

Agitations for Self-Identification and (Re)presentation in Selected Tshivenda Poetry

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Abstract

Tshivenda poetry thematises varied notions of selfhood and culture, among others. Within this thematisation, longings for the freedom to self-identify and (re)present the self or selves show up as recurrent themes. For analytical convenience, 10 Tshivenda poems were purposively selected and analysed in this article. The analysis is based on a predetermined set of themes, namely, the quest for identity and authenticity, notions of being and belonging, and intersections of identity, memory, home and renaissance. The paper deployed a qualitative research approach and was theoretically undergirded by Afrocentricity. The analysis reveals that Tshivenda poetry demystifies the metanarratives propounded by colonialists and apartheid exponents to negate African people's selfhood and culture. The analysis further reveals that the indigenes have always had ways to express their selfhood and ideological outlook, including agentively challenging false hegemonic discourses about them. This paper adds to the ongoing discourse on the politics of identity, belonging and discourses focused on how the formerly colonised asserted and still assert their presence and agency during and after decades of marginalisation and repression. It is recommended that aspects of African selfhood and culture captured in Tshivenda literature should form part of African indigenous knowledge systems that need to be studied in institutions of basic and higher education.

Keywords: Tshivenda poetry; belonging, culture; identity, place; selfhood



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Introduction

The subject of African identity in African literature has been receiving considerable attention in scholarly circles (e.g., Mahasha 2014; Mashige 2004; Mogoboya 2011; Mokgoatšana 1999; Raditlhalo 2003; Sebola 2020). This attention is ascribable to the fact that “communities, groups and individuals tend to ask themselves who they are after the colonial period” (Mokgoatšana 1999, vi). In their response, the concept “identity” either acquires or manifests myriad forms (“individual subject,” “identity formation,” “identification”), and these forms receive interpretations from varied perspectives and disciplines such as “Literary Criticism, Sociology, Psychology, Psychoanalysis and Political Science” (Raditlhalo 2003, 22). Raditlhalo (2003) looks at how individuals construct their identities by writing themselves into existence through first-person texts in the context of South Africa. In Mokgoatšana’s and Raditlhalo’s theses, autobiography as a literary genre is appreciated for its effectiveness in expressing the identities of the indigenes of South Africa. Mashige (2004) examines the conception and articulation of identity and culture in an archetypal collection of modern South African poetry. Mogoboya’s doctoral thesis (2011) investigates the notion of (African) identity in Es’kia Mphahlele’s fictional and nonfictional novels, with particular attention paid to the search for the lost identity of African cultural and ideological veracity. Except for Mokgoatšana (1999) and Sebola (2020), the other studies cited focus solely on identity as explored in texts written in English and not on those written in indigenous languages on the subject. A perusal of Mokgoatšana’s Master of Arts dissertation (1996) and doctoral thesis (1999) reveals that South African indigenous literature has significantly focused on the theme of identity, despite being largely ignored in postcolonial discourse(s) on African identity.

This article draws its impetus from the afore-cited studies in efforts to encourage inclusions of indigenous writings at a broader level in discourse(s) on African identity and culture in South Africa. It is hoped that this will result in indigenous writings no longer being treated as mere palimpsests on which the *otherised* record their stories (Mokgoatšana 1999). This inclusion will not only facilitate the migration of Tshivenda literature from the “margins” to the “centre” of discussions of identity, but will also reveal some perspectives shared by indigenous literature, i.e. Tshivenda poetry, on the trajectories and nuances of the Vhenda’s articulation of interfaces between identity and culture. Singular and manifold identities and (re)presentations depicted in selected Tshivenda poetry, written during the colonial and apartheid era and after the colonial and apartheid era in South Africa, will, in this case, also show how poets can use memory and imagination as tropes that are effective in the creation and/or recreation of identity, history and culture.

In this way, Tshivenda poetry will prove itself eligible for consideration within an Africological discourse that highlights selfhood and culture as significant aspects of a postcolonial condition. The term “postcolonial condition” connects with the concept “postcolony” in that it refers “to a place of suffering from a condition, a state of affairs

in which colonial subjects find themselves as a result of colonisation. It is basically a difficult stage, for the colonised are trapped in the culture of the colonial power, and the[y] attempt to maintain their own cultural identity” (Mokgoatšana 1999, 8). Of particular interest here is how the poets exhibit both an agency and urgency to vanguard their sense of individuation and subjectification in a culturally diverse context. Prior to that, it is vital that a brief reflection on some factors that contributed to the impoverishment of Tshivenda literature be foregrounded.

