voice, which is radically different in pitch and inflexion. In addition, throughout the ritual process, the mhondoro usually sniffs tobacco, and might emit roaring sounds (for they symbolically represent a lion), whistle, spit, or vomit water among other acts.

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<sup>12</sup> Conversely, the mhondoro never clap hands either to each other or to the people at the audience.

At the arena mhondoro occupy a specific place vis-à-vis the audience: they chiefly lie on the stomach on a reed matt under a thatched roof on poles (*dendemaro*), facing the attendants, changing sometimes from leaning right or left in a sitting position. Assembly participants on their part, sit outside<sup>13</sup> on the ground, facing the mhondoro, with men and women separated. Those mhondoro who stand in a brothers relationship, and those who can “joke” with each other (as mentioned previously, grandparents with grandsons), share the same matt lying close to each other. At a big assembly several mhondoro may arrive and lie under the *dendemaro* of the mhondoro hosting this assembly. The only exception being any mhondoro who stands in a father-son relation. Sons never lie close to fathers, but at some distance from the *dendemaro*.

As a last observation on bodily ritual aspects, women undergoing menstruation or bleeding for any other reason (post-partum consequences, etc.), are excluded from the ritual space, and cannot attend the meetings. Without discussing further details, a ritual taboo forbids the mhondoro (and the medium) either to see or to be in the vicinity of human blood.

### Spatial orientation and physical movements

As Parker stresses (2000), speech and words never stand alone in ritual performance, they are dependant on the accompanying spatial movements and orientation (*ibid*). Even in such rituals as mhondoro assemblies, which at first sight might appear to be static, formulaic spatiality is carried out by the ritual participants (i.e., the mhondoro together with the audience).

Both, the duration and location of ritual action (the assembly itself) are determined and controlled by the mhondoro. Assemblies always start at the crack of dawn or close to dawn, at around 5 am. and finish towards 9 am. While usually a few attendants are already present, and others arrive in groups later on, the mhondoro appears barefoot in his conventional black or blue garment coming from the nearby bush and enters the *dendemaro*, the ritual house, to occupy his position. Once he considers that the topics and issues to be dealt with that assembly have all been discussed, he ends the meeting by saying, “its over, I’m going”, and leaves the ritual space, returning to the bush that he inhabits. Thus, the mhondoro opens and closes the meeting.

The audience enters and leaves the arena through a spot designated for the living not for the ancestors, having left their shoes and other belongings a certain distance away. Once the meeting ends, the last to leave the assembly space are always the people (the living).

In the last three subsections were outlined some key aspects of mhondoro ritual performance. In what follows will be referred what are the concerns of these meetings and how they proceed.

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<sup>13</sup> Only occasionally (e.g., in cases of rain), and when the capacity of the *dendemaro* allows so, an exception for the structures are usually small, the attendants may sit inside sharing the space of the mhondoro.

Mhondoro assemblies or *dare* are held at the *dzimbahwe*, a deforested circle in the bush located at about 60-100 mts. from the medium's homestead. It does not lie on a common village path, but in a cul-de-sac, and thus, neither the arena nor the structures in it are immediately visible. At the *dzimbahwe*<sup>14</sup>, the house of the mhondoro (*dendemaro*) containing his paraphernalia and other belongings is located, as well as the playing and dancing ground, and the audience seating area. Maintenance of the *dzimbahwe* and in particular of the *dendemaro* and the mhondoro's ritual belongings is the task of the assistant to the mhondoro even after the medium's death.

Each mhondoro who regularly reappears in a medium has his own ritual space. The arena of a specific mhondoro might change, when his medium changes residence within the village or moves to another village (or even another ward), as well as when this mhondoro reappears in a new medium whose residence is elsewhere. In any of these cases, it is considered the mhondoro's choice to have changed his arena and not the medium's. Once abandoned, the *dendemaro* rapidly decays, and in a few years the entire *dzimbahwe* is reforested showing no trace of the political and ritual activity once held there.

However, the *dendemaro* and its surrounding area is a sacralized place in the same way as are certain other spots in the mhondoro's territory (e.g., springs, specific woods, pools, cliffs, the medium's burial place, etc.). In both, a regularly maintained *dendemaro* (active or not), or an abandoned *dzimbahwe* that has completely lost its ritual activity and convening power, they are and remain sacred, and cannot be profaned, which means that ritual rules and prohibitions must be observed.

