

## A SHONA ASSESSMENT OF EVOLVING MISSIONARY CHRISTIANITY IN ZIMBABWE

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### ABSTRACT

Beginning before the wave of African decolonisation of the 1960s but accelerating noticeably thereafter, both Christians and non-Christians across much of the continent created retrospective literary reconstructions of the impact of missionary Christianity on traditional societies. They thereby added important perspectives, many of them highly critical, on the saga of the church in Africa. One of the few female indigenous observers was the Shona novelist, Tsitsi Dangarembga (b. 1959), whose award-winning *Nervous Conditions* was published in 1988. Though biting critical in some respects, Dangarembga came neither to bury nor to praise, and her insights amalgamate disparagement of European condescension and heavy-handedness with acknowledgment of instances of missionary respect for indigenous culture. She also emphasised that religious intolerance was not an exclusively European phenomenon.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of missionary Christianity on traditional societies became a pivotal concern of African *littérateurs* during the 1950s, as is apparent from such works as the Nigerian Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and in the early years of decolonisation and independence it remained a principal theme in the novels of such writers as the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Cameroonian Kenjo Jumbam, and the Ghanaian Asare Konadu, to name but a few. The authors of these and many other works representing a wide spectrum of sub-Saharan cultures have shed considerable light on Roman Catholic, Anglican, and various kinds of Protestant missionary endeavours, and in so doing they have created a body of literature which missiologists and other scholars of religion should not ignore. Many of these indigenous voices have been intensely critical of what they regard as the devastating impact of Christianity, while others, such as John Munonye and Jumbam, have been at least moderately sympathetic to the advent of the new religion. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the Africans who have recreated in fiction the zone of intersection between the European Christian and the traditional African spheres have written from male perspectives about this general phe-

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nomenon of cultural collision. Hence, well-crafted recreations from female points of view are especially valuable as complements to this collective source.

One particularly noteworthy standpoint is found in the novel of 1988, *Nervous Conditions*, by the keenly articulate, award-winning Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga. This award-winning *Bildungsroman* with its reconstruction of young female aspirations of attaining through education at mission schools freedom from entrapment in the traditional rôle of rural Shona women was initially spurned as too radical to awaken widespread interest in Zimbabwe. When Dangarembga, then in her late twenties, initially submitted the manuscript of her book to a publishing house in Harare in 1987, the work was reportedly rejected because of its “strong feminist perspective”. This was arguably a blessing in disguise, as the book was issued in London the following year and eventually won the African section of the Commonwealth Writers Prize.<sup>2</sup> Critics praised it in reviews. Donna Seaman, for instance, declared that Dangarembga’s “characters are fascinating” and concluded that *Nervous Conditions* was “a unique and valuable book”.<sup>3</sup> American literary scholar Charlotte H. Bruner perceived “a fresh and original treatment” of the theme of cultural liberation and lauded Dangarembga’s “excellent style and power of characterization” as the most compelling strength of this novel.<sup>4</sup> Scholars from several countries have similarly praised its virtues in articles published in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Research in African Literatures*, and other internationally recognised journals. They have shed significant light on such key aspects of *Nervous Conditions* as the liberationist dimensions of the narratorial voicing,<sup>5</sup> the symbolism of ethnic foods,<sup>6</sup> and Dangarembga’s challenge to the central thrust of Frantz Fanon’s influential treatise, *Les damnés de la terre*.<sup>7</sup>

- 2 Derek Wright, *New directions in African fiction* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), p. 109.
- 3 Donna Seaman, untitled review of *Nervous Conditions*, *Booklist*, LXXXV, no. 20 (15 June 1989), p. 1779.
- 4 Charlotte H. Bruner, untitled review of *Nervous Conditions*, *World Literature Today*, LXIV, no. 2 (Spring 1990), pp. 353-354.
- 5 Pauline Ada Uwakweh, “Debunking patriarchy: the liberational quality of voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*”, *Research in African Literatures*, XXVI, no. 1 (September 1995), pp. 75-84.
- 6 Derek Wright, “‘More than just a plateful of food’: regurgitating colonialism in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, XVII, no. 2 (Spring 1995), pp. 8-18.
- 7 Sue Thomas, “Killing the hysteric in the colonized’s house: Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*”, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XXVII, no. 1 (1992), pp. 26-36.

Yet other themes in Dangarembga's deeply contoured first novel have remained largely unexplored. Among them, literary critics have almost totally ignored the missiological implications of this highly articulate feminist's reconstruction of her childhood world in colonial Rhodesia, despite the centrality of Christian missionary endeavours to the milieu in which the principal characters are developed. In the present article it is my intention to begin to fill this lacuna by analysing Dangarembga's perception and description of the missionary factors at work in the maintenance of gender and racial inequalities in Rhodesia during the 1960s and early 1970s. Particular attention will be paid to the shifting contours of the narratorial voice, which is that of an adolescent pupil at two mission schools, the conservative, patriarchal position of her uncle, who serves as the headmaster at one of those institutions, and the plight of his daughter, who has acquired European ways of thought during a five-year childhood stint in England but, after returning to Rhodesia in 1968, must sail between the Scylla of alienation from her birthright culture and the Charybdis of not being to live fully in accord with the progressive notions she has absorbed abroad.