Contributory Factors to the Penury of Tshivenda Literature in South African Literary History

Khorommbi (1996) says there are essentially four historical forces that indelibly contributed to the impoverishment of Tshivenda literature in South Africa. He begins by reflecting on the missionary stance assumed in Venda, where European missionaries, by virtue of being human, had their own prejudices towards the Vhavenda. They perceived the Vhavenda as dark, barbaric and backward—a heathen population that needed elementary education as a subsidiary to evangelisation. The term “heathen,” derogatory as it is, was ascribed to Africans and their belief systems, and encapsulated desecrations of African practices such as rituals, rites of passage, playing traditional music, and drinking traditional beer, among others. In their efforts to evangelise, the missionaries concurrently strove to “Westernise” or “civilise” Africans by imposing a version of the European way of life. In their view, to “civilise” entailed the phase of development only attainable when the “barbaric” customs of Africans are replaced by a culture comparable to that of modern Western nations. This implied that the existing African value system had to be surrendered to a Western value system. This surrender eventually manifested in the dominant thematisation of Christian dogma in Tshivenda literature. Consequently, folkloric elements of the Vhavenda such as folktales, riddles, songs, poetry, etc., were either totally excluded or sparingly documented. In this way, Tshivenda literature was severely impoverished.

Secondly, the apartheid state passed censorship laws, such as “the Suppression of Communism Act of 1955, enabling the Minister of Justice to ban South Africans living in or outside the country,” including writers (Khorommbi 1996, 7). Consequently, Vhavenda writers could only produce literary works that were deemed inoffensive to the state (Olaoluwa 2008), which meant that any works of protest against and resistance to the apartheid government could not be published. Needless to say, this contributed to the impoverishment of Tshivenda literature. Thirdly, at the time of the development of Tshivenda literature, most Vhavenda people lacked the expertise to express their ideas in writing (Khorommbi 1996). Lack of expertise seemingly emanated from a lack of desire to develop writing skills. Thus, “when the whole circle is considered, it finally means that the Vhavenda writers would have neither the reason nor the know-how to write down their response to either the missionary or apartheid periods” (Khorommbi 1996, 8). The last force that impoverished Tshivenda literature was “unsympathetic publishers” (Khorommbi 1996, 8). Apparently, “even before the bans, publishers

rejected manuscripts on the legal advice that they would probably be banned or would not sell, if published” (Khorommbi 1996, 8), which significantly hampered the proliferation of Tshivenda literature. Despite these challenges that impoverished Tshivenda literature, Vhavana writers still rose against the tide and produced literary works that are permeated with indices into their individual and corporate desires for the freedom to articulate their own identity and culture.

Theoretical Grounding

Afrocentricity undergirded this article. Proffered laconically, the concept of Afrocentricity assumes generally the following definitions:

- A mode of thinking and action in which the significance of African interests, tenets and viewpoints preponderate.
- An exercise in knowledge and an historical outlook that accentuates the ethos and feats of Africans.
- A transformation of approaches, politics, ideals and behaviour that suggests a simple rediscovery of African selfhood.
- An emphasis on “African centredness” as a means through which Africans can be accorded their intellectual “place” as “the originators” of civilisation (Chawane 2016).

Therefore, Afrocentricists argue that Africa and Africans should be understood within the African context, and through African epistemological lenses (Chawane 2016; Mokgoatšana 1999). Afrocentricity abets the discussion of this paper for three reasons, namely, its *methodological* stance, *theoretical* persuasion and *ideological* representation. *Methodologically*, Afrocentricity responds to intellectual imperialisms that strive to authenticate political and economic subjugation. *Theoretically*, it positions African people at the core of any analysis of African *noumena* and phenomena pertaining to action and behaviour. *Ideologically*, it signifies the sustained yearning by Africans for some set of archetypes that can tie them collectively as a community and offers an option to acclimatisation either barred by Eurocentrism or perceived by Africans as an acknowledgement of subservience and conquest (Chawane 2016). Reading Tshivenda poetry through the Afrocentric prism enabled the author to discuss the texts from the poets’ (African) agentive perspective instead of a Eurocentric viewpoint (Asante 1990; Shai 2021).

Methodology

This article adopted a qualitative research approach to analyse selected Vhavana poets’ desire to authorise and agentively articulate their identity. Although there are numerous Tshivenda poems on identity, this article only synthesised excerpts from 10 Tshivenda poems and subjected them to analysis. The poems are: “Matongoni” (Matshili 1972), “Hanga ndi ngafhi” (Mashuwa 1972), “Nṅe ndi nnyi, inwi ni nnyi?” (Ratshitanga 1973),

“Ivha zwine wa vha” (Ratshitanga 1973), “Ivha iwe muṅe” (Maḍadzhe 1985), “Venda thetshelosa” (Ratshitanga 1987), “Mpheni Venda ḵanga” (Ratshitanga 1987), “Maanda” (Ratshitanga 1987), “Tshililo tsha vhuvha” (Netshivhuyu 1990) and “Ndi nṅe nnyi?” (Rasila 2006). The poems were analysed based on a predetermined set of themes, namely, (a) the quest for identity and authenticity, (b) notions of being and belonging, and (c) intersections of identity, memory, home and renaissance.

