EXORCISM AS A MEANS OF COMBATING WIZARDRY: LIBERATION OR ENSLAVEMENT?

M. L. Daneel*

Exorcism forms an integral part of the healing ministry adopted by many of the established and Independent churches in Africa, particularly the prophetic movements of the Zionist and Apostolic type. Compared with the more common faith-healing activities, which combine direct pleas to the Christian God on behalf of the afflicted with a wide variety of symbolic activities – from laying-on of hands to sprinkling with holy water, the touch of a holy staff or the protective adornment of holy cords – exorcism represents a more dramatic act of spirit expulsion. Instead of praying to God, the priest, prophet or healer, acting as exorcist, commands the spirit invading the afflicted person to depart. Thus the ritual is a symbolic manifestation of God's power over the possessing spirit.

African cosmology is characterised by a preoccupation with the spirit-world in the form of ancestor veneration as a means of safeguarding social stability and the disruption of sociocosmic harmony by spirits of evil intent. Against this background exorcism appears in many instances to be an effective means of communicating the Christian good news of Christ's Lordship over all principalities and powers in the universe. At all events, many church leaders use exorcism as a pastoral instrument to combat wizardry beliefs, the accompanying fears and the antisocial forces thought to be at work. In addition many Africans witness about liberation and relief once they have undergone exorcist treatment.

A perusal of current theological viewpoints indicates, however, that scholars are by no means unanimous in their evaluation of the pastoral value of exorcism in the church of Africa. Broadly speaking, a distinction can be made between those church leaders and academic observers of African Christianity who either practise or theoretically support a ministry of exorcism, and those who oppose it or are highly critical of its seemingly negative implications. The former emphasize the *liberating* value of a ministry which appears to confront the existential needs and fears of people in a ritually understandable and therefore psychologically and religiously satisfying manner. The latter are sceptical of the long-term impact of a practice which is considered to be counterproductive in that it reinforces the traditional cosmology – and therefore *enslaves people* to the

* Prof. M.L. Daneel teaches in the Department of Missiology at the University of South Africa (P.O. Box 392, 0001 PRETORIA).
world of demons, wizardry beliefs and fears – without providing a realistic Christian solution.

In this paper I shall first of all consider a few of these contrasting theological viewpoints in an attempt to establish a theoretical framework within which to interpret the exorcist ministry of Zimbabwean Independent Church leaders that I am currently studying. Then I present a brief sketch, based on a recent survey of what could be called a Christian wizardry eradication movement. This case study concerns the exorcist work of Bishop Nyasha, leader of the Pentecostal Church (popularly known among the Shona as Pentecosta) – a Shona Spirit-type church with Zionist and Apostolic features, but focusing on the expulsion of wizardry or wizardry related spirits. The headquarters of this church is in the Chingombe chiefdom in the Gutu district, the same area where I studied Prophet Elison Mutingwende’s Shinga Postora (Courageous Apostles) movement in earlier years (Daneel 1974:266–276). As this latter movement also focused on wizardry eradication, some comparative observations will be included merely by way of clarifying the salient features of the Pentecosta’s pastoral ministry. Basically, however, this paper attempts to interpret and evaluate exorcism in one Independent Church in the light of recent theological considerations.

The length of this paper allows only a cursory treatment of relevant theories and a much abridged description of essentially novel and provisional empirical data from a research project still underway. Hence a word of caution: what follows is a preliminary and in many respects impressionistic excursion into a complex and sensitive field. If nothing else, I trust that my treatment of the subject will illustrate the relativity, if not futility, of our neat Western theories when confronted, in practice, with the belief systems and stark pastoral realities of Africa. Whatever our theoretical constructs, the fact is that the enacted theology of the African Independent churches is a vitally significant component of a developing African Christian theology. In this respect Bishop Nyasha’s ministry of exorcism is noteworthy, being one more instance of intuitive, spontaneous or dramatic representation of the gospel at the cutting edge of existential confrontation between the Christian message and evil (as defined in African cosmology).

THEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINTS

Support for and practice of a ministry of exorcism

Dr A.O. Ingenoza of the University of Nigeria calls for a more dynamic

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1. For descriptive purposes the term "wizardry" is used in this paper as an equivalent for the Shona term uroyi in its widest connotation. Within this broad conceptual framework – referring to evil, antisocial acts by both males and females – a distinction is made between sorcery and witchcraft. The former involves mainly the use of destructive medicine; the latter refers to psychic acts, with or without the use of witch familiars and/or evil medicine. In this paper witches on the whole are females. They can be classified as either hereditary witches or witches who, without any "supernatural" pressure, accept their profession by having witchcraft medicines rubbed into incisions in their bodies made by other witches. Bishop Nyasha’s exorcist ministry draws large numbers of potential or practising hereditary witches who seek liberation from afflicting ancestral spirits. For a detailed description of Shona wizardry beliefs, see Gelfand (1967, passim); Crawford (1967:74f); and Daneel (1971:156–177).
and contextualized form of Christianity in Africa, particularly as far as the “mainline” churches are concerned. He argues strongly for a ministry of exorcism on the grounds that “exorcism has succeeded in bringing relief to some affected people whereas other methods have apparently failed” (Ingenoza 1985:179).

In the Roman Catholic Church two of the best-known examples of African leaders engaged in the exorcism of evil spirits are Emanuel Milingo, former Archbishop of Lusaka (Zambia) and Fr M.P. Hebga, a Jesuit priest in Cameroon. Against the background of diverse studies in theology, psychology, philosophy and the social sciences, Fr Hebga has systematically investigated various stereotypes of spirit possession and has developed a pastoral ministry to deal with such cases. According to Lagerwerf, Hebga’s exorcist ministry includes “ongoing and powerful praying of the minister and his co-workers (prayers of the Roman ritual prove themselves especially effective), reading of certain passages from the Bible, invoking the archangel Michael or other saints, administering of holy water, touching the body of the possessed with a crucifix, discussions with and rebuking of the spirit(s), and in general a sympathetic and caring attitude towards the possessed” (Lagerwerf 1985:67).

Fr Milingo developed an astounding ministry in Lusaka in the seventies, drawing vast crowds to his healing sessions. Accused of unorthodoxy, neglect of his episcopal duties and dishonesty, he was summoned to Rome for intensive investigation. This led to his resignation from his See in 1982. His subsequent duties as Special Delegate to the Pontifical Commission on Migrant Refugees and tourism do not prevent him from giving pastoral service to hundreds of supporters in Rome and from celebrating a monthly “healing mass” on behalf of thousands of people. In his book, *The world in between* (1984), Fr Milingo develops a simplified demonology as the cause of much of the human suffering he has encountered in his ministry. He illustrates his convictions about the reality of Satan and demonic powers with references to the *Church of the Spirit*, a movement which allegedly receives spiritual powers from the devil; has pacts with the devil, contracted by individuals who have despaired as a result of their disappointment with human life and society; and communicates with evil spirits who have the gift of revelation. Milingo considers many religious ministers incapable of acknowledging such reality because they have become “spiritual diplomats” who have somehow accepted a form of co-existence with the enemy, the devil. “They say he is not there and when they are told that he is there, they tell the possessed that they should believe he is not there” (Milingo 1984:52). Needless to say, Milingo calls on fellow believers to stop being spiritual diplomats and to engage boldly in the fight against Satán. In his own ministry of exorcism or deliverance he is convinced that he shares the power and authority of Christ the Messiah to cast out Satan or any evil spirits (Milingo 1984:119). His appeal to the church universal,
therefore, is not only to preach the miracles of the gospel, but to deliberately invoke the healing powers given by Christ to his Church (Milingo 1984:103).

