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Rain, uncertainty and power in southern Zimbabwe

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In Zimbabwe, and across the region, rainfall and drought have long been measures of contested political legitimacy in ways not limited to the politics of food, famine and agricultural production. Around Lake Mutirikwi in southern Zimbabwe, this is true not just for spirit mediums, chiefs and other ‘traditionalist’ authorities for whom rainmaking practices are well-established means of demonstrating ‘autochthony’, sovereignty and legitimacy, but also for war veterans, new farmers, government technocrats and others involved in land reform during the 2000s. This is what I examine here. Whilst I focus particularly on rainmaking practices, encounters with *njuzu* water spirits, and national *biras* that took place in the 2005-6 when fieldwork was carried out around Lake Mutirikwi, the larger point I pursue is that water acts as an *index of power* – of the entangled but contested play of legitimacy and sovereignty - across many different registers of meaning and regimes of rule. In making this argument I engage with Keane (2003; 2005) and Engelke’s elaboration of Peirce’s theory of signs (1955), and build upon others (James 1972; Jedrej 1992) who have long argued that rainmaking ‘traditions’ across eastern, central and southern Africa are less a form of applied meteorology and more an idiom of politics and power, in order to argue that they are necessarily *both* at the same time.

Introduction: Censoring the weather forecast

In November 2010 a senior government meteorologist revealed that for much of the previous decade Zimbabwe’s weather forecast had been censored on a daily basis by the President’s Office. The admission came in response to journalists’ questions about ‘why the meteorological service department (MET) had over the years denied possible droughts’ that were later experienced despite predictions that ‘the country was expecting above average rainfall every year’. Also blaming ‘obsolete weather equipment’ and the loss of experienced personnel for the ‘inaccurate weather forecasting’, Washington Zhakata ‘admitted that there is heavy political interference and censorship of the weather forecasts in Zimbabwe before it is issued out to the public’. ‘This information’, he said, ‘was seen as sensitive’.¹

What this ‘sensitivity’ amounts to is the subject of this article. A clue can be found in a much earlier news item in the international press, which had reported (amid official denials) that ‘the president’s office took control of the forecasting service’ in 2003 ‘after learning that the drought-affected country is facing two more years of low rainfall’. Then a series of droughts had coincided with the first three years of fast

* Email: j.fontein@ed.ac.uk and/or joost.fontein@biea.ac.uk. This paper is part of a larger research project looking at landscape, water and belonging in the context of land reform in Southern Zimbabwe. It appears as a chapter in forthcoming monograph entitled *Remaking Mutirikwi: Landscape, Water and Belonging in Southern Zimbabwe* (James Currey, 2015) and an expanded version of it is to be published in *Cultural Landscape Heritage in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, forthcoming).

track land reform, deepening economic and political crises, and widening discontent about food shortages.

‘The government does not want any information on the weather to be leaked’ an official from the Meteorological Office said. ‘All our forecasts are to be sent to the president’s office, and only then can they be released’. ... Informed sources said Mr Mugabe feared that the revelation that no early end to the drought was in sight would heighten discontent at a time when nearly half the country’s 13 million people are going hungry. Food riots have already erupted in the capital, Harare, and the south-western city of Bulawayo this month. The development came as the World Food Programme said the harvest of the staple maize would be poor for the next two years... The impact of the regional drought has been compounded by Mr Mugabe’s crude land redistribution program, which has crippled the country’s agricultural sector and left swathes of fertile land unplanted.²

Although the political consequences of food shortages and rising prices are undoubtedly of great significance in Zimbabwe’s recent history, they do not alone adequately explain this long-term commitment to daily interference in the weather forecast.³ It is hard to make sense of ZANU PF’s impulse to censor the weather forecast in the 2000s without reference to the localized re-configurations of authority over land and ‘re-making of the state’ provoked by the fast track programme. If for many fast track offered the realization of long delayed, localised aspirations and imagined futures that turned on access to land and fertile soils in divergent ways, the recurrent droughts of the early 2000s were politically significant because they called into question the legitimacy of land reform, and the ‘third *chimurenga*’ [liberation struggle] constituted around it.

It is true that government often, perhaps erroneously (Richardson 2007), blamed recurring drought for the dramatic fall in agricultural production during this period, when its commercial farming sector was so profoundly reconfigured.⁴ But the political significance of rain and drought in Zimbabwe is not simply a question of agricultural productivity (cf Lan 1985; Ranger 2003; Vijfhuizen 1997; Mafu 1995; Mawere & Wilson 1995; Garbett 1977). Across the region, rainfall and drought have long been measures of contested political legitimacy in far more complex ways (Saunders 2008; Jedrej 1992; James 1972; Southall nd; Packard 1981; Akang’a 1987; Krige & Krige 1943). From the politics of floods and elections in Mozambique (Bertelsen 2004), to the collaborations of rainmakers and guerrillas in the Dande in the 1970s (Lan 1985), or the drought-invoking cosmic ‘unordering’ and pollution of the land caused by violence in Matabeleland (Werbner 1995:201; 1991:188; 1998:98),⁵ rain and drought are political in ways that intertwine with, but not limited to the politics of food, famine and agricultural production. Around Mutirikwi, this is true not just for mediums, chiefs and other ‘traditionalist’ authorities for whom rain making practices are well established means of demonstrating ‘autochthony’, sovereignty and legitimacy, but also for war veterans, new farmers, government technocrats and others involved in land reform in the 2000s.

This is what I examine here. Whilst I focus particularly on the significance of rain making, encounters with *njuzu* water spirits/creatures, and national *biras*

[ancestral possession ceremonies] in 2005-6, the larger point being pursued is that water often acts as an *index of power* – of the entangled, contested play of legitimacy and sovereignty - across many different registers of meaning and regimes of rule in which it is saturated. Towards the end of the article I turn to Keane (2003; 2005) and Engelke's (2007) elaboration of Peirce's theory of signs (1955), and build upon others (James 1972; Jedrej 1992) who have long argued that rain making 'traditions' across eastern, central and southern Africa are less a form of applied meteorology and more an idiom of politics and power, in order to argue that they are necessarily *both* at the same time. After all, the unfolding (if short-lived) optimism I encountered around Mutirikwi in 2005/6 was directly related to the successful rains of that season, because they *made real* the possibility that a diversity of long delayed, aspired futures might now be substantiated, just as the recurring droughts of previous years had begun to make land reform look tentative, uncertain and doubtful.

Rain making in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe the ancestral or divine provision (or denial) of rain, and rituals associated with it, have long been fundamental to so-called traditionalist forms of authority over people and land. This derives from the sovereignty of ancestral owners of the land from whom they descend or by whom they are possessed, and in turn from the high divinity *Mwari* [or *Mwali*, 'God'], widely accredited as the ultimate provider of rain. There are marked regional and historical differences in the relative role of different ancestral and divine cults in the provision of the rain, and these relate both to long and complex pre-colonial and colonial histories, and their contemporary invocation and re-imagination in ongoing contestations of belonging and rule.

For example, Lan (1985:72-117) explored the historical relationships between autochthonous 'Tavara' and 'Tande' clans and 'invading' but now ruling Korekore lineages in northern Zimbabwe, where the *mhondoro* [royal ancestors/lion spirits] of the former retained a special place in the hierarchical sequence of offerings by which requests for rain are passed up to the distant divinity *Mwari* (cf Garbett 1992). These ancestral relations were mirrored and contested in the unfurling relations between clans, mediums, chiefs and guerrilla fighters during the liberation struggle. Working in the same area over a decade later, Spierenburg (2004) explored similar dynamics in relation to later 'incoming' peoples or *vatorwa* [strangers] resettled by the postcolonial government in the 1980s. In Masvingo, the role of *Mwari* in the provision of rain has historically been much more immediate, and there are no *mhondoro* cults of the ilk apparent in northern Zimbabwe. Instead a system of *manyusa* and *munyai* [shrine messengers] once travelled annually between the *mukwerere* or *mitoro* [rain making] rituals held in individual chiefdoms, and the *Mwari* shrines at Matonjeni, Dula, Zhame and Njelele in the Matopos, southern Matabeleland, where the voice of *Musikavanhu* [creator of people] made the divine a much less distant entity. Although few *manyusa* still make these journeys, their past significance and the continuing importance of the *Mwari* shrines is evident in the

ongoing efforts of some mediums and chiefs, as well as war veterans,⁶ to visit the Matopos.

It is important to avoid any assumption that pre-colonial rain making was any less contested than the politics of rain and drought are today. The Matopos shrines themselves have long been embroiled in complex localised contests between competing clans, shrines and shrine keepers (Ranger 1999; Werbner 1989; Nyathi 2003). Furthermore, their crucial position at the pinnacle of regional rain offerings was not always consistent across Masvingo. Mazarire (2010) discusses the historical tensions between the various groups (Hera, Venda, VaRemba and Duma) who jostled for political and religious authority over land and water resources after the demise of the Rozvi 'Nechishanga' polity in the 18th century. Similarly, the 19th 'Duma confederacy' (Mtetwa 1976) was much more oriented eastward, towards the Pfupajena cult at Mandara hill, than the westward focus towards the Matopos many remember today. The influence of the *Mwari* cult among Masvingo's Duma clans was only firmly cemented in the early 20th century, after the death of Chief Mazungunye, a renowned rainmaker, had coincided with a severe drought in 1912. The 1912 drought and abundant rains that followed culminated an assemblage of meteorological and political events contributing to the Mandara cult's demise, amidst the growing incursions of the *Mwari* emissaries, Ndebele and Nguni raids, and the deepening interference of Rhodesian settlers, the BSACo, and Christian missionaries, from the end of the 19th century (Sayce 1978:58).

Around Mutirikwi in the mid 2000s, such entangled political, religious and ecological histories lay in the background of many resurgent disputes over territory, autochthony and authority among mediums, chiefs and clans. Just as the 'flood' of *Mwari* cult emissaries into Masvingo in the early 20th century (Sayce 1978:58) had alarmed Rhodesian settlers, and therefore fed into colonial state-making, alert as they were to the role of mediums and the *Mwari* cult in the 1896 rebellions (Ranger 1967),⁷ so drought and the politics of rain making continued to be woven into postcolonial state-making. The terrible 1992 drought, in particular, brought the question of the ancestral legitimacy of the state into sharp relief, so that even President Mugabe was forced to ask 'the spirit mediums to bring rain'; a request that many refused (Derman 2003:71). The 1992 drought equally brought tensions between 'African spirituality' and Zionist and Pentecostal churches to the foreground (Ranger 2011b), resulting in the (re)emergence of various 'traditionalist' movements; particularly the short-lived but high impact Julianna cult (Mawere and Wilson 1995; Mafu 1995; Ranger 2003). Indeed both Julianna's dramatic rise and her equally rapid demise - after she failed to make it rain (Ranger 2011: 6) - illustrate how political, religious and meteorological fortunes are often intertwined.

