

Machinations of spiritual entities in some of Charles Mungoshi's works in English

Barbra Chiyedza Manyarara⁴
University of Zimbabwe

Abstract

Through a textual analysis methodology of three selected texts by Charles Mungoshi, the interactions between the spirit world and ordinary Shona people are examined to unlock some of the multiple meanings to be found in these cultural artefacts. Christian values are shown as largely in conflict against the Shona spiritual world with its tendency towards the supernatural. In the selected works, the ngozi spirit has a strong presence that controls the literary lives of the persons of these works. Although the ngozi spirit affects both young and old, males and females, its influence is felt the most by young girls, single women and other females in their families. The impact on the male species seems rather minimal, perhaps reflective of patriarchal order. In Shona cosmology there is a strong belief that the panacea for ngozi is atonement. This study, therefore, explores the workings of spiritual entities in the selected works.

Keywords: *ancestors, machinations, ngozi spirit, supernatural.*

This discussion traces Charles Mungoshi's depiction of the supernatural in the novel "Waiting for the Rain" (1975) and in two short stories "The Little Wooden Hut In The Forest" and "Sacrifice" from the collection *Walking Still* (1997). There are meanings to the notion of the "supernatural" that the author's readership may not particularly appreciate. The paper posits that Mungoshi has tended to appear ambivalent towards the supernatural in some of his earlier works written in English such as, "Coming of The Dry Season" (1972), "Waiting for The Rain" (1975) and "Some Kinds of Wounds" (1980). The two stories "The Little Wooden Hut in the Forest" and "Sacrifice" both in *Walking Still* (1997) read as corrective and revisionary attempts to reaffirm the existence and potency of the supernatural, particularly the *ngozi* spirit. Writing within and about the Shona social environment, Mungoshi makes numerous literary references to the "supernatural". For lack of a better word, the term "supernatural" is used here in its broadest sense to refer to ancestral spirits and the workings of the avenging *ngozi* spirit. In the Shona world, the existence of

⁴ Barbra C. Manyarara is a senior lecturer in the Curriculum and Arts Education Department at the University of Zimbabwe. She teaches English language pedagogy and literature in English courses. Barbra is also a research fellow at UNISA with interest in child sensitive social policies, postcolonial literature, and competence-based language education.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Barbra Chiyedza Manyarara, Department of Curriculum and Arts Education Faculty of Education, University of Zimbabwe, P. O. Box MP 167, Mt Pleasant, Harare. Zimbabwe. Email: bcmagyarara@gmail.com

supernatural entities is a phenomenon surrounded by much scepticism on the one hand and total belief on the other.

Analytical Framework

Empirical in nature, textual analysis is the critical methodology employed in this discussion for close consideration of Charles Mungoshi's choices of language, imagery and literary techniques he employs in his inscription of the spiritual elements of Shona culture in the selected texts. This approach enables unobtrusive study of the indicated theme in the selected texts. As is the nature of hermeneutic studies, there are multiple meanings inherent in these texts but the critique makes no claims about the exhaustiveness and/or uniqueness of the reading of the works.

Objectives of the Study

In order to gather empirical evidence on the workings of spiritual entities in the selected works, the following questions/objectives were examined:

- Shona conceptualising of *ngozi* spirit;
- Impact of *ngozi* spirit on the Mandengu family in "Waiting for the Rain";
- Impact of *ngozi* in "The little wooden hut in the forest" in *Walking Still*; and
- Impact of *ngozi* in "Sacrifice" in *Walking Still*.

Conceptualising ngozi Spirit

The *ngozi* spirit according to traditional Shona belief systems is an angered or aggrieved spirit of a long dead ancestor or a wronged stranger who wishes to avenge for himself or herself on an individual or his or her family for transgressions committed in the course of the victim's life (Bourdillon, 1982; Gelfand, 1976; Meursing, 1993). According to Shona tradition, if someone meets sudden death at the hands of another, the dead person's spirit becomes restless, angry and vengeful. Such a spirit may possess one member of the murderer's family who will then spell out what is required to appease the wronged spirit. Alternatively, a diviner might declare *ngozi* as the cause of misfortune as in the persona, Betty's case.