As regards prophetic exorcist activities in Independent churches, I have pointed out the positive recruitment value of such pastoral practices for the Shona Independents in Zimbabwe. To numerous adherents of the Spirit-type churches exorcism symbolizes the liberating and protective function of the church. The built-in safeguards against possible misinterpretation of this ministry was described as follows:

The ritual context within which exorcism takes place is quite different from that within which the nganga (the traditional exorcist) operates. Here we have a group of people professing to be Christians who dance and sing Christian songs in the expectation of a manifestation of the Christian God’s delivering power. The act of driving out the inhabiting and unwanted spirit is usually performed in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Prophets generally recognize that the act of expulsion does not imply a self-willed manipulation of divine power and that God Himself is the final authority who decides whether their dramatized and symbolic action will be successful. Some of them admit failures, often with reference to God who willed otherwise. Then there is also the accompanying pastoral care and the insistence of prophets that afflicted persons themselves should pray perseveringly to be rid of troubling spirits. Thus we have a group-integrated technique with interaction between participant, congregation, exorcising prophet and praying patient – all of them in action before and depending on the great Deliverer of evil powers (Daneel 1974:342).

Because of these decidedly positive features of prophetic exorcism, as well as a persistent need for contextualized pastoral care in the face of the high incidence of spirit-possession observed amongst the Shona, I supported J.V. Taylor’s (1963:211) call for “the development of some properly safeguarded ministry of exorcism” in the church of Africa.

In the field of wizardry the weaknesses of a prophetic ministry of medicine-finding, wizard-detection and the exorcism of uroyi spirits, were pointed out. Some prophets, for instance, concentrate on the recruitment value of their services to such an extent that they neglect pastoral care of their flock. Others exploit the fears of people who feel threatened by the powers of wizardry. In some cases the discriminatory and stigmatizing effect of exposing potential or practising witches overrides the Christian spirit of love and sympathetic understanding, with detrimental implications for the social status of the woman concerned. It was felt, however, that the positive features of the prophetic campaign against wizardry practices preponderate, in that the message of God’s protection and liberation is convincingly carried into a realm frequently dominated by stark terror. The Christian message of reconciliation, moreover, is conveyed to the wizards – the outcasts and misfits of society – in a manner which provides
new hope of social rehabilitation. This is in direct opposition to the traditional belief: once a wizard, always a wizard – which assumes the incontrovertibly evil nature of whoever is branded a witch or sorcerer in African society (Daneel 1974:343–347).

**Criticism of exorcism: Preference for a paradigm shift**

Shorter’s (1985:95) reservations about exorcism as a pastoral tool in the church of Africa are closely linked with his views on the destructive impact of witchcraft theory and practice on African society:

Witchcraft is a kind of penumbra of human wickedness, an inborn preternatural power to harm and kill enjoyed for its own sake. To see all the misfortune, especially the more dramatic disasters, as traceable to human causes is intellectually satisfying. It also creates an illusion of control over evil forces, but ultimately it is not credible... It entails unjust judgements.

Shorter is particularly concerned about the misleading illusion of control over evil, the injustice of witchcraft accusations and the witch-finder’s pretence of finally judging the witch. Witchcraft accusation, in his view, is a form of self-salvation or self-justification, a mechanism of evading personal responsibility for misfortune and sinful acts, at the expense of whoever is branded the common enemy of the community (Shorter 1985:96). The witch-finder usurps the position of God by acting as both judge and executioner. His or her accusations destroy the social personality of the accused. By implication all witchcraft-eradication movements, by their very inclusion of witch-finding and accusation practices, only serve to strengthen people’s fear of witches and their acceptance of the underlying theory. They provide no viable solution or true liberation from an oppressive belief system.

Exorcism, in its popularized form in the Church of Africa, can include traditional aspects of witch-finding and accusations; can lead to indiscriminate attribution of misfortunes to evil forces, and hence to intensified exorcist procedures; and consequently can lead to aberrations similar to the European witch hunts. Shorter’s reticence on this score is therefore understandable. He reminds us that although Christ practised exorcism in the case of epileptics, he did not attribute every affliction to diabolical possession. Likewise, it would be wrong for the priest-exorcist to try and win over fellow believers to his views of demonic possession – a terrible prospect, considering the historic background of European demonology. Instead, Shorter (in Lagerwerf 1987:58) feels that the church should develop a more original and enduring ministry:

We should discourage interest in the spectacle of exorcism and dissociated personality in the normal context of healing and prayer over the sick. For the Christian African the world must be alive in a new sense, not with
the self-orientated, depersonalizing theories of African tradition, but with
the knowledge that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God” and
that all natural human realities are communications of divine love and
salvation in Jesus Christ.

In his recent book, *Jesus and the witchdoctor*, Shorter’s criticism of
exorcism is directed specifically against the work of former Archbishop
Milingo. He is convinced that Milingo imposes a medieval theory of
European demonology on the traditional African spirit world. This im­
ported theory has more in common with the *Malleus maleficarum* (hammer
of the witches) – a notorious publication by two Inquisitors in 1486, which
deals with the massive witch-hunt in Europe at the time – than with African
tradition (Shorter 1985:190). Milingo’s ministry incorrectly and indiscrim­
inately attributes diabolical possession to all kinds of mental and physical
afflictions (Shorter 1985:197). Repeated exorcism, Shorter insists, only
serve to strengthen people’s fears of demons and evil spirits. Hence the
dualistic world-view of absolute good versus absolute bad is reinforced to
the extent that the fear of demons overrides faith in the healing power of
God.

Without totally rejecting exorcism, Shorter suggests that the solution to
wizardry should be sought in alternative measures: firstly, the refusal to
enter into discussion about the objectivity of wizardry beliefs; secondly,
conscious relinquishment of the dualistic philosophy underlying wizardry
beliefs; and thirdly, transformation of the social world through socio­
economic development and Christian community building – that is, the
creation of a setting which will dispel wizardry-related fears.

David Bosch distinguishes between two different approaches to the
combating of wizardry. The first accepts in essence the African traditional
interpretive framework, while the second insists on changing this frame­
work, in other words, it switches to a new paradigm. Like Shorter and
also refers to Andrew Wall’s (1982:97–99) distinction: the first approach is
based on the *indigenisation principle*, in which the Christian faith is
incarnated in a particular culture; the second rests on the *pilgrim principle*,
through which God in Christ transforms culture. Of course one immedi­
ately wonders whether these principles should be interpreted as mutually
exclusive. Incarnation as envisaged by the indigenisation principle in fact
includes Christ’s transformation of culture. In practice at least indigenisa­
tion seldom involves a straightforward and passive adaptation of the
Christian faith to indigenous culture. It seems to me, therefore, that we
have here two principles with a considerable degree of overlapping,
displaying different emphases rather than absolute antithesis.

This aspect is not sufficiently recognized in the categorical theoretical
distinctions between the two. Bosch, for instance, classifies both the
confession of witchcraft practices (described with reference to the *Shinga*
Postora movement) and exorcism (mainly with reference to Milingo’s ministry) as belonging to the first approach. Thus the impression is created that these practices merely accept the traditional cosmology and make no real contribution to a final solution, a paradigm shift. Interpreted in Shorter’s terms, as Bosch appears to be doing, these practices serve to perpetuate and entrench instead of supplant the traditional paradigm. He does not sufficiently consider the possibility of exorcism – and not only Milingo’s kind of exorcism along European demonological lines – changing the traditional world view; of exorcism being instrumental in bringing about a paradigm shift. Bishop Nyasha’s ministry of exorcism, the case study to be discussed below, suggests that a fundamental reshaping of society is in fact attempted and that many of the features of an alternative interpretive framework, as proposed by Bosch, are integral to this ministry.

What, according to Bosch, are the requirements for a paradigm shift?

Firstly, Christians should help their community liberate itself from the scapegoat theory by invoking the message of Christ, the one true “Scapegoat” who carried away the sins of this world once and for all. Secondly, Christian teaching should emphasize the co-responsibility of all individuals for what goes wrong in society, lest the tendency to blame a wizard for such misfortune encourages a superficial understanding of conversion. Thirdly, a new understanding of human suffering should be fostered in order to change the philosophy which links suffering with evil and consequently imputes the practice of wizardry to the ill deeds of others. Fourthly, a fundamental change in attitude towards magic is required. Healing, reconciliation and mutual service should replace the search for and elimination of the alleged human causes of misfortune. Fifth, the Christian message should be proclaimed that evil has no future. The future lies with God. Satan and all manifestations of evil can therefore only be seen as conquered in advance by God. In this respect Bosch (1987:58–59) indicates that the church in Africa has not always managed to communicate the message of an ever-present God. The more remote God appears to be, the greater the need for magic to counter the destructive forces of evil.

