

Breaking the Seal: Decoding Rites of Passage in Tshivenda Poetry

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Abstract

This article analyses two poems that thematise *Murundu* and *Domba*, initiation rites for boys and girls in Tshivenda culture. Despite these rites being imperatively central to Vhavenḁa, they remain strictly bound to secrecy, silence, and mystery, resulting in their minimal documentation. However, Ralson Ramudzuli Matshili's two poems on *Murundu* and *Domba* enlighten the reader on how the rituals operate. Guided by semiotic theory and thematic analysis, this article examines the poems' use of symbolic language to reveal the inner workings and meanings of the rites. The article shows that the rites operate at a level surpassing other rituals, as they contribute to the construction and expression of the initiates' transformed identities. Ultimately, the article foregrounds poetry as a key commentator on culture and notions of masculinity and femininity, and thus adds to the discourse on gender and culture.

Keywords: culture; gender; *Domba*; initiation; *Murundu*; poetry; rites of passage

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Introduction

This article seizes an opportunity to illustrate that poetry and ritualistic practices rarely fall into mutually exclusive categories in Tshivenda culture. It analyses a sample of oral-related Tshivenda verse as if it were purely verbal and seeks out the potential connections between the once living tradition from which written poems stemmed and relevant ritual scenarios. Ultimately, it shows that ritualisation permeates multiple modes of expression, including the literary. However, an analysis of rituals as literary themes remains wanting. Inattention to the interface of Tshivenda poetry and ritual on the part of most scholars interested in Tshivenda folklore arises partly out of necessity: Lacking ethnographic records for the performance of ritual and its thematisation in poetry, they rarely speak with any confidence about the performance contexts or about the poets who composed most of the surviving poetic works. Nonetheless, a Muvenda poet interested in long-standing traditions has been able to foreground the intersection of poetry and ritual performance.

In his poetry anthology *Zwiala zwa Venda* (1967), Ralson Ramudzuli Matshili impressively preserves the oral-traditional “stamp” legible in specialised idioms, such as formulaic phraseology, themes, and type-scenes that recur throughout Tshivenda oral poetry, while elucidating the inner workings of *Domba* and *Murundu* in his poems. This article traces ritualistic features, whether linguistic, imagistic, gestural, or acoustic, that enhanced and informed the meaning of Matshili’s poems such as *Domba* and *Murundu*. In its appreciation of the sophistication, intricacy, and power of these rites, the article relies particularly on the poems’ coded language and aims to answer the following questions: What do these poems on the *Domba* and *Murundu* add to knowledge and an understanding of the transition rites for girls and boys into adulthood among Vh Venda, and how do they help to explain the art and value of the rites and the meaning of the language in which they are performed? In response to these questions, this article offers a literary-semiotic reading of two Tshivenda poems.

The selected poems compel a reader to move beyond surface-level readings by exploring the mechanisms behind their symbolic representation and meaning-making. Hence, this article employs the semiotic theory, which emerged prominently through the works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce whose foundational ideas significantly influenced how scholars interpret literature, leading to broader explorations into symbolism, textual interpretation, and cultural representation (Hawkes 1977). The theory is applied considering that what on the surface may seem to be an explicit symbol will, upon an in-depth analysis, emerge as a subtler form carrying multiple or layered interpretations influenced by context, culture, and reader perception. For example, the article will show that the concept *shuvhuru* (an uncircumcised lad or man), as used in the poem “Murundu,” is not merely a linguistic signifier but a complex symbol depicting notions of shame, exclusion, and social judgement. In Tshivenda ritual discourse, *shuvhuru* signifies an “incomplete” masculinity and thus creates the basis

of meaning-making in literary-semiotic analysis. Thus, crucial in this article is the need to elucidate the signifier-signified relationship in the poems.

Saussure defines the interface of the signifier and the signified as arbitrary, emphasising the dependence of meaning on cultural and linguistic contexts. In Tshivenda poetry, the relationship between these components becomes dynamic and interpretative. Consider, for example, the noun *ngoma* used in Matshili's poems "Murundu" and "Domba." In Tshivenda culture, the noun signifies multiple concepts, including a large pot-shaped wooden drum that is beaten on all important occasions (such as war and traditional songs and dance such as *Tshikona* and *Domba*), Malaria or any other disease affecting infants of which the characteristic symptom is a sunken fontanelle, the fontanelle itself, and an initiation rite, among others. The noun typifies a textual intricacy that requires a reader to manoeuvre the varying relationships between the signifier (*ngoma*) and the aforementioned multiple signified meanings. In Matshili's poems, then, textual codes operate as structural systems that guide a reader's interpretation and meaning-making from literary, cultural, historical, symbolic, and linguistic perspectives. Suffice to say, a careful analysis can decode the literary-semiotic significance of *Murundu* and *Domba* in Tshivenda poetry. Put succinctly, in performing a semiotic analysis of the selected poems, this article:

- Identifies the signs and symbols in the poems. The signs and symbols comprise words, phrases, objects, or any other aspects that convey meaning.
- Determines the signifier and the signified, where the signifier is a word or a symbol, while the signified is a concept or meaning represented by a word or a symbol.
- Analyses the relationships between signs and symbols, including how they interact with each other and with the whole poem.
- Examines the context and cultural significance of the signs and symbols, which entail the historical, social, and personal contexts in which the poems were written.
- Interprets the poems' meanings by combining the analysis of signs, symbols, and their relationships with the context and cultural significance.