Mhondoro gatherings are convened to deal either with personal, domestic affairs, or with matters affecting the community at large. In the first type (*kushopera*), the meetings chiefly concern the treatment of all sorts of illnesses, as well as witchcraft cases, desire for prosperity and protection for the fields, or the recovery of stolen items, amongst other individual concerns. In the second type (*dare*), the mhondoro may announce, warn, and advise about forthcoming dangers that the community might face (like floods, droughts, lion attacks, etc.), but he also reminds the community of their ritual obligations and demands that they be fulfilled (like the brewing of beer for rituals related to the fertility of the soil, the reconstruction or construction of the *dendemaro*, or support for the ritual grooming of a recently appeared mhondoro, etc.). Any matter that affects or concerns the community as a whole is also exposed, deliberated, or reported at the mhondoro council, such as local government demands on ward residents, parliamentary or Councillors elections announcements, intended or actual development projects in the area, announcements concerning the annual hunting activities of the local safari operator with a lease for hunting in the area, and proceedings related to this<sup>15</sup>, government food aid distributions in the ward, allocation of land both for ward residents and immigrants<sup>16</sup>,

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<sup>14</sup> Mhondoro lineage ancestors are also addressed by the name *dzimbahwe*.

<sup>15</sup> Dividends that ward residents should receive through CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Program for Indigenous Resources), which is an association of Rural District Councils.

<sup>16</sup> In Angwa and Masoka wards, land allocation is still mediated by local "traditional" leaders and legitimized by mhondoro councils, despite the stress made by some studies on the increasing rejection of "traditional" authority structures amongst younger generations (Masoka Community, 1997). Officially, the

report of the death of a community member and related ritual proceedings, issues concerning the death of a mhondoro's medium, and the process of the legitimization of a newly appeared or reappeared mhondoro.

From the perspective of the ancestor, anything occurring in the ward and affecting its dwellers concerns the mhondoro for it is his territory where they exert jurisdiction. Mhondoro councils are part of the "traditional" leadership system, which as an influential institution is involved in most aspects of social life in the ward from domestic conflicts to involvement in local government administration.

Both *dare* and *kushopera* sessions may overlap at the same gathering and the mhondoro, as owner of the ritual place of assembly, decides how to organize the procedure. Commonly, *dare* comes first, and individual matters are dealt with at the end, after the majority of participants have left. In practice, a *dare* is originally convened to consider a concrete community issue, after which some participants may discuss their affairs. However, if no spare time is left for that, individuals have to convene a new gathering for their own issues.

In all these cases, mhondoro councils, and by extension any mhondoro gathering<sup>17</sup>, are convened through the ritual calling of the royal ancestor by means of the mhondoro's assistant the evening prior to the assembly. However, occasionally and for less relevant meetings, the ancestor might also summon a *dare* without having been previously called, by announcing his presence at dawn in the usual ritual manner.

Before considering the access to the floor, the aspects on deliberation and decision-making, the profile of the assembly participants, etc. at mhondoro meetings, we must briefly discuss some local ritual and kin networks structurally bound to these councils. These are the local *machinda* group and the *dungwe*.

The *machinda* is a group constituted by the living male descendants of a mhondoro lineage, a royal ancestor (in our case a mhondoro of the Nyamapfeka descent line)<sup>18</sup> who once according to oral histories, conquered the area, by virtue of which he became "owner" of the territory. Some *machinda* are able to trace their ancestry fifteen generations back (Lan, D. 1985) to an original "owner of the land". Although their influence is strong, they represent in the area under study a small percentage of the total ward residents. Besides having ritual obligations with respect to the mhondoro to whom they are ancestrally linked, they work as a pressure group during ward deliberations concerning chieftaincy successions, as well as negotiations related to land and natural resource claims (e.g., wildlife, water, and forest), on the basis of their alleged autochthonous and ancestral connection to the land, that is, as the legitimate descendants

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District Council is in charge of land allocation in communal areas, but in Angwa and Masoka wards the Chief and headmen carry out this function using procedures that are largely informal (Welford, L. 2002), contravening state legislation as established in local governance policies. Land in communal areas and under customary law is patrilineally inherited, and local people have only rights of usufruct but not ownership.

<sup>17</sup> Including all-night gatherings, which might include the drinking of locally brewed beer.

