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Shona Male and Female Artistry

WILLIAM J. DEWEY

The Shona of Zimbabwe¹ have long produced a number of artifacts in which they take great pride. The majority of these are made during the winter months when people are not busy caring for their fields. Both men and women gain reputations as accomplished artists in their specialties and are able to attract clients from wide areas. Women fingerweave barkcloth blankets and mold pottery. Men carve wood and forge iron. This sexual division adheres to the pattern seen in much of Africa. It is apparent among the Shona, as it may be among many African peoples, that gender determines not only the physical nature of the work artists do but also what they perceive as being the source of their artistic inspiration. Male and female concepts of creativity differ.

For the Shona, creativity does not connote originality of expression, as it

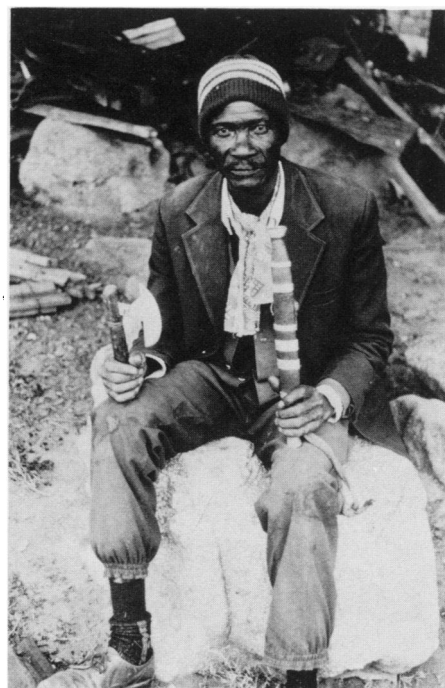
usually does in the West. Working with quite a narrow range of forms, their artists do not often diverge from traditionally accepted formats. Rather, creativity is thought of in terms of the power and impetus to create.² Shona artists make this clear when explaining how they started in their trade, received inspiration for their work, or gained their reputation. Since their explanations are culturally specific, we must understand not only the nature and uses of Shona art, but also the framework of Shona religious beliefs.

Artists often attribute their skills to the two principal types of spirits in Shona cosmology: the *shave*, usually interpreted as alien or wandering spirits, and the *vadzimu* (sing., *mudzimu*), or spirits of the ancestors. The *shave* are believed to be from outside Shona society—for example, from neighboring groups such

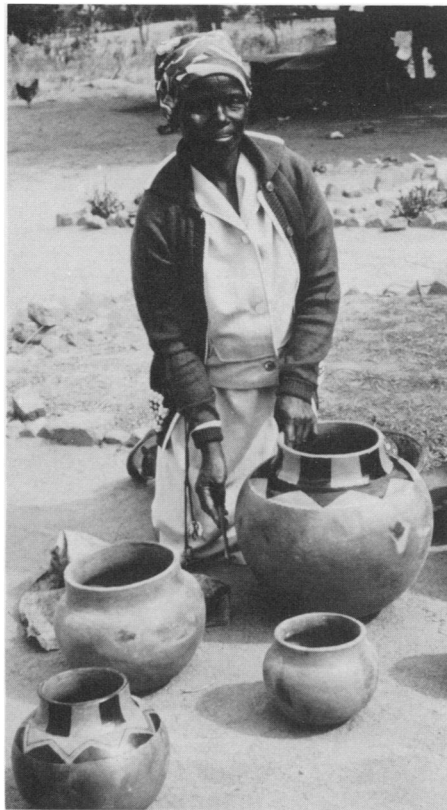
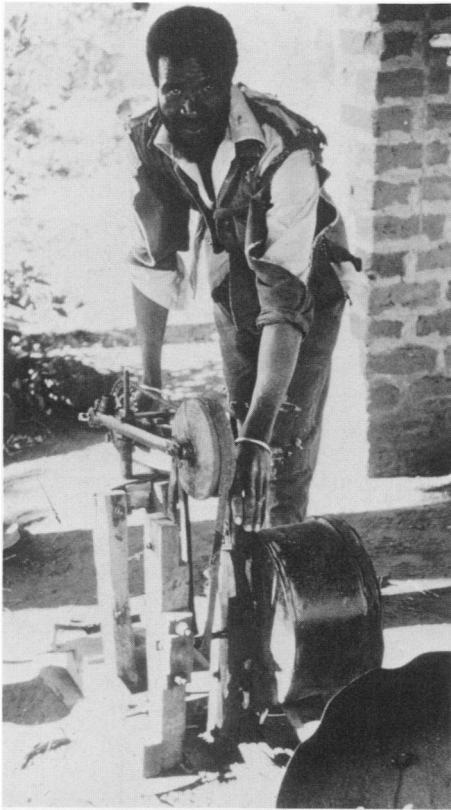
as the Ndebele, from intruders such as the Europeans, and from animals.³ Generally considered amoral, some *shave*, like those of witches, are viewed as malevolent. Others, regarded as benevolent, are said to be responsible for individual talents like healing, music, and art. The *vadzimu*, on the other hand, represent the collective ideals of the Shona and are the essence of morality. Identified as culture heroes (when genealogically remote) and ancestors (when closer), they exert a protective influence over all society, withdrawing it only for moral transgressions (Bucher 1980, Daneel 1971, Fry 1976).