If the fortunes of those who claim to bring or 'hold up' the rain are intimately connected with the vagaries of weather, there can clearly be much wider reverberations. Through the longer durée of the highly contingent, localised politics of rain making, we can begin to make sense of ZANU PF's concern to censor the

weather forecast throughout the 2000s. The recurrent droughts of the early 2000s not only undermined agricultural productivity already destabilized by land reform, but raised questions about its ancestral or divine legitimacy. Mediums often suggested the failing rains were indicative of the ancestors' marginalisation from the *fast track* program. In January 2001 Ambuya VaZarira told war veterans and 'new farmers' that 'the lack of adequate rain they had been receiving was because the government was not adequately consulting with spirit mediums'.⁸ And failing rains and poor harvests were amongst the reasons why many around Mutirikwi turned to mediums and 'autochthonous' chiefs, as they sought to 'make safe' their own resettlements. Similarly, countrywide 'national *bira* ceremonies' initiated by government for the first time in 2005, but organised locally by individual chiefs, point exactly to the entanglement of local and national regimes of rule within localised performances of sovereignty and legitimacy linked to rain making. Later the good rains of 2005/6 were often attributed accordingly. Yet if these government-sponsored events illustrate how the entangled sovereignty and legitimacy of chiefs and government could be mutually beneficial, they also rode rough shod over complex local histories of struggles between clans, chiefs, mediums and different rain making cults. It is no surprise that some around Mutirikwi met the 'national *biras*' of 2005 with suspicion, particularly those mediums who felt marginalised by the government's ever-closer association with chiefs.

If the 'reach of the postcolonial state' is 'conditioned' by 'locally proved realities of alliances within, between and beyond communities at the periphery' (Werbner 1999:70), then the control of water, I argue, invokes the very ambiguity of power - both as assertions of sovereignty, and in governmental dimensions of legitimacy and rule. This political tension is inherent to the material, cultural and ecological qualities and flows of water intertwining the local and national, crossing over different repertoires and techniques of water management (from rain making to dams, irrigation and contour ridging). The saturation of water across diverse regimes of rule and registers of meaning emphasises the specifically hydrological dimensions of the 'consequential materiality of milieu' (Moore 2005:24). If the politics of water has long been as central to Zimbabwean state-making as that of land (Alexander 2006), then my primary purpose here is to examine how water featured in localised struggles over sovereignty and legitimacy around Mutirikwi in 2005/6 in ways which replicated and were finely intertwined with water's centrality to Zimbabwean statecraft.

The political properties of water

As Wittfogel (1957) demonstrated, the control of water - whether for irrigation, sanitation, or safe drinking water, or in managing run off, erosion and siltation - is often central to the spatialities of power involved in statecraft (cf Mosse 2003; Fontein 2008). The politics of water is rarely entirely separate from that of land. Water and land may be different kinds of resources, their different qualities shaping

different kinds of politics, yet their histories and history-making are inevitably intertwined (Mosse 2008:939). My purpose is to focus attention upon how water in its various manifestations (rain, run off, rivers, pools, dams), and with its diverse material qualities (as a volume or a line, its fluidity, pooling, erosiveness, cruciality for life), features in complex reconfigurations of power around Mutirikwi. I build on the basic premise that any regime of rule - whether of 'the state' at large, local officials or the localised authority of chiefs, mediums, and war veterans - 'persists through both repressive and productive mechanisms of power' (Navaro-Yashin 2002:154), involving 'the articulation ... of pastoral care with sovereign power' (Hammer 2003:130-1). Across diverse 'regimes of rule' and 'registers of meaning', water is often central to both demonstrative, performative and sometimes coercive assertions of sovereignty, autonomy and capacity on the one hand, and on the other, those productive, disciplining, governmental dimensions of power that circulate around appeals to legitimacy, moral authority and consent.⁹

These forms of power exist in tension, are unstable and often mutually productive. They are not exclusive to each other, nor historically sequential as Foucault himself implied (Navaro-Yashin 2002:154). It is important to avoid privileging particular 'texts, taxonomies, and forms of knowledge produced by the state', or identifying *singular* rationalities of power, at the expense of the multiple co-existing, contingent assemblages of 'situated practices', discourses, and materialities of rule (Moore 2005:7). Hence 'sovereign', 'productive' and 'responsive' forms of power materialise through different processes and technologies of ecological and hydrological control co-existent in close proximity around Mutirikwi. These include the 'rain making' rituals, ancestral ceremonies, and the ritual protection of sacred groves, pools and springs, which which are my main focus here. But they also include all sorts of other, colonial and postcolonial, developmental, technocratic rationalisations of space and water, such as contour ridging, dam building and irrigation.

An important example is the continuing official insistence that land surrounding the lake must be properly 'protected' to prevent soil erosion and siltation. This involves performances of sovereignty (such as the coercive construction of contour ridges in the 1940-50s) alongside more productive mechanisms of power forging particular political subjectivities and regimented, disciplining landscapes, amid appeals to conservation, developmentalism and governmental legitimacy. Such regimes of rule are not separate from the historically contingent, contested structures animating the politics of rain and the ritual protection of sacred places, but rather intertwine with them. After all chiefs, headman and village heads have long been charged with ensuring soil protection strategies are adhered to, even as they must lead the government-sponsored 'national *biras*' introduced in 2005. Regimes of rule entangle across levels and chiefs can be simultaneously involved in rain making and technocratic soil conservation with no apparent contradiction.

But beyond simply examining how the control/provision of water is imbricated in emergent struggles for legitimacy, sovereignty and rule around Mutirikwi, my larger purpose is to explore the ‘complex reciprocity’ (Beinart 2000:287) of water’s diverse material qualities and the different meanings and politics these give shape to. Exploring the political salience of waters’ diverse materialities offers opportunity to consider the relationship between a ‘semiotics of water’ and the political materiality of signs. If water/rain partly determines what kinds of politics ‘gain traction’ around Mutirikwi - just as graves and ruins are active and affective in a complex ways in the politics of autochthony and belonging - then what things, places and substances like water and rain, graves and ruins *do*, relates intimately to what/how they *mean* in any context. This involves examining how ‘meaning and matter’ are not distinct but mutually implicated. As an ‘*index of power*’, what water signifies in any context depends in part upon its form and material qualities, as well as the unstable ‘registers of meaning’ (or ‘semiotic ideologies’, Keane 2003) that are at play. After all, it is good rains, at the right time, in sufficient quantities, and not destructive of crops or houses, that can signify the legitimacy of chiefs, clans, mediums, and the ‘moral wellbeing’ of community, government, or even ‘the state’ at large. Bad rains, or no rain at all, question such claims to legitimacy, even as they demonstrate perhaps most forcefully the ultimate sovereignty of the ancestors and of *Mwari*, as owners of the land and the provider of rain respectively. In this regard, the localised, topographical nature of rainfall in Zimbabwe is very significant. Good rains can fall in one area whilst nearby crops wilt under a heavy sun. At the same time, however, the effects of drought, rainfall and run off flow beyond localities, encompassing larger catchment areas, geographical zones and political terrains. The same is true of technological provisions of water, from irrigation to urban water supplies. So droughts at Lake Mutirikwi have profound effects downstream, particularly for the enormous Chiredzi sugar estates who financed the dam in the late 1950s.

The diverse regimes of rule and registers of meaning to do with water therefore relate directly to its multiple, changing and fluid material properties and forms, reflecting an uncertainty which easily defies singular ‘rationalities’ of meaning and rule. The focus of this article is necessarily narrowed, for sake of clarity, to the contested languages and practices of water - involving *njuzu* water spirits/creatures, national *biras* and rain making - invoked around Mutirikwi in the re-emergent ‘traditionalist’ politics of the 2000s. But water’s ability to cross, defy or even collapse different registers of meaning is important, because this fluidity of matter and meaning is what makes it difficult to grasp conceptually but also politically. If water is to be understood as *an index of power* – of the contested interplay of legitimacy and sovereignty – across the different regimes of rule it saturates, then often it is not clear whose, or what kind of, legitimacy and/or sovereignty it actually indexes. And it is this, I suggest, which animates the profound ambivalence towards it witnessed by ZANU PF’s apparent determination to censure the weather forecast through the

2000s. The same ambivalence animates the way mediums and rain makers have long been treated, even as chiefs and headmen have been drawn ever closer into government structures.

Mvura yakatsamwa, ivhu rakatsamwa nokuti madzishe haasi kuwirirana

[The water is angry, the soil is angry because the chiefs are quarrelling].

In October 2005 I visited Ambuya VaZarira. Arriving at her Mazare homestead, north of the lake, I found *seven days* millet beer had been brewed for a *bira* event. Shoes at the door and animated voices suggested a small but vocal group of people had gathered for the event. Peter Manyuki, VaZarira's son, stood up to greet me, and urged me to sit next to Ambuya, as I was handed a plate of *sadza* [maize meal porridge] and goat meat. I looked around the dark room at familiar and unknown faces, listening to the intense discussions going on.

Most people present lived locally, farming plots on Mazare resettlement scheme or recently resettled farms nearby. Many were members of the Chikwanda clan, and there were war veterans and local ZANU PF committee members present. The severe drought and failed harvest of the previous season (2004-5) meant the discussions revolved around, among other things, the (non) functioning of the local party welfare committee, promised but undelivered food aid, the ineptitude of a local councillor, and the imposition of a new field tax [*mutero we mhinda*]. Many referred to Masvingo's infamous factionalism, in which competing local chiefs and clans are involved in opaque ways. Although multifaceted, the heated discussions culminated in a consensus that all these grievances originated in the failures of the incumbent Chief Chikwanda (who was not present), whose authority and legitimacy was directly challenged.

One person says 'the Charumbira people are getting food whilst we are starving here'... 'No matter how much money we get together we can't see even a single truck of food here because we are not recognised, unless there is a chief to stand up for us'.

...

People suggest the chief is just a political appointment because he is close to the party. Some accuse him of taking food meant for old people, orphans and the handicapped ... and selling it on to make money.

Everyone seems to agree that they want to choose their own chief from the proper house now in line for the chieftainship. ... There is a great deal of animated discussion about this. One person suggests that when the Chikwanda people choose their chief they should choose someone because he is Chikwanda and not because he is an important figure in the party... 'A chief chosen because he is prominent in the party may use that position against us. We need a chief who will put Chikwanda people first'.¹⁰

For some, Chief Chikwanda's illegitimacy was based on his ineffectual or corrupt leadership, and his inability to ensure food assistance during a debilitating drought. Others challenged his legitimacy according to widely muted, but always contestable, forms of 'collateral succession', arguing that other 'houses' – suggesting particular people present - were now in line for the position. Therefore the dispute,

while circulating around broader grievances, pitted the agendas of particular claimants against Chief Chikwanda. VaZarira's own agenda was scarcely veiled, her complaint focusing on the incumbent's membership of an apostolic church that frowns upon 'ancestor veneration', for her an affront to her spirits and her authority as the senior Duma medium. As discussions heated up, Peter Manyuki announced there was another issue to be considered.

Peter says that the people gathered should be discussing the issue of people and cows drowning in pools of water nearby. He mentions the case of a young boy, in grade two at school, who disappeared last week and was not found for three days. He was eventually found by Ambuya [VaZarira] in a pool in the partly dried up riverbed of the Mutirikwi river near Mazare township. Police and others had been looking in the pool but could not find him. Ambuya went there, put down *bute* [snuff] and then the boy was found seated under water, dead. More recently two cows went missing and were found under water in the same pool... For two cases like that to happen at the same pool at the same time is very unusual and must mean that there is something going on. Peter mentions another case of a person rescued from a nearby dam. Peter mentions *njuzu* in the water, and explains that the water and the soil are angry: *mvura yakatsamwa, ivhu rakatsamwa nokuti madzishe haasi kuwirirana* [the water is angry, the soil is angry because the chiefs are quarrelling].

