


Blurry boundaries between Nwali and Jehovah in some Tshivenḁa modern poems

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Contrary to some Vhavenḁa poets who recognise Nwali and/or Raluvhimba as Jehovah, this article argues that Nwali and Jehovah are two distinct deities. It further asserts that there is no kinship or continuity between these deities. Although there are possibilities of there being some similarities of attributes between these deities, their conceptual distinctions highlight significant incongruities between them. Nwali in Tshivenḁa traditional religion (TTR) is identified as the Semitic Nwali, which is arguably evidence that there has been a 'Hellenisation' of TTR and the Vhavenḁa's concept of God. Consequently, the Vhavenḁa have been left with essentially two distinct deities to consider – a fact that has contributed and still contributes immensely to the ambivalence of the modern-day Vhavenḁa's spiritual lifestyle. This article might add to the ongoing discourse on the decolonisation of African traditional religions and their attendant theology.

Keywords: Christianity; Hellenisation; Jehovah; Mudzimu; Nwali; Raluvhimba; Tshivenḁa traditional religion.

Introduction

Some Vhavenḁa poets perceive the Vhavenḁa's God, Nwali and/or Raluvhimba, and the God of the Jews, Jehovah or Yahweh, as one and the same in their poems, despite the fact that the Vhavenḁa's concept of Mwali, Nwali, Mwari and/or Raluvhimba initially did not acknowledge any Israelite roots until the Vhalemba and Christian missionaries purported it in Venḁa (Le Roux 1999:119; cf. Mafela 2008; Mashau 2004; Matshidze 2013; Munyai 2016; Sebola 2020; Stayt 1931; Wessman 1908). The foregoing names for God as used in Tshivenḁa traditional religion (TTR) are viewed by scholars as referring to one deity, Nwali (Mashau 2004; Munyai 2016; Schapera & Eiselen 1959; Stayt 1931), with the orthographic distinctions between Nwali, Mwali and Mwari ascribed only to some linguistic variations among the Tshivenḁa, Karanga and Kalanga languages in Venḁa, western Zimbabwe and north-eastern Botswana (Madiba 1994). However, Rodewald (2010a, 2010b) objects and proffers that Mwali, who is worshipped by the Kalanga in Botswana, is different from Mwari and Nwali, worshipped by the Karanga in western Zimbabwe and the Vhavenḁa in Venḁa. He further distinguishes the Kalanga-speaking people of Botswana from the Karanga-speaking people of Zimbabwe, highlighting the use of /l/ and /r/ as significant markers of distinction between them. Seemingly, Rodewald highlights such distinctions to link Mwali in Botswana to the Israelites' Yahweh, while concurrently depicting Mwari in Zimbabwe and Nwali in Venḁa as merely traditional deities with intertribal significance.

Is Nwali African or Semitic, or both?

Rodewald's (2010a:11) insistence that 'the roots of worship to *Mwali* [in Botswana] can be found in Israelite worship of Yahweh' (original italics, author's insertion) can be critically engaged in lieu of the 'concept of Hellenisation' (Kanu 2021:61). This could be done in order to foreground the possibilities of African deities donning Hellenistic garb for the purposes of proving a point to the West, who thought Africans had neither a concept of God nor religion (Mbiti 1969). The concept of 'Hellenisation' is deployed within African and Western contexts often to locate (Judeo-Christian) missionaries' attempts to comprehend African cultures, traditions and religions, without regard to the peculiarities and particularities of the African traditional and religious context (Kanu 2021). Possibly, Rodewald's (2010a, 2010b) delineations of an African Mwali as Semitic Yahweh might be in tandem with some African scholars who are concerned with the misunderstanding and misinterpretation(s) of African traditional religion (ATR) and theology by the missionaries, ethnographers, historians, anthropologists and philosophers, among others. Among these scholars, there are those (e.g. P' Bitek 1963, 1964, 1969, 1971, 1972; Setiloane 1986) who have categorised African religion and theology as an independent field of

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study requiring the application of African-based approaches and those African scholars (e.g. Mbiti, Danquah, etc.) who were notably influenced by the Western approach to the study of African theology and religion (Kanu 2021:62). The latter category of scholars are criticised by P' Bitek (1969, 1972) for their misinterpretation of African traditional religion, particularly because of their efforts to comprehend this religion within the theoretical framework of the West, and thus they end up 'Hellenising' African religion and deities. The concept 'Hellenisation of African deities', as propounded by Okot and recently summarised by Kanu (2021), manifests in three important ways, namely (1) '[u]sing them to prove that the Judeo-Christian God does exist and has always been known among Africans'; (2) some African nationalists' obsession with proving to the West that the African is also 'civilised'; therefore, they dress African deities in Hellenistic garb and parade them before their Western counterpart(s); and (3):

Western missionaries who sought to show their audience of African elites that they, as Saint Paul in Athens, were highly religious people with the hope of winning them over to Christianity. (p. 62)

