

By Black Technocrat aka Bvumamuranda Technocrat

23 November 2015 ·

MaSiziba Saneliso points out that she finds it quite painful “that in less than 40 years the once traditional and cultural Mberengwa is now mostly Christian.” Her sekuru recently told her that in her Mberengwa home area in rural Zimbabwe, only 20 families still practice Chikaranga/Chivanhu. Says MaSiziba; “I wonder if Imbahuru is still in use?”

It is with this in mind that I thought it many help to share a few facts that I came across during my research work on traditional medical practices in Zimbabwe. Of particular interest are the findings of Professor Michael Gelfand.

While conducting the role of traditional medical practitioners, Professor Gelfand came across a practice that, I must say, is identical to a very important narrative in the Bible. Firstly, by quoting his words, let me share what Gelfand found in rural Rhodesia of the early 1960s. He writes:

“Besides treating individuals, the herbalist n’anga has a more general duty to perform, one of which affects the whole community. He may be called upon by the chief of a district to protect the inhabitants from epidemics believed to be caused by witchcraft.”

“This is an interesting ceremony which is worth describing,” writes professor Gelfand. “The day after his arrival in the chief’s village, the n’anga prepares some thin porridge at dawn and adds a little of his special medicine to it. When it is ready he puts it into a winnowing basket outside the main hut, and all the villagers are ordered to come and drink some of it. The n’anga stands next to the medicated porridge holding in his hand a whisk from an animal’s tail. As each villager moves up to the n’anga, he closes his fists, dips them in the porridge and licks off his hands, while the n’anga dips the tail into a small clay pot of water and sprinkles him. Everyone in the village, men, women and children must go through this ceremony.”

This is not all that Professor Gelfand found out in the early 1960s. He says; “In addition, the headmen of every other village in the chief’s domain also have to be present and each is given a little of the medicine in a calabash to take back to his village, where he must spread it by dipping his finger into the porridge and smearing it on the threshold of every hut.”

We are told that; “The Mashona believe that after such thorough preventive measures it is unlikely that an epidemic will break out again in the district for many years.” In other words, the plague will PASSOVER the people in the district.

Now, and MaSibanda Shami you had better believe me on this one, I read the Bible in a very seriously. It is because of this reading that I was literally gobsmacked by the ceremony that Gelfand found interesting. A serious practitioner of Judaism, one who must have been intimately familiar with the Torah, that being the collection of the Books of Moses, he must have been struck by the description of a ceremony that mirrors the Biblical narrative of the Passover as given us through Exodus Chapter 12.

According to the second book of the Torah, we are told: “The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, this month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb

for his family, one for each household. If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight."

Furthermore, the same book and chapter tells that the Lord said to Moses and Aaron; "Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast."

It is in the 12th verse that we are told the reason behind this very elaborate ritual. The Bible tells that; "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt."

Right there, in the last sentence of the verse we are told the reason for the ritual. It was a measure taken to fend off an impending plague. Where the Bible calls it a plague, Professor Gelfand calls it an epidemic but there is no difference here at all. Let me point out that in Karanga lore, witches are said to cause harm at night. Likewise, Exodus tells us that the Lord will visit death upon the land at night. Whether the ancient Egyptians called the cause of the death reported in Exodus witchcraft or not, I do not have the specific knowledge. What I know is that ancient Egyptians considered death to be a result of witchcraft and, as a result of this, performed very elaborate rituals to fend off witchcraft, especially during funerals.

What is beyond dispute here is that Moses and Aaron were told by the Lord to protect the community against an epidemic. The people had to consume bitter herbs. In ancient Egypt of the times of Moses, and as it is right now in Africa, bitter herbs are commonly used as medicine even when consumed as food. I do have a bitter-leaf plant from which I take tender leaves to make some concoction and the garnishment of my egusi soup. Much like some of the bitter herbs I know from my own village, the edible bitter-leaf herb is proven by modern science to be medicinal.

The bitterness in the herbs is a result of compounds some of which are alkaloids. These compounds are known to boost the immune system. In the event of a communicable disease, the people who consume these special medicines are left in a better position to avoid contracting the disease-causing contagion. From my reading of Exodus, that is precisely what Moses and Aaron were told to do.

In the findings of Professor Gelfand, he explicitly states that the n'anga puts his special medicine in freshly prepared thin porridge. This thin porridge may be masvusvu, which is essentially a variant of the popular mahewu drink prior to fermentation. Whereas the mahewu drink is often fermented, the masvusvu drink is consumed without having gone through the fermentation process. The masvusvu drink is an unleavened drink much like the food that is stated in Exodus 12.

Though Gelfand does not specifically call the thin porridge masvusvu or biti, I am inclined to conclude that this is the drink used because the sweetness of the malt used to make the drink abates the bitterness of the medicinal herbs. This masvusvu or unleavened mahewu is an excipient of the bitter but essential medicine much like syrup is used to make modern bitter medicine easy to take. What is significant here is that the porridge is unleavened for a very good scientific reason.

