

**UNDERSTANDING THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE IN VENDA: A
STUDY OF THE TRADITIONAL CONCEPTS OF GOD AND OF
LIFE HEREAFTER AMONG THE VENDA, WITH REFERENCE
TO THE IMPACT OF THESE CONCEPTS ON THE CHRISTIAN
CHURCHES**

BY

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DECLARATION

I declare that indigenization or internationalization is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Signature

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Date

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation reflects on the problem of the Vhavenda experience of simultaneous belief in the life hereafter and the Biblical God.

The study therefore indicates a systematic analysis of the Vhavenda concept of God as well as of life hereafter with regard to their own traditional and cultural experience. It became clear that Africans through the ages did believe in God. The human beings are created by God and life is a gift from God to the individuals, which means that they believed in God long before the missionaries came to this country. Africans had their own culture and their own religion. It is stated that God was worshipped as the greatest one. His Venda name was Nwali. In certain areas he was called by other names such as Raluvhimba and Khuzwane. This is a clear indication that the Vhavenda worshipped one God although they referred to him in three names; other tribe had other names for him.

Burial rituals play a significant role in Venda culture as it a pointer to the new world of the living dead. The burial rites make it quite vivid that bereaved believed strongly and convincingly that the dead is only making a way or taking a journey to his /her final destiny, the new world only know to the deceased .The living are convinced that the deceased have extra - power, as they are nearer to God, and they are now in possession of double powers, the one they had whilst they were still alive and the one they acquired after death.

Death is just a process of removing a person from the present of his being into the past .He / she goes to the land of the living dead which is not very different from this one. It is a duplication of this life. He / she will join the deceased members of his /her family. Life will continue just as it has been. Death is not feared but accepted as something natural and inevitable. After all, it is through

death that one joins one's departed fellows; therefore death is not regarded as annihilation.

The researcher has found out that there are few things which the African traditional religion seems not to understand or come to terms with regard to Christ and Christianity. In this case, the idea of Jesus as the Son of God and only great ancestor of all humanity seems to be a very strange and confusing concept among African traditionalists. They seemed to be failing to understand that Christ is a new great ancestor not in terms of family mediation only, but in the all inclusive and holistic approach in matters pertaining to faith. Christ Jesus is not only the great ancestor, but is God, mediator and saviour.

The Christian eschatology does differ from the traditional Venda belief, in a very important instance, while "eternal life" for the Vhavenda means reaching back into the past, joining the living dead whose lives are behind us, the Christian message reaches into the future, the coming of Jesus Christ, the promise of a new Heaven and a new Earth.

At the end a number of conclusions reached and a few points for future research added.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Relevance

The impact of the Christian faith in Africa - and on the traditional African society and culture - has been a point of discussion as well as of academic research, for many years. It is indeed true that the lives of millions of Africans have been profoundly changed by their encounter with the Bible, and with the God that the Christian missionaries introduced to them. Conversely, the content of the Christian message - especially the 'cloak' in which the message of Christ was presented to Africans - was challenged as well. Going back to their own traditional and spiritual roots, African Christians kept finding new ways to present the eternal message of Christ in the African context, in a way that made sense to African believers. But this process of osmosis is not without hazards. Misunderstanding and confusion are often the results of the process. Where do acculturation and contextualization begin? Where does syncretism set in?

1.2. Problem statement

An African proverb says, "The crown of a man is in his hands. Culture is man's crown". Traditional religion still forms the basis of African culture and manifests itself in every sphere of life. This implies that in the heart of an African, it becomes a juxtaposed situation, that African traditional religion is inseparable from the daily life of an African. Many African Christians have serious problems of understanding how the Bible and the Christian faith should relate to and address their traditional African religious system, their beliefs and practices. There are those who still cling to some of the "precious" traditional religious beliefs, practices and behaviour, even after becoming Christians.

For this reason, we cannot underrate the power and the influence of the traditional religious system and its hold on Africans, even after they have become Christians.

The maintenance of belief in the life hereafter by the Vhavenda Christians is not only a recipe for conflict between concerned Christians and church leaders but also for theologians. The latter differ radically on this issue. There are those who maintain that traditional belief in the life hereafter should not be entertained at all because it weakens one's faith in the Biblical God (some missionaries fall within this category). On the other hand there are those theologians who argue that traditional belief in the life hereafter should be maintained because it strengthens one's faith in the Biblical God (most contextual theologians fall within this category)

The problem which this dissertation is reflecting upon is, therefore, twofold, i.e. on the one hand it asks the question whether it is possible for one to dismiss the traditional belief in the life hereafter when one becomes a Christian, and on the other hand it asks the question whether it is possible for one to be a genuine Christian while adhering to the belief in the life hereafter.

As stated above, theologians and church leaders have taken opposing stands, but most unfortunately their doing so has not solved the problem.

Thus it is important to find a better solution to this problem. Is what appears to be a problem to theologians also an issue to ordinary Vhavenda Christians? One wonders if that is the case.

The first missionaries who came to Venda dismissed the traditional belief in the life hereafter as evil or heathen. This misunderstanding of the living dead is still

being perpetuated by the indigenous Christian church leaders, because they have inherited it from their white counterparts.

The first missionaries who brought Christianity to the Vhavenda were inconsiderate towards traditional religion; they did not take cognizance of the prevalent religion. This predicament was most alienating, as the Vhavenda came to accept what was concluded about their religion and as a result they became total strangers in the new religion.

According to Mbiti this happened to many parts of Africa, "Some of missionaries were being greeted by Akamba cynics on entering their villages, in the words "Here comes the white man to tell us more lies" (1971:14). This was indeed an expression of disapproval of what the missionary might say.

The problem arising from a belief in a Christian God as well as a belief in the living dead is further noticed during burial services in the manner in which petitions are addressed to the deceased. A traditional Muvenda does not see any wrong in saying "Greet them, all those who preceded you; and do have a good rest." It is clearly indicated that the departed is undertaking a journey.

This problem was further compounded by the white missionaries who did not understand the Vhavenda cultural background and their concept of life after death. This is confirmed by Stephen Neill, a highly respected writer and missiologists who states that this seems to be a universal problem to western missionaries:

"The authorities tended to think that what was good for the west would be good also for the Eskimo and the Polynesian and tended to produce as nearly as possible a replica of the society in which they themselves had grown up" (1970:28).

Neill's point of departure indicates that the missionaries' approach was often not objective but rather subjective. Had the early missionaries investigated in depth the traditional religion of the Vhavenda, such a problem regarding life hereafter would not have led to conflict.

St. Paul put it well when he indicated that to win the Jews one should be like them. In the same way, when working with Gentiles, one has to live like a Gentile, outside the Jewish law; in order to win the Gentile. This does not mean that Christian norms or standards are to be lowered or compromised but rather that one should understand the traditional culture and the belief of the people one is working with. In short, one should become a Muvenda among the Vhavenda. The primacy of Christ is proclaimed more successfully when one understands the religious background of the people that one is trying to convert.

1.3. Aim of the research

The aim of the dissertation is to examine the Vhavenda experience of simultaneously believing in the God of the Bible and still clinging to traditional religious convictions and experiences, and to find out whether the continued belief in the latter weakens or strengthens their belief in the former.

This dissertation therefore will give a systematic analysis of how the Vhavenda perceived life hereafter according to their own cultural experience. We will also give attention to the conflict between the Vhavenda and Christian leaders in this regard. The information given in this study will enable us to indicate the interaction between the two groups and society at large.

It will be categorically laid out that the Vhavenda traditional religion should not be undermined lest the Vhavenda society be destroyed for they will feel deprived of their existence as a nation which occupies a space on the map of the world.

1.4. Hypothesis

My hypothesis is that traditional belief in God as well as in the life hereafter does not weaken a Muvenda's faith, instead it strengthens his/her belief in God and his power over both the world of the living and the world of the living dead.

The world of the living dead is in no way in competition with the message of the Bible. The conflict, which exists between the Vhavenda Christians and the church leaders, as well as between the missionaries in this regard, seems to be a result of misunderstanding and mis information. The Vhavenda always believed in a Supreme God. He is perceived as the source of all power, the creator and the redeemer of all mankind.

The ancestors are not in competition with God but are under God's supervision. They are not worshipped but venerated. The Vhavenda traditional religion is in this regard no different from the other African religions of the people south of the Sahara.

Veneration of the dead has become a bone of contention between the Christian leaders and their congregations. The Vhavenda like all Africans, believe that after death the deceased receive power and force, and they are regarded as being nearer to God, than the living. Mbiti affirms this point when he indicates that:

“After death a person gets access to the mysterious ‘force’ of nature; and in this respect he is, as Hofmann also observed, clothed with spiritual power. The living-dead and the Aimu are in a sense, nearer to God than ordinary people” (1971:72).

The Vhavenda regard the ancestors as the living dead. The dead and the living have a close relationship. It should also be known that the ancestors are not

everybody who died, or any departed member of the family, but those who died at a mature age and left offspring behind.

1.5. Research Methodology

The research operates within two related disciplines: *Science of Religion* (describing certain phenomena within the traditional Venda culture and religion) and *Science of Mission/Missiology* (analysing the impact of the Christian message among the Vhavenda people in Southern Africa).

The methodology used was both *quantitative* as well as *qualitative*. In terms of *quantitative research* all the sources available to the researcher – books, articles, theses, et cetera – were gathered and studied. While the focus was primarily on the Vhavenda experience, the researcher found it necessary and helpful to find resources reflecting information and similar experiences among neighbouring communities (especially the Zulu, Shona, Pedi and Tsonga peoples).

In terms of *qualitative research*, in-depth interviews were conducted with a number of respondents in Venda. The nine interviewees were carefully selected, coming from different localities and holding different positions, to present a comprehensive and varied picture of traditional life, culture and religion among the Vhavenda people. A list of the names of the interviewees as well as their localities and positions is included in the Appendix to the thesis.

The researcher undertook his study from the vantage point of a *participant observer*. Being an ordained minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) he is daily involved in the life of his congregations in Venda, as well as in dialogue with fellow ministers in ELCSA and with colleagues from the wider ecumenical community on the above mentioned issues. It goes

without saying that some of the information as well as conclusions reached in the thesis are informed by the researcher's own experience. He recognises that but, however, endeavours to be as objective as possible in conducting his research.

1.6 A brief analysis of important concepts

1.6.1 Venda society

Venda forms part of the Limpopo Province in South Africa. This area shares borders with Zimbabwe in the North. In the East it is separated from Mozambique by the Kruger National Park. Venda as a country has been known by this name from time immemorial. The people of Venda are called Vhavenda in the plural and Muvenda in singular form.

The language spoken is Tshivenda, which is derived from the name of the area Venda. The language is quite unique in South Africa, for it cannot be grouped with either Nguni or Sotho. It is entirely on its own but it is nearer to Shona (Karanga), one of the languages spoken in Zimbabwe. This is indeed supported by Stayt:

“The phonesis and phonology of Tshivenda finds its nearest equivalent in the Karanga group, and it is quite sharply distinguished from the Sotho and the Tsonga group in this regard though from the former far more than the latter” (1931:09).

The language owes its early biblical translation to the German missionary Rev. Schweltnus of the Berlin Missionary Society. Smit supports this statement when he says.

“By the end of 1923 Schellnus put the complete New Testament text at the disposal of the society, by which it was published in 1925 The New Testament in the Vhavenda language was received with gratitude and joy by the Bavenda of the Northern Transvaal” (1970:225).

This is an indication that the Berlin Missionary society did not only bring the Gospel but also brought literature in the Vhavenda language. Khorombi (1996:42) indicates that “The histories of the church and schools in Venda are so interwoven that it is difficult to separate them, since all this work had been introduced by missionaries.

Venda is fertile and evergreen and the streams are always flowing with clean water. According to Benso (1976:16)

“Venda has many other streams perennial and seasonal, most of which join one or other of the major rivers. Owing to the seasonality of the rainfall, small streams can become raging torrents which are often impassable in summer”.

Venda is fairly fertile and it is one of the best watered regions in South Africa. In the North, most of the land is occupied by the Soutpansberg mountain range. Natural vegetation has not been much interfered with or destroyed. The natural indigenous forest of this area still serves as a tourist attraction.

Before discussing the Vhavenda concept of life hereafter as compared to the Christian tradition, it is important to give a brief history of Venda so that the reader may get a better picture of the people in question.

It is presumed that the Vhavenda originally came from the area around the great lakes of Africa which the Arabs called Zendji. Benzo indicates that:

“Available writing by the Vhavenda themselves has cleared the mystery concerning their origin and migration down the Dark Continent of Africa. The place of origin is the area around the Great Lakes of Africa, formerly called the land of Zendji by the ancient Arab explorers” (1979:35).

History has it that the first group which migrated to Venda is the Vhangona who arrived around the 13th century. Nemudzivhadi supports this statement: “The Vhangona might have crossed the Vhembe River towards the end of the 13th century” (1977:05).

On the whole the Vhavenda lived in peace until the Boers declared war on the Vhavenda of Mphephu on 16 November 1898. A misunderstanding between chief Mphephu and the Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek caused the war. The former then fled to Rhodesia. After the war, the town of Louis Trichardt, which is now Makhado, was established.

1.6.2 Venda Religion

It is essential to define religion from a broader spectrum and universal point of view and then relate it with the Venda religion.

From a sociological point of view Bate recognized that it is the society, not the individual, which distinguishes between sacred and profane things. He cites the symbolic use of totems by tribes of central Australia as an example of the way religion symbolizes society (2000:8). According to the definition by Bate, religion does not stem from the individual, but from the society as a group of individuals.

Freud, from a psychological point of view, further reinforces this statement. Freud considered religion as a neurotic need which all people would grow out of as mankind matured” *Ibid* :8. To Freud, religion was a neurotic need to stabilize the conflicts and fears in all individuals.

Tylor sees it with an anthropological eye when he defines religion “as belief in spiritual beings” (*Ibid*: 249). According to all these definitions, religion becomes a binding force amongst individuals; it brings the individuals to a state of cohesion.

From an African point of view, Parrinder indicates that “to Africans, the spiritual world is so real and nears, its forces intertwining and inspiring the visible world, that whether pagan or Christian, man has to reckon with things invisible to moral insight” (1962:10). Parrinder further maintains that there is a similarity in religion regardless of race. It is a clear indication that religion begins in knowledge, and leads in practice and finally ends up in the worship of God.

The Vhavenda, like any African society, believe in supreme beings. But it should be noted that this belief emanates from family and tribal gods. This belief is clearly indicated by the manner the Vhavenda offer sacrifices to their departed ancestors.

A special person, the makhadzi (aunt of the family) according to Vhavenda custom, always performs the offering of sacrifices. This could be performed by way of giving blessings; such as when a member of the family is undertaking a long journey to far away countries.

The first grains, green vegetables, the marula and other fruits of the New Year, according to the Vhavenda custom, cannot be eaten before the ancestors are informed.

According to Stayt a prayer is offered by the makhadzi:

“She says ‘Ndi ni fha nwaha muswa uri ni le ni takale, zwo salaho ndi zwanga na zwiduhulu, zwana na zwone zwile zwi takale-vho’ I offer you the first grains of the New Year that you may eat and be happy” (Stayt 1931:225).

The offering in this manner could start from family or community, but when coming to the national level Nwali is approached, as he is not a family or tribal god but the Universal One. Apart from the ancestral veneration which is a religious institution relating to tribal gods (ancestors) the Vhavenda had a firm belief in a Supreme Being.

The Vhavenda believed in God whom they called Nwali and the whole area was commonly known by this name. As a result the nation could not be regarded as heathen for it had a religion in which its faith was basically founded. Ranger, quoting Rennie, confirmed that “the first Tavhatsindi chief in Venda is said in oral tradition to have spoken with Nwali” (1974:14).

To the Vhavenda Nwali was the creator of the universe and would care for his people by supplying them with all their needs e.g. rain. In certain areas he was called by other names such as Raluvhimba and Khuzwane.

According to Benso: “The Vhavenda believed in a supreme being Khuzwane, who created all things and can be compared to the Hebrew Jehovah” (1979:34).

Van Rooy confirms that Nwali had other names, he says, “There used to be cult of the supreme Venda deity; Raluvhimba. Actually there are three names for this deity i.e. Raluvhimba, Nwali, Khuzwane (1971:40)

This is a clear indication that the Vhavenda worshipped one God, although they referred to Him by three names.

Junod (1920:207) writes:

“Raluvhimba is the maker of everything. I do not say creator, as the idea of creation *exnihilo* is not conveyed by the native term, nor does it clearly exist in the Bantu mind” (1920: 207)

Junod is, however, not quite correct when he says that the idea of creation *exnihilo* is not conveyed by the native term. The notion of creation out of nothing is not foreign to the Vhavenda, for in some instances they say *Musika Vhathu* creator of people. Daneel confirms the Vhavenda’s belief in Nwali as a creator of the universe out of nothing. He says

“They are both identical in style and are regarded as special manifestations of God’s creation; this is referred to as the work of Nwali” (1970:17).

According to Daneel the structures now known as the Zimbabwe and the Dzata Ruins (the latter found in Venda) were built by Nwali.

1.6.3 The Christian mission among the Vhavenda

It is acknowledged that the first white settlement in Venda occurred as early as 1820, when Coenraad de Buys and his extended family arrived in the area. The second group of whites was under the leadership of Louis Trichardt. According to Benso the arrival of the Voortrekker leader, Louis Trichardt, in 1836 coincided with the struggle for succession between Mpofu’s sons; Ramabulana and Ramavhoya (1979:20). These two groups did not come to proclaim the Good News, but to settle in the land, to find a new name for themselves.

It is generally believed that the Berlin Missionaries were the first missionaries to introduce Christianity to Venda, although written records indicate that the first missionary to pay attention to this area was Mckidd of the Dutch Reformed Church. This evidence is supported by Kirkaldy that:

“The first mission station to be established in the immediate vicinity of Vendaleland was the Dutch Reformed Church station of Goedgedacht, founded among the Buys people by the Rev. Alexander Mckidd in 1863” (2005:25).

The Dutch Reformed Church missionaries found it difficult to make an impact on the Vhavenda, as there was a communication breakdown due to the language problem. Benso affirms that, although the Dutch Reformed Church mission was established in the land of Makhado, Northern Sotho was used as a language of communication as missionaries did not know Tshivenda *Ibid 34*, and thus misunderstandings were created. The white missionaries translated Modimo (God in Sotho), into Mudzimu in Tshivenda, not realizing that according to the Vhavenda belief, Mudzimu is an ancestor or family god. No wonder Chief Makhado and his followers were not impressed with the new religion.

The Vhavenda believed in their universal supreme being, Nwali (Mwari in Shona). The conversation between Michael Buys and chief Makhado on the work of a missionary sheds light on this problem.

“Wat wil hy hê”, het hy aan Michael gevra...Hy wil vir jou bid, was Buys se antwoord, “Vir my bid? Weet hy dan nie dat ek self as godheid intree vir my volk by Mwari (God) nie?(Moller 1957:171)

This is a clear indication that chief Makhado believed in God Nwali. The missionaries bringing Christianity should have taken Vhavenda traditional religion more seriously. The misunderstanding between Makhado and the Dutch

Reformed Church missionaries must have reached the government's ears. A missionary from Elim Mission (Lwaleni) was sent as a negotiator, to calm the waters. According to Junod:

“The Elim Missionary was asked by the Government of the Transvaal to negotiate peace terms with a heathen Venda Chief, Makhatou” (1933:8-9).

It appears that the wrong approach adopted by the DRC missionaries might to a certain extent have affected the good relationship which existed between Makhado and the government of the Transvaal.

In May 1871, missionaries Grutzner, Beyer and Beuster visited Makhado to discuss opening a mission station in his lands (Sanberzweig 1896:294)

The Berlin Missionaries under the leadership of Beuster were the second group to establish a mission station in Venda. “Just under a year later, in March 1872, missionaries Beyer (from Blauberg) and Baumbach (from Makgabeng) made a reconnaissance journey to Khosi Tshivhase. At this meeting, the Khosi made it very clear that he had already for a long time wanted teachers to come” (Sanberzweig). This was under chief Tshivhase at Maungani in 1872. Mathivha supports this statement when he indicates that “on Friday 8 November 1872, they arrived and were given Maungani (the present Beuster) to help establish a mission station there” (Mathivha 1985:45).

Missionary Beuster was later joined by a Muvenda pioneer in the field of Christianity, Johannes Mutshaeni, who was converted to Christianity during the Kimberley Diamond field expeditions.

Mathivha (1985:46) reports that:

“On Christmas Day 1872 Johhanes Mutshaeni travelled to Beuster to find Rev Beuster and his colleague Rev Stech celebrating the day. They were surprised when Mutshaeni introduced himself as one of the Christians baptized while away from home.”

Mutshaeni worked hard to assist in proclaiming the Gospel and died on 4 November 1876. It was unfortunate that he could not see the historic occasion of the baptism of his wife Johanna, as the first Muvenda woman to be baptized at Maungani in 1877.

Rev Beuster is regarded as one of the best amongst the missionaries at the Berlin mission. He has left a footprint in both the fields of education and Christianity. According to Khorombi (2001:51) “Rev Beusrer has without doubt contributed more than any other missionary to the upliftment of the Vhavenda people educationally and spiritually”.

When some Vhavenda chiefs invited missionaries into the areas of their abode, the primary aim was to enhance the status of the chief and to fulfill his social needs. The proclamation of the Gospel was of secondary significance. Chief Mphaphuli was not in favour of missionaries, but his son Makwarela convinced him that the presence of the missionaries would enhance the status of a chief. Mathivha reports, “Although his father was not interested in the word of God, Makwarela persuaded and finally convinced him that the status of their people would be raised if a missionary came to their area” (Mathivha 1985:56).

We may also mention Michael Buy’s efforts to persuade chief Makhado to invite white missionaries to come and help him. The latter was still reluctant. “Kry vir jou’ n sendeling om jou teen diesulkes te beskerm en van raad te bedien soos die volk oorkant die rivier wat vir Moffat en Livingstone het... maar hiervan wil Makhado nie hoor nie. Hy will geen witman naby hom he nie” (Moller-Malan

1957:171). As there were some white traders who were not honest in their business activities, Buys failed to convince Makhado that it was in his interest to invite missionaries.

In retrospect the missionaries should admit a degree of failure, due to the double standards that guided them. The proclamation of the Gospel was in some cases overshadowed by a desire to serve the government of the day. It would be of great significance and interest to give a few illustrations to support this anomaly. Rev Beuster whilst at Maungani attempted to separate chief Tshivhase from Ramabulana by submitting a positive report on the former.

This was clearly reflected in a letter from the office of the Native commissioner of Klein Spelonken (no ss 4485 R11 291/95 dated 28/12/1894). Although the two chiefs regarded themselves as brothers (Khotsimuhulu and Khotsimunene) their relationship was strained. Rev Wessmann submitted a negative report on Makhado to precipitate a conflict between the government and the former. This was discovered in letter no ss 4485 R11 901/95, which was directed to the Native commissioner of Klein Spelonken, dated 16 January 1895.

It is further clearly recognized that some of the missionaries did not succeed in persuading the indigenous people to readily accept Christianity because of their oppressive actions and practices. The scripture says “because of you the name of God is dishonored among the Gentiles” (Roman 2:24), became true of them as well.

The native lands were expropriated under the pretext that they were neglected, although in fact and customarily they belonged to the chiefs and their people. The land was seized in terms of the white man’s law and sometimes the missionaries were party to these fraudulent procedures.

When the missionaries arrived amongst the indigenous people, their mission should have been to discharge the clarion call of the Gospel assigned to them; not to acquire land.

The buying of farms by missionaries led to inter-racial friction amongst the traditional leaders and the missionaries.

Mathivha (1985:258) has this to say: “Schwellnus bought the farm at Tshakhuma in the name of the Berlin Mission from a trader called Watt. He introduced specific rules that had to be observed by occupants of the farm. One rule was no work is to be done on Sunday”.

It is somewhat surprising to note that the farm at Tshakhuma was bought from Mr. Watt by the Berlin Mission. At more or less the same time the Swiss mission also bought a farm from Watt, as is indicated by Junod. “The Scotsman, Watt, having sold his farm to the newcomers, naturally left his house for them. Mrs. Creux, and Mrs Berthoud each made a sketch of those dwellings” (Junod 1933:10).

It is not very clear how the land trader Watt came into the picture because on the missionaries’ arrival, the indigenous people themselves allocated to them an area in which to establish mission stations.