Certain forces can be unleashed through the use of medicine. To acquire it or interpret the wishes of the spirits, one must go to a spirit medium or diviner-healer. Directly or indirectly, these practitioners are the main patrons of artists who make ritual objects, since they use many themselves and also direct their clients to have them made. A diviner-healer (*n'anga*), who can be male or female, explains sickness and misfortune by throwing and reading divination dice (Tracey 1934). Some specialize in medical treatments (Chavunduka 1978). All are able to interpret the needs and desires of the spirits, whether alien or ancestral. But like the *shave*, the *n'anga* are amoral and can use their medicine for acceptable or antisocial purposes.

On the other hand, spirit mediums (*vatete*, *svikiro*, or *mamvura*⁴), as living manifestations of the ancestors, are preoccupied with morality and people's welfare. Many concern themselves only with the matters of their extended families. At the other extreme, certain high-ranking spirit mediums have influence over large regional territories. They deal with the concerns of whole chiefdoms and are in charge of making rain (Gelfand 1962, Fry 1976, Bourdillon 1982). Historically they have played an important role in political life. During the war against the white settlers in 1896-97, the Shona were led by two such



LEFT: 1. MUSODZI MUCHEKA WITH A GUDZA (BARKCLOTH BLANKET) SHE MADE WHEN SHE WAS MUCH YOUNGER. ZIMUNYA, 1984. RIGHT: 2. MUNYIKWA TITIYA, A BLACKSMITH-CARVER, HOLDING A SMALL RITUAL AXE AND A CEREMONIAL KNIFE. MAKONI RESETTLEMENT AREA, 1984.



LEFT: 3. PETER GAMANYA, BLACKSMITH-CARVER FROM CHIKWAKA. RIGHT: 4. MRS. MAGADA, POTTER FROM MARANKE.

mediums, Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi (Ranger 1967). With the rise of nationalism and the resurgence of traditional religion in the 1960s, the Shona turned again to spirit mediums.⁵ During the 1970s war of liberation that led to Zimbabwe's independence, they were prominent (Ranger 1982, 1983:37-39; Lan 1983); in fact, one female spirit medium, possessed by Mbuya Nehanda, became famous for her support of the ZANLA guerrillas.⁶

Traditional art, particularly ritual art, has likewise experienced a renaissance in recent decades. Though the material arts of Southern Africa and of the Shona are often characterized as personal and utilitarian because they lack masking or figurative sculpture traditions, the religious and symbolic aspects of Shona art have been largely ignored. Whereas the objects made by women are predominantly functional, those made by men tend to have religious or ritual significance.

