

Understanding the Traditional and Contemporary Purpose of the Njelele Rainmaking Shrine through the Oral Testimonies of Local People in Matobo

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Abstract

The Njelele shrine is located in the Matobo Hills, an area that has been declared a world heritage site. The site of the Njelele shrine is of paramount spiritual significance in Zimbabwe, and it is visited annually between August and September for ritual purposes just before the rain season begins. The rituals are not limited to rainmaking but also relate to, for example, asking for forgiveness after society's wrongdoings and asking for cures for diseases. During the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, this shrine was consulted by politicians and liberation fighters, and, in contemporary times, war veterans still consult the Ngwali oracle. It is believed that many years ago a voice came from the Njelele rocks but that it has since disappeared because of the disrespect people have shown to the area. This article conveys the views of the local community about the traditional and contemporary purposes of the Njelele national shrine, and in so doing aims to provide some insight into these people's views. It also looks at the diverse values that different interest groups attach to the site. The researcher mainly used oral testimonies as sources of information but also consulted some published sources.

Keywords: Njelele; Mambo Hills; spiritualism; nationalism; intangible heritage; Matobo heritage site; Mwali religion

Setting the Scene of the Njelele Story

The Njelele shrine is located in Matobo Hills (also known as Matopos Hills), an area that has been declared a world heritage site by the United Nations Educational,



Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). UNESCO (2003) granted the area this distinction based on a number of factors, including the following:

- It has the highest concentrations of rock art in Southern Africa.
- There is a strong interaction between communities and the landscape, manifested in the rock art and also in the long-standing religious traditions still associated with the rocks.
- The Mwari religion, centred on Matobo, which may date back to the Iron Age, has the most powerful oracular tradition in Southern Africa.

With regard to the Matobo Hills being the centre of the Mwari religion it can be stated that the Matobo rocks “are seen as the seat of god and ancestral spirits. Sacred shrines within the hills are places where contact can be made with the spiritual world ... the living traditions in Southern Africa and one that could be said to be of universal significance” (UNESCO 2006). The Mwari/Mwali/Ngwari religion, which is associated with the Njelele site, is not limited to Matobo. Clarke (2008, 2) mentions that the site of the Mambo Hills (Manyanga or Intaba zika Mambo), which was declared a national monument in 1952, is indicated as sacred and part of the Mwari religion by the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe. There are also other shrines, for example, Bembe, Dzilo and Dula. Clarke (2008, 5) describes the Dula as the Red Axe (Impi yehloka elibomvu) shrine, which is associated with war, especially the 1896 Ndebele Anglo War.

There is more than one theory about the origins of the Mwari religion, but Clarke (2008, 2) theorised as follows:

Mwali is a Karanga/Kalanga God of creation, of the universe, who provides beings with fruits of the earth, as well as rain. This is an unseen God who lives everywhere. He is associated with certain hills, mountains, rivers and valleys, which are regarded as sacred. He may reveal himself through natural wonders such as lightning or through oracular voices, usually speaking out of caves ... [He] is served by a priesthood that interprets the voices emanating from the “oracle.”

Besides the religious importance of the Matobo Hills, it also represents a part of African nationalism in Zimbabwe. This is exemplified by the action of the National Democratic Party (NDP), which was formed in the 1960s, when it called upon its executives to confront the Rhodesian government at an inspired meeting held near Mzilikazi’s grave at the Matobo Hills (Ranger et al. 2015, 17).

The site of the Matobo Hills also brings to the fore the politics of heritage and commemoration, or what Fontein (2009) calls the politics of the dead. In the Matobo

Hills, Rhodes and also the first king of the Ndebele people, Mzilikazi, are buried. Nyathi (2016, 7) outlines that, apart from the natural attributes of the Matobo Hills,

there are numerous graves of historical figures within the hills such as King Mzilikazi, Prince Nguboyenja and Prince Sidojiwe, Cecil John Rhodes, Allan Wilson and his colleagues, Dr Leander Starr Jameson, Sir Charles Coghlan and the remains of those who took part in the two world wars (Memorial Order of Tin Hats (MOTHS)).