The active components in the bitter herbs are compounds called alkaloids. They have molecular parts that have nitrogen, the reason they are called nitrogenous or amine compounds. When brought into contact with media containing acids, the medicinal compounds form salts. These salts cannot be absorbed into the blood stream. Once they are in contact with acidic media, the drugs become ineffective or the effectiveness is greatly diminished. It is from this scientific fact that the bitter medicines must not be mixed with fermented drinks or food. Leavened food and drinks contain lactic acid. At its core, this practice has a very simple but logical scientific basis.

Let me surmise this by noting the similarities, or is it congruencies, between the Biblical narrative and what Gelfand found practices in rural Rhodesia of the 1960s;

(i). We are told of people consuming bitter herbs, which are consumed as food but also for their medicinal effects.

(ii). To make the bitter medicine palatable and remain effective, in both narratives we learn that acid-free food is eaten with the herbs.

(iii). A n'anga is invited by the community leader to help protect the people. Ultimately, a n'anga owes his or her talent to God. Moses and Aaron, the community leaders, were given their instructions by the Lord. Here, either Moses and Aaron were n'anga or, on the other hand, the Lord himself may have been speaking through an unnamed n'anga as a medium.

(iv). For the plague to PASSOVER or AVOID the homes of the inoculated people, part of the protective process involved smearing the doors with part of the food from the ceremony.

(v). In either case, the objective of the processes was to protect the people against plagues or, if you want, epidemics.

(vi). Death, which the ancient Egyptians attributed to witchcraft, is visited upon the people at night, the same that is said to offer cover for nocturnal practice of witchcraft in some communities in contemporary Africa.

From this single comparison, it does look like some of the Africans of our times seem to think that they are running away from their own customs. However, when you really look at it, they appear to be running towards practices that are but variants of what they are running away from. If we are to put it in less flattering words, these Africans in areas like Mberengwa seem to be preoccupied with the business of imitating people who are busy ignorantly imitating the ancient ways practiced by our own people for millennia until we started to abandon them a few years ago.

Ralph Sibande The argument here was not about FAITH but about the identity of the Exodus pharaoh.

I didnt quote any source.

I simply pointed out that the bible fails to identify this pharaoh by name. And that it is unusually silent about pyramids.

All this was not quoted from any source but based on my reading of the bible.

You have then went on to discredit me and my "sources".

I am still trying to figure out which narrative I want to force on people to agree with me.

I can proudly say I am a good reader of the bible. I have done nothing more than read my bible carefully.

Ralph Sibande Why should Egyptians bother to identify a non-event as far as they are concerned?

Not a single ancient Egyptian record talks about the Exodus. Their reason is simple: it never happened in their experience.

3 May 2014 at 19:25 · Edited · Like

Ralph Sibande

Ralph Sibande Its strange that you talk of names being blotted out but at the same time you seem to recall them. Don't you think you need psychiatric treatment? What have they done to you?

Black Technocrat Nyamuzihwa Masimba Musodza, the problem that some of us have are fairly simple.

(i) We grew up hearing that "Pharaoh" was very cruel. All alone we were made to believe that this one Egyptian king named pharaoh only to find out this was a title like president or prime minister.

Now, if some said President kept black people in bondage in America, is it unreasonable to ask which one of the 43 or 44 presidents was responsible? I think it is.

(ii) We cannot have an African leader be slandered for more than 2000 years and insist on not finding out which one of our ancient leaders was being defamed to the point where our own people, pharaoh's own people, besmirch one of their own.

I want to find out who this "Pharaoh" is so that I can really look at his reputation from our own perspective.

(iii) When I read the Bible story about David killing the giant Goliath, a story rammed down our throats since Sunday school, why must I not be startled when I then read the far much older story of Senuhe who fought and killed a giant that had been tormenting Senuhe's people? Senuhe's heroics precede those of David.

(iv) I find out that there was a 7-year drought in Egypt but the only problem is that it took place more than 1000 years before that of the time of Joseph the Patriarch. I have to question the Bible right away.

(v) When I run into an ancient story of a sister-in-law who attempts to seduce his husband's younger brother but goes on to accuse the young man of attempted sexual assault, I have to go back to the little story of Joseph the Patriarch's. He has a story not very dissimilar from that of Bata's story.

From just these 5 examples, I have to question the sincerity of the people who wrote the Bible. I come from a point of view that says the Biblical narratives have a solid historical foundation. Be that as it may, I also view the narratives as deliberately distorted to slander

Africans. It is from this perspective that some of us question the reluctance of the Bible and its defenders to name the pharaohs of oppression.

Lastly, it does not help matters when I go into the library for some research and I discover that a copy of one of the ancient texts of ancient Egypt was found in the tomb of a Christian monk. That monk may very well have been transcribing the ancient text but changing the characters and scenarios.

3 May 2014 at 21:40 · 8 Like · 2

Black Technocrat

Black Technocrat We will continue to look into Africa's history, Mpofu Mudzingwa Munhu. There is no choice here.