Njelele Cult and the Spirit of Thobela in the Matopo Hills Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a comprehensive ethnographic and historical analysis of the interconnected spiritual institutions of the Njelele shrine and the Thobela spirit within the cultural and dsociological landscape of the Matopo Hills in south-western Zimbabwe. It argues that these institutions are not merely relics of a static past but are dynamic, living systems of indigenous knowledge that have historically served, and continue to serve, as critical mediators between the human, spiritual, and natural worlds. The central focus is on their pivotal role in rainmaking rituals (ukucela imvula in isiNdebele; kukumbira mvura in chiShona/chiKalanga), which are fundamental to the socio-economic and cosmological order of the local Kalanga and Ndebele communities. Drawing on extensive scholarly literature, colonial archives, and post-colonial ethnographic studies, this article deconstructs the complex hierarchy of custodianship, the intricate ritual processes, and the profound cosmological beliefs that underpin these practices. It further examines the resilience of these traditions through periods of colonial disruption, political pressure, and contemporary environmental challenges, positing that the enduring significance of Njelele and Thobela offers crucial insights into sustainable environmental ethics and the enduring power of African spiritual epistemologies.

Key words: Njelele, Thobela Spirit, Cult, Zimbabwe, Ndebele

INTRODUCTION

The Matopo Hills is widely accepted as a Sacred Cultural Landscape throughout local communities in southern Africa. The Matopo Hills (also known as Matobo Hills) are not merely a geological formation of balancing granite kopjes and deep, spiritual valleys; they are a vast, open-air cathedral, a repository of history, and a living testament to the spiritual life of the people of south-western Zimbabwe. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for their rich cultural and natural significance, the hills hold over 3,000 registered rock art sites, spiritual shrines, and the graves of historical figures like Cecil John Rhodes and Mzilikazi, the founder of the Ndebele nation (Ranger, 1999; Pwiti & Mvenge, 1996). However, beyond their archaeological and historical value, the hills pulsate with a contemporary spiritual energy centred on two of the most powerful religious institutions in the region: the Njelele Rain Shrine and the cult of the spirit of Thobela: a towering spirit medium of the Shona and the Kalanga tribes of Zimbabwe. The primary concern of this article is to delve into the intricate relationship between these two institutions and their central function: the procurement of rain. In an agro-pastoral society, rain is not merely a meteorological phenomenon; it is a blessing from the ancestors (amadlozi/abakithi), a sign of cosmological balance, and the very foundation of life, health, and prosperity. Failure of the rains signifies spiritual disquiet, a breakdown in social morality, or a failure to honour the contractual relationship between the living and the supernatural world (Daneel, 1970; Aschwanden, 1989). Therefore, rainmaking is the highest and most public expression of this relationship.

METHODOLOGY

The article is based on qualitative analysis of existing scholarly literature, historical documents, and ethnographic accounts on Njelele cult in the Matopo hills Zimbabwe. It employs a hermeneutic approach, interpreting texts and practices within their historical and cultural contexts. The article acknowledges the inherent challenges:

Sacred and Secret Knowledge: Much of the deepest knowledge surrounding Njelele and Thobela is esoteric, revealed only to initiates. This paper relies on the accounts of trusted scholars who were granted access and respects the boundaries of this secrecy.

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Representation and Voice: There is a conscious effort to centre the voices and interpretations of the custodians and practitioners themselves, as mediated through empathetic ethnography, rather than imposing external analytical frameworks.

Interdisciplinary Approach: The topic demands an interdisciplinary lens, drawing from history, anthropology, religious studies, environmental science, and political ecology to fully appreciate its complexity.

Historical Overview

The academic study of the Njelele shrine and related rainmaking cults in Zimbabwe has evolved significantly reflecting broader shifts in anthropological and historical methodology. The earliest records come from colonial administrators, missionaries, and ethnographers whose accounts were inevitably shaped by the ideological imperatives of the colonial moment. Officials like Hole (1928) and missionaries like Carnegie (1904) documented Njelele with a mixture of fascination and condescension, often labelling it a "fetish" or "superstition" while simultaneously being forced to acknowledge its profound influence over the local population. These writings as Ranger (1967) and later Chidester (1996) would argue, were deeply embedded in the colonial project of undermining indigenous authority. They operated within a paradigm that sought to categorize African spiritual systems as primitive antecedents to Christianity, thereby justifying the civilizing mission. The missionary Robert Moffat's earlier work in the region, for instance, set a precedent by dismissing local deities as demonic, a view that coloured subsequent European interpretations. Yet, the very frustration evident in these accounts—such as complaints about the inability to secure labour during rainmaking ceremonies or the defiance of local people who prioritized pilgrimage to the shrine over colonial demands—betrays their value.

The scholars provide a fractured but vital record of the shrine's centrality and the early resistance to its co-option, offering a baseline of data against which later scholars could react and reinterpret. The work of Ranger, (1967) particularly his seminal book *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896-97* was truly revolutionary, marking a decisive break from these colonial narratives. Ranger argued that the First Chimurenga (Uprising) of 1896-97 was not a spontaneous act of barbarism but a carefully coordinated religious and political movement orchestrated by the spirit mediums (mhondoro and izangoma) of the High-God Mwari (or Mlimo). In this powerful narrative, oracles from central shrines like Njelele were the nerve centre of the resistance, disseminating messages and mobilising disparate Shona and Ndebele groups against the colonial encroachment. This thesis fundamentally placed African religious agency at the centre of the historical narrative, transforming mediums from purveyors of superstition into key political strategists and making the spiritual realm a legitimate and crucial field of historical enquiry.