Dangarembga's relationship to her subject was clearly conditioned by her own cross-cultural, transnational upbringing. Born in 1959 at Mutoko in eastern Rhodesia, she spent part of her childhood in England before returning to her homeland to complete her secondary education at a mission school. In 1977 this promising young Shona went anew to England, this time to study medicine, but came back to Zimbabwe in time to witness the proclamation of that independent nation in 1980. While studying psychology at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare, Dangarembga became active in literary and dramatic pursuits as well as keenly concerned about the subservient position of women in her land. Her interest in promoting social equality, including women's liberation, informed her published writing from the outset, and it determined much of the content of *Nervous Conditions*.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND PLOT SUMMARY

*Nervous Conditions* spans slightly over 200 pages and is divided into nine chapters. Its largely linear narrative is told by a Shona girl, Tambudzai (or "Tambu") Sigauke, in a rural region of Manicaland in easternmost Rhodesia who was born in 1955 and relates her tale from the mid-1960s until 1971.

8 "Between gender, race and history: Kirten Holst Petersen interviews Tsitsi Dangarembga", *Kunapipi*, XVI, no. 1 (1994), p. 344.

The chronological setting thus falls within the scope of the war for Zimbabwean independence, although the war itself is only briefly mentioned. Far more important is the struggle of the narrator for economic and social liberation from the stultifying rural poverty in which some of her relatives, especially her long-suffering, tradition-bound mother, are trapped. When her father's brother, together with his wife and their son and daughter, returns from a five-year educational stint in England, however, this missionary educational administrator announces plans to help his relatives advance economically by assuring that at least one member of each nuclear family can receive more formal education than is available in their village. Initially Tambu's brother, Nhamo, is the recipient of avuncular largesse; he is taken under his uncle's wing at the Protestant mission school in Umtali where he is the headmaster. Three years later, however, this modernised youth, who has become partially alienated from his family and home environment, dies. Tambu is chosen to take his place at the school. Much of the plot involves her quite successful adjustment to this new and stimulating environment, so different from the poverty in which she spent the first thirteen years of her childhood, and her subsequent admission to a Roman Catholic secondary school in Rhodesia. She long regards the education she receives at these institutions as the vehicle that will transport her out of poverty and inferior female status but eventually concludes that her personal cultural transition comes at a price and that male domination of society is too deeply entrenched to be quickly overcome through education and upward social mobility. Other significant elements in the plot are the course which her very Anglicised female cousin, Nyasha, follows after returning from England, a difficult road of adjustment that leads to violent clashes with her domineering father, narratorially ends with a severe case of *anorexia nervosa* and nervous breakdown, the resentment of Tambu's tradition-bound peasant mother to her children's cultural drifting, her uncle's opposition to the traditional Shona was of his brother, and cordial relations between Nyasha's older brother and a European missionary family. Dangarembga's tightly written narrative is very lean; nearly every line contains signs of cultural change or resistance thereto or material that is apparently relevant to this novel's principal themes.

### 3. BABAMUKURU SIGAUKE AS EXPONENT OF AUTHORITARIAN CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

Dangarembga's principal male character, the narrator's paternal uncle who is her benefactor and serves as the headmaster of the mission school, is fairly well limned as a man who straddles two cultures, patriarchally dominating his clan while co-operating with other representatives of missionary Christianity. His Christian name is not specified; the narrator always refers to him as "Babamukuru", the Shona word for uncle. This partial vagueness may be an intentional means of allowing the most powerful member of the Sigauke clan to represent both traditional male dominance and the emerging indigenous leadership of mission institutions during a period of transition in the Shona field. He is the first in his family to break decisively the bonds of poverty and — to some extent — tradition, although as we shall see shortly this ambitious figure remains captive to certain patterns of traditional Shona conduct.

Dangarembga employs a flashback to the narrator's deceased paternal grandmother to relate how the family came under the sway of missionary Christianity after "wizards" from the south entered Mashonaland and her husband died as a migratory labourer in the mines of South Africa. With his bereaved mother having to support six children, Babamukuru had been entrusted to the care of missionaries near the family homestead, or *musha*. At the mission, he toiled by day and, in the indirect discourse of his mother, "by night he was educated in their wizardry" (p. 19). The youth had performed "exceptionally well" at the mission school and, partly through employment for a farmer named Montgomery, acquired a penchant for self-discipline in his work. According to his own blunt testimony, "The man was cruel, but it was good training" (122). Recognising his potential, the colonial government gave Babamukuru a bursary which allowed him to earn a baccalaureate degree at an unspecified university in South Africa. He returned to Rhodesia and the service of the mission as headmaster of its school in Umtali. In 1965 he returned from a five-year study leave in England, master's degree in hand, to resume that post and also assume additional responsibilities as Academic Director of the church's Manicaland Region.

