

## **Urban Myths Pertaining to Road Accidents in Zimbabwe: The Case of Chinhamo Service Centre along Seke Road (Linking Harare and Chitungwiza)**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper explores urban myths concerning road accidents that occur between the 16 kilometre and 17 kilometre pegs along Seke road linking Harare and Chitungwiza in Zimbabwe. We argue that there exist a range of views with regard to the exact causes and nature of the carnage that occurs on the one kilometre stretch, that is from Koala to Chinhamo service centre. Some people argue from a rational standpoint that contributing factors to the high accident rate include the bend in the road, the state of disrepair of the vehicles, and the condition of the road. However, this does not explain the mysterious events often believed to take place on the Koala to Chinhamo stretch of the road. Within Shona traditional belief systems, a place where accidents usually occur is haunted by the spirit(s) of a person or people who were murdered. The murdered people then come to haunt the living until the living atone for the murder. This paper considers the range of interpretations given to the accidents on this road, and argues that further accidents can only be prevented if all interpretations are recognized as valid.*

**Keywords:** African worldview, urban myths, road traffic accidents, traffic regulations, Christian worldview, Shona people

### **Introduction**

There are various interpretations of the causes and the nature of accidents that occur at Chinhamo Service centre, specifically the one kilometre stretch from Koala to Chinhamo along Seke road. These interpretations are made by a broad spectrum of people including ordinary citizens, traditionalists, the clergy, scholars, media practitioners, the police and above all people who frequently drive along the highway. In this paper, we argue that the interpretations that one might dismiss as mythical may not necessarily be regarded as such by individuals who have witnessed the carnage first hand and who think scientific explanations are insufficient. We derive the definition of myth from Isidore Okpewho who views myths as the basic imaginative resource from which larger cultural values derive. Myths are indicative of a society that is constantly engaged in creative imagination and also engages in "abstract philosophical speculation". In his seminal text, *Myth in Africa*, Isidore Okpewho defines myths in Africa, "not as tale-type or genre, but as a quality-that quality of fancy which informs the creative and configurative powers for the human mind in varying degrees of intensity".(Okpewho, 1983, 219). We suggest that non-scientific responses to road accidents are such an instance of "fancy" and should not simply be dismissed. From the first of May 2008 to the thirty first of May 2009, thirty-two (32) fatal accidents at the one kilometre stretch were recorded; there were a hundred injuries and fourteen fatalities in nine of these accidents.(Traffic Accident Book (TAB) Register, ZRP Hatfield. 2008-9). Prior to this period, a bus from Harare to Chitungwiza overturned in unexplainable circumstances and many people were injured on the same stretch of road,

The confusion was worsened when a good Samaritan who was assisting in carrying the injured into ambulances had his car rammed into. People started speculation concerning the possible supernatural causes of the accident. Road accidents at Chinhamo Service centre along Seke road are a cause for concern for any who would care to give consideration to the frequency and the toll of accidents, bearing in mind that the Harare to Chitungwiza highway is among the finest of Zimbabwe's roads, boasting of a dual carriageway that it is in a relatively good condition. Chitungwiza residents who use the highway on a daily basis often witness fatal accidents and at times the wreckage takes time to clear, creating massive traffic jams that often lead to more accidents. Chitungwiza is a satellite town located 30 kilometres to the South of Harare and has an approximate population of 600 000 according to the census of 2012 (Pilot census, Central statistical office, 2012). To alleviate the transport problems within the satellite town the government has since mooted the idea of having a railway link between Harare and Chitungwiza, but this has not yet materialised. The Chitungwiza residents do not know about the developments and the challenges the government is facing concerning the railway.

There are a few industries to the western flank of the town which barely employ fifteen thousand people and the major business is retail, which is often carried out by informal traders. A greater percentage of the working class people work in Harare and some go to do their personal business in Harare.