Women are the potters in Shona society, as in most of sub-Saharan Africa. Some women make pots for their own use, while others sell their wares for supplemental income. Mrs. Magada, for example (Fig. 4), sent her children to school with pottery earnings. Most Shona pottery is utilitarian, used for cooking and storage. Potters told me that

certain pots are made exclusively for the ancestors and these—unlike household pots, which are often embellished with European-style paint—must not have any decorations on them. I suspect this prohibition is part of the general ritual aversion to things European, and is not necessarily an ancient practice. The context of use seems to be the major factor determining whether a pot is a ritual one or not.

Women also make the *gudza*, or barkcloth blankets. Musodzi Mucheka made the one she is holding in her lap in Figure 1. The technique involves softening the inner bark of trees, twisting it into threads, and then fingerweaving the fibers, without any loom, into the desired shape. Women's skirts used to be made by this technique (Bent 1892:270), but there are now very few women who remember how to do it. (Fortunately some craft cooperatives and women's clubs have begun making barkcloth items for sale.) Weavers recall that spirit mediums in the eastern part of the country wore fringed hats of barkcloth.⁷ Otherwise the fabric had no religious function.

Carved objects, on the other hand, tend to have ritual importance; and it is men who do the carving of mortars, drums, wooden bowls, stirring sticks, snuff bottles, and ceremonial walking sticks. They also carve headrests, probably the

most well-known Shona sculpture. The photograph in Figure 8, taken during Frobenius's expedition to the area in 1928, shows how people once slept on them. Very rare these days, they seem to have acquired a religious rather than a utilitarian function. One chief explained that when he prayed to his ancestors, he would take out his grandfather's headrest and begin by saying, "Grandfather, here is your headrest. . ."⁸ Another chief told me he had been having trouble judging cases and so had commissioned a headrest. By sleeping on it, he had dreams that would help him decide the cases.⁹ Sekuru Bwanya, a spirit medium, claims his headrest was made and used by the ancestral spirit that possesses him. On his first manifestation, this spirit told people to go and collect his things; these included the headrest, taken from the cave where he had been buried.¹⁰ It has obviously become one of the authenticating symbols or accoutrements of Bwanya's trade.

Blacksmithing is likewise a man's job. The smiths I interviewed claimed that the majority of their business now comes from people who want items demanded by the spirits. The ritual items they most often make include ceremonial knives and axes. The latter are used, like walking sticks, primarily in spirit possession ceremonies (*bira*). At a typical family ceremony, family and friends gather, first removing the most obvious vestiges of Western culture—shoes and watches—and leaving them at the door. As beer is consumed, the family spirit medium dances with ceremonial accoutrements, usually a walking stick and an axe. Then, possessed by the ancestor spirit, the medium converses with the family about specific matters of concern. Axes like the one in Figure 5 are passed down from generation to generation and universally associated with the ancestors (Dewey 1985). The same is true of ceremonial knives (Fig. 6). In recent decades a new style of knife has evolved: fashioned to resemble the Russian AK-47 rifles the guerrillas used during the recent war, it is definitely not meant as a toy or a tourist item (Fig. 7). Since the men and women who died in the war are now the most recent ancestors, it is quite fitting that their weapons should be the latest model for the ritual knife.

Men and women tend to explain their artistic motivation in different terms. Munyikwa Titiya, a blacksmith-carver, said that in the 1930s he had become very ill. His deceased grandfather had come

to him in a dream and had told him to become a blacksmith-carver. Beer was brewed and a ceremony held.¹¹ From that day forth he began wearing the imported red, white, and black cloth known as *retso* and associated with the spirits (Fig. 2). He also began blacksmithing. Since then he has been cured.¹² His story was typical of those told by male artists.

On the other hand, Mrs. Moyosvi, a potter in the Mutoko area, did not attribute her skill to the ancestors though she did make pottery for them on commission. She said she had begun her trade when young. Further questioning revealed that her grandmother had been a potter; nevertheless, she insisted she had taught herself. She told me people

had been advising her to brew beer for the *shave* spirits, but she was still undecided.¹³ Like Mrs. Moyosvi, Musodzi Muchka (Fig. 1) said that as a child she had seen others making the barkcloth, but she too claimed to have simply taught herself. Though some women acknowledged learning their skills from a relative, it is significant that many did not.

