

## COMMUNITY MASTERY OF THE SPIRITS AS AN AFRICAN FORM OF SHAMANISM <1> [DISKUS 9 (2008)]

James L. Cox  
Religious Studies  
University of Edinburgh  
New College  
Mound Place  
Edinburgh EH1 2LX

E-mail: J.Cox@ed.ac.uk

### ABSTRACT

Most scholars agree that shamans can be defined as religious specialists in traditional societies who are believed to enter a trance, leave their bodies and travel to upper or lower worlds in order to heal, predict the future, influence weather and enlist the help of spirits on behalf of the community. Yet, a fundamental disagreement centres on the distinction between those who are possessed by spirits and practitioners who seemingly incarnate spirits at will. In the former case, the medium appears to be controlled by the possessing spirit while in the latter case the specialist masters the spirits. Many scholars, such as Raymond Firth, Marete Jakobsen and the Russian ethnologist of the early twentieth century S.M. Shirokogoroff make controlling spirits, which is the dominant method of shamanic activity in Siberia and other northern regions, the distinctive feature of a genuine shaman, thereby excluding a vast number of societies, particularly in Africa, which feature possession as the primary mode of communication with the spirit world. By examining field material from Zimbabwe and by drawing on arguments by I.M. Lewis, this article interprets the process of becoming a shaman as beginning with spontaneous or involuntary possession and culminating with the shaman becoming expert at entering a trance. The Zimbabwean material confirms that this process occurs also in the development of spirit mediums in Africa, who, after a period of initiation, eventually control the spirits, albeit in cooperation with the community whose inducements and participation in the possession ritual ensure that the spirit 'speaks' through the medium. Seen in this light, shamanism can be interpreted as a universal phenomenon, applicable equally in Africa as in Siberia and other northern regions.

### INTRODUCTION

A marked difference in interpretation among scholars from many disciplines has surfaced in recent years regarding the proper definition of religious practitioners who utilise ecstasy or trance as a means of communicating with a postulated spirit world. Often

these practitioners are referred to as shamans. Typically, shamans are defined by the experience of going into a trance, leaving their bodies, and travelling to an upper or lower world, often with the assistance of spirit helpers. <2> Sometimes the spirit helpers are described as spirits of animals, but almost always the shamanic call entails a series of ordeals that, in the words of Piers Vitebsky, take ‘the form of a violent onslaught which leads to what seems like a complete destruction of the future shaman’s personality’. <3> Ultimately, the shaman masters the spirits that have attacked him and uses them to accomplish a number of tasks, such as recovering a stolen soul of an ill person, predicting the weather or guiding hunters to animals necessary for the sustenance of the community. This definition emphasises that true shamans control or master an assembly of spirits, and thus would seem to exclude from shamanic practice mediums who are possessed by spirits, but afterwards do not remember what occurred. The critical significance of this point has been underscored by the historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, who in his groundbreaking book on shamanism declared: ‘Incarnating spirits and being “possessed” by spirits are universally disseminated phenomena, but they do not necessarily belong to shamanism in the strict sense’. <4> In her study of Greenlandic shamans, Marete Jakobsen stresses that ‘mastery of spirits is essential to ... the role of the shaman’. <5> She quotes in support of her conclusion the early twentieth century Russian ethnologist S. M. Shirokogoroff, who asserted that ‘the relations between the shaman and the spirits may be defined as those between “master” and “servant”’. <6> This leads Jakobsen to a concise but clearly demarcated definition of a genuine shaman: ‘He is the master and ecstasy is his tool. <7> If Jakobsen is correct, the sharp distinction between a shaman and a medium can be summarised quite succinctly: a shaman ‘masters’ spirits; a medium is ‘mastered’ by the spirits.

Defining a shaman as a ‘master of spirits’ may seem a straightforward point, but on closer scrutiny, it appears to exclude a wide range of practitioners who employ similar techniques and who assume comparable functions for their communities as those who fit into this strictly applied use of the term. This omission is particularly applicable throughout most of Africa, where practitioners of trance states generally act as mediums for spirits, but seemingly do not control them. Nonetheless, like shamans, they perform a series of activities aimed at promoting community health and well being, including diagnosing and treating illnesses while in a state of trance.