By following the foregoing steps, it is hoped a deeper appreciation of the poems' meaning and their place within the broader cultural and literary context of Vhenda will be gained. For analytical convenience, a brief background on the cultural significance, secrecy protocols, and the relevance of symbolic language in *Murundu* and *Domba* might be helpful here.

Murundu and *Domba* in Tshivenda Culture

Rites of passage to adulthood for boys and girls, especially *Murundu* (solely for boys) and *Domba* (attended by males and females), are central, sacred, and performed with great ceremony in Tshivenda culture. Hence, they are treasured as significant signposts of Tshivenda culture (Ladzani 2022). They mark the passage of a person through the life cycle, from one stage to another over time (Diko 2025). This passage is mostly accompanied by a shift from one role or social position to another, integrating the human and cultural experiences with biological destiny: birth, reproduction, and death. The traditional rite that initiates a young man into full manhood and marital life in Tshivenda culture is called *Murundu* (also known as *muḽa*, *hogo*, and *ngoma*) whereas the rite for a young woman is known as *Domba* (Makhado 2009; Milubi 2000). *Murundu* entails *u fumba* (to be circumcised), followed by a series of rites and practices during initiation (Mudau and Mandende 2025). In this context, circumcision is not only a cut of the foreskin, but also a symbolic cut, connoting the connection of an initiate to the broader community, an acknowledgement of cultural identity, and a connection to his genealogical clan (Ncaca 2014). *Murundu* also entails going to the bush or mountain where the actual process of initiation takes place, focusing on the teachings and values that will be entrenched during this significant phase in the life of the new initiate (Mhlahlo 2009).

Vhavenda girls attend *Domba*. In this rite, both males and females are involved, although it is predominantly organised for females. Precaution is taken that participants never engage in pre-marital sex with each other. Both boys and girls are given explanations about pregnancy, the meaning and purpose of marriage as well as childbirth. They are taught taboos such as not engaging in sexual intercourse during menstruation, etc. For Vhavenda, initiation rites essentially represent a significant spiritual and psychological renaissance through which new birth is experienced and that ensures standards of social participation and personal behaviour are set (Mudau and Mandende 2025; Nemapate 2010).

These rites have been probed by anthropologists, ethnographers, and sociologists (notably Blacking 1969; Diko 2025; Ladzani 2022; Makhado 2009; Milubi 2000; Mpateni and Kang'ethe 2022; Mulaudzi 2001; Nomngcoyiya and Kang'ethe 2017; Stayt 1968). The scholars emphasise the roles of the rites in enhancing social capital, which manifests in respect, unity, love, moral regeneration, and consensus in most African communities. The recurrent admission among scholars is that the rites are deliberately shrouded in mystery, secrecy, and silence and as such, much of what supports them is known by relatively a few people (Diko 2025; Sebola and Mokgoatšana 2022).

So guarded are *Murundu* and *Domba* that the initiates must leave their families for the duration of the ceremony. The initiates are taken to a secluded place to hide the inner workings of the ceremony (Mokgoatšana and Mashego 2020). Ultimately, the initiates acquire lessons about societal roles, courtship, responsibilities, marriage practices,

sexual education, and moral value systems (Ladzani 2022). These lessons are presented in a coded language that is exclusive to this school. For example, the process of going to *Murundu* is called *u wela*, which literally means “to cross over” or “to fall into,” with the former being the accurate communicative meaning intended. This implies crossing over from childhood to adulthood (manhood) which, in this context, is also symbolically marked by cutting off the foreskin from the penis. The cut signals a moment of status change (Milubi 2000). When one finds these sacred rites thematised in poetry, an impulsion for a literary-semiotic reading arises. A key Tshivenda poetry text, *Zwiala zwa Venda* (Crowns of Venda), published in 1967 by Ralson Ramudzuli Matshili, has two poems about prominent initiation rites in Tshivenda culture, namely *Murundu* and *Domba*. Matshili’s poems are permeated with the coded language that characterises Tshivenda initiation rites.