These are just a few examples that show that the Matobo Hills have value for many people, with each group of people attaching different spiritual, cultural and memorial values to the area.

The Story of Njelele

This article captures the story of Njelele as narrated by six interviewees, namely, Bonyongo Ndlovu, Joseph Malaba, Jonasi Tshokodo Ncube, Nephas Ndlovu, Minyane Kaliba and Thenjiwe Lesabe. Some of the themes that are explored are the origins of Njelele, nationalism, African spiritualism, Christianity and the politics of dead bones. The motivation for using the oral history approach in this article is that a lot has been written about the Matobo Hills by archaeologists, geologists and historians but, in most of these written renditions, the voices of the local people were subdued whereas the voices of the historians were loud and clear. The Njelele story that is told here comes mostly from people on the ground and not from people in higher echelons in terms of knowledge production. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2007, 9) explained that subalterns have no archives and that orality is their only power; their concerns can only be captured well through oral testimonies.

Okihiro (1981, 42) averred that oral history is not only a tool or method for recovering history but that it is also a theory of history which maintains that the common people and dispossessed have a history to tell since there has been an overemphasis on the elite at the expense of the masses, leading to the writing of mythical and distorted history. Mazarire (2012, 44), citing Bhabha, associated oral history with the “everyday life-history approach” that represents a shift in focus from the traditional and conventional modes of “doing history” to calls “for the historian as a social critic to realize, and take full responsibility for the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present.” Mazarire (2012, 45) referred to Eckert and Jones who argued that “everyday life histories” privilege oral sources “without giving too much power to ordinariness. Instead, individual accounts and biographies cast in the realm of everyday life promote micro-histories that magnify the scale of observation in the analysis of general historical trends.” This is why the oral history approach was chosen for this study. At the same time, however, the author also consulted written sources.

Origins of Njelele

The Mwali or Ngwali cult recognises the following shrines, amongst others: Njelele, Dula, Wililani, Neyile, Ntogwa and Manyangwa. Some scholars believe that this cult may have originated at Great Zimbabwe together with the Mhondoro (ancestral spirit) cult, but became dominant in the southern parts of the country as an oracular movement that also incorporated ancestral elements after it had moved to the Matopos shrines. Others are of the view that the cult was introduced by the Kalanga of Venda origin.

In an oral history interview, Lesabe (1988) argued as follows:

To be possessed by a Njelele spirit you do not need to have been born in that family [of Njelele custodians]. That spirit chooses whoever it likes. The people that were known normally to possess those powers are Venda people. The rainmakers are believed to be Vendas. Because that is where Njelele came from. It came from Venda.

When asked whether the Nguni people who came with Mzilikazi from South Africa were ever part of the custodians of the Njelele shrine, Lesabe's (1988) response was as follows:

One day the shrine said, "I want my son to come here." Then the people who were sent, the chiefs, asked "How shall we know who your son is?" He said "Amongst the royal boys you will find one who has sores on his head." That was Hlangabese. The shrine did take some of Mzilikazi's children to its own. They became the children of the shrine like Hlangabese was. The mother of the late Chief Sigombe Mathema was also daughter of the shrine. These were both Khumalo boy and Khumalo girl but once possessed they became Tovela, which is the totem of the shrine.

However, Lesabe (1988) clarified that, "except for those possessed by the Njelele spirit, the AmaNdebele would not get involved in the issues of custodianship. First of all it's not our culture. It's not our tradition."

The shrines associated with the Mwali cult in Matabeleland lie deep in the Kalanga community. Dube (2015, 52) had this to say about the relationship of the shrines and the Kalanga people and its origin:

The Kalanga have (re)constructed their identity around the Mwali or Ngwali cult whose shrines include Njelele, Dula, Wililani, Neyile, Ntogwa and Manyangwa amongst others. There exists no formal knowledge of the functions of the Mwali cult prior to the coming of the Ndebele in the 1830s, and its origin has been a source of heated debate among scholars. Some scholars believe that it may have originated at Great Zimbabwe together with the Mhondoro (ancestral spirit) cult, but became dominant in the southern parts of the country as an oracular movement that had also incorporated ancestral

elements after it moved to the Matopos shrines. Others are of the view that the Mwali cult was introduced by the Kalanga of Venda origin.