Analysis

The Quest for Identity and Authenticity

The quest for identity and authenticity in Tshivenda poetry often comes linked to a call of conscience, as evinced in Maḍadzhe’s (1985, 20) poem, “Ivha iwe muṅe” (You be yourself) (1985, 20). In the poem, Maḍadzhe lampoons people’s tendencies to wish they were *someone* or *something* else. Maḍadzhe castigates people’s preference for pretentiousness at the expense of their *authentic selfhood*, which they adopt in an effort to gain likeability. In the first stanza, the poet avers:

*Luaviavi u nga si vhe,
I vha iwe muṅe.*

(You will never be a chameleon,
You be yourself.)

Chameleons are commonly known for their ability to assume a range of colours to conform to the colour(s) of their surroundings. Through this colour conformation, it becomes difficult for one to identify and extricate them from the environment. Put succinctly, chameleons have no phenotypical “fixity.” For this reason, chameleons become a source of metaphoric extensions in most cultures. In Tshivenda culture, for instance, referring to someone as a chameleon communicatively means that such a person is untrustworthy, pretentious, deceitful and unstable in their convictions. This is why the poet advises people to refrain from living like chameleons. He prods his audience towards embracing their uniqueness, both by accepting and being at ease with whom/what they are not. Rather than trying to live like chameleons, the poet encourages his readers to be appreciative of their unique design and identity. Although Maḍadzhe’s poem does not explore the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of “authentic” identity or personhood, his poem throws down the gauntlet for an understanding of Vhavenda poets’ quest for “authentic” selfhood. Ratshitanga’s (1973, 16) poem, “Ivha zwine wa vha” (Be what/who you are), resonates with Maḍadzhe’s poem in that it also encourages the necessity of accepting and appreciating one’s uniqueness:

*Muṅwe muḍivhi wa mafhungo,
O nndaya nga aya nda tenda,
Nge nda wana e a mbuya phungo,
Mbilu yanga yo a kuvhanganya ya renda
Zwe a ri: “zwine wa vha zwone u songo shanduka,*

Vhunga mpho ṭaḍulu dzo tumbuka.”

(One well-informed expert,
Advised me and I concurred,
Since I deemed the counsel good,
My heart gathered it and praised
When he/she said: “do not change who you are,
Since it is a gift originating from heaven.”)

*Zwine wa vha zwone ndi khwine u livhuwa,
Nga uri a u na maanḁa a u shandula
Zwe nga Makole zwa simuwa,
Vhunga wo shaya nungo dza u zwi landula.*

(It is best to be grateful for who you are,
Because you do not have the power to change
What God established,
Since you are devoid of the power to reject it.)

*We tshifhaṭuwo tsha mbifho a avhelwa,
Nga a lidze phala ya dakalo,
Vhunga lupfumo lwa mbilu o vhetshelwa,
A tshi ḁo ḁa a fura mulalo.*

(One apportioned an ugly face,
Should blow the horn in joy,
Since the wealth of the heart is reserved for him or her,
Culminating in the fullness of peace.)

*Zwe wa ḁewa ndi zwone,
U songo tama zwe muḁwe a ṭanganedza,
U sa ḁo gagaḁela u sa kone,
Wa sala fhedzi zwoṭhe zwo redza.*

(What you were given is appropriate,
Do not envy what the other received,
Lest you carry what you cannot,
And remain with nothing when all else fails.)

Similar to Maḁadzhe’s simplistic gait, Ratshiṭanga leans on oracular wisdom as a technique to highlight the essence of staying true to oneself. Staying true to oneself necessitates the willingness to embrace one’s uniqueness, irrespective of how one might feel about one’s appearance. The reader is encouraged to delight in his or her design simply because it is “God” who deemed it so. In the poem “Maanḁa” (Power), Ratshiṭanga (1987, 25) recognises the power inherent in self-identification:

Maanḁa a muthu ndi u ṭalusa,

*Na u sa lozwa vhuṅe hau.
Wa ralo zwe wa fhulufhela wa khwaṅhisa,
U sa londi u solwa kha zwau.*

(The power of a person lies in [self-] description,
And not losing your being/identity.
And remaining firm in what you believe,
Never paying attention to criticisms of your heritage.)