In these capacities, Babamukuru evinces a striking penchant for apeing not only the manners but also the attitudes towards his fellow Africans that were long widespread amongst European missionaries in much of the African continent. Signs of the substantial veneer of his assimilation — or at least acculturation — in these respects abound in Dangarembga's text. When

the narrator is taken for the first time to the large mission compound, she notices that her uncle's family are the only Africans there who inhabit a house whose red bricks have been painted white, like the other dwellings of the European personnel (p. 63). (Given Dangarembga's keen interest in Fanon, one is reminded of the title of that Francophone author's first book, *Peau noire, masques blancs*.) Of course he is one of the few indigenes in *Nervous Conditions* who drives a motor vehicle; his relatives walk or ride in a fifth-class coach of a train. The food which Babamukuru and his family consume in their home, beginning with bacon and eggs, toast, and tea for breakfast, is quintessentially English. Much the same can be said of their attire. Dangarembga describes him as "puritanical" and a "rigid, imposing perfectionist" (p. 87). Consequently, in typical missionary fashion, he reminds his relatives that they are morally accountable people (p. 147). No less significantly, this quasi-Anglicised missionary headmaster is clothed in censorious attitudes towards much that is central to Shona culture and seeks to influence his more traditional relatives accordingly as part of what he regards as their upliftment. In full accord with a long-standing missionary concern, the "strictly abstinent" Babamukuru staunchly opposes their consumption of *maseke*, or Shona beer strainings (p. 41). He shows no interest in tribal dancing on visits to his home and allows his daughter to attend "sinful" dances at the mission school only because as headmaster he cannot tactfully bar her from participating in that institution's functions (p. 95). Babamukuru will not tolerate any suggestion that his brother Jeremiah take a second wife (in this case, his own wife's sister, Lucia) and cannot understand why Jeremiah does not realise that such a traditional marriage practice is "sinful" (p. 127). In a similar vein, Babamukuru informs his brother that his marriage of nearly twenty years is invalid because it was not solemnised in a Christian ritual, which, he announces, must now be performed *ex post facto*. The strong-willed headmaster underwrites the considerable expenses in this carefully orchestrated and almost surreal ceremony, which is done in strict accordance with European ways, including tailored dresses for bridesmaids, one of whom is to be the couple's daughter, Tambu. Divination, of course, is anathema. Babamukuru is scandalised by his brother's suggestion, after learning of complications in his wife's pregnancy and other misfortunes that have befallen the family, that "a good medium" be engaged "to do the ceremony properly with everything — beer, a sacrificial ox, everything" to cleanse the clan of the evil that an unknown enemy has supposedly put upon them. The headmaster dismissively refers to traditional Shona healers as "witch-doctors" (p. 146). Against the backdrop of all these actions and attitudes of the hard-working uncle, it seems almost superfluous for Dangarembga to declare that "the authorities thought Babamukuru

was a good African” (p. 107). Particularly his attitude towards Shona culture remarkably mirrors those held by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century missionaries in Rhodesia who, in the words of W.R. Peaden in his study of the subject, summarily despised it as “barbaric or uncivilised”.<sup>9</sup>

It must be stressed that Babamukuru is not totally assimilated, and he has not fully assumed the attributes of a colonial English gentleman. For no other apparent reason than to underscore the incompleteness of his cultural transition underlying his Anglicised veneer, Dangarembga states that he uses his pen knife in lieu of a toothpick at the dining table (p. 44), belches in response to praise from his relatives (p. 47), brushes off a well-intended greeting by Tambu by grunting briefly (p. 80), growls and snaps at his daughter (p. 193), and merely grunts rather than giving a meaningful reply to a question by Tambu (p. 197). For all these and other negative signs which she places on him, however, Dangarembga does not depict him as uncharitable. A largely plausible and complex character, he is beneficent when assayed with the touchstones of the traditional Shona axiology and as a representative of the British colonial missionary establishment. Intent on helping members of his clan join him in upward social mobility, he is willing to toil with them physically on visits to the family farm and conceives plans for their economic betterment.

In harmony with her overarching theme of women’s liberation, much of Dangarembga’s portrayal of Babamukuru focuses on his consistently authoritarian and occasionally violent treatment of his female relatives. He believes that if equal opportunities cannot be extended to children of both genders, the education of boys should take precedence over that of girls (p. 44). When Babamukuru offers to allow Tambu to replace her deceased brother as a pupil at the mission school, he tells her father that it might be useful to educate “this girl” so that she can help to uplift her family of origin briefly before her marriage and subsequently maintains rhetorical control over her by reminding her that without his beneficence she would not have this privilege (pp. 56, 87). The authoritarian *pater familias* seeks to keep a tight moral rein on his Anglicised daughter by criticising her clothing as excessively revealing and upbraiding her for not returning home immediately after a school dance, suggesting without evidence that she has been participating in sexual misconduct (pp. 109, 112). Her brother, Chido, gets a tongue-lashing on the same occasion. “You let your sister behave like a whore without saying anything”, rages Babamukuru in the presence of

9 W.R. Peaden, *Missionary attitudes to Shona culture 1890-1923* (Salisbury: The Central Africa Historical Association, 1970), p. 41.