It is regrettable that farms were bought from strangers and not from the traditional leaders who were the owners of the land. Despite the difficulties encountered by both missionaries and the indigenous people, it should be noted with appreciation that the arrival of the missionaries brought enlightenment to this country. It should be remembered that the great project of uplifting and educating the people was undertaken by ardent missionaries.

It is through the efforts of the Berlin missionary society that their hymnbook is used universally in Venda, irrespective of denomination.

The Presbyterian Church was established with the provision of a hospital at Gouldville in 1902 under the leadership of MacDonald. In 1912 the Anglicans established a mission station at Mukula and later surrendered it to the Berlin Mission. In 1928 the Gereformeerde Kerk (Reformed Church) established a mission station at Hamatshisevhe, and it was later moved to Siloam, where a hospital was built. The Dutch Reformed Church at Tshilidzini Hospital (Place of Mercy) was founded by Dr Nico Smith in 1957. Rev Booyesen at Malimuwa near Louis Trichardt established the Apostolic Faith Mission Church in 1910. Charles Rathogwa Ndou started the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1928 at Sunguzwi

1.6.4 Acculturation among the Vhavenda Christians

It is important for this research to define culture and describe the process of acculturation in Venda. Oosthuizen (1986:70) defines culture as follows, “Culture is the integrated system of learned behaviour patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not the results of biological inheritance. It consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts.”

The essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values.

Aylward Shorter (1977:139-140) simply says: “All the learned aspects of human ideas and behaviour are what we call culture, and culture is made up of social facts, economic facts, techniques and everything else that an individual learns as

a member of his society, especially important is the area of ultimate concern that we term 'religion' and which integrates the view which a society has of man, his place in the universe and his destiny". Culture is dynamic, meaning that it changes from time to time and differs from society to society. It is not static.

Moila (1987:3-4) defines culture as follows: "Culture is the experience and expression of meaning. It is a context within and the socio-historical mechanism whereby meaning is both experienced and expressed".

The culture of a society, then, should be regarded as a vessel, which could be used as a vehicle to convey whatever dogma to the society.

According to Bocock (1985:75), "The axiom underlying what we may perhaps call the religious perspective is everywhere the same: he who would know must first believe." It is indeed an accepted opinion that belief should lead to knowledge and understanding. Edward Shil, in describing ritual, almost by definition indicates that "its continuation is inevitable; ritual is stereotyped symbolically concentrated expression of belief and sentiments regarding ultimate things" (Greeley 1969:122).

In terms of acculturation the missionaries should have aimed at transforming and enriching the culture of the indigenous people, and this could have been done to the Glory of God.

When the missionaries presented the Gospel, this should have been done in the ways relevant to the indigenous people's culture whilst the authenticity of the Gospel could still be maintained.

The missionaries however did not encourage the traditional leaders to take their rightful places and responsibilities. The chiefs were not encouraged into the new

religion of Christianity as they had many wives. Chief Makwarela who invited the Berlin Missionaries to establish a mission at his area was refused baptism. The new cultures were in conflict with each other.

The subjects of a chief often took refuge in the mission stations whenever they were experiencing difficulties in their places of abode. When they were converted to Christianity they were expected not to have anything to do with their pagan relations. This partly explains why Rev Creux bought an additional farm Waterfall *watervaal* to accommodate blacks that were expelled by the chiefs either for stealing or for any other offence.

Junod (1933:23) indicates “This would in any case be a prudent step, because the missionaries foresaw that they would have need of ground to house their Christian people, if the blacks were expelled from their regions, as was feared”. It goes without saying that the missionaries encouraged the indigenous people to stay in the newly established mission stations. By so doing they had to forsake some of their traditional culture and adopt a new one.

Revolutionary cultural changes make the new convert to forsake his cultural beliefs and to regard other people, who have not been converted into the new Christian culture, as inferior. He looks on them with scorn as they still adhere to their traditional culture.

Moila (1987:20) verifies this: “The missionaries brought into Pedi society what we see as God’s revolutionary kingdom”. It is quite understandable for the missionaries to have created this tension. The missionaries’ assignment was to bring men under challenge of the new Christian culture of reconciliation, so that lives might be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. By bringing revolutionary changes to the hearts of men, however, the church was indeed weakening the heart of Vhavenda culture.

It does happen that some new converts, who have embraced the new culture, are not Christians in the true sense of the word, but they want the social benefits of the new culture. This is clearly emphasised by Setiloane (1986:4) when he says:

“The dominating culture then places itself as the culture (even like the barbarian Romans set themselves over the cultured Greeks), and members of the other cultures seek to identify themselves with the dominant one because there are advantages.”

It is indeed true that their relatives who were still living according to traditional cultures never took these new converts, staying in the mission stations, seriously.

It is unfortunate that whites wrote most of the church history books and they often saw everything through the white man’s eye.

It should have been of extreme significance to the missionaries to have understood and appreciated the African traditional religion, and the Christian faith would have penetrated without much ado. If a human being is not full accorded respect and dignity, without racial prejudices, the Christian faith will be in danger and consequently it may end up becoming irrelevant.

In undertaking this research, it was of extreme importance to take seriously the Vhavenda’s perception of Biblical doctrines and the impact of the cultural beliefs on their perception of these doctrines. The consequences of the interaction between the Gospel message and the traditionally bound Vhavenda Christians needed to be observed.

Theologians or ministers from outside should not claim to know what the indigenous people (Vhavenda) mean when they refer to God from their own

cultural background. They need to study the language and the meaning of the words used to describe ancestral worship, offerings, and sacrifices.

Maboe quotes an interesting observation made by Sir Theophilus Shepstone:

“It is impossible I think to govern people satisfactorily without knowing their customs, and modes of thought. Magistrates, who do not possess or soon acquire knowledge of these are dangerous persons to be entrusted with the charge of native populations” (Maboe 1982:4).

It is quite significant that what is good for the magistrates who live in a foreign society is good for the white minister of religion who is serving an African congregation, such as the Vhavenda. The minister should learn with them and understand their problems and shortcomings.

Rev. Beuster used to employ the method of symbolic interactionism because he could reach the indigenous people without difficulty. Nemudzivhadi in his unpublished paper delivered during the dedication of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mbilwi said:

“Mufunzi Beuster o vha a tshi dalela misanda o namela bere, huno arali a wana tshikona tsho tangana, na ene o vha a tshi mona na khoru o di namela bere a tshi khou tshina. Musi tshikona tshi tshi kha u wa a thoma u amba fhungo la Mudzimu, (Rev. Beuster used to visit the chiefs’ kraals on horseback. If he found the tshikona dance in progress he would, whilst still on horseback, join in the dance. After the tshikona dance had abated, he would then start preaching the word of God)” (Nemudzivhadi 1991:1).

Beuster showed respect for the Vhavenda tradition by joining in their Tshikona dance and people in turn gave him a hearing when he proclaimed the Gospel.

The culture of the society should be regarded as a vessel wherein the Gospel can be conveyed to the society. The cultural background and customs should not hinder it from accepting the Gospel for people are saved by the Grace of the Lord Jesus (Acts 15:9-12).

Mathivha supported this statement when she said:

“Makwarela liked education so much that he became one of the pupils who learned to read and write. He was also interested in the work of God. He was very disappointed when the missionary refused to baptise him because he was not prepared to abandon his many wives” (Mathivha 1985:56)

This is a clear illustration that the Gospel in this case was presented in the narrowly spiritual understanding of the theologian, who lacked insight into the prevalent situation. Makwarela as the son of the chief, and the heir to the throne of Mphaphuli his father, could not abandon his wives, but he wanted to be baptised and saved.

Neill (1970: 55) mentions the example of Junod who spent 32 years among the Vatsonga:

“Junod lived among the Batsonga people for 32 Years, he lived, he listened, he analysed, and he recorded... the sense in which Junod viewed his own phrase of the South African tribe. Africa would no longer be Africa if there were no more Africans”.

The approach of Junod was that of creating a healthy atmosphere of understanding the social condition of the indigenous people, and then proceeding with evangelization. The Gospel could be deeply rooted if it could be coupled with their cultural background.

1.7 Overview of the thesis

The dissertation is divided into six chapters

Chapter 1

This chapter introduces the research project. The problem statement is clearly indicated; giving the reasons for instituting this particular investigation. The aims, the hypothesis, methodology and a brief analysis of important concepts such as African traditional religion, Christian missionary enterprises in Venda, the Vhavenda Christian acculturation, an overview of the research and structure of the essay follows.

Chapter 2

This chapter treats the Vhavenda concept of God, focusing on the strong belief of the Vhavenda as centred on Nwali and the impact of this on the Vhavenda's belief in the Biblical God.

Chapter 3

This chapter deals with death and the world of the living dead. The meaning of death as perceived by the Vhavenda is also examined. The burial rites make it quite clear that the bereaved believe strongly that the dead are on a journey to join those who have preceded them.

Chapter 4

This chapter treats the relationship between the living and the dead. The belief in life after death is clearly indicated by the large priesthood in various cults in Venda. Mention is made of the relationship between the living Vhavenda Christians and the living dead.

Chapter 5

This chapter treats the Venda version of Christianity. The Venda belief in God will be discussed as a stepping-stone, which has led the Vhavenda to regard Christ as their prime ancestor.

Chapter 6

Conclusion of the research, the main findings will be discussed and areas for future research will be noted.

Bibliography

A full bibliography will be added to the research.

Appendix

Lists of interviewees are included on the appendix.

CHAPTER 2: THE VHAVENDA CONCEPT OF GOD

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter the researcher seeks to explain the nature and the attributes of Nwali, which will serve as an introduction to a better understanding of the Vhavenda concept of life hereafter. The concept of a supreme being, who amongst the Vhavenda is identified as Nwali, will be discussed. A portion of this chapter will deal with how Nwali revealed Himself to the Vhavenda people as well as the sites associated with Nwali's visits to his people, the Vhavenda people in particular.

The impact of the Christian perception of God on the Vhavenda traditional belief will be discussed at the closing stages of this chapter. Finally this chapter will focus on a comparative analysis of God and Nwali as quoted by Van Rooy (1970: 156).

2.2. Belief in the Supreme Being

The knowledge of God was not strange to the Vhavenda. Bishop Nganda (1985:20) indicates:

“Long before the missionary came to this country; Africans had their own culture and their own religion. Our forefathers believed in God. He was worshipped as the great one. His Xhosa name was Qamata. His Zulu name was Mvelingangi. Other tribes had other names for him. Our forefathers worshipped God and depended upon him for their livelihood and their welfare but they did not invoke his name without some very good reason”.

Therefore, the existence of God was known to the Vhavenda from time immemorial. Traditionally, the Vhavenda had a notion of God which was passed on from generation to generation, and this in itself indicates that they were not atheistic.

Mbiti (1969: 36) quotes that: “God is no stranger to the African people”. Many African people such as the Akamba, Herero of Namibia and others, consider God to be merciful, showing kindness and taking pity on mankind. For that reason he is referred to as the “God of pity”, “God is kind, God is merciful”.

The mercy or kindness of God is felt in situations of danger, difficulty, illness and anxiety, when deliverance or protection is attributed to Him. He is called upon to help. Even when sorrow has struck, God may be called upon to comfort the people.

The Vhavenda, like any other African people south of the Sahara, had a belief in the Supreme Being. This unquestionable faith, also led them to the belief in the life hereafter.

The Vhavenda are convinced that the world is filled with God; for them thunder and lightning are connected with God. The idea of God is fundamental to the Vhavenda. This traditional belief cannot be overlooked, for to the Vhavenda it has a reality, it is a force to reckon with (Stayt 1969: 230)

Most of Vhavenda are somewhat reserved and secretive about their religious belief, more especially to aliens and those who show little interest in them as Africans. The Vhavenda also regard God as a causative agent whose knowledge is far above that of man. It is important to investigate the traditional concept of God among the Vhavenda before discussing their concept of life after death.

2.3. The names of Nwali

According to Schapera & Eiselen (1959:265) Raluvhimba (Nwali) was associated and connected with astronomical and physical phenomena. Although the Vhavenda regarded Nwali as residing some where far away and being remote from his people, in another version he was regarded in terms of a human grandfather who was obliged to visit his grandchildren. This analogy of Nwali as grandfather is further endorsed by Van Rooy, when he quotes the Vhavenda proverb, “*makhulu ndi tshiulu ri tamba ri tshi gonya* (Grandfather is an anthill, we climb on it in play)” (Van Rooy 1971) This proverb reveals one of the attributes of Nwali, which means that Nwali expressed his endless patience like a grand father.

The Vhavenda’s idea of God is associated with Nwali. The nation could not be regarded as heathen, for it had and still has a religion on which its faith was founded. They put their trust in the Supreme Being called Nwali, who they believe has supernatural powers. The Vhavenda are convinced He can change the course of events.

In this Chapter, I endeavour to explain who Nwali is, as this will serve as an introduction to a better understanding of the Vhavenda’s concept of life hereafter. As a result of considerable cultural affinity and linguistic association between the Vhavenda and the Mashona, they share the name for God (Nwari).

According to Kirkaldy (2005:168) Beuster recorded in a report, compiled in 1878 and published in the following year, that the supreme deity in Vendaland was Raluvhimba, the father of Holiness or the Holy partner. He was the active, all-creating and maintaining god through whom the trees, shrubs and everything were created and maintained even now. His dwelling was at Mabvumela

Mountain in the land of the Karanga people in Zimbabwe. He was also known as Muhali-muhulu or Mudzimu-muhulu (the great God).

To the Ndembu of Zambia the name Nwali is more familiar. It is a name which is commonly used in their various communal undertakings, especially in their sacrificial rituals.

Ranger (1974: 44) indicates that: "The chief undergoing his installation ritual is known as Nwali". Moreover, different forms of the name can be applied to ritual officials, who have the responsibility for performing rites of passage of various sorts.

Ranger (1974: 45) quotes Rennie who wrote that:

"The first Tavhatsindi Chief in Venda land is said in oral tradition to have spoken with Nwali, and that the Tavhatsindi gained political control of the high God cult which had been introduced into Venda country by the Mbedzi".

By the arguments advanced by both Ranger and Rennie it is well established that the name Nwali dates back to an early age, when it was associated with cultic observance. Rennie went a step further to associate the name with the Vhavenda, particularly those of the Tavhatsindi clan. One may deduce that the title Mwari/Mwadi/Nwali was applied to sacrifices or officials who had the responsibilities in such sacred rituals.

According to Ralushai (1980: 46) "The Vhavenda-speaking people, particularly those at Vhuronga and Vhuilafuri, pronounce the name Nwali and in Shona Mwari".

The Mashona, even to this day, are making use of the name Mwari. Historically it was used during their sacred initiation rituals. During the discussion the name Nwali will be used, as it is near to the Shona “Mwari”.

Daneel reports that Nwali was the name of God used by both the Mashona and the Vhavenda. He refers to the analogy between the Zimbabwe and the Dzata ruins in Venda. In Venda today the name Nwali is often used in referring to God.

In some of the songs sung by the youth, Nwali is seen as the creator. *Shango la Venda Nwali o li sikaho vhone madembe e a a sia.* (The country of Venda which was created by Nwali sees all the wonders). This in itself is a clear indication that unofficially, in the hearts of the Vhavenda, the name of Nwali, the creator God is still deeply engraved.

The commonly accepted name which is chiefly used by the mainline churches is Mudzimu, but some of the traditional independent churches feel more at home when they use Nwali. This is often observed when they pronounce their prayers. The pioneer missionaries in Zimbabwe employed the name Mudzimu for God. This was not acceptable to the Mashona, so they resorted to Mwari as reference to the Supreme Being.

Evidence advanced by Forture (1973: 47) reveals that “In Zimbabwe there are certain places where denominations are using the name Mwari instead of Mudzimu. In the Ndau and Manyika areas, “the name Mwari was used almost exclusively from the beginning, Ndau publications are almost exclusively those of the American Board Mission. In Manyika work by Anglicans from 1898, by Methodists from 1905, and by Roman Catholics from 1910, all used Mwari.

This is a good indication that the general opinion and the majority of the Mashona favour the use of Mwari, unlike the Venda where most of the mainline

denominations are still inclined to use Mudzimu. In the courts of justice in Zimbabwe, when a person takes an oath, he is encouraged to say “Mwari uri ku denga ndi betseme (so help me God). This oath is based on the purely theistic belief in one Supreme Being.

Between 1921 and 1924 there were discussions in Roman Catholic Church circles as to whether the Shona word Mwari for God should be replaced by “YAHWE”. The Majority favoured Mwari.

Daneel’s (1970: 38) research reveals the following:

Question: “What is the relationship between Mwari and the midzimu (ancestral spirits)?

Elisha: The midzimu are down here, Mwari is in heaven, but he co-operates with the midzimu.”

This interview leaves one with the impression that the Mashona regard Mwari as their Supreme God and midzimu as their ancestral spirits. It appears that the missionaries in Zimbabwe had a lighter burden in ministering to the indigenous people, as most of them could differentiate between the ancestral spirits and the Supreme God.

It was the white missionaries who brought the Christian religion to Venda, who first mistakenly used the name Mudzimu for God instead of the original traditional name Nwali. Dr. Mackidd of the DRC was inclined to make use of Sotho as a medium of instruction as Tshivenda was not a written language then. The name Nwali was further eroded by the coming of the Berlin Missionary Society. Rev. P.E. Schwellnus, the translator of the Sotho Bible into Tshivenda, although well-

trained in linguistics, was also influenced by the already existing Sotho name Modimo for God.

When the Bible was translated into Tshivenda, he used Mudzimu without doing any research into the traditional meaning of the word, so Nwali was not employed to refer to God. When the complete New Testament was translated in 1923, the name Nwali was omitted.

My informant Sophia Chaza of Zimbabwe said that “vadzimu are those people who have passed away, and Mwari is the Supreme Being”. Sophia’s statement is further supported by Ralushai (1980:17-21), who say:

“The early missionaries working on the Venda religious translation caused confusion by calling God, Mudzimu, while those working across the border of Zimbabwe used the term Mwari for God. Mudzimu means an ancestral spirit or person possessed by a spirit of his ancestor. Mwari is a Venda and Shona Supreme Being”.

Unquestionably injustice was done in neglecting the name Nwali and resorting to the use of Mudzimu. It would have helped the missionary enterprise a great deal if they had used the proper name of Nwali in their translations and publications, as well as in their preaching.

To sum up this argument, the name Nwali for God has become unfamiliar to the new generation. Nwali is regarded as a heathen oracle, or archaic God who should be associated with the ancestors. Mudzimu has currently been accepted as the name of the true Living God. In order not to cause further confusion and misunderstanding, the second revision committee of the New Testament did not change the name Mudzimu to Nwali because they feared to be criticized for interfering with the name of God. The Shona were fortunate to have forthwith

decided to use the name of Mwari, who according to their linguistic understanding is not Mudzimu, and the Christians in Zimbabwe show great resentment at the use of the name Mudzimu.

The other general name which was used to refer to God was Raluvhimba. He was the mysterious, deity of the Vhavenda, and he was identified with Mwari, the Mashona god, who revealed himself at Mbvumela in the Matoba hills of Matabele land (Stayt 1931: 230).

Raluvhimba and Nwali were regarded as one and the same supreme deity. The analogy of the two names was further substantiated by Stayt (1931: 230), when he indicated that:

“The Bavenda credited Raluvhimba with all the powers of Mwari, and although it is probable that at one time they were two separate deities, they have now become so completely identified that they are referred to indiscriminately by either name, the name Raluvhimba is peculiar to the Bavenda”.

As indicated by Stayt, Nwali and Raluvhimba were sometimes treated as two separate deities; therefore some people associated Nwali with the Mashona and Mudzimu with the Vhavenda. Although Junod (1927: 209) wrote extensively about the Tsonga traditional religion, he did make an explicit stand in supporting Stayt’s point of view in regarding the similarities of the two deities, when he indicated that “Raluvhimba is the maker and former of everything... What is of greater importance for them is the regular falling of the rain, and Raluvhimba is directly connected with it.”

The attributes Junod attaches to Raluvhimba are not dissimilar to Nwali's. The prevalent view amongst the Vhavenda is that the two names refer to the same God.

Raluvhimba, like Nwali, was the God of the whole Vhavenda nation. This is contrary to Beach's indication that Raluvhimba was only for the Mbedzi-speaking section of the Vhavenda. He admittedly pointed out that Raluvhimba and Nwali are interchangeable names for God.

Beach (1980: 251), indicates that "The Venda-speaking basic populations, especially the Mbedzi section, had a high God named Raluvhimba, who was originally worshipped in a cave shrine..... The Venda had come to think of Raluvhimba and Mwari as interchangeable names for the same deity".

Beach should have investigated the matter further, as to why the Mbedzi appear to be associated with Raluvhimba. Amongst the Mbedzi clan we find the officers who were connected with the sacrificial rituals of Raluvhimba. This matter of priesthood will be treated at a later stage.

Du Plessis, who stayed among the Vhavenda for many years at Siloam Mission station under the Gereformeerde Kerk, reinforces this argument. He says, "Raluvhimba, of soos in Karanga genoem word Mwari of Mwali, word beskou as die skepper en hoogste wese (1940: 99).

In some instances Raluvhimba is regarded as God of the Mashona. It is correct because the Vhavenda in Zimbabwe and those who were residing in Venda itself, never observed the Limpopo River (Vhembe) as a boundary; to them it meant nothing but a colonial boundary and no significant reason for stopping them from going to the other side of the river.

2.4. Attributes of Nwali

The attributes associated with the names of Nwali are those of an immanent and transcendent being, ever present in his own creation. Nwali is involved in and concerned about the activities and social welfare of his people. There is no distance or gulf between him and his creation.

Daneel (1970: 18) adds that “Mwari has not totally lost sight. In the composite picture of Shona traditional religion, he did become the personal being beyond and above the hierarchy of ancestral spirits”. According to Daneel, Nwali never stays away from his people, he provides for their social needs. In the hierarchy of the ancestral spirits he is rated as highest in rank.

According to oral tradition, on their movement Southwards, the Singo were protected by a drum with magical powers. This drum was known as the Ngoma-Lungundu, the drum of the dead or the drum of Mwari/Nwali. It was said to have been given to the breakaway chief by his father/ancestor, the God/king Mwari. The chief and, through him, his people, were greatly feared because of the power of the drum. Provided that it was continually beaten by the chief during times of threat, it would both protect the people against attack and cause them to defeat their enemies. The drum struck such fear into the souls of the enemies that they either fled in terror or fell to the ground in a swoon as in death. At times, the power of the drum was so great that it appeared to play itself. This was because the invisible Mwari himself was playing it (Kirkaldy 2005:18).

Stayt (1931: 233), mentions that “Nwali means the begetter of bearer, in own terminology some remote ancestor, although he is subject to many human weaknesses”. The attributes “human weakness” had a damaging influence on both Mudau and Marole. In Ngoma-Lungundu, Mudau appears to portray Nwali as an ancestor, who dies and disappears.

This implies that the work and acts of Nwali are associated with those of a human being. Mudau did not make a deeper study of the attributes of either Nwali or Raluvhimba, although he stated that, Nwali transferred his magic to his son as if he was a magician.

“The king Nwali died, and with him came the end of the great city.... Before Mwali vanished it is said that he gave all the magic to his elder son who had always listened to the royal commands” (Mudau 1940: 13). Marole (1966: 4) in support of Mudau’s point of view reflects that: *Mwari a pfulutshela hone a fhata mudi wa vhasadzi vhawe nga murahu ha zwickwara zwe zwa vha zwi hone* (“Nwali had moved his village next to a hill, where he stayed with his wives”).

It is presumed that both Mudau and Marole were influenced by Stayt with the result that they reduced Nwali to an ordinary living being that could stay with so many wives.

The Vhavenda were convinced that Nwali was the creator of the universe and that the whole cosmos was under his control. I differ with Junod, who depicts Raluvhimba as the maker and the former of everything. He does not want to use the word “Creator”: because according to him, Africans do not understand creation, as the idea of “*creatio ex nihilo*” is not conveyed by the native term, neither does it clearly exist in the Bantu mind.... “Natives do not bother much about creation” (Junod 1921: 209-210).

When the Vhavenda praise God they say *Musika-Vhathu*, which simply translates as creator of mankind. In Venda terminology *u sika* (means create) is to have the power of producing something which was not there before. Van Rooy (1970: 157) uses as illustration the phrase “*u sika mulilo*” to make fire, fire could be made by rubbing the two sticks together, “There is, however, a more suitable term, Musiki,

from the verb *u sika*. The word *Musiki* (Creator) is used in that form in the accepted version of the Apostles' creed”.