A family may suffer a string of tragedies or misfortunes until the spirit is avenged. Often, the standard appeasement for *ngozi* is a virgin, (usually very young girls), given in marriage to a male member of the victim's family. Usually, a large head of cattle also accompanies such a "bride" as part of the restitution paid to the wronged family. In support of the practice, Nyathi (2015) posits that fear of *ngozi* was a social enforcer of justice and fairness that worked to keep everybody on the straight and narrow. However, no justice was served if it took the life of a young innocent girl to atone for someone's wrongdoing, usually a long dead ancestor. Much as the government of Zimbabwe has instituted laws against this violation of a girl child's rights, the practice has persisted. Article 78 on marriage rights states, "No person may

be compelled to enter into marriage against their will" (Zimbabwe Constitution, 2013) but atonement for *ngozi* remains one of the unfortunate motivations for child marriages (Manyarara, 2015). Thus Mungoshi fictionally attempts to revoke this tradition that so oppresses the girl child under the auspices of traditional practice.

The two characters; Betty in "Waiting for the Rain" and Tayeva in the story "Sacrifice" in *Walking Still* are two very special people in whose portrayal Mungoshi explores community sanctioned victimisation of women. Betty is long past marriageable age but remains single because of a curse on the Mandengu family. Tayeva, on the other hand, is a self-possessed teenage girl who has to leave school to atone for a wrong committed by a long dead ancestor. The level of significance to the characters Betty and Tayeva is better appreciated by understanding the workings of the concept of *ngozi*.

In another short story, "The little wooden hut in the forest" in *Walking Still*, Kerina Mashamba is also represented as a victim of some spiritual sanction against her marrying and starting a family. All three women are examples of beliefs about wrongdoing ancestors and the need for atonement. The first two are victims of the spiritual machinations of *ngozi*, what Zimunya (1982, p. 89) has called "... the clithonic tyranny of the dead over the living". It is through these characters in particular that the workings of the *ngozi* spirit clearly manifest although the rest of the victims' families are also affected to differing degrees.

Impact of *ngozi* spirit on the Mandengu family in "Waiting for the Rain"

Through no fault of her own, Betty finds herself severely constricted to a life of loneliness and misery because her role gives her no opportunity to develop companionable relationships with men or other women. She must:

Leave home, never to return, and wonder the countryside in an unaided search for the surviving members of this family to one of whom she is to offer herself as a wife, *or a young female of another family must be abducted by the Mandengus and sacrificially murdered* [emphasis added] (Stratton, 1986, p. 16).

Two incongruences stand out here. The abduction of a girl from another family is further transgression of the kind the Mandengus must atone thus undermining the gravity of the processes of righting the wrong perpetrated against the initial victim because two wrongs do not add up to a right. This is no mathematical solution or otherwise, but a mere transference of the parameters of the problem.

Mungoshi appears to question the social traditions that make Betty, the character so easily dispensable. Betty's situation if compared to that of her eldest uncle Makiwa, who had run away from home to work in town but had been run over by his employer's car. Evident double standards show because for Makiwa who, although killed in an accident, legally or culturally, his death according to Shona precepts would have required some atonement of sorts (Gelfand, 1976). Yet the dead

Makiwa does not mutate into a vengeful spirit viciously seeking revenge. Stubbornly patriarchal and supportive of colonial subjectivity, the diviners exonerate the white man. They say: "... it wasn't his fault, the soil wanted the boy back" (*Waiting for The Rain*, p. 139). The Old Man admits the clan's mistake in not burying Makiwa among his own people and "now he demands a home to rest in" (p. 139).

This spirit (or the dead Makiwa), wants his name put on Lucifer, Betty's younger brother, who is going to travel to strange places as Makiwa had done in his lifetime. This almost benevolent spirit contrasts harshly with the malevolent ngozi spirit that demands a virgin, Betty in particular, in appeasement. There are no threats or restrictions to Lucifer's well-being should he refuse to accept Makiwa's name, unlike Betty who is doomed to eternal spinsterhood and barrenness should she refuse to leave home and become the bride of one of the unknown heirs of the murder victim.

Betty is frustrated because she finds herself the family drudge and butt of jokes. She attempts to alter her spiritually-imposed destiny by denying the untenable role. From pretending to receive love letters from an imaginary boyfriend to liaison with a married man Kureya, Betty fails to break the spiritual constriction on her life because of a long dead ancestor's transgressions. Kureya the married man is childless in his official marriage. He makes Betty pregnant but will not marry her knowing the stigma attached to her through the curse on the Mandengu family. However a spirit medium, Matandangoma divines that the child is dead in her womb, that way confirming the spiritual restrictions placed upon Betty by Shona traditions that extend punishment beyond the individual transgressor.