The first line in the stanza above condenses a human being's power into an ability to define and describe him- or herself. This implies that if someone is unable to authoritatively identify themselves, such a person is powerless. Thus, power dynamics are implicated in self-identification. Closely connected to self-identification is also one's valuation of one's ethnic heritage, even in the face of disparagements from others. In the next stanza, the poet employs imagery to augment the idea of taking pride in the authenticity and uniqueness of one's selfhood:

*Vhuṅe uhu ndi hu vhonekha kha ṅowa,
Ine hoṅhe i sa ite zwine muthu a tama.
Kha zwi melaho mavuni vhuṅwe vhu na ngowa,
I melaho ho gugumelwaho misi yoṅhe.*

(This sense of self-identification is evinced by a snake,
Which never does anything according to the will of a human being.
Of all that grows from the soil, others assume the similitude of a mushroom,
Which always breaks through hardened places.)

According to the poet, a snake never alters its identity in order to be accepted or understood by people; it remains true to its identity. The same goes for plants such as mushrooms, which never compromise their uniqueness even when they are suppressed by hardened surfaces. Through this imagery, the poet asserts that identity should never be compromised or abandoned, no matter how severe the conditions within which one finds oneself might be. This is important, particularly considering that the poem was written during the apartheid era in South Africa. The apartheid establishment saw "black" negatively as non-white and denied it a culture. But, for the indigenous African, the term "black" signified pride in African culture and history and committed the indigenous African to a struggle to cast off the non-African yoke (Barnett 1983, 7). For the poet, casting off the non-African yoke entails demonstrating agency in the formulation of narrative discourse on identity construction and articulation.

The privilege to narrate, or to restrict other narratives from forming and emerging, was very important to the colonising culture and its imperialistic ambitions (Said 1993). Therefore, the same power to narrate should be demonstrated by the formerly colonised to assert the uniqueness and authenticity of their own identity. Narratives of liberation should thus aid the mobilisation of people in the ex-colonial world to rise and cast off imperial subjugation. According to the poet, it is only when the formerly colonised

possess the power to define and describe themselves in their own space and right that they would finally know the power of authentic selfhood. To bolster his view, the poet uses domestic animals as an example:

*Lavhelesa mbudzi na nngu mafuloni.
Naho tshitumba tsha vha tshithihi hayani,
U lila hadzo hu nga u andisana,
Zwine vhuvhili la do fhela zwi songo shanduka.*

(Look at the goats and sheep in the grazing lands.
Even when there is only one kraal at their home,
They may even bleat like they are multiplying their voices in unity,
But, that will never change their unique identities.)

The idea propagated here is that although the goat and the sheep may both bleat, they still retain the essence of their uniqueness. The goat and the sheep may inhabit one kraal, but they will not lose their identity as a result of this co-habitation. In fact, in this co-habitation, one is still able to identify the unique bleating of each of these animals. Therefore, co-habitation does not necessarily imply conformation, one can still stand out in a multilingual and multicultural context, so to speak. In the last stanza, the poet ascribes the cause of human beings' inauthenticity to the prevalence of genetic modification, among other modern inventions.

*Muthu u shaya maanda aya nga u silinga,
Nge a fara itshi na tshila a tanganyisa.
Thanganyiso iyi a dikhoḁa ngayo o takala,
Ngeno ho xela vhunḁe vhune ha vha one maanda.*

(A human being lacks this power because of being naughty,
By taking this and that and mixing them.
A person then joyfully brags about this mixture,
While the authenticity of selfhood, which is the true power, is lost.)

The poet finds fault with humankind's desire to tamper with what he regards as God's original design. This tampering and scientific mixture of genes dilutes or obliterates the uniqueness of personhood. Netshivhuyu's (1990, 6) poem, "Tshililo tsha vhuvhva" (The cry of being), is coterminous with the previous poets' need to articulate uniqueness in the ideological superstructure of identity politics:

*Vhupfa hanga kha vhu moḁe,
Vhu fovhele thumbuni ya vuhwi,
Iḁo langa li vhone vhutswu,
Thangela-vhupofu ha vhuvhva.*

(May my feeling liquefy,
And be swallowed into the belly of silence,

May my eye see blackness,
The foreshadowing of the blindness of being.)

*Mbilu i sime lwa lugungulo,
Maṭo a phophe malofha,
Thindidzo tshanduko hu biso,
Mvumela-tshililo tsha vuvha.*

(May my heart start a song of unrest,
My eyes drip blood,
The solidification of change being ailment,
The complementarity of the cry of being.)