Van Rooy disagrees with Junod. He is convinced that the Africans did understand the meaning of creation. In the Venda Bible translation, Schweltnus used the term *Musiki* for creator, such as in *Musika Israele* the one who created Israel, in Isaiah 43: 15.

The Vhavenda, like other African tribes in Southern Africa, survived by tilling the soil, as there were no modern factories or industries to provide employment. Rain was very important and Mwali used to give them rain. This attribute of Nwali was of great significance to the Vhavenda. The Vhavenda relied for their livelihood on rain from Nwali as it was the only way in which they could survive. The fall of rain was an indication that Nwali could direct the course of nature. His power of rain-making was regarded with great hope.

They believed that during years of drought if he was approached he could transform the thunder clouds in the sky into rain. Stayt (1931:310) reports that: “A year of insufficient rain is always followed by the dispatch of an emissary to Mwari with presents of oxen and money”.

2.5. The revelation and manifestation of Nwali

Nwali revealed himself to his subjects in conspicuous manners i.e. in the form of thunder, and was also made more conspicuous by flames of fire which could be visible from a distance. To the Vhavenda, as the fire was not made, it was regarded as a divine fire. It is note worthy that both Bullock and Stayt explain the presence of Nwali in the same idiom: “Nwali was associated with the passing of a shooting star over the breadth of the land.”

His presence is manifested by divine fire on the mountain Rungai and thus his subjects will salute such a fire in respect (Bullock 1928: 122).

Bullock indicates that a visit from Nwali was welcomed with great joy, coupled with respect and adoration.

Stayt adds that “Raluvhimba visited the Mountain from time to time, appearing as a great flame on a platform of rock just above the cave. The appearance of the flame was accompanied by the sound of cranking irons, and manifestation of received by the people with shouts of joy and trilling” (Stayt 1931: 231).

Both Bullock and Stayt document that fire and thunder heralded the coming of Nwali. Such demonstrations of his presence amazed his people and had great impact on them. It may be presumed that worshippers of Nwali concluded that he was omnipotent. It is noted with great interest that Junod was highly impressed to have learnt that the Vhavenda had greater adoration for their god than that prevalent amongst the Tsonga or the Sotho. Mudau (1940: 11) confirms the belief that that “Nwali always revealed himself in fire that lightened up on top of the mountain Tshavhadinda in Venda”.

To sum up the attributes of Nwali, during the time of the invasion of the Ndebeles into Mashonaland, the Ndebeles forsook their worship of the amadlozi worship. They surrendered to the powers of Nwali for survival in times of drought and disaster. Bhebe confirmed that “when faced by drought, he first prayed for rain the Zulu way, it was only after these had failed that he could call upon the Mwari priests to perform mitoro (rain-ceremonies) (Schoffeleers 1978: 289).

It is indeed a clear indication that Mzilikazi, the chief of the Ndebeles, resorted to the worship of Nwali whom he believed to have supreme authority above the

other gods. The belief in Nwali permeated deeply through the Ndebele religious activities with the result that their own ancestors were obscured.

2.6. Sites associated with Nwali's visits

The places which were associated with the visits of Nwali are of significance. He preferred to manifest himself in specially selected places, in the caves, groves or mountains in Venda, although it has been noted that some of Nwali's shrines were under the control of the Vhavenda in Zimbabwe. I will not yet elaborate on the activities associated with Nwali in that region, as that will be dealt with at a later stage, but I will confine myself to the Nwali sites in Venda.

The main Nwali cult in Venda was centred at Makonde, and this is believed to have been established by the Dzivha and Mbedzi clans, who brought with them expertise on priesthood and of serving Nwali, when they migrated from Matopo in Zimbabwe. This has been confirmed by Rennie and Gray, who stated that: "the first migrants from the Shona area into Vendaland were people of the Dzivatotem". Of these groups the Mbedzi people are the most relevant to our argument.

Rennie (1974: 13) writes that "this group was responsible for the Venda cult Raluvhimba, the local equivalent of the Nwali cult". During the Ravhura dynasty, Magwabeni was the person closely associated with Nwali. His main task was to transmit messages from the latter to his Chief Ravhura, the Singo chief who had fled from his original tribe at Dzata. Ravhura built himself a stronghold at Mount Makonde which is situated in Eastern Venda along the belt which is associated with the Vhambedzi.

Nwali or Raluvhimba as he was commonly called, never visited the cave at Luvhimbi as was alleged by Stayt: "There is a cave at Luvhimbi where

Raluvhimba went to manifest himself” (1931: 231). This incorrect information concerning the visit of Nwali to Luvhimbi was picked up by many researchers as a living fact. Bhebe also accepted Luvhimbi as Nwali’s shrine.

“Luvhimbi is located in Vendale, it has now ceased to exist” (Schoffeleers 1978:311). I take it that the misunderstanding might have emanated from the name “Luvhimbi” and “Raluvhimba”. Further more, Ha-Luvhimbi lies some seven kilometres to the East of Makonde.

Although chief Ravhura took Makonde, Raluvhimba did visit the area. Ralushai made mention of the fact that “Nwali visited Makonde because he loved Ravhura who ought to have become head of Dzata, had he not fled from the place during the dispersal of Singo and their associates” (Ralushai: 1980: 1).

I do not think Ralushai has an axe to grind in this assumption because it has been established beyond doubt that Nwali visited Makonde long before Ravhura took over the area. There were frequent visits during the reign of chief Muthivhi of the Tavhatsindi. Strayt confirms this argument when he indicates that “The Mountain Tsha-vha-dinda, the place of messengers, where the cave is situated, was a stronghold of the Vhatavhatsindi people, under Chief Muthivhi. This district was later taken from Muthivhi by Ravhura” (1931: 231).

This in itself is clear proof that Nwali made frequent visits to chief Muthivhi long before Ravhura captured Mount Makonde from the Vhatavhatsindi.

The other site which was visited by Nwali was Ha-Tshivhula. This was along the Tshivhula Mountains, near the salt pans where the Zoutpansberg range starts. The area was under chief Tshivhula, who had recently moved to Mufongodi near Musekwa.

The Nwali site at Donwa was not in a cave, but it was just a place where he used to visit. The area is at Matsa in the Dzanani district. Any message from Nwali was taken to the senior chief Mphephu. The latter was not allowed to enter Donwa as he belonged to the Singo clan, and as such he was prohibited from doing so as it was a Ngona area.

Ralushai (1980: 01) confirmed this when he indicated that “This is not surprising, for Donwa being historically a Ngona area, it was like other known Ngona sites where senior Singo chiefs could not dare enter”.

Madindini a Nwali, is a natural tunnel which leads to the Mutale River, and it is a short distance from the Fundudzi Lake. The origin of this mysterious tunnel is unknown to residents of Tshitangani. This place is also regarded as the Nwali site. I had the golden opportunity of visiting the natural tunnel (*Madindini a Nwali*) and also had the privilege of sitting on the rock on which Nwali revealed himself at Mount Makonde.

This experience occurred on the day I was in the company of Dr. Ralushai and others when he visited these areas for the second time in 1979. The visit is confirmed as follows: “As I was not satisfied with the scanty information given in 1978, in 1979, I returned to Madindini-a-Nwali accompanied by the local junior chief (Gota) Netshitangani, Rev.Ndou, Mr S. Ntsandeni and Rev. S Mohlomi and other local people (Ralushai 1980:1).

As already indicated, the presence of Nwali at these sites was made visible by a flame; except at the *Madindini a Nwali* (Tunnel of Nwali), where no flame was noticed, and there were no interpreters who were associated with his visit. Local residents ascribed the existence of this mysterious tunnel to the work of Nwali as it was beyond their comprehension.

As Nwali was the supreme God of all the Vhavenda, we may find that there were other places claimed by the local people to be sites associated with Nwali. I have no authority to deny it, but those sites were not of great significance.

As has already been indicated, the Nwali site at Mount Makonde was regarded as the important one; the other sites mentioned were regarded as stations for Nwali on his way to Makonde. During Nwali's visits from Zimbabwe to Makonde, he regarded Makonde as his ultimate destination.

The Vhavenda used to say *Makhulu o swika, o da u vhona vhaduhulu* (Grand parent has arrived; he has come to see his grandchildren). To conclude this chapter, I will endeavour to indicate the factors which affirm and negate the Christian religion. The impact of the Vhavenda perception of the Biblical God will also be taken into consideration.

2.7 The impact of the Christian perception of God on the Vhavenda traditional belief.

Both Venda traditional faith and Christianity accept a Supreme Being, the creator God. Dr. Schweltnus in his translation of the Bible referred to God in the singular, as do the Vhavenda. The Lutheran hymnal, too, gives a clear indication of the oneness of God... "*I' we we wa hwala* "you who have carried". This point is further reinforced by Stayt when he indicates that *Ndi nea nothe na iwe thi mudi* (I give all of you and even the unknown ones).

When officiating at rituals, the priestess in Vhavenda culture, who is in most cases a makhadzi (aunt) , gives a clear indication that she is communicating with the ancestors (in the plural) and lastly with the unknown one (in the singular), who is God, the Supreme Being. In Venda tradition, God is referred to in the

singular. Most of the Independent churches however refer to Him, and address him in the plural e.g. “Vho Mudzimu”, “Vho Yehova”.

Converting campaigns and preaching were unknown to the Vhavenda. Their religious practices were interwoven with their customs and traditional beliefs. It was an obligation for all the indigenous people to know their religion without coming together and listening to a clergyman to proclaim their faith. Traditional religion was part of their culture. The Vhavenda were therefore somewhat negatively inclined to the new Christian religion, because their religion, like that of the Jews, had been handed down from generation to generation.

The arrival of the missionaries in Venda brought the dawn of a new name for God, “Mudzimu”. According to the Vhavenda, “Mudzimu is an ancestor and not the Supreme Being. The name of God Nwali was long established and accepted as their only God”. Ranger (1974: 6) confirms this when he indicates that “Historical linguists have suggested that the word or its variants is a Proto-Bantu usage and dates back some 4000 years”.

The new converts who entered this Christian religion shifted their belief from Nwali’s validity, and reduced him to a status lower to that of Mudzimu.

Whereas both Christians and the traditionalists should have regarded him as their Supreme Being, as it was done in Zimbabwe. Beach reports:

“In the first place, in the twentieth Century there has been an adoption by the Christian Missionaries of the word “Mwari” to mean Christian God. This seems to have led to a spread of the word into areas where it had not been in frequent use before”. (Beach 1980: 248)

If the first missionaries who had worked amongst Vhavenda had adopted an approach similar to that of their counterparts on the other side of the Limpopo River, the name Nwali for God would have facilitated the spread of the Christian religion without difficulties.

The Reformed missionary Van Rooy (1970: 156) states:

“This term would certainly have been much more suitable than Mudzimu if it had been introduced in the first place... fortunately they made a wise decision at an early stage to change to Mwari, and among the Shona Christians today it is generally accepted that Nwali is not Mudzimu, and that a Christian should have nothing whatsoever to do with Mudzimu”.

This misunderstanding of the name Nwali for God by the pioneers of Christianity in Venda, did not promote the acceptance of the Christian Gospel. To the traditionalist Vhavenda, Nwali gave a religious justification for their survival. Nwali, according to the Vhavenda's belief, was not a tribal god, or god who belonged to a certain clan in a specific area, Nwali was accepted by all the indigenous people.

According to Bullock (1927: 526), “It will be seen that we have left Mwari the god and his sons, and are now concerned with tribal spirit, who linked with and related to the tribe through its chief.”

Mudzimu was not regarded as a Biblical God but an ancestor, according to the school of thought every married men and women leaves Mudzimu which lives on after death and must be sacrificed to and appeased”.

Van Rooy (1970: 156) compares God and Nwali as follows:

GOD	NWALI
1. A sentiment being, Supreme over all beings	1. Supreme God of Venda supplementary components First ancestor of Venda
2. Unique	2. Other tribes may have others
	3. Deistic

According to Van Rooy's comparison, Nwali is the God of the Vhavenda only. This is interesting because Guthrie indicated that the name Mwari is a Proto-Bantu word which has been in usage over 4000 years. Surely this name was not used by the Vhavenda only, but also by other tribes south of the Sahara. Nwali, according to all relevant reports, was not merely the first ancestor of the Vhavenda as each family had its family ancestor. Nwali is a unique Supreme Being.

2.8. Conclusion

It is interesting to note that both the Western missionaries and the African people attribute the same nature to the Supreme Being, who, in the case of the Vhavenda, is known as Nwali. It may be concluded, therefore; that there is a similar idea of the existence of a super power across the spectrum of both cultures but approached from different angles. Nwali represents the final and highest power. Although the introduction of the Christian God received a negative response from the Vhavenda as a result of conflicting names and meanings attached to those names, there is at least today a common understanding of those names.

CHAPTER 3: DEATH AND THE WORLD OF THE LIVING DEAD (ANCESTORS)

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter the researcher has an opportunity to analyse the traditional understanding of death and the world of the living dead (ancestors). He endeavours to discuss in a detailed fashion the Vhavenda's idea of death in the opening pages of this chapter. The researcher will subsequently discuss some ideas and cultural practices concerning the burial of infants, unmarried males, and females. The burial and post burial rituals of Mahosi will be discussed in detail. This will include the practice of dehydration and cremation.

This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the significance of appropriate funeral rites as well as the factors that affirm Christian religion and their impact on the Vhavenda's notion of Christian funerals.

3.2. The Vhavenda's idea of death

According to Mbiti (1969: 145):

“Birth is the first rhythm of a new generation, and the rites of birth are performed in order to make the child a corporate and social being. Initiation rites continue that process, and make him a mature, responsible and active member of society. Marriage makes him a creative and reproductive being, linking him with both the departed and the generations to come. Finally comes death, that inevitable and, in many societies, most disrupting phenomenon of all. Death

stands between the world of human beings and the world of the spirits, between the visible and the invisible.”

There are many, and often complicated, ceremonies connected with death, burials, funerals, inheritance, the living-dead, the world of the departed, the visits of the living-dead to their human families, reincarnation and survival of the soul. Death is something that concerns everybody, partly because sooner or later everyone personally faces it and partly because it brings loss and sorrows to every family and community.

Mbiti continues (1969: 145): It is no wonder, therefore, that rituals connected with death are usually elaborate. It would be futile to imagine that we could deal adequately with the subject of death here, but there are interesting studies to which the readers may be referred.

The Vhavenda like other African tribes, explain death in terms of the life of the individual for he/she is part of the community. Death involves a complete destruction of the physical body. In short, it is accepted that death is something sorrowful, because the individual who has been living in unity with the group is broken. The organism which was a centre of pride and power is destroyed.

This argument is in line with the Biblical statement that says “We shall all die, we shall be like water that is spilt on the ground and lost” (2 Samuel 14: 14).

The Vhavenda are in agreement with this verse – *madi a tevhuwa o tevhuwa ha kumbelwi* (When the water is spilt you cannot gather it again). The Vhavenda do accept that the physical life of the body will not come back in the process of the resurrection, but nevertheless they do not believe in the complete extinction of the spirit of man, but in the continuity of life after death.

It is also accepted that the Old Testament is silent about the possibility of resurrection. The Israelites believed in serving God in the present: the concept of resurrection was a remote factor. Burden (1991: 24) says that:

“The people of the Old Testament were concentrating on serving God in the present life, leaving little time for the speculation about the next. Sometimes they used the idea of resurrection to express the national hope of the re-birth or re-creation of the nation like for example, Ezekiel Chapter 37.”

To the Vhavenda, like the Israelites, the concept of resurrection was obscure. The Vhavenda accepted death as a necessary end, but in some cases diviners were approached to reveal the cause of a person’s death.

The burial rituals play a significant role in Venda culture as they point to the new world of the living-dead. Burial services act as a springboard to the life hereafter. Although the manner in which these burial services are performed may differ from area to area and among different clans, the underlying purpose and belief is more or less the same.

The burial rites make it quite clear that the bereaved believe strongly and convincingly that the dead is only making his way or taking a journey to his final destiny, the new world only known to the deceased.

The Vhavenda commonly view life hereafter as a repetition or continuation of life on earth. The material needs experienced in this world will still be present in the life to come. When a person is seriously ill, his next of kin or relatives are informed and summoned to come and see him to bid him farewell.

Relatives expect him to say something which could be to their benefit, because according to the Vhavenda custom, a message received from a dying person is regarded as of great significance. Whatever instruction is given by such a person should be implemented or else misfortune may follow. It is commonly said, *Ipfi la mufu a li pfukwi*, (a message or word of the deceased should never be ignored), lest misfortunes befall whoever has not carried out such instructions.

Mbiti (1971: 132) Says:

“Whatever technical divisions are used, it is clear that African people have considered here to see man in two parts, the physical part which at death is put into the grave or otherwise disposed of, and the non-physical part which survives and bears the personality traits of the individual in the hereafter. Death may separate these two, and destroy the first part but not the second”.

According to Mbiti, it is firmly believed by most Africans that man does not die, it is the physical body that dies, but the spirit or soul escapes to some unknown place. The Vhavenda believe that the soul leaves the body immediately after death, but still maintain that the soul or spirit lingers around before the corpse is buried. It is therefore not surprising that in the presence of the corpse people speak in a low tone to avoid making a noise. The faces of the bereaved express grief as this is a solemn occasion.

The local headman (Gota) is usually contacted before the death is officially announced. This is a sign of respect to the traditional leader. The neighbours and the closest relatives will gather at the home where death has occurred. The Vhavenda uphold a dualist idea of the person. It is their earnest belief that the dead man cannot be destroyed, When he dies, it is the soul which disappears.

The body is not regarded as a person anymore. That is the reason why the corpse is referred to as “tshitumbu” and that of an animal is called “mutumbu” (carcass). The word “tshitumbu” is derived from “tshitumba” or thumba which is a temporal or miniature house.

The soul which was previously in this “thumba” is now “tshitumbu”. The Vhavenda says *a hu tshena muthu* (there is no person anymore). He is dead, although in physical structure the body is still lying there. The real person is gone, that means he is dead.

The Vhavenda, like any other nation, do weep and mourn for their dead, but this is toned down, lest they draw the attention of the children to what has happened. In most cases children are removed from the home of the deceased and the sorrowful atmosphere. Those who are old and in the process of mourning might be comforted by the elders who may say “Do not cry over him, for you cannot bring him back.”

In Vhavenda culture, weeping is discouraged because they believe that the deceased has joined those who preceded him and that he is nearer to God than the living. My informant Mukumela Mabonyane of Ha-Rammbuda Dzimauli, aged about 100, indicated that the Vhavenda have a belief that if you weep incessantly for the dead you may hinder him/her from travelling well because to them he is undertaking a journey. So weeping over him may disrupt his journey. In Venda circles wailing and crying bitterly is always viewed very seriously with great resentment, and a person who acts in such a manner is to be stopped immediately.

The Vhavenda do not mourn as though they had no hope. Their hope is founded in the conviction that the deceased is starting a new life. The wailing and the lamentations with bitter tears as reported by Holden, cannot be attributed to the

Vhavenda. The same is true of other African tribes. In this regard Soga (1931: 318), states “Death to the Xhosa does not indeed mean extinction. The soul lives on continuity of the family is preserved, the spirit of the departed has direct communication with the living, the living ministers to the wants of those who have gone before.”

It is indeed true that most Africans do believe that the dead are not totally extinct but are living in a world beyond our reach.

According to the Vhavenda tradition death is an awful event, although they are convinced that the dead will be in the company of those who died before them. Before burial the corpse is treated with respect and regarded as somewhat sacred. This differs from Xhosa tradition, as described by Zide:

“A corpse was one of the most fearful objects. This was made evident by the fact that it was not kept for a long time before burial. Sometimes a hole was made in a wall through which the corpse was carried for burial. In some places men were called to stab the corpse, these practices are still performed in some areas” (Zide 1984: 63)

The assertion that the Xhosas have a high respect for the corpse is refuted by their stabbing of the corpse. To the Vhavenda such action is regarded as taboo and implies no respect for the deceased.

To elaborate on the Vhavenda concept of life hereafter, I will treat the burial rites of both male and female, Mahosi (Chiefs) inclusive. Although the burial of Mahosi is restricted to the inner circle of the royal family, I will endeavour to discuss such burials as an indication of how life hereafter is viewed.

When a female dies, her corpse is left entirely under the care of the older females. They make all preparations which are accorded to the corpse. Stayt (1931: 162) indicates that “the body is arranged by the old women, who remove all ornaments, arrange it in the correct position, and wrap it in a blanket. A woman’s corpse is never wrapped in a skin.”

According to Tshinakaho Madadzhe of Dzimauli, ornaments such as buttons or bracelets are removed because the dead should not see sparkling things.

The implication here is that if not removed, shiny objects will remind the deceased of the wealth of the world, whereas such a person has to think of the new world where he or she is going. Referring to the Tsonga, Junod (1921:10) describes a similar custom:

“No iron must be put in the grave. Iron, black iron is ndjoba, it is dangerous to the deceased for it does not decay as quickly as the corpse, the rags and the mats... it must not be buried. Copper and brass still less, because they don’t even change colour. This would shine for death and point out other people of the kraal saying kill (viquet). Copper and bracelets as well as white snuff boxes are called Nhlale, not ndjoba”.

According to Junod’s exposition the customs of the Tsonga and the Vhavenda are somewhat similar. It is believed that sparkling ornaments may bring death to the family. In support of what Junod has pointed out about these ornaments, I may add that, I experienced this practice personally when my aunt removed buttons from one of our deceased relatives.

This practice is still commonly observed, although in a secret manner. A woman's corpse is not wrapped up in a skin but in a blanket. A skin indicates status of some kind; the same applies to a poor man, who is also wrapped in a blanket.

Cattle, in the Venda tradition, belonged to the head of the family who is a man, therefore he would be wrapped in a skin. The carrying of the body of a woman to the grave is the same procedure as that of a man. This will be treated at a later stage.

When the deceased is a male, all the burial rites and preparations of the corpse before it is taken to the grave are performed by men. Women do not take part in the preparations of the corpse of a male. They are not even allowed to touch the body a man. According to the old tradition a man is arranged in a squatting position. Stayt indicates that:

“When the deceased is a man, the body is arranged in a sitting position with the right side of the head resting on the clasped hands and if the joint becomes too stiff to manipulate they are first severed with an axe. The body is secured in this position with string of the bopha tree (tie death). A rich man is wrapped in the skin of one of his black oxen and a poor man is rolled in a blanket” (1981: 162).

Although Stayt does not indicate why a man is placed in a squatting position unlike a female who is prepared in a lying position, divergent reasons have been advanced. Some indicate that the deceased were buried in caves which were not deep so a person in a sitting position would fit easily into such small graves or caves. According to my informant, the late Phinias Munengwane, “the corpses of males are arranged in a squatting position so that they would be ready to attack whenever there is an outbreak of war”.

It is therefore understandable that females were not arranged in a squatting position for they take no part in war. Aschwaden (1987: 230) gives a different view of the squatting position of the body:

“The body is put into an embryo position , legs bent and close to the body and arms crossed at the chest. The posture has primarily a simple explanation, since in the past the dead were almost always buried in the caves; the bodies had to be made as small as possible to fit in. He further elaborates that this embryonic posture has symbolic significance also, the dead man was born in this attitude, and is to leave the world in the same posture.”

To me the similarity between the embryonic posture in the mother’s womb and the squatting position of the deceased makes sense.

As indicated before, the Vhavenda and the Karanga (Mashona) culture are somewhat similar. The preparation of the body of the deceased is therefore analogous. The squatting position of the corpse appears to have been a common practice of the Africans. Soga (1931: 319), substantiates this observation when he indicates that

“As soon as the spirit has left the body, the watchers bend the arms at the elbows with the hands level with the shoulders. The legs of the deceased are also bent at the knees and pressed upward the trunk. In this position they are held until rigor mortis sets in, but the eyes are not closed nor is the mouth shut, the body is now ready for burial”.

In Venda tradition, both the eyes and the mouth are closed, irrespective of sex. The corpse should be in a sleeping position and could only awake when he has

reached his destination. The difference in obituary rites between males and females are only noticeable during the preparation of the corpse and the burial services at the grave, but the other procedures are the same.

The house in which the corpse is kept before burial is regarded as sacred among the Vhavenda, even to the extent of extinguishing fire. To them fire means light and joy. According to Kriel (1989:17) “fire is so closely connected with life, the commencement of a new spate or quality of life is often introduced by extinguishing old fires and lighting new ones. After the birth of a child a fire should likewise be kept flaming brightly.” But when someone dies, they say “tshikuni tsho dzima” (the splinter has been extinguished). They even go to the extent of not cooking as there is no fire. Provision is made for the children to eat “muladza” (cold food which was cooked the previous day). The whole day is regarded as a day of mourning; as a result, there is no cooking in the household of the deceased.