Ethnographic Depth and Theological Engagement

The most detailed, empathetic, and nuanced studies of the Njelele shrine and the Mwari cult originate from a distinct scholarly tradition: that of ethnographers and theologians who committed to long-term, immersive fieldwork, often building relationships of deep trust with the ritual custodians and participants. This approach stood in stark contrast to the fleeting and prejudiced observations of early colonial writers, offering instead a profound engagement with the internal logic and spiritual worldview of the cult itself. The monumental work of Daneel (1970) is paramount in this regard. As a theologian actively engaged in dialogue with African Traditional Religions (ATRs), his methodology was not one of detached, objective observation but of participatory and respectful inquiry. His seminal work, *The God of the Matopo Hills* (1970), provides an unparalleled insider's view, meticulously recording the intricate theology of the Mwari cult, which he understood not as a simple polytheism but as a complex system centered on a single High God (Mwari) who is accessed through a hierarchy of intermediaries, including the ancestors and the powerful oracular voices of the shrine custodians. Daneel (1970) documented the rich liturgy—the specific prayers, chants, and ceremonial sequences—that structured communication with the divine, and he preserved the exquisite ritual poetry used to invoke rain, blessings, and social harmony. This moved the academic analysis far beyond a purely political or functionalist interpretation to a deep understanding of the cult's spiritual core, its soteriological concerns for the well-being (*hutano*) of the community, and its ecological mandate to maintain balance between the people and the land.

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Contemporary Reinterpretations of Njelele Cult

Building upon the robust historical and ethnographic foundations laid by earlier scholars, a new and vital wave of academic research has emerged, dedicated to examining the contemporary relevance, reinterpretation, and renegotiation of the Njelele cult and Thobela spirit within the modern socio-political and environmental landscape of Zimbabwe and the broader region. This scholarship moves decisively beyond a purely historical focus to engage with the complex present-day realities that these sacred institutions navigate, revealing them not as static relics but as dynamic, living systems actively involved in shaping and responding to modern challenges. Scholars like Spierenburg, (2004) in her influential work Strangers, Spirits, and Land Reforms, provide a crucial comparative lens. While focusing on the Dande area, her meticulous analysis of the conflicts over land, resources, and autochthony—where spirit mediumship is central to legitimating claims of belonging and authority—offers a critical framework for understanding similar dynamics around the Matopo Hills. Her research demonstrates how mediums and the spirits they channel are powerful actors in contemporary disputes over land allocation and resource access, often finding themselves in direct contention with state agencies and neoliberal development projects.

This theme of contention and negotiation is further explored by scholars such as Fontein (2006, 2015), who, in works like The Silence of Great Zimbabwe, delves into the politics of landscape and heritage surrounding other major sites, providing a methodological blueprint for understanding the Matopos. Fontein's (2015) focus on the contested meanings of landscapes, the silence and secrecy that often surround them, and the interplay between local knowledge and state power is directly applicable to the ongoing struggles over the control and interpretation of Njelele. Furthermore, contemporary Zimbabwean scholars are producing groundbreaking work that grounds these analyses in local specificity. Researchers like Ndlovu (2018) and Mpofu (2017) have focused intently on the challenges of heritage management, analysing the tensions between the state's desire to commodify the Matopos for tourism and UNESCO World Heritage status and the deep-seated concerns of local communities and cult officials about the desecration, trivialization, and loss of ritual control that such processes can entail. Their work interrogates the commodification of culture, where sacred rituals risk being repackaged for a tourist audience, potentially stripping them of their spiritual potency and community-owned meaning.

In parallel, this body of literature highlights the increasingly prominent role these shrines are playing in fostering community-based environmental conservation and providing a vital cultural framework for addressing the modern climate crisis. In a context of increasing droughts and environmental uncertainty, the rainmaking rituals of Njelele are being reinterpreted and revitalized by many communities not as archaic relics but as a legitimate and necessary repository of ecological knowledge and a mechanism for collective action against environmental distress. This aligns with a broader African intellectual tradition, seen in the work of scholars like Mandivenga (2020) whose teachings on living in balance with nature are being revisited. The cult's emphasis on ritual cleansing, restrictions on over-hunting or deforestation in sacred groves, and the moral philosophy linking social harmony to environmental balance are increasingly viewed as valuable resources for contemporary environmental ethics and community resilience.

This evolving interdisciplinary conversation, which also engages with the work of historians like Kaarsholm (2021) on the role of the past in the present and political scientists like Moore (2015) on the continuities of protest, moves the discussion firmly into the 21st century. It positions the Njelele cult and Thobela spirit as active agents in ongoing debates about land rights, cultural sovereignty, environmental justice, and the very meaning of modernity in Zimbabwe. The article therefore seeks to synthesize these diverse contemporary strands of scholarship with the historical and ethnographic traditions, combining the granular analysis of Ranger and the deep theological engagement of Daneel with the present-focused work of Spierenburg, Fontein, Ndlovu, and Mpofu to present a nuanced, multi-layered, and dynamic picture of Njelele and Thobela as profoundly adaptive cultural systems whose significance continues to evolve.