Netshivhuyu's poem advocates the need for a utopian narrative of both self-identification and self-determination. Otherwise recondite aspects such as the dissolution of feeling and consignment into "silence" or "oblivion" are intended to highlight the notion that the definition and description of authentic selfhood are not to be found in an earthly realm. The quest for true identity and authenticity is interspersed with the need to go beyond the earthly realm and align with a reality whose authority supersedes that of the earth or human constructs. The poet believes that by accessing a dimension beyond the earthly dimensions of existence, he will gain a true and clear understanding of his authentic self. It is not specified in the poem whether the poet yearns for an encounter with God or with gods as his system of reference for true identity. In the poem "Nṅe ndi Nnyi, Inwi ni Nnyi?" (Who am I, Who are you?), Ratshitanga (1973, 1) yearns to acquire true and wholesome knowledge about the origin of humankind by attempting to answer two questions, "Who am I?" and "Who are we?" In the process, he transmutes the "I" of an individual into the corporate "I" of group identity:

*Nṅe ndi nga inwi, ndi nga uḷa,
Nda nga uyu na vhaḷa vhe vha fhira.
Shangoni tho ngo ḍa u dzula;
Ho vha u shuma kha we roṭhe a hira.*

(I am like you, I am like that one,
Like this one and those who have passed.
I did not come to stay in this world;
It was merely to fulfil the mandate He hired all of us for.)

In his transmutation of the individual "I" into the corporate "I" of group identity, however, Ratshitanga does not clearly answer the questions, "Who am I?" and "Who are we?"; he merely uses allusions instead of descriptions of identity. However, to the poet, such allusions are not baseless, especially because they may be taken as: (a) an acknowledgement that identity is too complex an entity to be assigned an absolute definition; (b) human identity cannot be fully understood or clearly defined unless there are substantial answers to philosophical questions such as "Where do we come from?"

(Origin), “Who are we?” (Identity), “Why are we here?” (Purpose), “What can we do?” (Potential) and “Where are we going?” (Destiny). The poet does not answer these questions. However, in the next subsections, the selected poets attempt to respond to some of these questions.

Notions of Being and Belonging in Tshivenḁa Poetry

This subsection discusses the selected poets’ exhibition of both a sense of being and belonging in their poetry. It further shows that identity is interconnected with *place* (home) and *memory*, the hallmarks of belonging and identification. Some poems are read in this section with the effects of forced removals in apartheid South Africa borne in mind. These historical experiences are among the formative influences of the poets’ longing for belonging. This subsection shows that when people are removed from their home (land), a sense of melancholic alienation often emanates. Rasila’s (2006, 44) poem “Ndi nḁe nnyi?” (Who am I?) typifies this melancholic alienation:

Ndi nḁe nnyi kha ḁa muno?
Ndi nḁe nnyi kha zwa muno?

(Who am I in this world?
 Who am I in the things of this world?)

Rasila does not provide answers to these questions; he simply laments the loss of his identity and sense of cultural understanding. He connects the loss of his identity and culture to the loss of his religion, as the next stanza elucidates:

Vhurereli hanga ndo ḁaḁa,
Nda doba ha mutsinda–mufheledzi,
Ha mpfunza vengo kha zwa hanga,
Na zwino ndi zwi sili,
Na zwifho nda ḁala.

(I threw away my religion,
 And picked the foreigners’ religion as the ultimate one,
 It taught me to hate my ethnic heritage,
 To this day, my ethnic beliefs are pagan
 Even the sacred sites I turned away from.)

Rasila’s lamentation above is not only tinged with a sense of regret for abandoning his traditional religion but is also reflective of how cultural imperialism contributes to cultural malnutrition and schizophrenia among the imperialised. Rasila leaves it to the reader to grasp the implicit message of how the Vhavenḁa abandoned their traditional religion in preference of Western values and religion, a fact which eventually resulted in cultural confusion, if not hollowness. The allusive quality of the lines above shows that traditional religion imbued the Vhavenḁa’s faith to an extent that their daily lives were regulated by pious practices and customs until European missionaries and other

colonial settlers arrived (cf. Khorommbi 1996). His reference to “*zwa hanga*” (my ethnic heritage) is representative of the Vhavenda’s knowledge of God, which finds expression in proverbs, names, prayers, songs, myths, folktales and religious ceremonies (Mbiti 1969). Rasila feels culturally disoriented and alienated; consequently, he feels disconnected from his ethnic identity—a sense of alienation may stem from the abandonment or annihilation of a person’s traditional culture. With the arrival of Europeans in Venda also came the Vhavenda’s loss of most of their land and cultural identity. Hence, Ratshitanga’s (1987, 16) poem “Mpheni Venda langa” (Give my Venda) instantiates a longing for the restoration of the Venda (home) he knew before European invasion:

*Mpheni Venda langa ni mphe dakalo;
Mpheni Fundudzi na milambo yothe ya lunako.
Ni nhee Mangwele na Lwamondo,
Luvhola ndi i vhone kha la Tshipembe.*

(Give me my Venda and you shall have given me joy;
Give me Fundudzi and all the beautiful rivers.
Give Mangwele and Lwamondo,
And let me Mount. Luvhola in the south.)