Among both the Venda and the Shona fire is regarded as taboo in the vicinity of the deceased. “Fire in the dead man’s hut is extinguished by the medicine man if the deceased has been an important member of the tribe. The notion behind this ceremony seems to be that the old fire has become impure through contact with death” (Petterson, 1953: 114). By implication the fire here appears to be defiled. The medicine man is called especially to extinguish it, for it will be difficult to include the old fire in the purifying ceremonies which may follow days after the burial rites.

Stayt substantiates this, indicating that: “at the time of the burial, if the fire in the dead man’s hut and any wood that was collected before the death are thrown away as the fire must die out completely with its owner (1931: 164).

According to Stayt, it is an undisputed fact that in the Venda culture there is no cooking as the fire would have been extinguished, for it has gone away with the owner.

Junod (1927: 135), who has a profound knowledge of the Tsonga, points to an analogical practice:

“Without delay the fire which was burning in the funeral hut, is removed and carried into the square. It must be carefully kept alight. This is a taboo. Should there be rain it must be protected. All inhabitants must use this fire during the next five days. It will be put out by the doctor with sand on the day of dispersion of the mourners.”

In the life hereafter there is no provision made for fire, as it appears to have no value for the deceased in the future world.

It is worth noting that in Venda circles there is also a belief that if one is an amputee during one’s life, one would be maimed in the future world. Therefore the idea of amputation is regarded with great constraint and is regarded as very dreadful. It is not surprising that many people are prepared to die with their gangling limb rather than lose it. It is a general belief that in the life hereafter people will be exactly as they are in life and their body marks will still be visible.

After the body has been prepared for burial, a word from the gravediggers who are regarded as “dziphele” (hyenas) is awaited. According to Venda belief the

hyena is not a likeable animal. It is in most cases associated with bad omen, for it roams at night whilst people are sleeping, hence the gravediggers are regarded as “dziphela”. According to the Venda tradition the graves are dug at night, except perhaps in some cases where diggers come across a big stone which may delay them from completing the grave in time. The site of the grave is usually pointed out by the medicine man. In most cases the graves are not far from the homestead, some are just next to the fence (luhura).

Royal groups or clans have their own graves which are regarded as sacred or holy bush (tshiendeulu), no commoners, or strangers are welcomed in this sacred forest. In Venda culture a stranger should never be buried in one’s grave yard or next to one’s homestead. It is frightening when a stranger is buried in one’s graveyard or next to one’s homestead. The matter becomes worse when a stranger is found dead next to one’s home, he cannot be buried in one’s grave yard and he is buried alone, away from the homestead.

The Vhavenda are afraid of the strange dead man’s spirit for it may cause trouble in the family, and they will be unable to appease it as his lineage is unknown to them.

Nkhumeleni Ralushai of Ha-Ralushai under chief Mphaphuli indicated that “there is a grave of an unknown Karanga who died en route to Kimberley. The stranger was among the migrant labourers from the then Rhodesia to Kimberley. The grave even today is referred to as (Tshidza tsha Mukalanga Ha-Ralushai) the grave of the Karanga at Ha-Ralushai. The Shangaans are so afraid of the corpse of the stranger, that they even run away, they are afraid to *dofo ne emt* (defilement)”. Junod indicated that “should there be strangers in the village when the death takes place; they will run away quickly to avoid defilement” (Junod 1927: 135).

The Vhavenda never demarcated a common site for graves. This practice was introduced by the Bantu Authorities Legislation of 1951, when communities were compelled to bury their dead at the place set aside for a graveyard. In the case of mission stations, graves were arranged in lines and only the converts who were in good standing in the Christian rights were buried in the graveyard.

According to Venda tradition, their dead were always buried some hours before dawn or immediately after dusk. It is not easy to specify time, as watches were unknown to the people of old. One informant, the late Vho-Mulatedzi Rambuda gave as a reason for this type of ceremony that children were not to see what was taking place. But this could not be a valid reason as children still noticed what happened. My other informant, Vho-Tholi Mathevula, gave a better reason, "It is our custom to bury our dead when it is cool for we do not want them to be exposed to the sun for they see us."

When the corpse leaves the hut for the burial, it is usually carried out through a new outlet which has been carved in the hut to avoid making use of the common door. Even when leaving the homestead, the gate which was commonly used is ignored and a new gate is used; which in the Venda terminology is called "Tshivhana" which is a temporary narrow gate made at the rear of the homestead. In Venda culture it has been a standing belief that the deceased cannot use the same outlet as the one used by the living. Immediately after the corpse has left for the graveyard, the new outlet will be sealed up without any waste of time to conceal what happened. Aschwaden verifies this: "According to the Karanga, the body is carried through the new opening and not through the door in the wall specially made for the purpose; the ordinary door is for the living" (Aschwaden, 1987: 254).

The Shangaans, who are neighbours of the Vhavenda, seem to practise a similar tradition. According to Junod “the corpse must not be carried out of the hut by the door, but by that artificial opening so he leaves the hut foremost”.

People sometimes stop up their noses with the leaves of a bush called “ngupfana”, which has a strong scent, in order not to perceive the smell of death (Moya wa mufu)” (Junod 1927). The only difference here is that the Vhavenda never in any way show that the deceased has any smell. For to them he has joined the living dead, and as such he must be accorded all respect. The corpse is carried on a pallet (hingo) made of wood as coffins were unknown to the people of old. During this solemn procession, conversation is very limited.

Before reaching the graveyard, the deceased is given a resting place along the way irrespective of how near the graveside is. I witnessed this incident personally when my grandfather was buried. My uncle called the pallbearers to order, “Give the deceased a rest, you are not carrying a carcass”. To the Vhavenda, the deceased is still living and should be given a rest.

When asked why the deceased is given rest on the way to the graveyard they simply say, “We are not chasing him away, we still love him, and he must get rest”. According to Van Warmelo (1932: 134), vhuango or hingo is not ceremoniously borne by right to the place of burial. At intervals the procession must halt, and leaves are plucked for the burden to rest on.

“*Zwiawelo* (resting places) remain sacred for many years, and people throw down some leaves there for luck wherever they pass by. There is such a “Tshiwelo” on the road from Sibasa camp to Makonde which has been there for at least sixty years, and fresh leaves may still be found lying on it often enough, even today”.

I agree with the observation made by Warmelo. The Masingo of Mphaphuli had several resting places, for most of the senior members of Miluwani are still buried under Headman (Gota) Mbara.

They usually leave Mbilwi which is the Khosi (Chief) headquarters (Musanda) to Miluwani, and they have several resting places, but Tshamalema is commonly known as their resting place.

The Vhavenda have resting places attached to their different clans and areas, for instance, Tshatsimba at Tshakhuma. This was the resting place for Vhadau Vha Ha-Madzivhandila on the way from Mangwele to the burial place (Tshiendeulu).

The so-called "holy forests" were sites of direct confrontation between missionaries and local rulers. These sacred forests (tshifho, tshiozwi or tshiendeulu) served (and continue to serve) as the burial ground of members of the royal families. In the case of the more powerful Mahosi and Magota, they covered a significant area. Entering these forests and graves was (and remains) strictly prohibited for non-royals and was enforced both supernaturally and by guardians of the royal graves. For an example, the Thathe Vondo holy forests, sacred to the Netshitongani magota of Tshivhase, were believed to be inhabited and protected by a huge supernatural Lion, the reincarnation either of the ancestral ruler, Khosi Nethathe or of the successive magota (Mitteilungen des Huldensfreud 1887:2)

The Mashona of Zimbabwe still practice this custom. The corpse should be rested on the ground on its way to the grave, however short the distance may be, and then all stand in a circle around the body to prevent the dead man's spirit from escaping and returning to the kraal (Bullock, 1927: 265).

As it has already been indicated by Van Warmelo, stones are gathered and leaves are plucked from areas near the resting place and this place is regarded as sacred.

The packing of the stones and leaves resembles miniature grave. In some places regarded as resting places, fresh leaves are often visible, for whoever comes across this “Tshiawelo”, still tends to pluck fresh leaves and drop them on this sacred resting place. Some even go to the extent of plucking their own hair to substitute for leaves.

When the burial team has arrived at the graveyard, the body is lowered into the open grave to let the deceased rest, and this is done in a gentle manner so as not to hurt the hearts of the bereaved. According to Stayt (1931: 162),

“The body is placed beside while the eldest sister prepares a rough earth head-rest at the end. The body is then lowered and placed on its right side with the head oriented towards the North-East, while the eldest sister throws the first handful of earth (soil) on saying, “You must sleep in peace, you must not be angry with us, for we gave all you required and wrapped you in a skin of your oxen”. After this the relatives stand aside while the grave is filled in.”

Stayt is regarded as one of the outstanding researchers on the Vhavenda, for he spent many years visiting different communities in Venda. But I differ with him when he says that the eldest sister of the deceased prepares the headrest in the grave. According to the Venda custom, women are not much involved in the burial. It is unbecoming for a woman to go into the grave as reported by Stayt. I don't know where he obtained his information. The action of the eldest sister as indicated by Stayt would be regarded as entirely taboo.

The head of the deceased in the grave is placed in such a manner that it faces north-east. According to the Vhavenda, it reminds the deceased that he should know where his forefathers originated. It is the belief of the Vhavenda that they emigrated from Central Africa; thus the head of the dead person is to face north-east. According to Bulock (1927: 268), “the body of many should lie in the grave that it faces towards the place where his ancestors came.”

On the position of the head of the deceased we have divergent views: Goody, for instance, indicates that “a man is laid on his right side, facing east. This is done, they say, so that the rising sun tells him to prepare for the hut or the farm. A woman rests on her left side facing west so that the setting sun will warn her when to prepare the meal for her husband’s homecoming (1962: 144).

Although Goody in his argument does not specifically refer to the Vhavenda, it does reveal that the position of the deceased’s head is of great significance regarding the belief of Africans in the life after death.

This is clearly indicated by Goody when he says that the dead man’s position will assist him when it is time for hunting.

When the body is in the grave, the closest relatives are the first to throw soft soil on the deceased. They will be careful not to throw in soil with stones, for they do not want to hurt the dead. It is during this time that short impromptu speeches are addressed to the deceased, who, according to Vhavenda belief, hears them although he cannot reply.

Gelfand (1977:74) relates:

“As they throw each says farewell, I shall meet you, keep my place there. Then the father produces the bag containing the

deceased's belongings that he brought and hands it to the son-in-law who is standing in the grave. He places them next to the head of the deceased and says "here are your things".

This is done in the true belief that the dead will require these material things in the other world. According to Venda culture, the deceased is bidden farewell by saying "Good- bye, do not forget us who are living, for you have been given everything that you require for your journey". The deceased is asked to inform those who preceded him that those who are still in the land of the living are still in good health.

This is a clear indication that the Vhavenda are convinced that the deceased has the power to reserve places of residence for his next of kin, in the next world. Although the living do not know where he is going, they do have confidence that he is going to meet his relatives who died before him. The other reasons for giving him material things in the form of clothes is that he should be able to protect himself against bad climates and that he should not bear a grudge against the living for he may wish them bad luck, if they do not treat him well on his departure to the next world.

Stayt (1931:242) confirms the belief that material equipment should accompany the deceased on the day of his funeral:

"A hoe handle and two broken pots are placed on the grave of a married man who dies before any of his wives. When a wife has died first, he has no need of his equipment as she will be waiting to work for him in the spirit world as she did on earth."

It is believed that the deceased is in the company of those in the spiritual world and is taking away his utensils, for he will need them. A wife who died before her

husband will still be responsible for him, as she when was on earth. To the Vhavenda, marriage is not dissolved by death, but there is continuity in the world beyond.

Junod says, "The mats are spread in the grave as well as jackets and trousers, because there the deceased will come and sit on them when he goes out of his hut to rest in the square" (Junod 1927: 140).

According to Junod, some of the Shangaan clans have first and the second holes in one grave, as it is dug in terraces. This is not applicable to the Venda culture, but the concept of material equipment which must accompany the dead is similar. This is an indication that all these articles serve as a preparation for the life hereafter.

Mbiti (1971: 133), dealing with the Akamba concept of death, indicates that, at death, a person, a living-dead, joins other members of his household who have preceded him in the spirit world. Although Mbiti was not referring to the Vhavenda in particular, the Akambas are one of the nations of Africa, their respective traditions are similar with regard to the next world.

It must be borne in mind that in Africa the family has a much wider circle of members than the word suggests in Europe or North America. In traditional society, the family includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who may have their own children and other immediate relatives.

In many areas there is what anthropologists call extended families, by which it is generally meant that two or more brothers (in patrilocal societies) or sisters (in matrilineal societies) establish families in one compound or close to one another. The joint households together are like one large family. The family also includes

the departed relatives whom we have designated as the living-dead (Mbiti 1969: 104).

According to Vhavenda custom, the men cover the grave with earth, and this is done in a gentle manner, starting with the loose soil without pebbles and stones, for they do not want to hurt the deceased.

Stayt (1931: 162) indicates that “the eldest son then places a large flat stone at the head of the grave and the other stones are laid down by the rest of the party. A branch of the “Mutshetshete” (from u tsheta) “to be quiet”, is placed over the head of the grave to give shade to the dead man. Possibly both stones and thorny branches were originally placed there in order to keep the spirit confined, making it more difficult for it to escape to bring evil to its relatives.”

The placing of a flat stone on the dead by the eldest son is an indication that the son now becomes the head of the family. His deceased father must see him making this last good gesture as this would bring him prosperity in the tasks which lie ahead of him. The stone will further act as a guide to indicate which side of the head faced so that during the post burial ritual ceremonies the stone will be anointed (u roredzwa).

It has been indicated earlier that the dead is believed to be still alive, consequently the branch of the “Mutshetshete” tree (wag-n-bietjie doring o Zyzyvas mucromata wild) is placed on the grave to shelter him. Stayt attaches a different meaning to this branch. According to him it must quiten the deceased (tshete) and also prevent evil spirits from returning home.

The Mutshetshete branch placed on a grave provided shade for the deceased as its leaves did not easily dry up. When the time came for the leaves to dry up, it was a sign that the deceased had completed his journey, for he had joined the

society of the living-dead. In the Venda culture it is referred to as “tshiila tsho fhela” (the mourning period is over).

“Tshiila” means a taboo, or something which is forbidden. This argument is further reinforced by Phophi (1970: 78), when he indicated that “Siphuma musi o ralo u tangulwa thavha yawe o dzula maduvha eneo a tshi Linda tshibvo tsha nwana wawe uri Mutshetshete u range u vhuna”.

(When Siphuma was deprived of his mountain stronghold, he kept watch over the grave of his child until the leaves of the Mutshetshete dried up). This is a better explanation of the significance of the Mutshetshete branch placed on the grave than the one advanced by Stayt.

According to Aschwaden a big stone is placed at the spot where the dead is buried. “Many Karanga plant a “Mukonde” tree at the spot, and this tree is said to be suitable because it cannot be eaten by animals, or used as firewood. The tree is seen as most important as it represents the head, and people go when they want to say a few words to the deceased” (1987: 261).

This custom is practiced by the Karanga as indicated by Aschwaden is similar to that of the Vhavenda. Both tribes place a stone and plant Mukonde, but their interpretation as indicated by Aschwaden differs slightly. The Vhavenda provide shade for their deceased by using both the Mutshetshete and Mukonde trees.

According to Aschwaden the shadows of both the stone and mukonde trees represent the shadow of the deceased whereas in the Vhavenda context the mukonde tree provides shade for the deceased and the stone placed on the head acts as a sign to indicate which side the head of the deceased is facing. The Vhavenda regard everything which has been provided for the deceased

during his burial as defiled and these items could only be used again after the purification ceremony.

The Bopha-Vhafu tree which was used to tie the man and place him in a squatting position and the mukonde tree cannot be used at home as firewood, neither can they be eaten by animals no matter how green the leaves may appear to be.

After the men have finished covering the grave, utensils and articles which were used by the deceased during his lifetime are carefully placed on the grave. The articles such as spears, axes and in the case of women, her “vhukunda” (anklets worn on the legs and arms) are also placed with the other articles.

The articles are now regarded as now sacred and it is taboo to touch such things or bring them to the home of the living (ndi zwigwasha) for they only belong to the deceased.

The “Makhadzi” (Aunt) will pour a calabash full of water on the grave. This is regarded as “shothodzo” (to make cool) and this action enables the deceased to undertake his journey in a cool temperature. The Makhadzi will further on bring a wooden plate heavily laden with seeds of different kinds, and each of the closest relatives will pick some seeds from the plate (ndilo) and scatter them, saying, “These are yours and the remaining ones are mine”. My informant Johannes Nemutamvuni indicated that “the seeds which were given to the deceased would be used by him in the next world and those which remained were regarded as fertile. Some would be used during purification and be regarded as “mafa”, meaning the seeds which are inherited from the dead.

The seeds could still be mixed with others so that they could fertilise the rest, and prevent the crop from wilting (u reremela) and ensure a good harvest.

Krige (1931: 232) confirms this relationship between the fertility of the crops and the seeds:

“When one dies, there is thought to be danger that the fertility of the crops will depart with him or her. Hence, when a gourd of seeds of every kind is placed in the grave together with the fire brand and calabash of water for the journey, some of the seeds are scattered over the body with the words “do not depart with all the corn and seeds”.

Both the seeds which remained after some had been scattered on the grave and were taken home and regarded as fertile as they were left by the deceased, and the calabash of water which was given to the deceased are typical of the African tradition.

Although the water is not placed in the grave, it is assumed that the deceased will drink it on his journey to the next world. The firebrands, which are pieces of burning wood, will assist him in making fire in the next world. Some even go to the extent of giving him beer, but this is not common amongst the Vhavenda.

Regarding spears which are laid on the grave, my aunt aged 77, of Thongwe Village, indicated that “the deceased will make use of them in the next world should there be an outbreak of war”.

Holden (1866: 362) substantiates this, He writes “When finished the men and women stand, and with their hands scrape the loose soil around on to the little mound. A large bowl of water with an infusion of bulbs is then brought, when the men and women wash their hands and the upper part of their feet shouting “Pula-Pula” (rain, rain). An old woman, probably a relative, will then bring his weapons, bows and arrows, war axe and spears, also grain and garden seeds of various

kids, even the bones of an old pack ox, with other things and address the grave saying “these were all your articles”.

According to Holden, some of the Sotho clans use bulbs in the water for washing and purification. The shouting of “pula, pula” (rain, rain) as mentioned by Holden, is a common characteristic of the Basotho, and means “May we be blessed with rain”.

It constitutes good wishes for a prosperous future. The deceased is reminded that he must not withhold rain. His departure should not bring drought to them, but pula, pula. It should be noted that articles placed on the grave reflect the gender of the deceased.

It can be deduced from the impromptu speeches and burial rituals during funeral services that the deceased are not regarded to be dead. Although they cannot reply to the speeches made to them, they are able to hear all that is being said.

Petterson mentions that the Thonga-Ronga tribes have another way of communicating both with the deceased and those who preceded him:

“You my ancestors, who are assembled here today, do you not see this? You have taken him, I am done now. I am done now.. I pray you are yonder as he has gone back to you that we may remain in peace. He did not leave us in anger. Let us help each other to mourn him well, even our parent-in-law from among whom he has taken life” (Petterson 1953: 11)

Most African tribes assume that the deceased is now promoted to the unknown. It is an accepted fact that he has joined his departed relatives. They consequently plead with him not to be angry with those who are staying behind.

It appears that Petterson is unaware of the fact that an African traditionalist does not use the words “I pray you who are yonder”. He can only plead with those who have gone yonder.

The deceased is given a message to take along to his destination. The word “pray” is a Christian term which Petterson uses out of context with reference to the traditional burial.

As has been previously indicated, weeping is strongly condemned in Venda culture. The traditional burial is conducted under strict discipline, there is no wailing. By custom, the Vhavenda do not cry in public for fear of drawing the attention of strangers and that of children from whom death is kept secret.

My informant Luvhengo Ralikhuvhana, informed me that when she was 12 years old, she noticed tears running down the cheeks of her mother, and when she asked her mother what she was crying for her mother denied that she was crying but indicated that snuff had gone into her eyes and as a result tears were flowing from her eyes (Ndo kombodzwa nga fola, ndi zwine mato anga a bva mitodzi). In reality she was crying for her dead brother, but she was trying to conceal that from her children.

It is therefore surprising that Stayt writes about the Vhavenda weeping bitterly, for according to Vhavenda custom weeping is uncommon and uncalled for. He indicates that “when the burial party returns to the kraal great lamentation is raised, the women and children wailing and weeping and the wives sometimes, throwing themselves about in dramatized paroxysms of grief. The men comfort them by saying that the deceased has gone home” (Stayt 1931: 164).

Stayt, by implication endorses the Vhavenda’s belief in the life hereafter, for it is indicated that the deceased has gone home. This expression is commonly used

by elders to console those who are sorrowful, some of whom refrain from eating for a day or two for a day or two.

The condolences are expressed to give those left behind strength and endorse the belief that the deceased has gone home or to his permanent destination. The lamentation by the Vhavenda as reported by Stayt is an unsolved mystery. There is a probability that he might have come into contact with Junod, who wrote extensively about the Batsonga of Portuguese East Africa.

During Stayt's stay in the Zoutpansberg he might have been influenced by the Batsonga who were in daily contact with the Vhavenda, for Junod writes that the Batsonga do weep and cry bitterly:

“The wailing (kudzila nkosi): as soon as he has finished praying, those present commence crying, the wailing begins. The women get on their feet and shout loudly, throw themselves on the ground. The wife of the deceased cries more than anyone else, I remain alone in the lonely plain (libalem). Where have you gone? You have left me” (Junod 1927).

This tendency to cry is probably more characteristic of the Vhatsonga culture, for in the Vhavenda culture crying in such a manner is taboo and a sign of weakness. Should a woman show signs of weeping, she is immediately withdrawn from the burial party. She should rather stay behind than join those who are going to the graveyard.

When everything is over at the graveyard, the burial party will go back to the home of the deceased. On their way conversation may start, although in a low tone. On arrival a purification ceremony is performed. This involves the

consanguineous, the people who were involved in the handling of the corpse and all those who took part during the burial rites, including the gravediggers.

The washing is done as a way of repelling the defilement of death. Death is commonly regarded as a frightening thing and it brings a grotesque expression to the faces of the bereaved, and as a result everybody feels bound to wash his/her hands although he or she did not touch anything during the burial ceremony. To the Vhavenda purification is an accepted burial ritual.

The practice of purification after burial services is explained by Stayt, as follows:

“The burial party go through a social purificatory ritual to cleanse themselves from defilement and dangers of the contact with the corpse. They wash in the river, and on their return a heap of grass is lighted in the *khoro*. After lighting the new fire, the medicine man dips a branch of Bophavhafu (tie death tree) into a mixture that he has brought with him and smears it on the palms and the back of the hands, on the feet, and on the chests of all the relatives. He also gives them a dose of the mixture to drink. All the children of the deceased must go through a special purification ritual (Stayt 1931: 164).

In the olden days the cleansing was done by the people themselves. They went to a stream or river to wash off the bad luck which the Vhavenda believe they have accumulated during the burial activities. To add to that, medicine mixed with water is sprinkled on the relatives, using Bophavhafu, a tree creeper called *Andenia Gumifera*. This creeper is mostly associated with burial rituals and seen as a way of preventing death and the spirit of the deceased from haunting the children.

Children are also sprinkled with bophavhafu, although they do not even know what has happened, from them death is kept secret. The following description is by Aschwaden, who wrote extensively about burial rites of the Karangas:

“After the burial, the cleansing ceremony takes place. Face, hands and feet are washed so that all the dust and soil is left at the graveside. The old Karanga say to take soil home from the place would mean calling death. Some wash at the nearest river, others use a jug of water into which crushed leaves of the Dambachiera tree has been put. The symbolical cleansing is to wash off the death bringing diseases. The Dambachiera tree is to help activate the forces already present in man, and so to guard against uroy” (Aschwaden 1987: 263-264).

The symbolical cleansing as documented by Aschwaden is one way of repelling death and guarding against evil spirits “uroy”. The same applies to the Vhavenda; the main purpose of this washing is not to remove dust, but to wash away the defilement of death. The sprinkling of water mixed with a medicine of some sort, is the other way of using magical powers to drive away death from members of the family so that they should be set free and be clean.