These things are happening because the current chief is not the proper chief at all. He is a member of an apostolic church and does not follow the rules of the soil, nor does he listen to what the spirit mediums say. For VaZarira to go and tell him what she has been told by the ancestors, whose land this is, is impossible because he won't listen to her and does not respect her.¹¹

This, Peter told those gathered, is what they should be discussing. VaZarira then prompted a huge response by suggesting they choose another person for the Chikwanda chieftainship, and bring him to her. 'If you come with someone today' she said 'I will take him to the DA tomorrow!' This provoked a huge cheer, and some individuals stood up to perform impromptu dance moves in celebration. Soon drums were being beaten and everyone began to dance. The discussions were over for that day.

This was my first introduction to an ongoing dispute within the Chikwanda clan about the legitimacy of the current chief. It is but the latest in the clan's particularly turbulent history, dating back to the racialised dispossession of their land in the early 20th century, their forced dispersal, and the removal of the 'chieftainship' in the 1947; followed by the reinstatement of the chieftainship after independence and later, much more gradually, some of its territory. Many farms resettled under fast track north of Mutirikwi have 'reverted' to Chief Chikwanda, who has appointed *sabhuku* (village heads) and *sadunhu* (headmen) across the area. In the context of government policy to (re)install 'traditional leaders' on all resettled land (Mubvumba 2005), the re-establishment of Chikwanda's place in a local order of chiefs, clans and territory was assured even as it provoked a new intensity of disputes within the clan and with neighbouring chiefs.

But what struck me most was how this very specific dispute over a chief's legitimacy was inexorably linked to broader political, social, and importantly, ecological events. Severe drought, the non-arrival of promised food aid, and the

drowning of a boy by *njuzu* in an almost dried up riverbed, were linked and understood as the material manifestations of Chief Chikwanda's illegitimacy. The politics of food distribution apparent here are important, linking drought to questions of political legitimacy and illustrating how the contested authority of chiefs is necessarily intertwined with regional and national politics.¹² But what I wish to focus on particularly is how all these different dimensions of Chief Chikwanda's alleged illegitimacy were linked to the troubling presence of *njuzu*, and how this indicated the 'anger' of 'the water' and 'the soil'. Manyuki and VaZarira's invocation of a connection between *njuzu*, drought and Chief Chikwanda's illegitimacy is consistent with the broader literature on religion, ecology, rain making and politics across southern and eastern Africa. *Njuzu* feature prominently, alongside sacred pools [*dziva*] and snakes (particularly the python [*shato*]), across Zimbabwe's wide diversity of ecological, rain making, fertility and healing cults (cf Reynolds 1996:158-60; Gelfand 1959; Shoko 2007; Aschwanden 1989; Schoffeleers 1979; Rennie 1979; Bourdillon 1987; Mawere & Wilson 1995; Ranger 2003; Daneel 1998). Their continuing social and political significance is amply evidenced by the frequency with which *njuzu* are blamed for (amongst other things) the abduction of children, interfering with dams and bore holes, and for denying rain. This proliferation of *njuzu* across Zimbabwe's rivers, pools and dams, and across its divergent often highly localised cults, makes them rather hard to interpret. Establishing exactly how *njuzu* feature in this complex cultural nexus - as powerful water creatures, perhaps half human/half animal or perhaps spirits, associated with healing and water, believed to live below ground and jealously guard specific pools, rivers and springs in the landscape - and what their link is to the ancestors who own the land and *Mwari* who provides the rain, is not straight forward. Many around Mutirikwi were unable to articulate a clear account of the cosmological order of spirits, ancestors and the divinity *Mwari*, and their different, inter-related relationships to land and water, sacred places and rain. This reflects both complex histories of migration, shifting authority, and the waxing/waning influence of divergent ancestral/divine cults across southern Zimbabwe, and the uncertain political properties of water I have been describing.

Ambivalent *njuzu*

Often (perhaps erroneously) translated as 'mermaids', descriptions of *njuzu* I encountered were decidedly varied, divergent and uncertain, even as most agreed that they constitute (or once constituted) a powerful presence in the landscape. Some suggested that while the ancestors are associated with the land that they own through the soil, caves and mountains in which they are buried, it is through the water of the sacred pools, rivers and springs which they inhabit and guard that *njuzu* are associated with *Mwari* who provides the rain, and the *manyusa* messengers who once linked specific ancestral territories to the Matopos shrines. So in June 2006, VaZarira explained: 'We need to have a *bira* for those *njuzu* because they have made sure that

there were plenty of rains this year. We need to thank them, because there is no hunger this year ... Yes *muzukuru* [grandchild – referring to the author] *njuzu* bring the rain. They go straight to *Mwari*, *Musikavanhu*, *Nyadenga* to ask for rain. That is why we need to cook a very big *bira* for them.¹³

Aschwanden too suggests that many Karanga people consider *njuzu* to be ‘messengers from the Matopos’ (1989:188), even if others denied this connection. *Njuzu* ‘announce an imminent rainfall’ and ‘if, in the hot season, one hears distant thunder without seeing lightening, this is *njuzu*’s voice’. Similarly ‘if a whirlwind sweeps the country and one hears the noises of *njuzu* in the pool at the same time, the old Karanga say: “*Mwari* [God] has passed by” ’(Aschwanden 1989:189). Yet most people I spoke to stated clearly that it was for the ancestors that beer should be ‘cooked’ to request rain.¹⁴ Older people remembered *manyusa* who used to travel to the Matopos carrying *rapoko* [finger millet] and other rain offerings, but very few suggested *bira* events should held for *njuzu* specifically.¹⁵ Even VaZarira’s close associate, acting Chief Murinye felt that: ‘people go to the *mudzimu wemvura* [ancestor of water] to ask for rain, not the *njuzu* ... people have their *mutoro* [rain making event] and they ask their *mudzimu* to ask for rain from *Mwari* and then they go to Matonjeni to ask for rain. People don’t go to *njuzu* to ask for rain. The *njuzu* is for those places where water comes from, that is where the *njuzu* lives, in wells, springs and rivers’.¹⁶ Yet Murinye agreed that ‘*njuzu* and *mudzimu* do work like a hand in a glove: the *njuzu* looking after springs and rivers and *mudzimu* after the land and the rain’.¹⁷ This was echoed by others, including VaMakasva who cited an old proverb ‘*mudzimu wakupa chironda wati nunzi dzinodya*’ (lit. ‘an ancestor gives you a wound so that the flies can eat’) to illustrate the co-operation of *mudzimu* and *njuzu*.

The association of potentially dangerous *njuzu* (and their taboos) with particular sacred water sources links them to the ancestors through the ‘autochthonous knowledge’ of the landscape held and enforced by local chiefs, mediums and clans, which ‘incoming’ war veterans and new farmers sought to ‘make safe’ their farm occupations. The dangers of watery places associated with *njuzu* faced on the farms were frequently discussed around Mutirikwi. Like the crocodiles encountered by Kariba’s fishermen etching out increasingly precarious livelihoods after 2000, for Masvingo’s new farmers, and its fishermen,¹⁸ *njuzu* could appear part of a ‘diverse assemblage of human and non-human adversaries’ to be dealt with (McGregor 2008:868). I was often told the use of soap, ash, and washing dirty pots or linen is prohibited at pools, springs and rivers associated with *njuzu*, and the defilement of such places can have grave consequences. In such accounts, *njuzu* appear ambivalently both as indices of ancestral and chiefly authority over the land (through the landscape knowledge claimed by ‘autochthonous’ clans), and yet through their association with water and rain they also index the ultimate sovereignty of *Mwari*, the bringer of rain. This ambiguity of what authority or sovereignty *njuzu* index (cf Aschwanden 1989: 186-200; Bourdillon 1987; Lan 1985; Mukamuri 1995) reflects the fluidity of water, and its changing material forms and qualities across divergent

registers of meaning and regimes of rule. Indeed, in a sense, *njuzu* manifest the link between the ‘territorial’ authority of ancestors and the ultimate ‘rain providing’ sovereignty of *Mwari*, just as ‘their’ watery places materially link the rain to the land.

In his symbolic analysis of Karanga mythology, Aschwanden (1989:186-200) too faced the ambivalence I encountered trying to locate the cosmological ties linking *njuzu* to ancestors, and the *Mwari* cult. He focused attention on their ‘doubtful descent’ and their hybrid nature; half human, half creature, or ‘human animals’ (1989:197). For him ‘the question of *njuzu* descent has never been answered absolutely satisfactorily or without contradiction’ exactly because ‘the undefined nature of a phenomena is its essential characteristic’ (1989:189). This uncertainty surrounding *njuzu* reflected ‘the exchange between man and nature’, which is ‘made real by letting something in the pool descend from man, and something in man from the pool and its creatures’ (1989:197). For Aschwanden the ‘symbolically and mythologically related relationship between nature and man’ can only be understood through the existence of hybrid *njuzu* in the ‘Karanga weitbild’s’ ‘pool complex’. In his analysis the pool and its creatures are symbolically linked to woman, witchcraft and the ‘marriage-and-incest problem’ (1989:197) because ‘the idea of the stranger is also immanent in the pool’, and ‘as the woman who bears children, or becomes a witch, is always a stranger, so all the spirits from the pool ... are always genuine alien spirits (*mashave*)’. ‘The “pool” from which a man obtains his children [ie woman]’ is therefore ‘always alien to him because the child is in the uterus surrounded by alien blood, in the same way as non-consanguine ancestral spirits rule the “pool”’ (1989:198).

In this structuralist understanding ancestors who own the land and are of the soil, are linked reciprocally to *njuzu*, who are of the water, pools and rivers. *Njuzu* are connected to ancestors in the same way that incoming wives and affines are linked to their ‘autochthonous’ husbands – they are the ‘strangers’ who enable life to be renewed.¹⁹ So for Aschwanden, ‘the woman who creates life, or destroys it by refusing her role, is the pool through which nature lives or dies’, just as ‘*njuzu* lives in these waters in order to safeguard the life and prosperity of nature and the rivers’. ‘But if *njuzu* is too much interfered with, it disappears and leaves drought, death and destruction’ (1989:198-9). This offers a powerful explanation for Manyuki’s linking of the ‘anger of the soil’ and that ‘of the water’, as expressed by drowning of the young boy by *njuzu* in the Mutirikwi river in October 2005. It is also a powerful analysis of the ontological significance of the ambivalence of *njuzu*, which finds important echoes in the autochthonous claims of some clans that their ancestors ‘germinated’ from the land, or were married to, abducted by, or descended from *njuzu* who emerged from sacred springs.²⁰

But if Aschwanden’s symbolic analysis of the Karanga ‘pool complex’ offers a sophisticated account of *njuzu*’s powerful but ambivalent presence in mythology and landscape around Mutirikwi, his is also a decidedly synchronic and ahistorical approach. The uncertainty that circulates around the respective roles of ancestors,

chiefs, *njuzu*, *manyusa* and *Mwari* shrines in the provision of rain, the protection of sacred water sources, and the conferment of ancestral and divine legitimacy, equally reflects the multi-layered history of alternative regimes of rule and contested spheres of political/religious influence that waxed and waned during the area's complex pre-colonial pasts. Such pasts are materialised through the affective presence of graves, ruins, rivers and sacred places, which are to varying degrees available for imaginative re-deployment in the present. Just as there was an ebb and flow to the reach of the Matopos shrines and other rain cults as different dynasties moved, settled and ruled across pre-colonial southern Zimbabwe, so it is unlikely that *njuzu*'s salience has remained constant. In other words, as well as complex ontological and structural continuities, there are also important histories and historiographies at play in the ambivalent significance of *njuzu* around Mutirikwi. This reminds us that so-called 'traditionalist' regimes of rule are, and always have been, as contested, multiple and overlapping as 'modern', 'technocratic' governmental structures of rule can be.

