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**Priestly Office / Spirit Mediums / Pastoral Care**

1 **Introduction**

The Priestly Office, the concept of Spirit Mediums and the practice of Pastoral Care have contextual spiritualized meaning and relevance among the Ndebele people of Matabo in Zimbabwe. Matabo is an area in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe bordering Matabeleland South Province (Moyo 2019, 114 – 124). In Matabo, mainly among the Ndebele people the functional understanding of the Priestly Office is synonymous with the traditional understanding of the role of spirit mediums who give answers to challenges beyond human comprehension. Spirit mediums are caregivers to individuals and communities in response to that which is mainly spiritual and mysterious to normal human beings. In the mind-set of one with a traditional understanding of a person called by God as a priest, then the priestly office becomes an avenue for caregiving to people on issues beyond human comprehension. To fully understand the characteristics of an ideal pastoral caregiver (the priest) in Matabo one needs to understand the traditional understanding of a spirit medium and *Sangomas¹* among the Ndebele. The term ‘priest’ is not popular in my area of research, people use the word *Umfundisi*. *Umfundisi* is a Ndebele word directly translated to mean ‘the teacher’. In Matabo the English reference to *Umfundisi*, is Pastor. The Priestly office in this chapter will interchangeably referred to as pastoral office or *Umfundisi*. It is also common for people to refer to mainline church (Lutherans, Seventh Day Adventists, Church of Christ, and Brethren in Christ) ministers as priests or Reverends (commonly shortened to Rev) while ministers from other ministries² (Victory Fellowship, Oasis of Life, Assemblies of God and Living Waters) are referred to as pastors. However, both groups are referred to as *Umfundisi* in isiNdebele. This chapter seeks to explore and expose the popular understanding of the role of the pastoral office amongst the Ndebele which explains the appetite for miracle working pastors popularly known as ‘man of God’.³ This chapter is a result of an ongoing research project on how miracle healing attracts people and seemingly people do not

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¹ *Isangoma* is also referred to as *Isanuse*. Both words refer to one with spiritual powers to see beyond human comprehension. One who can operate and communicate at the spiritual realm.

² Ministries refers to new churches being formed across Southern Africa who are filled with the Holy Spirit. They conduct their services mainly in tents. The majority of their membership are people who are transferring from mainline churches or those who worship in mainline churches and then visit the ministries for spiritual based solutions to challenges.

³ At present we do not have what people popularly call ‘the woman of God’ for female pastors or and priests.
question the instructions by pastors leading to drinking of petrol, eating snakes, eating grass and many other behaviours that people would not do under ‘normal’ circumstances. What is it that makes people from all social levels of society accept instructions from pastors without questioning? Why do people seemingly shelve their rationality when dealing with pastors mainly from new church movements popularly known as ‘Ministries’? This ongoing study started in 2017 in Matabo and surrounding areas. I have gathered data so far from 31 church leaders and 217 church members. Preliminary findings indicate that, at a conceptual level, amongst the Ndebele, there is no separation between Christianity and Traditional African Religions, people of Matabo prefer a ‘man of God’ with power. This means a priest who is overtly filled with the Holy Spirit and can act like a spirit medium or a Sangoma of the people by telling and foretelling people’s needs and expectations. The Ndebele will flock to pastors who express their Christianity using African concepts of spirits and salvation from present afflictions such as misfortune, poverty, sickness, and spiritual attacks. The priest must demonstrate amandla (power). Pastors then demonstrate power through such acts as spraying people with insecticides, raising the dead, offering portions for luck, speaking in tongues, talking directly to Jesus to get immediate answers for the congregants, anointing with oil, deliverance sessions, praise worship, healing crusades, fasting and prayers, visions and prophecies that respond to the everyday needs of Africans.