My informant Mhuri Lawrence of Messina Beitbridge, aged 38, mentioned that “when it was discovered that her mother-in-law had died early in the morning, the helping maid of Shangaan origin, who was sharing a room with the deceased had fled at night when she noticed that the old lady had died”. The main purpose of her unceremonious departure was avoiding defilement from death of the old lady. According to her upbringing, had she remained until the dead lady was discovered by members of the family, she would be forced to participate in all

purification ceremonies which would probably not be in accordance with the Shangaan culture.

3.3. Burial of infants

When a child is buried, there is no sign that its spirit is expected to live on, and there is no religious burial service. In some cases it is only the mother who weeps for the infant. The father or any other men may dig the grave but do nothing else. The whole matter is left entirely in the hands of older women. My informant Maria Tshithukhe indicated to me that “we holders of the assegai do not bury the young ones for they are nothing else but water”.

According to the Vhavenda culture, it is only adults who have produced offspring, who can receive full traditional burial.

It is an accepted Vhavenda belief that those who die young cannot become ancestors. They will minister to no one, as they have no children. The Vhavenda do not render offerings to their spirits, as they have none and do not require propitiation.

3.4. Burial of an unmarried male and female

There is usually great concern when the death of an unmarried male or female occurs, because he or she leaves no offspring.

It is indeed a loss to the family because the deceased will not have performed the major duties which ought to be fulfilled by any living individual.

When a person dies before marriage or dies childless, it is regarded as a sorrowful state of affairs and a curse because the chain of family lineage would have been broken.

Their family tree will be regarded as incomplete without his or her children. The parents are further afraid that the deceased may cause trouble at home, so funeral rituals are performed to comfort him or her wherever he or she may be. Stayt describes the funeral rituals performed for an unmarried male as follows. “If he is not pacified he may become a source of endless trouble to the lineage. So he is given an old used hoe to handle, “Gulelwa” with a cotton tied near the hole, to symbolise a wife, the string being her waist band and the hole for female genitals.

A girl, never the deceased’s sister, fixes this symbol at the cross roads in the path in a well cleared open space where the young man’s spirit can clearly see it, with the handle pointing towards him as he approaches his old village, when they have properly fixed a woman of the dead man’s lineage, generally the Makhadzi, pours beer into the hole saying:

“Today we have found you a wife, the wife is here. Do not worry us anymore. If you are annoyed with us come here.” A similar rite is very rarely, performed after the death of a girl dying unmarried having reached the age of puberty. Such a girl is called *lupofu*, the blind one, as she has died without any knowledge of sexual life.

A peg is driven through the hole in the hoe handle that is provided for the comfort of her spirit to symbolise the male organ” (Stayt 1931: 242)

All the ritual ceremonies are performed to allay fears that the deceased will give the family of the living no peace, for in the new world he will be without a wife.

Hence these two rites are performed in order to pacify and comfort the dead who die unmarried. The ceremonial rites reveal that the Vhavenda believe that, the dead are still very much alive, although in a world unknown to the living.

As indicated earlier, different African tribes have comparable traditions. Aschwaden gives a good illustration of a similar ritual among the Karangas of Zimbabwe:

“When a married, childless woman dies, one tries to comfort her before the funeral by attempting to fulfil her dearest wish to have a child. This is a labour of love for the deceased, they say, one of her consanguines inserts a dead animal (a mouse or rat) into the dead woman’s vagina and pulls it out again. This is a symbolic birth. A fruit of the Mutarara tree or a dead animal is put into the vagina of a dead unmarried girl, and she is told: “This is your child” (Schwaden 1987: 243).

It is believed that the deceased witnesses all these activities. According to the way of thinking of both the Vhavenda and the Karanga, it is very significant for the deceased to be comforted with the fulfillment of these natural human desires.

3.5. Burial and post-burial of Mahosi (Chiefs)

The burial of chiefs “*mahos*” further explains the Vhavenda concept of life hereafter. The full particulars of the burial ritual of chiefs are not easily accessible as everything regarding these procedures is kept strictly confidential.

When the chief is seriously ill, this matter is kept secret. It is always said “*musanda hu na biso*” which is a royal expression for indicating that the chief is ill, but a stranger may not understand the meaning of that expression. If there is

no more doubt that death will occur, some of the people who are attending to the ailing chief in his hut will have to leave.

A few of his closest relatives will remain to witness the last moments of his life. As a sign of respect his passing away will be announced as follows: *mativha o xa* (the pools have dried up) or *khosi yo dzama* (the chief has disappeared). This means he has gone away without leaving a trace as it happens with the disappearance of locusts and certain species of caterpillars, *mashonzha* which are very numerous but suddenly seem no more. The death of the chief is described in this way to make it clear that he does not die but disappears and joins those who have preceded him. It is a way of honouring the traditional leader as a victor who has been exalted to the higher position of ancestors.

Krige makes illuminating references about an ailing Zulu chief:

“On all such occasions the king is said to be “uyadunguzela” that is brooding, hibernating, and the people are not to know what the trouble is. If the king dies from his illness, he is still said to be brooding in this way until his burial takes place and his death is made public” (Krige 1950: 171).

The observations made by Krige about a dying Zulu chief are not far removed from the Vhavenda traditions and practices.

Stayt supports these observations:

“When the chief is seriously ill, his condition is kept a close secret. When the people begin to notice that has not appeared for a long time and to ask questions about him, they are told by his court

officials that he has a bad cold and must be in his hut for some time” (Stayt 1931: 206).

According to the Vhavenda culture, it is not customary to disclose the condition of the chief or even to indicate that he has a bad cold as stated by Stayt. Although his absence has been noticed by his subjects, to detract the minds of the people, the Makhadzi (Aunt) and the khotsimunene (young brother) may say the chief has undertaken a journey (Ho nengiwa). The term makhadzi refers to a paternal aunt or any ortho-cousin of the father, one who is makhadzi to him. Khaladzi refers to the sister of a male, the brother of a female, and ortho-cousins in the same way (Van Warmelo 1971:99 and 168). During the Khosi’s lifetime, the makhadzi and the khotsimunene act as his chief advisors. Together with him they form the top executive structure.

3.6. Burial: Practice of dehydration

It has always been a common practice to wrap up the chief’s corpse in the skin of an ox before laying it to rest as wooden coffins were unknown to the Vhavenda chiefs. Only a few examples of chief’s burials will be dealt with. These are drawn from the practices of different clans. The Mphaphuli bury their chiefs temporarily at Mbilwi, which is the royal place.

Dzivhani (35) noted that amongst the Vhavenda groups, “The corpse of a chief is not buried in the ground and covered with earth. For him they slaughter a black bull and skin it, and sew the corpse in the hide in the evening. A small hut is built and plastered with mud inside and outside, and even inside the roof. A platform is erected inside. They then summon those who used to live in close contact with the chief, who waited on him and ate with him, and these people are killed by strangling with a girdle. They are tied hand and foot with the creeper bopa-vha-fu and placed upon the platform. Their bodies are called the mat of the chief.

Then the corpse of the chief sewn up in the hide is bent up and placed upon the corpses of the retainers, and others are placed over it. Under the platform they make hole into which the moisture from the rotting corpses runs. A retainer who wants to save his life when he sees that the chief is about to die and there is no hope, will immediately go on a visit very far away in another country, for there is no other means to escape. A retainer who they fear will show fright, is enticed into the *thondo* and strangled there. Another they might send on a distant errand with others who are to strangle him on the road, and nobody will ever hear where he went, for the stranglers will return and say “We became separated on the road and thought he had returned home.”

The corpse does not touch the ground but is placed on a raised platform. They will later wrap it up in a skin to be taken to Miluwani, the site of the final burial graves. This is sacred place and only dry bones are allowed.

The chief is buried with of his predecessors as documented by Van Warmelo (1940: 135):

“Those of Mphaphuli bury their chief in the bush near the village. They dig a hole like a pit and plant misimbiri poles all rounds. They make a platform inside and place the corpse upon it. A kind of hut is constructed at the poles so that the hole is covered in, and it is smeared on the outside. This small house is called Tshiruxwi and it is not known to strangers. The corpse remains there until only the bones are left. Then the sacred bull is slaughtered and they take its skin and wrap the bones up in it and take them to the sacred grave for final burial” (Warmelo 1940: 135)

It will also be of great interest to know the burial rituals of the Ramaru royal family. The Ramaru clan belongs to the royal family of the Ramabulana. The

Ramaru traditional leader had his residence at Shehe (Elim). According to the custom of the Vha-Haramaru, when their chief is certified dead, his hut (*pfamo*) is well cleaned and smeared with dung (*u shula*). The corpse is laid on a clean new mat (*thovho*) and it is left to decompose in this sealed hut. When the worms or bacteria have thoroughly worked on the corpse, the closest sister (*Makhadzi*) opens the door. The worms will be noticed leaving the corpse, and disappearing *u dzama*.

Hence the expression *khosi yo dzama*, meaning the chief has disappeared. When the skeleton is dry, the bones are wrapped in the skin of a black ox and taken to the sacred grave “Tshiendeulu”.

In this case the skeleton is taken to Sunguzwi as the chief was a member of the royal family of Ramabulana. At Sunguzwi the deceased joins the society of the living dead (*o iswa vhanweni*). It is believed he has joined his relatives.

The most significant part of the corpse is not the flesh but the bone which must be well looked after. In these bones there is life.

Hence they are wrapped carefully in the skin for transmission to the final destination of burial where the deceased is going to join those who have preceded him.

3.7. Post-burial: Practice of cremation

The royal family of Tshiavha buries the dead headman (*Gota*) in a unique manner quite different from the other chiefs. After an interval of three years or more, the remains of their deceased are taken to Fundudzi Lake. All the ceremonial rituals are performed next to this lake. A miniature hut is made with grass and the bones are placed in that hut and incinerated. When everything is

over, the ashes are cast into Lake Fundudzi. The women start ululating (u lidza mifhululu) and the men yell or play music from phalaphala.

The Tshikona dance forms part of the celebration as this is a moment of joy, because the deceased has joined his folks who are believed to be living in Lake Funduzi. Hence the lake is regarded as sacred.

The burial rituals performed by the royal family of Tshivha are not dissimilar to those practised by the royal family of Lwamondo. They both believe in incineration of the remains of their dead, and the ashes are thrown into the river.

In this manner their deceased has joined the other members of the family who have preceded him.

Van Warmelo confirms this analogy of burials of the Tshivha and Lwamondo royal families when he indicates that “when a chief of Lwamondo is dead, the corpse is laid out on a raised platform of sticks, it is taken out after a period of three years, and the remains are incinerated, and the ashes thrown into the river (1940: 135).

3.8. The significance of appropriate funeral rites

In African tradition the place of burial is of great significance. It is a firm belief that the dead should be buried next to his relatives, for it is assumed that in the life hereafter he should be in the company of his own people.

The well conducted research on the burial of chiefs and kings of the Ciskei by Zide reveals the following:

“A recent example of the burying of chiefs on hill-tops was that of the re-burial of the remains of chief Magoma at Ntaba Kandoda near Bebe Nek. The researcher interviewed chief Lent Magoma about the re-burial of the remains of his great-great grandfather at Ntaba Kandoda. He mentioned that in Xhosa tradition, chiefs were expected to be buried on hill-tops, these being symbolic of their high authority and status over their subjects. He also made mention of the fact that Chief Magoma, his great-great grandfather, was prior to his death, detained and sent to Robben Island by the British Government and thus when he died, could not be accorded the appropriate funeral rites deserved by chiefs. He (chief Magoma) therefore felt it necessary that the remains of his great-great grandfather was to be arranged for him. It should be noted that the burial of the remains of Chief Magoma at Ntaba Kandoda gave new weight to the Xhosa belief in burying their chiefs with other heroic people who were buried there ” (Zide,1984: 77).

According to African tradition and belief, the dead are not dead in the real sense of the word, but they have formed a community of the living-dead. The dead of the same clan should be buried in the same area.

From the above it is clear that African Chiefs who are highly esteemed are buried with respect and with secrecy so that commoners should not have access to the chiefs' burial rites. In African thought the burial of the dead is regarded as very significant and it brings great blessings, provided the dead are laid to rest with great care. The Vhavenda have a strong belief that without a grave the dead

have no home for the bones. Hence a grave according to the Vhavenda tradition is not dug but built. *U fhata mudi* (to build a home for the deceased body). Vhavenda graves are well looked after as they regarded as the home for the deceased.

Communication between the living and the dead is conducted at the graves, hence they are kept clean. While the corpse remains unburied and deprived of ritual rites, they believe that relatives, who did not perform the appropriate burial rites, will be haunted by the spirit of the unburied one. Therefore many of the corpses are brought from as far as Johannesburg to be buried in Venda. The Chairman of the Land Commission in Venda, Gota F.N. Ravele, indicates that:

“The Vhavenda are so serious with the burial of their dead that if a person dies somewhere and is buried there, they dig the grave and move the remains to the sacred place. If he dies in town, attempts are made to bring him home.

That is why traffic is so heavy between Venda and urban areas. If there is no means of bringing the dead home, they slaughter a sheep and bury it to designate that grave as his” (Ravele 1980: 30).

According to Vhavenda belief, if only the spirit of a person who dies far away can be appeased by a fictitious grave, it will not be troublesome to the next of kin.

Stayt describes such a ceremony:

“Sometimes a man dies away from home and it is quite impossible for his body to be brought back and properly buried. If his spirit becomes troublesome, and requires to be propitiated by a sacrifice at the grave, a fictitious funeral is enacted. A sheep is slaughtered

and its head used to symbolize the dead man's corpse, a grave is dug and its head is buried with due reverence in the usual way together with some of the dead man's clothing or possessions and this grave is thereafter considered to be his" (Stray 1931: 163).

The fictitious funeral is regarded as the burial of their dead for it is conducted with the highest reverence. It should also be noted that the practice of exhumation does not pertain to members of the royal family only, for it is an accepted belief that any deceased should be buried in an appropriate place or with members of his family.

To reinforce this argument, "the US government was recently expected to exhume the body of the Batonka tribesman to be reburied in Zambia in accordance with its tribal rites. Don Jacobs indicated that "the US government is now expected to pay the R10 000-00 costs of exhuming the Zambian tribesman's body and flying it back to Livingstone in Zambia where relatives will be able to claim it for a tribal burial" (Sunday Times: 27/08/1989, P4).

It is indeed an accepted African tradition that the deceased should be buried with the full rituals of his clan, and he should be laid to rest next to his family or relatives who preceded him. This practice points to the life hereafter.

Death for the Vhavenda is not a total separation from the living. The foregoing illustrations of burial rituals are evidence of a fundamental belief in the importance of life after death. The funeral rituals of the Vhavenda indicate that their main concern is to make provision for the future well-being of those whom they bury. The Vhavenda believe that a person is immortal, and that he would enjoy eternal life, after death. For this reason they have a great veneration for the dead, for they are under the impression that the deceased see them. In all the data received from my informants however there is no evidence to support the

theory that the Vhavenda believed in the resurrection of the body. Such an event would be unthinkable. It is strongly believed that the dead have joined the society of the living dead. As a result the Vhavenda dread the spirits of the deceased who were not buried in the proper manner.

3.9. The factors which affirm or negate Christian religion, and the impact on Venda perception of Christian funerals

As it has already been indicated, the Vhavenda have great respect for the dead, no wonder bodies are so well well looked after. This respect for the dead has retained its impact on Vhavenda Christians.

In Biblical times, a corpse was well washed and dressed in a spotless white calico material. The Jewish customs, which according to Nganda (1985: 23) are not far removed from the African traditional rituals, were designed to take good care of the corpse before burial. To bury their dead naked was considered shameful and a sign of disrespect.

Landman (1969: 596) indicates that “the practice of dressing the dead in his best robes and with ornaments is alluded to in 1Sam 28: 4... The early Hebrew kings had their crowns and sceptres buried with them, as well as expensive ornaments and jewels.” Following this example the Vhavenda Christian traditionalists bury their dead fully clothed, to them, the clothes accompany the deceased to the next world.

If the deceased is a man of status, his body or coffin is still wrapped in the skin of a bull or his kaross. At the funeral service of Piet Thanyani Dzivhani, who was buried on 2 November 1991, the younger brother placed a walking stick on the coffin and it was buried with him. To the Vhavenda Christians there was no

problem, although it was an embarrassment to the young officiating deacon of the church.

As a matter of fact the belief of the Vhavenda in the life hereafter, is somewhat similar to the belief of the early Egyptians.

The Egyptians believed that the deceased would experience hunger in the world beyond the grave, it was quite customary for the deceased to be buried with food, for him not to suffer from hunger.

The Vhavenda Christians may be strongly committed to the principles of Christianity, but deep down they still believe that the dead are alive somewhere beyond the grave.

Ndou (1993: 101), reports that “at a funeral service conducted by Rec. A.K. Masehela at Gouldville Presbyterian Church on 9 October 1987 the representative of the African, Methodist Episcopal Church, Mrs E. Mulaudzi in her speech of condolence mentioned that “the deceased Elinah Mushaisano Nematikonde is seeing us where she is, and she is overjoyed to be buried in such a good Christian service”. This is a clear indication that the Vhavenda Christian has no problem regarding the traditional view of life hereafter.

The questions of family graves is sometimes treated with scorn by theologians or associated with heathenism. It may happen that the deceased’s relatives wish to bury their dead in family graves, or it might have been the wish of the deceased.

According to Vhavenda customs and tradition, each family or clan has its own family graves. If the deceased is buried in a family grave they usually say *o iswa vhanweni*, (he/she is being brought to the others). The Vhavenda customs are in line with those of the Vhalovhedzi vha Ha-Mudzhadzhi (the Lobedu of Modjadji).

Krige, who made an in-depth study of the Lobedu, gave an indication of the problem which arose after the burial of a member of the royal family who had been converted Christianity:

“Why did you bury me in the valley in the sun (instead of in the ancestral grave?)... Similarly Mutogwane, brother of the queen, who in 1934 became a Christian on his death-bed, withheld rain in 1935 because they had buried him in a Christian cemetery (Krige 1940: 90).

The consensus seemed to be that even convert to Christianity should still be buried in the family graves. The Bible indicates that Abraham was counted amongst the first to purchase a plot for family graves. “He said to the Hittites, I am an alien and a settler among you. Give me land enough for burial-place, so that I can give my dead proper burial” (Gen.23: 4).

This is an indication that the dead should be given a good burial. The Vhavenda bury their dead in a suitable place where there is shade (mirunzini), not in the valley or sunny places. Nowonder Queen Modjadji was not satisfied with the burial of her brother Mutogwane, who was buried in the valley.

It is an accepted ritual practice that after the grave has been covered with soil, the Vhavenda place material articles on the grave to accompany the dead, as has already been indicated. These include seeds, utensils and water to cool the dead (shothodzo).

Nowadays Vhavenda Christians lay wreaths, but these to a Muvenda still convey the same message as that of material articles. According to Bishop Subukwe wreaths are but a waste of money:

“Bishop Sobukwe (74 years of age) of the Anglican Church in Alice was interviewed as to the Christian belief in putting wreaths on top of the graves. He mentioned that this practice had no Christian foundation and stressed that he felt the money used to buy wreaths should rather have been used to help the bereaved family to defray the funeral expenses (Zide 1984: 110-111).

Idowu (1973: 179) gives also a very good approach to this problem of wreaths and articles placed on the grave, his argument relates to the Englishman and the Chinese:

“We may call to mind here the popular story about the Englishman who went to place a wreath on the tomb of a deceased relative at the same time that a Chinese was putting rice on the tomb of his own deceased relative. The Englishman characteristically asked the Chinese, ‘when is your relative going to eat the rice that you are offering?’ To which the Chinese promptly replied, ‘When yours smells your flowers’.

The action of both the Englishman and the Chinese comes down to the same meaning. A Muvenda does not see any evil in placing object on a grave.

This is a clear indication of the conviction that not even death can break the relationship between the living dead and those who are still alive

3.10. Conclusion

The prevailing idea in this chapter is the conviction that death is not the end of life in Vhavenda tradition; rather it is the continuation of life on the other side of the world. The manner in which the burial of the Mahosi (Chiefs) was conducted reflects the belief that there is a very special and intimate connection between the living and the living dead.

The living may communicate with the living dead on different levels. The living dead are believed to have departed to a place that is closer to the Supreme Power or Being where they can communicate with that Supreme Being on behalf of the living. Death therefore is viewed and accepted as a graduation from a poor state to a better state in the presence of the Supreme Being. These notions become evident in the manner in which burials are conducted; as shown in this chapter.

CHAPTER 4: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE LIVING DEAD

4.1. Introduction

It has been indicated in the preceding chapter that to the Vhavenda death is only a physical separation it is also strongly believed that there has always been a relationship between the living and the living dead. In this chapter I will discuss the nature of this relationship. The roles and functions of the living dead with regard to the living as well as communication with them will be discussed. This will be followed by critical analyses of the relationship between a living Venda Christian and the living dead.

I will then close this chapter by discussing the impact of the status of the dead on the Vhavenda perception of Christian religion.

4.2. Death is not regarded as total annihilation

After the burial rituals have been performed, it is not the end; the dead are not totally buried and forgotten, but the living keep contact with their living dead.

To the Vhavenda death is not a total annihilation, but is regarded as a bridge by which one crosses to the world yonder, “lufu ndi muratho kana dambuwo” (death is a bridge). This concept is endorsed by Mbiti (1971: 62).

“The basic notion of the next world is found in all African societies, as far as one knows. It is the hereafter beyond physical death. This is pictured exclusively in materialistic terms which make that world more or less a carbon copy of the present”.

According to Mbiti death is not the end of it all; life hereafter is to some extent a duplication of the present life.

The Vhavenda are concerned with what takes place now. In short, time is considered as a two-dimensional phenomenon with a long past, and a dynamic present. It is therefore not surprising that in their daily activities people were concerned with their departed living dead who needed to be informed of the activities of the living descendants.

Mbiti (1969: 83) describes the ancestors as the departed of up to five generations. They are in a different category from that of ordinary spirits. They are still within the sasa period. They are in a state of personal immortality. Their process of dying is not yet complete. They are called the living-dead. They are the closest links that men have with the spirit world.

Some of the qualities attributed to spirits apply also to the living-dead. But the living-dead are bilingual beings. They speak the language of men, with whom they lived until “recently”, and they speak the language of the spirits and of God, to whom they are drawing nearer ontologically. According to Shabangu (2004: 121), these are the “spirits” with which African people are most concerned. It is through the living-dead that the spirit world becomes personal to them. They still are part of their families, and people have personal memories of them.

According to Mbiti (1969), the two groups are bound together by their common sasa that for the living-dead is, however, fast disappearing into the Zamani. The living-dead are still “people” and have not yet become “things”, “spirits” or “its”. They return to their human families from time to time, and share meals with them, albeit, symbolically.

The IMBISA Standing Committee (1996) attempted a short description of an ancestor in African traditional religion. It wrote that it is not possible to speak of traditional religion without touching on the subject of ancestors. Because they are nowhere and yet everywhere, it is difficult to speak of them comprehensively. However, an ancestor is a person:

- Who died a good death after having faithfully practised and transmitted to his descendants the laws left to him by his ancestors.
- Who contributed to the continuation of the line by leaving many descendants.
- Who was a peacemaker, a link that fostered communion between the living and the dead, through sacrifices and prayers.
- A person who is the first-born is a candidate par excellence to become an ancestor because he is able to maintain the chain of the generation in a long genealogy. The right of the firstborn is thus an inalienable right.

As a way of illustration, among the Vhavenda new customs such as circumcision (murundu) and (musevhetho), initiation schools for both boys and girls respectively, were adopted from the Lowveld Northern Sotho, which made it impossible for the descendants to participate in sacred activities because the living dead had never taken part in such initiations as they were of foreign origin. It is quite common to hear the old people saying “Vhafhasi vha do ri mini vha tshi vhona muthu o ralaho zwitunguloni” (What will those below the ground say when they see such a person participating in a religious ceremony).

The Vhavenda believe that the living-dead are in a strong relationship with them, for they see what is going on with their living descendants. According to

Vhavenda culture and traditional belief in the life hereafter, an individual cannot invest goods in this life in the hope of drawing interest in the life hereafter.

Those who are rich on earth will be rich in the new world whilst those who are poor will still remain poor in the world yonder. This indicates that economic and political status on earth and in the next world of the living-dead remains the same.

The killing of the chiefs' closest favourites in the Venda culture, (Zwileli) shortly after his death confirms this view, for as they were his servants or subjects on earth, they should continue serving him in the next world.

It goes without saying that their status remains the same in this world and in the next world.