Whatever these structural and historical complexities, however, it is clear that drownings attributed to *njuzu* are often taken as a sign that the 'rules of the soil' have not been respected, that the ancestral owners of the land and/or *Mwari* the provider of rain are displeased. Many around Mutirikwi remember drownings and accidents attributed to disturbed *njuzu* when the dam was being built in 1959-61; and how future accidents were prevented by rituals held by local chiefs as the 'autochthonous' guardians of the land being inundated.²¹ Similarly, *njuzu* drownings in the Mutirikwi river in late 2005 revealed that 'something has gone wrong'. As VaZarira exclaimed: 'these days *njuzu* are being seen everywhere, and even [I] am now afraid to go out. There must be a reason for this, somewhere something has gone wrong and steps will have to be taken to correct that'.²² Clearly, the appearance of *njuzu* - like the falling of good, fertile rains, or bad, destructive rains or even the lack of rain altogether - are indicative of the moral well-being of people, land and the state, and therefore can be seen, like rain and drought, as *indexes of power*; even if it is not always clear whose or what form of legitimacy and sovereignty (or lack of it) is being indexed. In 2005, the drowning of the young boy in the Mutirikwi river was for many an index of Chief Chikwanda's illegitimacy. But it also allowed VaZarira to demonstrate (by finding the dead boy in the pool) her capacity as a powerful Duma medium; a position that for some empowered her to be an arbitrator for the troubled chieftainship.²³ In turn the drowning of the boy by the *njuzu* could be equally demonstrative of the sovereignty of ancestors as owners of the land and of *Mwari* as the provider of rain. After all Chief Chikwanda's apostolic faith, his failure to follow the 'rules of the soil' and to respect VaZarira, was also an affront to them.

National *biras*

If drought provoked difficult questions about Chief Chikwanda's legitimacy, then in late 2005 fears grew amongst disgruntled clan members that his alleged failure to conduct a proper *bira* at their sacred *mapa*, Mafuse, on Mt Harawe, when government

was sponsoring 'national *biras*' throughout the country, threatened further crop failure.²⁴ Manyuki told me Chief Chikwanda refused to allow a *bira* at Mafuse, because his religious beliefs denigrated ancestral events.²⁵ Later, after the first rains had fallen in the district but not in Chikwanda's area, these fears were heightened as good rains were promising elsewhere. VaMutsambwa complained that Chief Chikwanda's refusal to involve VaZarira in his national *bira* meant that 'in late November/December everywhere else was getting rain, but we weren't here because *ndenga ne midzimu akatsamwa* [the sky and ancestors are angry]'.²⁶ Chief Chikwanda told me that despite his apostolic faith, he *had* organized (though not attended) a *bira* at Mafuse; indicating how the government's commitment to a resurgent 'traditionalism' could compel even chiefs of different religious persuasion to take part. Later, when it became clear good rains were widespread, some did recognize Chikwanda's event had been successful, even if VaZarira attributed the good rains to *Mwari* and even *njuzu*. According to Furere Mashuro, a *sabhuku* in Zano, east of the lake, 'this year our chief did a good job. He told everyone to prepare their beer ... so ... the rains were good, everyone will harvest and there won't be hunger'.²⁷

In fact the government's new national *biras* of September 2005 proved hugely significant as the rainy season bore fruit.²⁸ For many across Masvingo they signalled government was at last listening to chiefs and mediums, and recognising that their legitimacy sprung from the ancestors and *Mwari*. Indeed for some the good rains demonstrated how, as 'intermediaries between human beings and the Creator' the authority of ancestors and mediums 'supersedes that of *madzimambo* [chiefs]'.²⁹ As Trust Mugabe, councillor for ward 13, explained:

We had many years of drought and the *masvikiro* [mediums] were saying we need *biras*, for the chiefs to respect their *vadzimu* [ancestors]. That's when we saw the government was serious about *masvikiro* after many years of poor rains. That is why this year the rains have fallen well. It was only this year that the *masvikiro* were given attention, and the rains were good, just as the *masvikiro* said they would be. [But] even in some places there is still not enough rain ... because they are not respecting the *masvikiro* all the time. In south Matabeleland there is still not enough rain, ... and in other parts of the country too ... there is still *nzara* [hunger]. All this is caused by the government not respecting the *masvikiro*.³⁰

In April 2006 I waited patiently for a chance to speak to Chief Fortune Charumbira - President of the Council of Chiefs,³¹ highly influential in Masvingo and closely tied into ZANU PF politics – at his well attended weekly *dare* (meeting/court). I was fascinated to overhear his telephone interview with a journalist from the state-owned newspaper *The Herald*, discussing the successful rains of 2005/6 and the national *biras* of the previous September.

In the waiting room ... we hear everything going on. The chief is hearing cases, and his loud voice booms out from next door. He often gets phone calls, and always takes them, dealing with all sorts of business at the same time. He gets a call from a journalist ... They are discussing the chief's regalia and in particular the pith helmet and red cloak which are part of a chief's official outfit.

Chief Fortune explains: This regalia ... was given to the chiefs during the colonial government ... so now that we have independence we want to change it. So we are looking into preparing a new outfit ..., which will restore the dignity, yes dignity, and we can say identity. You see this is about building our own identity as black Zimbabweans; our dignity and our identity through restoring our Zimbabwean traditions. This is part of our wider efforts to restore our own identity, which was ignored, side-lined or destroyed by the colonial government. ... This goes along with our efforts to restore our traditions, like here ... we had the return of the Zimbabwe Bird, and also we have our identity as Zimbabwean warriors. We are warriors, Zimbabweans are warriors. We have fought the first *chimurenga* and the second and now the third *chimurenga*, so we want restore our identity. So that is the first thing, the chiefs' regalia.

Second, we have Statutory instrument 17 of 2006, and ... the main thing is the restoration of the full powers of chiefs. This statutory instrument 17 is about the power of enforcement. The chiefs will have the power to enforce their findings from their courts. Previously ... the chief needed to go to the magistrate, and the messenger of court would have the power to enforce the judgement of the chiefs, now that power to enforce is going back to the chiefs, so that they enforce their own judgements. Whether that means the payment of a cow or a goat or money, the chiefs will be able to send their own messenger to collect those goats or whatever Yes ... they deal with civil cases not criminal cases, which will remain with the police and the courts. The chiefs have the power to fine up to a maximum of 100 million dollars, and this is why we are having workshops with the chiefs to teach them about their restored roles and what they should now be doing.

This ... is but one part of ongoing efforts to restore the traditional role of chiefs. Last year, yes, we had those *mabira* [national *biras*], that was very important. And you see this year the rain fell very well and we are hearing ... that ... in most of the country there are bumper harvests, because the rains fell after those *mabira*. And the *zunde ramambo* every chief should have a *zunde ramambo*. Those stray cattle collected and sold by the police, that money should also go into the *zunde ramambo*. No, the *zunde ramambo* is not for the chiefs' own fields ... its for feeding the orphans. There are many orphans out there....³²

Charumbira's comments illustrate brilliantly how the national *biras* fitted his 'traditionalist' agenda, and how that located chiefs within ZANU PF's broader strategy of re-making the state through its rhetoric of 'patriotic history' (Ranger 2004). They also illustrate how Charumbira's particular agenda (wherein chiefs rather than mediums were especially trumpeted) envisaged a 'regime of rule' in which a complexity of productive, coercive, governmental and hegemonic mechanisms of power are intertwined, entangling a plethora of sources/forms of sovereignty and legitimacy. While the question of the chiefs' regalia points to the symbolic and demonstrative stylistics of chiefly rule, the discussion of Zimbabweans' 'warrior identity' directly complemented ZANU PF's hegemonic 'patriotic history' and third *chimurenga* project. The reference to Statutory Instrument 17 located this 'traditionalist agenda' within wider legislative changes (cf Mubvumba 2005), pegging the 'return' of chiefs' authority within a legal structure that points to the ultimate sovereignty of law and the state. At the same time, the *zunde ramambo* project points to the pastoral dimensions of chiefly rule and the imperative to be responsive to peoples' needs. The references to national *biras* and 'bumper harvests' too fulfils such responsive requirements, but importantly do so in a way that implicates not the sovereignty of the state or law, but rather the legitimacy deriving from the sovereignty of the ancestral owners of the land, from whom chiefs descend. For Charumbira the national *biras*' success, as manifest in that year's good rains, were a personal triumph,

as well as an indication of the potency of government's renewed commitment to re-imagined 'traditionalist' rule in which chiefs had a central role. I was even more fascinated to read the resulting news report the following day.³³ It faithfully reproduced the discussions I had overheard with the startling exception of the chief's emphasis on the national *biras*. This was subtly transformed into a triumphalist announcement about 'bumper harvests', with little mention of the national *biras* that for many around Mutirikwi were responsible for the fertile rains. Perhaps not everyone in Harare felt that trumpeting the successful rains as an indication of the potency of 'traditionalist' regimes of rule - thereby pointing to the legitimacy chiefs receive from ancestral and divine sovereignty - necessarily served ZANU PF's wider political purposes.

Nevertheless, if many chiefs around Masvingo felt vindicated by the apparent success of the national *biras*, for war veterans and 'new farmers' the good rains served to re-legitimise faltering land reform and no doubt contributed to the optimism of that year. Several acknowledged not enough attention had been paid to mediums and ancestors during the early *jambanja* stages of land reform in 2000-2. As the war veteran VaChuma, explained 'we knew we were doing something good [by taking the land] but saw that some things were not going very well, like those droughts... things were not yet settled'. 'Later' he continued, 'we knew that people should follow the rules of the land ... to respect the land. We decided to ask VaZarira ... what we should do. And the chiefs ... decided they should brew beer to give thanks for getting the land back for their *sekurus* [lit. grandfathers, meaning ancestors here]'. 'So every chief in the whole country brewed beer last year and that is why the rains were good and there is enough to eat this year'.³⁴ Another war veteran, VaKurasva, on Desmondale farm, agreed.³⁵ VaMakasva, living below Beza, felt that war veterans 'should have worked with the *masvikiro*' when they first reoccupied the farms; 'that is why the rains refused ... these last few years'. He agreed the good rains resulted from the national *biras*, but warned that although 'things are a bit more stable' they were 'not yet properly sorted out'. 'There is need to prepare more *biras* and call all the *masvikiro* to do our things properly', he told me.³⁶

Not everyone was unanimous about the *biras*' success, particularly during the anxious months of October and November 2005, when early signs provoked much concern that the rains would again fail. VaZarira and her supporters were often extremely sceptical. Complaints were diverse, reflecting widespread confusion about the national *biras*' purpose; whether to request for rain, assistance with land reform, or to announce the success of the *hondo yemhinda* [war of the fields]; or, as some claimed,³⁷ to do with the unresolved legacies of liberation war dead in mass graves in Mozambique and Zambia (Fontein 2009b, 2010); or all of these together. According to Manyuki each of these issues needed to be dealt with individually. He felt this lack of clarity, their televised nature, and the sight of chiefs wearing shoes and performing for the cameras, all reflected the inauthentic nature of the government-instigated *biras*. His views were shared by others. The problem, he said, 'is that they are

working with these very young chiefs who do not know the traditions properly, instead of working with the old people and the *masvikiro*'.³⁸ This sentiment was shared by Bhodo Mukuvere who attended Murinye's *bira* but lamented:

Vakapira mudzimu wekare [they appeased the ancestor from long ago], there was dancing and beer and food. I want the things from long ago. This life of today I don't like it. There was no *vadzimu* [ancestors] who came out [possessed mediums] because there were only youngsters there, no one knows. Me, I am not seeing it. Even the *manyusa* are no longer. The *vadzimu* are there, they are not happy. It is quite a big problem. Can you see the rain is not coming?³⁹

Such complaints echoed concerns that the national *biras* celebrated chiefs and war veterans but excluded mediums. Mai Makasva, a *sabhuku* under Chief Mugabe, attended both an earlier *bira* organized by VaZarira, and later, Chief Mugabe's own national *bira*. Worrying about the late rains in November 2005, she acknowledged the national *biras* had been unusual because they were organised by chiefs and war veterans in the absence of *masvikiro*:

We do not know why the rain is refusing to rain ... we cooked beer and held *biras*. We had a *bira* recently. It was big. Everyone was there; the *masvikiro*, even from Mashava, Matopos, even Harare. But even then the rains have not come. We did it in July, VaZarira cooked the beer there at that mountain Chasosa. [And] the national *biras* were done well. We had ours at Chikarudzo. It is true they were different. That one, *doro harina kupirwa nemasvikiro* but *nemadzishe* [‘that beer was not appeased by the spirit mediums but the chiefs’] and the comrades, but the first *bira* we had in July was done by the *masvikiro*.⁴⁰

For VaZarira, such concerns not only reflected her ongoing dispute with Chief Chikwanda, but longer-standing grievances about the marginalisation of *masvikiro*.⁴¹ For her mediums' exclusion from the national *biras* was merely the latest in a long series of exclusions, even as chiefs were increasingly courted by ZANU PF. Such complaints illustrate how contested 'traditionalist' regimes of rule are, and reflect ZANU PF's uneasy relationship with mediums, particularly in comparison to the relatively pliant regime of chiefs, headman and village heads.⁴² Unlike chiefs, whose authority and legitimacy is more dependent upon political allegiances and state structures, mediums depend on the efficacy of their performances and their ability to demonstratively submit their subjectivity to the agency and sovereignty of the spirits possessing them, even as they too must be responsive to their various local audiences (Fontein 2006a:47-70). This has a longer history than ZANU PF's re-found 'traditionalism' over the last decade, dating back to the 'ultra-traditionalism' of the 1960s, after the demise of the Native Land Husbandry Act, when chiefs 'stood at the centre of the Rhodesian's state's struggle to remake its authority over land and people' (Alexander 2006:83), and mediums became increasingly (but not unflatteringly) influential for Zimbabwean nationalism

These inherent tensions between chiefs and *masvikiro*, and the localized nature of the *biras*, also meant that criticisms reflected and sometimes exacerbated longstanding tensions within and between different clans. The contested nature of

Chief Chikwanda's *bira* at Mafuse is a case in point, but disgruntlement also circulated around a national *bira* allegedly held at Great Zimbabwe by Chief Charumbira, which fed into the enduring tensions surrounding that site (Fontein 2006a). As delayed rains in some areas in late 2005 raised fears of another drought, VaZarira, Chief Mugabe and others vocalized concerns about Charumbira's rumoured involvement at Great Zimbabwe.⁴³ Both felt a single national *bira* with all the mediums and chiefs should have been held at the site to signify both its national importance and, of course, its proper custodianship by those with valid 'autochthonous' claims to it. As Chief Mugabe explained:

The government organised those *biras*, each chief at their home, with only his own people. That is not the *bira* of all the *masvikiro* at GZ that is needed to make the rains fall. ... The keys of the rain are there at GZ. It was clever of them to organise the *biras* at chiefs' homesteads instead of GZ, they didn't want it to work properly. GZ is now very dirty, it needs to be cleaned with the rains. The foundation of GZ is Duma. Charumbira is not happy about that. ... At GZ the person who has to *kupira* the ancestors would have to be me, and not him, even as head of the chiefs. I heard a rumour that in secret, late at night, Charumbira did go in there. That is why the rain is not falling. We don't know what *mushonga* [medicine/witchcraft] he went into GZ with, but the rain is not falling.'
As we leave the building, Chief Mugabe points to the sky. 'Look, the clouds were being built by the heat but now the wind is breaking them down. The rain has already passed by. It will not rain today'.⁴⁴

A visit to Matonjeni?

However parochial these tensions around Great Zimbabwe often appear, for Chief Mugabe, VaZarira and others they clearly have far wider significance. VaZarira has long been involved in efforts to reclaim and re-sanctify it as a key sacred site of national significance. In 2005 she did participate in acting Chief Murinye's national *bira* at Boroma, but over the following months her attention focused on organising a visit to Matonjeni in the Matopos.⁴⁵

The conversation turns to her efforts to arrange the trip to Matonjeni to ask for rain. That is why she is trying to meet the chiefs. She stresses that when she is working to ask for rain it is 'for the whole country', but 'the government refuses to help us. Seven years I worked with the comrades during the war but now they have forgotten us. During the [national] *biras* some people were saying they were to appease the spirits of the dead comrades, others that it was to ask for rain, but no it was to welcome the new country, to thank the ancestors for independence'. She mentions another *bira* which she organised a long time ago when she wrote angrily to the president himself, and was eventually helped with bags of maize, *rapoko* [finger millet] and two beasts, which 'the president said was for Ambuya to use as she knows how'. 'But at this recent *bira* they were making the war vets and chiefs important but not the *masvikiro*. Now I have to go Matonjeni to ask for rain, but they are not helping me. It is as if they don't understand. I need to go to Matonjeni where a voice speaks out of the rock'.⁴⁶

As 2005 turned into 2006 VaZarira and acting Chief Murinye made great efforts to secure financial support from local ZANU PF politicians, businessmen and government administrators for transport and fuel to make this visit.⁴⁷ She saw her approach to the recently elected Senator Mavhaire, in particular, as a 'test' of his recognition of where sovereignty over land and rain ultimately lay. As she put it 'I

want to ... see if he keeps his promises, because the work that I am doing is for ... the country and since they are the government it is work that they should be doing ... so they should send me a car to take me where I need to go'.⁴⁸ For VaZarira, Mavhaire's legitimacy (as with Chief Chikwanda) clearly depended upon his recognition of her authority as the medium of an ancestral owner of the land, and in turn of *Mwari*'s ultimate sovereignty as the provider of rain. Her comments reveal a commitment to a 'traditionalist' regime of rule in which mediums, ancestors and the Matopos shrines, rather than chiefs, are key to the provision of rain. The significance of failing or successful rains was therefore ultimately less as indices of the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of chiefs, than of the sovereignty of the ancestors, their *masvikiro*, and most of all *Mwari*. In other words, hers was an attempt to secure a place for *masvikiro* and the Matopos shrines in the re-configuration of authority over land and people ongoing since independence, but drastically revived since 2000. This encompasses a moral vision of the future that gains traction ecologically and materially through rain and water, but builds on particular readings of past regimes of ecological and political control.

VaZarira and Murinye's unsuccessful efforts throughout 2005/2006 to visit Matonjeni - first to ask for rain and then, after the rains had come, to offer thanks - do reflect older histories linking Masvingo to the Matopos. Their determination acknowledged even as it re-constructed a past when *manyusa* linked individual chiefdoms to the *Mwari* shrines, and were responsible for requesting rain, while mediums and chiefs focused on problems to do with the land. As acting Chief Murinye explained:

'Rain, is the job of the *manyusa*. They come from each chiefdom, where they collect money and gifts to help them on their way to Matonjeni to ask for good rains. They can even go by themselves if they are not sent by the chief, and usually they would travel on foot. The chiefs and *masvikiro* should also go Matonjeni to thank for good rains or even to ask for rain, because there have not been *manyusa* in this area for a long time. But traditionally it is the role of *manyusa* to ask for rain. The chiefs and *masvikiro* go there to speak to the Voice of the rock ... to deal with the problems of the *nyika* [land, territory]. *Manyusa* go there for *mvura* [water]. Chiefs and *masvikiro* might go there to address problems of army worms or locusts, or disease affecting people, or lightening strikes killing people and burning houses. Or if a chief is having problems with people not ... following the traditional rules. Maybe people are not burying children in the wet soils by rivers as they should, but rather in the hard soils. Or cutting sacred trees or not following other rules ... to protect the country. There are so many rules. Chiefs and *masvikiro* go there *kugadzikana nyika* [to settle the land]'.⁴⁹

This offers a different 'traditionalist' vision to ZANU PF's growing embracement of chiefs and headmen since the late 1990s, as most actively advocated by actors like Chief Charumbira. Perhaps ZANU PF's heavily politicized rhetoric is unable to deal with the localized, historical complexities of contested territorial and rain making cults. Yet VaZarira and Murinye's determination to visit Matonjeni also re-forged a past in which the 19th century influence of the Pfupajena and Musikavanhu cults, for example, and of the rain making practices of pre-Duma Karanga clans, are also conveniently set aside.⁵⁰

Murinye and VaZarira's efforts also reflect their individual histories and aspirations. For Murinye, a visit to the Matopos shrines offered opportunity to replicate his late father's visits, from which he had acquired his own name, Matopos.⁵¹ His father, Mudarikwa, had last visited Matonjeni around 2003 with a delegation led by VaZarira, and his son's desired visit in 2005/6 was in part intended to solidify his authority as chief within his own clan, from whom he collected funds for the trip. For her part, VaZarira had utilized NGO funding to make several high profile visits to the Matopos during the 1990s (see Daneel 1998), where she was received with great honour by the *Voice* at Dzilo shrine. No doubt her authority within the Duma clans was invigorated by these visits (Fontein 2006a:64). Sharp reductions in NGO funding in the 2000s, amid deepening political crisis and government suspicion, are part of the backdrop to VaZarira's search for funds among Masvingo's political leaders in 2005/6. Fuel shortages meant transport was a particular problem and VaZarira even approached a local transport company, Mhunga buses, seeking help with transport, diesel or food.⁵² Later Murinye acquired diesel from relatives in Mozambique.⁵³ Despite promises made during the senate elections of November 2005, Masvingo's politicians did not ultimately facilitate VaZarira's intended visit to Matonjeni in 2005/6, confirming what her son Manyuki already suspected, that: 'politicians often make promises they don't keep, especially at election time'.⁵⁴ Clearly, a rain-requesting visit to Matonjeni did not have the same significance for local ZANU PF politicians, as it did for VaZarira and Matopos Murinye. Perhaps once the rains had come, they no longer saw the need. Or it reflected the continued unease with which state, government and party structures have long dealt with mediums, rainmakers and the Matopos shrines.

Mediums and the state

Manyuki claimed a former Masvingo provincial administrator (PA) once told him that in the past 'there used to be [local government] budget allocation for visits to Matonjeni'. Furthermore, 'during the time of Smith and Rhodesia there was always money for that and people used to go very frequently with help ... from the PA'.⁵⁵ This echoes accounts of white settler farmers sponsoring rain making ceremonies on their farms in the past, reflecting historical coexistence and proximity with existing African communities in material landscapes around Mutirikwi, and their shared need for rain. Whether provincial funds were ever set aside to fund trips to Matonjeni, or not, it is clear that relations between mediums and different arms of government has, since independence, been characterized by a profound ambivalence, unlike the increasingly re-incorporation of chiefs and headmen into local state structures. The ambivalence sometimes shown by nationalist political elite to mediums during the liberation struggle (cf Chung 1995:146) has largely continued since independence. At times, such as during the 1992 drought (Mawere & Wilson 1995), mediums have been embraced at the very highest levels, but this has never amounted to sustained incorporation into local government structures in the way chiefs have been.