The problem of an overly restricted definition of shamanism has been analysed by the British anthropologist I.M. Lewis, who argues that shamanism forms a part of a larger phenomenon called ‘ecstatic religion’, and thus in a wider sense incorporates many forms of spirit possession under its remit. <8> Lewis builds his argument initially on the distinction between ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ applications of terms. <9> A word used in an ‘emic’ sense derives from a particular locality and describes cultural practices specific to the region from which it originates. The term shaman is usually attributed to the Evenki, a Tungus speaking people of Siberia, who employed it, in the words of Fiona Bowie, ‘to refer to a religious specialist who has the ability to enter a trance state in order to communicate with and appease the “spirits” for the purposes of healing, fertility, protection, and aggression, and to act as a guide to the souls of the dead’. <10> Very few writers on this topic, including Eliade, employ this definition in a strictly ‘emic’ way,

preferring instead to apply shamanism more widely as characteristic of practices employed by similar religious functionaries in various parts of the world. This exemplifies the 'etic' use of an 'emic' term, a way of speaking with which we are quite familiar. For example, Lewis points out that although we are aware that the word 'taboo' has its origins in Melanesian societies, now it is frequently used to refer to any forbidden action. Likewise, 'caste' originates in India, but it now is applied to describe any type of rigidly enforced social categorisation. <11> So, according to Lewis, the term shaman refers to many forms of ecstatic religious experience covering a wide sphere, including Sufi mysticism and charismatic forms of Christianity, but most notably African spirit possession. <12> In other words, it is not necessary to restrict the definition of a shaman to those who literally master spirits, if we are employing the term 'etically' to refer to a general typology of religious practitioner.

The 'etic-emic' distinction, however, does not resolve the problem of restricting a shaman to one who 'masters' spirits. If controlling spirits constitutes one of the main activities of a shaman, as Jakobsen found in Greenland and Shirokogoroff in Siberia, the problem cannot be reduced to one of using a locally derived term ('emically') in a universal way ('etically'), but of agreeing on the essential characteristics within the definition. If 'mastery' constitutes a primary power of an authentic shaman, then it would appear inappropriate to refer to those 'possessed' by spirits as shamans, since they appear not to fulfil one of the essential components within the definition. In order to shed light on this issue, in this article, after presenting field material derived from Zimbabwe, I will analyse the position taken in this debate by the British anthropologist, Raymond Firth, in light I.M. Lewis's further and quite helpful notion of what he calls a shamanic career. Firth and Lewis ostensibly adopt differing positions on whether or not the classification 'shaman' must be limited to those who 'master' spirits, but by taking them together, I hope to resolve the problem created by an (apparently) overly restricted definition of the term and at the same time contribute to new interpretations of the meaning of spirit possession.

## BACKGROUND TO THE FIELD STUDIES

The field material I use in this article is obtained from ritual descriptions gathered by my phenomenology of religion students at the University of Zimbabwe and published in full as part two of my book Rational Ancestors: Scientific Rationality and African Indigenous Religions. <13> I assigned my students the task of observing a traditional ritual in their home areas in June and July 1990, after first instructing them in principles derived from the phenomenology of religion, such as performing epoché, <14> using empathy and providing basic interpretations of the phenomena in ways that incorporate believers' perspectives. In many cases, the students had never before attended a traditional ritual, partly because of their young age, but also because many had been pupils in Christian missionary schools where they were taught rigidly that such rituals violate Christian teaching. Most students needed permission from an elder in the village to participate in the various rituals, and each explained the context for the exercise. They then wrote up their findings as one of the assignments for the course. Subsequently, after receiving permission from each student, I edited the papers and published selected accounts as part

two of my book. It is worth noting that I credit each student by name, indicating the region from which the account was obtained, and, where relevant, I provide a short explanation of the purpose of the ritual itself. Admittedly, as student reports, these accounts suffer from severe limitations, but nonetheless I contend that they provide a rich source of information, particularly since the students had ‘insider’ access to the rituals and each had been prepared by studying appropriate methodological principles.

The field descriptions supplied by Zimbabwean students demonstrate clearly that up to this day specialists throughout Zimbabwe regularly employ aspects of their personality to become possessed by a spirit, frequently that of a deceased family ancestor. In the process of becoming a medium, the practitioner undergoes stages of development, beginning with some sign of a call, usually illness, which is followed by an initiation ritual, until eventually the person is recognised by the community as adept at inducing and achieving a state of possession. The field material suggests further in what ways the medium is regarded as performing a necessary function by securing and maintaining social and material conditions conducive to the general health and well-being of the community as a whole.

The rituals described by the Zimbabwean students are almost all set within the context of the extended family. In every case, each relates in some way to a misfortune such as illness, death or economic hardship. In traditional Zimbabwean society, the ancestors are responsible for protecting members of their extended families from such hardships. When misfortunes occur, an explanation is required. A common interpretation is that the ancestors are demanding a ritual of honour, usually because they have been neglected. Sometimes, they allow the misfortunes to occur because they need to communicate to their children. In order for such a communication to take place, a medium is required. One method of receiving messages occurs through mechanical devices, such as divining sticks, which the specialist ‘reads’ in order to decipher what the ancestors are saying. Other mediums use dreams to convey what the people need to hear. Another mode occurs through possession, in which the medium assumes the voice, mannerisms and characteristics of a particular ancestor and directly converses with members of the extended family. In one sense, each type of medium is referred to as a n’anga, usually translated as a traditional healer, but whose role entails many functions, including diagnosing the causes of a problem, prescribing the proper remedy and offering a prognosis for its resolution. A n’anga who serves as a ‘voice’ for the spirit by employing possession as a primary method of communication between the ancestors and the community is called a svikiro. This type of medium, in the words of M.F.C. Bourdillon, ‘is supposed to be conscious of nothing that happened during the séance, and has to be informed by others of what the spirit said’. <15> If an essential component of shamanism includes ‘mastery’ of spirits, as Jakobsen and Shirokogoroff contend, descriptions by my Zimbabwean students that feature the svikiro as one who apparently falls under the control of a possessing spirit during a ritual are most relevant to the central issue I am raising in this article. <16>