It is possible that the claim that an African deity such as Mwali is Yahweh falls within the ambit of Hellenisation, as presented here. Although there is a possibility of a local, traditional deity gaining intertribal and possibly even intercontinental significance because of migration and intermarriage, among other contributory factors, it does not necessarily mean that such a deity should be replaced by another on the premise of popularised 'similarities'. Rodewald's (2010a, 2010b) view of African Mwali as linked to Semitic Yahweh is presented selectively in favour of those aspects (laws, worship and supplication, day of rest, etc.) that resonate with the worship of the latter deity and subtly ascribes aspects deemed abhorrent to Yahweh, such as ancestor veneration, to Mwari in Zimbabwe. Rodewald does this to bolster the view that Mwali in Botswana is a distinct deity from Mwari and Nwali in Zimbabwe and Venda, respectively. One might even argue that Rodewald Hellenises Mwali and relegates Mwari and Nwali to the fringes just to ensure that Mwali in Botswana attains acceptability in Judaism. In the same vein, although Mashau (2004) and Munyai (2016) acknowledged the possibility of there being some etymological and historical links of the name Nwali to the Karanga (and Shona) language in Zimbabwe, where the name for God is 'Mwari', the duo still insists that the Mwari referred to here is the *Mwari weMatonjeni* [God of Matongoni] and not *Mwari weDenga* [God of Heaven]. *Mwari weMatonjeni* is said to have historical links with the Vhavanḁa people (namely the Singo clan), and accordingly, even before they supposedly migrated to the southern parts of Rhodesia and northern Transvaal, the Singo had been closely associated with the Mbire tribe and regularly sent delegations to the Matonjeni shrines (Daneel 1970:44; Munyai 2016:21), suggesting that there are links to the past and continuity. The Tshivenda equivalent name for Matonjeni is Matongoni. Mashau (2004) and Munyai (2016) distinguished between

Mwari of Matongoni and Mwari of Heaven because their goal is to help Christian missionaries on how to best present a contextualised missiology to the Vhavanḁa, unlike their forerunners who dismissed Tshivenda culture as pagan and barbaric. Needless to say, both Mashau and Munyai distance themselves from the Nwali in Venda and associate themselves with the Semitic Nwali, as Ratshifanga's poem will also affirm. This article argues to the contrary.

On de-Hellenising Nwali

The antithetical stance assumed here emanates from the realisation that, in the Vhavanḁa's traditional concept of Nwali, there are neither allusions to kinship nor continuities between African Nwali and Semitic Jehovah. Put succinctly, TTR and Judaism did not originate as the same religion, as is seemingly the case with Mwali in Botswana. Certainly, a Semitic-related Nwali, also known as Jehovah, Yahweh or Mudzimu – the God of the Bible (Adamo & Olusegun 2022:1–7; Rodewald 2010a:11–21, 2010b:22–30) – is acknowledged among the Vhavanḁa. This, however, should not be taken to imply that this Semitic Nwali was always known and worshipped by the Vhavanḁa. As will be shown later, the Vhavanḁa (formerly called Vhasenzi by the Vhalemba) associate their Nwali with their ancestral home, Matonjeni or Matongoni, and not Israel. In addition, the analysis of Matshili's (1972:26) poem 'Matongoni' will reveal that the Vhavanḁa also refer to Nwali as *Makhulu* [Grandparent]. Reference to Nwali as *Makhulu* resonates with the Vhavanḁa's view of their ancestors (*vhomakhulu*) as mediators between them and Nwali. Thus, there is a hierarchy of authority in the religious view of the Vhavanḁa, with Nwali as the most senior ancestor, the ancestors occupying the immediate ranks below and the living Vhavanḁa at the most junior level (cf. Schutte 1978:111). The Semitic Nwali, on the other hand, has no room for ancestor veneration in his institution of worship (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 18:11; Isaiah 8:19).

The Semitic Nwali was probably introduced by the Vhalemba¹:

[D]uring the pre-Islamic period (before 600 AD) [when] Judaism spread into Saudi Arabia, Africa and the rest of the world, resulting in more than one tribe in Africa embracing a self-declared form of Judaism. (Le Roux 1999:14)

That the Vhalemba have lived for centuries among the Vhavanḁa, resolutely stating their Israelite roots and Yahweh as their God from generation to generation, contributed immensely to the identification of Nwali in Venda as Yahweh (Le Roux 1999). With this identification also came the *adoption* of various forms of Judaism by distinct groups in distinct locations (Parfitt 1997 in Le Roux 1999:14). The adopted forms of Judaism, Le Roux (1999) averred, were preceded by African traditional religious practices, including the veneration of African Nwali. Jehovah must have been

¹Vhalemba are 'a group in southern Africa who even today regard themselves as Jews or Israelites ... and to my knowledge the only group in southern Africa who have specific oral traditions that they originally came by boat to Africa' (Le Roux 1999:26). They live amongst other peoples in southern Africa, mainly in Venda, Sekhukhune, Mpumalanga and the southern parts of Zimbabwe.

introduced in this process of adoption and subsequently gained prominence and ultimacy as the true, exclusive and universal God.

African traditional religion: A *praeparatio evangelica*?

There is also a claim that the traditional Nwali exited the Matopo hills in Zimbabwe to make way for the white missionaries who were bringing the gospel to the indigenes (Schutte 1978:110). This is problematic because it depicts African traditional religion in general and TTR in particular as '*praeparatio evangelica*' (Mbaya & Cezula 2019:425, original italics). Moreover, it suggests that TTR comprises elements that can be validated as Judeo-Christian, which if true, further implies that Judeo-Christianity is a true and universal religion for which all other religions must be abandoned. If TTR is *praeparatio evangelica*, a question arises – that is, why would the missionaries supposedly sent by Nwali, who exited to make room for them, speak of the same Nwali as pagan and superstitious (Khorommbi 1996)? Why would the same Nwali allow the message of 'redemption from sin', preached in his name, to be accompanied by the colonisation, oppression and dehumanisation of the very people in need of redemption? Did the message of redemption necessitate the imposition of a Semitic heritage on Africans and subsequent misinterpretations of ATR, as Le Roux (1999:16) observed? Is there room for a postcolonial student of religions and religious movements in Africa and South Africa to view these phenomena through 'the lens of decoloniality' (Kgatle 2021:1)? Is it possible to evaluate religion and religious movements in Africa within a context that interlinks 'colonisation, domination, resistance and recovery' (Chidester 1996:238–240)? How does one objectively reflect on the blurred boundaries between Nwali in Venḁa and Jehovah in Israel without ignoring the fact that in South Africa:

[T]here are groups on whom the idea of Jewishness was either imposed, or those who identified with the concept, because it may have confirmed and reinforced ancient traditions and customs? (Le Roux 1999:21)

Can one interpret TTR not as some barbaric paganism or a distorted form of Judaism once observed by 'illiterate' Africans while waiting for the 'civilised' Europeans to come and enlighten them, but as a legitimately independent religion? Does African religion always have to be studied solely in comparison to Christianity? These questions are raised naïvely, not only to encourage an interpretation of ATR and TTR that goes beyond relying on 'frontier theorists (comparativists)' when discussing unfamiliar African religions but also to propose a discourse that moves away from discussing African traditional religion and theology, explicitly or implicitly, either as a distorted form or an antithesis of a more 'superiorised' and 'universalised' religion – Judeo-Christianity.

As a first step towards responding to some of the questions raised here, this article argues that, fundamentally, there is no kinship or continuity between Nwali in Venḁa and

Jehovah, as purported by some of the selected Vhaventḁa poets. This means that, historically, TTR and Judeo-Christianity originated as separate religions. Given that there is a conceptual difference between these deities, one can logically argue that the two deities stand in possible antagonism with one another. The argument is based on an analysis of a representative sample of Tshivenḁa poems on Nwali and Jehovah, where some poets who believe in Nwali in Venḁa maintain the deity's distinction from Jehovah, whereas the other poets who insist on Nwali being Jehovah do so while exhibiting a sense of dual consciousness. This article is purely qualitative in approach and analyses six purposively selected Tshivenḁa poetry anthologies. The texts were selected because they contained poems that thematised Nwali and Jehovah either as one and the same or as distinct. The anthologies are *Vhakale vha hone* (Ngwana 1958), *Vhungoho na vivho* (Ratshitanga 1972), *Tsiko-tshiphiri* (Sigwavhulimu 1971), *Fhulufhedzani* (Matshili 1972), *Mirunzi ya vhuo* (Sigwavhulimu 1975) and *Vhadzimu vho tshenuwa* (Ratshitanga 1987). Nine poems were selected from the anthologies and analysed based on the following themes: (1) Nwali as distinct from Jehovah in TTR, (2) communion with the spirit world in TTR, (3) Nwali as Jehovah in Tshivenḁa poetry and (4) perceptions of Jehovah in Tshivenḁa poetry.

Analysis

Nwali as distinct from Jehovah

Matshili's (1972:26) poem 'Matongoni' not only implicates Matongoni, Matongoni or Vhukalanga (Zimbabwe) as the Vhaventḁa's ancestral home, but it also emphatically separates Nwali from Judeo-Christianity. Prior to that, however, the poet provides the reader with some sort of sociological background to the historical relationship between Nwali and Vhasenzi. The poem reads thus:

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

[What bothers Mwali, Grandfather, is a consoler,
How spoiled we were at Matongoni our home;
What did we lack?
In autumn, our bellies were full.] (p. 26)

Originally, the Vhasenzi (an ancient name of the Vhaventḁa), the ancestors of the royal Singo clan of the Vhaventḁa, lived in a city called Matongoni [The Graves] in Zimbabwe (Schutte 1978). The first line of poem states that Nwali is grief-stricken and without a consoler in sight. The reader is not immediately informed about the cause(s) of Mwali's grief. The poet progresses to reminiscing about the bounties once enjoyed at Matongoni. The poet does this to depict Matongoni as a place not only worth reimagining but also revisiting because of the tranquillity and prosperity once enjoyed there. The poet opts for reimagining instead of physically returning to Matongoni because *Nwali wa Matongoni* [Nwali of Matongoni] is angry at the Vhasenzi because of their disobedience to him, for reasons to be considered shortly.

The poet's mention of Mwari in the same breath with Matongoni is unsurprising, given that Mwari or Nwari conversed with the Vhavanḁa at Mount Matongoni (Khorommbi 1996). The Matonjeni or Matongoni shrine complex was essentially the centre of the Mwari cult (Daneel 1970; Schutte 1978). Schutte (1978) recorded that Matongoni itself had six distinct offices, occupied by a high priest, a keeper of the shrine, a *hosanna* or dedicated male, a *jukwa* dancer, a second priest and interpreter of the voice of Mwari and a medium. Also connected to the cult was the tremendous drum that was classified as the drum of Nwari, *Ngomalungundu* (Le Roux 2009:102), the voice of the great god, King of Heaven (*Mambo wa Denga*), but also of the ancestor god of the Vhavanḁa and Vhakalanga (Schutte 1978). The drum is believed by some scholars to parallel the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament (Le Roux 2009). Perhaps this is where others might claim that the Semitic Yahweh is Nwari. However, Le Roux (1999, 2009) is quick to associate the drum strictly with the Vhalemba, whose oral traditions trace back to Israelite roots, and not the rest of the Vhavanḁa. Unlike Mashau (2004) and Munyai (2016), Schutte (1978) does not see a distinction between *Mwali weDenga* and *Mwali weMatonjeni*. This lack of distinction implies that to the Vhavanḁa, Mwari or Nwari was both an apical ancestor (also referred to as *Makhulu*) and the God of Heaven. Had Mashau and Munyai corroborated their claims by presenting the distinctions between the two deities, perhaps what would have been left to address is only the identification of these distinct deities by the same name. In the next stanza, the poet reflects on the Vhavanḁa's relationship with Nwari at Matongoni:

*Mvula i sa ni vhakalaha vha isa nduvho,
Nduvho ya tanganedzwa nga dakalo jihulwane,
Ngomalungundu ye ngindi-ngunduu ya unga jothe,
Mifhululu ya jaha thungo dzotho.*

[When it did not rain, the elders sent propitiations,
The propitiations were accepted with great joy,
Ngomalungundu would naturally rumble,
Ululations would spread to all directions.] (p. 26)

The foregoing stanza ascribes rain-making qualities to Nwari, an aspect that was triggered by adherence to Nwari's prescriptions. As stated in the poem, *vhakalaha* were designated to deliver these propitiations to Nwari at Matongoni. Implied here is that Nwari was never approached or appeased by just any member of society (Mashau 2004; Munyai 2016) but by designated members of the Vhavanḁa. The principle of relying on intermediaries to approach and address the king, the ancestors and Nwari is well known and observed in African communities (Mokgoatšana 1996). However, that Nwari is approached and propitiated mainly by *vhakalaha* as intermediaries does not mean women have no place or roles in the worship of Nwari. In fact, Mukonyora (1999) challenged the marginalisation of women and their depictions as men's subordinates in the 'particular strand of Shona religiosity known widely as the Mwari religion' (Mukonyora

1999:278). Furthermore, '*Madzitete* [aunts] and *Madzimbuya* [grandmothers], for example, brew beer for drinking at ritual gatherings' (Mukonyora 1999:277). The central thesis of Mukonyora's (1999:278) article is that 'some of the feminine features of this [Mwari] religion were suppressed and others distorted' (author's insertion). The female features of Mwari alluded to here include but are not limited to (1) fertility, as ascribed to Mwari, resonates with the aspects of a woman-focused culture, and (2) the designation of Mwari as *Dzivaguru* [the Great Pool] symbolises a pool of water, 'the fountain and origin of life, like the woman's womb' (Mukonyora 1999:282). Therefore, Mwari has two dimensions: the male dimension and the female dimension. However, the latter has been suppressed, resulting in Mwari being viewed essentially as the God of the patriarchal family only. Even in Tshivenda culture, the *makhadzi* plays a prominent role in the veneration and propitiation of both Nwari and the ancestors (Matshidze 2013). Thus, the poet's mention of *vhakalaha* as the only ones eligible to approach Nwari is a deliberate tactic to enforce male focus in the worship of Nwari. This tactic seemingly resulted in Nwari being regarded as 'a personal being beyond and above ancestral hierarchies and [who] could only be approached through the mediation of the senior lineage ancestors (*mhondoro* or *vharudzi*) or special messengers' (Schutte 1978:110). Even from this patriarchal posture, that the poet mentions *vhakalaha* (pl. 'old men') instead of *mukalaha* (singular) shows at the very least that ATRs and TTR are not an individual affair; they are corporate religions that include the whole community. Generally, Nwari and the ancestors are approached by the group (*vhakalaha* and *vhakegulu*, 'old women') to satisfy group interests and needs. Even if an individual were to attempt to open a line of communication with Nwari, an ancestor or ancestors, that individual would use the plural to indicate that the interests are not only his or her own but also those of the groups that he or she represents (Mokgoatšana 1996). When this principle is adhered to, Nwari responds favourably to all people in his realm of rulership, resulting in the people's tremendous joy. In these moments of joy, Nwari's tremendous drum *Ngomalungundu* would, according to the poet, also spread its echoing sound (for a detailed analysis of the drum, see Le Roux 2009). At times, the power of the drum was so great that it appeared to play itself, as stated in the poem, and this was because the invisible Mwari or Nwari was playing it (Kirkaldy 2002). When Nwari received propitiations from his people, what would happen was:

*Ya thoma u bvuma nga Tshipembe,
Kukole paṭa vḥukati ha jhoho,
Milobilo ya unga thungo dzotho,
Ra takala u handululwa nga makhulu washu.*

[Thunder began in the south,
A small cloud would gather in the [sky]
Downpours would gush from all directions,
We would be glad after receiving relief from our grandfather.] (p. 26)

The poet's recurrent allusions to and appreciations of Mwali's rain-making abilities are meant to reveal the deity as *Mwali* [sower], which acknowledges the deity as the giver of rain and with 'the fertility of crops and women' and (Schutte 1978:110). When rain falls, because Nwali is appeased, the people celebrate and live at ease. Theirs is a life characterised by:

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

[Songs and celebratory performances
Plays and the reed-pipe dance in full blast,
Tshigombela and hollow bamboo instrument in accord,
With Matongoni, our beautiful home, at ease.] (p. 26)