The alternating celebration followed by frequent denigration of mediums of Zimbabwe's highest profile ancestors (Nehanda, Chaminuka, and most recently Changamire Dombo) at the hands of ZANU PF, point precisely to this ambivalence. Numerous examples attest to this. Nehanda was celebrated during the liberation struggle due to her role during the first *chimurenga* of 1896-7 (Ranger 1967; Lan 1985). Guerrillas famously carried Nehanda's elderly medium over the border to Mozambique (and back again after she died).⁵⁶ But at Great Zimbabwe shortly after independence, another Nehanda medium called Sophia Muchini was initially courted by senior politicians but then implicated in attacks on white farmers east of Mutirikwi, and convicted of murder. At her trial 'she declared that ... the claimed independence was a mockery ... [and] Mugabe was a puppet of the whites', to which ZANU PF spokesmen retorted 'that the party had made Nehanda rather than Nehanda the party and that it was treason to dispute Mugabe's right to determine peace' (Ranger 2010:10). In the early 1990s in northern Zimbabwe some mediums (including another Nehanda medium) did receive substantial rewards for their work during the struggle, although many interpreted them as officials' attempt to get mediums' approval for unpopular, 'rationalising' land reforms then being implemented (Spierenburg 2004) . More recently, reports emerged that police destroyed the home of a 'new farmer' in Chinoyi, on the orders of Lina Govera, another Nehanda medium in northern Zimbabwe.⁵⁷ Conversely Sadomba (2011) discusses the mixed fortunes of another four competing Nehanda mediums involved in *fast track* in Masowe and subsequently evicted from resettled lands in favour of more senior political clients. This was despite announcements by ZANU PF's most strident recent ideologue, Tafataona Mahoso, that Nehanda herself was inspiring war veterans in the third *chimurenga* (Ranger 2010:10); a sentiment I often encountered amongst war veterans around Mutirikwi.

Part of the problem often cited by authorities is establishing the authenticity of mediums. In March 2005 then president of the Council of Chiefs, Jonathan Mangwende, told *The Herald* that 'that the whole country is filled with people claiming to be possessed by Ambuya Nehanda or Sekuru Kaguvi. There are now lots of bogus and greedy spirit mediums'.⁵⁸ Urging 'all people who claim to be possessed ... to first approach traditional leaders in their areas because tradition just like anything else has its own rules, procedures and processes', he revealed mediums' need to maintain local support bases, but also implied a vision of 'traditional rule' in which chiefs preside over mediums' authenticity/legitimacy, and not vice-versa, as VaZarira and others would advocate. Questions of authenticity and local legitimacy were also a feature of the death of Muchetera, a famous Chaminuka medium killed in 1977 by guerrillas concerned about his Rhodesian sympathies (Ranger 1982). More recently, descendants of the original Chaminuka medium, Pasipamire, famously killed in 1883 by Lobengula, collected his remains from Matabeleland and re-interred them in a new shrine in Seke communal lands near Harare, to await the 'resurrection of the legendary medium', which will result 'in all the problems facing the country

disappearing'. NMMZ became involved 'at the shrine ... to preserve it as a cultural heritage', thereby setting 'the stage for a tough battle between the National Monuments and Museums and the family'.⁵⁹

Another case worth citing is that of the 'diesel *n'anga*' Rotina Mavhunga, self-proclaimed medium of the Rozvi ancestor Changamire Dombo, who was courted by ZANU PF ministers, as well as local chiefs, after claiming she discovered diesel flowing from rocks near Chinoyi in northern Zimbabwe in 2007. She received '\$5 billion [Zimbabwean dollars], a farm and other services' before her fraud was discovered; lifting 'the lid on how deep belief in superstition and sorcery among the country's political leaders runs', as one newspaper chided.⁶⁰ But if the 'diesel *n'anga*' case revealed the credulity of some within ZANU PF, becoming the source of great ridicule,⁶¹ it also illustrated how mediums can be victim to the machinations of politicians who court them (Fontein 2012). A similar argument applies for Sophia Muchini, whose involvement in farm murders around Mutirikwi after independence insinuated political manipulation by the then Minister of Health, Ushewokunze (Clark 1985:133). The medium Tenzi Nehoreka is another recent example, whose noisy visits to Great Zimbabwe, Njelele and other shrines, with large war veteran entourages, have provoked deep consternation among shrine keepers, local officials and ZANU PF; particularly after he 'allegedly stripped Chief Tandii ... of his chieftainship badge', leading to a court trial, and significantly, subsequent acquittal.⁶² The sinister 'carrot and stick' role played by the CIO (Zimbabwe's feared intelligence organization) in the guarding, surveillance and rewarding of mediums further reveals how ZANU PF and security branches of the state, do not take the influence mediums wield lightly. Spierenburg recalls encountering CIO agents guarding a Nehanda medium behind barbed wire at a house in Hurungwe, and argues the government's reaction to resistance by *Mhondoro* mediums to land restructuring in the 1990s, was characteristically ambivalent: 'On the one hand, ... mediums' arguments were not taken seriously at all ...DDF and Agritex continued attempts to implement the land reforms ... On the other hand, government did try to bribe the mediums of Chidyamauyu and Nehanda, and kept the latter under close surveillance, indicating that it did not consider the Mhondoro mediums' challenges harmless at all' (2004: 222).

There is evidence of similar CIO activity in Masvingo more recently. In early 2006 nine Chiweshe mediums turned up at Headman Nemanwa's household with the intention of holding a *bira* for rain at Great Zimbabwe. They were under the obvious surveillance and 'custody' of CIO minders who delivered them and periodically returned during their extended, if unwelcome, stay.⁶³ Ahead of elections in July 2013, several different groups of mediums from all over Zimbabwe slaughtered cows and made offerings 'for peace' at Great Zimbabwe, chaperoned separately by unrelated CIO agents.⁶⁴ These included another significant but controversial medium around Mutirikwi, Mai Macharaga, a war veteran closely involved in directing land

occupations in Masvingo in the early 2000s, and a former associate of VaZarira, who claimed in 2006 that she received substantial CIO support.

In terms of '*matraditional*' things are better now ... and *biras* asking for rain are being organised. I have been organising a big *bira* at Great Zimbabwe soon with members of the CIO and the President's Office in Masvingo. Because of the droughts of recent years I had been telling the authorities that it was important that *biras* be arranged at Great Zimbabwe, as well as trips to Matonjeni to ask for rain. At first they ignored us .. but later people from the President's office came to organise *biras* because the rains were not falling. Before the national *mabira* of last September there was a *bira* organised in Muchakata where VaZarira and chiefs Murinye, Mugabe, Chikwanda and other Duma chiefs were invited. But I did not go because I was still unhappy about having been sidelined ... Later they came back and I did attend a following event held in Great Zimbabwe. It was there that the authorities were told that those national *biras* had to be held across the country ... But things are not always easy. Even last year when I prophesised that there would be very good rains ... they did not believe me at first, but later they saw that it happened.⁶⁵

This account, and other conversations with Macharaga in 2006, revealed that her relationship with VaZarira had become strained since previous research in 2000-1 when they had been forged in a closer alliance. This is not surprising given Macharaga's claims to be organising a *bira* at Great Zimbabwe, affronting VaZarira's own claims to the site. This is important because it says something about the different ways in which mediums establish their legitimacy, and illustrates how tensions between chiefs and mediums can be replicated between different mediums. A comparison between Macharaga and VaZarira is illustrative. As medium for not only the ancestor Zarira, but Murinye himself, the most senior Duma ancestor in the district, VaZarira's popular support is based largely upon on her clan loyalties, her alliances with Duma chiefs, and upon the effectiveness of her performances as a medium. Conversely, without such clan loyalties to draw upon, Macharaga's legitimacy is based to a much greater extent on her war veteran past. In this respect it is no surprise that of all Masvingo's mediums, she was most closely involved in land occupations around Mutirikwi, and for a time, an influential member of the district land committee. This does not mean she is more politically malleable than VaZarira, or feels less marginalised from state processes than other mediums.⁶⁶ Yet it does suggest that she may have more to gain from close association with agents of the 'President's office'.

But the consequences of this kind of 'official' attention can be very severe. In 2002 a 70 year old medium called Takatukwa Mamhova Mupawaenda was killed for 'mobilising chiefs, headmen and other traditional leaders against President Mugabe in the presidential poll', prompting condemnation from other mediums who pointed out that in the 1897 Kaguvi and Nehanda had been killed by Rhodesians 'for standing up to the same brutal policies now being perpetrated by Zanu PF'.⁶⁷ Active, articulate mediums like VaZarira and Macharaga clearly have to tread carefully. In 2006 I sensed growing unease from VaZarira, and those around her, as she became increasingly aware of being under CIO surveillance. Yet ultimately such attention by the feared security arms of central government is also a strong indication that the

potential political efficacy of mediums' claims about the sovereignty of the ancestors as the owners of the land, and of *Mwari* as the provider of rain, however contested, has been recognized far beyond the remaking of Mutirikwi's landscapes by war veterans, new farmers, chiefs and mediums in the 2000s.

Water and the materiality of signs

The multi-layered political imbrication of rain and water around Mutirikwi I have been describing is not unique to Zimbabwe. It reoccurs in different forms throughout the region. Reviewing rain making practices across eastern and central Africa,⁶⁸ Jedrej pointed to the 'highly ambivalent power' of people credited with controlling the rain, noting how the extent to which 'weather is experienced as benign or malignant' is often 'indicative of the general state of the community' and 'its moral well being' (1992:292). Furthermore, 'those enjoying sovereign powers ... not expressed as a rain making cult', he argued, 'appreciate the threat posed by the appearance within their domains of such techniques and their practitioners' (1992:292). Although his example is articulated spatially, across the 'definite boundary to the spread of rain making techniques [that] can be detected along the Nile-Zaire watershed', this sense of threat posed to 'non-rain making' sovereignties is clearly applicable to the ambivalence with which party and state officials have long engaged mediums in Zimbabwe.

Jedrej also made the important point that 'there is no useful correlation between rainfall distribution and the distribution of rain making institutions', nor is the 'unreliability of rainfall' a 'sufficient condition' for explaining the 'emergence and persistence of rain making institutions' (1992:290-1). Rather, citing Packard's study of the Bashu of Eastern Congo (1981), Jedrej pointed to the 'ambivalent attributes of rain', including its variability and unpredictable quantity, quality and periodicity, which can cause crops to wilt and harvests to fail, regardless of high annual rainfall figures. These qualitative properties of rain, and particularly of the timings of different types of rainfall in relation to crop growth cycles and decisions about when to plant, are hugely significant for farmers in Zimbabwe.⁶⁹ It means that farmers in communal areas, and on resettled farms without irrigation, do 'live in a world in which plenty and famine can and do follow one another unpredictably' (Jedrej 1992:291). Similarly, the localized and topographical nature of precipitation is equally significant in the hilly, middle veld escarpment area around Mutirikwi.