Historical And Cultural Backgroud of The Matopo Hills

Understanding the profound significance of the Njelele shrine and the Thobela spirit requires first situating them within the deep, multi-layered history and cultural palimpsest of the Matopo Hills, a landscape that has been consecrated as a sacred centre for millennia. This geological formation of balancing granite kopjes and hidden

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valleys is far more than a mere backdrop; it is an active, historical agent in its own right, whose spiritual potency has been recognized and augmented by successive cultures. The earliest human inhabitants were the San (Bushmen) hunter-gatherers, whose physical and spiritual legacy is fundamentally imprinted upon the stone (Mandikudze 2009; Gillian 2013). As Garlake (1995) meticulously documented in his seminal work, *The Hunter's Vision: The Prehistoric Art of Zimbabwe*, the San left behind an exquisite and extensive gallery of rock art that adorns the caves and shelters throughout the region. These paintings are not mere decorations but are, as Lewis-Williams (2002, 2003) has powerfully argued through his neuropsychological model, potent expressions of a complex spiritual worldview deeply connected to the natural world and centred on the shamanic trance experience.

The iconic depictions of elongated, fluid human figures (trancing shamans or *gi:xa*), enigmatic therianthropes (part-human, part-animal beings), and sacred animals like the eland, all point to rituals aimed at healing, rainmaking, and interacting with the spirit realm. This artistic and spiritual activity imprinted an enduring sacred character (*numen*) onto the landscape, establishing specific sites within the Matopo Hills as portals to the spirit world long before the arrival of farming communities. This San legacy is not a separate historical footnote but a foundational layer that was consciously absorbed and reinterpreted by later inhabitants. As historian Huffman (1996, 2009) has argued in his work on the cognitive and symbolic dimensions of Southern African archaeology, the incoming Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralists, ancestors of the Kalanga and Shona peoples, did not simply displace the San. Instead, they engaged in a process of cultural incorporation, recognizing the inherent power of the places the San had already sanctified. This is a critical point emphasized by scholars like Mvududu (1999) and Nthoi (2006) in their studies of indigenous religions; the continuity of sacred geography suggests a strategic and spiritual assimilation of autochthonous knowledge.

The new settlers effectively mapped their own evolving religious system, which included Mwari, the High God, and a hierarchy of ancestral spirits (*midzimu* and *mhondoro*), onto the pre-existing sacred landscape. Consequently, many of the most important shrines, including Njelele itself, are located in caves and shelters previously associated with San ritual activity, creating a powerful syncretism where the deep-time power of the place enhanced the authority of the new rituals performed there. This long durée of spiritual occupation, stretching from the San through the rise and fall of states like Great Zimbabwe and the Khami phase, and into the Ndebele period under Mzilikazi, who also recognized the power of the Matopos and incorporated its cults into his kingdom's spiritual infrastructure (Cobbing, 1976; Ranger, 1999), establishes the hills as a timeless, pan-ethnic regional cult centre. Its authority transcends the political fortunes of any single group, making it a unique and enduring reservoir of spiritual power in southern Zimbabwe, a fact that explains its continued relevance from the pre-colonial era through the liberation struggle and into the modern day.

The Rozvi State and Njelele Cult

From around the 11th century, the demographic and cultural landscape of the region was transformed by the arrival and settlement of Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralists, the ancestors of the Kalanga and related Shona peoples (Huffman, 2007; Gillmore 2011). These communities did not enter a spiritual vacuum but encountered a landscape already deeply sanctified by the San (Bushmen), a fact that would profoundly shape their own religious developments (Garlake, 1995; Ndlovu, 2020). By the 15th century, following the decline of Great Zimbabwe, the political centre of gravity shifted to the southwest. The area encompassing the Matopo Hills came under the influence of the Torwa state, centred at Khami (Pikirayi, 2001; Coper 2010), and later the powerful Rozvi Changamire state, which emerged in the late 17th century under the leadership of Changamire Dombo (Mudenge, 1988; Hove 2001).

The relationship between these polities and the Mwari cult is a subject of critical historical importance. Historian Mudenge, (1988) in his foundational work Christian and Traditional Religion in Zimbabwe, provides a robust argument that the Rozvi Mambos (Kings) systematically co-opted and utilised the oracular power of the Mwari cult—whose principal shrine was widely believed to be located within the Matopo Hills—as a primary mechanism to legitimise and consolidate their political authority. In this model, the cult was not separate from the state but formed its spiritual and bureaucratic backbone. The cult's network of priests and messengers (vanyai or mahosana) acted as agents of the Mambo, facilitating communication across the vast Rozvi confederacy, collecting tribute, and disseminating the divine will as interpreted through the oracles at Njelele and other

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affiliated shrines (Beach, 1998). This created a powerful fusion of spiritual and secular power, where the king's earthly authority was sanctified by the voice of Mwari (God).