### **Methodology**

Collection of data for this study was done through questionnaires and interviews on randomly selected respondents. Among these respondents were commuter omnibus drivers (45), police officers (90), passengers (150), private vehicle drivers (55), traditionalists (100), religious congregations (Roman Catholics (50), Anglicans (50), Methodists (45), Apostolic Faith members (71), Pentecostals (55), religious leaders/elders (50), pastors/ministers/priests (45). Actual data on the number of accidents that occurred between May 2008 and May 2009, the number of deaths and the number of injuries were collected from Hatfield police station with the approval of Police General headquarters. The sample varied from group to group on a sliding scale. Out of the three Police stations in Chitungwiza, questionnaires were responded to by about 30% of officers on each station. Drivers and passengers of commuter omnibuses were interviewed at convenient bus stops along the road, Private motorists were interviewed at the service station on this bad stretch. Religious people were interviewed at their usual places of congregation,

### **Analysis of Data and Research findings**

Responses from the questionnaires and verbal interviews, about what the causes of the accidents were, can be categorized under the following headings: Shona religious and cultural beliefs, Christian beliefs, and references to the road traffic regulations and laws. In the Chinhamo debacle, various views and opinions were put across by many people and some of them can easily be dismissed as make belief stories. However to those who have witnessed some of the carnage and to people who believe in Christianity and those who believe in Shona cosmology, there is nothing unreal about the stories, these are real stories and their causes, these people feel strongly, need to be addressed as a matter of urgency as failure only may lead to further deaths. Asked about the main cause of accidents at the place, one respondent, Tawanda Zvinairo\* pointed out: "People say, two people were run over by a car there way back" (the respondent could not remember when exactly) "and from that moment, accidents began to occur but I don't know how far true it is".

Another respondent, Maidei Jamu\* had this to say: "That is a tricky place because people testify seeing people or figures on the way and if they try to avoid them they get off the road and an accident occurs". Another version of the later response goes, a beautiful woman wearing a wig is often seen at night, smiling and beckoning to individual motorists and those who know that she is a visitation simply run over her. What they only hear is "*wigi yangu, wigi yangu!*" (*My wig, my wig!*) as the woman disappears into thin air. When such stories are exchanged by commuters passing by the place, some women do not take this lightly, at times they interject and point out that actually babies are seen crawling and as drivers try to avoid them, they get involved in fatal accidents. To further confirm this, the arguments go, that is why the place claims a lot of children. One driver testified that he of all the people did not believe that there was anything amiss at the place up to a point when in one of the evening drives he felt his hand clasped and the steering wheel got twisted as the vehicle made for the ditch, he only survived, as he puts it, by shouting the name "Jesus" and stamping on the clutch and brake pedals.

He argued that, usually, the visitations target lone drivers and even where there are many people in the vehicle the visitations may only present themselves to the driver.

One story goes: A kombi was travelling from Harare to Chitungwiza and there was a man who was wearing a hat that almost rendered his face invisible, seated next to the driver among other passengers. When the Kombi got to Koala, a woman seated at the back seat got into a trance and all of a sudden ordered the driver to stop the vehicle immediately as there was an accident about to happen that would kill some passengers. Other passengers asked the driver to comply and truly the Kombi came to a screeching halt. It later turned out that the woman belonged to the apostolic sect. She claimed that she had been instructed by the Holy Spirit. She asked every man to take off his hat before they passed along the Chinhamo area and men who had hats in the Kombi complied except for the one seated next with the driver. It was observed, he was not keen and this invited vitriol from other passengers as they claimed they were behind time.

One daring passenger snatched the hat off only for everybody to realize that there was no head. At this juncture the man disappeared into thin air, for it was an apparition. The woman, still in a trance, took charge, singing "Hosanna" and everybody else in the Kombi began singing, chanting prayers as the Kombi moved slowly past the stretch of the road adjacent to Chinhamo service centre. Takawira Kazembe (2012) shows that leading spirit mediums in Zimbabwe who were consulted about similar phenomena say that when a person dies he goes to a state of existence where he/she joins his/her ancestors. They examine his/her life activities before they accept him/her into their ranks. If there are outstanding issues the ancestors order him/her to go back and get the issues rectified. For example, if the deceased was murdered, they will order him/her to go back and ensure that restitution is effected. The soul of the deceased will attempt to obtain restitution. It plays havoc on the murderer(s). If, for some reason, the murderer does not pay up, the deceased tries all tricks to gain the attention of those ignoring it. These tricks may include harassing people who pass by the scene of murder.