In the foregoing stanza, Tshivenḁa traditional songs and dances, *Tshikona* and *Tshigombela*, are not only linked to pastimes in Matongoni but presented as praise to Nwali in gratitude to the provision of abundant rain. Seemingly, Nwali did not perceive the Vhavenḁa's traditional songs and dances as pagan and therefore abhorrent expressions of worship, unlike the missionaries who perceived them as animist, heathen and pagan practices that reflected barbarism and backwardness (Mokgoatšana 1996). For the poet, Matongoni is the Vhasenzi's place of creation and origin, not Israel:

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

[Matongoni, Matongoni, our place of creation
You bestowed so much good to us
Your glories remained with you shielded;
When we remember Matongoni, we fast from food.] (p. 26)

As might have been observed, Matshili's poem makes no mention of Nwali as being Jehovah. If anything, his poem depicts Nwali as free from Hellenisation. In his poem, he touches (although tangentially) on the migration of the Vhasenzi from Vhukalanga (Zimbabwe), Matongoni, to their present habitation in South Africa (Madiba 1994). This hypothesis is explored in yet another poem by Matshili (1972), 'Mupfuluwo wa Vhasenzi' ['The migration of the Vhasenzi'], where the poet speaks in the first person as Nwali, thus:

Hee inwi vhaḁuhulu vhang!
Ni itani phanda ha maḁo anga?
Milayo yanga no i isa ngafhi naa?
Zwiito zwanu zwi a nengisa vhannani.

[Hey you, my grandchildren!
What are you doing before my eyes?
Where did you put my laws?
Your deeds are disgusting.] (p. 29)

According to the poet, Nwali's displeasure with the Vhavenḁa emanated from their abandonment of his laws, but the poet does not specify those laws. Here, Nwali has

parallels with Jehovah, who also has laws, which because of spatial limitations cannot be explored here. The poet, speaking in the first person, implies that Nwali not only spoke *to* people but also *through* a person, that is, a poet. If Nwali spoke through a person, it follows then that Nwali could inhabit or possess a human being. Nwali's possession of a human being also implies that the deity could take control of both the mental and vocal faculties of a person to express his will and intentions, making a human being a medium through which he could convey his word and will. Here, Nwali is also in consonance with Jehovah who is believed to fill his messengers with his Spirit for the purposes of fulfilling divine purposes. Contrary to the claim that Nwali left Matongoni to make room for the white people, the poet ascribes the Vhavenḁa's abandonment of Nwali's laws and internecine wars to his departure from them, as the next stanza affirms:

Mufhirifhiri ndi wani vhukati hanu?
Ni vhangisana mini tshihuluhulu?
No nndina nga maanda vhasenzi vhang,
Mishumo yanu i a ntsilinga zwihulu.

[What are the bloody wars for among you?
What are you fighting one another for?
You infuriated me so much, my vhasenzi,
Your deeds are greatly repulsive to me.] (p. 26)

*Vhasenzi! No n[n]dina pfuluwani,
No ntshonisa vuhuhulwane a vhu lwelwi,
Muḁi wanga no u fhiselani vhannani?
Vhasenzi nandi! Pfuluwani maḁoni anga.
Iyani thungo ya Tshipembe noshe,
Ni dzule shangoni lavhudi la mulalo,
Fhano aiwa, ndi a pfuluwa nḁe Mwali nga ndoḁhe,
Ndo sinyuwa muḁi wanga wo lovha na zwalo.*

[Vhasenzi! You angered me, move away
You embarrassed me, seniority is not acquired through protest
Why did you burn my home?
Oh, Vhasenzi! Move away from my sight.
All of you, move to the South
And settle in the good land of peace
Here, no, I, Mwali am leaving of my own accord
I am furious, my residence has disappeared with its sacred sites.]
(p. 26)

The cause of conflict among the Vhasenzi is not specified in the poem. What is clear is that Nwali is both infuriated and nauseated by the internecine wars at Matongoni. In fury, Nwali commands the Vhavenḁa to leave both their home and his sacred place, Matongoni, to go to a place merely referred as the 'south' in the poem. However, part of Nwali's fury with the Vhasenzi is that in their internecine wars, they also burnt his sacred site, his home. Although Nwali is grieved by the Vhavenḁa's abandonment of his laws, their bloody wars and subsequent destruction of his sacred site, he still instructs them to go to 'a good land of peace' that is in the south (Venḁa?). Here, Nwali is depicted as a God who, although infuriated by his people, still provides what is good for them, which typifies his benevolence towards his people as superseding his fury against them.

In Matshili's poem, Nwali is presented uniquely as the Vhasenzi's deity, with no Semitic connection. Even in their communion with Nwali, tradition and ancestor veneration interface with each other, something forbidden by Jehovah in the Bible. On this note, it might be worthwhile to state that Nwali in Venḁa has no problem with the ancestral dance called *malombo*, to which Jehovah would not take kindly because it is essentially a dance that facilitates communion with the ancestral spirits. The next subsection analyses Ngwana's poem with the intention to show how TTR associates communion with ancestral spirits with Nwali.