However, other scholars have refined this picture. Pikirayi (2001), while acknowledging the close links, cautions against seeing the cult as a mere "tool" of the state, arguing instead for a more symbiotic relationship where the priesthood retained a significant degree of autonomy and its own institutional interests. The work of preeminent Kalanga scholar Nyathi (2012, 2020) is crucial here, as he grounds the discussion in the specific cultural and linguistic context of the Kalanga people, who are the primary custodians of the cult and whose language is the liturgical language of its rituals. Nyathi emphasises the deep Kalanga roots of the Mwari religion, arguing that it predates the Rozvi state and was an intrinsic part of Kalanga spiritual life that the Rozvi rulers, themselves likely of Kalanga origin, inherited and elevated to a state religion. This perspective challenges any simplistic top-down model and instead suggests a complex, long-term development where Kalanga religious structures provided the foundational ideology for later empires.

Consequently, many of the most important shrines, including Njelele itself, are located in caves and shelters previously associated with San ritual activity, creating a powerful syncretism where the deep-time power of the place enhanced the authority of the new rituals performed there (Ranger, 1999; Scholes et al 2012). This long durée of spiritual occupation, stretching from the San through the rise and fall of states like Great Zimbabwe and the Khami phase, and into the Ndebele period under Mzilikazi, who also recognized the power of the Matopos and incorporated its cults into his kingdom's spiritual infrastructure (Cobbing, 1976; Ranger, 1999), establishes the hills as a timeless, pan-ethnic regional cult centre. Its authority transcends the political fortunes of any single group, making it a unique and enduring reservoir of spiritual power in southern Zimbabwe, a fact that explains its continued relevance from the pre-colonial era through the liberation struggle (Ranger, 1985; Schliffen 2001) and into the modern day.

Sociological And Anthropological Significance of Matopo Hills

The Matopo Hills hold profound sociological and anthropological significance for the local Kalanga and Shona communities, functioning not merely as a physical landscape but as the very bedrock of their social structure, cultural identity, and cosmological order. **Ranger (1999)**, in his seminal work *Voices from the Rocks*, argues that the hills constitute a "ritualized landscape," where geography is inextricably linked to spirituality, history, and community memory, serving as a central place for rain-making ceremonies, harvest rituals, and communication with the divine through the Mwari/Amadlozi cult. This deep spiritual connection is further elaborated by **Nyathi (2012, 2020)**, who emphasizes the hills' role as the core of Kalanga ethnogenesis and cultural continuity, where language, oral traditions, and indigenous knowledge systems are preserved and transmitted across generations, reinforcing social cohesion.

Anthropologically, the hills are a palimpsest of layered sacredness; as noted by **Garlake (1995)** and **Ndlovu (2020)**, the adoption and sanctification of San rock art sites by Bantu-speaking communities exemplify a process of spiritual syncretism and the continuous re-interpretation of the landscape's power, creating a shared sacred geography that transcends individual clan or ethnic affiliations. Furthermore, the sociological function of the hills as a unifying regional cult centre, analysed by **Mudenge (1988)** and **Beach (1998)** facilitated inter-community interaction, conflict resolution, and the consolidation of political power; while in the contemporary era as **Werbner (1991)** and **Fontein (2006)** explore, they remain a crucial site for negotiating autochthony, belonging, and cultural rights against modern state pressures, making them an enduring symbol of resilience and the central anchor for the collective identity and social well-being of the surrounding communities.

Njelele Cult: Hierarchy, Ritual, And the Voice of Mwari

Njelele is the most famous of several caves in the Matopo Hills that serve as shrines (izindaba) for the worship of Mwari. Mwari is the supreme God, creator of all things, who manifests through a voice that speaks from the depths of the sacred caves (Werbner, 1977; Gilman 2011). The Mwari cult is a monotheistic religion with a complex theology. Mwari (also known as uMlimu in isiNdebele) is a remote, omnipotent deity who controls the cycles of nature—rain, drought, fertility, and disease. Mwari does not directly interact with humans but communicates through a divine voice (izwi) heard in the shrines and through a hierarchy of intermediaries. The

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deity is understood as both benevolent and punitive, providing rain for moral communities and withholding it for those who transgress sacred laws (Daneel, 1970; Sadio 2008). With regards to the Ritual Hierarchy: The operation of the cult depends on a precise and graded hierarchy of officials, each with distinct roles (Werbner, 1977; Daneel, 1970). The Custodian (Wosana or Umuntu Wesizwe): The chief priest of a specific shrine, like Njelele. This is a hereditary position, typically from a specific Kalanga or Shona clan. The custodian is the physical guardian of the shrine, the master of ceremonies, and the only one who can enter the innermost sanctum. He is considered married to the shrine and must adhere to strict taboos to maintain ritual purity.

The Voice (Izwi) is the core of the oracle. The voice is the audible manifestation of Mwari, believed to be a ventriloquistic phenomenon produced by a hidden speaker within the cave system. The messages are interpreted by the custodian and messengers. The voice provides guidance, predicts events, diagnoses causes of misfortune (often attributing it to social strife or witchcraft), and prescribes remedies, including rainmaking ceremonies. The Community Elders (Amadoda Amadala/Amakokela) comprise Local community leaders. These are responsible for organising the people, gathering offerings, and liaising with the messengers. They represent the social unit that seeks communion with the divine. The Messengers (Vanyai or Izinyanga Zesizwe) are the most public figures of the cult. They are itinerant priests who travel in pairs (often an older and a younger man) between the central shrines and the outlying communities. They carry the prayers of the people to the shrine and return with the divine responses and instructions. They collect offerings and announce the ritual calendar.