The question people ask is whether these visitations are real or whether they are merely diversionary statements by reckless and drunk drivers who would be keen to shirk criminal liability. There are stories of drivers who see forests in front of them on the road, and apply emergency brakes to avoid hitting trees, only to realize there were no trees. There are other stories of drivers trying to avoid herds of cattle on the road. The drivers in turn employ all possible avoidance manoeuvres against nonexistent cattle only to get involved in accidents. There is a story of a man who was developing a property in Borrowdale, in the Eastern suburbs of Harare but lived in the western suburbs of Harare. He visited his Borrowdale property on a Friday afternoon and was there until sunset. On his way to the western suburbs he stopped at the shopping center close to Borrowdale Police Station and met two friends. The man does not drink alcohol but he sat with his drinking friends at a restaurant. At about 8 pm he told his friends that he was going home. The friends asked for a lift to their home in the area. After leaving his friends, the man decided to drive towards a road he knew well, and while driving towards that road, the man saw a forest ahead of him.

Suddenly, there was no road and he felt he was hitting trees. He finally stopped the car, got out to inspect for damages on the car. Finding no damage on the car, he opened the driver's door to proceed on his journey home. He suddenly heard a woman's voice: "Are you alright?" The man answered: "Yes I am OK. But I am not sure about the car." Confident that there was a person to share the experience, he went round the car again, lighting a cigarette in the process. The woman said "You are lucky because many people have died here!" He suddenly realized that the very tall white lady had vanished. He proceeded home at between 5 and 10 km per hour, very scared. His flight to Kenya was at 11.00 am the following morning. He visited the scene of his ordeal. There were no trees. All he saw were the skid marks. On his return from Nairobi 3 weeks later his friends told him that he should have followed their advice and followed the directions they had given him. They said a prominent man had killed his wife at that spot. A few months later, a prominent businessman had a fatal accident on the same spot.

Writing on the causes of a string of terrible crashes on Harare to Masvingo highway in Zimbabwe in an article entitled, "Zimbabweans say angry ancestors behind road accidents" posted on the website on 11 December 2009; Robyn Dixon reports that some people point out that traditional rituals to appease the dead have not been performed for years. Among some visitations reported by ordinary people, it is said that there are "pedestrians crossing the road at night, dressed in black, walking so slowly that drivers are forced to swerve -- ghostly figures not made of skin and bone are reported as walking at the place.

In addition, it is said that the mermaid in the Pimbi river, got angry at the blood and gasoline spilled when a bus crashed into the water two years ago and went on to cause more accidents.(Ibid). As is clear from this report from Dixon, there are cultural interpretations for the phenomenon. In Zimbabwe, leading spirit mediums point out that places like the one kilometre peg between Koala and Chinhamo need to be cleansed ritually by spiritual practitioners who will plead with the spirit to leave the innocent people alone and obtain restitution from the murderer. These spiritual practitioners will plead with the ancestors of the spirit to assist the suffering soul. They assist the spirit to locate the perpetrator(s) and achieve restitution. According to leading spirit mediums, there is no other way to solve the problem of avenging spirits except restitution, and many Zimbabweans hold this view too. A further dimension to this is that it is believed by many that the deceased will entice the perpetrator(s) to commit more murders, as if to say, you killed me, kill others so that I shall have company. When the soul of the deceased is sent back to achieve restitution, it is believed, it goes back to the scene of death and tries to locate the perpetrator.