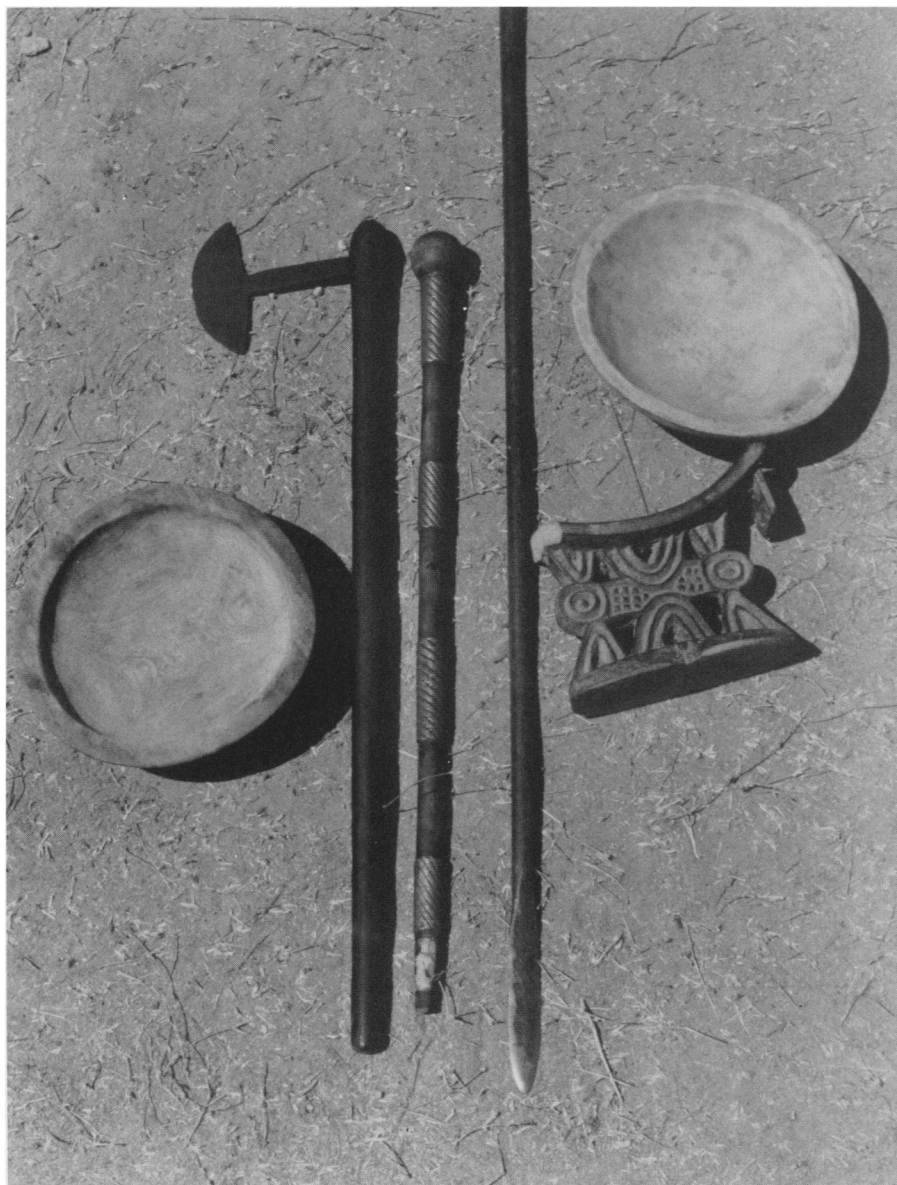
The Shona believe knowledge can be acquired in a number of ways: it is possible to learn through training, but there is also inherent knowledge, especially where many traditional crafts are concerned. Potters, barkcloth weavers, and basketmakers often say that they received no training: they know how because their parents knew how, or be-

cause they simply taught themselves. Knowledge can also be gained through possession, either by alien or ancestral spirits, and through dreaming (Kriel 1971, Lan 1983). Few of the artists I interviewed were ever actually possessed by spirits. Many, however, claimed they communicated with them in dreams.¹⁴

