Masowe Wilderness Apostles

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The Masowe Apostolic movement is made up of many religious communities that originated in colonial Southern Rhodesia during the 1930s and have become widely known in southern and central Africa. Distinguished by white robes and worshipping in open air venues that they call masowe, meaning ‘wilderness’, these African Apostles can be seen anywhere in fringe places by the roadside, behind factories, on the edge of fields, on hilltops, near lakes, on rock surfaces, in grasslands, underneath trees etc. Buildings are avoided for ritual purposes because of the belief that the Holy Spirit comes through the wind and must blow freely through the atmosphere. Today, this form of vernacular Christianity has a membership of approximately 5 million people in southern and central Africa alone.

Through the symbolic act of going to pray out of doors, the Wilderness Apostles also see themselves as stepping outside zvinhu zvechirungu, meaning symbols of western culture that they associate with human folly and immoral behavior. Although toilets and fences are becoming common features that gradually bring about a sense of the permanence of the sacred wilderness, the general pattern has been to declare the quest for freedom of the human spirit in sacred venues that contrast with the European missionary model of Church.

In addition to the tradition of spending long hours praying in the open air as a way of registering discontent with a modernity supported by missionary Christianity that believers are forced to grapple with in wider society, Wilderness Apostles are known for
migrating from the country of their origins in Zimbabwe, to South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Tanzania and Kenya. Werbner describes this trend in the African Apostles thought pattern as a way of using the biblical idea of ‘exile’ to communicate a quest for liberation from an oppressive social order. He relates the experience of oppression to the quest for freedom and transcendence through an insistence on prayers held in fringe places bereft of any enclosure and lacking permanence.

Such is the social reality in Africa today, however, that it is imperative to see beyond the stories of African protest against colonialism and biblical imagery. Women and children are so visible in the sacred wilderness that it is important to articulate the nature of their oppression and their language of resistance in relation to the landscape. Jules-Rosette has drawn attention to ritual activities among the Maranke Apostles originating from the same setting, but with its own history. She observed as I have subsequently done among the Masowe Apostles that women are the ceremonial leaders because they exercise certain important mystical powers and spiritual gifts. This argument can be taken a stage further by relating the ceremonial function of women to their experiences and conceptual understanding of nature.

For a start, the open air is the most natural environment for women to pray and exercise mystical powers. Women spend many long hours each day working in the fields, fetching water and firewood, collecting fruit and vegetables and so on in the background culture. These chores explain not only the marginality of women through a relationship forged with nature, but also the existence of a female oriented knowledge system whereby nature is held sacred as the Mother of all living creatures. The sacred wilderness thus takes on a special meaning for women who experience oppression by
being subjugated as if they were a part of nature and are filled with a quest for transcendence based on an understanding of nature as sacred.

However, patriarchal attitudes are so pervasive in southern and central Africa that, even in this movement of liberation, men refuse to consider women for official leadership. At the same time, they respect their vital role as mediators of divine truths and executors at healing ceremonies. The male clientele of the Wilderness movement also join women in their special quest for emancipation from the male ancestors. For instance, all members of the sacred wilderness drop their lineage names and call each other by their first names only. This is to avoid invoking the ancestors and to allow for a greater sense of equality among believers in the agreement that the ancestors are ignorant of the ways of God and, as a result, are to be exorcised through prayer. The rejection of the ancestors who are the pillar of the man-led traditional family and the burden it puts on women in the background culture as crop producers, child bearers and hunter gatherers roaming the rivers and forests, prompted this new definition the sacred wilderness as being in some profound sense associated with women despite the official leadership.

It is not surprising that women who have always worked closely with the elements of nature to please the patrilineal ancestors are attracted to a movement that dramatizes resistance to oppression and even rejects the ancestors to whom women are beholden subjects by having rituals in the open air. Daneel observed that in the Mwari (high god) religion among the Shona, earth is not a just a place for men to have dominion, but in creation mythology, earth is feminine and divine, with her creative power being that of generating and nurturing life through the rains which is equated with women giving birth to children. The soil, water and the wind and the woman’s womb are
key ideas used in creation myths to interpret the coming to being of living creatures in a world that begins with all living creatures co-existing harmoniously. Women are thus attracted to the wilderness movement because their quest for transcendence takes them beyond the colonialists, missionaries and the male ancestors to a spiritual freedom that respects the pre-Christian conceptualization of Earth as feminine in the Mwari religion.

Consequently, *Masowe* women in the sacred wilderness excel as healers, i.e., people filled with the spirit that restores life and causes barren women to give birth again while encouraging good morals and peaceful living. Furthermore, the use of earthenware bowls filled with water, stones, clay or leaves, milk and sometimes oil, is consistent with them as children made in the image of Mother Earth. These objects, held in association with the manifestation of the Holy Spirit during healing ceremonies and exorcisms of evil spirits among the Wilderness Apostles are direct reminders of Earth as Mother and life giver in Shona mythology.

Finally, the Apostles hold the earth sacred and their venues of prayer are usually chosen because they are deemed uninhabited-- open and not as yet spoiled by man. One of the reasons that the communities disappear from the landscape in a city such as Harare, and reappear elsewhere, is largely determined by the wish for prayer in environments where human beings have not destroyed trees and grasslands by putting up buildings. Although it is becoming common to see toilets built for sanitation purposes and pressure is being put on Apostles to build churches and thus to bureaucratize, the Apostles could teach us about preserving life on earth. By using the landscape to construct a sacred wilderness in which one leaves the trees, grass and rivers flowing is a beautiful illustration of how human beings could rethink their relationship to nature as one of
sharing, rather than manipulating and destroying. Occasionally, the Apostles have been known to destroy rock paintings when they have gone into the mountains to pray (Domboshava, Harare). This is because they see rock paintings as direct reminders of the ancestors whom they regard as evil and therefore at war with in the sacred wilderness. Otherwise, the Wilderness movement is guardian to an eco-theology that has yet to be fully articulated.

In summary, somewhere in the background world of Masowe believers is a religious heritage whereby Earth is gendered, divine and necessarily part of any discourse on religion and nature. In the vernacular Christianity represented by the Masowe Apostles are, in the sacred wilderness filled with large numbers of female adherents and fewer men, lessons about the uses of space by people who have always had an intimate relationship with nature and who have shown their discontent with colonialism and traditional African patriarchal culture, and who continue to wrestle with the effects of both in today’s world.

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Further Reading