From the point of view of practical needs, the Old Man and the Mandengu family's patriarch and his large family are literally waiting for the rain in the month of October, which marks the beginning of the rainy season, but spiritually the family is waiting for guidance and blessings from their ancestors. Concurrently, the family has also been waiting in vain for Garabha and Betty to marry so as to complete the natural birth, second birth, marriage and eventual death cycle (Finnegan, 2012). The Old Man's family, made up of his two sons and their own families, Kuruku and Tongoona is terribly divided.

Family dissonance is another significant feature of Mungoshi's oeuvre. On the surface, they appear divided by mutual mistrust, but at a deeper level, the chasm is a result of a deadly combination of the unappeased spirits which are looking for a home as in the cases of Garabha and Lucifer and an avenging spirit as has been noted in the case of Betty. Each of these characters is in a predicament that is not of their making, at least according to Shona cultural beliefs (Bourdillon, 1982). The two brothers Garabha and Lucifer in "*Waiting for the Rain*" are different in most social respects but they both come to a similar end. The Western educated Lucifer is contemptuous of his illiterate family and also ashamed of his humble origins; a feeling he clearly articulates. In spite of his seemingly "precious" Western education, Lucifer is still susceptible to the "superstitions" of Shona belief systems.

Deep in their psyches, the characters are insidiously controlled by the spiritual whose impacts they disbelieve and valiantly attempt to avoid but in vain. Although the character Lucifer thinks and acts as if he does not have much in common with members of his family and rejects the baggage that comes with being a part of the Mandengu family, he is nonetheless affected by his ancestral spirits by virtue of being a descendant, therefore an automatic member of the Mandengu line.

To avoid the fate of his line, a little like Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, Lucifer chooses to become a nomad, leaving his family to go to school overseas; that is, he wanders far away from home. Matandangoma, the Mandengu family's spiritual advisor's prognosis is, "... he is going to more darkness" (Waiting for the Rain, p. 152). His education will come to nought until and unless the spirit of Makiwa is rested. Makiwa is his ancestor of the accidental death. Makiwa's belonging in the spiritual realm may be thought problematic in that death does not necessarily make this character an ancestor (Rabaka, 2007; Thabede, 2008). However, Shona cosmology privileges him. The fictional Makiwa dies before completing major life rituals, especially marriage and the attainment of elderhood. Therefore he has not lived a full measured life, nor cultivated any notable moral values or achieved any social distinctions to attain the status of an ancestor; his status typically illustrates some of the subtle nuances of Shona worldview that separates it from the general African one. Rabaka (2007, p. 57) confirms this possibility when he says "*the similarities – though, to be sure, not identical in nature* – of the various thought, belief and value systems of continental and diasporic African peoples have led many theorists to argue that there is indeed an African worldview [emphasis added].

Despite the fact that the employer is not blamed for the accident, Makiwa's spirit seeks burial rights from his family and will remain restless until appeased. Typically illustrating the disruptions that have occurred to the African worldview through colonial culture, the white employer gets away with causing the death of another. A Shona person would have been required to appease the spirit of the dead as per culture (Bourdillon, 1986). It is this spirit that has set its sights on Lucifer, therefore likely to curtail the latter's physical and mental break with the family (Manyarara, 2000).

Compared to the Western educated Lucifer, his blood brother Garabha is generally respectful towards all elders in his community and regards them as sources of information and wisdom. That is, unlike the rebellious Lucifer, he conforms to social norms and expectations. He still has to leave home to escape his parents' nagging. They constantly pick on him for being unemployed; clearly a double standard considering their general attitude towards westernisation. More importantly however, they are grossly unhappy over his failure to marry and the consequential failure to attain traditional manhood through marriage (Ndofirepi & Shumba, 2014).

Mungoshi's society in the novel is unambiguously patriarchal and does not have much respect for a man who has not settled down in marriage like the character Garabha. Garabha is actually possessed by the spirit of Samambwa, however, the

latter had been another wondering persona who eventually dies away from home and again no proper burial rites are performed. Accordingly, his spiritual unhappiness translates into a relentless hold on Garabha. As in the case of his younger brother Lucifer, what was required was simple: brew beer and find a "home" for the Samambwa ancestor as attested by Bourdillon (1982) who observes that traditionally death was always considered unnatural and in most cases requiring divination. Significantly, the spiritual holds on both Lucifer and Garabha are veritably less malicious than the prognosis visited upon the girl Betty.