This article is a textual analysis of two purposefully selected Tshivenda poems that were authored by Matshili (1967) in his classic anthology, *Zwiala zwa Venda*. Out of at least 40 Tshivenda poetry anthologies perused by the present author, only Matshili devoted poems to *Murundu* and *Domba*. When perusing the anthologies, only those that had poems on the two initiation rites met the inclusion criteria whereas those that did not were excluded. Ultimately, the two poems in Matshili’s anthology were selected, not only for their elaborate and yet cryptic description of *Domba* and *Murundu*, but also for the poet’s audacity to write and publish full length poems on what is viewed in Tshivenda culture as sacred, sensitive, and therefore surreptitious. The present author’s sociological background by virtue of being a researcher of Tshivenda literature abetted the content analysis of the poems. However, great care was taken to ensure that this positionality does not influence interpretation by commenting solely on the cultural meanings of the signs and symbols used in the poems. Furthermore, since the article deals with sacred knowledge, the author ensured that boundaries of secrecy were maintained by providing only a literary-semiotic analysis without disclosing the inner workings of the rites, as a disclosure of such workings was not the poems’ intention. In employing a semiotic approach to the study of the selected poems, four steps were followed: 1) a heuristic reading of the poems (first-order semiotic system), 2) a retroactive or hermeneutic reading of the poems, 3) a matrix or keyword search in the poems, and 4) theme determination.

A heuristic reading entailed reading the poems linearly based on their linguistic structure. Here, aspects such as normative grammar, morphology, semantics, and syntax were considered when analysing some words in the poems. A retroactive or hermeneutic reading was required after a heuristic reading did not provide the meaning of the poems; it only provided convenience and a reference to obtain the true meaning of the poems. Hence, it was continued with a retroactive reading. Retroactive reading refers to the second-order semiotic system, which provides interpretative meaning. It focuses on the meaning of language based on literary conventions. This reading was critical because the language of poetry uses various figurative languages, metaphors, or ambiguous meanings, among others. A matrix or keyword search continued with the search for the

formulation of the theme of a poem. This was done because the results of retroactive reading were also not maximal in giving the meaning of the poems. After finding the matrix or keywords in the poems, the next step in studying the poems was theme determination to get the main essence of each poem and provide essential information about the message that the poet sought to convey. This process occurred within the broad framework of coding signifiers, categorising cultural symbols, and finding an interpretive linkage to ethnographic literature on the thematised rites.

This section identifies semiotic codes, elucidates the signifier and signified in the poems, analyses the meanings of the codes and their interaction in the poems, and explains their context and cultural significance considering Tshivenda culture. It begins with Matshili's (1967, 29–30; emphasis added) poem "Domba":

Yo **hakwa deu** ya **vhaṭhannga** na **vhasidzana**,
Zwanḁa ndi tshaini yo vhoḁha mbongola.
Mabengele o shoshela zwanḁani.
 Ndi vḁuketsheketshe **Nyamasindi**.

[Young men and young women have queued,
 Arms are a chain fettering a donkey.
 Bangles stack on the hands.
 It's all rattles, Nyamasindi.]

Semiotic Coding in the Poem "Domba"

The title of the poem is "Domba." The noun *Domba* was formed from the verb stem *dombela*, meaning "to become more mature" (Mulaudzi 2001, 9). *Domba* also relates to *dombelela*, which means "ripe or ripeness" (a reference to maturity and readiness for marriage). With their knowledge of all the formulae and terminology of *Domba*, the initiates are perceived as the foundation of the future generation; hence, they are also called *vḁatei*, which is derived from the verb stem *-tea*, meaning "lay [the foundation]." In the preceding stanza, there are words such as *hakwa deu* (hooked rope), *vhaṭhannga* (young men), *vhasidzana* (young women), *zwanḁa ndi tshaini* (arms are a chain), *mabengele* (bangles; armllets) and *Nyamasindi* (name of the supervisor; facilitator; literally meaning "Mother of Masindi"). These words have literal meanings in Tshivenda culture. For instance, *deu* is a rope or thong by which the front oxen of a team are led. However, in *Domba*, *deu* signifies a leader of the initiates and the movement made by the initiates when dancing is *u haka deu*, where the dancers stand closely together in file, and each holds the arms of the novice in front. The way in which they hold the arms while standing in file can be likened to the formation of a chain; hence, the poet says "zwanḁa ndi tshaini." *Mabengele* are part of the traditional attire worn when the *Domba* is in session. The dancers also put on rattles around their ankles, which make a rhythmic, rattling sound during the dance; hence, the poet's use of *vḁuketsheketshe* (rattles). *Nyamasindi* symbolises the supervisor of the *Domba* dance. The prefix *Nya-* in the name of the supervisor symbolises "the mother of."

The poem begins with a description of how *Domba* is performed, with a key emphasis on the participants and their attire. There is also a careful choice of words, especially in the allusion to the participants. From the onset, the reader is informed that the key participants are *vhaṭhannga*, *vhasidzana* and *Nyamasindi*. *Vhaṭhannga* and *vhasidzana* symbolise the neophytes and by extension lack of knowledge and experience in the rite, whereas *Nyamasindi* symbolises *nyamatei*, a female, who by virtue of being an expert in the rite supervises the initiates in the *Domba*. The poet establishes this understanding from the onset to elucidate the scene of *Domba* performance, which opens with the juxtaposition of neophytes and experts. Here, the poet highlights the idea that *Domba* would be incomplete without either of these participants.