<sup>18</sup> Who consequently are MaKorekore Shona.



of the “owners of the land” in this area (the mhondoro). They are the *vana vepasi*, the “sons’ of the soil”. The influential “sons’ of the soil” discourse, not only sanctions the authority of dominant groups that control land use and access at ward level, but also has an impact on present-day state discourses on citizenship and on the “politics of identity and belonging” (Hammar, A. 2005). Official local history (which is the history of the “sons’ of the soil”), as recounted in oral histories and myths, is the *machinda*’s and the elders’ privileged information and not public knowledge. Whenever needed, and particularly during community deliberations at mhondoro councils, this knowledge is accurately recounted, actualized and interpreted by the lineage ancestor, and his living descendants. Thus, the meaning of local history is controlled by the dominant elite, while at the same time this history validates the authority of this elite on the use of and access to land (and natural resources), and on chieftainship legitimacy. *Machinda* are typically elders and village headmen (*sabhuku*) and they belong to the (MaKorekore) ward leadership, thus, dominating the representation of interests and in ward decision-making structures (to which Chiefs and Councillors<sup>19</sup> belong). Additionally, headmen often act as the assistant to the mhondoro.

The *dungwe* is a heterogeneous male network ritually bound to the mhondoro (expected to give ritual support at any mhondoro gathering) constituted by ward residents, to which *machinda* are part. Each recurrently reappearing mhondoro has his/her own *dungwe*. The *dungwe* works also as a system by which locally residing lineages that are not descendants of the mhondoro, can virtually “become” –i.e., to count as— living descendants of the mhondoro lineage owing the area but only for ritual purposes.

Although officially each person is free to speak and take part at a mhondoro council, to have access to the floor, and so to “participate” at the assembly, these rights do not imply decision-making power, since mhondoro councils are frameworks that tend to reinforce and sanction the hegemonic status of local elites.

Thus, in practice who really have a say about ward community concerns, and particularly about land and resources? Chiefly, seniors (elders) over juniors, men over women<sup>20</sup>, and *machinda* (the local elite) over the rest of residents.

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<sup>19</sup> While the ward Councillors are elected every four years by the residents of the ward, the office of headman is in Angwa and Masoka (predominantly) patrilineally inherited, therefore, headmen are not nominated by the Chief as established in the Chiefs and Headmen Act. ZANU-PF dominates both ward structures, elected and “traditional” (i.e., Councillors and headmen respectively) as well as the Mbire District Council.

<sup>20</sup> Women participation and representation within the “traditional” authority structures is scant; they are also rarely represented on committees (e.g., CAMPFIRE, and LGDA) and in village meetings. Further, ward administration in Angwa and Masoka is dominated by men who are from the Makorekore group. Therefore, women are largely disenfranchised from formal decision-making processes (Welford, L. 2002) both within “traditional” structures and local governance. Dominant social and cultural values perpetuate stereotypical gender roles and the view that women are not qualified for leadership. Women have some input at the ward party level through the governmental ZANU-PF Women’s League, although it is limited to organizing local women’s support for the party. As some studies have stressed, women dominate many local church groups, and attend women-only meetings usually guided by the pastor’s wife (*ibid*).

A case of land allocation might serve to exemplify a common community interest that would summon a mhondoro council (*dare*) and the way main social actors would engage and proceed.

As mentioned, settlement in communal land in Angwa and Masoka is in practice carried out by the Chief and the headmen independently from District Council (Mbire Rural District Council) and ward Councillors who, according to local government legislation are the appointed authority for land allocation. In both wards the Chief retains control over land allocation, however, on a day-to-day basis he delegates individual negotiations and procedures to the headmen of the ward (there is one per village). Immigrants have to apply to Chief Chisunga with a letter of reference from the Chief of the area where they previously resided. When approved, the potential settler is referred to a headman, who, after negotiating with the immigrant the location of a plot, sends him to consult the mhondoro who has jurisdiction over that territory. The headman then convenes a mhondoro assembly (by ritually calling the mhondoro either directly or through the assistant), where the ancestor will be informed, the issue will be discussed, and if after a ritual procedure the mhondoro so authorized, the allocation of land and settlement may proceed. At the assembly discussion issues may raise for example, regarding whether the proposed area is convenient for settlement or not, suggestions in the case the plot is too close to a sacred area, claims by other residents, etc. Present and forming part of the audience would be typically the headman, the prospective settler (and kin) and those residents who want to participate, for as mentioned, mhondoro assemblies are open to all. Therefore, villagers who want to make a statement or question do it in turns, often by formally clapping hands at the beginning. Disagreement between the participants tends to be arbitrated by the mhondoro who hosts the assembly.

On the other hand, residents that may want to change their own plot for agricultural or residential purposes do not need to apply to the Chief for settlement rights. In the rule, resident and headman of the area engage directly and on an informal basis in the micro-politics of negotiation, contravening state legislation in this respect. Further, the resident has no ritual obligation to inform the mhondoro about the change.