These 'ambivalent attributes of rain' are linked in Jedrej's argument to the ambivalent power of rainmakers, but ultimately he concluded that it is the 'political quality of indigenous meteorological institutions which accounts for their distribution and persistence rather than the physical properties of the climatic environment with which people have to contend' (1992:292). 'Rain magic' is therefore more 'an idiom' or 'language' of political power than 'applied meteorology' (1992:290 & 293), and it is the embedded-ness of rain making institutions in political and social hierarchies that accounts for their continuing salience. And it is on this point that I find myself in disagreement with my late friend and mentor. Jedrej's essay contributed to a volume

(Fradenburg 1992) exploring the role of women and gender in structures of dominance and resistance (Jedrej 1992:298); an admirable framework for a discussion of African environmental religions, which others, notably Ranger (2003) and Sanders (2008), have elaborated in further detail. My purpose here has been somewhat different. I have sought to explore the political efficacy of rain (and water more generally) as imbricated in contested ‘traditionalist’ regimes of rule and registers of meaning in southern Zimbabwe, without succumbing to a naive environmental determinism or a simplistic functionalism that Jedrej rightly warned against. My framework derives from recent debates about materiality, and particularly questioning of commonplace distinctions between matter and meaning, semiotics and materiality, which has focused attention on the materiality of signs (cf Keane 2003; 2005). This leads me to question whether a valid distinction can in fact be made between rain making as an *idiom* or language of power, and as ‘applied meteorology’. I would argue that for many people around Mutirikwi, it is necessarily both these things.

Although recent debates about materiality are often presented as something critical and new, they have many precursors.⁷⁰ A precursor of sorts for my argument can be found in James’s 1972 essay ‘The politics of rain control among the Uduk’. Her discussion has strong echoes with Jedrej’s paper (which drew on it) and the situation I describe in Masvingo. For example, how ‘control over the rain is one of the main idioms through which power relations are worked out in Uduk society’; the salience of rain’s variable, localized and topographical qualities, forms and periodicity; and the ‘double-edged power to bless or curse’ that ‘he who controls the rain’ possesses (1972: 34, 35 & 37). While Jedrej (1992) and Ranger (2003) might point out that this ‘he’ is often a ‘she’, I draw attention to an interesting analogy James made between rain making and currency. In her words:

To perform a rain ritual is not simply to carry out a naïve “symbolic” act ... supposed to have instrumental efficacy; it is to make a calculated move in a very real game of social and political manoeuvre. That moves in the local power game are often of a “symbolic” character should require no special explanation, as symbolic action is bound up with politics everywhere. Politics is played not only with such obvious symbols as flags, banquets and cricket matches, *which may be opposed in the mind to the reality they symbolize; but also with symbols which are themselves a reality*, a means of social articulation and political control. Currency is such a symbol, the circulation of money and financial policy being in them selves the stuff of politics. (*my emphasis*, James 1972:33)

Later, in her conclusion, James returns to her analogy with currency:

The symbols of rain-control are in a broadly similar way a system of giving shape and substance to social and political credit. One could not compare a rain stone with a piece of money, true; but one could suggest a parallel between rights over rain stones and, say, shares in an insurance company. To ask: “why do you believe in rain stones” is in some ways parallel to asking “why do you believe in the Sudanese pound?” – *and not at all parallel to the question “why do you believe in the radio-forecast”*. Belief in rain stones, as in currency, is rooted in local political structures of confidence and credit between people. (*my emphasis*, James 1972:57).

As with Jedrej's comment about rain making not being 'applied meteorology', I am also inclined to disagree with James's suggestion that belief in rain making is not parallel to a belief in the radio forecast. In part, I think we should, as Henare et al. (2007) imply, take our informants more literally. But James's comment about symbols not 'opposed in the mind to the reality they symbolize but also ... themselves a reality' does offer an opportunity to consider *both* how 'belief in rain stones ... is rooted in local political structures of confidence and credit', and for understanding how the contingent forms and moments through which such beliefs gain traction socially and politically are in part dependent upon meteorological materialities.

This is where Keane (2003; 2005) and Engelke's (2007) elaboration upon Peirce's theory of signs (1955) is significant. For Peirce, 'words are not all that signify' and 'in his work there were three aspects of signs, each of which has a different kind of material relation to the world' (Engelke 2007:31). These are iconic, indexical and symbolic. If the meanings of symbols are based on convention, and therefore arbitrary, then the meanings of icons and indexes are based on a material relationship between these signs and what they represent; they 'are defined, at least in part, by the qualities of their materiality' (Engelke 2007: 32). Icons are 'likenesses ... of the objects they represent', so pictures and maps resemble what they represent. But an index 'points to something', and this 'pointing-to can also involve (or imply) causality' (Engelke 2007:32); the object being represented in some way causes the index. Engelke provides the usefully meteorological example of a weather vane - 'so if the wind is blowing east, the weather vane points east; that is, the index (the weather vane pointing east) is caused by the object (the easterly wind)' (2007:32) - but we could equally consider an appropriately hydrological example, such as rain or flow gauges or even pre-paid water meters (cf von Schnitzler 2008). This is the basis of my argument about water, particularly rain, being an *index of power* - successful or failing rains can index the legitimacy of chiefs, mediums and even government, and in turn the sovereignty of ancestors as owners of the land, and ultimately, of *Mwari* as the provider of rain.

The significance of this take on the 'materiality of signs' is that it allows analysis which does not reduce everything to the endless conceptual play of discourse and meanings, separate to the material world. Rather than the significance of the material world amounting simply to the way it reflects the politicised play of language, symbol, culture, memory and even 'ontology', Peirce's approach incorporates how the material qualities of signs in part condition, enable and constrain meanings. In this way it does have 'a much easier time incorporating the stuff of ethnography' (Engelke 2007:32). Sociality, historicity, contestation and political efficacy are *in part* determined independently of human agency, because matter and meaning are fundamentally intertwined. And so rainfall really can, in part, determine political fortune.

Importantly, this argument is not to denigrate James and Jedrej's reflections on how rain making is rooted in the play of symbols embedded in political structures,

because the materiality of signs gains political efficacy in relation to the constant play of contested 'semiotic ideologies' (Keane 2003:419); shared 'basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world'. This approach is therefore deliberately open-ended and ultimately indeterminate; the efficacy of particular 'semiotic ideologies' is contingent and gains traction in relation to the material world, even as the material world or features of it, achieve their contingent significance in relation to particular 'semiotic ideologies'. So around Mutirikwi not only the legitimacy of particular chiefs, mediums or senators is at stake when the rains are promising or fail, or when children are abducted by *njuzu*, but also the different, contested 'traditionalist' regimes of rule put forward in the localized processes of remaking authority over land. In a context where droughts are recurrent, unpredictable, yet to be expected, water is of course always politically salient, but how this salience is realised is dependent both upon its unstable material qualities (and in relation to other material substances and forms: landscape, soil, climate, and so on), and the unstable registers of meanings and regimes of rule with which these are intertwined.

In Engelke's work (2007) on the *Masowe weChishanu* Church (Friday Masowe Church) in Harare, who are unusual because of their deliberate rejection of the bible, he argues that for them water is so common it is therefore mundane. Unlike other substances like pebbles and honey, and especially the anxiety provoking, unstable materiality of the bible, water's ubiquity of religious and political significance, from healing to rain making, and across many different religious contexts, is so widespread that Apostolics can make no special claim to it. Water's meaningfulness is so imbued, so intrinsic, it causes no particular anxiety because it is 'a lost cause' (2005:133-4). Unlike Engelke's Apostolics, I am less convinced about the innocuousness of water's ubiquity. Around Mutirikwi, water's ability to cross, defy or even collapse the different registers of meaning and regimes of rule in which is imbricated - its fluidity of matter and meaning - can be the cause of much anxiety and contestation. How to make sense of all the different meanings and political significances of water's many different forms/qualities, from rain to run off, boundary rivers and conduits, from healing substance to irrigation, from cholera to drowning, and *njuzu* spirits to soil erosion? Water is significant in so many different registers of meaning and political salience. Even within the broadly shared recognition around Mutirikwi that rain is ultimately provided by *Mwari*, through the intervention of ancestors, *njuzu*, mediums and chiefs, there are a range of contested 'semiotic ideologies' and 'regimes of rule' at play. What water means in any moment is dependent upon its many different forms and qualities: as rain that falls after the sun's heat has built towering clouds; as *njuzu* drowning children; or destructive rain ruining crops and collapsing houses, or drought signifying poorly performed *mukwerere* ceremonies; the list seems endless. And what then about irrigation, water supplies and boreholes; or soil erosion, contour-ridging and dam-building? What does water index in all of these differing registers, and in all of its variable qualities and forms?

The answer I have been working towards is that water is an *index of power*. But not power simply as something someone has, to wield over someone else, nor omnipresent productive power as reified by Foucault. But power as contingently all of these, in tension, unstable, contested and mutually productive. Water can index productive, pastoral, governmental forms of power circulating around appeals to legitimacy, developmentalism, moral authority and consent, as well as performative and sometimes coercive assertions of capacity, autonomy and sovereignty. Around Mutirikwi water as rain, and as dangerous *njuzu*, indexes the authority and (il)legitimacy of chiefs and mediums, but also the (il)legitimacy of government and state. Indeed the very ambivalence with which ZANU PF have treated mediums since independence is, in this respect, indicative of its own uncertainty about water. Unlike Engelke's *weChishanu* apostolics then, the ubiquity of water's salience - its excessive, imbued meaningfulness and unstable materialities - do not make it innocuous, but rather provokes deep anxiety not only for new farmers, chiefs and mediums waiting for rain, but also for state officials and politicians. It is this uncertainty about the ambivalent ubiquity of water that, I suggest, can help us understand ZANU PF's impulse to 'moderate' the weather forecast throughout the 2000s.

¹ 'Political interference in Zim weather forecast' www.radiovop.com, 17/11/2010.

² 'Mugabe seizes weather service' *Sunday Telegraph*, 27/1/2003.

³ Protests about food shortages and rising prices had been a feature of Zimbabwe's political landscape since 1997 ('Zimbabwe police fight food price protesters' *Reuters*, 17/10/00; 'Zimbabwe food riots spread' *BBC News*, 6/1/2003). The situation dramatically worsened in the 2000s, but it also created new spheres for ZANU PF patronage, particularly through the politicization of food distribution (HRW, *Not Eligible: The Politicization of Food in Zimbabwe*, October 2003, Vol. 15, No. 17(A)).

⁴ 'Don't blame it on the weather: CFU' 1/8/12 *Zimbabwean*

⁵ Also 'No rain in Zimbabwe's Matabeleland south' *Radio Netherlands Worldwide*, 27/6/11.

⁶ There has been a proliferation of controversial war veteran visits to Matopos in recent years, especially Njelele ('War vets Njelele trip slammed' *Newsday* 29/4/11; 'Blood soaked war Vets' Njelele sacrilege' *Newsday* 2/5/11; 'War veterans fight over Njelele shrine' *Standard*, 20/5/12).