The poet's use of "yo hakwa deu" conjures in the reader's mind the leading of oxen using a rope, which in the poem is meant to create an image of how the initiates are led and mentored by experts into adulthood. The idea here is that the initiates are so clueless about the direction they must take that they literally need an expert to "hold them by the hand" through the entire process. Like oxen following a guide's rope, the neophytes learn to trust and follow the nudge of the leader. The hidden meaning here is that transitioning into adulthood requires expert guidance where a mentee not only trusts their mentor but must totally obey instruction. Not only should the neophytes yield fully to their supervisor's instruction, but they must also join hands with their fellow initiates and enter together into the rhythm of song and dance. It is implied here that the journey into adulthood is a team effort. As they form a chain with their arms, a sense of solidarity and communal interdependence is reinforced and the burden of learning the dance into adulthood becomes bearable.

The second stanza unveils the actual performance of *Domba*:

Nyamungozwa u ṭavha mukosi,
 Vhasidzana vha **tivha khulo, vhaṭhannga vha honedza,**
Vhabvana vha huvha mihuvho,
 Ngoma i fhaladza makwara, i vhidza bonndo dza vhatu.

[Nyamungozwa shouts,
 Girls ecstatically vocalise a hocket, young men grunt,
 Young women raise an alarm,
 Sounds of the drum level mountainous places, summoning offerings.]
 (Matshili 1967, 30; emphasis added)

There is now mention of *Nyamungozwa* or *Nemungozwa* who symbolises a song leader (Mulaudzi 2001; Milubi 2000). He is assisted by a woman known as *Nyamatei*, who supervises the girls and was mentioned in the first stanza. As stated previously, the prefix *nya-* symbolises "the mother of" whereas the noun stem *mungozwa* signifies the woman who has just given birth (Mulaudzi 2001). Although the name *Nyamungozwa* signifies femininity in its semantic content, it explains the role played by the man in

charge of the rite. He symbolises the mother of all the initiates, and they should all listen to him. *Nyamatei*, on the other hand, provides the basics of life to the initiates.

The poet says “vhasidzana vha tivha khulo,” literally referring to a unique multi-part vocal style used that is contrasted with the subdued call-and-response style used by female initiates that preceded it during the dance. It uses hocketing and interlocking techniques reminiscent of *Tshikona* (another prominent and popular Tshivenda dance and ritual) in that each girl performs only a limited number of notes to a phrase, which combines with the phrases of other girls to create a dense harmonic sequence. Singing in quasi-orgiastic cries of joy, the result is an ecstatic musical style, to some extent symbolising sexual climax (Blacking 1969). So, in alluding to this style, the poet not only draws from Tshivenda culture where *khulo* entails singing as a canon and in deep falsetto, as mostly done by women transporting beer, but also hints at the *Domba* as a signifier of marital readiness and lessons about sexual intercourse. The lines “vhaṭhannga vha hoṇedza” (young men grunt) and “vhasidzana vha huvha mihuvho” (young women raise alarm) signify not only a dense harmonic sequence in the performance but also sexual climax. At this rite, initiates are generally provided with teachings in preparation for marriage and parenthood.

The noun *ngoma* used in the last line, “Ngoma i fhaladza makwara, i vhidza bonndo dza vhathu,” is loaded with multi-layered meanings. In Tshivenda culture, *ngoma* generally refers to “a large, pot-shaped drum with hemispherical resonator carved out of solid wood and is always played with a stick” (Blacking 1967, 19); however, semiotically, *ngoma* could signify ancestors’ voices (Sebola and Mokgoatšana 2022), a song (Ratau and Sebola 2022), a baby’s fontanelle, or initiation rites (Nemakonde 2006). In both the poem and *Domba* performance, *ngoma* symbolises the dancers’ singing and various motions and by extension *maṭano* (demonstrative lessons). During *Domba*, the initiates are introduced to *ngoma ya ṭharu* (the demonstrative lesson of the python), *ngoma ya sali* (the demonstrative lesson of embers), *ngoma ya mavhavhe* (the demonstrative lesson of pain), *ngoma ya muṭoṭombudzi* (the demonstrative lesson of the grasshopper), *ngoma ya phalana* (the demonstrative lesson of impala), *ngoma ya singwele* (the demonstrative lesson of falling), *ngoma ya mbudzi na nngwe* (the demonstrative lesson of the goat and the leopard), *ngoma ya muvhero* (the demonstrative lesson of a young married man), *ngoma ya Thovhela na Tshishonga* (the demonstrative lesson of Thovhela and Tshishonga), and *ngoma ya nyalilo* (the demonstrative lesson of crying).

The literal meaning of *Domba* becomes a complete institution when the demonstrative lessons above are presented to the initiates. The demonstrative lessons are symbolic of practical life (Mulaudzi 2001, 13). For instance, the demonstrative lesson of the python is centred on a woman, and the python symbolises a woman and fertility. The demonstrative lesson of embers teaches the initiates about the hardships of life by making them hold hot embers. Mulaudzi (2001) says that in *ngoma ya mavhavhe* (the demonstrative lesson of pain), the initiates are ordered to engage in strenuous physical exercise. The purpose of the lesson is to prepare the initiates to face hardship after

graduating from the *Domba*. The pain associated with the lesson is evinced by the noun *mavhavhe*, which is derived from the verb stem *-vhavha* (painful).