Nyasha. When she protests, he strikes her, and accuses her of disgracing him. Father and daughter trade punches and wrestle on the floor as he threatens to kill her and hang himself. At the end of their one-sided bout, Babamukuru tells his shocked wife that Nyasha is no longer his daughter and must leave their home (p. 115). The girl nevertheless remains, but her estrangement from her father is permanently exacerbated. Tambu's crystallising perception of her uncle's violent demeanour is confirmed when he subsequently whips both her and Nyasha, tells his faithful wife to leave, and expresses no regret when she does so, only to return five days later (pp. 118, 169, 172-174).

Dangarembga nowhere comments explicitly on the relationship of this pattern of male behaviour to missionary Christianity, however; and whether she regards it as somehow attributable to what Babamuruku has learnt from European propagators of the gospel or signifies a departure from Christian moral principles is simply not clear from the text. In any case, one is left with the impression of a gaping chasm between the part of this central Christian character's conduct and the religion which he ostensibly represents. Christianity, in other words, does not necessarily overcome the oppression and occasional brutality of traditional Shona gender inequality.

#### 4. NYASHA SIGAUKE AS A CULTURALLY REPLANTED AFRICAN

For purposes of comparison, an examination of Babamukuru Sigauke's daughter, the quasi-autobiographical Nyasha, is particularly enlightening, because, unlike that of Tambu, her suspension between two cultures is not primarily attributable to her being removed from traditional village life and sent to a mission school, but to her being in the second generation of Europeanised Shona and, at least for a while, to her being replanted in Rhodesia after a five-year absence in England. Dangarembga emphasises that upon returning to the colony of her birth Nyasha has forgotten much of her mother tongue and, in the eyes of narrator, seems "morose" and "silent and watchful" (p. 52). Three years later she confides to Nyasha that she and her brother had been "frightened" and "confused" upon returning to Rhodesia, for to them "all was strange and new. Not like anything we were used to. It was a real shock!" (p. 78). But the confusion and fear prove to be only temporary, and she adjusts at least moderately well to life in Umtali. When Tambu arrives there three years later to enrol at the mission school, Nyasha can greet her warmly, and the two become close friends (pp. 66, 78).



Nyasha never sheds the impact of her “Englishness”. She bakes European-style, prefers to speak English even after recovering her Shona and, to the dismay of her mother, reads D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (pp. 66, 75, 83). A hankering after her roots remains embedded in her soul and occasionally comes to expression. The curious Nyasha asks Tambu about ancestral ceremonies, admitting embarrassment about her ignorance of them. Some of her queries stymie her cousin, however, “since we did not often perform the rituals any more” (p. 147). In a minor effort to recover part of their lost tribal tradition, Nyasha convinces Tambu to assist her in making Shona pots, an exercise in which the latter has scant interest (pp. 149-150). Moreover, Nyasha is a politically conscious girl with a keen interest in global history. She evinces a keen interest in the South Africa of B.J. Vorster, reads about the Nazis and the American bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, questions the validity of Zionist claims to Palestine and the Smith government’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence, and assures the family’s domestic servant that it is not necessary to kneel before her (pp. 79, 93). Yet it would be facile to attribute Nyasha’s political conscience to her time in England or to her parents’ trans-cultural straddling. Many Africans of her generation whose parents were mono-cultural developed similar interests without leaving their native lands.

Nyasha does not share her father’s zeal for Christianity, and her general attitude towards that religion is ambivalent. In harmony with her incipient political liberalism, she goes to church because, in Tambu’s words,

she was at a devout stage of development: she liked having causes and the Christian cause, which was conformist but could clandestinely be translated into a progressive ideology, was ideal for her (p. 98).

Later, however, Nyasha becomes more critical of Christianity and links it to imperialism. She delivers to her cousin

“a lecture on the dangers of assuming that Christian ways were progressive ways” and declares that “it’s bad enough . . . when a country gets colonised, but when the people do as well! That’s the end, really, that’s the end” (p. 147).

Apparently this dimension of her attitude towards Christianity is derived from her intellectual exercises, but her conflict with her self-righteous father has also played a part in determining her perception. In the penultimate chapter she confides to Tambu, “I can’t just shut up when he puts on his God act” (p. 190), a statement which can readily be interpreted as a critique of paternal hypocrisy which points to the cleft between Babamukuru’s behaviour and that of the more charitable European missionaries at Umtali

but does not, of course, constitute a rejection of Christianity as such. Otherwise, Nyasha has nothing to say about any religion.