Tied to Ratshitanga’s longing for the Venda he knew is the concept “renaissance.” An analysis of the term “renaissance” will indicate that actions or processes that entail a zeal for the resurgence of a lost, marginalised or overlooked culture, science and literature can be summarised as a “return” (More 2002). The reference here (in Ratshitanga’s poem) could suggest a kind of return to an erstwhile condition of being or a recurrence of something desired. Hence, the term “renaissance” is “defined in terms of words that begin with the prefix re-, as expressed in (re)birth, (re)discover, and (re)define, (re)dress, (re)generate, (re)awaken, (re)invent, (re)present or (re)turn” (More 2002, 66). Thus, it is unlikely that the poet longs for the re-traditionalisation of Venda to its pristine state prior to colonisation and cultural schizophrenia.

Ratshitanga’s poem, however, moves from an essentialist mystification of African essence that is genetically determined to one that is geographically bound. Hence, his main cry is for the restoration of the Vhavenda’s land. The cry for land brings into sharp focus the effects of social maladies such as displacement and dislocation in the discursive setting of identity politics. The poet’s cry for land is basically reflective of the fact that when people are moved from their homes, they tend to be overwhelmed by a melancholic sense of alienation. This is because people identify with a *place* and feel at one with that *place*. As a result, they are always occupied with the idea of returning to the *place*. For this reason, the poet demands his land from the European settlers:

*Mpheni Madzivhanwombe ho dzulaho vhaeni,
Phepho i tshi rwa mitambi i wane pfulo.
Ni ralo ni nkonanye na avho vhaeni,*

Vhunga na u rangani ro konana.

(Give me Madzivhañwombe where visitors settled,
The cold persisting, so that the flocks will find pasture.
By so doing, reconcile me with those visitors,
The same way we reconciled in the beginning.)

Dislocation, therefore, results in the shell-like hollowness that geographically dislocated people feel (Mogoboya 2011). This melancholic sense of alienation results in the poet feeling rootless and soulless because people’s home (land) makes them tick. The poet emphasises the idea that “visitors” (European settlers) settle Venḁa. Furthermore, the settlers did not only take the land for mere residential purposes; they also took the Vhaventḁa’s grazing lands and subsequently crippled the Vhaventḁa’s means of economic development. Thus, dislocation and displacement fragment and undermine people’s lives and livelihoods, which further compounds that sense of alienation. Displacement and dislocation erode a people’s sense of identity and belonging. For the poet, the problem can be resolved by engaging with the settlers about the prospects of land redistribution. He alludes to the fact that, initially, the Vhaventḁa and the European settlers had a cordial relationship and thus lived in harmony. On the strength of that former cordiality, reconciliation between settlers and the Vhaventḁa indigenes as well as the restoration of land should be re-imagined. Obviously, land redistribution will not be as easy as the poet suggests; he merely seeks to prod the readers towards a reflection on the prospects of regaining their land. Mashuwa’s (1972, 9) poem “Hanga ndi ngafhi” (Where do I belong [?]) exhibits both a sense of alienation and a need for belonging:

*Hanga ndi ngafhi ndi shangoni ḁa vha tshilaho?
Tshanga ndi mini i si vuvhu?
U kundwa vhannani a hu na lukuna,
Hai, u amba ndi u pfa nungo.*

(Where do I belong in the land of the living?
What is mine except privation?
There is nothing good in lack,
No, if I were to state it in detail, it would be a waste of time.)

Longing for belonging and the attendant sense of alienation emanate from both poverty and people’s indifference to the poet’s plight. Mashuwa’s sense of alienation could also be taking its impetus from apartheid South Africa—“a racially turbulent society” (Chapman 1982, 11). It can be asserted that the discrepancies between ordinarily accepted ideas of human dignity and the atypical mortifications that were daily mounded on Black people by the apartheid state informed some Vhaventḁa poets’ thematisation of belonging (Sebola and Mogoboya 2021).

Intersections of Identity, Memory, Home and Renaissance in Tshivenda Poetry

As already stated tangentially in the previous section, the term “renaissance” has brought attention to the postcolonial concept of “return.” According to More (2002), two ideas about “the return” may be recognised. “The first is an Afro-pessimistic conception that construes ‘the return’ as a regression to something similar to the Hobbesian ‘state of nature’ (innocence), and thus retrogressive and oppressive” whereas “the second conception is the opposite” and interprets “the return” “as necessary, and thus progressive, liberatory politics” (More 2002, 61). More (2002) argues further that the former view smacks of apartheid’s (mis)representations, indicative of most Western depictions of Africa and Africans, “a view driven by ideological and political motives desirous of halting and obstructing transformatory praxis” (More 2002, 61). Against this backdrop, this subsection presents the selected poets’ (re)imaginings of their ancestral home (Matongoni) (Schutte 1978), and their longing to return to this home. The poems are read in light of the liberatory construal in an attempt to show that the poets’ idea of return is not essentialist but that it is aimed at (re)forming and (re)educating the Muvenda person. Furthermore, the poets reimagine returns to their ancestral home while shaping a sense of selfhood and authenticity they think is fitting to the necessities of “modern” existence (More 2002). To this end, Ratshitanga’s (1987, 43) poem “Venda Thetshelesa” (Venda, Listen) abets the discussion on the notion of return among the Vhavenda poets:

*Rothe ro bva Vhukalanga,
Ra swika Dzaṭa ra fhaṭa,
Govhani ḷa mulambo Nzhelele,
Mirafho ya ṭandulukana ri tshi khwaṭha.*

(We all hailed from Vhukalanga,
And arrived at Dzaṭa and built,
At the valley of the Nzhelele River,
Generations successively came and solidified us.)