The demonstrative lesson of the grasshopper teaches females congenial submission to their future husbands. *Muṭoṭombudzi* is a female grasshopper that is bigger than the male grasshopper and represents females in the *Domba* and yet this female, despite being bigger in physique, willingly defers headship in the home to her husband. The demonstrative lesson of impala teaches the initiates that in whatever they do, the chief, who is equated to *phala* (impala), should get a share. During the demonstrative lesson of falling, female initiates are taught to be faithful to their husbands; otherwise, trouble may befall them. In the demonstrative lesson of the goat and the leopard, male initiates who play the role of drunken men are taught that while they are drinking beer, the goat they are supposed to take care of is killed by a leopard. In this way, the male initiates are warned to be always alert and to protect their properties (Mulaudzi 2001, 13). The demonstrative lesson of a young married man teaches young men to defend themselves if they happen to be in trouble. The noun *muvhero* is derived from *muvhera* (young, married person). The demonstrative lesson of Thovhela and Tshishonga teaches young men to be strong and protect their wives. During the lesson, male initiates play the role of Thovhela and Tshishonga. These two characters are married men and when a fight breaks out, Tshishonga is defeated, and his wives are taken by Thovhela (Mulaudzi 2001, 13). Thus, the poet tactfully uses *ngoma* without elaborating on its connotative meaning, perhaps to prod the reader towards its semiotic reading and interpretation. To a casual reader, the foregoing meanings may not be considered when reading the poem.

In the third stanza, the poet says:

Nyamungozwa haṅwani hu kiwa mapfura,
Mufari wa deu, u farese u si fare deu madebe.

[Nyamungozwa's oral cavity drips oil,
Chain-holder, hold it tight, not petulantly.]
(Matshili 1967, 30)

The plea that the “holder of the chain” (neophyte; recruit) should “hold tight” reinforces the idea that it is most difficult to dance in front, because of the pressure of the people behind, and so new recruits are put there so that they will quickly learn to dance (Blacking 1969). What is signified here is that the dance is simple but requires careful co-ordination with the drum rhythms: The girls' song follows the beat of the alto drums, but their feet must follow the tenor drum. On the command from the supervisor, they move forwards and around the drums and the fire in an anticlockwise direction until they are told to stop moving. They then bend over towards the centre of the circle and “pump” their arms forwards and backwards until the song stops. Finally, they kneel and do what is known as *u losha* (to greet) in the traditional Tshivenda fashion (Sibadela 2002), and the ritual would be completed.

Semiotic Coding in the Poem “Murundu”

The first stanza of Matshili’s (1967, 65; emphasis added) poem “Murundu” reads thus:

Wo taha **murundu** wa **maḍali**,
Mashuvhuru o dzhenwa nga **ḵowa-gudu**,
 Yo taha **ngoma ya vhanna** muila-vhasadzi,
I ladzaho shango mulalo wa ḍala hoṭhe,
Ngoma-nduna ya Vhalemba vha Mbelengwa.

[Murundu of Maḍali [sic] has been erected,
 The uncircumcised are gripped by fear,
 The drum of the men who avoid women has sounded,
 Bringing peace across land,
 It is the male ritual of Vhalemba vha Mbelengwa.]

The first stanza foregrounds several signifiers and the signified in the instalment of a male initiation rite in Tshivenda culture. They include *Murundu*, *maḍali*, *mashuvhuru*, *ḵowa-gudu*, *ngoma ya vhanna*, and *ngoma-nduna*. That the poet begins by identifying the rite as *Murundu wa maḍali* (Maḍali’s initiation rite) signifies that the rite is not installed or erected by just anybody; there are experts called *maḍala/maḍali/maḍale* and *maine* (healer) who are tasked with the responsibility of establishing and supervising the rite. Hence, the opening line of the poem mentions the *Murundu* of *maḍali* has been erected. *Maḍala/maḍali/maḍale* (spellings differ because of dialectical variations of the Tshivenda language) is a secret term of *Murundu* that mainly signifies the head of a circumcision lodge. *Maḍali* is also a name of an age grade (*murole*) in Tshivenda culture. In the poem, it symbolises a gathering of an age group ready for circumcision.