However, and although it is beyond the scope of this paper, the relationship between mhondoro and community through their mediums is far more complex. As a number of studies continue showing, mhondoro ancestors in communal land do not only articulate and sanction local claims but are also able to mobilize community intervention particularly when residents' interests (land and natural resources) are considered to be at risk (Chikozho, C. and Latham, J., 2005; Hasler, R., 1996; Spierenburg, M., 2004, 2005).

#### **4. Rural local governance: state apparatus and paradoxes**

The “traditional” leadership is hierarchically structured in Chiefs, headmen and village heads who form part of rural local government institutions. However, mhondoro mediums although pivotal in the “traditional” authority system (at least in Mbire District) are not part of the state controlled structures of rural local government. They have

actually never been incorporated in any state controlled structure, either in the colonial state or the post-independence state. Early post-independence legislation, introduced with the aim of ending *de facto* the political function of mhondoro mediums, reducing them to mere healers (Bhebe, N. and Ranger, T. 1995), did not achieve their intended (political) effect, at least not in Dande.

Current legislation includes Chiefs as *ex officio* (not elected) members on Rural District Councils, and headmen and village heads in sub-district structures of Rural District Councils (Chakaipa, S., 2010). Further, the Constitution of Zimbabwe (as amended 2005) includes 18 appointed Chiefs as part of the legislative body as Senators, and they are paid a monthly salary and allowances by the state (Makumbe, J., 2010). As a consequence, these Chiefs sitting in Parliament always end up voting in support of the governmental party ZANU-PF for they are appointed by the President (*ibid*). In addition, since 2000 traditional leaders have been extensively politicized<sup>21</sup> as well as threatened and bribed (particularly mhondoro mediums).

Both, before and after Independence, “traditional” leaders have been sought and often co-opted by the governmental party seeking their support in order to exert authority in their communities to influence governance processes, and the electorate. At the same time, the law prevents them from seeking elective office and from participating in party politics.

## 5. Conclusion

In Mbire district (as in the rest of Zimbabwe) a dual system of law operates, based on the one hand on constitutional law (which is secularized, i.e., detached from ancestral values), and on the other on customary law, which articulates with religious or sacred practices (here mhondoro ritual processes). This results in a number of ambiguities in the legislation and administration of communal lands (e.g., the double function of headmen: ritual and local governmental).

“Traditional” authorities, in particular Chiefs, headmen, but also mhondoro councils can be seen as undemocratic (non-elected) institutions of governance. This paper aims to contribute to a reflection on whether or not mhondoro councils, as a ritualized system of decision-making and participation, could be compatible with democratic procedures and local government elected structures.

Further, the section on traditional leaders (article 14) of the Global Political Agreement (GPA), which took effect on February 2009, does not add much to previous legislation on this issue (e.g., the Traditional Leaders Act of 2000, and the Constitution Amendment No. 8) apart from insisting on a rhetoric of political neutrality by chiefs, headmen and

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<sup>21</sup> In the Zambezi Valley: “MP Accused of Fuelling Political Violence in Muzarabani”, *SW Radio Africa*, 27 April 2010; “News Alert 12 May: Chief Kasekete orders daylight robbery in a politically motivated act of malice”, *Rohr Zimbabwe*, 12 May 2010; “ZANU-PF terror campaign in Mudzi and Muzarabani”, *SW Radio Africa*, 13 May 2002; “Corpses Rot As ZANU-PF Terror Moves a Gear Up”, *The Standard*, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2008.

village heads<sup>22</sup>. Particularly in Mashona Central Province (to which Mbire District belongs), this situation, along with the extensive co-option of traditional leaders<sup>23</sup> into the governmental party, leads us to infer a policy of continuity with respect to the local governance system, and possibly on patterns of authority and on the politicization (to date ZANU-ization) of rural government institutions – particularly of those who receive a salary and/or allowances.

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<sup>22</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Global Political Agreement (GPA) and of the role of traditional leaders contemplated in this document, consult for example: [www.cisomm.org](http://www.cisomm.org). “Deconstructing the GPA: A Step by step analysis of the Global Political Agreement”. By Zimbabwe Chimbga (ZLHR Programme Manager, International Litigation, Lobby and Advocacy); [www.zimfa.gov.zw](http://www.zimfa.gov.zw) (Agreement between the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the two Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formations, on resolving the challenges facing Zimbabwe); [www.sokwanele.com](http://www.sokwanele.com) (Zimbabwe Inclusive Government Watch).

<sup>23</sup> “The role of chiefs in the new constitution”, *The Zimbabwean*, 13 April 2010.

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