However much I agree with these requirements for a paradigm shift, the question remains how one is to convey this message effectively in a society which still by and large applies the scapegoat theory, where the belief in magic is still rife and where one is confronted constantly with outcasts, misfits and marginal figures – those already accused and stigmatized, in search of a cure or a lasting solution. What do you do with the afflicted members of families who for many generations have had a tradition of inherited wizardry? When such individuals fall ill and have dreams which are interpreted by society as call-dreams to perpetrate wizardry, they are at once stigmatized in their neighbourhood. In their appeal to the church for a solution, do we avoid talking about the objective reality of wizardry as it
features in their lives for fear of giving credence to such beliefs, as Shorter would have it? Or do we confront those beliefs with the message of the one Scapegoat, Christ, and exorcise the invading spirits as part of the solution to a tradition-based problem, despite the risk of misinterpretation in certain quarters? Bishop Nyasha’s ministry offers a specific response to this question.

**A CASE STUDY IN ZIMBABWE: BISHOP NYASHA’S PENTECOSTA CHURCH**

**Origin and organization**

Bishop Nyasha has been an active member of the *Church of Christ* in the Chingombe chiefdom (Gutu district) since 1965. Known for his gifts of healing, he played an important role in the healing ministry of his church during the war years. In the late seventies, when the local church minister left to take up residence in Masvingo for security reasons, Nyasha’s leadership became even more firmly established. He appointed a core group of young men who assisted him with faith-healing practices, similar to those of the surrounding Spirit-type churches – the Zionists and the Apostles. After independence the local minister’s return in 1980 brought him into conflict with Nyasha, who was expelled from the Church of Christ because his healing ministry was considered controversial. It seems more likely, however, that the real reason for his expulsion was that he had established himself as a popular leader and thus posed a threat to a minister who had lost stature by forsaking his parish in a time of crisis.

For some time Nyasha participated in and considered joining either a *Ndaza* Zionists group, Mutendi’s Zion Christ Church or Maranke’s Apostolic movement. Then his young assistants from the Church of Christ urged him to establish a new church. They spent night-long vigils with him, praying and fasting in the surrounding mountains, until he had a vision which convinced him that he had to start the Pentecost Church. He acted upon this inspiration immediately and baptized his former Church of Christ supporters – Charles Munyede, Shepherd Chimutso, Felix Manyenzi, James Matimbira and Wellington Mukuya. His own principal leadership was confirmed by Bishop Matthew Forridge of the Zion Christian Church of Christ, together with myself one of the founder members of *Famidzano* (the Shona Independent Church Conference) and one of the staunchest ecumenical figures in the district. According to Nyasha, Bishop Forridge said after an ordination ceremony: “Go now! Build your church in accordance with your own convictions and insights. I have authorized your divinely inspired leadership.” Thus the Pentecostal Church was founded in 1980, with Nyasha as bishop and his fellow healers as senior dignitaries in different congregations. Focusing its ministry mainly on healing through
the exorcism of *uroyi* (wizardry), *ngozi* (vengeful) and *shave* (alien) spirits, the new movement gained some 1 000 followers during the first five years of its existence. Nine congregations were established, the respective centres being Chingombe, Muchekayaora, Charumbira, Chitsa, Wadzenenga, Minda-mirefu at Chigukune (all in central and eastern Gutu), as well as Harare, Kwekwe and Shenjiri. Bishop Nyasha's residence in Chingombe is church headquarters, popularly known among the *Vapente-costa* as "Jerusalem". Each congregation has its regular worship, led by a hierarchy consisting of a minister, evangelist preachers, overseers and deacons, and its own court (dare) responsible for disciplinary matters. As a high percentage of the Church's membership consists of adult females – former prospective or active “witches” who have found refuge in this movement – the Women’s Association constitutes an influential subunit, in charge of Bible study, prayer meetings and practical services rendered to needy women.

The Church’s annual programme includes three Paschal celebrations: one in January; the big one in May when the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is celebrated; and the October “seed-conference” (*ungano yembeu*) when the seed to be planted by the overwhelming majority of peasant church members is blessed by the bishop to secure good crops. Each of these mass meetings include the climactic sacrament of holy communion. In style of worship and organization, therefore, the *Pentecosta* closely resembles the Shona Independent churches of the Spirit type. In addition the movement has a theology which emphasizes the message of salvation provided by a triune God, “Jordan” baptism, faith healing and speaking in tongues. Thus most of the works of the Christian Church (from a Reformed perspective) are in evidence. Despite the indisputable “wizardry-eradication” features of Nyasha’s ministry we are faced here with a fairly stable and growing ecclesiastical institution.

**Historical and socio-religious context**

A number of factors have contributed to the *Pentecosta*’s preoccupation with wizardry-related ills in society and exorcism as a predominant therapeutic practice. First of all the war had given rise to uncertainty and social upheaval in Zimbabwe, an ideal breeding ground for heightened interest in and accusations of witchcraft (Bosch 1987:41). The need for security in a war-torn society had led to a renaissance of traditional religion. Scores of guerrillas and *mijiba* (members of the youth league) intensified ancestor veneration and relied on ancestral guidance for the strategic planning of their offensive. They received this instruction through the traditional spirit mediums (*masvikiro*), particularly during secret *pungwe* (political instruction) meetings. Wizardry allegations became the
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idiom for a massive purge to rid society of all collaborators who were considered a threat to the cause of regaining the “lost lands.”

The cessation of hostilities at Independence left many people displaced or homeless. Suspicion of others and concomitant wizardry accusations persisted. The purge of unwanted elements in society continued, despite public attempts at reconciliation. Consequently, at the time when Bishop Nyasha launched his church, there were many people in rural society suffering from the after effects of war, many of them socially suspect or objects of revenge and therefore in dire need of a protective and stable anchorage. In the aftermath of war the uncertainty – caused by a radically changed administrative system, the removal of chiefs as tribal political and legal authorities and the consequent relegation of the spirit mediums to a degree of obscurity, as well as the subdivisioning of districts and chiefdoms into wards – heightened feelings of anxiety and frustration. In addition there was the trauma caused in marriages by years of forced separation, infidelity, illegitimate children, extramarital relationships, etc. – a trauma which very often found expression in wizardry allegations between spouses.

Nyasha saw the need of numerous women whose weakened marital ties and affected social status rendered them vulnerable to suspicion or accusations of practising witchcraft. In response he developed a ministry, focused not so much on the finding and accusation of witches and sorcerers as on counselling those who had been afflicted and rejected. He carefully avoided direct accusations, which in any event would have exposed him to prosecution under the Witchcraft Suppression Act. Instead, he developed a sympathetic counselling technique which enabled women in particular to reveal to him the nature of their malady and the kind of social conflict they were involved in. Such confessions usually included admissions of actual witchcraft or the experience of call-dreams from deceased relatives who had been known to be witches. Nyasha’s patients were therefore not only “war casualties” but also the members of families with a tradition of uroyi-involvement, suspect as a result of persistent affliction and the experience of call-dreams “to lift the cooking stones” (kumutsa mapfiva – to inherit the practice of witchcraft from a deceased relative). Whereas traditionally established witches were thought to be incurable and evasion of call-dreams was considered fatal to potential witches, Nyasha (his name means “mercy”) propagated a message of hope and social rehabilitation in lieu of social ostracism or death. This was expressed in the integration of the liberated muroyi into the church.

Nyasha’s ministry of exorcism is not an isolated instance. All the Spirit-type churches practise exorcism to a greater or lesser degree: Mutendi’s ZCC through “Jordan” baptism; the Ndaza Zionist groups by invoking spirit-possession in afflicted individuals, then tying them up with “holy cords” and expelling the invading spirit(s) through direct commands; and the vaPostori by rotational movements of the possessed person’s head.
(kudzungudza) and similar symbolic acts. Nyasha however belongs to a group of specialist prophetic healers who, over the years, have established a tradition of wizardry-eradicating practice. In the Chingombe chiefdom, for instance, the well-known Apostolic prophet Jaka Mukurumbera specialized in the detection and removal of evil medicine, transferred to victims of sorcery through poisoning (kudyisa), the foot-trap (chitsinga) and mystical propulsion (chiposo) (Daneel 1971:165; 1974:264). Elison Mutingwende likewise founded a new movement, the Shinga Postora (Courageous Apostles) on the basis of detecting and burning uroyi medicines placed by sorcerers or witches in the fields or homesteads of peasants (Daneel 1974:278–392).