In Matabo, I have observed and confirmed through interviews and informal discussions that in most cases pastors that are overtly filled with the Holy Spirit are relevant to the socio-spiritual needs of the Ndebele than pastors that are not filled with the Holy Spirit. Pastors from mainline churches or traditional churches such as the Lutheran Church, Seventh Day Adventists Church, Brethren in Christ, and Church of Christ are viewed as not filled with the Holy Spirit. Mainline church pastors are general viewed as divorced from the spiritual existential needs of their members. Members of these churches do come to their churches for a normal Sunday or Saturday service, but when they meet spirit related pastoral needs, they visit the pastors of the Ministries that are filled with the Holy Spirit. I fact amongst the Ndebele, all of life’s needs have a spiritual dimension hence the argument by Clement Osunwokeh (2014, 166)⁴ that “[r]eligion indeed makes a tremendous impact on the social, political and economic life of the Africans.” The spiritual dimension is central in deciding which pastors to go to in times of need. Some churches do not have the spirit. For example, about 133 of my participants concurred that there is no Holy Spirit in the Lutheran Church. Participants in this research project who know that I am a pastor openly told me that there is no spiritual healing from the Lutheran church because

⁴ Clement Osunwokeh writes from a Nigerian perspective. Interestingly, though Nigeria and Zimbabwe are miles apart, the understanding of the position of a priest is related. African Traditional religious understanding of traditional priests/priestess contributes to how society perceives a Christian priest.
the pastors of the Lutheran church do not have the Holy Spirit. They said that Lutheran pastors and those of other mainline churches ‘are dry’.

This chapter will start by expositing the Ndebele people of Matabo and their context. This will be followed by an exposition of the characteristics of a spirit medium. The spirit medium phenomenon will be used as a theoretical frame of reference for the Ndebele’s understanding of the priestly office. The chapter will go on to explain the behaviour of performing miracles by the church ministries in contemporary Matabo and the reasons for the behaviour of both the priests and the recipients of the services of priests. The chapter also demonstrates the concept of priestly dignity in the worldview of the Ndebele people of Matabo. The chapter concludes by pointing to the type of priest that is ideal for the people of Matabo.

2 The Ndebele People of Matabo and their Context

The Ndebele people of Zimbabwe are in the majority descendants of Zulus who travelled northwards from South Africa in the nineteenth century. They belong to the bigger group of the Nguni tribes, which includes groups such as the Zulu, the Xhosa, and the Swati. In 1823, Chief Mzilikazi Khumalo had a conflict with King Shaka Zulu over the spoils of war in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. As a result, Mzilikazi travelled north with his regiment and their families. Eventually, Mzilikazi settled in Zimbabwe, becoming the king of the Ndebele. The name ‘Ndebele’ comes from the Sotho people who called them ‘Matabele’, which means ‘people of the shields’, in reference to the shields of war that these Zulus carried. As these Zulus travelled northwards, their vocabulary became richer (or polluted) by picking words from the tribes with which they interacted. Therefore, the Ndebele of Zimbabwe speak what some people would call corrupted Zulu. Ndebele has more vocabulary than contemporary Zulu.

Some Ndebele people do belong to the church, and they respect church-based rituals such as baptisms, funerals and marriages. However, when the Ndebele meet challenges, they do seek for pastoral care from Priests. For many Christians, pastoral care is viewed as an important aspect when one meets challenges in life, but it is not the only way. At night congregants can go to other faith-based healers such as pastors from other denominations (especially the newer charismatic healing ministries) and traditional spirit mediums including sangomas (King 2012). In a way, they will still be seeking for spiritual pastoral care, only that it will be away from their denomination.

Pastoral care is related to the works of a shepherd to a flock (Louw 1998, 21). According to Patton (2005, 107), “pastoral care is part of practical theology which focuses on pastoral practices” on human events as they make sense of their context. Patton further argues that in the ministry of pastoral care, people care for each other because they are aware that God cares for them all in their given context (Patton 2005, 107). Pastoral care is the central role of Priests in Matabo in both Christianity and African Traditional Religions.
Besides pastoral care from the church, the Ndebele people as religious beings find it difficult to make a distinction between their Ndebele culture and African Traditional Religion(s). The Ndebele are religious beings in that religion permeates one’s life from the womb until life after death (Moyo 2019, 115). There is no life outside the influence of religion. Religion “is the total traditional world view with all the values and beliefs” (Moyo 2019, 115). In most cases religion means the presence and the influence of God, ancestors, and the spirit world. For the Ndebele it is difficult to pick out behavioural patterns in which a Ndebele person can then say this is culture and this other one is religion. In fact, what we have is a human being living their life in a particular way that makes them who they are. It is then up to those interested in categorising issues to say this is religion and this other is culture. This cultural way of living culture and religion does not need to convert or proselytise, one is conceived and born into the religion (Bozongwana 1983). It does not wait for a person to grow up so that they can learn how to read about the religion from some kind of ‘Holy Book’; its strength is that it is a lived religion.