There is literary merit in the notion that the present generation will always take after earlier generations of a family, at least in the world of the novel, "Waiting for the Rain". In his seminal work "Those Years of Drought and Hunger", Zimunya (1982), appears to suggest that generations take after each other. He discusses the variations of the Samambwa legend thus:

The tragedy assumes cosmic proportions through the reverberating echo of an archetypal motif running through the family psyche. The motif gives the novel its mythic structure. The myth of the Fugitive or the Traveller, or the Wanderer, or the Hunger manifests itself over and over again variously in the Old Man, Garabha, Makiwa and Lucifer (Zimunya, 1982, p. 85).

The troika comprising of the first living generation, that is, ancestors in waiting – Sekuru, Japi and Mandisa - appear to know the solutions to the problems bedeviling Tongoona's family, a part of the larger Mandengu family. They unquestioningly attribute all the problems to the machinations of angered spirits. Tongoona fails to resolve the crisis in his family, because like others of his generation Kuruku, Raina and Rhoda – he is caught between two disparate consciousnesses. They are undecided over which beliefs system to follow between the Shona and the Western, in particular, Christianity. An eloquent example of this confusion and ambivalence about ancestral worship and Christianity is provided by Raina, of the parent generation.

Raina says: "Guard and guide him, O Lord, we put him in your all-merciful hands." She makes the sign of the cross and throws some roots onto the fire. Tongoona watches all this with some uneasiness in his mind. He would like to do the same, to be able to say some such words as his wife says, and make the sign of the cross with the same ease of hand and mind, but he is worried by these roots and it has not been clearly declared that the God of the Bible doesn't work with them anymore. So, *to put roots on the fire with the same hand that makes the sign of the cross and mouth incantations to the ancestors with the same mouth that addresses the God of the Bible* – that, he feels, is going a bit too far [emphasis added] (Waiting for the Rain, p. 176).

Certainly Tongoona, unlike his wife Raina who collapses the two seemingly bifurcated belief systems into her own version of prayer, suffers much uncertainty over engagement with this dual spiritual practice and unequivocally abandons both. That is, "... he says prayers neither to his ancestors nor to the God of the Bible"

(Waiting for the Rain, p. 176). This is an active decision taken but driven by the confusion due to the coming of Christianity to a culture that had its own existing systems of beliefs in a Creator God, a definite spiritual crisis.

Illustrating another angle to the spiritual crisis, the same Tongoona breaks with the past by disinheriting his first son Garabha in favour of his second one, Lucifer. This further illustrates a confusion and uncertainty on the dictates of culture and practical action. Tradition is clear on who may or may not head a traditional Shona family: it is always the eldest son, despite prevailing circumstances, such as unemployment, being unmarried or being physically challenged. After all, the appointing of a nominal family head is not ordinarily done by the head of the family while he is still alive as Tongoona tries to do. It is the province of grandfathers or uncles after the death of the real head of the family (Gelfand, 1976).

The Mandengu family crisis leads to a breakdown of the material and political world of Shona communities (Stratton, 1986; Zhuwarara, 1987). Therefore the crisis is more a cultural and spiritual disruption. The land as the material base of the traditional Shona people and the abode of their ancestors was forcibly wrested away from them and their shrines desecrated. Concurrently, belief in ancestors was severely eroded by colonialism. The settlers encouraged disbelieving attitudes through the twin pillars of Western education and Christianity, causing socio-cultural and religio-cultural crises. With the Shona spiritual world hinged on the land as its material base, Mungoshi explores how the base in turn, can claim her own if wronged as illustrated principally through the character Betty's severely constricted life trajectory and the portentously unfruitful wonderings of her brothers Lucifer and Garabha.