The obvious question remains: Can Nyasha's illness be attributed to her personal trans-cultural situation? There is insufficient evidence in Dangarembga's text to conclude that a direct cause and effect relationship exists between the two. It is true, of course, that Nyasha's father is a demanding headmaster and a domineering parent who brooks no dissent from his children; it is also true that for reasons which do not seem apparent to the narrator she pushes herself over the brink by studying fanatically to prepare for school examinations. It seems entirely conceivable that this intellectually very curious and goal-orientated adolescent would have developed a similar mental illness had she stayed in England or, for that matter, if she had grown up only in Rhodesia. Furthermore, Nyasha's brother, Chido, who has similarly spent a quinquennium of his childhood in England and is occasionally subject to the lashing of his father's critical tongue, and who associates very closely with Europeans in Rhodesia, does not evince mental illness in any form. Indeed, in the eyes of the narrator this Shona is emotionally well-adjusted and a picture of health (p. 108). In the end, to conclude that Nyasha's *anorexia nervosa* is a consequence of her international upbringing and the intercultural matrix which her family represents is to engage in extra-textual speculation. Interviewed in 1991, the erstwhile medical student Dangarembga acknowledged that *anorexia nervosa* is difficult to diagnose in Africa, obliquely disavowed belief in a necessary linkage between that disease and the aspirations of middle-class Africans, and pointed out that even in families which are prone to this disease scholarly pursuits can be beneficial.<sup>10</sup>

## 5. MISSIONARIES AS FUNCTIONAL TYPES IN TRANSITION

In contrast to her carefully limned Shona characters, Dangarembga's missionaries never really emerge as individuals. Indeed, only fleetingly do they even appear as such in the narrative. Instead, almost without exception they are collective entities who play transparently functional rôles without taking on credible flesh and blood. Nevertheless, the portrayal of missionaries in *Nervous Conditions* merits consideration because of their part in creating what the young narrator believes is a path towards worldly salvation.

10 "Between gender, race and history: Kirsten Holst Petersen interviews Tsitsi Dangarembga", *Kunapipi*, XVI, no. 1 (1994), p. 346.

The precise sources of the narrator's early perception of missionaries are unclear; she does not state whether she had any contact with them before her uncle takes her under his wing at Umtali. Her grandmother had told her that they were "holy" and, in contrast to most white people, had come to the Shona not to take but to give. At the mission, the young girl encounters them daily on meticulously landscaped grounds. Her general impression of missionaries is decidedly positive. "They were about God's business here in darkest Africa", she recalls.

They had given up the comforts and security of their own homes to come and lighten our darkness. It was a big sacrifice that the missionaries had made. It was a sacrifice that made us grateful to them, a sacrifice that made them superior not only to us but to those other Whites as well who were her for adventure and to help themselves to our emeralds.

This awareness, which may have been fostered by the missionaries' comments about their lives abroad (though that is not stated explicitly), elicited a favourable response amongst the young learners:

We treated them like minor deities. With the self-satisfied dignity that came naturally to white people in those days, they accepted this improving disguise.

Something about these foreigners remains unfathomable to the adolescent Tambu: "I often ask myself why them come, giving up the comforts and security of their more advanced homes" (p. 103). That question remains unanswered in her mind, but in any case she makes it clear that for the most part the awe in which the children hold the missionaries has not inflated the egos of these alien Christians, some of whom have made determined efforts to bridge the gap between themselves and the indigenes. Indeed, to Tambu, this kind of missionary, though a minority, seems worlds apart from European Rhodesians in general:

These missionaries, the strange ones, liked to speak Shona much more than they liked to speak English. And when you, wanting to practise your English, spoke to them in English, they always answered in Shona.

Such families had carried their efforts at acculturation to an extreme:

Most of these missionaries' children, the children of the strange ones, did not speak English at all until they learnt it at school, just as we did and in the same classroom as we did, because their parents sent them to school at the mission with the rest of us.

Tambu emphasises, however, that the majority of the missionaries' progeny were fluent in English and attended public schools in Umtali (p. 104). One of the few overarching generalisations which can be made about the Protestant missionaries in *Nervous Conditions* is that they are not a monolithic entity. Some of them, as the narrator strives to make clear, belong to a new breed who are decidedly more interested in fostering interracial equality and communication rather than maintaining the posture of domination more characteristic of an earlier phase. This, of course, reflects a readily documentable transition in the history of Christian foreign missions generally during the latter half of the twentieth century. Small wonder, then, that Tambu can declare that she "liked the missionaries. In particular I liked the young ones" (p. 103).

Together with her Anglicised cousin Nyasha, Tambu befriends Nyaradzo Baker, a similarly aged daughter of a missionary family who can speak Shona. The Bakers, though not well developed characters in *Nervous Conditions*, are intercultural bridge builders who readily relate to Africans. Nyaradzo's two older brothers attend a secondary school in Salisbury. Whether this was an institution catering specifically for the children of missionaries is not stated. In any case, it is racially integrated, although Nyaradzo explains that the prohibitively high fees made it unaffordable for nearly all blacks. To Tambu it seemed strange in the late 1960s that Africans could attend a predominantly white school. "I would still have like to go to a multiracial school", she confesses, "and I liked the feeling of ambition and aspiration that went with this desire" (p. 105). The Bakers' spirit of racial toleration and cordiality across ethnic boundaries is apparently sincere. There is no indication that the daughter's friendship with the Sigauke girls is anything less than genuine. Moreover, Tambu points out that the two Baker boys accompany her male cousin Chido with them on Christmas vacation to Chirundu, although this makes it impossible for the African boy to celebrate that holiday with his relatives, a break with family tradition which does not appear to bother him in the slightest, in contrast to his father's consternation over his absence (p. 120).