Nyasha’s ministry differs from the Mutingwende’s in that it avoids direct accusations of wizardry; he merely baptizes self-confessed wizards or whoever genuinely wants to join the church, thus playing down the coercive element. In contrast to Elison Mutingwende’s recruitment strategy, Nyasha capitalizes on the image of his church as a protective refuge for social misfits and outcasts (Daneel 1974:277) as a major attraction to prospective members. A significant difference is that Elison remained a roving prophet with little capacity for organizing and stabilizing the ecclesiastical structure he had founded. The eight congregations he established in 1966 remained small and eventually dwindled away, because his fellow office-bearers remained dependent on his anti-wizardry activities to such an extent that they neglected to take responsibility for evangelistic outreach and pastoral care of their subordinates (Daneel 1988:188).

Nyasha, on the other hand, delegates evangelistic and pastoral responsibilities to subordinates much more effectively. This enables him to maintain a more consistent presence in the Gutu district than Elison had done, thus ensuring continuity of contact with those who need him. As a result he appears to be establishing a much more stable and diversified ecclesiastical structure than Elison had managed to do. It is likely, therefore, that as his church grows, he will adopt the same strategy as other well-known Independent church leaders like Bishop Samuel Mutendi: that of delegating prophetic and, in this case, exorcist duties to subordinate clergy with charismatic gifts as his own administrative and other official church duties increase.

At present Nyasha is still rendering a specialized service to his followers and to the surrounding Mission and Independent churches. For it is obvious that people from the entire range of local ecclesiastical backgrounds seek his assistance, or eventually become permanent Pentecosta members.

One can say, therefore, that in the whole ecclesiastical framework of the prophetic type some kind of long-term solution to the problem of wizardry beliefs is being worked out. As the larger movements in post-independence Zimbabwe increasingly turn to educational, agricultural and community
development projects – in other words, the kind of socio-economic change which, in Shorter's view, should lessen African society's preoccupation with wizardry – a specialized prophetic service, based on mutual interaction, continues to cater for those whose pastoral needs are still basically defined in traditional cosmological terms.

The Pentecostal ritual of exorcism

Counselling and confession

Long sessions of counselling and confession form an integral – often an introductory – part of Nyasha's ministry of exorcism. The bishop himself had the following to say about the suggestion that his counselling sessions with women in particular could be a subtle process of witchcraft imputation:

We work with the revealing powers of God which are aimed at bringing hidden evil into the open. It is a matter of fighting darkness in the name of Christ's truth. I observe a person during discussion and go a long way round [i.e. approach sensitive issues indirectly]. You cannot simply start by saying: "Mother, you are a witch!" You talk with them [mostly afflicted women] about their experiences and encourage them to tell you about their dreams, their domestic circumstances and their motives for coming to the church to worship. I tell them that I can see that they love their husbands, that they want to avoid conflict with others and that they want stable homes with many children. They usually agree with this. I may then suggest that the patient is plagued by a spirit at home which prevents her from fulfilling her good intentions. In response she may explain the entire situation and herself name the plaguing spirit. When I subsequently suggest that she may be used [by a spirit], she could confess either the experience of bad dreams [i.e. call-dreams] or the perpetration of evil under the influence of the uroyi spirit. The next step is to tell such a person that she will have to resist such evil herself. In just about every case the response will be: "Yes, I want to be rid of such evil..." Through eliciting this confession I am said somehow to have imputed witchcraft. But it is always a matter of people coming to us for assistance and themselves requesting a solution. Without the revelation of hidden evil and the decision of the afflicted person to resist it, a cure cannot be effected... This procedure is not against the government's ruling [the Witchcraft Suppression Act]. What the government is trying to prevent is the disruption of society caused by people who go around and make arbitrary accusations of witchcraft.

This statement reveals Nyasha's fairness towards patients in attempting to establish what they themselves consider to be the cause of their malady. Knowing that many women seek his assistance out of sheer desperation after having been branded potential or practising witches by society, he facilitates confession and emphasizes the afflicted person's commitment to change. Although Christian terminology is used in categorizing the intrusive spirit as an unwanted devil (satani) or demon (dhimoni), Nyasha is sufficiently conversant with all aspects of traditional cosmology to refrain from applying a simplistic demonology. Careful probing reveals to him whether the patient is beleaguered by shavi spirits, with a view to practising traditional medicine as a nganga; by a ngozi spirit seeking revenge for a
murder committed by the afflicted person's relatives; by a neglected ancestral spirit (*mudzimu*) which merely urges sacrifice; or by a real *uroyi* (witchcraft) spirit – the patient's deceased grandmother, aunt or mother – who wants a living descendant to inherit and practise the profession of witchcraft. In addition, a distinction is made in the field of wizardry between male sorcerers, who use mainly destructive medicines, and female witches who either inherit their trade through spirit coercion, or are voluntarily drafted into “guilds” of witches by the introduction of medicine into their circulatory system through incisions (*kutemerwa*).

As a champion of reconciliation between relatives, Bishop Nyasha also diagnoses the work of *mubobobo* spirits. He claims that such spirits destroy marital ties by invading the minds of married females to such an extent that they consider the possessing spirits to be their husbands. Having himself experienced rejection by his second wife for a certain period, he considers the spell cast by these spirits most difficult to break. The indications are that his prolonged spells of fasting and prayer on behalf of himself and his second wife, as well as his feelings of utter helplessness in the face of marital disintegration prior to reunion with his wife, were decisive in the development of his ministry aimed largely at healing and strengthening marital ties.

Counselling itself may be repetitive. The bishop believes that he is guided by the Holy Spirit in his diagnostic probing until he and the patient reach consensus. In the event of the patient wishing to be rid of a possessing *uroyi* spirit, the divinely prescribed, infallible therapy consists of “exorcism in Bethesda”.

The symbols of exorcism

For the purposes of exorcism a distinction is made between entering Jordan for baptism and entering the Bethesda pool for spirit expulsion. In practice, however, the two ceremonies frequently overlap. Whenever the initial baptism of novices in Jordan provokes spirit possession, the ceremony will include exorcist procedures. Subsequent exorcisms on behalf of baptized church members are, however, referred to as Bethesda healing and not as baptismal ceremonies, despite such symbolic similarities as immersion in water.

*Water*, the main ritual component of exorcism, symbolizes the presence and liberating power of God. It also reminds of the uncompromising truth of Christ which unmasks the deception and socially destructive intentions of both the inhabiting spirit and its host during the struggle between good and evil in the water. Thus the pool is the place where Christ’s kingship over all powers is vividly enacted, where the message that “evil has no future”, to use Bosch’s term, is meaningfully and dramatically enacted. In the water, symbol and reality merge. The Holy Spirit is present at the pool...
in all its power to assure victory over the forces of evil. Traditionally associated with purity and fertility, water in this context also effects purification, so that the candidate emerges from the pool cleansed of evil inhabitation and intent.

Said Nyasha about the expulsion of evil at the pool:

_Uroyi_ is a very powerful force which human beings cannot overcome on their own. When such powers are at work we can fight and overcome them only if we are truly guided by God. We take the beleaguered person to the pool of Bethesda where we cast out the possessing spirit. If we fail, we return home and seek God's guidance once more, until he reveals to us how to deal with that spirit. Later we return to the pool once more. There we pray over and instruct (kurairidza) the water about the persistent spirit before we commence fighting it, until it leaves.

From this narrative it is clear that the African equivalent for the biblical Bethesda pool (Jn 5:1–15) is the one near Nyasha’s Jerusalem or wherever Nyasha prefers to conduct a Bethesda ceremony. The African equivalent for the angel stirring the water is the prophet praying over and “instructing” the pool. Human activity in this instance is not interpreted as magical manipulation to ensure successful spirit expulsion, but is considered to demonstrate right-mindedness and dependence on God’s powerful presence, since the _uroyi_ power is considered too powerful for ordinary human beings to overcome on their own.