It tries to attract attention and causes unexplainable events to occur, including some which lead to further accidents. Further accidents lead to increased numbers of spirits needing appeasement and the location becomes a black spot. Unexplainable events will be occurring at the scene of the murders, unreal people will be noticed doing all sorts of things: loitering, drawing peoples' attention, handling moving cars' steering wheels, sitting on bonnets of moving cars, running along moving cars, etc. The perpetrator(s) of the killings, many believe, have to pay restitution and only then will the problem cease. According to leading spirit mediums, when the murdered get compensated, the situation normalizes. Commenting on the arguments put forward by leading spirit mediums, Michael Bourdillon (1998) argues that among the Shona avenging spirits are terrifying and can attack harshly and suddenly. There is also a less positive side to this as "an angry spirit is not easily appeased. Thus the angry spirit of a man murdered some eighty years ago is believed to have caused the death of the two brothers who plotted the murder, their father and six of their children, and still to claim the occasional victim among their descendants while the surviving relatives are still trying to raise the large fine in cattle necessary to appease the spirit."(Bourdillon, 1998: 233)

In the above, Bourdillon reports the belief that the spirit of the dead demands retribution from the living relatives and children of someone who has committed murder. This is only redressed, it is believed, when the perpetrator's family atones through payment of cattle and a virgin girl as the deceased victim's family's demands. This is corroborated by Takawira Kazembe (2012) who reports that members of the perpetrator's family, both the nuclear and extended family, are believed to fall victim to purges by the spirit of the deceased victim and do not have viable options other than paying the victim's family. Whereas it is true to say that Human rights pressure groups and the Girl Child Network in Zimbabwe have been on the forefront fighting against the practice of atoning with an innocent virgin girl alongside a herd of cattle, in many instances the practice still happens and goes on unreported. This shows the significance attached to the fact that the carnage is understood to be caused by the *ngozi* (the deceased avenging spirit) Thus at the Koala to Chinhamo stretch, it is not uncommon to hear drivers who believe in these visitations talking to themselves whenever they have near misses to accidents to the effect that: "*Siyana neni, handina ukama newe uye handina mhosva newe*". (Leave me alone, I am not related to you and I do not have any crime against you).

Respondents to the questionnaire, both men and women selected randomly by the researchers, also relayed their fears of foul play by business people who operate commuter omnibuses, buses and kombis. Generally, respondents expressed their belief that business people are in the habit of sacrificing innocent people to enable their businesses to flourish. The practice, known as *kuchekeresa* in Shona is often exaggerated to such an extent that it is held to be the norm, in accusations against greedy business people who are suspected of using body parts of victims to create strong charms that in turn make those businesses flourish. In one of the accidents that occurred at Chinhamo, it is rumoured that one child corpse was found beheaded and the head was never recovered. Tendai Madhukeko\* whose cousin got killed in one fatal accident in a minibus that claimed nine lives in Nyanyadzi\* claimed that there were two children and a cousin of the owner of the minibus among the nine deceased. The omnibus owner, who is also a bishop of a certain 'mysterious church' insisted that the funeral of his deceased children was to be held at a private location in Harare and only church members were allowed to attend the funeral and not relatives. The business owner is known to have bought a herd of twenty cattle and four new omnibuses some few weeks after the funeral. To Madhukeko, this can only be indicative of the levels of greed and unscrupulousness that prevail in the society.

Of course the Police dismissed such claims as mythical and not corroborated by evidence. However, we argue that some of the stories and their interpretations are only too real in the minds of ordinary Zimbabweans, and that any response to these accidents cannot simply dismiss ordinary people's understandings of events. The societal beliefs in the existence of such practices mean that ordinary people, at least subconsciously, draw connections between events and the lives of those whose bus, omnibus or kombi has been involved in an accident. When they discover that a certain business person's buses or kombis are time and again involved in accidents, they may demand to have them outlawed and permits rescinded irrespective of the fact that the vehicles may be in good condition. The hidden text in the outcry is that the business person has bad charms that cost the public a heavy toll in terms of life. This practice is captured in some literary texts by Zimbabweans notably Claudius Matsikiti's *Akadzipwa neganda remhuru* (He, the expert, was choked by the skin of a calf), Bisset Chitsike's *Wakandigona wena* (You Managed Me) and George Mujajati's *The sun will rise again*. In the later text, Mujajati gives reader's insight into the mind of a certain wayward businessman.

