MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA & AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

EDITORS

Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni
Georgina Kwanima Boateng
Molly Manyonganise

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THE BELIEFS AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND THE ENVIRONMENT AMONGST THE KALANGA IN NORTH-EAST BOTSWANA

*Fidelis Nkomazana*¹

Abstract

The chapter examines how beliefs and religious practices have influenced communities in dealing with the environment in Botswana. The chapter demonstrates how religious practices and beliefs have in various ways promoted ecological sustainability. The chapter observes that attitudes and perceptions, especially those influenced by religion, are important determinants of ecological behaviours. Rural communities are particularly seen as possessing certain cultural contexts, attitudes and world views that have contributed positively towards environmental protection and sustainability. An examination of the role played by religious practices and beliefs, in the contexts of the Kalanga in the north-east of Botswana, reveals that religion contributes immensely towards positive public attitudes, perceptions and understanding of the environment.

Introduction

Grim and Tucker (2014:62-63) define the word ‘environment’ in relation to ecology as referring to the dynamic interactions of humans with nature. They also observe that, consequently, the interaction between religion and environment provides a framework for exploring diverse religious world views, symbol systems, rituals and ethics in relation to the processes of the Earth and the universe. The environment, according to Grim and Tucker (2014), is to be nurtured and refers to the Earth and the land on which everything stands and where humans and animals dwell and plants grow, as well as the water and food which are so essential for life. The Earth, therefore, gives life and eventually everything returns to it with deep connections through religious practices and rituals. They use the Latin word for religion, *religio* meaning “to bind back” or “to bind together”, to stress this. In this

1 Dr Fidelis Nkomazana is affiliated to the University of Botswana. [Email: nkomazaf@mopipi.ub.bw]

way, religion orients humans to the universe, grounds them in the community of nature and humans, and nurtures and transforms the processes and experiences of the environment (Grim & Tucker, 2014:37, 39).

Empirical studies show how beliefs, religious practices and world views amongst the Kalanga in the north-eastern part of Botswana contribute towards addressing environmental challenges and problems. The qualitative methods of collecting and analysing data were used to understand the dynamic interactions and relationship between the environment and religion.

The traditional ways through which ecological knowledge was imparted to subsequent generations are examined. Their effectiveness as methods are examined in the context of modernity and the influence of Western education and culture. The Kalanga strongly believe that indigenous ways of addressing ecological problems were relevant. The challenge is that these indigenous beliefs and religious practices are waning, with many people influenced by Christianity and Western education. Despite this new development, these beliefs and religious practices remain active in the life and thought of the people. The conclusion of the chapter is that neither traditional nor modern scientific modes are adequate on their own in addressing ecological problems. Synergy between the two is necessary.

The chapter argues that religious practices and beliefs significantly influence a community's understanding and experience of climate and adaptation to change, indicating the need for an inclusion of such information in education addressing such adaptation. Certain beliefs and practices were identified from the interviews with participants in north-east Botswana that contributed towards implementing positive environmental conservation measures. It was found that indigenous communities regarded themselves as religious, saw climate as a natural process that is governed by God, and thus influenced members of the community to do those things that will impact on the environment positively.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are to

1. discuss the origins and development of sacred places and identify their locations in the Kalanga region of the north-eastern part of Botswana;
2. examine the impact of beliefs and religious practices associated with sacred places and how they contribute to the conservation of the environment; and
3. assess critically how the introduction of Christianity and modernity have affected and weakened indigenous beliefs and religious practices, and the implications of this for the environment.

Methodology

This study on sacred sites was conducted using qualitative methods as well as interviews and observations. In some instances, a questionnaire was used to investigate how the ideas and stories people tell about the origin, development and purpose of the sacred sites developed (Carmichael, Hubert, Reeves & Schanche, 1994). This involved visiting some of these sites, observing their religious operations where possible, examining the religious objects associated with them and investigating how some of these were used to perform important rituals at these locations that are regarded as sacred (Carmichael et al., 1994). The study also provides an understanding of people's views and perceptions of the objects associated with the sites. During the interviews, I asked the respondents to either relate their experiences of these practices or what they were told by their parents about the religious significance of these sacred sites (Carmichael et al., 1994). They were asked to elaborate on the procedures in performing ritual practices at or near these sacred sites and their understanding of the social, political and religious significance of this. The statements, which are belief systems expressed in terms of practices, were collected through interviews with participants, as well as through observations of rural communities in the Kalanga region with reference to the sacred sites.