## HOW A MEDIUM IS CHOSEN AND INITIATED

Although illness and misfortune are considered evil and thus act against the general well-being of the community, ancestors can inflict suffering on individuals and even on the community as a whole as a means of making contact with and gaining the attention of their families. This occurs in the selection of spirit mediums and represents one of the cases in which ancestors directly cause illness rather than allowing it to occur by withholding their protective functions. In such instances, rituals to initiate the spirit medium are required. Although these actually cure an individual of an illness, their aim is primarily social. Mediums must be chosen and initiated into their roles as conduits of communication between the community and the ancestor spirits.

In many of the cases I recorded from my students' observations, a person who has been chosen by an ancestor spirit to be his/her medium first experiences a long and seemingly incurable illness. At first, the family seems perplexed by this occurrence. No matter how they treat the illness, the person never recovers. It is only when, after seeking advice from a n'anga, they perform a ritual in which the ancestor spirit is enabled to possess the medium that the illness disappears. A typical example of this is provided by Florence Shoko, whose description comes from a rural area near the village of Mberengwa in southcentral Zimbabwe. <17> Shoko recounts that a man in a particular family 'became seriously ill all of a sudden'. The family elders were told by a n'anga that for the man to recover they must brew beer and hold a ritual in honour of a particular ancestor who wanted the sick man to become his 'home'.

On the day of the ritual, the extended family gathered in the homestead. The actual ritual was to take place in the central kitchen hut. The principal participants in the ritual were the immediate family members, the sick man, the n'anga, and the eldest man in the family. Florence Shoko was allowed to participate in the ritual by permission of the elders in the family, although she does not indicate whether or not she was a member of the family. The participants sat around the room in a circle with the sick man seated in the middle of them. White and black pieces of cloth were draped around him. The elder who was in charge of the ceremony welcomed the family members and announced that they would all work closely to ensure the success of the ritual. At this point, some people began a low beating of drums, which Shoko says increased in volume as time passed. This was followed for about two hours by singing of traditional songs and dancing. Other people played mbiras accompanied by drums. <18> During this activity, the sick man and the n'anga remained seated in the middle of the circle.

Suddenly, the n'anga stood up, began singing and whistling while waving a knobkerrie in the air (this is a walking stick with a rounded knob at the top, traditionally used by many southern African peoples as a weapon). The room became silent and the people started a slow clapping of hands. The n'anga then called for silence, took some tobacco snuff in his hand and sniffed it. He followed this by sneezing loudly. The emotional intensity of this moment is recorded by Shoko: 'I realised that I was shivering due to fear'. The n'anga mixed the snuff with some water in a plate and passed it around the circle so that each family member could take a drink from it. Each person sneezed after drinking the mixture. The n'anga next hit each person on the back with a hairy tail. At this point, the sick man, who had remained seated all of this time, fell over on his back. The n'anga sat

on top of him and uttered some words which were indistinguishable to the participants in the ritual. After repeating the words for some time, the n'anga stood up, leaving the man on the floor as if he were 'dead'. Shoko says that she 'could not help screaming'.

The drums then began to beat and people started singing. The sick man suddenly woke up, shook his head vigorously and sat down again. The people became silent, but the n'anga ordered them to clap slowly 'to encourage the man to speak'. After clapping for what seemed to Shoko a very long time, 'the man motioned for silence and he began to speak in a strange voice'. He was now no longer speaking as the sick man, but as the ancestor spirit. He thanked the family for recognising him as their 'father'. He praised the elder for making the ritual a success. After his short speech, he asked for beer, which he first poured on the floor saying, 'Drink this, those who went before me'. He then drank the beer himself and ordered that the rest of it should be distributed among the family members. At this point, Shoko says, the man just fell down on the floor and 'lay straight'. Within a short time, he woke up and was completely cured of his illness. 'He was back to his old self again.' In subsequent rituals, this same man would be the medium for the ancestor who had been recognised in this initiation ceremony.