The Ndebele cosmology is composed of both visible and invisible spirit beings which have influence on living human beings which are appeased using rituals and living life according to acceptable social norms and values, which can be described as a cultural way of life or religious way of life of good relationships (Bozongwana 1983). The life of the Ndebele resonates with argument of Mbiti, that human life is composed of life forces that people constantly interact with influencing the course of human life for good and for evil (Mbiti 1970). In the Ndebele worldview, the unborn, the living-living and the living-dead are all part of the constellation of the living spirits (Moyo 2019, 116). A Kenyan scholar, Ndeti, argues that the community “extends beyond the living members of the clan and tribe. It incorporates those who have died and those who are yet unborn. [...] [The individual] is a physical representative of the dead, living and unborn. Thus [the individual] is a community incorporating three principles – life, spirit, and immortality” (Ndeti 1972, 114).

Life amongst the Ndebele is highly rooted in this kind of cosmology and worldview, making it very difficult to separate culture from religion and God. Lalaye (1981) is of the view that the African traditional cosmology is dynamic. It recognises and integrates the duality of the mind and body, magic and rationality, order and disorder, negative and positive powers, and individual and communal consciousness. Family relationships, communal relationships and relationships with strangers are part of the religious observances to continual appease the spirit world. When things do not work out in life one is forced to seek an understanding of their relationship with the spirit world. This understanding of God and ancestors borders around theology of retribution. God and ancestors are happy, and they bless those who relate well to others and the environment. On the contrary those who do not relate well will be cursed through misfortune and ill-health. A good priest needs to understand this worldview and have the power to connect with the spirit world.
3 The Concept of Religious Hybridity in Matabo

The Ndebele people of Matabo who have converted into Christianity still participate in African Traditional Religious practices of the community such as contributing funds to the annual entourage that visits the rain goddess in Matopos hills – eNjelele. The majority of the Ndebele population have intricately brought together aspects of culture and Christianity to a whole new way of doing Christianity. It is now very difficult to separate Ndebele cultural practices from Christian practices. They have formed a hybrid type of religion. They are practicing a form of Christianity that is uniquely Matabo type. The priestly office is then understood from a hybrid worldview that mixes African Ndebele worldviews with Christianity. Priests from mainline churches are viewed as directly opposed to the African cultural practices as they favour western cultural practices in their mentality and practice of ministry. On the other hand, African Initiated church pastors favour African cultural practices in their pastoral practices. Nonetheless, broadly speaking, both sides see the priest as a spirit medium who can perform extraordinary acts through the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

In Matabo, the priestly office is multifaceted and depends on contextual religious traditions, cultural practices, and environmental conditions. The priestly office can align itself with the fundamentals of the religious spiritualties of the context or may be continuously seeking to oppose the local cultural and religious traditions. In both instances, one cannot understand the spirit medium until one understands the hybrid worldview of Matabo. A priest in the context of Matabo must understand the local cultural behavioural patterns and religious ecumenism (or syncretism) that links all religions in an individual. The priest must be transcultural and trans-religious in nature thereby allowing Christians to live their Christianity in the auspices of their Nguni cultural nuances. The ideal priest should be able to navigate the space between Christianity and cultural practices that can be said to be African traditional religious practices. Christianity in particular and religion in general is experienced as discursive cultural practices. The priestly office is that of navigating the socio-economic and political challenges as well as the joys of people in context and offer spiritual based responses to such. In Matabo the priestly office is a spiritual office where people receive answers to issues that are beyond human comprehension through the priest’s spiritual connection with God or the gods. To understand the Ndebele worldview on priesthood one must understand the concept of spirit mediums.