Nyati, the businessman who murders a child called Thabitha contemplates:

My *n'anga* has promised that he can prepare me a lot more powerful charms if I could bring him the private parts and the heart of a young innocent virgin. That innocence would be the factor that would effectively blind anyone to any crime I would have committed... (Also)...the charm would bring me unbelievably immense wealth and political power. (Mujajati, 1999, p92)

The *kuchekeresa* practice is believed by ordinary people to be rampant, yet these ordinary people barely provide substantive evidence of such cases. When they discuss matters to do with accidents where many people die, they often do not dare mention names of people they believe to be the perpetrators of the evil spell, as they risk being taken to court for contravening The Witchcraft Suppression Act [Chapter 9:19] of the Zimbabwean Constitution which makes it a crime to accuse anyone of witchcraft. There are times when it becomes a muffled public secret that x and y's buses must not be boarded as they become renowned for claiming people's lives through accidents. Thus, in Zimbabwe, buses servicing long routes have been subject to public scrutiny. One businessman had to change the paint colours of his buses because he was running out of business as the company became known for being involved in accidents which the government was on record declaring national disasters. The classification of accidents as "national disasters" often occur when many people die in a single accident in Zimbabwe and the government assists the bereaved families with food, coffins to bury their deceased ( those who would have died out of the accident).

Causes of Accidents according to the Christian World View

- In May 2009, various church denominations gathered to hold prayers and church services at the open ground that is near the place of the accidents. Commenting on the demography of religious groupings in Zimbabwe, Munetsi Ruzivo (2012) puts Christianity (including syncretic forms) at 85% of the whole population about 10,200,000 (Apostolic 33%, Pentecostal 17%, Protestant 16%, Roman Catholic 10%, Other Christian 8%). The dominant churches are the African Church, the, Anglican Church, the Baptist Church, the Lutheran Church, the Reformed Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The interdenominational gathering included people from a cross section of the aforementioned churches. A well wisher also provided a tractor and mowers to clear the place of long grass and to increase visibility. An interview with one of the pastors, Reverend Kachipapa King of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe who organised the interdenominational service revealed that Christians view the place as a battleground where the devil had been waylaying humanity. In Christian cosmology, the devil is believed to be a rebel angel, Lucifer who was thrown from heaven after disobeying God. It is also believed that the devil is going to face judgment for the disobedience. As the devil awaits judgment day, it is believed that this renegade angel is busy causing havoc to humankind and also recruiting mankind to go with him/her to hell (a place believed to harbour an everlasting inferno). Commenting on the Chinhomo debacle, Reverend Kachipapa King pointed out that the place harbours territorial spirits which need to be bound lest the devil's kingdom would flourish (Kachipapa King, 2010). The pastor went on to quote Ephesians chapter 6 verse 12 which states "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." (Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Ephesians 6, vs 12)

Thus, the idea of having a church service at the place was done in the belief that it was a way of fighting the evil spirits and chasing the demon that was frequenting the place. He further pointed out that there was a whole subject of demonology and the type of demon that afflicted such places could be a district or provincial spirit and these demons are different from the continental spirits that afflicted whole continents. Echoing the same sentiments, Shamiso Nyamupachitu\* who attended the service pointed out that when things proved to be difficult to understand, Jesus was the answer hence she subscribed to the idea of holding prayer meetings at the place. She insisted that the spirit of death itself needs to be cast away. Another respondent who attended the service, Edward Nyamapfeka\* pointed out that what was happening at the place could only be interpreted as the devil's machinations and these machinations can easily be detected because prior to such serious accidents, it is not unusual to see dogs and cats run over by cars especially on the highway in the Hatfield area. Christians were quick to dismiss the idea that spirit mediums would provide a solution by helping assuage the aggrieved spirits. There was general consensus among Christian respondents that the devil is the main culprit and no amount of recompense can satiate the devil's desire for blood and evil actions.