Preceded by public prayer and open confession by the potential or practising witch/sorcerer on the banks of the pool, the actual exorcism consists of forceful immersion to symbolize God’s victory over evil. If the spirit protests, the patient (at this stage often in a state of possession) is repeatedly splashed with water until breathing becomes difficult and the departing spirit leaves a gasping and subdued figure, quietly resting in the water. Small wonder that those who have undergone repeated exorcisms refer to their experience as _kundorobga Bethesda_ (lit. to be beaten [at] Bethesda; i.e. to be struck with water in the Bethesda pool).

Other symbols used at the Bethesda pool are the following. A piece of _red cloth_ is tied around the patient’s waist. This cloth symbolizes the cleansing and protective power of Christ’s blood. As the _uroyi_ spirit is more powerful than its host and therefore capable of harming her/him, the element of danger during exorcism is subverted by the patient’s symbolic acceptance of Christ’s kingship. In addition to the triumphant aspect of Christ’s salvific work, the cloth also reminds the patient about her/his public confession of sin which suggests not only a miraculous or ritually formulated expulsion of evil taking place, but also an admission of personal guilt – a state which has to be cleansed by Christ’s blood. Liberation from the _uroyi_ spirit is therefore accompanied by deliverance from sin. Nyasha’s exorcism does not provide the patient with a convenient loophole by
placing all the blame on the uroyi spirit. Public confession of guilt confirms personal involvement and abuse of individual responsibility by the patient. Built into this exorcism is the ongoing conversion message which prohibits any facile justification through the projection of all guilt onto the unwanted spirit. Besides, the red cloth symbolically establishes common ground between the suffering of Christ, the one Scapegoat of all the world, and the suffering of the real or potential wizard as a result of social discrimination and isolation; an identification which on the one hand heals, and on the other hand requires persevering prayer and spiritual growth of the now liberated person.

Money (50c or Z$1) is also brought to the pool. The coin used is called gupuro, the divorce fee which, in accordance with customary law, accompanies a divorced woman when she goes back to her parents. The gupuro at the Bethesda pool signifies public recognition of “divorce” between host and inhabiting spirit. It is also called: mari yokutuka (money of the curse), because both the afflicted person and the prophetic exorcist are required to publicly dissociate themselves in the strongest terms from the invading spirit by cursing it and commanding it to leave. By throwing the coin into the pool the patient is not only publicly divorcing her/himself from the uroyi spirit, but is also subjecting the unwanted spirit-being to the superior power of God represented by or present in the water.

In the case of a persistent spirit which keeps returning to its host after exorcism, the patient is required to bring a new plate and a fowl to the pool. The unused plate symbolizes the sharing of something of value between host and spirit, something not easily surrendered. Upon killing the fowl its blood is spilt into the plate – the symbolic equivalent of innocent blood spilt by the uroyi spirit. In the pool the exorcist may smear the blood on the patient, then wash it away while addressing the spirit: “See this plate and the blood in it. It is the blood of the people you kill. See, we wash the blood away and we throw this plate away. Likewise this person casts you away. You are to go now in the name of Christ, and never return.” Thereupon the plate and the remaining blood is cast into the pool.

Whenever witch-familiars (spirit animals, birds and reptiles) and the use of destructive medicines are involved, exorcism is supplemented with the literal and/or symbolic burning of evil. In performing all these activities Nyasha is fully aware that there is much more at stake than just the miraculous elimination of evil. His is an ongoing ministry – a struggle, not only with the unseen powers, but also with the unpredictable and ambivalent attitudes of humankind: people who on the one hand seek God and on the other refuse to follow in his ways. “I talk to people about their sinful ways,” he said, “and I keep telling them that they themselves do not really want to change. I say to them: ‘You are still in league with those spirits or demons. You do not really want them expelled.’ There are those, too, who come with an overwhelming desire to be liberated. After exorcism they
witness about their former addiction to evil and about complete liberation. The plaguing spirits leave them permanently.”

Nyasha encounters opposition from rival healers and church groups. One suspects that the main motive for such opposition is envy of his popularity and growing following. Allegations are made, however, that Bishop Nyasha is a bad man because he pollutes all the pools with plates and money. Opponents try to sway opinion against Nyasa by suggesting that people who wash in the polluted pools could be possessed by the now vengeful evil spirits exorcised in those pools. Thus the symbols of liberation are reinterpreted by outsiders as vehicles of retaliatory evil. Nyasha refuses to be intimidated by such tactics. He is convinced that he has received a gift from God which he should use to serve troubled humanity.

**Exorcism: a one-sided ministry?**

The centrality of exorcism in Nyasha’s ministry cannot be denied. It forms the dramatic focal point of his work and has become the single most potent recruitment device in his church. The combination of this specialized ministry in the field of wizardry and his extensive ecclesial duties and authority means that Nyasha’s concentration on a contextualized gospel of liberation conditions the theology of his entire church. A certain one-sidedness is therefore inevitable.

In the sermons of the Pentecosta preachers there emerges a powerful God who triumphs over all evil, a Christ whose cross tells more about truth and kingship over all powers in heaven and on earth than about his suffering as a human being, and a Holy Spirit who reveals and combats wizardry as a threat to human life and society rather than one who sanctifies the believer’s inner being.

Nyasha’s sermons usually range across a broad spectrum of subjects. His message is characterized by a broad evangelistic streak, with direct appeals for conversion, apocalyptic expectations and a legalism focused on strong Christian morals in marital and family life. Yet within this framework he constantly draws his followers’ attention to his main concern, the Christian strife between good and evil – expressed, of course, in terms of the traditional world view.

An excerpt from one of Nyasha’s sermons illustrates the point. He opened a weekend conference at Gutu in December 1985 as follows:

I know God because he is involved in our struggle and guides our existence. Because he is our Saviour, our Protector and Teacher we experience a wonderful life. Because his name is present at this place, our Jerusalem, it is blessed and holy. What God expects of this gathering is that we should reconsider our deeds and act as true Christians. God is not happy with the death of the unrighteous. Come ye, therefore, return to Jehovah. Those
who do so will have their sins forgiven. Today our sermons will concentrate on 2 Peter 1:5–9, so that we can learn how a person who worships God should behave. We need this instruction because most of us are inclined to worship in ignorance.

We come to God's house as passive members, ignorant of the real meaning of Christian discipleship. Why? Because we enter the church for selfish motives. We seek physical survival [to have our flesh saved] instead of subjecting our spirit [in the sense of entire being] to the saving power of God. When we experience illness we run to the healers to be prayed for. Only at these times do we recognize God.

Those who practise wizardry are active at all times. They cover great distances at night, like we had to do to attend pungwe meetings [during the war]. We believers must be just as active if we want to please God. It is pointless for us to kneel and prophesy if the deeds of our life do not witness to our faith...

Last night three women were brought to my attention. I did not sleep all night. These women did not sleep at their houses either. They were right here in this vicinity [operating as witches]. Two of them intend eating a child. They even sent medicine to induce lameness in my legs. If God had not protected me I would have been in trouble. At first I could not understand what was happening. Then I noticed the medicine consisting of female hair and blood. It was sent to hurt me, but it failed in the same way as the drums of evil had gone silent because of God's power. The Lord refused!

God knows the span of our lives; he counts our years. Nevertheless the enemy follows us, seeking our destruction because the drums of evil are silenced. God sees this and is angered. He says that you [the three witches concerned] will eat your own children, since he will prevent you from eating the children of others. God refuses. He says: “Since you lust after human flesh, eat your own children!” Those who have ears, let them hear what God's Spirit tells his church. Let those who want to be people of God live in God. As the hunter eventually gets killed by his hunting, so the wizard eventually gets killed by his wizardry, unless he repents. The only ways for all of us to be saved, including the wizards, is through God. He alone knows the inner being of a person. He knows where evil hides. Persevere ye therefore in prayer. Persevere until the Lord comes. That is our salvation...

The righteous will meet Christ when he comes. Those of good blood will arrive here and reveal their dreams. In our dream narratives we reveal our attitudes towards God. Sometimes when I sit and listen to dream accounts, I say “Yes! Yes!”, even while I know that the Lord refuses [baptism or exorcism] because the entire truth has not been revealed.