The unshakeable belief of Africans in the powers of their ancestors in most cases is unquestionable; they believe that their ancestors have great concern for their living descendants. According to Chakanza (2004: 7) "Duties towards God and the ancestors (include): Observance of ancestral customs, funerals, rites of passage, offering sacrifices to the ancestors, traditional dances, perpetuation of names of the ancestors.

This notion became more conspicuous during the war of liberation in Zimbabwe. The blacks in that country put their trust in their ancestor Nehanda, and they were convinced that this ancestor was in control of the war, and he was always consulted for advice and guidance.

This is confirmed by Lan (1985: 217-218) ,who wrote:"The ancestor who received the most attention and the greatest praise was Ambuya Nehanda, the Mhondore

whose mediums had participated both in the first liberation struggle, the rebellion of 1896, and the second.”

This statement by implication indicates how the bond with the ancestors was conceptualised by liberation movements in Zimbabwe. The living-dead instill the spirit of patriotism into the lives of their living descendants. Mr Mugabe used to swear by his ancestor Ambuya Nehanda.

Lan reports as follows:

“The Prime Minister, Mr Mugabe, swearing by the name of the legendary anti-British spirit medium Ambuya Nehanda, vowed that his government would confiscate White owned land for peasant resettlement if Mrs Thatcher suspends promised British compensation” (Lan 1985: 219)

Mugabe’s swearing by the name of the ancestor is a clear indication that Africans are convinced that the living-dead are of great assistance to them, so they believe in both the mighty acts of their ancestors and the tenets of Christian religion without the former posing a threat to the latter. According to Rev. Schneider “Ancestors are much nearer to the people’s hearts than the Supreme Being (Maboee 1982: 25).

The Shembe Church for example, makes no secret of the fact that it endorses the Ukubuyisa ceremony which is the ceremony performed by the Zulus to integrate the spirit of the deceased person into the Zulu Society (Munyai: 2000: 10). Oosthuizen (1992: 87) makes it clear that the Zulu Christians turn to their ancestors more readily than to Christ for solutions concerning practical issues in daily life.

It may be deduced from the above statements made by Schneider, Munyai and Oosthuizen, that the Supreme Being cannot be approached directly, not because the living-dead obscure God, but because the ancestors are nearer. They perform the work of intermediaries between the Living and God.

It would be of great assistance if the word ancestor could be well defined so that it would give a better understanding of ancestral worship. In the Oxford Advanced Dictionary the word is defined as follows: “Any one of those persons from whom one is descended, especially one more remote than a grandparent” (Hornby 1974: 29). Hornby’s definition of the ancestors is persons who form part of the family tree or the lineage. We may thus to call them our family predecessors.

4.3. The functions of the living dead (the ancestors)

Significant dimension in the role played by the ancestors is how they are believed to transmit and safeguard life. The ancestors are models for the living. The words of Max Seckler, cited in Bujo (1992: 30) are appropriate:

“.... Time and history are real, irreversible and unrepeatable. They can be posed the question of the meaning of life. But there is more to it than simply imitating the behaviour of the ancestors. Traditional actions and formulas really bring strength to the living, enabling them to live better in the future.”

The recalling of “the past”, effects what it signifies. Health, wealth and the enjoyment of life, may be rooted in the past, but it is the past that has meaning for the present and the future. The present is shaped by the past. Indeed, the final consummation, when all come to their perfection, is already present (Shabangu 2004: 131).

In Venda the word “ancestor” (vhadzimu) refers to the grand parents or parents who have died. In practice, the Vhavenda regard the ancestors as members of the family who died at a mature age that is any person who has begotten children, full grown fathers and mothers. This notion is based on the belief that death is not a total destruction of life, but an entire transcendence of a person.

The Vhavenda regard the ancestors as the living-dead, and this belief creates a close relationship between the dead and the living, which results in personal contact. Setiloane remarks:

“It is my sincere conviction that the question of the ancestors and the living-dead (badimo),

Iminyanga or Amadlozi has been wrongly approached right from the beginning. The people who first brought it to the notice of the world outside were the missionaries who were definitely biased because they had an alternative agenda and programme of belief to promote. Besides they came out of a totally different background and an experience of spirituality which they came especially to be advocates of (Setiloane 1986: 17).

According to Setiloane, the pioneers in the field of missionary work lacked background knowledge of African Religion and its meaning. This led to the misunderstanding of words, with the result that they lost their original meaning and context.

According to Vhavenda tradition, the ancestor is the departed member of the family who still has close ties with the living.

Stayt (1931: 241) indicates that:

“The relationship between an individual and his ancestors is by its very nature essentially a family affair and the spirits are only concerned with the members of their own families. But in the event of any national thanksgiving or calamity the chief ancestors, although actually propitiated by the chiefs’ lineage alone, are felt to be associated with all the people”.

The argument as advanced by Stayt has not succeeded in defining the meaning of “ancestor” because in his argument the spirit and the ancestor are one and the same, whereas the Vhavenda believe that, when a person dies, he joins those who preceded him, that is, people of the same family tree. But as the other world is unknown to the living, it is accepted that the living-dead are living in a spiritual world.

The Vhavenda, as already mentioned in Chapter One, treat the dead with the highest reverence because they have acquired a higher status and are now regarded as “Vhadzimu” (Singular “Mudzimu”, god). Linguistically, the word “Mudzimu” belongs to the mu-vha class of nouns and, in most cases, refers to the personal Mudzimu-vhadzimu. This indicates that the ancestors are regarded as persons, not gods. In Tshivenda a dead man is sometimes referred to as “munna wa vhane” (a man who was there or who was with the living).

Junod gives an explicit explanation of this:

“If the monotheistic notion which found its expression in Raluvhimbi is very vague, the ancestor worship of the Ba-Venda is much much more concrete, consisting, as it does, in precise rites, the meaning of which is not difficult to detect. The gods are called “Badzimu”

(singular, mudzimu) evidently the same root as the Sotho “Modimo”. Every human being becomes a Mudzimu at his death” (Junod 1920: 211).

Junod as an expert in Tsonga traditional religion compares the manner of reverence accorded to the ancestors by the Vhavenda and the Tsonga respectively. He is highly impressed by the way the Vhavenda accord respects to their ancestors, pointing out that the Vhavenda are more concrete in their sacrificial rites. He concurs that the deceased are exalted into Vhadzimu (ancestors) after death. As for the word “Mudzimu”, the aged could already be referred to as Mudzimu. “Makhulu ndi mudzimu wanu” (your grandparent is your god), for instance, is a common expression.

Van Rooy (1970: 139) agrees. He writes that “even an old person can be referred to as mudzimu if he is older than anybody else in the vicinity”. This in itself is an indication that the aged were highly respected.

According to Vhavenda culture the aged were even given the status of the ancestor. Van Warmelo even went further to say: “Domba ndi Mudzimu” (1940: 53). Domba is the python dance which is an initiation ritual for girls. Van Warmelo probably meant that the Domba is sacred, for it was usually performed at night and in the early mornings.

The question which now arises is when a person actually becomes an ancestor. It has already been indicated that only those who die at a mature age become ancestors. An infant or unmarried person cannot achieve the status of ancestry as he has no offspring to minister to. As a result there will, in this case, be no intercourse between the dead and the living. A dead father or grandfather becomes a home ancestor, because the circle revolves around family bonds. The tribal ancestors are those who form the greater part of the dominant lineage

which is linked with the political territory where the chief (khosi) is the traditional leader.

Wessman illustrates this point when he indicates that “there are provincial gods, village gods and sometimes even house gods. In the immediate neighbourhood of the larger kraals of the chiefs, there is a so-called sacred forest where the gods dwell and are not forgotten on special festival occasions” (Wessman 1908: 82).

So, the mudzimu could be associated with both family and tribal ancestors. It is worth mentioning that the Vhavenda do not regard Nwali as the ancestral spirit assigned or associated with one family or tribe, but he is regarded as the universal and supreme-creator, for the midzimu are guardians of the tribal morality. The ancestors are not really worshipped in the true sense of the word, but are venerated. The living descendants pay respect to their departed ones, due to the fact that they are now in a high office in the world yonder.

Therefore, ancestors are representatives of Nwali and act as mediators between him and their living relatives.

Mbiti (1976: 62) clarifies the intermediary function when he says that people feel themselves to be very small in the sight of God. In approaching him they sometimes need the help of someone else, just as in social life it is often the custom to approach someone of high status through someone else. For that reason, some African peoples make use of helpers in approaching God, although they also approach him directly.

Procreation is another function that ancestors are believed to provide to living relatives. Mbiti (1969: 26) maintains that this is related to the concept of personal immortality, which explains the religious significance of marriage in African

societies. Unless a person has close relatives to remember him when he has physically died, then he is nobody and simply vanishes out of human existence like a flame when it is extinguished. Therefore it is a duty, religious and ontological, for everyone to get married.

If a man has no children or has only daughters, he will find another wife so that through her, sons may be born, who will survive him and keep him (with the other living-dead of the family) in personal immortality.

Procreation is the absolute way insuring that a person is not cut off from personal immortality. Ancestors ensure such a function and that is why, according to Dyrness (1990: 35) in Sierra Leone, a family would visit a cemetery to tell the ancestors about the impending marriage: Is everything in order? Are the prospects propitious? They pour drink on the ground and scatter cola nuts. If the cola nuts land in a proper way, all will go well.

Daneel (1970: 147-152) maintains that virtually all Shona believe that “the family spirits protect the family” (*midzimu ya pamusha inorinda musha*). While this protection becomes visible in the attainment of success in all aspects of life, the basic concept here is that the ancestral spirits keep guard at the doors of the family homes during the night. Whenever the evil powers, sorcerers and witches are at their most active and create a menace, the guardian spirits stand at the door (*kumira pamukova*) to avert the danger.

In contrast with the positive functions, stands the destructive power of the ancestors. Daneel (1970: 48) maintains that if they are neglected, they can kill, cause grief or inflict trouble (*kunetsa*). Sickness, death and accident are thus frequently connected with the displeasure of the ancestors. They do not destroy their relatives by direct mortal blows but they withhold their protective function and expose the family member to the power of evil. To obtain some measure of

security in this existence or regain the guardian functions of the ancestors is of the utmost importance.

As with most other Africans, the Vhavenda live in continuous contact with their ancestors. Communication from the side of the ancestors takes place through dreams, the causing of sickness, or periodical revelation of their wishes through a recognized medium. The living are told what is expected of them by the “other” world.

In their turn the living relatives address their ancestors in a number of symbolic ways. They may, for example, “give” the ancestors some food during meals, or engage in private talk with an object – frequently a beer pot or blanket – that represents the ancestors. In the wider ritual context, a recognized official of the group addresses the ancestral spirits concerned.

4.4. Whether the living dead are worshipped or venerated

Africans, unless they have internalized the Westerners views of them, strongly resent the suggestion that they “worship” badimo (ancestors). They argue that the European word “worship” does not properly convey the same meaning as “service” (tirelo), the service which they perform in relation to their ancestors. The “service” that is rendered to the badimo is in fact of the same quality and level as that rendered to one’s parents while they are living. In Se-Tswana “Re direla badimo” means we *serve the ancestors* (fulfil all proper duties towards them, that is, provide the ancestors with the necessities of life, food, clothing, etc). But “Re rapela Modimo”, we *pray to Modimo*” (Setiloane 1976: 18-19).

The logic of this is that the badimo are merely our “deceased parents”. But it needs to be noted that parenthood in the African concept is not limited to the

physical relationship. It spells authority over one that originates beyond the two parties concerned.

According to Ndou (1993: 112), “Prior to death and before the entry into the ancestral arena, the ancestors were ordinary family members who cared for the daily welfare of their earthly children. It was indeed their duty to ensure both family and tribal duties, to maintain peace and stability in their abode by enforcing discipline wherever it was needed. Although, now when they are in the world yonder, their remaining offspring still feel that they need their blessings. The Vhavenda believe that the living and the dead are somewhat interdependent, for the one cannot survive without the aid of the other. As a result they are often in communication with one another. At this point, therefore, there is no iron curtain which separates them. The bond of cohesion is brought about by interdependence”.

Parenthood, even while the parent is living, is an intermediary rank. It is also a channel of forces which span the various levels of being in this life, across the homes and clans in the total community of village and tribe as well as with the unseen world of BoModimo (Divinity) which is strongly inclined to be identified with the underground. Mosima: the Abyss from whence the first people came and to which all go (Shabangu 2004: 151).

Mbiti (1969: 26) explains the concept and understanding of ancestor worship among Africans as follows:

“... The act of pouring out libation (of beer, milk or water) or giving portions of food to the living-dead, are symbols of communication, fellowship and remembrance.

They are the mystical ties that bind the living-dead to their surviving relatives. Therefore these acts are performed within the family. The oldest member of the family is the one who has the longest sasa period and therefore the one who has the longest memory of the departed. He performs or supervises these acts of remembrance on behalf of the entire family, addressing (when the occasion demands it) the symbolic meal to all the departed (living-dead) of the family, even if only one or two of the departed may be mentioned by name or position (e.g. father, grandfather). There is nothing here about the so-called “ancestor worship”, even if these acts may so seem to outsiders who do not understand the situation.

It is true that on the surface, an untrained mind may interpret such practices as worshipping ancestors. This could be because someone of a different faith, for example a Christian, may expect the name of Christ to dominate the discourse. Once that is not pronounced a conclusion would most likely be that God is not known. Even though the name of God is not pronounced, the ultimate recipient of offerings and sacrifices is God.

Ancestors are only venerated (honoured, remembered). The context is identical to one of another faith, such as Christianity. Therefore one cannot “Christianize” the African culture. One can however investigate how the Gospel message is embodied in this culture.

Commenting on the offerings that Africans give to their ancestors, Crafford (1996: 16) argues: “Dit is verkeerd om te praat van vooroueraanbidding. Hulle word nie as gode aanbid nie, maar word vereer as lede van die gemeenskap, nou net met hoër status en magte”. (It is incorrect to speak of worshipping of forefathers.

They are not worshipped as gods, but are only honoured as members of the community, now only endowed with higher status and power).

Rev. Wessman (1908: 155) contends that the strong bond which binds the Vhavenda and their ancestors is a state of fear and insecurity. By implication he means that the living not only seek the protection of the ancestors for survival, but also protection from them. The Jewish faith forbids the belief that the souls of the dead bring protection, whereas the Vhavenda do not only expect to be protected by the dead, but also fear their influence, as they think they might do them harm. The fear which is indicated by Wessman is coupled with respect for the living-dead.

According to the Vhavenda culture, fear of senior family members does not mean that one hates them because they might hurt one. Children have respect for their elders and the latter in turn show respect to the ancestors and they in return show allegiance to the high god Nwali.

To distinguish between the words worship and veneration we quote the definitions given in the Oxford English Dictionary by A.S. Hornby (1994: 995). Worship is defined as “reverence and respect paid to God, and veneration as “regard with deep respect, they venerate the old man’s memory.” It is noted with appreciation that the word worship as defined by Hornby, means reverence to the supreme god, whereas veneration indicates the respect accorded to an older person by a young one.

According to Idowu, the ancestors are not really worshipped but venerated. He adds, however, that that the veneration which is accorded to the ancestors is conducted in such a manner that it turns into worship, for it is approached with the strictest reverence (1973: 186).

4.5. Communicating with the living dead

In the Venda traditional belief, the ancestors are informed of the activities which take place in their family setup. The deceased parent could have been a bad father during his lifetime, but the children will still venerate him.

In Tshivenda it is said “Mufu ha lifhedzwi” (never take revenge against the deceased). Gelfand (1962: 52) provides with a good indication of the bond between the dead and the living “The Mudzimu takes his offspring to live the same good life he led. He wants no change”. As has already been pointed out, children will try all they can to please the living-dead. By implication the ancestors wish their offspring who are still in the world of the living well.

In Venda the word “u rerela” is often used when referring to ancestral worship. This is the most appropriate word. It is even closer to veneration, for the term worshipping the ancestors is used with some resentment. “U rerela” means to render “services” which are directed to or performed for the ancestors. The service rendered to the ancestors is of a similar nature to rendering services to the living who in this case are the parents.

It appears that Schewellnus, the Venda Bible translator, had difficulty in choosing the appropriate word for “worship”. He was forced by circumstances to use the word “worship” in the Old Testament, where he made use of “u rerela” in Jonah 2:1. It is mentioned that “Jona e thumbuni ya khovhe, o rerela Yehova Mudzimu wawe ari” (Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish). In Venda Biblical terminology the word “u rerela” poses a problem as it is borrowed from Sotho.

Van Rooy (1970: 171) clarifies the usage of the two words ‘u rerela’ and ‘u rabela’. The term ‘u rerela’ (to pray) and thabelo (prayer) are the ones generally

used for referring to prayer in the Venda Bible. They have been introduced from the Sotho “go rapela” (to plead), which is the generally accepted term for “prayer”. This set of terms has also been accepted by the Venda people, but unfortunately it has acquired a restricted and formal range of meaning, as could be expected of a borrowed term. Actually it refers to a church service rather than a spontaneous individual prayer.

Dr Van Rooy is correct when he indicates that the use of the word “rabela” is restricted. It is more appropriate when it refers to the Judaic God in church. When communicating with the ancestors in Venda the words *u rabela* refer to rendering services human to human.

Van Warmelo (1935: 171) provides a thought provoking insight when he refers to the Venda way of praying. When they pray they say, “You my makhadzi help me, and you my grandfather, I sacrifice to you”. This is a purely heathen prayer, quite uninfluenced by Christian or other European terminology.

When offering sacrifices the Vhavenda would never say “we pray you”. They would start right away with the plea they wish to put before the ancestors. They would add: “I sacrifice to you”. This could have had a better meaning as an act of worship. This misuse of words led to a misunderstanding of communication with the ancestor as opposed to offering a prayer to God, for the term *u rerela*, according to Van Warmelo, is associated with heathenism.

The Vhavenda concept of life hereafter is well demonstrated by the various ways of contacting the living-dead (ancestors). The process of rendering services to the ancestors is not an individual venture. There are occasions and circumstances which lead to the performing of sacrificial rites to the ancestors. They could be contacted at different levels. At the family level, this could be done in times of sickness or death.

According to Venda belief, sickness cannot appear without the knowledge of the ancestors. Still in the family circle, when a woman is barren, it gives rise to concern. It is strongly believed that the ancestors desire man to multiply and replenish the earth. They are satisfied when they see that the families they left behind are being extended to prevent their family clan from diminishing.

The ancestors could also be approached on a national level. This involves the nation as a whole, in times of need such as the outbreak of an epidemic, or the invasion of locusts in various parts of the country. The traditional leader of the area or the tribe would take the initiative to find out what the cause might be which brought about such a disaster.

Stayt explains this:

“The relationship between an individual and his ancestors is by its very nature essentially a family affair, and the spirits are only concerned with members of their own families, but in the event of any national thanksgiving or calamity the chief ancestors, although actually propitiated by the chiefs lineage alone, are felt to be associated with all the people” (1931: 291).

According to the Venda traditional religion, an individual has no right to approach an ancestor alone, without alerting members of his family.

Such action could be viewed in a serious light, and he can be regarded as having angered the ancestors with the result that he may invite misfortune upon the family. He could not even dare to approach the ancestors without the assistance of officiating officers.

Communal communication and sacrificial rites are a joint effort. They should be conducted in an orderly manner. The man servant of the ancestors is called a priest, and could also be assisted by junior officials.

Of all the African tribes in Southern Africa, it would appear that the Vhavenda were fortunate to retain their original name for the official servant who ministers to the ancestors. The name of the priest is “Tshifhe”. This is not a borrowed word from other languages. In Sotho, the priest is referred to as “Moprisita” and in Nguni languages the word “Umprisita”, is employed. The name Tshifhe (priest) is derived from “U fha” (give). Tshifhe thus means “the giver”, he is giving to the gods or ancestors. Du Plessis (1940: 101) supports this argument in the statement below:

“Hy, wat aan die voorouers gee, sal nie honger gaan neerle
(*Tshifha Vhadzimu ha lali na ndala*)”.

By implication Du Plessis points out the originality of the word tshifhe, from *tshifha*. It is a revealing fact that the Vhavenda from time immemorial had a special name for the person who communicates with the ancestors on behalf of the family or community.

The officiating *tshifhe* was a person who was highly trained in sacrificial matters. During his training he had to apply very strict discipline in keeping the secrets. In most cases training was under the supervision of a senior expert in the ritual practices of the family..

After he had received this intensive training, he was regarded as a person imbued with special religious knowledge, and he was to approach his ritual duties with great awe. He was expected to perform his work in such a manner that all

sacrificial rites were observed as prescribed, lest the lives of people be endangered in the presence of the ancestors.

It is interesting to note that Ralushai (1980: 11) regards Tshifhe (priests) as messengers or interpreters of Nwali as the latter did not understand Tshivenda. “In previous works dealing with Mbedzi among other things, I mentioned that Matobo (clan Muleya) and Magwabeni (clan Munyai) were messengers of Nwali in Venda... these men acted as interpreters as Nwali could not speak Venda”. Prof Ralushai should have used the name “Tshifhe” or priest, not messenger. A messenger could have been picked at random, whereas a Muvenda priest was a person who had received training for priesthood.

Parrinder (1962: 101) also regards the office of priesthood to be of great significance. He indicates that “African priestesses may work in conjunction with men like the Hebrew prophetesses Huldah and Anna, or they may have a sanctuary like Deborah’s, to which men as well as women may come. The training will be under the charge of an older expert, who may train several priestesses at the same time”.

According to Venda traditional religion, men and women used to work jointly as priests and priestesses. In most cases the priestess was a sister in the family or the sister of the chief and is referred to as “makhadzi”. Stayt (1931: 250) explains this as follows:

“The sister of the head of the lineage, who is so important in its social behaviour, plays an equally important part in its religious affairs. She is the priestess of the lineage, and except on rare occasions, paternal ancestor spirit may only be approached through her”.

In the Venda culture the chief (khosi) of a tribe is regarded as a unifying force and General of the Army (mulanga mmbi), should war break out. He shows his leadership by leading the army. The same occurs in religious matters of worship, the chief (khosi) is always regarded as the high priest.

In the Venda culture, a khosi (chief) is never appointed, but born. For him, to be khosi (chief) he must have royal blood in his veins. It is not surprising at all, that the Vhavenda regard the chief as one descended from the gods, and worthy of their religious awe. He forms a link with the living-dead or ancestors. As a line of communication, the children have to respect the parents and the parents in turn give respect to the khosi (chief) who ultimately gives due respect to Nwali who is in the higher zone, and regarded as Supreme. There, his image is conclusively venerated.

The chiefs are generally involved in national sacrificial rituals as high priests of the community. National sacrificial rituals cannot be fully dealt with in this dissertation as they are too numerous. One instance will serve to as an indication of their relevance. The Vhavenda regard the communal ceremony of the harvest thanksgiving as of great significance. It has always been a common practice for them to honour their ancestors as a way of thanksgiving for the harvest received from their fields.

The ceremony is regarded as *thevhula* (to pour out). It refers to the pouring of water, beer or even blood from a bull. The community at large is involved. The harvest ceremony is not performed by an individual. As the harvest thanksgiving is a national ceremony, the “Makhadzi”, the sister to the chief, alerts the latter that all arrangements for the harvest ceremony have been made. He in turn will proclaim this information to the community regarding the offering ceremony (*thevhula*).

The members of the royal family will be led by the “makhadzi” to the graves. The commerce does not participate in these proceedings. The whole ceremony is regarded with great solemnity. Van Warmelo (1932: 159) indicates that “we ourselves never say a word, we are most serious. We go on, still in single file, with the makhadzi in front, the tshifhe behind her carrying the *mubvumelo* and we all in the rear”. Dr Van Warmelo emphasizes how sacred the whole ritual is, the participants even refrain from conversation.

The Vhavenda regard it as a taboo for anybody to enter into harvest before the ancestors are informed and have tested the first grains before anybody else. When they arrive at the place of the offering, the tshifhe commences the rituals. He must speak as if he is addressing human beings. He says:

“Ndi ni fha nwaha muswa uri, ni le ni takale, zwo salaho ndi zwanga, na zwiduhulu zwanu na zwone zwile zwi takale-vho, (I offer you all of you, I deprive none amongst you. What remains in the ground belongs to me and your little ones. Let them eat and be happy). Ndi nea nothe na iwe tshimudi I give all of you and even the unknown ones)” (Stayt 1931: 255).

In the offerings, the tshifhe (priest) makes it quite clear that all the ancestors should partake of what is offered to them. She calls them all by name, including the unknown. This unknown is in the singular and one might ask whether she is not referring to the supreme one. This reminds one of the al tar for the unknown god which Paul found in Athens.