The account offered by Florence Shoko is quite typical of how a spirit medium is chosen and initiated in Zimbabwe. A serious and inexplicable illness provides the clue that the person has been selected by an ancestor. This is confirmed by the n'anga who prescribes a ritual both as the cure of the illness and the way for the spirit to make contact with the family members. The ritual contains a long, frequently emotionally charged build-up in which traditional singing, dancing, drumming and drinking of beer occur. The centre of attention is the sick person, but the aim of the ritual is actually focused on the community. The sick person becomes the instrument through which the community will address concerns to the ancestor and through which the ancestor will reconfirm his/her care for and protection of the family. The medium is chosen to perpetuate the commerce between the spirit world and the community, which is necessary for the prevention of misfortune and the maintenance of social harmony and well-being.

## INDUCING A POSSESSION

During rituals in which a medium becomes possessed, in order to facilitate communication between the community and the ancestor, numerous techniques are employed to induce a trancelike state. Many of these have already been described in the initiation ritual witnessed by Florence Shoko. They include beer drinking, sometimes smoking mbanje (cannabis), drumming, dancing, singing, breathing snuff, playing musical instruments such as mbira and rattles. The emotional atmosphere intensifies until the medium undergoes a physical and psychological transformation during which the spirit speaks through the voice and body of the possessed person. Normally, the medium requires the support of the community to become possessed through the dancing, singing and drumming, which lend to the overall expectation of the people and provide the necessary environment to encourage the possession.

A clear picture of how possession is induced is found in Cleophas Gwakwara's description of a ritual to honour the ancestors (bira) of a headman. <19> His research was conducted in Gonamombe in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. Gwakwara states that the ancestors were informed one week before the ritual was to take place that the family was preparing to honour them. Prior to beginning the brewing of beer, the headman of the homestead sprinkled some snuff on the ground and announced: 'To all those who are down, the fathers, the mother and those beyond our reach, your children have thought of giving you a brew'. Following this, the headman took some water and poured it into a big basket of rapoko, the grain from which the traditional beer for the ritual would be brewed.

The night before the ritual, drumming, singing and dancing began and continued throughout the night. Gwakwara notes that 'nobody slept'. One woman, who had danced all night, shouted, 'Do not play with Bazvi'. She was referring to the senior ancestor spirit for whom the ritual was particularly intended to honour. Preparations continued the next morning when the headman pointed with his walking stick at a bull which had been dedicated in a previous ritual to Bazvi. The headman declared, 'All those gathered here, this is our uncle, Bazvi, our elder, our leader, for whom we have gathered here'. It is common in Zimbabwe for a bull to represent the presence of the ancestor among the family. As in this case, the bull is even referred to by the name of the ancestor.

After the announcement by the headman, singing and dancing resumed while beer was splashed on the ground as an offering to Bazvi. According to custom, the ancestor's bull was then slaughtered by the sons-in-law of the headman. Some of the blood from the bull was collected in a clay plate. As this was being done, a woman rushed out of one of the huts, grabbed the plate and drank all of the blood. Gwakwara indicates that he watched the woman's actions 'anxiously'. While the woman was licking the last bit of blood from the plate, the people clapped their hands in a slow, rhythmic way.

People then relaxed for many hours, drank beer and ate some of the meat from the bull which had been cooked. After midday, people began singing again. Gwakwara notes that this time 'the singing was tinted with shades of alcohol'. One old woman pointed to a nearby mountain called Gwindingi, which had been the subject of one of the songs. It is not clear from Gwakwara's account if this was the same woman who had danced all night and announced, 'Do not play with Bazvi', but it is possible since the woman who pointed to the mountain was about to become possessed by Bazvi.

The singing intensified and Gwakwara notes that 'pent up emotions began to be aroused'. During the singing of the song containing the words, 'Spirits come back, oh spirits come back', Gwakwara says the emotional atmosphere 'reached a peak'. It was at this point that the old woman who had pointed to Gwindingi Mountain became possessed. She could 'jump sky high as if the ground were hot'. She rushed backward and forward in a frenzy of activity before she stopped and assumed a squatting position. During her jumping and running about, she held a walking stick in her hand (the symbol of ancestral authority) pointing it upwards, downwards and in the direction of Gwindingi Mountain.

After she assumed a squatting position, Gwakwara reports that the woman ‘fell violently and started weeping and speaking in certain voices which I do not want to believe that I was the only one who could not comprehend’. By this time she had assumed the voice and mannerisms of a man. She was given her ritual clothes: a black and white cloth hung over her shoulders and a baboon skin for her head. She also was given a smoking pipe which she put in her mouth. The old woman had been transformed into Bazvi, the senior family elder who could now communicate directly with the community.