Rainmaking Ritual at Njelele

The ritual for rain (ukucela imvula) is a elaborate, multi-stage process (Daneel, 1970; Ndlovu, 2018). The Decision: The process begins at the community level. After a prolonged drought, elders consult and decide to seek help from Njelele. They gather traditional offerings: black cloth (representing rain clouds), black beads, spears, hoes, and, most importantly, a black bull. When the offerings are gathered together, The community sends a delegation to invite the Mwari messengers. The messengers arrive and receive the offerings and the people's prayers. The messengers, accompanied by a select group of elders, undertake the journey to Njelele. The approach to the shrine is governed by strict protocol: silence, ritual cleansing, and the observance of numerous taboos (e.g., no pointing at the cave, no wearing of shoes or metal objects). At this point, the offerings of the localles are presented to the ancestors. At the mouth of the cave, the custodian receives the offerings. The black bull is sacrificed. Its blood is sprinkled as a libation, and its meat is cooked and left for the spirit. The other offerings are placed inside the cave.

The elders present the people's petitions for rain and prosperity. The custodian then retreats into the cave or to a designated spot to listen for the voice of Mwari. After a time, he returns with the oracle's response. The response is rarely straightforward; it is often cryptic, requiring interpretation. It might blame the drought on a specific social ill (e.g., a murder that went unavenged, widespread witchcraft, or disrespect for elders) and demand rectification. The directives in the oracle to the local communities has to be implemented before the rains can fall. After that, The messengers return to the community with the divine message. The community is then obliged to fulfil the conditions set by the oracle. This might involve conducting a cleansing ceremony (ukuchatha), confessing wrongdoings, or driving out a witch. Only upon achieving social and moral purification is the rain expected. This process illustrates the fundamental holistic principle: the meteorological is inextricably linked to the moral. Rainmaking is thus a form of social governance, reinforcing ethical codes and communal cohesion.

Distinguishing Features Between Njelele and Thobela

Ancestral Power and Territorial Authority draw distinct lines of operations between Njelele/Mwari and Thobela spirit. While Njelele represents a supra-tribal, God-centred cult, the Thobela spirit represents a more localised, ancestral form of authority deeply tied to the land itself. Thobela is not a single spirit but a title for a powerful senior ancestral spirit (mhondoro in Shona/Kalanga; idlozi elikhulu in isiNdebele) that protects a specific territory. The mhondoro are spirits of founding ancestors, original chiefs, or legendary figures who, upon death, become guardians of the land, its people, its animals, and its rain (Lan, 1985; Aschwanden, 1989). Thobela is thus a territorial spirit (mudzimu wenyika). Unlike the remote Mwari who speaks through a voice, Thobela communicates by possessing a living human medium (svikiro in Shona/Kalanga; isangoma in isiNdebele). The spirit chooses its medium, often through a prolonged illness or strange behaviour which is interpreted as a calling.

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The medium, once accepted and trained, becomes the literal embodiment of Thobela. When possessed, the medium is no longer themselves; they speak with the authority and voice of the ancestor, offering counsel, settling disputes, and performing rituals. The rainmaking rituals performed for Thobela share similarities with those at Njelele but are distinct in their emphasis on ancestral lineage and direct spirit possession. As the owner of the land, Thobela is directly responsible for its fertility. If the spirit is angered—by bloodshed on the land, violation of taboos, or neglect by the people—it will withhold rain. The community, led by its chief and elders, approaches the spirit medium. Offerings of beer (umqombothi), white cloth (symbolising purity), and a white beast (a goat or bull) are presented. The medium undergoes possession by Thobela. In this state, the spirit diagnoses the cause of the drought. The diagnosis is often direct and specific, naming individuals or conflicts that have disrupted harmony.

Prescription And Cleansing

The ritual prescriptions of Thobela, which almost always involve a form of cleansing ceremony known as *kuchenesa nyika* (to clean the country), represent a sophisticated application of indigenous ecological and social knowledge. As anthropologist Werbner (1989) elucidates in his work on Kalanga ritual (e.g., *Ritual Passage, Sacred Journey: The Process and Organization of Religious Movement*, such ceremonies are not merely symbolic but are performative acts designed to restore a fundamental moral and physical equilibrium to the land and its people. The concept hinges on the belief that social transgressions—such as murder, incest, or political violence—metaphysically "heat" or pollute the land (*nyika*), breaking its sacred covenant with the ancestors and leading to calamities like drought, disease, and infertility. The cleansing ritual, therefore, is a practical technology for restoring order. As described by scholars like Daneel (1970) and more recently by Fontein (2006), the ceremony can involve the entire community, led by elders and spirit mediums, walking the boundaries of the chiefdom (*matunhu*).