Dangarembga hints at a minor counter-current in this favourable stream of remarks about the Protestant missionaries at Umtali. Despite the opposition of Babamukuru Sigauke, who does not want his son Chido to have significantly more exposure to English ways, Mr. Baker believes that talented youth should have an opportunity to attend the same private school in Salisbury in which his own sons are enrolled and consequently drives Chido to the capital to take the prescribed entrance examination. The sceptical Nyasha is convinced that this missionary has also intervened to

secure a scholarship for her brother and attributes that act to less than altruistic motives.

So Chido feels better about sending his sons there in the first place. Really! The things they get up to pull the wool over our eyes. Really!

To Tambu, this explanation of Baker's rôle in the matter seems plausible, because without such financial assistance

Chido certainly would not have gone to that school and Mr Baker would have had his sons' superior education nibbling away at his conscience (p. 106).

But this momentary cynicism does not significantly alter the narrator's generally salutary impression of missionaries in Rhodesia. Indeed, although she never acquires the ardent interest in political affairs which has sprouted in Nyasha's mind while in England, she occasionally ponders contemporary events during the war of independence without taking an unambiguous stance on that conflagration. Tambu does not "think that the missionaries, along with all the other Whites in Rhodesia, ought to have stayed at home" (p. 155).

Dangarembga's comments about Roman Catholic missionaries are limited to the narrator's shifting perceptions of religious sisters affiliated with the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart. Before they call at the Protestant mission school in Umtali, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, to consider girls for admission to their own institution, Tambu

had no knowledge of nuns except as spiritual, chaste beings who dedicated their pious, prayerful lives to the service of God.

This stereotypical image led her to assume that the Roman Catholic Church was superior to her own, unnamed, denomination, because "it created such virtue". The down-to-earth reality of the visitors bursts the bubble of her imagination:

Thus, when the nuns came to the mission and we saw that instead of murmuring soft blessings and gliding seraphically over the grass in diaphanous habits, they wore smart blouses and skirts and walked, laughed, and talked in low twanging tones very much like our own American missionaries did, we were very disappointed (p. 176).

Individual encounters with the sisters during interviews establish their sincere humanity in the narrator's mind. She recalls warmly:

We were actually very impressed with them after that. We thought they were very kind and definitely holy to take such an interest in

us, for interested they were, asking us all sorts of questions about our parents and our friends and what we liked to do in our free time. I was delighted that people, white people for that matter, thought my background was interesting (p. 177).

Tambu does not seem to accept uncritically remarks by some of her classmates who have Catholic acquaintances about the “nefarious practices” used to ensnare girls in their religious orders. To her, the vision of becoming a cultivated lady by attending a multiracial convent school is sufficiently powerful to overcome such objections (pp. 177-178). After Tambu arrives at the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, she finds herself on a luxuriously manicured campus where many of her fellow pupils own automobiles, but she is dismayed to learn that she and the five other enrolled Africans must share a crowded room in a residence. They are thus not only segregated from their classmates because of their race but also assigned to inferior quarters, as only four of their white counterparts reside in each room. In response to Babamukuru’s benign protest about the crowded conditions under which his niece must live, the sister who smiles “beatifically” to greet the Sigaukes (and whose race, it should be noted, is not disclosed) explains proudly, “We have more Africans here than usual this year and so we had to put them all in here” (p. 194). Dangarembga allows this *de facto* condoning of racial discrimination to speak for itself, and the narrative concludes shortly thereafter without further comment on race relations at the Roman Catholic school. The narrator points out, however, that she has access to an impressively expansive library there and suggests obliquely that her wide reading in it contributes to her ongoing personal cultural and intellectual liberation (p. 195).

Dangarembga remains silent about several key issues which, had she elucidated them, could have shed considerable light on perceptions of missionary endeavours amongst the Shona in their war-torn land during the transitional 1960s and 1970s. One wonders, for example, whether those missionaries at the school who speak the vernacular fluently and encourage their children to socialise with young Africans participated in the process of indigenisation of educational materials and the leadership of the neo-phyte churches in colonial Rhodesia. Have they trained indigenous people who differ significantly in temperament and cultural attitudes from Babamukuru to assume positions of responsibility? Did the missionaries in question — as did many of their counterparts on innumerable other mission fields in Africa and elsewhere — appreciate any aspects of local cultures besides the Shona language? And what were their attitudes towards decolonisation in Africa generally and the struggle for independence in Rhodesia?

## 6. POPULAR RELIGIOSITY

The narrator makes no secret of the fact that she jumps at opportunities to attend two mission schools not as an expression of her religious zeal but because she believes that the education they offer can be a stepping-stone to a materially better life free of the restraints of male domination and poverty. Nevertheless, from a missiological viewpoint it is worthwhile to examine in *Nervous Conditions* Dangarembga's depiction of the religious life of Shona people who either straddle or are close to the border of their traditional religious beliefs and practices on the one hand and missionary Christianity on the other, precisely because the author offers a distinctive perspective on this phenomenon.