The term *mashuvhuru* signifies an uncircumcised lad or man who has not been through the *Murundu*. Lads might be uncircumcised simply because their time has not yet arrived, whereas some men might be uncircumcised because they either fear circumcision or just do not believe in the practice. In any case, such lads and men are held in little to no esteem in a society that circumcises its male persons. In the poem, the poet immediately establishes a contrast between *maḍali* (a revered man) and *mashuvhuru* (fearful men, cowards). The poet says when the circumcision lodge was set up, “*mashuvhuru o dzhenwa nga ḵowa-gudu*” (the uncircumcised were struck with terror), as they feared that it was set up for them. Consequently, they hid themselves for fear of being abducted and forcefully taken to the lodge. Stayt (1968, 127) confirms that “any uncircumcised man, venturing near a circumcision school was likely to be caught and detained by force until he had conformed with all the regulations of the lodge.” Such men would metaphorically experience *ḵowagudu*. Literally, *ḵowagudu* is *sciatica*, a sort of rheumatism making legs swell. However, in the poem, it signifies the terror of the uncircumcised when they hear about the instalment of *Murundu* and the prospect of being taken there forcefully. References to the rite as “*ngoma ya vhanna*” or

“ngomanduna” hint at the idea that the circumcision lodge is where “real men” are made, implying that anyone who has not attended it is not a man.

The line “ngoma ya vhanna muilavhasadzi” (men’s ritual forbidden to women) signifies that *Murundu* has some taboos to prohibit women’s presence in the ceremony. For instance, although it is a place where blood is shed during circumcision, the blood of a menstruating girl is not tolerated (Milubi 2000). In fact, any girl who is menstruating is not allowed to cook *tshivhanelo* (initiates’ food). Milubi (2000) proffers that menstrual blood in this context is associated with contamination and infirmity. Girls who are permitted to cook for the initiates carry cone-shaped porridge to a spot called *dzikhareni*, where the uninitiated young men gather before they are fetched for circumcision. Girls and women are not allowed to pass this spot (Milubi 2000). The same prohibition enforced against menstruating girls and women applies to breastfeeding women. Such women are not allowed to cook for the initiates because milk in this case is not, as is often the case, ascribed life-giving qualities. Milk here is viewed by the supervisors of the rite and ultimately by the initiates as a disease-causative agent during *Murundu*. The poet equates the advent of *Murundu* with the institution of peace in the land, which is ironic considering that to *mashuvhuru*, the rite causes terror. In the poem, the terror of the uncircumcised is quickly eclipsed by shouts of jubilation for *Murundu*, as the next stanza affirms:

Wa ima **hu pfala khuwa thungo dzothe,**
 Hu tshi **imbiwa luimbo lukhoḁa vhanna,**
 Vhanna vha tshi u fhufha vha ṭhakhha makole,
Migwabere i tshi lelemela sa luṭanga lwa maḁini
Ngoma-mbuya ya Vhashavhi vha Mbelengwa.

[Once set up, there is ululation from all corners,
 With a song to praise men,
 Men leaping as high as the sky,
 With sticks shivering as a reed in the water
 The good ritual of Vhashavhi of Mbelengwa.]
 (Matshili 1967, 65; emphasis added)

The first stanza reiterates the joyful shouts in celebration of *Murundu* and adds that it is a rite exclusive to and in praise of men. The noun *vhanna* (men) is repeatedly used in the poem to distinguish the circumcised as worthy of honour while castigating the uncircumcised and deepening their sense of exclusion and alienation from society. The circumcised return from the lodge carrying *migwabere* (sticks), which could be used to punish the uncircumcised if encountered on the way. Thus, *migwabere* signify the punishment of any kind that may be suffered by the uncircumcised at the hands of the circumcised while at the same operating as a marker of circumcision.

In the third stanza, the poet directly addresses the uncircumcised, calling upon them to join the ritual:

Wo taha murundu asuyo **mashuvhuru**,
Gidimani ni yo dzhena **ni vhe vhanna**,
Ni songo shavha vhañwe **sa vhasadzi**,
Iyani ni vhone zwi no itwa **ni vhe na mulayo**,
Kha ngoma ya **vhalungu-na-nguvho**.

[Murundu is set up for you the uncircumcised,
Hurry up, go in and be men,
Do not be afraid as though you are women,
Go, witness what is done, and know the law,
At the ritual of Vhalungu vha na nguvho]
(Matshili 1967, 66; emphasis added)

The line “gidimani ni yo dzhena ni vhe vhanna” (Hurry up, go in and be men) illustrates explicitly that the uncircumcised are not regarded as men. The instruction to hurry up and go is meant to endorse the separation of male initiates from their mothers and all other females during the ritual. This dramatises the transition from a world of women and children to one that is ideally male. Those who do not join are likened to women, as seen in the third line, which likens uncircumcised men who fear *Murundu* to women, with the simile “sa vhasadzi” (like women) used to signify cowardice and fear. This stanza not only equates circumcision with idealised masculinity but also as a signifier of a man’s bravery in Tshivenḁa culture. In addition to encouraging the uncircumcised to attend *Murundu*, the poet adds that they should go and witness the inner workings of the ritual and know *mulayo*. Ordinarily, the noun *mulayo* means “law,” but in the ritual, the erudition of *mulayo* is upheld as a salient feature of the rites and must be strictly kept within the circle of the initiated. Hence, *mashuvhuru* are told to go and learn for themselves, as *mulayo* is disclosed at the lodge and nowhere else. *Mulayo*, then, is better understood as “esoteric knowledge” or “wisdom,” which refers primarily to a series of formulae in which certain familiar objects are given special names, rules of conduct and etiquette are reiterated, and the meaning of rites and symbolic objects is explained. In maintaining the secrecy of the ritual, such special names, rules of conduct, and etiquette will not be disclosed in this article. Sufficient for this article is the reiteration that *Murunduni*, the initiates, are taught to keep secrets, to greet, to respect elders, to be faithful, to live in harmony with others, and to observe other similar indoctrinations.