⁷ Officials were highly sensitive to the threat posed by mediums and *Mwari* cult messengers after the 1896 rebellions. In October 1899 the Chief Native Commissioner (CNC) told the Native Commissioner (NC) for Gutu, that 'your chiefs should be warned against listening to any foolish advice or prophecies by their witchdoctors or "mswikiros"' (Circular, CNC to NC Gutu, 2/10/1899, NAZ NVG 1/2/1). A year later, the assistant NC Gutu was requested to investigate reports 'quietly and without alarming the Natives' suspicions', that 'M'wari of Matabeleland has instructed Gutu's people not to sow any Rapoko [finger millet] this year, but only to sow Munga or Nyauti [sorghum], and has told them something is going to happen'. In 1904 the NC Charter district requested that the NC Gutu 'collect evidence ... to support a charge of endeavoring to incite natives to rebellion', against Manyanga, a 'Mlimo [or *mwari*] messenger' spreading a 'Mlimo message' amongst the chiefs of Gutu and Chilimanzi 'to the effect that that the whites would be driven out of the country by a gale' (NC Charter to NC Gutu, 7/3/1904, NAZ NVG1/2/1). As late as March 1936 a messenger called Koko, possessed by the 'rain making' spirit Mbedeze, from Matonjeni, was stopped in the Mtilikwe reserve and taken to police at Fort Victoria, where he signed a statement explaining he was collecting 'contributions from all chiefs, headmen and kraal heads ... so that rain sent by the Spirit would fall'. He would take them to Matonjeni and then return with 'a certain kind of seed grain' for contributors to mix with their own seed to 'strengthen their crops so they could resist drought'. By then official anxieties had eased, and the NC was more concerned about 'fraud' than rebellion, adding that Koko 'appears to be a victim of Machokoto' the 'principle offender' (Statement by Koko, 12/3/36, NC to BSAP, Victoria, 12/3/36, 'NC Victoria: correspondence, 1935-36 NAZ S1043).

⁸ Fieldnotes 26-27/1/2001.

⁹ In other words, the politics of water embodies both Gramscian notions of hegemony, at the intersection of coercion and consent, and Foucauldian notions of discipline, techniques of the self and governmentality (cf Moore 2005: 9).

¹⁰ Fieldnotes 29/10/05.

¹¹ Fieldnotes 29/10/05.

¹² If ZANU PF has often been implicated in politicising food distribution, frequently it is chiefs who have been directly accused of restricting aid to party supporters ('Cases of Politicised Food Aid Growing, Says MDC' 17/1/2003 *Daily News*; 'Villagers walk out on Chief Charumbira' *Daily News*, 4/6/13).

¹³ VaZarira, 10/6/06.

¹⁴ Aschwanden also noted that requests for rain were rarely made directly to *njuzu*, although 'in reply ... one occasionally hears a noise coming from the caves, which is made by the *njuzu*' (1989:189). Only 'during persistent aridity' did people in the past 'make a "human sacrifice" to the *njuzu*' - by leaving a child by a pool to become an *njuzu*- 'to ask the ancestors and god for the life-saving rain' (1989:189-90).

¹⁵ Simon Charumbira, 27/5/06; Bhodo Mukuvara, 19/11/05a.

¹⁶ Acting Chief Murinye, 13/6/06.

¹⁷ Acting Chief Murinye, 13/6/06.

¹⁸ VaChigohwe, 10/5/06.

¹⁹ As Lyn Schumacher pointed out (pers.comm. December 2012) 'in northern Zambia it is just the opposite - the men are the incomer 'strangers' who must marry into the matrilineage of the 'owners of the land', eventually becoming owners themselves when subsequently buried in the land'.

²⁰ For example at Great Zimbabwe (Fontein 2006a: 19-41), where the little girl *Chisikana*, who was taken by *njuzu* and emerged from a sacred spring, is claimed as a founding ancestor or as an affine, by both the Nemanwa and the Mugabe clans, in their continuing disputes over the custodianship of the site.

²¹ VaChikami, water bailiff 6/11/2005; VaChinengo, 26/5/06; Geri Zano, 23/3/06; Chief Mugabe 19/11/05; Bhodo Mukuvara, 19/11/05; Matopos Murinye 13/6/06.

²² Fieldnotes 2/11/05.

²³ Fieldnotes, 24/11/05.

²⁴ Fieldnotes 24/11/05.

²⁵ 'People were preparing to have their *bira* there at ...Mafuse, but the chief ...sent them away... These *biras* should be done at the sacred places not in someone's house. The problem is that he is a Zion and that is why he doesn't want anything to do with *chikaranga* ['tradition'] and *biras*. Even though he wears the *nyembe* [title] of the chief, which comes from the elders [ancestors], he refuses to respect them, and even calls them *mweya wetsvina* [dirty/evil spirits]' (Manyuki, 29/11/05).

²⁶ VaMutsambwa, 19/12/05.

²⁷ Sabhuku Furere Mashuro/Gundura 12/4/06.

²⁸ The *biras* were celebrated on television, and in the government press ('Message from Manhize. Dzimbahwe speaks with Muhera wekwaPfumojena' *Daily Mirror on Saturday*, 4/3/06), although some reports chided that they could not 'ask for crucial inputs [ie seed and fertiliser] from the other world', which still 'had to be met by the responsible ministry', ('No more rhetoric: heads should roll' *Sunday Mirror* 26/2/06).

²⁹ 'Dzimbahwe speaks' *Daily Mirror on Saturday* 4/3/06.

³⁰ Trust Mugabe, 16/3/06.

³¹ He was elected president of the council of chiefs, replacing Jonathan Mangwende, in April 2005 ('Zimbabwe: Charumbira Elected Chiefs' Council President' *Herald*, 7/4/05).

³² Fieldnotes, 23/4/06.

³³ 'Zimbabwe produces better harvests: Chiefs' *Herald*, 24/4/06.

³⁴ VaChuma, 12/6/06.

³⁵ 'Why there was no rain last year? There were some problems with leadership and the *masvikiro* and ancestors who felt they were being ignored. So then they had those *mabira*. It was an issue to do with *chivanhu chedu* [our culture]. So government told us to brew beer to appease the ancestors, because they were being disturbed ... they held those *biras* and that is why this year it rained a lot, which showed us that some of those problems have now been sorted out' (VaKurasva, 17/4/06).

³⁶ VaMakasva, 14/01/06.

³⁷ Robbie Mtetwa, 29/6/06.

³⁸ Manyuki, 5/11/05.

³⁹ Mukuvara, 19/11/05.

⁴⁰ Mai Makasva, 26/11/05.

⁴¹ 'When the second *chimurenga* first started a few freedom fighters came into the country to fight and they were all killed. That was when they realised that they needed the support of the *masvikiro* and we helped them. That is why we got independence. But since independence they have forgotten about us and the important work we do. That is why there are now problems of fuel, money and rain. Then they started to say we need to take back our land, and of course the land has to be returned but they have done it in the wrong way. They have forgotten about the *masvikiro*. They have chased away the whites from the land not thinking that the country needs money, and the land needs to be returned properly, with the *masvikiro*. That is why there is no fuel, no food or money and no rain' (Fieldnotes 3/11/05).

⁴² A similar argument could be made for Zimbabwe's diverse array of churches. Since 2008 there is growing evidence of a concerted campaign by ZANU PF to court churches of all varieties, including Zimbabwe's many Pentecostal churches. This was not particularly prevalent around Mutirikwi in the mid 2000s.

⁴³ Ambuya told me: 'there has still been no rain. It is a big, big problem. There is definitely something that has been done wrong... In the old days in November if the rain had come, it had come, but this wind is taking the rain away. The reason the rain is not falling is because of those national *biras* in September. They should have been held with all the chiefs at Great Zimbabwe [GZ], instead of just Charumbira by himself. It is not his place, none of his forefathers are buried there. Beer should have been cooked in the *sango* [bush] outside of GZ. Then those elders who have graves in GZ, should have gone in with their beer, *bute* [snuff] and black cloths to pray to their ancestors there. It is only Mugabe and Nemanwa, and maybe Murinye, but not Charumbira. There are Haruzvivishe graves there, right on top of that mountain. I would like to see Charumbira showing us his ancestors' graves there.' Peter Manyuki chimed in saying '*kwakapinda politics ipapo* ["there was politics involved there"] ... that is why Charumbira alone went in there, because he is the chairman of the chiefs' (Fieldnotes 29/11/05). Haruzvivishe made similar complaints against Charumbira, saying the lack of a proper *bira* at Great Zimbabwe and the failure to consult the *masvikiro*, meant that 'if you see that the rain does not fall this year, it is because of that'. But he also did not attend Chief Mugabe's *bira* because he continued to dispute his claim to the chieftaincy (Fieldnotes 6/10/05).

⁴⁴ Fieldnotes 19/11/05.

⁴⁵ As indeed she had successfully done when I was researching Great Zimbabwe five years earlier.

⁴⁶ Fieldnotes 2/11/05.

⁴⁷ In these efforts the district and provincial administrators, the now former provincial Governor Chiwewe, the now late, retired General Zvinavashe as well as the then new senator Mavhaire were all approached, without success.

⁴⁸ Fieldnotes, 29/11/05.

⁴⁹ Fieldnotes, 17/3/06.

⁵⁰ VaChinengo, 26/5/06.

⁵¹ Matopos Murinye explained: 'One time my father went to the Matonjeni with a delegation. At that time he had not had any sons yet and he said this to the voice at Matonjeni and the voice said that when he returned he would find that one of his wives who was pregnant had had a son. He was told to name his son Matopos, and much later on I myself had to go to the Matopos to thank the voice that speaks from the rock there' (Fieldnotes 17/3/06).

⁵² Fieldnotes, 24/4/06, also 17/3/06.

⁵³ Chief Murinye, 22/5/06.

⁵⁴ Fieldnotes 24/11/05.

⁵⁵ Fieldnotes 17/3/06.

⁵⁶ Mhanda (2011) describes how during the war, guerrilla fighters had returned Nehanda's remains, who died 'in exile' in Mozambique, to Zimbabwe for burial before the struggle could be continued.

⁵⁷ 'Police destroy home on orders from Spirit Medium' *Zimbabwe Independent*, 5/3/10.

⁵⁸ 'Bogus national spirit mediums hammered' *Herald* 8/3/05.

⁵⁹ 'Chaminuka: The resurrection?' *Herald* 14/12/2009, cited in Ranger 2010:14.

⁶⁰ 'Saga could land Mudede in court' *Financial Gazette* 2/11/07. The same report implicated the Registrar-General Tobaiwa Mudede for obstructing justice by harbouring Rotina Mavhunga after the fraud was discovered.

⁶¹ For example 'Zimbabwe's person of the year' 18/1/08; 'Changamire Dombo on trial' 9/4/08, Blog: 'THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GAPPAAH', available at <http://petinagappah.blogspot.co.uk/>, accessed 18/6/13.

⁶² 'War vet Tenzi Nehoreka acquitted' *Nehandaradio*, 20/4/14; 'War veterans vow to defy Zanu PF' *Standard* 24/6/12.

⁶³ Fieldnotes, 7/3/06; 16/3/06; 19/3/06; 28/3/06; 20/4/06.

⁶⁴ Fieldnotes, 9-15/12/13.

⁶⁵ Mai Macharaga, 25/3/06.

⁶⁶ Her confrontation with the provincial governor Josiah Hungwe in 2001 is a good illustration of both her own disaffection, and how she too, like VaZarira, is imbricated in the nitty-gritty of ZANU PF's complex factionalism (*Masvingo Star*, 2-8 & 9-15/3/2001, also Fontein 2006c:183-4).

⁶⁷ 'Spirit mediums condemn Terror', *Daily News* 7/3/02.

⁶⁸ From Sudan and Ethiopia to the Eastern Congo and down to Zimbabwe (Southall nd; James 1972; Packard 1982; Akong'a 1987; Krige & Krige 1943; Lan 1985).

⁶⁹ In the past rain offerings across Zimbabwe were closely aligned with the agricultural season to ensure the right kind of rain fell at the right moment in the annual cycle (Lan 1985; Bourdillon 1987; Garbett 1977, 1992).

⁷⁰ Just as Mauss's *The Gift* (1954 [1923]) anticipated Gell's *Art and Agency* (1998), and Williams's (1977) notion of 'structures of feeling' anticipated recent interest in notions of 'affect'.

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