

The role of traditional healers in conflict resolution in Zimbabwe, 1890–1980

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Abstract

This paper analyses the historical role of traditional healers (n'anga/chiremba) in conflict resolution in Zimbabwe. Historically, traditional healers occupied a powerful position in Zimbabwean society. Not only were they healers but they also handled social problems and contributed to peace and reconciliation. However, colonial rule in Zimbabwe (1890–1980) ushered in a spirited challenge to the authority of traditional healers. They were ridiculed as fraudsters who perpetuated unfounded superstitions. Nonetheless, traditional healers continued to exist underground. Notwithstanding that, their role and contribution to peacebuilding remains on the fringe of academic inquiry. The question that this paper addresses is how and under what conditions traditional healers contributed to conflict resolution at the grassroots level. The paper focuses mostly on records of conflict and violence in court cases, underscoring how witnesses' evidence brought attention to the role of traditional healers in reconciliation. It demonstrates the various contexts in which traditional healers' interventions were alluded to but ignored in the state's attempts to administer justice. By digging up obscured and misrepresented evidence of traditional healers' practices in conflict resolution in the colonial archive and in-depth interviews, we unravel this understated but most crucial element in the process of conflict resolution in Zimbabwe since 1890.

Keywords: Traditional healers, conflict resolution, peace, security, justice, Zimbabwe