In regard to the view that the Mwari cult originated with the Venda people, Dube (2015, 53) referred to Ndlovu-Gwakuba who argued that “the cult is said to have been introduced by the migrants from Vendaland of the Dziva totem and was later developed by the people of the Shoko totem. The Mwari cult in the Matopos reached its mature development during the Shoko period.” Ncube (1989), one of the shrine keepers, to whose family the duty was delegated to be custodians of Njelele, traced his roots to the Venda. However, he said later that they became abeNyubi, and his praise names were associated with the characteristics of the Mwari cult. His praise names are eNcube, eGudu, eThobela, eDziba, eDombo linopoteleka. The praise name “Thobela” is given to all who are part of the Mwari cult, and “eDombo linopoteleka” is the Kalanga praise name that means the rock that shifts. The belief in the Venda origin, which later became the abeNyubi origin, is common in Matobo, and this may lend credence to the belief that the Mwari cult was of Venda origin. However, more research is needed in this regard.

Ndlovu (1981, in his oral history interview, argued that the Mwali cult is of Nyai origin and he indicated that the Nyai people speak a Kalanga dialect. He also noted that there is the tradition that advances the theory of the Mwali cult in Matobo being brought by two Venda brothers who, when they advanced along the Tuli River into Kalangaland, built shrines, one of which was Njelele. In Ndlovu’s (1988) interview, the name of Njenjema appeared frequently, and Ndlovu described him as one who belonged “to the Nleya clan, the Nilikawu clan who have the chieftainship. They introduced the Ngwali cult to the Kalanga people.” Malaba (1984), when interviewed, explained that they originated in Venda and were directed by the Ngwali/Mwali cult to come to the new shrine of Njelele.

Mwali Religion in Relation to Zimbabwe’s War of Liberation

In one of the oral history interviews with Lesabe (1988), she started her story of Njelele by stating that when King Mzilikazi of the Ndebele people came to Zimbabwe he paid tribute to the Njelele shrine. This tribute was paid in the form of ten head of black cattle, which the Njelele people, according to their custom, led to the top of the shrine. Then the cattle just disappeared and nobody knew what became of them. Another ten head of cattle were sent to Esengwe (another Njelele shrine). This was a tradition that the King carried out every year. Dube (2015, 53) referred to Gann’s study of Kalanga traditional customs in which the following was noted:

Makalanga high god was based in the Matopos, and although the Ndebele conquered the Kalanga, they themselves fell under the Makalanga religious sway. This

demonstrates that despite the domineering nature of the Ndebele immigrants, they realised the importance of the Kalanga cultural beliefs, which can be read as an acknowledgement of Kalanga identity.

Lesabe (1988) narrated that the case of King Lobengula was contrary to the above. King Lobengula refused to pay homage to the shrine, and the problems he experienced with his leadership were ascribed to his stance towards the shrine. Lesabe described the situation as follows:

When the shrine gave Lobengula instructions for him to come to the shrine he refused to go to the shrine. He always sent his indunas there; he never went personally ... for example, he was given a name by the shrine which he refused to adopt. He refused that name and said, "There is no other man who can give me a name other than my father." Particularly that the shrine spoke a different language from his language. He despised that.

As portrayed by Lesabe (1988), the failure of King Lobengula to defeat the imperialists who wanted his kingdom could have been caused by his hesitant behaviour in paying homage to the Mwali religion as his father Mzilikazi had done.