This process of territorial perambulation is both a literal reclamation of space and a symbolic re-weaving of the social fabric. During this walk, medicinal herbs (*muti*), specially prepared by a knowledgeable *n'anga* (traditional healer), are sprinkled at key points. This *muti*, as documented by Prins (1980) and Trippler 2008) studying indigenous knowledge systems, is composed of specific plants known for their purifying and "cooling" properties, acting as a pharmacological and spiritual antidote to the "heat" of disorder. The accompanying libations and prayers are the communicative core of the ritual. The prayers, often highly formalized and delivered in a deep, archaic version of the local language, are offered directly to the Thobela ancestor. As historian Beach (1998) notes in his research on Shona historiography, the spirit is not worshipped as a god but is petitioned as a senior elder and intermediary. The community asks the *mhondoro* to take their case—their repentance and their needs—to the higher, more distant God, Mwari. The pouring of beer (*doro*) or water on the ground as a libation is a critical material offering.

This particular act, analyzed by scholars like Cheater (1986; Gakpo 2011) in the context of gender and ritual, is a tangible act of reciprocity and respect directed towards all the ancestors of the land (*vadzimu venyika*). The act is meant to nourish them and secure their continued patronage and protection. The role of Thobela, therefore, is fundamentally more immanent, accessible, and interventionist than the transcendent Mwari. As theologian Daneel (1970) argues in *The God of the Matopo Hills* (1970), while Mwari is the ultimate creator and source of all power, the *mhondoro* spirits like Thobela provide a localized, personalized, and immediate point of contact. They are embedded in the specific history, geography, and kinship structures of a particular community, making them uniquely positioned to understand and address its specific problems. This creates a tiered spiritual system where a supreme deity governs universal order, while territorial ancestors manage the day-to-day moral and environmental welfare of their descendants, offering a framework for spiritual intervention that is both cosmologically vast and intimately local.

Resilience And Resurgence

Despite facing immense challenges from colonial suppression, missionary opposition, post-independence political co-optation, and the pressures of modernity and climate change, the Njelele cult and related spirit institutions like Thobela have demonstrated a profound and dynamic resilience, continually adapting to remain relevant within the spiritual landscape of Zimbabwe and beyond. They persist as the first port of call for a great

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many people during periods of acute crisis, be it personal misfortune, widespread disease, or national turmoil. This endurance, as argued by scholars like Spierenburg (2004) in her work on spirit mediums in the Dande, is due to their deep embeddedness in the social fabric and their ability to provide explanations and solutions that are culturally coherent and immediately accessible, often filling voids left by failing state services and distant bureaucratic institutions. Furthermore, the contemporary rise of global ecological consciousness and the palpable failures of top-down environmental management have spurred a new scholarly and practical appreciation for the cults' intricate environmental ethics.

As explored by researchers like Mandivenga (2020) and much earlier by Daneel (1998) in his groundbreaking work on African Earthkeeping (e.g., Earthkeeping Churches at the African Grassroots (1998), the principles embedded within the rituals of the Mwari cult—communal responsibility, sacred groves, seasonal restrictions on hunting and gathering, and the direct linking of environmental health to social morality—offer a powerful, holistic alternative to Western conservation models that often divorce nature from culture and spirituality. The cult's worldview, which posits that environmental degradation like drought and deforestation is not merely a technical problem but a symptom of broken social relationships and moral transgression (a concept known as nyonganyonga), provides a compelling framework for understanding ecological crisis that resonates deeply with local communities. This is not a static preservation of tradition but a active resurgence and reinterpretation.

As ethnographers like Mpofu (2017) and Ndlovu (2018) have meticulously documented, rituals are still conducted by officially recognized custodians, and pilgrims from diverse backgrounds continue to flock to Njelele, particularly during times of severe drought. This pilgrimage, studied also by Werbner (1989) as a "ritual passage," is a powerful testament to their enduring cultural and spiritual significance. It represents a conscious choice by communities to engage with their own epistemological heritage in the face of modern challenges. This resilience is further explained by scholars like Maxwell (1999) and Ranger (1999), who note the ability of such institutions to operate within "rural cosmopolitanism," absorbing and syncretizing Christian and modern elements without losing their core identity. The cults thus persist not as fading relics, but as vital, living systems of knowledge and practice that continue to offer meaning, order, and potential solutions in an increasingly uncertain world. In 2025, rituals are still conducted, and pilgrims still flock to Njelele, particularly during times of severe drought, demonstrating their enduring cultural and spiritual significance (Mpofu, 2017; Ndlovu, 2018).

Comparative Analysis: Symbiosis And Distinction in The Cosmic Order

Within the indigenous cosmological framework of south-western Zimbabwe, the Njelele shrine, as the paramount oracle of the High God Mwari, and the spirit of Thobela, as a powerful territorial ancestor (mhondoro), are not competing institutions but exist in a carefully calibrated, complementary, and hierarchical relationship (Bourdillon, 1987; Maregere 2003). This symbiosis, as detailed by a range of ethnographers and theologians, creates a sophisticated, multi-layered system for managing the relationship between humanity, the ancestors, and the environment, ensuring that both universal and localised needs are addressed through the appropriate spiritual channels. This structure is most effectively understood as a pyramidal hierarchy, a model articulated by foundational scholars like Daneel (1970; Faser 2017) in The God of the Matopo Hills and M.F.C. Bourdillon (1987) in The Shona Peoples. At the absolute apex of this spiritual universe resides Mwari (also known as Mlimo), the supreme, omnipotent God who is the ultimate, transcendent source of all life, rain, and cosmic order. Mwari is remote, all-powerful, and not directly approachable by ordinary individuals; communication must be mediated through a specialised priesthood and specific, powerful locations like the Njelele shrine. As Werbner (1977, 1989) explains in his analysis of regional cults, this centralised, oracular function allows Mwari's authority to transcend ethnic and clan boundaries, creating a pan-regional religious network.