Bishop Nyasha's preoccupation with the powers of darkness is plain from this sermon. At the same time he discloses his own vulnerability as an exorcist to counter-attacks by witches operating at night. In a sense he is cautioning his listeners that everybody is exposed to suffering. There is no guaranteed immunity against wizardry despite the fact that God counts our years. Yet God's followers can be confident of protection and salvation, because God's power triumphs over that of evil. Nyasha himself communicates considerable confidence, knowing that his God-given ministry has been instrumental in "silencing the drums of evil" – that is, eradicating the practice of wizardry. The essence of his message at this juncture is that God's saving power confronts and overcomes evil. It is not some vague and distant victory, but one experienced in this broken world, penetrating the conflicts and anger of tense relations and erecting the signs of God's triumph over evil in the very context where the heat of hatred and frustration generates the momentum for the next round of destructive action.
In Nyasha's world victory in God does not permit complacency. Vigilance and perseverance in prayer remain vital. Humility and total dependence on God are required in the struggle against evil. With this in mind, Nyasha wars against the wrong motives for worship. Aware that his exorcist ministry can contribute to a one-sided understanding of salvation, whereby the church is seen purely as a safe refuge from physical affliction, he urges all believers to repent fully.

In view of Nyasha's overriding preoccupation with the very real threat of wizardry to life, it is an open question whether he actually achieves a comprehensive understanding of the gospel message for every avenue of life. There can be little doubt, however, that many of his followers have an authentic experience of liberation in that sphere of life where the closest of human relationships come apart.

**THE IMPACT OF NYASHA'S EXORCIST MINISTRY**

It is difficult to assess fully the impact of Nyasha's church on rural society in the widest sense of the word. Such an evaluation requires a wide-ranging survey of entire village communities to which the Pentecosta members belong – a project which has not yet been attempted. Nevertheless, a perusal of interviews with church leaders and members (most of whom had been exorcised) as well as close observation of the movement over a number of years is sufficiently revealing to permit at least a preliminary evaluation of prominent trends.

**Positive features**

**Prophetic control**

Nyasha's church resembles the other Shona Spirit-type churches in that it established an image of prophetic control over wizardry activities – even more decisively than most of the Zionist churches. To the vast community of believers in these churches, with their common interest in ritual purification and the combatting of evil forces, their prophetic movement – diversified as it is – amounts to a protective institution. In an earlier study (Daneel 1974:293) I noted that "although it is recognized that the majority of wizards, even within these churches, are never completely cured, there is some consolation in the knowledge that the prophets know who the wizards are and that they reduce the inclinations and powers of church members who perpetrate such evils to a minimum through repeated exposure in public".

This observation still holds true, with the exception that Nyasha's ministry reflects a more powerful assertion of complete eradication of wizardry. The sceptics in Shona society may well contest his claims, but
somehow he has managed to convince most of his followers as well as a large number of outsiders that all wizards can in fact be cured completely through the mercy and power of the Christian God, irrespective of the degree of their involvement with evil. His, therefore, is not a mere “pest-control service”, as Shorter (1985:97) qualifies witch-finding movements, “which results in strengthening people’s fear of witches and consequently their acceptance of the [witchcraft] theory”. Nyasha’s pastoral aftercare of the exorcised, his insistence on quality of Christian discipleship and persevering prayer by the liberated wizard and his total reliance on God’s power go a long way in establishing faith and confidence in God’s reign, his future and his liberation, thus modifying the traditional basis of the fear of wizardry. The transformation associated with conversion and spirit-expulsion in Nyasha’s church goes deeper than just a “temporary respite from fear” (Shorter 1985:97). It reaches down to the intellectual fabric of wizardry beliefs by forcibly blowing the traditional belief in the incorrigibility of wizards and by demonstrating to congregations that retaliation and the elimination of wizards can be replaced by loving acceptance and social rehabilitation.

Transformation, however, is a slow process, always incomplete, as is the Christian experience of conversion. Prophetic control, consequently, remains significant, also in Nyasha’s church. It is a form of support and a safeguard against destructive evil in the event of a former wizard’s relapse. To Nyasha prophetic discipline realistically accepts the sinfulness of human nature, the prospect of even the staunchest believer succumbing to temptation – an insight which in itself militates against the traditional dualistic philosophy behind wizardry, namely an antithesis of absolute good and absolute evil.

In the Spirit-type churches, prophetic control generally consists of three types of activity.

First, all neophytes are subjected to one or several diagnostic prophecies, prior to Jordan baptism. These prophecies serve to determine if potential or self-confessed wizards intend to stop their practices and if they are retaining some of their malignant medicines or familiars for use while they are church members. While the prophet aims at bringing all the neophyte’s hidden sins and possible wizardry involvement into the open, it is vital that the latter demonstrates right-mindedness and a willingness to submit not only to the prophet, but also to the divine authority operative in this first phase of initiation into the new group.

Secondly, regular exposure during church services establishes a pattern of public confession. Church members, particularly the Vapostori, are required to pass the “gates” to the sacred enclosure prior to the commencement of the service. Confessions of sin are made to prophets representing symbolically, at that point in time, the “gates of heaven”. Brief as these confessionals are, they effectively demonstrate control by the Holy Spirit.
and subject unruly church members to a supernaturally sanctioned ecclesiastical authority.

Thirdly, there is the final “gate test” prior to participation in the eucharist at the annual Paschal celebrations, which represents the most spectacular form of wizard-control in the Spirit-type churches. As purity, at least in intent, is prerequisite for partaking of the sacrament, confession assumes greater intensity and urgency during lengthy nocturnal vigils than in the case of other ceremonies. Continuous speaking in tongues by the prophets at the gates and radical rejection of those who refuse to make full confessions serve to confirm the Holy Spirit’s power of control and symbolically illustrate his victory over evil. (For a full discussion of these three measures of control, see Daneel 1974:292–308).

Apart from assimilating these prophetic control measures in a manner suggesting a distinct preference for Maranke’s Apostolic tradition, Nyasha has developed Bethesda exorcism as his church’s special weapon to combat and control wizardry. There can be little doubt that this ritual appeals to the imagination of those to whom he ministers, that it has convinced many Pentecosta members that wizardry is not only curbed but completely overcome and that sustained vigilance on the part of the Holy Spirit, prophets and potential victims of wizardry permits people to relax, overcome their fear of evil and enjoy a normal life.

**Group catharsis and individual liberation**

A study of the biographies of numerous people who have been exorcised shows that spirit expulsion and healing of individuals invariably also trigger a therapeutic process in a family and village context. As wizardry activities are exposed and the uroji spirits’ hold on their hosts are broken, conflict with spouses or with villagers who feel threatened is either resolved or simply fades into the background. The malady of the bewitched or ensorcelled, or the affliction of those called to perpetrate witchcraft, is not an isolated, individual issue. It is symptomatic of social conflict, of insecurity and uncertainty in the face of uncontrollable forces of social change, of ambition, rivalry, jealousy and animosity in interpersonal relations. Thus the patients arriving at Nyasha’s headquarters for consultation mostly have a history of strained relations with others, imputed antisocial conduct, increasing ostracism by various groups – in fact, a whole web of disturbed relationships. Consequently the afflicted are often accompanied to the prophet’s headquarters by delegations who witness to proceedings and report back to the social group concerned. A therapeutic solution for the patient can therefore have a positive cathartic effect on an entire family or village where tensions have been building.

The life histories of exorcised Pentecosta members, specifically those associated with wizardry practices, mostly reveal certain stereotype trends.
First, persistent illness leads to visits to traditional *nganga* and/or Independent Church prophets, who may ascribe the malady to the activity of *uroyi* spirits, particularly if the family has a history of wizardry involvement. Should the diagnosis be confirmed by the patient’s dreams about blood, eating of children, graves, death and the like, it is generally accepted that the patient is under supernatural pressure to practise wizardry. Depending on a variety of circumstances, including the character of the patient, the village community then brands the afflicted person as either a potential or a practising wizard. In either case the patient’s position in society deteriorates, leading to isolation or family conflict which undermines the patient’s self-confidence and exacerbates her/his physical and mental suffering. Invariably this is when the patient, in a state of despair and terror of spirit intervention, arrives at Nyasha’s Jerusalem. Through a process of counselling, confession and exorcism, the patient experiences liberation from the afflicting spirit(s) and in most cases recovers completely to proceed with normal life. Rehabilitation of the actual or would-be witch or sorcerer follows a route of spiritual growth and intensified personal spiritual activity (e.g. prayer and fasting, regular participation in Nyasha’s church activities and the bonding of interpersonal ties, both in the new church and in a family context).