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5 Njelele is the name of the hill housing the rain goddess. The ‘e’ in eNjelele stands for ‘in’.
The Spirit Medium Phenomenon

Spirit mediums are both women and men who are blessed by the possibility of being possessed by the spirit of an ancestor (at times referred to as the Living dead). The process leading to one being possessed by the spirit of an ancestor varies from one family to another or from one village to another. This is because African Traditional Religions are not monolithic even within the same tribal grouping such as the Ndebele. In Matabo community there are two common ways of becoming a spirit medium. The most common is that the spirit of the ancestor chooses whomever it wants. Whoever is chosen by the spirit can become aware of such a calling through becoming sick in strange ways that defy diagnosis by western medical practitioners. The person may also have strange dreams and visions that normal will become fulfilled to show that the ancestors (abaphansi, izinyoka or amadlozi as they are referred to in isiNdebele) are visiting the person. This eventually leads to an existing spirit medium telling the family of the sick person or the sick person directly that he/she is being invited by the amadlozi /abaphansi to become a spirit medium.

The second route to becoming a spirit medium for amadlozi is through appointment by the family. The family may see the mannerisms or physical characteristics of a family member that reminds them of an ancestor and decide to nominate that individual to be a spirit medium for the family. A ritual is then performed to invite the spirit of the ancestor to use the individual as a spirit medium. In both the above cases the individual then goes through a form of training (Ukuthwasa) from an experienced spirit medium. In other words, becoming a spirit medium comes through a calling to this ministry. The calling can be direct to the person, or it can be through others as in the case of family members identifying an individual as suitable to be a spirit medium. The training by an experienced spirit medium which may involve going to specific shrines equips the trainee with the tools of the trade.

A spirit medium can be a community seer, healer, or isangoma /isanuse. This becomes a form of a vocation for the medium. The spirit medium is a respected figure because he /she represents the presence of the spirit world. When possessed by the spirit the incumbents do not speak their own mind but the mind of the ancestor. The spirit medium is a connection between the living and the living dead. Disrespecting the spirit medium is tantamount to disrespecting the living dead. The spirit medium is consulted for spiritual issues that are seen to permeate all of life. The voice of the spirit medium is the voice of the gods and therefore cannot be opposed. Spirit mediums command respect in all sectors of the community in Matabo. This includes Christians who still fear the perceived power of the spirit mediums. Besides respect there is also fear of the spirit mediums as they may invite the wrath of the spirit world against anyone who does not respect them. So, all the Christians can do is to avoid the wrath of the spirit mediums by respecting them.

If individuals, families, and communities are confronted by spiritual issues that are believed to be hidden from normal human beings, they consult the Sangoma.
Sangoma then uses spiritual powers to unravel that which is hidden from normal human beings. People do not consult a Sangoma before exhausting their human abilities. In Matabo the Sangoma is consulted when human wisdom has failed. According to the Ndebele, that which defies human wisdom, will according to the Ndebele be pointing to the spiritual nature or supernatural nature of the phenomenon requiring the services of one with supernatural powers.

5 Sources of the Dignity of a Priest in Matabo

Through the tradition of the missionaries, African Christians, especially in the mainline churches value the ritual of ordination (Ukugcotshwa kukamfundisi) which in the traditional sense means the anointment of the priest. According to Clement Osunwokeh (2014), the priestly office in itself carries some level of dignity for the office bearer. Dignity is supposedly conferred on the priest during ordination. For the people of Matabo one who is ordained carries the power of the spirit world. Ordination sets one apart from the rest of humanity to a level next to the gods.

The Priest is not a “normal” human being; he/she is dignified in a manner that borders on fear of the connection of the priest to the spirit world. The priest carries both blessings and curses hence the fear or veneration of the individuals in this office. The priest is the one who speaks to God or gods on behalf of society. Clement Osunwokeh says that society “understands the priest as a sacred person, set apart by ordination and in possession of special sacramental power and is often described as ‘another Christ (alter Christus)’” (Osunwokeh 2014, 169). This resonates with the traditional African understanding of priesthood where a person is set aside and apart by the ancestors or gods to connect the living to the spirit world. The priest usually carries the character of the gods. A priest is the epiphany of the gods. In this way, a Christian priest in Matabo is expected to be the epiphany of Christ. This means the priest must speak and act with spiritual authority. The priest can earn respect and dignity for performing miracles and extra ordinary acts. In this way the priest will be demonstrating power (amandla). Amandla confirms the priest’s connectedness with the gods. Without amandla the priest is not as accepted as the one viewed as possessing unique extra ordinary power.