Just below this supreme apex are the powerful territorial ancestors, the mhondoro (Shona) or izangoma (Ndebele), of which Thobela is a prime example. These spirits, as Lan (1985) masterfully detailed in Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe, are the spirits of legendary founding ancestors or past chiefs who control specific, vast domains (nyika). They are more immanent and accessible than Mwari but still wield immense power over the welfare of their entire territory, influencing rain, warfare, and ecological balance. Their primary role, within this hierarchy, is to intercede with Mwari on behalf of the people of their locale. When a community faces a drought or a moral crisis that has "heated" the land, it is the mhondoro like Thobela who is

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first petitioned. The spirit, through its medium, then prescribes the necessary rituals (kuchenesa nyika) to restore balance and may, in turn, appeal to the higher authority of Mwari at Njelele for the ultimate granting of rain. This intermediary position is crucial as Sandelowsky (1979) and Cheater (1986) have noted, because it provides a personalised and geographically specific point of contact that is intimately familiar with the local history, ecology, and social structure of its people.

Finally, forming the broad base of the cosmological pyramid are the recently deceased family ancestors, the vadzimu (Shona) or amadlozi amancane (Ndebele, "small spirits"). As extensively documented by Bourdillon (1987) and Prins (1980), these spirits are concerned almost exclusively with the welfare of their immediate kin and lineage. They are the first point of call in most personal issues—illness, infertility, job-seeking, and domestic disputes. Their influence is micro-local, focused on the household and the family kraal, and they enforce a moral code within the kinship unit. This layered system ensures a clear division of spiritual labour and jurisdiction. One would not petition Mwari for a family quarrel, just as one would not petition the vadzimu for province-wide rain. The system is therefore one of both symbiosis and distinction: the base-level ancestors uphold daily morality, the intermediate territorial spirits like Thobela manage regional ecology and social order, and the supreme deity Mwari, accessed through Njelele, governs the universal, cosmic processes. This elegant hierarchy, as Schoffeleers (1979) and Ranger (1999) have argued, has provided a resilient and adaptable structure for spiritual and political life for centuries, capable of incorporating new elements while maintaining its fundamental order.

Functional Distinction and Synergy

In terms of scope, the influence of Njelele operates on a distinctly national and regional level, a characteristic extensively documented by scholars of Southern African religion. Its appeal transcends ethnic and chiefly boundaries, attracting petitions from across Zimbabwe and neighbouring countries such as Botswana and South Africa, forming a vast spiritual network that ignores modern political borders (Ranger, 1999; Werbner, 1989). In stark contrast, as described by Binsbergen (1981) in his work on regional cults, the authority of a spirit like Thobela is resolutely local, confined to the specific area and chiefdom it oversees. This structural difference is mirrored in their operation: Njelele is oracular and indirect, its communication mediated through a complex ritual hierarchy and a mysterious voice, a system analysed by Daneel (1970) as a key feature of the Mwali cult. Thobela's manifestation, common in many territorial cults, is personal and direct, speaking through a possessed medium in a language immediately understandable to the community (Schoffeleers, 1979).

The functional distinction between these entities further highlights their complementary roles within a layered spiritual system. While both are central to rainmaking, Njelele's role, as argued by Ranger (1967) and Beach (1979), is more akin to a supreme court and a meteorological command centre, dealing with large-scale regional droughts and major socio-political crises. Thobela, conversely, acts as a local magistrate, handling community-level disputes and immediate environmental management, a function typical of territorial cults detailed by Schoffeleers (1979). This creates a hierarchical system of spiritual recourse where a problem is first presented to Thobela. Its failure to bring rain is interpreted not merely as an inability but as a sign that the issue exceeds its local jurisdiction, necessitating an escalation to the higher, regional authority of Njelele (Mukonyora, 2007; Matanga, 2010). This ensures that every level of social and environmental disorder has a corresponding level of spiritual intervention, forming a comprehensive indigenous framework for maintaining cosmological and ecological balance.

Colonial And Post-Colonial Pressures

These existed in form of Colism. Colonial administrators, recognising the political threat of the cults, actively sought to suppress them. They discredited the oracles, arrested messengers, and promoted Christianity. The centralisation of state power undermined the authority of chiefs and spirit mediums. Missionary Christianity vehemently opposed these traditions, labelling them demonic. This created a spiritual dilemma for many Africans, leading to a decline in open practice, especially among the educated youth. In the post-Colonial Politics, the Zimbabwean government has had an ambivalent relationship with these institutions. At times, it has sought to co-opt them for nationalist purposes; at other times, it has viewed them with suspicion as alternative

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sources of authority. The political instrumentalisation of traditional leaders has also complicated the role of spirit mediums.