The Vhavenda are people who practise communal life, by eating together with the ancestors, children included. This action is a unifying factor. Brothers who have differences are reconciled at this ceremony. The sharing of food with the ancestors is also meant to revive the covenant of oneness.

4.6. The relationship between the living Venda Christian and the living-dead

It is strongly believed in Venda circles that the ancestors transmit what has been offered to them to the high god, who is Nwali. The ancestors have no power either of rain or of national phenomena such as disaster. Gelfand (1955: 115) confirms this:

“The vhadzimu cannot create power. This is solely what man owes to his creator (Mwari). Can the Shona tribal spirits (Mhondoro) make rain? Are they creative? They cannot bring rain by their own creation but, as they are intermediaries between man and the creator, they are able to bring their influence to bear on him”.

Gelfand’s observations confirm the Venda belief that the ancestors act as mediators between the living and the supreme god who is Nwali. Gelfand is quite explicit when he indicates that the vhadzimu (ancestors) have no creative power, but they depend entirely on the creator who may receive the request advanced by them. It is now clear that the ancestors are regarded as mediators. Theron (1996:07) writes “Prayers are not addressed directly to God, but through the ancestors to God. Since he is the Almighty, the Supreme Being, he cannot be approached directly, or spoken to directly. He can only be approached through intermediaries.

Zide (1984: 29) argues that:

“The term “ukungula” does not have a Christian meaning of worship in its content, nor are the ancestors the goal of worship in Xhosa traditional religion: (It is alleged that the Roman Catholics worship Mary, just because they worship God through her. It is alleged that Moslems worship Mohammed just because they worship God

through him. Likewise we Xhosa people have been accused of worshipping ancestral spirits and yet we only accord them, beseeching them to plead our protection to the Almighty, the Omniscient)".

As indicated by Zide, Africans adhering their traditional religion fail to understand how well established denominations like the Roman Catholic Church can render such strong reverence to Mary through whom it is assumed, their prayer can reach the Almighty God. By way of implication she acts as mediator. The same standpoint was mentioned by Pope John Paul II on his recent visit to Zambia, he prayed to Virgin Mary, "to intercede for the many people in Africa who suffer from war, violence, injustice and oppression and from social and economic hardship" (Cape Times: 5/5/89, P.7). The ordinary Muvenda, who still believes in the ancestors, sees the Virgin Mary as one of the mediums, for she intercedes to God on behalf of the people.

The analogy of the medium is, however, taken too far by Zide (1984: 30) when he goes to the extent of comparing Jesus Christ with the ancestors. "In the European form of religion, Jesus Christ is the medium just as the ancestors are the media in Xhosa religion". His argument is based on the belief in the ancestors as viewed by Africans, but it must be remembered that, Christ is above the ancestors. He is the prime ancestor. He is not a medium, and cannot be brought to the level of the ancestors. A strong point of divergence is that the ancestors have not been resurrected, whereas the resurrection of Christ is irrefragable.

It has become evident that when the tshifhe (priest) is talking to the ancestors, he addresses them as he would speak to his living parents. To a stranger, it may reflect a lack of respect. Smith concurs with this statement when he mentions

that “Europeans have noted an apparent lack of reverence in ritual approach to the Midzimu. Africans do not consider it unseemly to scold even their quasi divine chiefs who have power of life, and death over them” (Smith 1961: 25).

This incidence of scolding the ancestors by the officials of the priesthood is further endorsed by Dr Van Rooy (1970: 171):

“This kind of prayer can degenerate into real scolding sessions when the participants are of the opinion that God has neglected his duties towards them”. The Rev. D.W. Giesekke of the Berlin Mission society at Tshakhuma relates an experience during January 1966, when he was present at the Zionist prayer meeting for the purpose of asking for rain during the severe drought of that year”.

It is surprising how Giesekke failed to understand the way the Vhavenda Zionists were expressing their sentiments to God. The manner they approach the ancestors and God is the same. They are however more composed and relaxed. They are composed because they are speaking to their father. Rev Giesekke should not have been surprised for he grew up among the Vhavenda and as a result knew much of their culture.

The sort of scolding is not confined to the Vhavenda. It is actually not scolding in the true sense of the word, it is a free conversation.

In the Venda culture when subjects are paying homage to the chief (khosi), they speak freely, for this is the accepted manner to express their sentiments to him.

They even go to the extent of saying *lifa lini nda wana tsimu* (When will he die, so that I can acquire a field?). The chief will take such statements in a pensive mood

by way of nod. To him this is a compliment of the highest order. The chief (khosi) appreciates such scolding, because this is done in public. His people are not gossiping or speaking behind his back, they utter their views about him in the open. Such a request will be favourably considered.

The scolding mentioned by Van Rooy is but “wrestling” with God, as could also be found in the Old Testament. David in the Psalms uttered strong statements in appealing to God, “Rouse theyselves”, why sleepest though, O Lord? Awake! Do not cast us off for ever.” (Psalm 44: 23). This verse may be viewed by a layman scolding God, but this is nothing but a plea directed to God as father.

One can furthermore refer to Genesis 32: 24-26 where Jacob wrestled with God at Penuel and was later blessed after a long struggle. It has been noted during the foregoing discussion that the Vhavenda, concerning sacrifices to the ancestors have in many instances relied on the services of experts or specialists in the field of priesthood.

The performance of sacrifices is left entirely in the hands of appointed officials. It would not be an exaggeration to indicate that the sacrificial rituals offered to Nwali, the god worshipped by both the Vhavenda and the Mashona of Zimbabwe could not be performed by ordinary priests. This duty was performed by specially designated clans.

Nwali was above the ancestors, and it is on very rare occasions that his name was ever mentioned “Although the Venda believed in ancestor worship and possession cults (Ngoma-dza Vhadzimu), Nwali’s name was never mentioned in ancestor worship service except among the rain-making Mbedzi (Ralushai 1980: 19). It is evident therefore that the Vhavenda did not regard Nwali as their ancestor, but as the Supreme Being.

There is clear evidence that Nwali was associated with the Venda priests, and they conducted rituals at both Nwali shrines and Nwali sites in Zimbabwe and Venda respectively. Magwabeni and Mathobo who belonged to the Munyai and Muleya clans were involved in the activities at Nwali sites in Venda. These clans were commonly known in Zimbabwe and North Eastern Venda and were regarded as experts in religious rituals in the service of of Nwali.

The argument below advanced by Cobbing (1972: 7) indicates that the Venda priests did play a significant role at the Nwali shrines based in Zimbabwe. “The first Njelele priests, Jenje and Pinga, were of the Mbedzi Venda who had fought with their tribe in the Transvaal. Another Venda Mafuka established a shrine first at Gwenungwe in the Gwanda region”. Cobbing thus confirms that some of the priests who were associated with the Nwali shrines in Zimbabwe were of Venda descent.

They were rated highly as pariachs in the hierachy of priesthood. Evidently the Vhavenda priests were knowledgeable about sacrificial rituals and communication between the living and the departed living dead. The Vhavenda priests were destined be intermediaries, and their role was unquestionable.

Research conducted by R. Mwanza (1972: 7) into the Nwali cult centred on Nhema-Selukwe Tribal Trust in Zimbabwe, supports Cobbing observations. He indicates that the Vhavenda priests were involved in the activities at the Nwali shrines. “This was a revelation that Nwali is not of the Mbire clan (Shoko Ncube) the high priests should be of Mbire”.

It may be reasonably assumed, therefore that the Vhavenda priests were highly influential in ritual activities. As indicated by Mwanza, the high priest came from the Mbire clan and Mbavani, who did not come from the Mbire clan (Venda),

could not be accepted in to the priesthood. This is a clear indication that the Vhavenda of the Mbedzi clan were the experts concerning the Nwali shrines.

Most of the names of the priests who were attached to the Nwali shrines in Zimbabwe suggested that they are of Venda descent. It is surprising that Cobbing reports that the Nzhelele shrine was established by the Vhavenda, whereas there is no trace in the trials of Nwali that he ever visited Nzhelele in Venda.

It has been established beyond doubt that Chief (khosi) Mbulaheni Mphephu who resided in Nzhelele had to send messengers all the way to Zimbabwe in search of Nwali so that he could approach him for rain for his drought-stricken country:

Stayt (1931: 233) maintains that:

“Since then in years of drought and plenty alike Mphephu, and after his death, his son, always sent an emissary to Raluvhimbi at Mbvumela. I was informed that last year Mbulaheni sent 100 in cash, his emissaries returned more satisfied that god had accepted their offering and would send the required rain.”

This proves beyond doubt that Nwali had no shrines at Nzhelele in Venda. This is supported by Cobbing when he mentions that the Nzhelele shrine was under the jurisdiction of the people from Venda descent. “The first Nzhelele priests, Jenga and Pinga were of the Mbedzi Venda, who had fought with their tribe in the Transvaal”. Cobbing is of course referring to Nzhelele in Zimbabwe (Ralushai1980: 16).

The shrine at Nzhelele in Zimbabwe is sometimes called Matongoni (in Venda) and Matonzeni (in shona). It was regarded as a shrine of the cult of Nwali and it

was situated on the Matopo Hills. It is an undisputed fact that both the Vhavenda and the Mashona were vested with controlling positions at this shrine.

4.7. Transformed Venda perception of life hereafter

The foregoing discussions reveal without doubt that the Vhavenda have high regard for their deceased, whom they believe to have essential selves independent of their earthly bodies. The titles they held as parents in their various families before death are retained. To the Vhavenda, life is endless for their departed ones continue to receive veneration and sacrificial offering, as practiced by their living offsprings. The deceased are now imbued with powerful and undisputed authority over their survivors.

According to traditional belief the creator cannot be reached by the living, thus the Vhavenda are convinced that the living-dead can act as intermediaries between the living and the Supreme Being. The living-dead are further regarded as nearer to God than the living. As a result they receive their authority from God should also be imparted to the living descendants. The living-dead are regarded as being exonerated from secular evils.

The ancestors have the authority to bless the living in their daily activities and as a result the living descendants are convinced that the living-dead have a strong influence on their lives.

As it has been stated in the earlier discussion, the respect paid to the living-dead is an indication of the Vhavenda concept of life hereafter.

It has also been learned that respect and love for the dead is not uncommon and it is still prevalent in the Vhavenda traditional religion.

There are people in Venda circles who still ascribe their dreams, and also their being haunted at night to the work of the dead. Although some sophisticated sections of the population view these claims with scorn, deep down in their hearts they are convinced that the living dead still have a part to play in the lives of the living. This is an indication that the general belief of the Vhavenda is that communion and communication between the deceased and the living is still possible.

The following is an example of how significant this communion is. The deceased who died with some complaints or harbouring an unresolved conflict against one of his family members, is highly feared, because it is believed that as an ancestor, he may inflict punishment the guilty person. During the terminal period of his sickness, the patient is always well nursed, in order that he should not die in a state of resentment. For should he die in this state, his descendants will be scared of communicating with him.

The most significant aspect of the belief in ancestors is that human personality is not destroyed by death or the decomposition of the corpse, but lives on. Although the concept of resurrection does not exist in the Vhavenda rationale, they believe in the immortality of the soul. To the Vhavenda, the living and the dead are interdependent. As a result they are capable of communicating with each other as the communion is strongly cemented.

It should be clearly understood that the Biblical God, Jahweh, who created mankind, was never referred to as grandfather or ancestor; for God is the Father of Jesus Christ. He cannot be demoted to the level or status of the ancestors. In

the realm of communicating with the ancestors, reference is made to the family divinities who are the living-dead grandfathers.

In summing up I would like to emphasize that the communication which is practised by the Vhavenda when they bring sacred offerings to the living-dead is an indication that the “filial” duty is still intact. The departed are always appeased so that they might sleep peacefully, for they are constantly regarded as people, but of higher authority. The living are always convinced that the living-dead will never mislead them in whatever request they make of them. It is of great significance to take note of the factors which affirm or negate Christian religion, and their impact on the Venda perception of the status of the living-dead.

In the Vhavenda culture the concept of futurity as based on the resurrection of the dead is unknown. When the missionaries proclaimed that the Christians will be raised from their graves and receive glorified bodies, to the traditionalist Muvenda, the statement sounded incredible. The Vhavenda believe in the continuity of life in the Spirit World, for life after death is a continuation of what happened in the world before death.

The concept of resurrection caused tremendous misunderstanding amongst the believers of old. The people of the Old Testament knew very little about the resurrection of the dead, it was not of great significance to them. Burden indicates that “The people of the Old Testament were concerning on serving God in the present life, leaving little time for speculation about the next, sometimes they use the idea of resurrection to express the national hope of rebirth” (Burden 1991: 24).

To the Israelites, then, resurrection was not a prominent concern. They may have believed in the restoration of Israel as a state however, It appears the raising of Christ from the dead gave birth to the concept of resurrection.

In the Old Testament, however, there is evidence of a man being raised from the dead “Once some men were burying a dead man when they caught sight of the raiders. They threw the body into the grave of Elisha and made off, when the body touched the prophet’s bones, the man came to life and rose to his feet (II Kings 13: 21).

According to this passage the man rose to his feet although he was dead, but this was not resurrection as indicated in the plan of salvation. The man did not have a glorified body, so this action could not be regarded as resurrection in the fuller meaning of the word. Moreover, it was neither universal nor Christocentric.

4.8. Factors which affirm or negate Christian religion: Their Impact on the Venda perception of the status of the dead

The sacrificial rituals and offerings to the ancestors act as affirmative factors towards the Vhavenda Christian religion. The Vhavenda regard their sacrificial rituals, as proof of their belief that the living dead are under God’s guidance and direction.

The indigenous people feel within themselves that by talking and communicating with the living dead they are talking to God, for they believe that God dwells beyond the clouds, whereas the living dead are underground *vhafhasi* (those below).

Offering sacrifices to the living dead it is a way of appeasing them and satisfying the needs of the living dead and by so doing they put them in their rightful place.

The living dead are further regarded as the vessel to convey the requests of the living descendants to their ultimate goal who is the creator. The Vhavenda regard the Christian doctrines in terms of their belief in the living dead.

The living dead are in some cases offered sacrificial rituals when a member of the family is ill. Should a person be cured after this performance, the bonds of unity between the living descendants and the living dead are strengthened, but ultimately the healing of their patient is attributed to God and not to the intermediaries. This healing is regarded as an act of reconciliation by God, who brings order, stability and harmony to the whole universe.

Father Carmichael made use of the opportunity when he found the Basotho conducting their thank offering according to their own custom, "Father Carmichael, having learnt of the cause of the singing and dancing, without more ado, joined in the celebration ..." I have been informed about why you are feasting here this morning. I wish to join with you in thanking God for the safe delivery of the child and for the good health of its mother. Let us now kneel down and pray to God for His mercies "(Maboe 1982: 31).

The approach of Father Carmichael to the Basotho yielded good results because he converted the whole village to Christianity without condemning them, their traditional thanksgiving offering was transformed to a Christian prayer of thanksgiving.

During sacrificial rituals elements such as water are used by the priest (tshifhe) when conducting his ritual offerings, and also the purification rites. The first missionaries who worked amongst the Vhavenda were prejudiced against the usage of these elements, and they were regarded as heathen, in spite of the fact that, in church, water was used for both drinking and baptism.

If the missionaries had been patient enough in studying and analyzing the sacrificial rites as conducted by the Vhavenda, these would have acted as a base or stepping stone to the final sacrificial offering of Jesus Christ.

It is not surprising that the independent churches are gaining more followers than the mainline churches; the reason is that the former capitalize on the failure of the missionaries who brought the word of God from their own cultural background. The independent churches adapt the traditional religion of the indigenous people and through it they introduce the Gospel of Christ.

4.9. Conclusion

The researcher is compelled to conclude; that the relationship which is believed to exist between the living and the living-dead influences the actions and behavior of the indigenous people. This is of course a contributing factor to the continuation of communication with the living dead. The belief is also evident in the actions which the living perform to honour their living dead such as *u phasa*, *thevhula* and the cleansing, annual visitation of the graveyard sites.

CHAPTER 5: TOWARD VHAVENDA VERSION OF CHRISTIANITY

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter the focus will be on Christianity within the context of the Vhavenda clan. The researcher will seek to analitically present the Vhavenda version of Christianity as compared to the missionary concept, or in a general sense an African vs Western perspective of Christianity.

This chapter also discusses the supremacy of Jesus Christ as the chief ancestor of all ancestors. Various beliefs will be compared in order to clarify different views of Chistianity.

5.2. Belief in God

In the foregoing Chapters it was clearly indicated that the Vhavenda version of Christianity was not in line with that of the missionaries. The Venda Christians' faith is definitely informed and coloured by their traditional religion.

The Vhavenda understood the Christian God in terms of the traditional concept of Nwali as a creator of the universe. Among Vhavenda Christians, Nwali is regarded as the one who ensure their survival in this world. Vhavenda Christians regard God as Father. This is evident in the prayers of the Independent Churches They say *Khotsi Ramaanda* (Father the Almighty). Some even go to the extent of saying "Baba Ramaanda".

By implication God is respected and upheld as a living person, as the Vhavenda address him as "khotsi" (Father who is in heaven) as in the Lord's Prayer.

Harm was unquestionably done by the pioneering missionaries in Venda when the name Nwali for God was neglected, as has been indicated in Chapter Two.

Nwali was regarded as a Supreme Being by the Vhavenda. Moreover, the name Nwali has been associated with cultic observance from time immemorial. The concept of a Supreme God was of fundamental significance to the indigenous people.

As the missionaries associated Nwali with heathen oracles of some kind, it was indeed very difficult if not impossible for them to persuade the Vhavenda to accept Christianity. As an example, I may cite the case of Chief Makhado. A conversation between Chief Makhado and Michael Buys reveals clearly that Makhado regarded himself as a believer in Nwali and therefore not as a heathen. The Dutch Reformed Church Missionary consequently failed to persuade Makhado to accept the new religion. Another factor which worsened the situation was the use of the name Mudzimu with reference to God.

The Vhavenda Christians believing in God as the Supreme Being easily identify Him with the Jahweh of Israel. They have believed in him since before the dawn of Christianity. "Before the advent of Christianity, the Vhavenda believed in a Supreme Being, Khuzwane, who had created all things and can be compared to the Hebrew Jahweh" (Benso 1979:34).

To the Vhavenda Christians, God could be referred to by three names, Khuzwane, Raluvhimba and Nwali and these posed few problems to them when they were converted to the new Christian religion.

To the Vhavenda God was not a Deus Otiosus. The Vhavenda believed in a God who was not remote from his people. The God they believed in, walked and travelled with his people during their migration from Central Africa to what is Venda today. The Vhavenda's faith in Nwali was reinforced by the miracles performed by the Ngom-Lungundu (sacred drum) which they carried along in their exodus from their place of origin.

According to Mudau (1940: 10) Ngoma-Lungundu was the sacred drum of the Vhasenzi, who had brought it with them from the North, from Matongoni or “the graves”. Their king was greatly feared by all his people for he could work miracles with the drum of the gods. Mudau, a devoted Christian and member of the Lutheran Church, evidently believed that Ngoma-Lungundu could work miracles and protect the Vhavenda against the enemies they came across on their journey.

As has been mentioned, the liberating actions of Jahweh, who acted as warrior to destroy the enemies of Israel, convinced the Jews that He was a caring God. This coincides with the Vhavenda’s view of Nwali. The Vhavenda regarded Nwali as their earthly king who could give instructions and directives like the God of Israel. Mudau (1940: 10) quotes the following:

“Fear nothing, everything will go well. The important thing is Ngoma-Lungundu, which will help you greatly. Whenever enemies trouble you, beat the rain-making drum, and everything that lives will be seized with fear and fall down as in death, excepting you yourselves. In this way all the country will fear to undertake anything against you, because you are my grandchildren.”

Both the white missionaries and the Vhavenda Christian leaders see the belief in the miracles which emerged from Ngoma-Lungundu as a problem, whereas the Vhavenda Christians who still uphold their tradition see it as no threat to their new Christian religion.

The Vhavenda Christians do not see any difference between their migratory journey from Central Africa to Venda under the guidance of Nwali and that of the Israelites during their Biblical Exodus from Egypt. The Vhavenda Christians, still

claim that the same God who created the universe and rules in Venda and elsewhere is the same God who promised to make the Israelites people and give them a land.

The Vhavenda Christians are convinced that God is in control of history; he changes political leaders, and liberates those who are oppressed. Older Vhavenda believe that God is the great manager of all the, and is their God who identifies with them. The younger generation, however are sceptical about the Biblical God whom they regard as the God of the whites.

The Vhavenda Christians do not view God as an idea or thing, they regard him as one who is involved in the affairs of the world, and keeps it running. He did not make the world to abandon it again. He cares for what He has created. The living-dead are not regarded by the Vhavenda as God but they are under the supervision of God. Although the missionaries of old belittled the Vhavenda's ancestors and poured scorn on their idolatry, calling it futile and powerless, the Vhavenda Christians regard God as a Mighty King over all ancestors, who must be appeased either by prayer or offerings.

5.3. Christ, the prime ancestor

It is therefore not surprising that some Vhavenda regard Jesus as the prime *ancestor*, for he once lived in a particular country, Israel. He moved amongst the people and healed the sick. The people who were suffering cried to him and were saved.

Through his incarnation, Jesus became the prime ancestor. Christ, during his time on earth, gave himself unconditionally to the people, transforming their culture.

Maboee cites a Basotho fable which portrays Christ as an ancestor, one who would be perfectly acceptable to the indigenous people of Venda too:

“Senkatana chose to die leaning against one of those wooden poles. Why? He was a leader, protector and sustainer of his subjects by always seeing to their well-being. The Cross of Christ, made of wood, has been of great importance in the salvation of mankind” (1982: 09).

Senkatana is depicted as a hero, and a great sustainer of his people, like Christ who undertook the work of reconciliation, breaking the enmity of God and man. The work of reconciliation is performed by a person who once lived with the people, and experienced all their social needs. Chief Senkatana felt pity for his subjects and as a result he was prepared to die for them. Maboee argues that, potential Basotho converts should have been approached by the missionaries in this manner:

“They would have then addressed the Basotho as follows: For as we arrived among you from our own countries we found you relating the fable of Moshayanyama Senkatana to your children around the evening fires. The same Moshayanyama Senkatana, we declare unto you as Christ. The Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. A king and deliverer of mankind from Sin (Maboee 1982: 9).

Had the first missionaries who brought the new religion to the indigenous people adopted the approach used by St Paul at Athens, progressing starting from the known gods as worshipped by the local people to the unknown one, Christ would probably have been well received as the Son of God, the prime ancestor and the redeemer of mankind.

As explained in Chapter three, a person who attains the status of an ancestor should have left offspring behind and have been of a mature age. Christ is accepted as an ancestor because he was a hero and king of kings; as a result he superseded all the ancestors. In the Vhavenda culture and tradition a man who liberated and protected his people was accorded the status of “muhali” (the brave one, or hero) eventually used as laudatory epithet for a chief (kholi). No wonder, E. Mudau in his argument emphasized that was the king of the Vhavenda.

The chiefs are also regarded as the ancestors of their tribe. If the missionaries had adopted the positive approach of portraying Christ as the Vhavenda prime ancestor, the Vhavenda would have easily accepted him as the Son of God and their redeemer.

The missionaries, however, failed to use this concept as their point of departure. It is a well-known principle that a good teacher should take his students from the known to the unknown. The kingdom of the ancestry would have formed a good basis for the kingdom of Christ, and the Vhavenda would readily have accepted Jesus as the ruler of the ancestors.

The ancestors will always be in the minds of the Vhavenda Christians, and they have always formed part of their daily lives. The matter of the ancestors was mishandled by the pioneering missionaries. They associated the veneration of the living dead with idolatry. In reality whenever an African speaks of the offering to the ancestors, he refers to personal contact. The living dead is a person who once lived and cared for his family and community. The ancestors are what the Vhavenda Christians regard as fathers and mothers who once cared for their offspring.

The Hebrew tradition also advocated respect for the ancestors, when Jahweh revealed himself to Moses, he indicated to him that he was the God of his

forefathers: You must tell the Israelites that it is YEHOVAH the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, who has sent you to them” (Exodus 3:15).

It can be stated without doubt that the Israelites were in line with African tradition in the veneration of their ancestors. When Moses discovered that Jahweh was the God of his forefathers, Abraham and his lineage who were the departed ones, who stood in close proximity to the living God, he was convinced that the living God had revealed himself to him.