It is clear from Gwakwara’s description that the ritual had been anticipated for quite some time. During the week prior to the beginning of the ritual, the atmosphere of expectation increased. Throughout the night directly prior to the ritual, the people sang and danced without any sleep. The community was fully involved in creating the right environment for the possession to take place. The rush of energy necessary to sustain a night of sleeplessness added to the communal anticipation. Beer drinking also contributed to creating the right context for the possession. The erratic behaviours of various people, such as the woman rushing to drink the blood, are accepted and approved by the community. By the time the actual possession occurred, dancing, singing, and later beer drinking had been going on for around sixteen hours. That emotions were rising just before the possession is affirmed by Gwakwara’s references to ‘pent up emotions’ being released and reaching a ‘peak’ through singing. Taken together, we can regard all these as communal inducements to the individual’s possession. They reflect the community’s stake in the success of the medium becoming the avenue for direct contact with the ancestor spirit. Yet, clearly the medium for Bazvi is an experienced svikiro who knows precisely how to act within the context of the communal setting, and knows exactly how to signal to the community that the possession is about to occur.

## THE CONTENT OF SPIRIT COMMUNICATION

From my reading of the student accounts, I am persuaded that the content of the communication with the ancestor is much less important than the fact that contact has been established successfully. I conclude this because the aim of the ritual possession is well understood by everyone, and thus what is communicated by the medium is quite general and already known by the community. Almost always, the people state that they are performing the ritual so that the ancestor will know that he/she is remembered and honoured and thus that the protection of the ancestor against evil and malevolent forces will persist. If the ancestor is pleased with the ritual, the people are assured that they have done it in the right way and that the continued care of the family by the ancestor has been secured.

It is the actual possession which demonstrates that this is the case. Nowhere is this more evident than in Gwakwara’s account. Bazvi jokes with the people, even to the point of shocking them. He tells one man he will cut off his testes. He calls his wife forward to sit with him and jokes about her buttocks and claims he will sleep with her. The people understand this and all laugh. It is evident that Bazvi is very pleased with the ritual in his honour. When he reaches the serious part of his talk, he tells them, ‘I am happy with your gathering and that is why I joke with you’. He then informs them that ‘no evil has



transpired'. He means by this that the ritual has been accomplished in the right way. He also implies that no evil spirits have entered into the homestead and thus the family is safe. He then promises to carry the message to Nyakuvamba (the one who founded the people in this land) that his people still remember him. This will further ensure the well-being of the community. In Gwakwara's rendering, the people themselves do not ask for anything specific from Bazvi, but it is understood that they are seeking his continued ancestral protection, guidance and care.

In some situations, however, the people do make direct and explicit petitions to the ancestor. This is shown in Brighton Ncube's research among the Ndebele speaking people of the Kezi Area in Matabeleland South. <20> In this case, the possessed person was the elder son of a recently deceased man. After undergoing similar inducements to those described in the other cases, the elder son became possessed by his father. During the possession, Ncube says 'the blood relatives were asked to come one by one expressing their problems to the spirit'. They knelt down before him and dropped some snuff around the clay pot containing traditional beer. They then sniffed some of the tobacco, which was followed by a loud sneeze. After clapping their hands out of respect for the spirit, they asked for 'employment, success at school, or promotion at work'. Others 'wanted to be cured of diseases and some wanted cows and a greater harvest in the fields'.

Reciprocity between the people and the ancestor is evident in Ncube's description when the ancestor expresses his requests to the people. In this case, he wanted quite a number of items to be associated with the medium and to be used during possession. These included a black and red cloth to be worn during possessions, a spear and a shield, an animal skin hat, a drum, mbira, bones of a puff adder, elephant, lion and leopard. He also asked for a bull to be dedicated to him. It should be named 'grandfather' and never be mistreated or used for ordinary labour such as ploughing the fields. Finally, the same ritual of honour was to be repeated annually. If these conditions were met, the ancestor promised 'to protect the family'.

In all cases of spirit possession, this contractual understanding between the ancestor spirit and the people prevails. The spirit's role is to protect the family members; the community's is to honour regularly the ancestor through rituals during which he can possess his medium. This underlying assumption is transparent to the people and explains why, as in Gwakwara's account, the performance of a successful possession is far more important than the specific content of what is voiced either by the spirit or by the people. In Ncube's case, the requirements are made explicit, underscoring the essential purpose of all rituals of spirit possession as communal concerns with matters of health, social harmony and freedom from misfortune.