By way of example, Mrs Evelyn Chiremba’s tape-recorded account of her experiences is reproduced in part. Mrs Chiremba belonged to Bishop Mutendi’s Zion Christian Church, until she joined the *Pentecosta* in 1984. She said:

I suffered greatly because my late aunt’s spirit kept visiting me. My aunt was a bad person who practised witchcraft. After my mother’s death, her spirit exposed me to my aunt’s spirit by ‘opening the door’ [i.e. withdrawing her protective ancestral function of guarding the doors of her living descendants]. It was an evil thing for my mother to do. Both these spirits wanted me to become a witch. Because I refused to participate my health deteriorated until I was almost completely crippled. All my strength had gone. My aunt’s spirit fought me, insisting that she wanted to come and live with [in] me. But I kept refusing to live with a [spirit] person practising witchcraft.

When things had become unbearable, I joined the *Pentecosta* in 1984. They received me kindly, cleansed me and chased both spirits away. Then they healed me and restored my strength. My troubles are over.

Bishop Nyasha revealed the truth about the plaguing spirits during his prophecies, and we [me and my family] agreed. He also interpreted the meaning of my dreams - bad dreams about snakes and graves and the coming deaths of people, dreams which terrified me. With the expulsion of the spirits, the bad dreams stopped. Should they occur again, I shall immediately discuss them with the Bishop. It is a relief to know that one can rely on his assistance. Our bishop has received great healing power as a gift from God. The Holy Spirit works through him whereby he heals many people in the pool of Bethesda.

Subsequent to the casting out of the *uroyi* spirits at Bethesdã, Nyasha repeatedly advised me to pray perseveringly and to go to *masowe* [a ritually/secluded place for fasting] to fast. This I do regularly, because if I stop worshipping God the evil spirits can return. One has to remain on guard oneself.
Having been in the Pentecost for several years without a recurrence of spirit visitation, I now believe that if I remain in this church there is no chance of being possessed again. Should it ever happen that these spirits return, it will be a sign that I am worshipping the flesh and not the truth [God].

Mrs Chiremba’s testimony highlights the following positive features of Nyasha’s ministry:

1. **Liberation** is experienced as real and lasting. Through the all-powerful Christian God a new life is possible. The traditional incorrigibility of witches is unmasked as a fallacy.

2. **Rehabilitation** of the potential or practising witch is possible. Where exorcism is followed up by sustained consultation, as well as acceptance and support by the church group, an atmosphere is created in which the scapegoat of society – the suspect, outcast or misfit – can heal and grow into a meaningful existence.

3. Despite the significance attributed to the dramatic enactment of God’s power in exorcism, the ritual is interpreted in context. It is not seen as a mechanical process, an isolated miracle in which God manifests his power only to withdraw again into obscurity, or as mere magical manipulation of mystical forces by a gifted exorcist. The **active involvement of the patient** in confessing sin, receiving exorcism and **taking responsibility** for a future life of sustained worship (i.e. maintaining a direct relation with a liberating God) forms an essential part of Nyasha’s ministry. Mrs Chiremba’s recognition of her own responsibility in the struggle against evil is a move away from the traditional (if not universally human) tendency to indulge in self-justification by projecting sin and all manner of evil deeds on an extraneous agent. The evil, in this case attributed to the *uroyi* spirits, does not exonerate the host – neither from deliberately seeking deliverance, nor from remaining vigilant against future temptation.

The traditional paradigm of the objective reality of witchcraft may not be completely changed, but Nyasha’s exorcism **certainly attacks its roots**. Pastoral consultation, which takes the traditional world view seriously and confronts it with the Christian message of deliverance, goes beyond mere reinforcement of the old system. Although it is impossible to gauge from interviews with former patients whether some of their old fears of visitation by *uroyi* spirits or with direct threats of wizardry are still lurking in the background, there is ample evidence that many patients, like Mrs Chiremba, experience complete liberation from incapacitating fear – liberation in which obsessive preoccupation with evil forces is replaced by new hope and a will to lead socially constructive lives.

**Reconciliation**

The message of reconciliation is central in Nyasha’s ministry. It is highly significant that many of the women who have been exorcised in the
Pentecosta spontaneously refer to this church as kereke yokuwadzanisa (the church of reconciliation). Their histories by and large confirm that their relations with their spouses or other family members improved as a direct result of Bethesda treatment and (in the majority of cases) obtaining Pentecosta membership. Their image of the church as a conciliatory institution therefore is primarily indicative not of group identity or loyalty, but of an experience of changed relationships, of love and acceptance against a background of strife, rejection and suffering.

Asked about her church's service to society, Mrs Evelyn Chiremba said:

Many women suffer when uroyi spirits plague them. These spirits always try to take complete control [of their hosts] and thereby separate women from their husbands. This certainly is a church of reconciliation, because it seeks to overcome family feuds arising from the visitation of these evil spirits. I experience that myself through better relations with my people at home. This church has a message of love. It overcomes darkness and brings harmony between people. All of it is the work of God. It is his Spirit who overcomes all darkness, his power which enables us to lead (whole) lives with others at our homes.

Mrs Zimuto, a former Roman Catholic with a long history of illness – both her own and her children’s – claimed that Bishop Nyasha managed to liberate her and her relatives from both a vengeful ngozi spirit, widely considered to have caused several deaths in her family, and her mubuya (grandmother) spirit which had been urging her to practise witchcraft. She said:

I did not join this church just to be healed. I wanted my entire life changed. In addition I was desperate for a solution for my family. Because of the ngozi spirit my children were ill at the time. The spirits of the ngozi and of my mubuya kept pushing my family [towards destruction]. As a result my relationship with my husband deteriorated. We kept quarrelling and I was irritable. Whenever we talked I scolded him. Now that those spirits have been driven away we rarely quarrel and we discuss things openly. My husband still does not attend church. But he appreciates the change in me and has, as a result, stopped smoking and drinking. When he observes my going to sleep without praying at night, he insists that I pray. Then I get up and pray for us all.

I belong to the Pentecosta now. It instructs me. It is my life. My friends urge me to go back to the Roman Catholic Church, but this is where I have found life and where I shall stay.

It is evident from these testimonies that the message of reconciliation is concretely realized in the lives of potential or self-confessed witches at two levels: those of the church and the family. Through induction into the church – which to the suffering and suspect holds prospects of healing, acceptance by a group which understands the agony of ostracism, and generally improved social status – a wholesome existence becomes possible. Close identification of the new member with both the healer-prophet and a women's association (engaged in regular Bible study, prayer meetings, ministry to the poor, etc.) contrasts starkly with the suspicions,
accusations and withdrawal of relatives and acquaintances in the home village. Hence the renewal of purpose in life – the “fulfilled life” of Evelyn Chiremba and the “finding of life” of Mrs Zimuto. The consequences of liberation and change, of confession and submission to prophetic authority in a church setting, are soon reflected in improved family ties. With new hope and purpose in life comes renewed self-confidence, an essential symptom of good therapy noticeable in the attitudes of most of Nyasha’s patients or ex-patients of whose testimonies were recorded.

There can be little doubt that much of Nyasha’s success in effecting genuine reconciliation between outcasts, misfits and suspects and their disenchanted spouses or other relatives hinges on his ability to identify closely and convincingly with those who seek his help. Unlike the roving prophet whose brief stay and direct or indirect imputations of wizardry can incur grievous stigmatization and discrimination by a village community against the guilty party, Nyasha’s sustained and selfless identification with supplicants is a hallmark of sound pastoral care. His radical rejection apparently extends to the invading spirit or uroyi medicine, while his patience, sympathy and understanding for the afflicted person communicate the good news of the gospel in such a way that the possibility of a lasting solution – against all traditional odds – is realized.