Impact of *ngozi* in "The little wooden hut in the forest" in *Walking Still*

Lack of a husband for a woman used to be, and regrettably may still be, a cause for social stigma. Mungoshi represents spinsterhood as variably a cause for concern in the Shona world that he writes about. The case of the persona Kerina Mashamba in the short story "The little wooden hut in the forest" in *Walking Still*, is one such example. She is drawn as incomplete and this status, as Betty's in "Waiting for the Rain", is again attributed to the machinations of an *ngozi* spirit. At thirty-one, Kerina Mashamba is a beautiful but cursed object of fear. The narrator describes her thus:

Girls of her age-group now had their third or fourth baby. Kerina was slowly becoming the village aunt. Her problem was that *no man would ask to marry her*. It was not that she was unattractive. She was, in fact, very beautiful. So beautiful that some elders considered that this was the reason why no man had ever taken her seriously... A curse had been cast on Kerina Mashamba. Everyone in the village knew it... Before Gavi, Kerina was certain that she was doomed to die single, and probably alone, in a little thatched hut at the edge of the village [emphasis added] (*Walking Still*, p. 152).

Kerina is neither free nor independent as she is bound to the underworld. She is accused object of fear and only manages to ensnare a reluctant Gavi, courtesy of her aunt and brothers who manipulate and threaten Gavi. By innuendo the character Gavi is a lost guerrilla who strays into "Kerina's orbit" and is trapped into marriage because he is a stranger. Unaware of the curse on Kerina and probably socialised out of such beliefs by his sojourn in the guerrilla training camps (Manyarara, 2013), Gavi hastily marries Kerina but is cuckolded and dominated by his wife who is rumoured to be a witch, another key strand of Mungoshi's oeuvre. Their getting lost in the mist, going in circles from sunrise to sunset, crossing and re-crossing the same river has intimations of witchcraft in its portrayal. Although equally illuminating, the literary tensions of this story on the effects of the *ngozi* spirit are less impactful than the tale of Tayeva in "Sacrifice".

Impact of *ngozi* in "Sacrifice" in *Walking Still*

The "Sacrifice" is the short story of a bright teenage girl, Tayeva, who has to drop out of school in order to atone for a wrong committed by a long dead ancestor. She, also like Betty, in "Waiting for the Rain", is a victim of the tyranny of the dead over the living. But unlike the earlier story, in which the writer appears ambivalent about the belief in *ngozi*, in this short story he unequivocally affirms and reinforces the existence and potency of *ngozi*. In an unusually poignant manner, Mungoshi tells the story from the sacrificial virgin's point of view. Although socialized into muteness by her mother, Tayeva eventually realizes the cause of "... quarrels, accusations of witchcraft, finger-pointing and doors slammed into the face of others" (Walking Still, p. 121).

The three smaller families of Chizema, Nhata and Mungofa were afflicted by *ngozi* that had killed several of her siblings and cousins, causing deep fractures within their kinship system. Tayeva eventually learns the cause and panacea from over-hearing her father and uncles' discussions. The latter insist that Chizema, Tayeva's father, give her up as sacrifice to one of the wronged people. She would be married off to any one of the males from wronged family and as is always the case in matters of *ngozi*; her parents would receive no bride price at all. The cause of the deaths is supposed to be a transgression perpetrated by Kusema, her late grandfather against another family. The wrong had to be atoned and the standard appeasement for the malevolent *ngozi* spirit is a young girl, a virgin and a large head of cattle.

Manyarara (2000) rightly questions this standard appeasement as it reduces the girl to an expendable commodity that not only has no right to a choice of a lover but also can be exchanged for wrongs committed by long dead ancestors to completely alter such a girl's life trajectory. This also is an important instance of child marriage motivated by machinations of the spirit world over the lives of the innocent who must suffer on behalf of long dead wrong doers.

As in the novel "Waiting for the Rain", Mungoshi juxtaposes Christianity with traditional belief – both require the virgin. The motif of the nuns and the price of *ngozi* atonement both function to revoke ideology built on male control. The nuns must preserve their virginity while Tayeva is expected to surrender hers. Endowed with a measure of narrative agency, Tayeva does not passively accept her victimhood. First she appeals to her mother to do something to stop the sacrifice. Her mother is much distressed especially when Tayeva appears to enter a trope of liminality (Quayson, 1997). No longer the ordinary girl, Mungoshi imbues the character with a quasi-esoteric status. She tells her mother the rest of the *ngozi* tale, the deaths and the appeasement and further insists on being told how the rest of the Mutunga family had stopped the deracination of their families caused by the *ngozi* spirit.