## ACADEMIC DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF THE FIELD MATERIAL

In his book, Religion: A Humanist Interpretation, the British anthropologist Raymond Firth, who conducted research in the early 1960s among the Kelantan ethnic groups of Malaysia, analyses spirit possession in terms of 'control'. He distinguishes various roles

for participants in possession rituals and argues that ‘spirit possession’ occurs when a community attributes ‘a trance state to control by extra-human agency’. A spirit medium refers to ‘the individual who in such state purports to serve as a vehicle for spirit communication.’ For Firth, this activity does not qualify as shamanism, since he restricts the term ‘shaman’ to a ‘human controller’ who ‘is regarded as master of the spirits concerned’. <21> Spirit possession by itself cannot be regarded as shamanistic, since this normally entails involuntary possession which occurs entirely outside the will of the medium. In Kelantan possession rituals, he explains, various individuals assume different roles but only the ‘master of ceremonies, who manipulates the spirits at will’, qualifies as a genuine shaman. Firth admits that amongst the Kelantan, ‘every spirit medium has some form of internal control by which he is enabled to return from his state of dissociation to his ordinary condition’, but he distinguishes this from the ‘external control’ exhibited by ‘the master of ceremonies’ who is ‘recognised as the person having prime authority in the proceedings’. As such, he is ‘the “master of spirits”, a shaman in the strict sense of the term’. <22>

Firth clearly employs a restricted application of the term ‘shaman’ by delineating different roles for participants in the possession ritual. Strictly speaking, only the master of ceremonies, who does not go into a trance state and is not possessed by the spirits, actually manipulates the spirits and ensures that they possess the medium. Firth emphasises ‘control’ since he argues that ‘for social utilization the mediumistic state must be able to be induced and not simply have to rely on spontaneous generation’. <23> In his view, the medium does not control the situation, but becomes possessed involuntarily; the master of ceremonies remains in control. Firth emphasises, nonetheless, that the community has a vital stake in the success of the possession, and for this reason, the inducements to the possession are carefully constructed: ‘Here the master of ceremonies, the attendant crowd, the phased climax and relaxation of the performer’s movements are significant’. <24>

In the Zimbabwean case described by Florence Shoko, where the medium suffers a seemingly untreatable illness, during the ritual, which as we discover serves as an initiation of the sick man as a svikiro, the medium experiences what might be called an involuntary possession, or in Firth’s words, ‘spontaneous generation’. The n’anga, as master of ceremonies, is the key figure in making certain that the possession occurs. If I apply Firth’s reasoning to this case, since the n’anga is the one who controls the spirits, the n’anga, not the newly initiated svikiro, assumes the role of the shaman. It is important to note, however, that the central role of the n’anga is emphasised only in Shoko’s account, which is an initiation ritual, but seems largely absent in the ritual described by Gwakwara. I interpret this as indicating that the medium in Gwakwara’s report is experienced and well known to the community. She is adept at using the community to induce the possession and thus, as an expert practitioner, actually controls the ancestor spirit. It is likely in this case that a n’anga would have played a role in the ritual by diagnosing that the ancestor required a ceremony of remembrance and by issuing instructions in preparation for the ritual, but the svikiro remains in control of the actual possession. In other words, the controlling function of the medium is shown to be

very different in initiation rituals than in regular rituals honouring ancestors or in times of crisis when ancestor intervention is needed.

I find support for this interpretation in the writings of I M Lewis, who in his book Religion in Context discusses spirit possession in terms of what he calls 'the shaman's career'. <25> In Lewis's view, initially, a prospective shaman will endure a crisis, often an illness that cannot be cured by conventional means. This normally entails involuntary possession by a spirit, which generally is treated by exorcising the invading spirit. According to Lewis, if exorcism does not produce a cure, the person may become recognised by the community as one who has obtained elementary shamanic powers. Through a process of training by an experienced shaman and in a series of agonising struggles with the spirits, the person obtains the power to use the spirits for strategic purposes in aid of the community, until finally the possession becomes voluntary and the shaman becomes adept at using possession for a wide range of activities. Lewis thus describes the shamanic career as a process of moving from involuntary to voluntary possession, of travelling from the role of a novice to becoming adept at performing shamanic tasks. An expert shaman is one who voluntarily enters trance states, is possessed by spirits at will and hence is capable of performing vital functions required by members of the community. In this way, mastery of spirits and possession are seen as compatible in the overall development of shamanic powers. In light of the shamanic career as outlined by Lewis, based on Florence Shoko's description of the initiation of a medium and in contrast to Firth, we might better regard the *n'anga* not as a shaman but as an instructor in the practice of possession, which the novice is just at the initial stages of learning. Over time, the newly initiated medium becomes an expert at ensuring that possession occurs, although the role of the community remains central to the regular success of the ritual.