A key observation from the first to the last stanza is that the poet recurrently refers to *Murundu* as either “Ngoma-nduna ya Vhalemba vha Mbelengwa,” “Ngomambuya ya Vhashavhi vha Mbelengwa,” “ngoma ya vhalungu-na-nguvho,” or “ngomakhudzwa ya vhalungu.” The poet does this to sustain the view that *Murundu* was introduced and established by Vhalemba (also known as Vhashavhi, Vhamwenye, Vhasena, Vhalungu, among other designations). Although Van Warmelo (1960) proffers that the Vhaventḁa adopted circumcision for males from their neighbours the Vatsonga and Basotho, Stayt (1968) and Makhado (2009) argue that the Vhalemba influenced Vhaventḁa, Vatsonga, Bapedi, and Basotho to install *Murundu*. Seemingly, the poet’s recurrent allusion to

Vhalemba as the custodians of the rite is not only to contest Van Warmelo's view, but also to use poetry as an appropriation of history. Back to the poem,

Lu pfala lu tshi **shusha manngoḁa tsho dzumbana,**
Zwigoma zwinzhi zwo tibwa ho sala murundu fhedzi,
Tsemano na nndwa zwo fhela shango lo lala;
Thungo dzoṭhe **hu pfala luimbo luthihi.**
Lwa ngoma-khudzwa ya vhalungu.

[It sounds frightening, the uncircumcised is hiding,
The minor rituals are all stopped except for Murundu,
Insults and strife are over, the land is at rest;
Only one song is heard from all corners,
Of the great ritual of the Vhalungu.]
(Matshili 1967, 66; emphasis added)

The term *manngoḁa* signifies a circumcised person who has not yet been *mudabe* (a circumcised mentor who fulfils the responsibility of teaching the initiates *milayo*), who does not know everything yet. One may add that *manngoḁa* are also called *marivhane*, whereas those who have performed the duty of *mudabe* are called *ramaadana* and can play the part of *vahwira* (intermediaries). In the first line, the poet says the *Murundu* song frightens this individual and adds that considering the prominence of *Murundu*, minor rituals have been put on hold so that only *Murundu* prevails. This symbolises that *Murundu* is revered and performed with great ceremony. At least now *lishuvhuru* and *manngoḁa* are on common ground because they are both signified as overwhelmed by the dreadfulness of *Murundu*. Perhaps the distinction lies in that *manngoḁa* dreads *Murundu* from within the inner circle and is thus secure in his belonging to the circle while *lishuvhuru* fears and is communally disdained without prospects of accessing insider information about the cause of his dread.

The foregoing stanza focuses on the power of the *Murundu* song, which varies based on where and when it is sung. There is a song that must be sung when the already-circumcised initiates are sitting by the fireside in the evening; another song is sung when the uncircumcised initiates are being circumcised; there is a song that is sung when the *vhadabe* (plural form of *mudabe*) fetch food from the women, and another song is sung by the circumcised in memory of home (Rabothata 1991). The poet merely mentions the *Murundu* song here but does not provide the lyrics, which restricts a broader analysis of *Murundu* songs in this article. However, in the fourth stanza, the poet adds,

Vha yaho **vha vhuya na madzina maswa,**
Rasivhetshela, Rasingwani, Razwimisani, Rasanavho,
Oṭhe madzina a murundu a thoma nga RA.
A songo ralowo ndi mapambuwi.
Ndi ngoma-mbuya ya vhalungu.

[Those who go there return with new names,

Rasivhetshele, Rasilingwani, Razwimisani, Rasalanavho,
All the names given at the Murundu have the prefix RA.
The one who does is a stray person.
It is the good ritual of vhalungu.]
(Matshili 1967, 66; emphasis added)

Implicit in the preceding stanza is the poet's understanding that, traditionally, the circumcision lodge is burnt down after approximately three months, and the initiates are taken to the river to bathe themselves. As soon as they emerge from the river, they are given new names. The new names suggest a transition from boyhood to manhood, and the initiates are then called by their new names (Milubi 1997, 2000). As the poet affirms, the new names are characterised by the prefix *Ra-*, such as *Rafumbedzani*, *Ratshilumela*, or *Rathiyaya*, or in the case of the poem quoted above, *Rasivhetshele*, *Rasilingwani*, *Razwimisani*, and *Rasalanavho*. Even the name of the surgeon in the rite is named *Ravhalia*. The Tshivenda prefix *Ra-* originally means "father of," forming nouns denoting function or position such as *Ramukhadi* (herd master), *Ramuḍi* (owner of the homestead), *Ratshili* (selfish one, particularly to his wife or wives) (Nemukongwe 1995). The prefix is also used when new chiefs and headmen are given new names on the day of installation that are derived from historical events or that contain good wishes for their reign, such as *Ranwedzi* (one to whom people should listen).