Lesabe (1988) further argued that during the Anglo Ndebele war in 1893 the voice of the shrine was heard talking to a Nguni man who was known as Mtuwane Dhlohlhlo. This man played a major role in ending the war as he was given the power of war by the shrine according to the Nguni man. So when it came to wars (especially the war of Red Axe or Impi yehloka elibomvu or the Anglo Ndebele War during the times of King Mzilikazi and King Lobengula, the Ndebele usually consulted the shrine (Lesabe 1988). Clarke (2008, 6) argued that the Red Axe shrine at Dula in the Matobo Hills is associated with war. This shrine had "to be consulted before going into and finishing military operations. When the King was going to war he would be treated with herbs." This argument was supported by Ncube (1989) who explained in his oral history interview that they went to Dula when they were about to go to war and that they received instructions and predictions and advice about how they should conduct themselves. Ncube (1989) also associated the Dula shrine with the capacity of ending disease. According to Lesabe (1988), Joshua Nkomo went to the Dula shrine only once (in 1953), at which time the shrine told him that "there is going to be bloodshed, but you, son of Nyongolo, great son of Maweme, you will lead this nation ... nobody will touch your body. I will fight with you, let's go to the war together." Lesabe (1988) postulated that it was this prophecy that made ZIPRA so powerful.

In the same interview with Lesabe 1988, Terence Ranger, the historian, who was a co-interviewer, had a follow-up comment to Lesabe's statement when he said he knew Mtuwane Dhlohlhlo had played an important role in the 1896 uprising, and that he had

been described by the white people as the mouthpiece of the Mlimo, even though Cobbing (1976) disagreed with that. According to Cobbing (1976, 442) the “cult was Venda, not Rozvi, in origin; that in fact no named priest played any part in the rising.”

Dube (2015, 137–138) gave some insight into the relationship that the war veterans of the Second Chimurenga had with the Mwali religion by saying that “moreover, Kalanga identity as represented by the Manyangwa shrine gained momentum in the years following the outbreak of the liberation struggle. The guerrillas derived great benefit from their success in working with the mediums at Manyangwa shrine.” Dube (2015, 139) further stated that “as the liberation struggle intensified, the Manyangwa shrine became very instrumental as a base for guerrillas.” Dube (2015, 139) cited Manyangwa Dube as stating the following:

This shrine [referring to Manyangwa] was a hospital. It cured a number of guerrillas who were sick during 1976 and 1978. It was more than a hospital, the guerrillas from all sorts of background also showed some respect and trust to our Kalanga religion. I remember a Ndebele guerrilla who said “your Kalanga religion is very powerful, thank you for healing me.”

Dube (2015, 140) reported that “the guerrillas who sought treatment in the shrine also got healed, and consulted on spiritual matters at the shrine,” and he cited the words of December Moyo, an ex-ZiPRA military man, who had said in an oral history interview he had had with him:

Manyangwa is my saviour; I got healed at Manyangwa after struggling for over a year with my wound. In 1975 I went to consult Manyangwa and he said that I would not die during the war but I would be sought after independence. This is what exactly happened. I almost got killed by Mugabe’s 5th Brigade soldiers during the post-independence Gukurahundi civil war. Do not underestimate Kalanga religion.

Clarke (2008, 23) found that there were “close connections between Mwali religion and the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU). ZAPU’s armed forces, called ZIPRA, visited Manyanga and respected the place, though they did not go to the shrines ... Andrew Siborani Moyo, the [shrine] priest, was a ZAPU driver.”

Spirit-Medium Discourse Hijacked by Politicians

The influence of politicians or the government in the management of Njelele dates back to the colonial period. One of the interesting oral testimonies to that effect was given by Ndlovu (1981) in his interview. He said that after the Ndebele had arrived in the country and there had been no rain, Mr Thomas (the Native Commissioner around 1911) consulted Manyanga and Njenjema to perform rain ceremonies. He would give

Manyangwa and Njenjema a bag of grain to brew beer and ask them to perform the ceremony. During the ceremony, the rain mediums would not return to their homes before the rain fell. Dube (2015, 139) mentioned the interest of the Rhodesian government in the issues of African religion, which was demonstrated by their appointment of Latham, an anthropologist, to the position of Research Officer and giving him the task of

identifying the major spirits “of functional importance throughout Rhodesia,” their mediums, and their shrine centers and sacred places. Manyangwa was therefore identified in the Spirit Index as a possible guerrilla collaborator being possessed by an “alien spirit which prophesied and treated patients with medicine.”