Communion with the spirit world in Tshivendḁ traditional religion

Ngwana's (1958:28) poem 'Malombo' sheds light on how the dance facilitates communion with the ancestors as intermediaries to Nwali in TTR. The first stanza reads thus:

*Dzi a takuwa ngoma dza malombo,
Vhomatsige a vha tsha amba na muthu;
Hu pfala tshale na ngoma fhedzi;
Hu pfala nyimbo dza Matongoni.*

[The *malombo* drums are rising
Master drummers no longer talk to anyone
Only hand-rattles are heard
Matongoni songs are heard.] (p. 28)

Malombo is performed seasonally in Tshivendḁ culture, usually when there are some obligations from the ancestors that it must be performed (Nengovhela 2010:17). It could be that there is a person who has an ancestral call that they must start operating in. Such a person cannot start operating without being authorised by the ancestors, which is why the ritual dance must be performed first (Nengovhela 2010). Another name for this ritual dance is *u tika ngoma* [to hold or keep the drum in balance] performed for the purposes of *u wisa midzimu* [to settle the spirit of the gods]. The word *ngoma* is pregnant with meaning here, because the drums played during the dance are also viewed as the voices of the ancestors. Hence, in the first line of the poem, the poet mentions *ngoma* to centralise the role and significance of drums in the dance. It is noteworthy that the poet identifies the songs sung during *malombo* as Matongoni (Nwali's home) songs. That the songs were performed at Nwali's shrine without Nwali being offended (as Jehovah would be), shows that there are distinctions between the deities. Also, the *malombo* dance requires the *nanga* [traditional healer] and *maine wa tshale* [hand-rattle specialist], or *ngaka ya malopo* [*malombo* specialist] in Northern Sotho (Sodi 1998), to be present to diagnose the possessed person and to facilitate communion with the spirit. The poet's use of the word *tshale* [hand-rattles] in the third line of the preceding stanza affirms the role and significance of these ritual specialists. When the *tshilombo* finally relays its message, it speaks in Tshikalanga, Tshivendḁ and a mixture of the two, or in a language intelligible only to the initiated:

*Vhatshini vha amba nga Lukalanga;
Vha amba lwa vhadzimu vhavho;
Ndi lwone lwa vhomakhulukuku;
Vha rerela midzimu yavho.*

[The dancers speak the Lukalanga language
They speak their ancestors' language
The ancestors' language
They worship their ancestors.] (p. 28)

That the ancestral spirit speaks in Tshivendḁ, Tshikalanga or a mixture of both and not Hebrew should suffice to inform the reader that Nwali, acknowledged as working in harmony with the ancestors, is not Jehovah. The *malombo* dance is not only linked to Matongoni, but the beat of the drum (symbolic of the ancestors' speech) also contributes to communion with the ancestors at Nwali's abode. Jehovah does not permit this in his worship, hence the clash between adherents of TTR and Judeo-Christianity, which further confirms that the two groups do not believe that they are worshipping the same God. While the two poets, Matshili and Ngwana, portray Nwali as exclusively African, with no connection whatsoever to Jehovah, there are, however, other Vhavendḁ poets who perceive Nwali as Jehovah, whom they also identify as Mudzimu [an ancestral spirit] (Rodewald 2010a).

Nwali as Jehovah in Tshivendḁ poetry

Despite the missionaries having perceived Nwali as a pagan god and further replacing his name with Jehovah and Mudzimu, Ratshitanga (1972), however, thinks Nwali is an appropriate name for Jehovah:

*Jehova ndi u ri mini?
Nga Tshiheveru ndi u ri Nwali.
Kha Testamente Ntswa li siho ndi mini?
Ndi nge kani li sa tawe nga vhanwali?
Vhanwali a huna [sic] tse vha nanga,
Vhunga zwe vha nwa a si zwe vha tama,
Vho tovhele zwe Muimeleli na Vhafunziwa vha kwanga*

[What is meant by the designation Jehovah?
In Hebrew, it means Nwali.
Why is this name not there in the New Testament?
Is it probably because the writers did not like it?
The writers did not write according to their own dictates
Since what they wrote was not what they desired
They tailed the Advocate's and Disciples' prescription.] (pp. 24–25)

That the poems open with a rhetorical question could be an indication that there were concerns with the use of the name, Jehovah, to refer to the 'High God' in Venḁa. The concept must have been so foreign to the Vhavendḁ that they wondered what it meant. Instead of providing the etymology and meaning of the name Nwali in Vhavendḁ, Ratshitanga prefers to equate the name with a Hebrew one. To begin with, there is no phonetic, phonological, morphological or syntactic resonance between the names Nwali and Jehovah. One wonders how the poet came to the conclusion that Nwali means Jehovah in Hebrew. One can only speculate on the poet's Hellenisation of Nwali, which might have been

influenced by the Vhalemba in Venḁa and later endorsed by the missionaries. The poet wonders why the translators of the New Testament into Tshivendḁ disregarded the name Nwali as an equivalent of the name Jehovah, as if the name Nwali was used in the Tshivendḁ translation of the Old Testament to refer to Jehovah. The deity named Jehovah in Hebrew is identified as Mudzimu in both the Old and the New Testaments. The fact that Nwali was avoided as an equivalent of Jehovah when translating the Bible into Tshivendḁ may be because of what it represents and means in TTR. This avoidance, a cause for wonder even to the poet, might also evince 'the problems of translating the names that refer to (YHWH) and his attributes' into African languages (Moomo 2005:151). Had translation of Jehovah into Tshivendḁ relied on 'a theoretical frame of reference' (Moomo 2005:151), where the Vhaventḁ's rich sources of description of God were considered, Ratshitḁanga's identification of Nwali in Venḁa as the Semitic Jehovah would not have been left unaddressed. His view, like Rodewald's, discussed earlier, should be read in light of the three ways through which the Hellenisation of African deities manifests. By identifying Nwali as Jehovah, Ratshitḁanga essentially vanguards the notion that this deity was a disguised or distorted form of Jehovah in precolonial and premissionary Africa.