When *Ravhalia* is done with the circumcisions, the *midabe*, *milidi*, and elderly men come together and say:

Mafhe!
Mafhe mafhefho!
Mafhe!
Mafhe mafhefho!

[Done!
Done, finished!
Done!
Done, finished!]
(Matshili 1967, 66)

Immediately after these expressions, the leading voice declares *dziḍa!* and then everyone responds in unison by saying *dziḍa!* The singing of *Mafhe! Mafhefho!* followed by the acclamation of *dziḍa!* can be seen as the reaffirmation of "male" presence on behalf of the *mashuvhuru* who are now accepted into real manhood (Milubi 2000). After undergoing the initiation rites, the young men are deemed ready for marriage.

A literary-semiotic reading whose goal is to find the final meaning of a literary work was conducted in this article. Before the final meaning of each of the two poems could be obtained, an intermediary or alternative meaning of the poems was considered by firstly highlighting the literal meaning of a word in the poem that may have been a

signifier, for example. The example of *ngoma* readily comes to mind here. The alternative meaning of *ngoma* as a musical instrument was obtained first before formulating the final meaning of its use in the two poems. In the poems, *ngoma* signifies *ritual*. A heuristic reading of the poems aided significantly in obtaining the intermediary or alternative meanings of coded words such as *Nyamasindi*, *Nyamungozwa*, and *Nyamatei*, where a morpho-semantic analysis of the prefix *Nya-* and the noun stems drew the reader closer to the figurative meanings of these nouns. This analysis paved the way for a retroactive reading and subsequent discussion of the layered meanings even in a linguistic unit such as the prefix *Ra-* in both Tshivenda discourse and ritual language. The socio-cultural meanings of words such as *ngoma*, *Nyamatei*, and *Nyamungozwa* confirm that “symbolism is culture-bound” (Nengovhela 2010). Symbolism in poetry encourages layered interpretations (Mazumdar 2014).

The foregoing analysis of the poems on *Domba* and *Murundu*, respectively, also reveals the Vhavenda’s thinking about sex, gender, and maturity, and these rites are therefore presented as critical pillars of culture and tradition. The rites remain reserved for some (the initiated), guarded against others (the uninitiated), and prohibited to the most powerful (the supervisors). Yet from the poet’s perspective, the rites are associated with positive experiences, such as feelings of empowerment, affirmation, and belonging. Seemingly, the rites provide the initiates with the skills and mechanisms of negotiating the realities of the rites themselves and in real life. Ultimately, the rites instil a sense of responsibility coupled with respect for self and others as fundamental among the initiates. Independence and autonomy also emerge as some of the key performance areas of successful femininity and masculinity, at least in as far as they are defined in society.

Interestingly, while the poet praises the two rites and their participants, there seems to be a disdain for the uninitiated (*mashuvhuru*) in the poem “Murundu,” which has considerable implications for gender discourse and notions of masculinity and femininity in Tshivenda culture. It seems dignity and value are ascribable only to the initiated. Perhaps a further exploration could critically and comprehensively reflect on gender constructs in Tshivenda culture. Of primary interest in this article was the figurative use of language as a trope in Matshili’s poems and what his poems reveal about the meaning of initiation rites. An analysis of the poems shows that a valid ethnologic inquiry into expressive culture can focus upon the vicissitudes of subjects and objects as they are related in complexes of semiotic predication.

Conclusion

This article analysed Ralson Ramudzuli Matshili’s two poems on *Domba* and *Murundu*, which may be viewed as the prominent initiation rites of the Vhavenda. Perhaps this article’s contribution to knowledge is its attempt to read the poems from an *emic* perspective on Tshivenda culture, which allowed for an authentic and even approximate exposition. An *etic* approach, which gravitates towards an imposition of foreign views upon a people’s indigenous culture, would not have been helpful, as it operates on the misguided belief that one culture has a right to impose its values on other cultures and

to insist on the “rightness” of its frameworks, thus positioning other cultures in a junior light and implying that they are subsets of the imposing culture. This article cherished an exposition of culture for its own sake. Through emic consideration, this article proffers that: (a) People’s folklore possesses an epistemological, etiological, and eschatological content that interprets their reality; (b) people’s peculiarity can be studied and understood more as a philosophical than a biological issue from their own perspective(s); (c) a critic can come to terms with the fundamental cultural differences because they appreciate people’s ownership of values, knowledge, and culture; and (d) people can gain a total reclamation of their philosophical ground without being victims of assumptions and stereotypes that support established value systems and critical theories with little regard for their own significant historical experiences. To the poet, initiation rites are an important topic, and they presently remain an important topic in South Africa (Diko 2025), not only because of the public health discourse and debates around circumcision, but also because of the increasing significance of initiation for communities for which the practice holds strong socio-cultural relevance.

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