Johwani Nyamukapa, a blacksmith, explained his own circumstances: "My heart used to beat a lot in the mornings and evenings, and I would see a vision of two lions at the hut door sides. I thought they were truly the ancestors. During the night I would dream of a hammer and bellows laid near my pillow. When I told my father about it he prohibited me from telling anyone else. He bought the bellows and hammer, offered them to the spirits, and from then I started making my iron objects." When asked if his customers were satisfied with his work, he answered in a uniquely Shona way. He told of making several ritual axes for a spirit medium. When the man came to collect them, he was so pleased that he became possessed on the spot, and instructed his companions to give the blacksmith more money.¹⁵

One elderly potter, Mrs. Kwari, claimed to have learned her skills in a dream. She dreamt that she had come upon a house with many beautiful pots outside. Nearby were some people molding pottery, who told her to go and fetch some clay if she, too, wanted to make pots. She explained that she had done as she was told, and has been making pottery ever since that time.¹⁶ Her case is unusual, so it is significant to note that she did not know of any potters in her family, as her relatives had all died when she was a child. Those people who taught her in the dream were not identified as ancestors, and she did not claim to be influenced by either *shave* or *vadzimu*.

Illness or distress is a common theme in the stories related by male artists, just as it is in those told by spirit mediums and diviners (Fry 1976; Bourdillon 1982). Typically the future artist, diviner, or spirit medium is troubled by illness or misfortune. The affliction is then diagnosed as a manifestation of the ancestors, who want the person to turn to smithing, divination, or mediumship, as the case may be. Peter Gamanya (Fig. 3), for example, was a barber working in town until he fell too ill to work. His troubles were attributed to an ancestor spirit telling him to become a blacksmith-carver. He did so, returning to his rural home town. In Gamanya's case, as is frequently



5. ITEMS FROM A RURAL HOME, OFTEN USED IN RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS: WOODEN BOWLS, A RITUAL AXE, A CEREMONIAL WALKING STICK, A SPEAR, AND A HEADREST.