Undeniably the power of the living dead is indelibly impressed on the hearts of the Vhavenda Christians. It does not matter how educated or committed to the Christian faith one is, when good fortune, seems to be exhausted, the living dead are consulted. To ward off the tormenting spirits of the living dead is a common practice amongst most of the Vhavenda, if not all. This reveals that to the Vhavenda, the ancestors are living people who should not be disturbed but should always be left in peace. Many people try to ensure that the ancestors are kept as far away as possible.

It is therefore not surprising that one sees in many obituary notices “sleep well” or “rest in peace”. The Vhavenda are inclined to pronounce such messages as, “sleep well, go in peace, and rest in peace”. According to the Vhavenda Christians, the deceased is undertaking a journey, no wonder he is given such messages of farewell.

The point at issue now is how Jesus Christ is viewed in the context of the ancestors. The Vhavenda Christians regard him as the prime ancestor, for he supersedes the ancestors in all respects. It would have been of great significance had the missionaries introduced Jesus as the Prime Ancestor.

Historically they would have been correct because he lived with the people as a human being. The approach adopted by the missionaries regarding ancestors is questioned by Maboe (1982: 26027), who writes:

“It is quite plain here that had the missionaries realized and understood the Basotho view on family life, they would have had no difficulty in comprehending the role of the Badimo, and thereby being able to introduce the Great Intercessor and Mediator Christ, the Son of God. For there is One God, and one Mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as ransom for all, to be testified in due time (1 Timothy 2: 5-6). The Basotho, if approached on these lines, would respond wonderfully to the Christ who functions as the true mediator superseding even the Badimo”

This statement by Maboe is alarming if not terrifying, for the missionaries’ denial of Jesus as the prime ancestor is a challenge confronting every Christian Muvenda. As long as the indigenous theologians continue along this line, the confusion will remain and Christians will find themselves belonging nowhere. The question here is one of understanding the correct meaning of the word ancestors. The missionaries ought to have been conscious of the indigenous people’s traditional religion, which could have been transformed into Christianity. The fact that the Vhavenda are human beings whom Christ died for, should have been taken into consideration.

Van Rooy takes a divergent view, and has no room for ancestrolotry .Neither does he make an attempt to use it as a scaffolding to build Christianity from African traditional religion. According to him “Africans cannot understand Christ from knowledge of ancestrolotry. He indicates that:

“Ancestrolotry worship or communication with ancestors tends to supersede Christ as mediator and render his priestly office meaningless, as has been demonstrated many times in Christian communities which practise the veneration of saints ... Africans cannot accept Christ alongside the ancestor Spirits (1971: 87)

Much harm is done when the local customs and traditional beliefs are not taken into consideration. Van Rooy, does not take into consideration that the African society is a single entity and continues as a unit which aware of all its its members, the ones who are living and the living-dead.

Moila confirms the belief that Jesus is the prime ancestor:

“God is the single unique entity and the bearer of all moral characteristics expected of human beings. He is the only source and giver of power. God rules both the living and the dead and his kingdom combines the two. Since God is unapproachable to the living, the dead are the only means through which they can approach him. Thus the Pedi perceive Christ as the prime ancestor; He is not God (1987: 85).

In support of Moila’s point of view, it may be mentioned that Christ is revealed as the Prime Ancestor in the historical events which were commonly narrated to the communities who lived in New Testament times. Similarly, the Vhavenda Christians, though perhaps operating from a religiously pluralistic point of view, still claim that Jesus Christ is the prime ancestor who operates in Venda as elsewhere and that he is accepted as the creator and liberator.

Another aspect which makes Jesus so easily accepted as the Prime Ancestor, is the fact of his humanity which is clearly illustrated by his birth of a human mother,

his physical emotions, and his need for sleep and food. While here on earth he performed many miracles.

His extraordinary power and wisdom qualify him for the status of prime ancestor. While on earth, he did great things which normal human beings would never have done. His power superseded that of all other ancestors before and after his death.

5.4. Belief in the Holy Spirit

The idea of the Holy Spirit in the minds of the Vhavenda is somewhat vague. They speak of “Muya wa Mudzimu” as the spirit of God. Their belief in the Spirit of God was not in line with the perception of the Holy Spirit as viewed by the missionaries. As a result the missionaries concluded that the idea of the Spirit of God was unknown to the Vhavenda.

According to Vhavenda tradition a medicine man does not derive his power of healing from his own wisdom. He is imbued with the Spirit of God. Maboe (1982: 12) writes:

“A serious study of Mosotho medical practitioner or medicine man as he is usually called is a good exposition of how the Basotho thought of the Holy Spirit of God.”

This is another indication that the Basotho, like the Vhavenda, believed that the medicine man was always in contact with the living dead who in turn acted as intercessors with the living God. The medicine man too, believed that he was guided by the spirit of God to heal the sick.

The foundation was well prepared for the missionaries to have expanded on the knowledge and the authority of the Spirit of God, when they introduced the Holy Spirit as the Third Person of the Trinity.

Established churches, however, condemned the consultation of traditional healers or traditional medicine men or the so-called witchdoctors by their converts.

The Vhavenda Christian in the past consulted medicine men secretly, but nowadays church members consult them whenever it is necessary without any fear, for they do not see any conflict. They believe that a medicine man works with the spirit of God.

Van Niekerk (1996: 34) cites an example from a publication of M.V. Gumede (with a B.A. from the University of Natal and MB ch B, from the University of the Witwatersrand). In his book *Traditional healers*, Gumede reports that the role of Africa's traditional healers has become more important and that more than 80% of black patients first consult traditional healers before knocking at the doors of Western medical practitioners for help. This also confirms that many Africans still look to traditional beliefs for answers to their problems.

Maboe (1982: 12) in support of this says: "The respect given to the doctor was far more than that given to the chief. He was regarded as a servant of God, a link between man and the Badimo who were intercessors between man and God. A present day priest still wields more respect than the chief in a Basotho Christian community".

This is because he is a doctor of the soul. That a medicine man is more respected than royalty is supported by the Vhavenda saying: "*Vhukololo a vhu ambuwi hu ambuwa vhunanga*" (The medicine man's craft can ford a river, but

not royal rank). This means that when abroad, a man is honoured for his ability but not for his rank at home.

The Vhavenda Christians incorporate practices and beliefs from their indigenous culture and traditions into their religious views and thereby add relevance to their understanding of the Holy Spirit as a dimension of the Trinity, while discarding the evil spirits and demons as manifestations of the Spirit of God. Vhavenda Christians believe that the devil has a host of evil spirits which can deceive the children of God and mislead them. This idea is well clarified in I Tim 4:1 “Now the spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from their faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.”

5.5. The worship of God

In their adoration of God, Vhavenda Christians express their sentiments in hymns and songs. The Vhavenda, like any other African group, have their church music accompanied with expressions of joy and other emotions. Most of the hymn books which were used by the mainline churches or old established churches no longer appeal to them; instead they prefer hymns which move them emotionally. It is during this singing period that people are filled with a spirit of reverence which leads to the fulfillment of their ultimate purpose of praising God.

Music lends liveliness to the Vhavendas’ faith in God. It needs to be revived in the heartbeat of joy. Instruments such as guitars and drums as well as body movements inspire the members of the church. The missionaries’ style was utterly foreign to the indigenous people. Music which is coupled with movements of joy in the church reminds the Vhavenda that they are free and have been liberated from sin, and from the clutches of the oppressors.

Music is an expression of creativity and revives the spirit of hope and survival through endurance. It ultimately focuses on the reality of liberation. Beyond the oppression and distress which the Vhavenda have endured during the colonial rule, in Christ they found such profound overflowing mercy and empathy.

When missionaries came into contact with the Vhavenda they did not make use of the local melodies, styles and structures, instead European hymns were literally translated into African languages with the result that many converts did not enjoy them.

Neill asks, “Why did the missionaries reject the local form of music and introduce inspired Western tunes which are the expression of an entirely different musical idiom?... When missionaries have tried to set Christian words to the old tunes, the converts have been horrified” (1970: 23).

The music of the indigenous people which was not associated with Christian words was regarded as evil and blasphemous by many missionaries. But it is important to note that the situation has now changed. Following the recent advent of Pentecostal Churches such as the Zionists and Baptist churches both members of the mainline churches and the Independent churches are now at home when they sing hymns as the music has been greatly influenced by African tunes and styles e.g. there is now a lot of handclapping in church music, a practice which was never accepted in mainline churches before.

The Vhavenda Christians reinforce their faith by acknowledging the mighty acts of God when the sick are healed through prayer. The independent churches regard this healing as part of the Gospel, when this is coupled with interpretations of dreams. These concepts which are practised by the Zionists appeal to the Vhavenda whose belief in the life hereafter poses no threat to the Christian faith.

Moila (1991: 36-37) indicates that:

“Zionists churches interpret salvation primarily in terms of health and vitality. As representatives of the independent churches say, “Everybody knows that healing is very important in our churches”. In general most of the independent churches offer salvation here and now. In contrast Pedi Orthodox Christians interpret Christianity as primarily concerned with other world Salvation. Thus they use prayer to alleviate hardships rather than to remove them completely. On the other hand, the Zionists use prayer to drive out evil spirits, witchcraft familiars, or the power of sorcery.”

In support of Moila’s statement, it may be mentioned that the independent churches have drawn many members from the mainline churches. This is in response to the desire of the indigenous people for a style of worshipping God more suited to their own tradition, in an atmosphere that makes the church service distinctly African.

5.6. The Vhavenda Christian funerals

The Vhavenda Christian funeral has shifted from the usual traditional funerals. The burial service in the Venda culture was treated as a very private matter, only the closest adult relatives and neighbours attended the service. The rest of the people would rather come to pay their condolences after the burial service. They could come two days or a week after the burial services “u da u imela” (To come and pay their condolences).

The Vhavenda Christian funerals are different. Short devotional prayers are conducted in the evening during the week, before the funeral services which are in most cases held on Saturdays. These evening prayer services are a means of

consoling the bereaved. On Friday some conduct night vigil services but this practice is not common with the mainline churches, unlike the independent churches, who have taken this custom from the urban areas.

On the day of the funeral the corpse will be fetched from the mortuary and brought to the home of the deceased so that it could rest for a while before it is taken to the graveyard for burial services. This practice of giving the deceased rest, has been a long standing tradition, even Christianity has failed to break this one, *Mufu u a awedzwa* (The deceased should be rested).

To the Vhavenda the deceased is not dead; thus he or she must rest at his home as a last tribute to his relatives and the bereaved. The bereaved, especially the relatives, will file past the coffin (which is partly opened to reveal the head of the deceased). The viewing of the face of the deceased is known as “u tovhowa”.

In Chapter two, Van Warmelo, a well trained ethnologist, is quoted. He reports that the procession to the graveyard should have resting places, to give the deceased a rest before arrival at the burial place. In 2001 , I experienced such a practice, where the Roman Catholic Priest who conducted a burial service for a member of his congregation at Manavhela Village (Ha-Kutama), requested the pall-bearers to stop and rest on the way to the graveyard.

Some Vhavenda Protestant theologians viewed this action with scorn for they could not understand the action adopted by the priest. To the Vhavenda this was not a matter of concern as it had been the practice from time immemorial. It is therefore not surprising that they welcomed the action taken by the priest.

A short devotional service is usually conducted at the home of the deceased. After the church service the procession files to the graveyard, where the burial

rites are conducted. Some of the messages read from the wreaths would indicate that the deceased is not dead but undertaking a journey to a place yonder.

Other messages would read “Prepare accommodation for us, we are also following you”, (Ni ri lugisele madzulo, na rine ri do ni tevhela). The reading of the words on the cards and flowers should be interpreted as a way of comforting the bereaved and addressing the shock caused by death.

In some cases the aim is misdirected, some people want their presence to be felt when their messages from the wreaths and cards are read. Zide (1984: 112) support this argument when he indicated that:

“It was also established that in many cases the people present at the funeral that had sent telegrams, cards, letters, etc. anxiously waited for these to be read out. In many cases people are more concerned, about this than consoling the bereaved family. This concern to hear their messages read has partly come about because funerals are today social events in contrast to the very personal and family atmosphere that existed in the olden days”.

Traditionally, as I have already mentioned, funerals were treated with respect, and were a family affair, but of late they have lost their true meaning. They have been turned into social gatherings, with the result that sometimes, a proper funeral atmosphere is absent. In fact the way, in which some funerals are conducted, they resemble wedding parties except that there is some solemnity in the faces of the bereaved.

The bereaved family and women present sprinkle earth in the grave whilst the men fill the grave with shovels. This act of sprinkling of the soil with hands is a way of bidding the deceased farewell. If it happens that the deceased still has

traditional ties with his relatives, the “Makhadzi” (Aunt) will come forward to complete the traditional burial rituals.

This action may embarrass some officiating ministers of religion but the Vhavenda Christians will not be surprised by her action, as it is an accepted practice amongst the Vhavenda.

When everything is over, all the people who were at the graveyard are expected to go to the deceased’s home. Although the Vhavenda Christians are convinced that death is a necessary end, the concept of purification after burial services is still embedded in their minds. The people will wash their hands, even those who never took an active part in covering the grave.

My informant M. Gombani indicated to me that, “If you don’t wash your hands death will occur at your home.” Some are under the impression that they wash their hands in preparation for what they are about to eat, as generally food is served after funerals, but traditionally the Vhavenda do not eat at funerals, as there is no cooking. “Tshikuni tsho dzima” (the splinter has gone off). The act of washing of hands after a burial is confirmed by Maboe (1982: 34):

“From the graveyard all mourners are expected to go to the home of the deceased to wash their hands, men and women using different basins, so as to purify themselves from the contamination caused by death. Two female informants, both Christians, (45 and 49 years) of Maphumulo Village near Stanger (Durban) mentioned that in some cases people are so westernised that they use soap for washing their hands.”

Both Christians and non-Christians still observe the practice of washing hands after a funeral service. It is a widely accepted custom.

5.7. Christian status of ancestors after burial

The Vhavenda understanding of the status of the ancestor from a Christian point of view is evident from the burial services practiced by the Vhavenda Christians.

The erection of tombstones is becoming a common practice in Venda. My informant Samuel Nedzamba who is an active member of the church indicated that, “erecting a tombstone for the departed, it is to appease the spirit of the deceased”. When speeches are made during the unveiling of these tombstones, one often hears the speakers say, “You have appeased the spirit of the deceased, and you will have blessings from now on. The problem at this juncture is not with the Vhavenda Christians but with the officiating minister. The deceased who has now attained higher status by being an ancestor will be satisfied with the work performed by the living.

My informant, an ordained Minister of the Methodist church, once found himself taking part in the thanksgiving offerings. Early in the morning members of this church offered sacrifices at the grave of the deceased who was buried with Christian rites. After this, the minister was invited to officiate at a devotional service at home, after which he enjoyed a meal with them.

Maboe in support of this practice indicates that:

“The Basotho, finding no wrong in their sacrifices, still carry on with it, though under a different cloak in order to mislead the church. They now call it “Tafole” (Table or better still, “party”). Moreover, the priests or ministers often join these parties. When this happens, the Basotho Christians laugh in their sleeves to see men who condemn PhaBadimo as heathen, now feasting and drinking happily (1982: 34).

It has been established that Africans in their traditional religions are convinced that their living-dead have now attained high status. The missionaries should have made use of this belief as a point of departure to bring in Christ as the ultimate ancestor.

5.8. Conclusion

It is interesting to note that almost all religious denominations point to the existence of a Supreme Being, but only differ in their approach. The Supreme Being may have different qualities dependent on the given group. The different identities ascribed to this Supreme Being cannot be dealt with in this dissertation, however.

The researcher therefore arrives at the conclusion that there is a common belief in the existence of some Supreme Being, but who he is and how he relates to each group depends on their understanding of the nature of that relationship.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1. Introduction

Through this research, the researcher wanted to clarify the understanding of the Christian message in Venda, to present a study of the traditional concepts of God and of life hereafter among the Vhavenda, with reference to the impact of these concepts on the Christian churches.

The main research question for this study was twofold, firstly the question was asked, whether it is possible for one to dismiss the traditional belief in God and in the life hereafter when one becomes a Christian. Secondly, the question was posed, whether it is possible for one to be a genuine Christian while still adhering to the traditional belief in the life hereafter.

The conclusions and recommendations will now be discussed:

6.2. CONCLUSION

It has been revealed in this thesis that, although the missionaries made a significant contribution in bringing the Gospel to Venda, neither the main tenets of Vhavenda traditional religion, nor the Venda language, was given proper consideration. The missionaries for instance, committed a grave error, by using the name Mudzimu (Modimo in N. Sotho) for God, instead of Nwali, which had been used by the Vhavenda to refer to their supreme Being. The missionaries regarded Nwali as a pagan god. This undoubtedly caused confusion at first, as the Vhavenda of Zimbabwe used the name Nwali for God, whilst the South African Vhavenda used Mudzimu for God as indicated above.

It has been mentioned that the attributes associated with the names of Nwali are those of an immanent and transcendent being, ever present in his own creation. Nwali is involved in and concerned about the activities and social welfare of his people. Nwali preferred to manifest himself in specially selected places in the caves, groves or mountains of Venda, although it has been noted that some of Nwali's shrines were under the control of the Vhavenda in Zimbabwe. The main Nwali cult in Venda was centred at Makonde and this is believed to have been established by the Dzivha and Mbedzi clan, who migrated with their expertise in the priesthood of serving Nwali from Matopo in Zimbabwe.

In this study it has been clearly indicated that missionaries and Church leaders had a problem regarding the life after death as viewed by the Vhavenda, whereas the Vhavenda did not dismiss their belief in and understanding of life hereafter when they received Christianity. They became Christian although they still adhered to the Venda culture and tradition.

It has been shown that although the Vhavenda believe in the life hereafter, they acknowledge that the Biblical God is in charge of both the world of the living and that of the living-dead. This research reveals that the belief in the life after death is not a threat to the faith of the Vhavenda Christians, but ultimately leads to the Vhavenda's belief in the Supreme God, as the source of power, the creator and the redeemer of the cosmos. In similar fashion the Vhavenda belief in the world of the living dead, has had a profound impact on Christians in Venda.

After a careful study of Venda burial ceremonies and taboos as well as the deep seated meaning behind these ceremonies, the conclusion is reached that they do not clash with Biblical customs. Moreover, even after becoming Christians, many church members still hold these customs, as well as the ideas behind them, remain dear to Church member.

The close link between the living and the dead that is so important in Venda tradition remains important to Vhavenda Christians. Having examined the world of the living-dead and the role that the ancestors play in the lives of the living , the researcher reaches the conclusion that traditional belief serves to strengthen the Christian faith in the life hereafter and in the eternal destiny of man.,

Jesus is seen by Vhavenda Christians as the Prime Ancestor, and many traditional concepts and legends concerning the ancestors may serve to help Africans to understand the role that Jesus Christ, son of God, has played and still plays in reconciling us to God.

One important discrepancy, however, remains. The Christian eschatology differs from the traditional Venda belief, in a very important instance. While “eternal life “ for the Vhavenda means reaching back into the past, joining the living-dead whose lives are behind us, the Christian message reaches into the future, the second coming of Jesus Christ, the promise of a new Heaven and a new Earth.

Mbiti (1969: 27-28) says:

“ Traditional Africans consider time as a two dimensional phenomenon , with a long past and a dynamic present .The future as we know it is non - existent in traditional African thinking .The future does not constitute time since events which lie in the future are not yet experienced . In addition, it is only what has taken place or will shortly occur that matters more, than what is yet to be”.

What has taken place therefore (the past) is an elongation of the present and adds to the events that constitute time. Therefore, time is oriented toward the past rather than to the remote future. So, people tend to look more to the past to adjust their being (Parrinder 1969:80). Traditional Africans have no conception

that this universe will ever change or come to an end. Rather they look back from where they came. The universe is endless; nothing will bring history to a halt. As a matter of fact, people have nothing to fear and nothing to set their minds upon as far as the future is concerned. History moves from the present to the past

This has to do with the strong African sense of the past, and their very shallow view of the future. The past tense can be expressed in many ways, the future tense is weak, and refers to only a few months ahead.

The study further argues that the traditional belief in the life hereafter does not weaken one's faith in the Biblical God, as some theologians and missionaries have concluded. It has been suggested in the discussion that the belief in the life hereafter should be maintained because it strengthens one's faith in the Biblical God.

The veneration of the dead has often become a bone of contention between the Christian leader and the congregation, but it was categorically stated that the ancestors were not worshipped like Baal, the god of the ancient Semitic people, but were appeased when the people showed respect to the living dead. The living are convinced that the deceased have extra power as they are nearer to God, and they are now in possession of double power, the strength they had whilst they were still alive, and the power they acquired after death.

Death is just a process of removing a person from the present of his being into the remote past. He/ she go to the land of the dead, which is not different from this one. It is a duplication of this one and it is underworld and not Heaven.

He / She will join the deceased members of his /her family. Life will continue just as it has been. The land of the dead is beautiful since no one comes back. Death

is not feared but accepted as something natural and inevitable. After all, it is through death that one joins one's departed fellows.

Vhavenda Christians are delighted to be able to have access to Christ as their prime ancestor, because he is approachable and through him they ultimately will reach eternal life which is the destiny of all human beings.

Research for this dissertation has found strong evidence of osmosis between the traditional Venda religion and Christianity. Despite the warnings of missionaries, who were sometimes ill-informed, and despite the efforts of Church leaders who in Venda remain "pure" orthodox, the researcher has discovered that many Venda Christians still lean heavily on traditional concepts, in the same way traditional Venda religion is continually being influenced and even enriched by Christianity.

Had the missionaries made a study of Venda culture, and employed their findings in their mission strategy, there would undoubtedly have been less confusion, as cultural customs and practices would have been interpreted correctly, and ultimately the Gospel would have been accepted with greater ease in Venda.

6.3. Recommendations

The Church should not ignore the African culture of the indigenous people nor its practices, for these practices have impacted on the indigenous people for a long time and have always been part of their way of life.

Transformation, as a course of action, should take place amongst the ministers of religion, the laity and the exponents of African traditional religion. Coming together could encourage each group to get involved in the discussion of how the process of inculturation could be carried out. It should be realised that human

weakness causes people in both camps to be afraid of changes because, for example, they may fear that their beliefs would be thrown overboard. A concerted effort needed to find workable solutions.

In Jesus Christ, God transforms the Vhavenda to be acceptable as co-workers in the Kingdom of God. In the transformation process the Vhavenda traditional culture and practices should be respected and incorporated into the Christian religion.

Neither the missionaries nor the colonists in the past undertook sufficient research to enable them to work successfully amongst the Vhavenda. African culture should be nurtured, honoured and respected, thus encouraging the spread of Christianity. In the past, sadly, it was ignored, in the interests of imposing Christianity on the indigenous people. It should be accepted that there is a difference between Christianity and Western Culture. The Vhavenda culture, too, could be used as a vessel to facilitate the acceptance of Christianity.

This research further argues that the veneration of the living-dead does not weaken one's faith in the Biblical God, as some of the theologians and the missionaries concluded. Jesus is above the ancestors, for he rules the whole universe and not a particular clan or tribe.

The missionaries and the elders of the Church should not be overly impressed by the influx of new members who join the Church. Churches may appear to grow, while the hearts of congregants are not possessed by Christ. The Church should be realistic. Tribal, customs would eventually be enculturated into Christianity when the change of hearts takes place.

6.4. Areas for future research

I would like to indicate three areas for future research on the subject:

1. Where does healthy acculturation and contextualization turn into dangerous syncretism?
2. How to invite laity and clergy in a meaningful way to a dialogue on acculturation to promote successful acculturation?
3. There is heated debate about modern alternative burial ceremonies, using one grave for more than one body or even opting for the cremation of the body. It is a very emotive issue and needs careful study, research and dialogue.

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Appendix

List of interviewees

<u>Names</u>	<u>Locality</u>	<u>Position</u>
1. Mukumela Mabonyane	Dzimauli	Traditional Doctor
2. Tshinakaho Madadzhe	Ha-Kutama	Layperson
3. Phinias Munengwane	Ha-Mangilasi	Headman (Gota)
4. Mulatedzi Rammbuda	Ha-Rammbuda	Chief's Sister (Makhadzi)
5. Johannes Nmutamvuni	Tshidzati	Headman (Gota)
6. Luvhengo Ralikhuvhana	Mukumbani	Traditional Doctor
7. Maria Tshithukhe	Nzhelele	Chief's Sister (Makhadzi)
8. Mhuri Lawrence	Beitbridge (ZIM)	Reverend
9. Samuel Nedzamba	Ha-Mulima	Layperson