Most members of the extended Sigauke family do not appear to be particularly religious, notwithstanding the fact that some of them bear such Biblical names as Isaiah and Jeremiah; Babamuruku is clearly the exception as he toils at the mission school. His relatives are in the zone of overlapping cultures in which they have accepted Christianity but maintain some elements of traditional religious beliefs and practices. Tambu, for example, in the second chapter prays to the spirit of her deceased grandmother (p. 17), and her mother has no doubt that "evil spirits" have poisoned sibling relations within her family (p. 51). Jeremiah Sigauke advocates retaining the services of "a good medium" to help rid the family of various problems (p. 146). When the Sigaukes gather to welcome Babamukuru, his wife, and their children back from England, they praise the gods while the returned school official says grace, a brief episode clearly emblematic of the religious syncretism Dangarembga highlights, along with these Africans dancing to "Amazing Grace", to emphasise that the characters are in a stage of spiritual transition (pp. 40, 42). Zeal for the gospel does not characterise most of the Sigaukes. The narrator discloses that her family rarely participates in the services of worship held in the village some two and a half miles from their modest home. She herself had attended more often while a pupil in the village school, though only

because children who had not attended Sunday School were caned on Monday, or put to work in the teacher's gardens.

During the period following her brief stint of local education and her departure for Umtali, Tambu admits that "without the prospect of caning to push me, I had hardly been to church since I left school" (pp. 21-22). Once in the custody of her religious uncle and his wife, however, she, together with her cousin Nyasha, attend Sunday school weekly and are there taught by prefects about "Charity and Love and Sin". Tambu ponders these

matters without fully comprehending them but finds “less confusing” the hymns “about respecting our parents to increase our days and rolling our burdens away”. “That pragmatic and uninspired approach to life was something I understood well”, she recalls. Following this weekly religious instruction, she and her classmates are lined up for inspection and marched into the sanctuary for a two and one-half hour service (pp. 98-99). The impression which Dangarembga thereby creates is one of largely mechanical and passive participation rather than one of sincere piety and religious zeal

## 7. A YOUNG PILGRIM’S PROGRESS?

How does this young Shona girl develop in and react to this formative environment? More specifically, how does her formation in missionary institutions determine her personality and behaviour, especially with regard to her indigenous culture? The narrator’s progression towards adulthood and her quest for liberation from the world of her childhood form much of the plot of *Nervous Conditions* and provide Dangarembga an opportunity to reveal how great an impact the culturally heavy-handed environment of a mission school can have on an intellectually gifted adolescent girl who strives to emerge from a background of rural poverty and marginal literacy.

Before considering Tambu’s case, it can be enlightening to summarise the changes in her brother’s attitudes and conduct after he comes under the influence of missionary education. When Nhamo learns that his uncle shall remove him from the village environment and take him to the school at Umtali, he boasts triumphantly, “I shall no longer be Jeremiah’s son”, pronouncing his father’s name derogatorily and reciting a brief list of the European habits he shall acquire with regard to attire and eating (p. 48). This ambitious response foreshadows the youth’s subsequent conduct vis-à-vis his family and traditional village culture. After her brother begins to live with their uncle in Umtali and return only annually to their farm, Tambu and most of his other relatives in the village lament the path his personality is taking. He is no longer willing to engage in physical toil but prefers to bury himself in his books; he rejects the practice of eating without utensils and insists on using a knife and a fork; and he finds it beneath his dignity to ride with redolent Africans on the local buses (pp. 1, 6-7). These changes, Tambu is initially certain, stem from the influence of his newly acquired privileged status at the mission school. On the other hand, after Nhamo insists that his sisters carry his luggage and violently asserts his authority over them, she eventually concludes that



in reality he was doing no more than behave, perhaps extremely, in the expected manner. The needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate (p. 12).

Part of this arrogant adolescent's behaviour is, in her perception, typical of culturally ingrained male Shona conduct and thus cannot be attributed primarily to his exposure to European and/or Christian ways. Witnessing the thrashing which Babamukuru gives his daughter confirms her tentative conclusion about male Shona behaviour. This incident convinces the young narrator that the plight of women is by not necessarily alleviated by education and material prosperity, as she has hoped.

The victimisation I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn't depend on any of the things I had thought it depended on. . . . But what I didn't like was the way all the conflicts came back to the question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness (pp. 115-116).

Evidently concerned about her own potential alienation from her family, upon arrival at the mission school where her uncle is the headmaster Tambu vows not to be overcome by her opulent and beguiling new surroundings. "Babamukuru was God, therefore I was in Heaven", she confides.

I was in danger of becoming an angel, or at the very least a saint, and forgetting how ordinary humans existed — from minute to minute and from hand to mouth. The absence of dirt was proof of the other-worldly [*sic*] nature of my new home (p. 70).