The information currently available does not permit an accurate assessment of the extent to which rehabilitated wizards meet with full approval or repudiation in the wider social context. Criticism of Nyasha’s ministry by some rural people in the Chingombe chiefdom indicates some scepticism. This suggests possible deterioration in the social status of at least some of the “wizards” subsequent to their confessions and treatment in Nyasha’s church. On the other hand there are indications of great esteem from outsiders, specifically for the exposure of evil and the restraint of wizardry practices attributed to Nyasha’s ministry.

**Negative features**

*Possible misinterpretation of exorcist symbolism*

Despite Nyasha’s clear distinctions between the symbols he uses at Bethesda and the beings or powers represented by them, the chances are that some of the participants attach a magical interpretation to their use. Thus they endow the water of Bethesda with inherent efficacy and remedial qualities without fully understanding the power of the Holy Spirit. It is also possible that the red cloth and its protective quality assume such importance in the ritual context that it loses its instructive value concerning the wider salvific implications of Christ’s blood. In addition, the use of fowl’s blood could evoke unintended traditional connotations, as if the fowl had some sacrificial significance in placating the troublesome spirit.
The occurrence of such misinterpretations does not necessarily invalidate Nyasha's entire ministry. In Africa the tendency among Christians to attach magical interpretations to, for instance, the symbols of the sacraments is a common phenomenon, both in the “historic” and the Independent Churches. The repeated proclamation of the gospel as an integral part of exorcist procedure and the prophet healer's manifest faith in the triune Christian God act as powerful correctives and deepen the understanding of those sufficiently open to religious reorientation. The use of fowl’s blood in Nyasha’s exorcism moreover symbolizes dissociation from and rejection of the possessing spirit. It has no propitiatory objective, as Nyasha and his assistants intend it to be the strongest possible symbolic statement against the destruction of life wrought by wizardry.

Enslavement?

Does Nyasha’s exorcism effect complete liberation from possessing spirits causing affliction and from related fears? Is the image of the Pentecosta as a protective institution and the prominence of the charismatic leader not a stumbling block in the development of the patient’s own spiritual strength and understanding?

The emphasis in the cited testimonies on prophetic support and guidance, as well as the tendency to regard church membership as a safeguard against future visitations by evil spirits, indeed suggest the substitution of one kind of “enslavement” for another. I have little doubt that at least some patients acquire a kind of “captive” status in the church through a combination of external and internal coercive factors, such as disapproving neighbours who demand expulsion of the culprit from their village or some other radical solution, as well as the subjection of the desperate outcast to a strict disciplinary code within the Pentecosta. Not all patients achieve true religious liberation and independence subsequent to the initial spirit expulsion. To them Nyasha’s dream interpretations and sustained guidance, instead of iconically reflecting Christ’s power over evil, become binding in a legalistic sense and a precondition for future well-being. In such cases the exorcist and his institution have an addictive rather than a liberating impact — a state which does not leave sufficient scope for detached and objective reflection.

Flaws of this nature do not, however, preclude a positive evaluation of Nyasha’s ministry. Much as the “captive” membership of some of his patients and their residual fears of a recurrence of spirit possession could be exploited, wittingly or unwittingly, for purposes of in-group cohesion, Nyasha makes a point of stimulating the patient’s own religious responsibility. As mentioned above he insists on patients persevering in prayer, fasting and spiritual growth as an essential condition for long-term recovery. His ministry therefore provides a powerful inducement for
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overly dependent followers to develop from captive security to independence and freedom.

**Discrimination and stigmatisation as side-effects**

From my observations of Nyasha’s exorcist rituals I gained the impression that in some marginal cases, where wizardry is not necessarily at issue, group dynamics and expectations of revealing confessions subject the patient to pressures quite disproportionate to the malady or social misbehaviour presented. This can lead to confessions of nocturnal or other antisocial activities of which the patient is not guilty. Such confessions in turn can cause discrimination against unfortunates by unsympathetic outsiders. In other words, Nyasha’s exorcism can also have counterproductive social results. Instead of healing and reinstatement in society, general deterioration of social status can be the outcome of misconstrued confessions.

In some cases it must be extremely difficult for a suspect “witch” to decide what to confess. Refusal to confess some form of witchcraft involvement could confirm the suspicions of relatives or hostile villagers and lead to social alienation. By the same token confession of witchcraft in order to satisfy group expectations could produce mentally and spiritually beneficial results within the Pentecosta church without, however, providing an equally satisfactory solution in the village context. Prophetically induced confessions can therefore jeopardize the patient’s position back home (by more or less playing into the hands of his or her enemies) instead of effecting the desired reconciliation.

Whereas Bishop Nyasha tries to avoid coercive measures, some of his assistant prophets tend to pressurize patients in an attempt to obtain full confessions, particularly when they deal with “hardened” wizards who are uncooperative. As prophetic persuasion takes place in the name and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, sympathetic consultation can develop into psychoreligious coercion, a subtle or flagrant process in which the prophet takes unfair advantage of a troubled, victimized and socially insecure patient.

I once witnessed a somewhat unrepentant witch entering the Bethesda pool. The prophet-exorcist who was not satisfied with the “witch’s” confession, dived into the pool, then turned his back on the “witch”, tore his garments in a dramatic act of repudiating evil and walked away from the pool, leading the entire attendant congregation back to the conference camp. The diminutive figure of the “witch” sat shivering, rejected and alone in the water. Under such severe pressure she eventually made a complete confession and a few days later had a plaguing uroyi spirit exorcised. Whereas my Shona field-assistants seemed unperturbed and felt that drastic action against a person associated with evil was appropriate, I
could not help resenting the event as discriminatory and judgmental. The incident is not representative, but it illustrates one of the weaknesses of a ministry not entirely free from prophetic abuse.

A consideration of both the positive results and imperfections of Nyasha’s exorcist ministry highlights the complex problems one faces in assessing this phenomenon in terms of the above-mentioned theoretical framework. A biased appraisal of the negative implications of confession and exorcism for some individuals could lead one to claim that the end result is enslavement to the old order – that Nyasha’s preoccupation with wizardry leads to an affirmation of the traditional paradigm. This could be taken as evidence that Shorter’s warning against the negative results of traditional witchcraft eradication movements applies to Nyasha’s work; that his control over evil is purely illusory; that he establishes an unjust, discriminatory system; and that he usurps the position of God by passing judgment on the wizard. The negative aspects discussed above indeed suggest that such criticism would be valid up to a point.

On the other hand the overwhelming positive evidence suggests that we are confronted with an admittedly incomplete ministry – and one would do well to remember that however correct its doctrinal or theoretical formulation, no church practice in this life is perfect – but one which is instrumental in genuine liberation and healing. Nyasha’s exorcism implicitly encompasses both the indigenizing and pilgrim principles referred to by Walls (1982). Inasmuch as it adresses the old paradigm – taking related beliefs and fears seriously while introducing an essentially new message which denies the incorrigibility of the wizard, replacing the traditional punitive measures with reconciliation and facilitating the social rehabilitation of the scapegoat – it represents a significant contribution to a paradigm shift. This paradigm shift is not as sweeping and articulate in Nyasha’s church as it appears on paper in Bosch’s theoretical treatise (1987). Yet it militates against traditional scapegoat theory by introducing the liberating and humanizing message of Christ’s sacrifice into the world of suffering experienced by the casualties of that theory. In its own imaginative way this ministry proclaims the enigmatic truth that evil has no future, that the only worthwhile future is with God. Hence in one way or another the requirements for a paradigm shift, as elucidated by Bosch, features in the Pentecosta church.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that, by Western standards, Nyasha and most of his assistants have had little or no education. Thus theirs is not a consistently systematized theology or a deliberate programme of radical change in philosophy or world view. Still, on the basis of intuitive, simplistic understanding of the gospel, they have introduced the good news of Christ’s reign into the dark realm and existential reality of evil. In this enacted theology of ritual and symbol they have made and are making a more original, more effective contribution to wizardry-related pastoral
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care than many a mission church which misunderstood, rejected and ultimately negated the wizardry beliefs and the concomitant needs of African people.

REFERENCES CITED