Although Ratshitḁanga asks an important question, that is, 'Was it because the translators did not like the name (Nwali)?', he is either unwilling or unable to search for an answer. In the end, the question remains unanswered in his poem. Upon failing to provide an answer, he concludes that this disregard of the name Nwali for God in the Bible must have been the preference of Jehovah himself. Further compounding the problem is that Jehovah or Yahweh is identified as Mudzimu in the Tshivendḁ Bible. This is problematic because the noun Mudzimu refers to 'the ancestral spirit or spirit elder' in Chishona and in Tshivendḁ (Gelfand 1959:74). The noun Mudzimu, as used in the Tshivendḁ Bible, was adapted from Modimo, which means *Mo-(go)dimo* or *Mo(ho)limo* ['there above' or 'the place where God is'] (Setiloane 1986:22). Therefore, for the Vhaventḁ who espouse TTR, the noun Mudzimu could be read as referring to an ancestral spirit and not the almighty God, as the Bible translators intended. Evidently, a wrong name, wrongly interpreted, has been used wrongly to refer to God in the Tshivendḁ Bible. In spite of this, the name Mudzimu came to be used as a natural name for God in Tshivendḁ culture, with poets such as Sigwavhulimu (1971) attempting to account for its etymology and meaning in the poem 'Mudzimu' [ancestral spirit but now 'God']:

*Iwe mudzi
Mudzi-mudzi
Mudzimu
Mudzi-muthu
Mudzi wa muthu
U thoma muthu,
U fhedza muthu,
U mudzi wa u thoma,
U mudzi wa u fhedza
Mudzimu*

[You are the root
The real root
God
God-Person
A person's Root
You invent a person
You complete a person
You are the first [top] root
You are the last [ultimate] root
God.] (p. 53)

Sigwavhulimu seeks to educate the reader about how the Vhaventḁ eventually appropriated an ambiguous name for God in Tshivendḁ. For Sigwavhulimu, God (Jehovah) can be viewed as the root: *Iwe mudzi* [you root]. The root's fundamental function is to attach a plant to the earth. The same root transports nutrients and nourishment from the soil to the plant to which it is connected. As the root, God is depicted as the foundation of all life and living. To the poet, Mudzimu is not just an option in a multiple choice of 'roots'; he is the real and ultimate one, the one without whom nothing and no one can live. Thus, to Sigwavhulimu, *Mudzimu* is the real root of a person; that is, he is both *Mudzi wa muthu* [root of a person] and *Mudzi-muthu* [God-Man]. Hence, Ratshitḁanga (1987) affirmed this view:

*Vho ri ndi ene Mudzi
Wa vhatlu na zwiwumbwa zwofhe.*
[They said he is the Root
Of people and the whole creation.] (p. 5)

It must be borne in mind that the Mudzimu praised by the Christian poets Sigwavhulimu and Ratshitḁanga (Khorommbi 1996; Mafela 2008) is Jehovah. Perhaps, to address the ambiguities of reference when the term Mudzimu is used in Tshivendḁ, Ratshitḁanga (1972) thought it fit to distinguish Mudzimu for Jehovah from Mudzimu for an ancestral spirit in the poem, 'Mudzimu na Vhadzimu' [God and gods]:

*Mudzimu ndi musiki na mukuvohtedzi
Wa tsiko yofhe ya jaḁulu na shangoni
Ngeno vhadzimu vhe vhaḁukumedzi
Kha vhuswina uri shango ḁi dzule mivhangoni.*
[God is the creator and buffer
Of all creation in heaven and on earth
While gods are instigators
Of the enmity so that world continues to live in disharmony.] (pp. 6–7)

Instead of providing the etymology of the terms and their semantic properties in Tshivendḁ culture, such as Sigwavhulimu attempted earlier, Ratshitḁanga prefers to disparage ancestor spirits while depicting Jehovah as the only true God. Mudzimu (Jehovah) is identified as the creator, who is also a compassionate and loving father with the best interests at heart for all his creation. His demonstration of love is notable in his delegation of all his earthly creations to human beings. *Vhadzimu* [ancestors or gods], on the other hand, are presented as antagonists and false versions of God, undeserving of veneration. In the final

stanza, *vhadzimu* are classified as *marena a si na vuhosi* [lords without jurisdictions of rulership], implying that they are undeserving of any seat of sovereignty among the living – or anywhere else for that matter. Ratshitanga's espousal of the Christian faith and subsequent promotion of the faith are accompanied by disparagements of TTR – a tactic deployed by the early Christian missionaries in Venḁa.

Sigwavhulimu also uses the names Mudzimu and Yehova (Jehovah) interchangeably in his poetry. In Sigwavhulimu's (1975) poem, 'Khumbelo kha Yehova!' [Petition to Jehovah], Mudzimu is identified as Jehovah:

Yehova! Iwe Yehova!
Ri sikele vuhuthu vhu sa tshili;
Vhuthu vhu sa fi.
Ri sikele maḁo a sa vhoḁi;
Maḁo a sa kombodzali,
Maḁo a sa pofuli.
 [Jehovah! You Jehovah!
 Create for us humanity that does not live
 Humanity that does not die
 Create for us eyes that do not see
 Eyes that do not become blinded
 Eyes that do not become blind.] (p. 7)