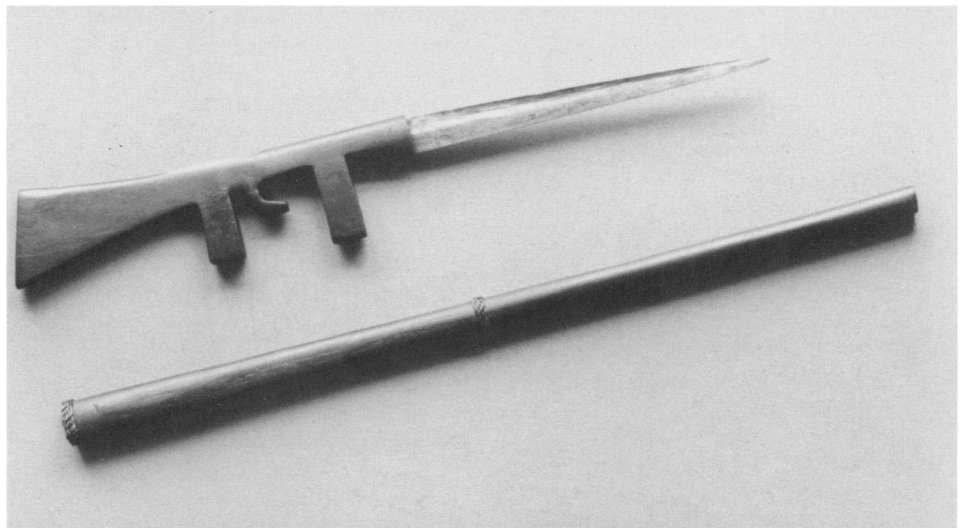
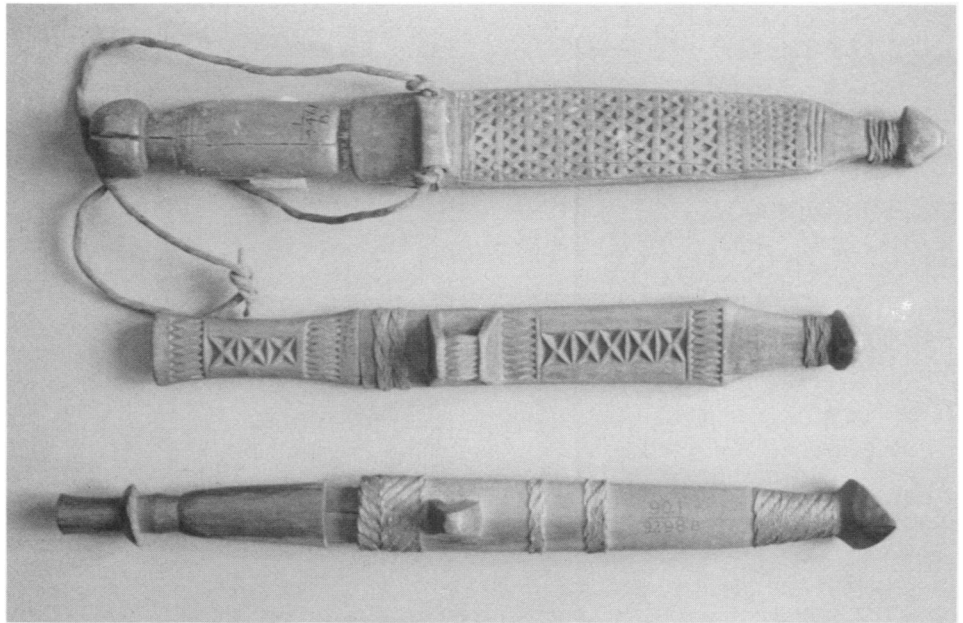
true, he was bothered by odors associated with Western society, such as automobile exhaust and cigarette smoke. His mother brewed beer and a ceremony was held at which he received both the accoutrements of a particular *shave* and the hammer of his grandfather. Gamanya explained, "After the talent has left one person, it must go to another person who must also do the same. Without any training, the chosen person just finds himself doing it." When asked how a person comes to make specific designs, he said, "Some can make things they have never seen before; some have the things brought to them in dreams. One can dream of an object and as you make the object a person whose *shave* or *mudzimu* will be requiring the thing will appear. Alternatively the client may describe verbally the articles he wants."¹⁷

Taundi Kahuni's story perhaps best illustrates concepts articulated by Shona male artists. Kahuni, a blacksmith-carver from the Mutoko area, explained that before he began smithing he had dreams of being in a cave from which he could not find his way out. He realized that it was his ancestral spirits wanting him to continue their blacksmithing trade.¹⁸ (The Shona were commonly buried in caves in earlier times.) Kahuni obtained an axe and a knife, the symbols of the ancestors, and began his smithing. His workshop is now located in another cave-like structure, the hollow base of a baobab tree. Just as in ancestral ceremonies, watches and shoes—the trappings of Western civilization—must be removed before one enters.

Thus Shona men and women articulate their creative experience differently. Women rarely attribute their skills to the ancestors, and only occasionally acknowledge the help of the *shave*.¹⁹ They tend to believe that they learned their skills from relatives, or else that their ability is inherent or self-taught. Male artists, on the other hand, routinely claim to be inspired by the *vadzimu* and *shave* spirits, whose communications often come in the form of dreams. The reasons for these differences seem to be most clearly linked to the fact that the objects made by men are primarily ritual in nature, whereas those made by women are not. □

Notes, page 84

TOP TO BOTTOM: 6. SHONA KNIVES. WOOD, IRON, WIRE. 38, 33, & 36cm. AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY, NEW YORK. 7. CEREMONIAL KNIFE IN THE SHAPE OF A RUSSIAN AK-47 RIFLE. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION. 8. A WANOE. SHONA MAN SLEEPING ON A HEADREST. 1928. COURTESY OF THE FROBENIUS-INSTITUT, FRANKFURT.