This trend continued during the post-independence era. The leader of ZAPU, Joshua Nkomo, was involved in the formation of a traditional shrine committee that was going to address the challenges facing the management of the shrine. One of the interviewees, Nephas Ndlovu (1988), commented on this issue when he said, “Joshua Nkomo was behind this thing and he actually knows all the people who were in this committee. He was interested in reviving the importance of the shrine. We held several meetings at the shrine with Joshua and the committee and all the chiefs in Matabeleland, some as far as the Midlands. We held a meeting at Natisa in 1982.” However, this caused disharmony with his political foes who thought Joshua Nkomo was now using Njelele to gain political mileage. In support of this, Nephas Ndlovu (1988) narrated that Nkala, who was a prominent ZANU member, was not happy with Nkomo:

The interest that Ushewokunze had was also in Nkala. Certainly they thought that Joshua would gain ascendance over them if he used Njelele as a base. So Sitwanyana was kicked out from there, as a result of that. I didn’t hear that Nkala initiated that. I know it. I was there. The first meeting that Nkala came to was in 1983 when he made threats at a rally at Kezi, and subsequently after that he made pronouncements at meetings. He said Nkomo was using Njelele as a political platform over and above the political good of the nation.

Mwari Religion versus Christianity

When the missionaries came to Matopos they had no interest in interpreting the voices from the rocks; instead they took steps to claim the Matopos for Christ (Ranger 1999, 15). The missionary churches in the Matobo area were the Brethren Church of Christ, London Missionary Society and Seventh Day Adventist church. Mission schools, which came as a result of the incursion of Christianity into the area, were located right up against all the major shrines (Ranger 1999, 53). The Njelele Primary School, which was closer to the Njelele shrine, was run by the Seventh Day Adventist church. The Mtshabezi Missionary School of the Brethren Church of Christ was close to the

stronghold of three particularly influential Mwali priests, Siginyamatshe, Dapa and Vudze (Ranger 1999, 53). However, despite these spirited attempts by missionaries to scuttle the Mwali cult, the Manyangwa and Ntogwa shrines are still consulted today by both the Kalanga and Ndebele despite the influence of Christianity (Dube 2015, 140).

The attitude of the Christian church to the Mwali cult was clear, judging from the words of one of the interviewees, Mr Minyane Kalibe (1988), a devout Christian of the Dutch Reformed Church. He said that “we forgot about the Mwali cult, ancestral spirits and left that to our elders” when asked how he integrated Christianity with ancestral spirits.

Matobo Hills as the Centre of Different Values to Different People

Rhodes memorialisation has always been controversial and it continues to spark controversies. Recently, the University of Cape Town in South Africa started the “Rhodes must fall” movement, which led to the removal of the Rhodes statue from the university’s campus. However, in Zimbabwe his body is interred in the sacred hills of Matobo, the centre of Zimbabwe’s African spiritualism, and in the same geographic space where the founder king of the Ndebele people in Zimbabwe is also interred. Ranger et al. (2015, 11) in fact argued that the “Matopos hills were full of spirits. In eastern Matopos lay not only Mzilikazi’s tomb but also several shrines of the Mwali (High God) Cult; at Rhodes’ grave there were the spirits of the Rozwi and Banyubi rulers; to the south-west lay the senior Mwali shrine, Njelele In the end it was left to Rhodes to achieve a colonial triumph over the African spirit world.”

This awkward scenario has raised mixed emotions among the population of Zimbabwe. The radical voices have called for the removal of Rhodes’ remains from the sacred hills of Matobo. Ranger et al. (2015, 42) referred to an interview with Cain Mathema (currently the Minister of Provincial Affairs in Matabeleland North) in which he lamented that:

I wonder why 30 years after independence his grave is still found on the country’s traditional shrine of worship. It’s an insult to our ancestors and maybe that is the reason why our ancestors at Njelele, where we pray for rain, are no longer giving us enough rain The total liberation of Zimbabwe is not complete as long as the country continues to live on the legacy of our former masters. As long as the names remain, as long as the scar of Rhodes’ grave remains, it is not the psychological colonisation question alone that remains open, but the question of true freedom.