Lewis's notion of the shamanic career thus corrects Firth's overly restricted definition of a 'shaman' as a 'master of spirits' in a technical sense. Nonetheless, Firth makes an important contribution to the debate over the meaning of spirit possession by emphasising that Kelantan rituals are performed to resolve numerous threats to community well being. In a manner similar to Lewis, Firth defines the phenomenon of spirit mediumship as a type of behaviour exhibiting 'the complex, non-rational elements in personality'. <26> He explains that in most societies where this phenomenon occurs, it generally is 'institutionalized, and incorporated into a cult'. <27> This means that the personal experience of the individual is turned into an activity with social significance. In most cases, the Kelantan medium induces trance through auto-hypnotism or is easily encouraged into such a condition by others. While in the trance, the person is capable of intelligent and coherent conversation. In psychological terms, Firth says, this reflects a dissociative state 'in that the personality of the individual appears to have altered or a different facet of the personality is presented than ordinarily appears in social life'. <28> Kelantan society uses such sensitive personalities for therapeutic purposes. When a medium enters a trance, normal social relations are temporarily suspended, ritual space and time are introduced and symbols are employed to diagnose and to cure illness within the community. <29> The spirit medium thus overcomes what Firth calls the 'human dilemma' resulting from the apparent 'arbitrariness of external events' and 'the logic of

human action'. <30> By determining the causes of external events and by prescribing actions to rectify what the people perceive as serious threats to their health and well-being, the medium provides the community with a way of making sense of what otherwise would be experienced as chaos and confusion.

If we take Firth and Lewis together, it is possible to suggest that a person who is possessed assumes a position that is recognised by the community as executing functions necessary for maintaining order and stability. As such, the community depends on the successful performance of rituals in which the medium becomes possessed. According to Lewis, the medium develops into a reliable ritual resource over a period of time, beginning with involuntary possession. However, by the time the person has become adept at ritual performances, although still using the technique of possession, the medium is now in charge of events and expresses this power by involving the community in a cooperative effort aimed at ensuring the success of the ritual. In this sense, 'mastery' occurs even when the medium appears to be in a dissociative state, 'out of control' and amnesic. Although, unlike Lewis, Firth did not apply the term shaman 'etically', he nonetheless admitted that the phenomenon of spirit possession is 'world wide' and 'recognisable from an early period of human society'. <31> My point is that Firth needed to take just one step further to agree with Lewis that the universal phenomenon of spirit possession confirms the universal practice of shamanism.

In the end, both Firth and Lewis agree that members of a community play the central role in ensuring that ritual performances succeed and that the spirits thereby enter into communication with them recurrently and predictably. If we were to apply 'mastery' in a highly restricted sense, therefore, we would conclude that the community itself operates as a shaman, but it is better to refer to this as a community shamanic experience facilitated by a practitioner who can be relied on to use community inducements to ensure that possessions occur whenever they are needed. In all cases, whether in Africa or the Arctic, this practitioner is the shaman, one who learns to master the spirits and call them at will, although the way this occurs and the manner control is exercised remain culturally determined and specific.

My interpretation of Firth and Lewis taken together is fully confirmed by the accounts of Gwakwara and Ncube. It is clear from these descriptions that possession provides the community with a means of controlling, through symbols expressed in rituals, the otherwise unpredictable external events that pose threats to the people's well-being. The role of the medium, therefore, is therapeutic, but it is primarily a social therapy. Without continued, repeated, controlled and predictable commerce with the ancestor spirits, the foundation on which society is built would disintegrate. The context for possession thus is social; it provides the community with control over threats to well-being, such as illness, death, infertility, failure of crops and unemployment. Possession always has a ritual setting and is filled with the symbols of the ancestor. The possession begins at expected times and ends at appointed moments, and always includes the assistance of a person who is not possessed, such as a n'anga, an elder or an immediate family member, but the expert svikiro knows precisely how to employ the inducements within the ritual to become possessed at will by the host spirit.

## CONCLUSION

The trancelike state of possession employed by certain spirit mediums in Zimbabwe falls within a broad category of religious practitioner, who, although particularly suited temperamentally for this type of experience, acts in and on behalf of the community. As we have seen from the discussion generated by Firth and Lewis, the vital function of mediums, that of promoting and maintaining the health of the community, exists in other indigenous societies. We would be safe to conclude, therefore, that spirit possession, although personal to the medium, is not in essence individual because the community sanctions and indeed depends on the predictability and regularity of such occurrences. Seen in the larger light of a 'career' or a process, the spirit medium, as an indispensable functionary in community settings, surely qualifies as a shaman in the strict sense of the word. From the initial stages, which indeed are characterised by involuntary possession, the medium develops into an expert who employs possession reliably and predictably on behalf of the community. In this sense, shamanism, even when defined narrowly as 'mastery of spirits', can be considered rightly as a universal category applicable equally in Africa as in Siberia and other northern regions.

## NOTES:

<1> This is a substantially revised version of my earlier article, J.L. Cox 'Spirit mediums in Zimbabwe: Religious Experience in and on behalf of the Community', in *Studies in World Christianity*. No. 6 (2), 1986, pp. 190-207.

<2> M. Eliade *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. (London: Arkana Penguin, 1989), p. 6.

<3> P. Vitebsky *The Shaman*. (London: Duncan Baird Publishers, 1995), p. 59.