A commentator on Christianity and spirit beliefs in Africa Collins Armah writes that "the constant attribution of everything (including road accidents) to the work of the devil or witches and wizards is (a) source of worry." (2009) Armah argues that beliefs in superstition and prayer have hampered the development of science and technology in Ghana, and in Africa as a whole. He insists that the practice of attributing every misfortune to the work of either God or the devil is commonplace in Africa and that this usually leads to the removal of human agency, a damaging trend. To him, people must take responsibility for their misdemeanors and not blame the invisible. He argues further that (in Ghana where he is), it is retrogressive to blame road accidents on anything other than human failure to abide by rules and standards. He points out: "It is sickening to hear people call during radio phone-in programs attributing the trends of road accidents to witchcrafts whilst our roads are not good; when most of the accidents are caused by our own negligence; when many police officers collect bribes instead of arresting drivers that flout the law; and many obvious human errors that could lead to accident(s) on our roads (Armah, "Prayer Camps and Superstitious Beliefs: A Challenge to Science and Technology in Africa" at <http://modernghana.com/news/207838> posted on 24 March 2009).

While much of what Armah writes is useful and important, the present paper disagrees with his assertion that one needs to disregard the intervention of spirituality in road accidents. Acceptance of the idea that much of what occurs on the roads can be ascribed to spirituality does not amount to acknowledging that the devil (Lucifer or Satan as Armah puts it) would seem as if he/she was thrown from heaven to Africa. Armah's own observations fail to convince especially when it comes to the analysis of accidents that occur at Chinhamo. The slight bend on the stretch is not the only slight bend on the Harare Chitungwiza road, nor is it the worst meandering bend. Also, it is not true to say that defective vehicles are the only ones that get involved in accidents along the one kilometer stretch. That Police officers in Africa, be it in Ghana or Zimbabwe, take bribes and leave drivers for imminent death is true though the exact impact of such behavior needs verification through a systematic study. Without such a study, we argue that though cases of corrupt officers may not be uncommon in the media (both visual and audio), to describe these as the main causes of accidents could be an overgeneralization. From our findings in this study, we argue that, alongside these possible interpretations, it is also crucial to accept spirituality as an interpretation of these road accidents at the one kilometer stretch. Ignoring this important aspect of people's lives has a negative impact on the authorities' ability to prevent further accidents.

Dongo Remi Kouabenan (1998, 246) argues that there are substantive studies which prove that the analysis of road accidents varies from people to people and "it is also linked to certain characteristics inherent in the analyst and in the social group to which one belongs: beliefs, value systems, norms, experiences in common, attitudes, roles, social and technical practices". However, according to Police reports, excessive speed, inattentive driving and misjudging distance are the major contributory factors to the accidents. (TAB Register, ZRP, Hatfield 2008-9). In an interview, a traffic officer argued that drivers have a tendency to underestimate the slight bend and the slight depression at Chinhamo, hence they do not even bother to put extra care when passing through the place. What then happens is that they realize when it is too late that they have misjudged and out of desperation, they panic and become a threat to other road users. Though the officer conceded that people talk a lot about spirituality and visitations at the place, these claims are not corroborated by evidence.

In some cases expert accident evaluators are called and they report speeding in excess of 130 kilometres per hour. Given the fact that other road users will be travelling at speeds in the range of 100 kilometres per hour, dangerous overtaking will occur. In as much as discussing the occurrences of accidents in Zimbabwe and Africa in general is concerned it is imperative to point out that apart from what data can be gathered on the ground, the subject is highly emotive given the fact that it is also a fertile ground for the damning stereotypes of Africa created by the West. In addition it is pertinent to point out that the frequency of accidents is not a preserve for Africa, neither is it a unique African subject. Ashley Gilmour (2009) writes that “globally, road accidents kill around 1,2 million people a year and cause injury to about 40 times the people killed”. She goes on to enumerate various factors that cause accidents, among them bad roads, decrepit vehicles, bad weather, driver behavior and pedestrian behavior. Although the causative factors that Gilmour cites are critical in the understanding of road accidents, we insist that there is a spiritual dimension as pointed out by most of the respondents to questionnaires especially in the interpretation of accidents at the Koala to Chinhamo stretch. Any response to the road accident toll, we argue, needs to consider spiritual understandings alongside those listed by Gilmour, and commonly accepted by the authorities.

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