Ratshitanga provides an account on the migration of the Vhavenda from Vhukalanga (Zimbabwe) to Dzaṭa (South Africa). Vhukalanga is, to Ratshitanga, the original home of the Vhavenda and therefore serves as a representation of the Vhavenda’s history and identity, both of which are linked to the Vhavenda’s ancestral home, Matongoni. Matshili’s (1972, 26) poem “Matongoni” provides more insight into the (re)imagination of Matongoni, compared to Ratshitanga:

*Matongoni hayani hashu,
Hayani hashu havhuḍi;
Ro dzula hone ri tshi ḍiphina,
Ri tshi ḷa ra posa na tsiwana.*

(Matongoni our home,
Our beautiful home,

We lived there in enjoyment,
Eating so much that we also fed the poor.)

The poet identifies Matongoni as a beautiful home once characterised by such prosperity and abundance that even the poor were fed from its supplies. Matongoni is also depicted as a place worth recreating or revisiting. Returns to Matongoni appear to be a Herculean task, particularly because so much has changed since the Vhavanḁa's migration that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to recreate the ancient and ancestral home of the Vhavanḁa. Secondly, returns to Matongoni cannot happen because it is traditionally held that Nwali (also Mwali, the High God of the Vhavanḁa) instructed the Vhavanḁa to leave the place and move to the south (South Africa), as the next stanza confirms:

*Tshi dinaho Mwali makhulu ndi mufhumudzi,
Ro thakhwa hani Matongoni hayani hashu;
Ndi tshini tshe ra vha ri tshi lila?
Tshifhefho dzithumbu dzi tshi dzula dzi mirutshe.*

(What bothers Mwali, the grandfather is the lack of a comforter,
How spoiled we were at Matongoni our home;
What did we lack?
In autumn, our bellies were full beyond capacity.)

It is not strange that the poet progresses to mention Mwali in the same breath as Matongoni. It is believed that Mwali conversed with the *Vhasenzi* (Vhavanḁa) at Mount Matongoni (Khorommbi 1996). Thus, Matongoni also represents the Vhavanḁa's *spiritual connectedness to the place*. The subsequent lines of the poem all reiterate the prosperity and abundance once enjoyed and now longed for by the poet:

*Mvula i sa ni vhalalaha vha isa nduvho,
Nduvho ya tangedzwa nga dakalo lihulwane,
Ngomalungundu ye ngindi-ngunduu ya unga lothe,
Mifhululu ya taha thungo dzothe.*

(When it did not rain, the elders sent their propitiations,
And the propitiations were accepted with great joy,
Ngomalungundu would spontaneously rumble: ngindi-ngunduu
Ululations would spread to all directions.)

The above stanza reinforces the association(s) of Mwali with rain-making, an aspect that was triggered by prescribed propitiations. *Vhalalaha* or senior male members were the ones designated to deliver these propitiations to Mwali. Mwali was not approached or appeased by just any member of society (Mashau 2004; Munyai 2016). Understanding the propitiation of Mwali and the ancestors in Tshivenda culture also required one to have a firm grasp of "African philosophical conceptions of religion" (Mokgoatsana 1996, 115). A probe into Africans' cosmogonic outlook and the manner in which their social order is structured enables one to learn how the principle of relying

on intermediaries to approach and address the king, the ancestors and God, the Supreme being, is adhered to (Mokgoatšana 1996). According to the poet, Mwali is approached and propitiated by *Vhakalaha* as intermediaries. This affirms the idea that Mwali is “a personal being beyond and above ancestral hierarchies and could only be approached through the mediation of the senior lineage male ancestors (*mhondoro* or *vharudzi*) or special messengers” (Schutte 1978, 110). The poet makes it a point to mention *Vhakalaha* (old men) (plural) instead of *mukalaha* (singular) because African religion is a corporate religion and not an individual affair; it incorporates the entire community. Thus, to satisfy group desires and requirements, a group of *Vhakalaha* approach Mwali and the ancestors. Even if an individual would have attempted to initiate communication with an ancestor or ancestors, that individual would use the plural to emphasise that the desires and requirements are not only his or hers, but the community’s that he or she represents (Mokgoatšana 1996). When this principle is adhered to, Mwali responds favourably to all people under his realm of rulership, resulting in the very people’s tremendous joy.