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29, 49 (top), 50 (center & bottom), 51 (top):

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31, 32 (right), 33-36, 37 (top), 39: Anita J. Glaze

32 (left): Keith Ostertag

37 (right): Steve J. Sherman

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DEWEY, notes, from page 67

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1. Zimbabwe, the newest nation in Africa, achieved independence in 1980. The Shona are a patrilineal people of the Bantu language group who have customarily engaged in cattle raising and mixed farming. Traditionally they have organized into numerous independent chiefdoms, though over the last thousand years powerful states such as Great Zimbabwe and Mutapa have arisen in this area (Beach 1980).

2. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (New York, 1975: 311) "creative" can mean, "characterized by originality and expressiveness" or "having the ability or power to create things."

3. When people become possessed during religious ceremonies, they act in a manner characteristic of the particular spirit. Those possessed by European slaves, for instance, pick up knives and forks (whereas they would normally eat with their fingers), and speak English words. For photographs of peoples possessed by baboon spirits, see Gelfand 1962, plates 86-87 and 102-03.

4. *Vatele* is the name for family spirit mediums among the Karanga and Manyika Shona. The higher-ranking spirit mediums are known as *aswikiro* among the Karanga, Manyika, and *Zezeru*; and *manvura* among the Korekore.

5. Peter Fry documented this in *Spirits of Protest* (1976).

6. She even went with them into their staging areas in Mozambique (see Frederikse 1982: 42; Martin & Johnson 1981: 75-78). The original Nehanda and Kaguvu are now considered national heroes, and a sculpture of them has recently been erected in the Parliament buildings in the capital city of Harare (*The Herald*, June 26, 1984).

7. To my knowledge the only photographs of this are the ones taken on Frobenius's expedition to Southern Africa in 1928. (Frobenius Institute, Frankfurt, Expedition IX, Sud-Afrika Band 3, #10642. 3). They show what Frobenius called a "rain priest" wearing a fringed hat of barkcloth. The man was, in fact, a regional spirit medium.

8. Interview with J. Madzivire, acting chief Musarurwa, Nharira, Charter District, May 31 and September 2, 1984.

9. Interview with Chief Nyoka, Manyene, Charter District, June 2, 1984. Several artists I interviewed said they had been commissioned to make headrests for spirit mediums. Though they were not always sure of the intended purpose, they surmised that the headrests were meant to facilitate dreaming of the ancestors.

10. Interview with Sekuru Bwanya, Shamva, June 30, 1984.

11. The exact nature of these ceremonies is not clear to me, and the artists were hesitant to explain the circumstances in depth. Brewing beer is a precursor for possession ceremonies of *vadzimu* and *shave*. Beer is also brewed at regular intervals to honor the ancestors more generally. During these ceremonies the ancestors are addressed or beseeched, and offerings of beer are made. Whether or not possession occurs, the ceremonies mentioned by the artists constitute a formal acknowledgement of the role of the spirits in their inspiration.

12. Interview with Munyikwa Titiya, Makoni District, July 11, 1984.

13. Interview with Mrs. Moyosvi Nyamazwe, Mutoko District, June 20, 1984. The ritual pottery that she said she made, which is typical of the area, is placed either in or on graves.

14. Paul Berliner (1978) has documented that Shona musicians, particularly the *mbira* (thumb piano) players, also claim to receive inspiration from the ancestors through dreams.

15. Interview with Johwani Nyamukapa, Mutoko, June 20, 1984.

16. Interview with Mrs. Kwari from Chimanimani, July 8, 1984.

17. Interviews with Peter Gamanya, Chikwaka, May 1 and June 2, 1984.

18. Interview with Taundi Kahuni, Bwanya, Mutoko District, June 19, 1984.

19. Kaemmer (1975: 144) mentions that in the Madziwa area of Mt. Darwin, *madamba shave* spirits are associated with pottery making.

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OPPOSITE PAGE: MURAL PAINTING OF WAMBELE. DOUBLE-JAWED OR JANUS "COMBAT" MASQUERADE ORIGINATING WITH THE NAFANRA SUBGROUP OF THE SENAMBELE. THE PAINTING IS BY A YOUNG MAN OF THE FODOMBELE VILLAGE OF WAACENÉ OR WARANYIENE. LATA A VILLAGE. DIKODOUGOU DISTRICT. 1984. SEE PAGE 30.