The character and acts of the priest, as noted above, must resemble those of Jesus Christ or of the Apostles of Jesus Christ. The life of the priest must be exemplary of what the priest represents. The priestly office demands integrity in daily life and pastoral practice. In African politics there is some level of corruption that is cancerous. Pastoral integrity calls the priest to be a model of sacrificial veracity through living according to the principles of the Kingdom of God that is governed by values such as love, honesty, and integrity. This calls for the ethics of morality and holiness in the life of the priest. The priestly office is dignified if it manifests the divine presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the world of the ‘Ministries’ priestly dignity is manifested through the presence of the Holy Spirit which enables the priest to speak in
tongues and perform miracles. Being filled by the Holy Spirit and performing miracles to respond to the needs of society makes the priest worthy in the community. Priestly dignity is worthiness in the eyes of society ascribed to a priest because of what they offer to the community. The priest must bring salvation to the community in the here and now. Surely Africans in general and the Ndebele in particular do understand the eschatological meaning of salvation as espoused by the mainline churches, however a priest makes positive impact if they can save people in their present day needs in the socio-economic and political needs of society. The Ndebele are inclined towards present salvation than salvation located in the unknown eschatological future of the church.

Dignity varies from denomination to denomination. There is a tendency in Matabo for people to view their own priest as the real priest compared to priests from other denominations. Therefore, the dignity of a priest may be located only in the membership of his/her denomination. There is also the possibility of people offering selective dignity depending on their needs from different priests belonging to different denominations. Presently, the most social popular priests are from Pentecostal and charismatic churches and ministries because they are regarded spiritually powerful. The power of Umfundisi is based on the ability to demonstrate being filled with the Holy Spirit enabling one to perform extra ordinary events such as healing in the name of Jesus Christ. The spiritual functionality and connectedness to Christ by the Umfundisi is equal to dignity.

Umfundisi must remain connected to Christ for authenticity. All mysterious and strange performances by Umfundisi must be done in the name of Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit to avoid being viewed as a magician. The source of the dignity of the Umfundisi is the Christ (Osunwokeh 2014, 169). Umfundisi is the dwelling place of the Christ and is therefore expected to perform the miracles that Jesus Christ performed during his earthly sojourn. In contemporary Matabo a priest who does not perform extra ordinary acts is viewed as not being filled by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, pastors perform miracles and ask their congregants to perform extra ordinary acts as a way of responding to the religious worldviews of the context. A priest must be Christ like but at the same time must be like the spirit mediums who are able to respond to extra ordinary human needs. Osunwokeh says that Umfundisi shares the dignity of Christ “…which no earthly instrument could alter; mankind, nature, luck or fate. All through his earthly life the divine will of the Father was upheld, and the dignity remained intact…This is also a dignity which is not determined by his human person, possession, and state but by his essence as a priest ‘alter Christus’” (2014, 170).

In the Ndebele worldview a spirit medium or Sangoma is a representative figure of the gods or ancestors (Wreford 2005; Jonker 2008). The spirit medium is endowed with the powers of the gods as long as they are filled by spiritual powers. Similarly, when the Ndebele see Umfundisi they imagine seeing God the Christ through the Umfundisi. The Umfundisi is also viewed as a representative figure of the presence of the Christ. As a result of the above Osunwokeh (2014, 170) argues that “So, it is logical to conclude that there is no other basis, no other point of reference that can be adduced
for priestly dignity other than the highly dignified priesthood of Christ that a priest shares. So, one may conclude [...] that there is one priesthood, that is Christ and that there is one source of the priesthood that is Christ” (2014, 170).

6 Conclusion

The hybridity nature of Christianity in Matabo creates a particular type of a priest who should be able to respond to the needs of people whose cultural underpinnings have intertwined Christianity with African Traditional Religious beliefs and practices into an inseparable reality. Armed with this understanding we are beginning to have priests (pastors) who are keen to perform miracles such as raising the dead, giving people material and monetary prosperity in the name of Jesus. In the African context of the Ndebele, salvation is in the here and now and therefore priests are struggling to make Christianity offer salvation from the socio-economic and political challenges in the here and now. Priests are also responding to the Ndebele’s inherent belief in spirits by performing exorcisms and deliverance services. The priest is a spirit medium endowed with the power of the Holy Spirit among the Ndebele people of Matabo.

Bibliography