The poet goes on to say:

*Matongoni marubini ashu,
Haya ha miomva na miṭaḍa minzhi,
Miṭshelo ya tshaka dzoṭhe,
Maḍi a shuluwa hoṭhe-hoṭhe.*

(Matongoni our ruins,
A place of bananas and numerous fruits,
Fruits of different kinds,
Water pouring everywhere.)

Because of Mwali’s provision of rain at Matongoni, people enjoyed the bounties of the earth such as bananas and other varieties of a plentiful harvest. The poet’s reminiscing on these times of bountiful harvest at Matongoni is aimed at contrasting the Vhaventḁa’s life under the sovereignty of Mwali and the life they lived without Mwali, the latter being a life of lack and despondency. At Matongoni, the Vhaventḁa’s life was characterised by

*Dzinyimbo na miulu zwi tshi nanela,
Matangwa na tshikona zwi tshi likitana,
Tshigombela na lugube zwi tshi fhalana,
Ḳo lala Matongoni hayani hashu havhuḍi.*

(Songs and celebratory performances heightening,
Plays and the reed-pipe dance in full blast,
Tshigombela and hollow bamboo instrument in harmony,
With Matongoni our beautiful home at ease.)

Emphasis is still on the joyful life of the past. This joyfulness was expressed through songs and other forms of celebration. The poet further connects the Tshivenda traditional dances such as *tshikona* and *tshigombela* to Matongoni. Missionary endeavours eroded or contributed to the neglect of these African cultural patterns and traditions on the premise that they were animist, heathen and pagan religions that reflected a large scale of barbarism and backwardness (Mokgoatšana 1996). But for the poet, Matongoni is home:

*Matongoni, hayani hashu havhuḍi,
A ri nga ḍo u hangwa na khathihi,
Ri u humbula masiari na vhusiku,
Ri tshi elelwa zwivhuya zwau zwavhuḍi.*

(Matongoni, our beautiful home,
We will never ever forget you,
We think about you day and night,
Remembering all the good you possess.)

The interface of identity, memory and place is manifested in the above stanza. The poet speaks to Matongoni and makes a societal oath that Matongoni will never be forgotten. The poet does not explain how Matongoni will remain in the memories of the Vhavenda; he simply states that the place will always be on the minds of those connected to it. The poet has nothing bad to say about Matongoni, but only the good once enjoyed in the place. In the last stanza, Matongoni is identified as the place of the Vhavenda's creation or origin:

*Matongoni, matongoni tsikoni yashu,
Wo ri kanzwa zwihulu vhukuma,
Zwigala zwau wo sala nazwo wo zwi kuvhatedza;
Ra humbula Matongoni ri a ḍidzima zwiḷiwa.*

(Matongoni, matongoni where we were created,
You bestowed so much good to us,
Your glories remained with you shielded;
When we remember Matongoni, we fast from food.)

Both Ratshitanga and Matshili mention the Vhavenda's migration from Vhukalanga, Matongoni, to their present habitation in South Africa, in an attempt to reflect on the "glorious" past once enjoyed by the Vhavenda. It can be assumed that this "glorious" past was enjoyed before the advent of missionary influence and colonialism in Africa. Overall, the Vhavenda poets emphasise four discrete modes of being and belonging, namely, social connectedness, historical connectedness, environmental connectedness and spiritual connectedness. These modes may appear distinct and isolated, but as one reads the poems, they turn out to be interconnected and mutually dependent. Being and belonging are depicted as a form of connection to something or someone else (whether this something or someone is one's god, ancestors, society, history or environment).

Conclusion

The appeal of the selected Vhavenḁa poets' writing lies mainly in their expression of the need to be agentively assigned the prerogatives to articulate their own sense of self-identification and cultural representation. The poets' agitations for self-identification and representation are a poignant and realistic portrayal of the Vhavenḁa's collective need to move from the fringes to the centre of postcolonial discussions of identity and culture. For the poets, this need is etched in the desire to capture the stark and naturalistic depictions of their cultural consciousness and struggle for liberation. For them, the poem becomes the shortest route to the truth of the circumstances in which the poets lived, and possibly still live in South Africa. The poets' linkage of identity, memory, home and renaissance serves to bolster the idea that art for the Muvenda has always been a communal activity and never a private contemplation. "I" is used in the collective sense to protest against the cultural emasculation and malnutrition brought by the imposition of foreign culture. Therefore, the Vhavenḁa poets' artistic experimentation always has close affinities with the salient features of their history, home, beliefs and cultural uniqueness, which give Tshivenda poetry archetypic resonances with postcolonial poetry productions in other African cultures.

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