War veterans have also been pushing for the grave in the Matopos Hills to be dug up and Mr Rhodes’ remains to be returned to the United Kingdom, blaming them for the lack of the rain in the area (Laing 2012). These sentiments were echoed by ZANU PF youths in Bulawayo in 2016 who pushed for Rhodes’ grave to be dug up and his remains

to be thrown into the Zambezi River. In that way they showed their solidarity with University of Cape Town students who wanted the statue of Rhodes to be removed from their campus (Ndlovu 2015). In both situations and many others the Government of Zimbabwe has refused to succumb to these pressures mainly because of revenues that accrue from tourists that visit Rhodes' grave.

Ransford (1968, 62) argued that Rhodes knew the power of using buildings and monuments to symbolise conquest. In 1893, after the flight and death of King Lobengula, Rhodes decided to build himself a cottage on the remains of Lobengula's house as if saying he was now the successor to Lobengula and the ruler of Matabeleland. Ranger et al. (2015, 4) cited another interesting example involving Major Allan Wilson and his patrol team who pursued King Lobengula who was then killed by Matabele warriors. The remains of Major Allan Wilson and his group were initially interred in the Lupane District in Pupu but later Rhodes ordered their remains to be removed and buried in Great Zimbabwe. However, the bones were later removed and buried in Matopos next to Rhodes himself (Ranger et al. 2015, 39). Ranger et al. (2015, 4) argued that in so doing "Rhodes was planning to ideologically expropriate Zimbabwe as the symbolic centre of the Rhodesian state." So, from this background it can be deduced that Rhodes' burial in the Matobo Hills was a calculated move to show his conquering prowess over all what is and was important for black Zimbabweans. Taking note that Mzilikazi, the founding king of the Ndebele nation, is buried in the Matobo Hills, Rhodes became "determined that he would himself be buried in the Matopos so that his spirit could replace Mzilikazi's as owner of this wonderful stretch of country" (Ranger et al. 2015, 5). The other prominent white Rhodesians buried at Matopos are Leander Starr Jameson, who was a close right-hand man of Rhodes, and Sir Charles Coghlan, the first settler Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia.

Amidst this memorialisation storm, in the oral history interviews used in this study there remained an ominous silence about Rhodes' grave in the area. Whilst no specific question was asked about Rhodes' grave, the participants also did not even digress by steering their talk towards that subject as one would expect. Can the reason be the economic benefits that come with the presence of the Rhodes grave in the community? Ranger et al. (2015, 41) argued that:

In fact the site is an important income generator for the government. National Museum and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ) introduced entrance fees to the site in 1997 to fund conservation efforts for other sites under their care and currently it earns tens of thousands of dollars from these fees. Newspaper columnist and veteran of the 1970s war of liberation, Saul Ndlovu, summed it up when he wrote: "People who scream for the repatriation of Rhodes' bones have no idea about revenue-generating tourist attractions."

Jakes (2016) mentioned that Sandi Moyo, the Provincial Affairs Minister, had called for the preservation of the late former colonialist Cecil John Rhodes' grave in Matopos to be preserved as it was bringing foreign currency through tourists from Britain. The same sentiments were echoed by the former President of Zimbabwe, Mr Mugabe, (cited by Ranger et al. 2015, 19) who averred that:

You have the Matopo Hills where the man they called the founder of our two countries lies buried, Cecil Rhodes. Some want the bones removed. But I am saying the bones do not do us any harm ... but the bones, there we would want to make them pay taxes. I have said in the past that Rhodes should pay his taxes [but] our people do not want to promote tourism towards that grave. They are still a bit uneasy.

As mentioned in this article, different people attach different values to the Matopos Hills. It appears these different opinions are here to stay.

Conclusion

It is sometimes so refreshing to just listen to the voices of the local community when they are speaking about their history. Sometimes we are tempted to analyse those stories being told and come up with theories, as the author of this article was also tempted to do. However, most of the article was based on and only on the voices of the local community members as they spoke about their history in Matobo. It is a history of contested values, a history rich in African spiritualism, Christianity, politics of the dead and contemporary politics of the living, as told in simple language by the residents of Matobo.

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