Regional Influence of Njelele Cult in Southern Africa

The Njelele cult, centered around Njelele shrine in the Matobo Hills of Zimbabwe, has exerted a profound and enduring influence across Southern Africa, functioning as a major regional religious and political force long before and after European colonization. As a primary oracle (*mandiki*) of the Mwali (Mwari) deity, the voice of the Njelele shrine transcended ethnic and linguistic boundaries, attracting pilgrims and soliciting rain and counsel from groups as diverse as the Shona, Ndebele, Tonga, Venda, Shangani and Sotho (Ranger, 1999; Daneel, 1970). This cross-cultural appeal established a vast spiritual network that facilitated not only religious exchange but also socio-political cohesion. During periods of anti-colonial resistance, such as the First Chimurenga of 1896-1897, the cult's oracles are widely documented by scholars to have provided a unifying ideological framework and a channel for communication effectively coordinating dissent against colonial authorities across a broad geographical spectrum (Ranger, 1967; Beach, 1979). The shrine's authority, derived from its perceived efficacy in rainmaking and its strategic location in a neutral, sacred space, positioned it as a supra-tribal institution capable of mediating disputes and fostering a shared identity amongst diverse peoples facing a common colonial threat.

The regional influence of Njelele cult, however, was not static and has been continually negotiated and reinterpreted through history (Sandelowsky, 1979; Mukonyora, 2007). The Zimbabwean government's post-independence attempts to co-opt the shrine for nationalist purposes and the increasing involvement of Christian prophets have complicated its historical role; yet its symbolic power as a pan-regional point of spiritual contact remains significant (Mukonyora, 2007; Pongweni, 2016). Furthermore, the cult's influence is evident in the persistent circulation of narratives and practices related to Njelele beyond Zimbabwe's borders, impacting ritual and belief systems in neighboring countries like Botswana and South Africa. This demonstrates how indigenous religious networks have historically operated without regard to modern political boundaries, creating a cultural map of Southern Africa that is distinct from its colonial-imposed cartography (Werbner, 1989; Matanga, 2010). Thus, the Njelele cult's legacy is its historic function as a vital, dynamic hub within a wider Southern African spiritual ecosystem, whose influence lay in its ability to provide a common ground for ecological supplication, political mobilization, and cultural dialogue for myriad tribles in widely spaced out indigenous communities.

In addition, the influence of Njelele shrine extends far beyond the Matopo Hills, reaching into the Limpopo province of South Africa, including the Thoyandu and Mathanda areas of the former Venda homeland. This connection is part of a wider regional cult network, a phenomenon extensively analysed by scholars such as Werbner (1989) and Schoffeleers (1979), where a central oracle serves a dispersed and multi-ethnic constituency. For communities in Venda, Njelele (often referred to locally within the context of the Mwali cult) was historically recognised as a supremely powerful and distant rain-making centre; a place to appeal in times of catastrophic, widespread drought that local ancestors and territorial spirits could not alleviate. The pilgrimage to Njelele from Venda was a major undertaking, organised by chiefs and elders who would send messengers (vanyai) with offerings to intercede on behalf of the entire community (Daneel, 1970; Killian 205). This practice embedded Njelele within the Venda cosmological hierarchy not as a replacement for localised spiritual authorities but as the ultimate arbiter of ecological and moral order, whose authority was invoked when localised rituals had failed.

The continued though transformed significance of Njelele in the Venda areas speaks to the resilience of these pre-colonial spiritual geographies. As Spierenburg (2004) demonstrates in her work on land reforms in northern Zimbabwe, such regional cults provide frameworks for claiming autochthony and legitimising political authority, a dynamic that also plays out in South Africa's post-apartheid landscape. In contemporary Thoyandu and Mathanda, the historical memory of Njelele persists amongst elders and traditional leaders, often invoked in discourses about environmental degradation and the perceived loss of cultural identity. While the frequency of formal pilgrimations may have declined due to border restrictions and the rise of Christian churches, the symbolic power of Njelele endures. It remains a potent point of reference in narratives about a time when spiritual and ecological balance was maintained through adherence to a pan-regional indigenous knowledge system, thus highlighting its enduring legacy as a cultural and religious landmark for Venda and Shangani communities.

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CONCLUSION

The Njelele cult and the Thobela spirit in the matopo hills are far more than historical curiosities or "traditional beliefs." They are sophisticated, dynamic institutions that represent a profound indigenous epistemology. Through their intricate rituals, hierarchical structures, and symbiotic relationship, they articulate a worldview in which the natural environment, social morality, and spiritual belief are inextricably fused. Rain is not begged for; it is negotiated through the maintenance of cosmic and social order. The study of Njelele and Thobela is, therefore, not just the study of "rainmaking." It is the study of a complete system of governance, justice, environmental management, and spiritual identity. Their endurance through colonialism, Christianity, and modernity speaks to their deep-rooted legitimacy and their ability to adapt while retaining core principles. In an era of unprecedented ecological crisis, these institutions offer valuable lessons. They remind us that environmental sustainability cannot be divorced from social equity and ethical living. The voice from the cave in the Matopo Hills and the words of the possessed Thobela medium continue to echo a timeless truth: the rain will fall only when the people are in harmony with each other and with the universe they inhabit.

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