The poem is essentially a prayer, which according to Mokgoatšana (1996) is a mode of communication between people and their creator. This communication can be direct or indirect, depending on the cosmogonic view of those praying (Mokgoatšana 1996). In the given poem, Sigwavhulimu does not plead with Nwali of Matongoni, as would be expected in Venḁa where TTR is practised; on the contrary, his plea is directed to Jehovah, equated with Nwali by Ratshitanga earlier. In the poem, Jehovah is depicted as possessing the supernatural power to create and recreate, suggesting that he is *Musiki* [Creator]. Although the same qualities were also ascribed to Nwali of Matongoni by the 'traditional' poets, Sigwavhulimu and Ratshitanga both chose to ascribe them solely to the Christian God. To these poets, the only true God is Jehovah, and all reverence and supernatural abilities should be exclusively assigned to him. Surprisingly, while in the poems cited earlier, Ratshitanga vehemently attacked TTR to advocate Judeo-Christianity, in yet another poem, he pleads with Nwali, who is venerated in TTR and no longer the Semitic Nwali. In the poem 'Nwali thetshelesa' [Nwali listen], Ratshitanga (1987) says:

Masimu vho govhela,
Na mvula i sa ni.
Madanga o fhalala,
Ro sala ri si na.
 [They took our fields
 Rain no longer comes
 Our kraals are empty
 We are left with nothing.] (p. 44)

The poet implores Nwali to notice that the fields of the oppressed Vhaventḁa have been taken by their oppressors. This

issue is important to raise to Nwali of Matongoni because the Vhaventḁa were and, to a certain extent, still are an agricultural community (Khorommbi 1996). They depended largely on what the fields yielded for their livelihood, hence their propitiation of Nwali for the provision of rain. Therefore, taking away their fields equals taking away their means of sustaining their livelihoods. Aggravating the problem for the poet was that there was no rain. Here, the poet implicitly draws the Vhaventḁa's ancient understanding of Nwali of Matongoni as the rain-giver into considerable light. Unlike the previous poems, where he disparaged ancestors while praising the Judeo-Christian Mudzimu, in this poem, Ratshitanga changes his position:

Vhadzimu vho tshenuwa,
Zwifho a ri tshee na.
Ho sala u tovhele,
Kha vho ri thubaho.
 [The gods are astonished
 Our sacred places are gone
 All that is left is for us to follow
 Those who captured us.] (p. 44)

Ratshitanga now perceives the hierarchy of spiritual authority as having Nwali at the top and *vhadzimu* [ancestor spirits] at the bottom, but in unity. This perception lends support to Khorommbi's (1996) assertion that:

The two realities are not in conflict with each other. The ancestors (*Vhadzimu*) have been living on earth worshipping Nwali. When they die, they go to be with Nwali. In the whole exercise of worship, they are not excluded. (p. 100)

With his change of heart, Ratshitanga bemoans the Vhaventḁa's loss of their traditional and ancient ways of worship. The captors referred to in the poem are the colonial missionaries who came to Venḁa and imposed their religion on the people. Ratshitanga is unhappy that the Vhaventḁa are not only suffering at the hands of their captors, but also because their captors contributed to the loss of their ethnic heritage. Consequently, the Vhaventḁa are now the 'followers' of their 'captors'. Seemingly, the new religious exercise does not find resonance with the Vhaventḁa's cosmogonic and cosmological views. Ratshitanga now sees missionary Christianity as disruptive of the African way of life. According to Ratshitanga, a community that once lived in harmony and love now lives fearfully and somewhat in cultural schizophrenia because of the new religion. Hence, he pleads with Nwali of Matongoni to:

Ipfa khumbelo dzashu,
Ri fhe zwo juwaho.
Ri vhujelele hafhu,
Murahu havhudi.
 [Listen to our pleas
 Restore to us what was taken
 Let us return [again]
 To the beautiful past.] (p. 44)

In his conclusion, the poet issues a communal request to Nwali to hearken to his prayer. The request is that Nwali should restore what has been lost. The allusive quality of *Ri*

the zwo furwaho [Restore to us what was taken] entails the lost land, flocks, freedom and TTR. Ratshiṭanga propagates the idea that the ancient ways that have been dismantled were better than the new ways. He asks for the opportunity to be returned to the 'beautiful' past, although he does not speak clearly on what he means by this request. One can only insinuate that Ratshiṭanga refers to the olden days when the Vhavenḁa lived in harmony and love as one family under one God (Nwali), before the missionary invasion. In this poem, Ratshiṭanga depicts God (Nwali) and gods or ancestors (*Vhadzimu*) as living in harmony, an aspect that he contested seriously in his earlier poetry. This syncretism either affirms the tenacity of TTR against attempts to obliterate it or a nuanced realisation that there are, after all, distinctions between Nwali and Jehovah.

Conclusion

In TTR, Nwali is depicted as a deity who has no problems with ancestor veneration and belief in traditional healers, among others, which were perceived by Jehovah's adherents either as pagan, satanic or superstitious. Particularly concerning is that Nwali is claimed by some Vhavenḁa poets as the Judeo-Christian God. The Hellenisation of Nwali in Venḁa, where TTR is practised, included introducing him as Jehovah or Mudzimu. Seemingly, (1) some missionaries were deeply concerned with the Vhavenḁa's conversion to Christianity in an apolitical manner, (2) some missionaries cooperated more with the colonial forces of the time towards political and cultural subjugation and (3) the proliferation of information about the Judeo-Christian God as the only true God seems to have contributed to some Vhavenḁa poets desecrating their own deity and religion in favour of the former. These three ways through which the concept of 'God' as Jehovah was introduced in Venḁa should be considered a springboard into further research and discourse on the blurred boundaries between Nwali and Jehovah.

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