Prayer sessions are engaged with to try to avert the imminent disaster but these largely fail as does Tayeva's mother's violent quarrels with Tayeva's uncles and her emasculated father's equally violent attempts to stop the sacrifice. Significantly, the Mutunga family actively but unsuccessfully attempts to rebut the *ngozi* effect but in the end they give in. They are defeated by the spiritual machinations of *ngozi*, that is, they are unable to free the clan from clithonic tyranny of the dead over the living (Zimunya, 1982). In the end, the village headman Muza, as custodian of the Shona socio-cultural traditions, gathers the Mutunga family and publicly berates them collectively and advises them of the need to cooperate to solve the *ngozi* problem.

During this gathering Mungoshi explicitly projects Tayeva. For a start she is the only young person present among the adult men and women. As Muza concludes his severe berating of the gathering, "Tayeva looked at *her* people *her* family" [emphasis added] (Walking Still, p. 147). In a final liminal state, Tayeva appears to drift into limbo and when she wakes:

... what she had to do was so clear to her that she wondered why she had not seen it this way before. She felt so certain of what had to be done; it was as if someone had whispered it into her ear. It looked and felt so right that she did not feel any responsibility for making the decision. It was as if she were only carrying out orders, obeying someone's will. Tayeva felt a strange strength welling up in her, a strength that would brook no hindrance (Walking Still, p. 148).

Suddenly Tayeva commands not only everyone's attention, but automatic respect. Both her parents and one of her uncles protest her decision but she insists that the decision cannot be put off. There is a role shift as Tayeva takes on a spiritually sanctioned adult role of consoling "her children", that is, her parents and other relatives. In her new liminal role, Tayeva's eyes "... now seemed to be flashing with an unearthly fire as she looked from face to face..." (Walking Still, p. 149). Everyone, except her mother seemed afraid of this "stranger". Her Uncle Mungofa speaks to her as if he were addressing the new spirit medium of a great-great aunt of the clan. He addresses her as "Ambuya" (Walking Still, p. 149). From being an ordinary school girl, she develops first, the articulation of an angry confused teenager, then an almost adult knowledge and acceptance of the need for atonement and finally takes on the esoteric

role of the spirit medium ancestor aunt of the Mutunga family. The convergence of Tayeva's three impulses is designed to illustrate how the rest of her family had become victims of the murder victim's spiritual machinations as well as the extended family's violence and pressure to make her the "sacrifice".

The uncanny appearance of the grey-haired old man on the scene to claim his virginal bride at this exact moment in time may be thought as authorial collusion with his creation but the incident also confirms the liminal quality of the resolution of the *ngozi* curse on the Mutunga family. Even this old man seems afraid of what he sees in Tayeva's face – she is not simply a sacrifice, there is something more to her. Perhaps Mungoshi's drawing of Tayeva's final incarnation is designed to dispel reader anxiety but unwittingly he invokes it by employing the Orpheus motif (Quayson, 1997; Stratton, 1994).

For all her new-found resolve, the Orphic quest undermines Tayeva's control of the tale, her own narrative. The old man comes to find her, thus fulfilling a patriarchal myth; unlike Betty who might maintain her freedom as a perpetual spinster if she refuses to go in search of the victim's family. Despite it all, the narration shows that Tayeva will not be short changed. It is the old man who "... seemed to hesitate, lowered his gaze to the floor, daunted by the fire in Tayeva's eyes" (Walking Still, p. 150).

Thus Mungoshi endows this character with ambiguity and category confusion all of which are in mitigation of the impact of the belief in the *ngozi* spirit on a family's psyche. However, modern readers are likely to find this ending retrogressive because Tayeva is constructed as modern girl but it is this very deep incongruence that drives home the depth of spiritual machinations on the lives of unfortunate characters, real or imagined.

Conclusion

Murder of a stranger or one's own as is suggested by Matandangoma in "Waiting for the Rain", is not a solution to *ngozi*. In Shona cosmology there is a strong belief that the cure-all for *ngozi* is atonement. That its machinations can affect anyone within the genealogical line of the initial perpetrator of the murder, is a preventive measure against senseless and willful taking of another's life. In a society that did not run physical prisons, the fear of the workings of the *ngozi* spirit reads like a strong motivation to maintain civil relationships with one's neighbours and strangers alike. Therefore this belief is difficult to dismiss even in reality because literature tends to reflect and refract life. Although only three of Mungoshi's works are engaged with in this discussion, the workings of the supernatural and spirituality in the culture of the Shona is a fine thread that has a tenuous but recognisable presence in most of this writer's work.

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