Nevertheless, it all proves too seductive, and what Tambu calls "my reincarnation" soon begins (p. 92). She apes her "thoroughbred cousin" Nyasha in certain respects, though without acquiring the same confrontational spirit or degree of political consciousness, reads romance novels, straightens her hair, and gains acceptance as a diligent pupil. Returning to the family compound for Christmas vacation, Tambu immediately perceives it as dilapidated and notices the dishevelled condition of her younger sisters. She also upbraids her mother for not maintaining a higher standard of hygiene in the family latrine, thereby hammering an enduring wedge of resentment between mother and daughter (pp. 123-124). When Tambu, with her uncle's belated approval, announces her intention to accept a scholarship to attend the convent school, her mother is deeply distressed at the prospect of seeing this daughter drift even further from her cultural moorings.

Tell me, my daughter, what will I, your mother[,] say to you when you come home a stranger full of white ways and ideas? It will be English, English all the time.

She curses her husband's domineering brother for facilitating this threat to the remnant of family unity:

Truly that man is calling down a curse of bad luck on my head. ... I've had enough of that man driving me from my children. Driving me from my children and ruling my life. He says this and we jump (p. 184).

Tambu remains undeterred, despite the unveiled, resentful envy of her classmates in Umtali who must continue at the school there. As she approaches the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, she recalls her vision of wearing tailor-made suits and gloves. "There should have been trumpets, truly there should have been", reasons this girl "so recently a peasant", who believes that "all the things that I wanted were tying themselves up into a neat package which presented itself to me with a flourish" (p. 191).

The narrative concludes on a different note, one which points to an undefined questioning of missionary education as a means of female liberation. After an angry exchange with her culturally conservative mother, Tambu returns to the Roman Catholic school, but now a more critical attitude has begun to germinate in her. She confesses on the penultimate page of the text:

I was beginning to have a suspicion, no more than the seed of a suspicion, that I had been too eager to leave the homestead and embrace the "Englishness" and after that the more concentrated "Englishness" of Sacred Heart (p. 203).

Unfortunately for the purposes of a missiological consideration of *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga has not yet published a sequel in which she charts her subsequent development, particularly her relationship to missionary Christianity.

For missiological purposes, it must be stressed that Tambu does not undergo a religious conversion. Apparently she was baptised into the Christian faith as an infant (though that is not stated in the text) and raised as such, notwithstanding what appears to have been the tepid character of her parents' involvement in the church. Nevertheless, Tambu's relationship to Christianity and attraction to Christian institutions is in full accord with the conclusion of the eminent Zimbabwean sociologist and erstwhile Jesuit, Professor M.F.C. Bourdillon, in his analysis of religious conversion amongst the Shona. "There are a number of reasons in favour of joining a Christian church apart from religious conviction", he declared.

One is education. In the early days of education, the Shona saw it as a means of obtaining the white man's knowledge and ultimately the white man's wealth. In practice, education is still the principal means for obtaining better employment.

## 8. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Some critics have found it tempting to read *Dangerous Conditions* as an unbridled critique of the European cultural, and specifically Christian, impact on Shona society. Writing analytically from a thinly veiled position of hostility to Christian missions in Africa, for example, one eminent authority on post-colonial African literature, Professor Derek Wright, declared that at the end of the narrative Tambu “returns to her colonial convent to acquire more of the ‘killing’ Englishness that will only deepen her moral dilemmas and exacerbate her country’s nervous condition.”<sup>11</sup> This, however, is an exegetical extrapolation which fails to do justice to the nuances of Dangarembga’s ambivalent reconstruction of the complexities of the religio-cultural interaction at work. She does not naively present a one-sided case for indigenous harmony, particularly with regard to the status of Shona women, which has been upset by exposure to the values and mores of other cultures, including that of British civilisation intertwined with missionary educational institutions. Rather, this discerning author repeatedly emphasises certain strains that inhere in the indigenous world, not least with regard to male domination, and the continuity of this factor in Shona Christian circles. To be sure, the degree to which women were subjugated in traditional Shona culture and in an evolving Zimbabwe has been debated, and Bourdillon has argued that they were less oppressed than is sometimes believed (and, one might add, is assumed in such reconstructions of Rhodesian society as one finds in *Nervous Conditions*).<sup>12</sup>

In ways both subtle and overt, Dangarembga reminds readers of the pitfalls of ascribing to her novel a homogenised view of missionary Christianity and of its impact on the Shona as individuals. Perhaps most blatantly, she contrasts the virtues of both Protestant and Roman Catholic missionaries (though they are not carefully defined characters) on the one hand and the narrator’s imperious uncle on the other. Dangarembga underscores through direct comment and such obvious signs as the colours of missionaries’ dwellings that the men and women who have propagated the gospel amongst the Shona have differed greatly in their attitudes towards indigenous cultures, their willingness to fraternise with the Shona, and their approaches to racial integration during a period of profound cultural, religious and political transition.

11 Derek Wright, *New directions in African fiction* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), p. 122.

12 Bourdillon, *The Shona peoples*, pp. 50-57.

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