<4> M. Eliade *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, pp. 499-500.

<5> M.D. Jakobsen *Shamanism. Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to the Mastery of Spirits and Healing*. (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), p. 7.

<6> Cited in M.D. Jakobsen *Shamanism. Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to the Mastery of Spirits and Healing*, p. 8.

<7> M.D. Jakobsen *Shamanism. Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to the Mastery of Spirits and Healing*, p. 9.

<8> I.M. Lewis *Ecstatic Religion. A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1989, 2nd ed.), p. 9.

<9> I.M. Lewis *Religion in Context. Cults and Charisma*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 2nd ed.), p. 105.

<10> F. Bowie *Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 191

- <11> I.M. Lewis *Religion in Context: Cults and Charisma*, p. 105.
- <12> I.M. Lewis *Ecstatic Religion. A Study in Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, pp. 15-16.
- <13> J.L. Cox *Rational Ancestors. Scientific Rationality and African Indigenous Religions*. (Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998).
- <14> Derived from the work of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), epoché has been used by phenomenologists of religion as a technique to suspend, or at least temporarily put into brackets, any preconceived judgements researchers may hold about the truth or value of the religion they are studying, thereby producing fair descriptions free from unexamined biases. See, J.L. Cox. *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion. Key Figures, Formative Influences and Subsequent Debates*. (London and New York: Continuum, 2006).
- <15> M.F.C. Bourdillon *Religion and Society. A Text for Africa*. (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1990), p. 81.
- <16> For an excellent discussion of the background to ancestor spirits and their mediums in Zimbabwe, see M. Gelfand *The Spiritual Beliefs of the Shona*. (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1977). Two other helpful background works are, M F C Bourdillon *The Shona Peoples*. (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1987) and M.F.C. Bourdillon *Where Are the Ancestors?* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1993). Sections are devoted to a discussion of the ancestors and to spirit possession in G. ter Haar, A. Moyo and S. J. Nondo *African Traditional Religions in Religious Education: A Resource Book with Special Reference to Zimbabwe*. (Utrecht: Utrecht University, 1992), pp. 75-111 and pp. 117-156.
- <17> J.L. Cox *Rational Ancestors. Scientific Rationality and African Indigenous Religions*, pp. 217-18.
- <18> Mbira refers to a traditional musical instrument comprised of flattened metal strips of varying lengths about the width of a thumb fastened by a metal bridge to a rectangular block of wood. The metal strips, or 'keys', are played by plucking them with the thumbs and index fingers. The most common mbira has twenty-three keys arranged in two rows. See, D. Berens *A Concise Encyclopedia of Zimbabwe*. (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1988), p. 249.
- <19> J.L. Cox *Rational Ancestors. Scientific Rationality and African Indigenous Religions*, pp. 213-16. In traditional Zimbabwean society, several extended families live in a village (musha) under the leadership of a headman, who either founded the village or is the patrilineal descendant of the founder. See, J.L. Cox *From Primitive to Indigenous. The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 125-29.
- <20> J.L. Cox *Rational Ancestors. Scientific Rationality and African Indigenous Religions*, pp. 243-45.
- <21> R. Firth *Religion: A Humanist Interpretation*. (London and New York: Routledge), p. 175.
- <22> R. Firth *Religion: A Humanist Interpretation*, p. 122.
- <23> R. Firth *Religion: A Humanist Interpretation*, p. 122.

<24> R. Firth Religion: A Humanist Interpretation, p. 121.

<25> I.M. Lewis Religion in Context. Cults and Charisma, pp. 105-21. In this section, Lewis critically analyses numerous theories of shamanic initiation and practice, including, among others, Eliade's definition of the shaman (referred to above) as one who ascends to the heavens, and the anthropologist Erika Bourguignon's notion that a correlation can be found between societies that emphasise possession and their means of subsistence. See E. Bourguignon Possession. (San Francisco: Chandler and Sharp, 1976). Lewis draws support for his model of the shaman's career largely from the studies done early in the twentieth century in Siberia by the Russian ethnologist, S.M. Shirokogoroff, and the later work on Siberian shamanism by the Finnish anthropologist, A.L. Siikala. See, S.M. Shirokogoroff The Psychomental Complex of the Tungus (London: Kegan Paul, 1935) and A.L. Siikala The Rite Technique of the Siberian Shaman (Helsinki: FF Communications, 1978).

<26> R. Firth Religion: A Humanist Interpretation, p. 111.

<27> R. Firth Religion: A Humanist Interpretation, p. 175.

<28> R. Firth Religion: A Humanist Interpretation, pp. 120-21.

<29> R. Firth Religion: A Humanist Interpretation, p. 120.

<30> R. Firth Religion: A Humanist Interpretation, p. 125.

<31> R. Firth Religion: A Humanist Interpretation, p. 111.