Literature review

Amanze (2002) pointed out that religion sees the Earth as very important in human lives. It is on the Earth that people plant their seeds for food and bury the dead, especially the *badimo* (ancestors), who are buried in her bosom. It is for this reason that religion is believed to punish those who abuse the Earth. Amanze (2002) states the name for the Supreme Being amongst the Batswana is *Modimo*, who they say is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe (Mbiti, 1977; Nkomazana, 2005; Setiloane, 1976). He goes further to make a close link between religion and the environment, saying:

The environment is the area of action of both spiritual as well as physical beings supposed to interact with one another in harmony and reverence. By and large, the environmental processes are essentially a result of the activities of the spiritual forces especially the ancestors, which impinge on the physical world in an intermittent way. Any form of defilement of the environment, it is believed, has its own consequences unless special rituals are performed to pacify the anger of the ancestors, who are the guardians and custodians of what God has created.

(Amanze, 2002:302)

Another important scholar who discusses the relationship between religion and the environment is Parrinder (1969), who argues that in Africa land is generally considered sacred, because it is believed to belong to the *badimo*. It is for this reason

that in Africa land was not to be sold, because doing that would displease the *badimo*. For both Amanze (2002) and Parrinder (1969), sacred sites as well as their environments such as mountains, hills, rivers, trees and special rock formations are not only associated with spirits, but are also believed to be endowed with sacred mystical powers. Discussing the religious significance of land amongst Africans, Kenyatta in his book *Facing Mount Kenya* (cited in Amanze, 2002) says that Africans depend entirely on the land as it not only supplies them with the material needs of life, but also provides spiritual and mental contentment. Amanze (2002) observes that African religions have the tendency to promote close contact with the cosmos. For him, nature – which refers to the sun, the moon, the stars, the Earth, animals and plants – greatly influences people's religiosity. He sees nature as possessing spiritual powers and providing a platform for people to communicate with the divine, which is done by turning to the natural objects such as trees for the worship of God. Amanze (2002) argues that it is for this reason that certain trees are highly respected and preserved. He argues that these objects cannot be cut or used for purposes other than for ritual performance. To support his argument, he quotes Zahan (1979), who writes:

The African believer does not willingly isolate himself from nature; nature must act without intermediaries or obstacles on the officiants and those who participate in the mysteries. As regulators of liturgical cycles, the sun, moon, stars, earth, animals, and plants directly influence people in prayer. That is why the idea of a temple as a place of worship is foreign to the African beliefs.

(Amanze, 2002:299)

Gelfand (1962) also makes an important contribution to this discussion. He suggests that trees have great religious symbolism and that they are a symbol of life, steadfastness, permanency, immortality and fertility. He observes that certain ritual activities take place under a tree for its shade and other benefits, thus playing an important role in the religious life of the people. He therefore concludes that the environment is a sacred phenomenon.

Amanze (2002) takes the issue of the religious significance of the environment further by citing Zahan (1979), who writes that

[i]t is curious to note that while in geographical terms the hydrography of Africa makes it a land of contrast (humidity and dryness being found there to extremes) Africa can also reveal an astonishing uniformity if we consider the purely religious value of water ... men consider it with respect. Springs, streams, rivers, lakes and ponds constitute the great "aquatic temples" of African religions. Each possesses its own meaning.

(Amanze, 2002:300)

Gelfand (1962) draws our attention to the fact that water had religious significance everywhere in Africa. It is life and the source of life for plants, animals and human life. It purifies, restores, cleanses and regenerates.

Finally, it must be mentioned that a wide range of literature has confirmed this connection between religion and environment (Amanze, 2002; Campbell, 1968; Larson, 1971; Livingstone, 1857; Mackenzie, 1971; Setiloane, 1976). Mbiti (1977) and Setiloane (1976) take the matter further and observe that in African traditional religions humanity and religion are interwoven. In their view, the natural phenomena and nature itself are inextricably part of African beliefs and religious practices.

Theoretical framework

Identifying a theoretical framework for the relation between religious beliefs and environmental protection and conservation is critical for this chapter. You have nature/environment, on the one hand, and beliefs and religious practices, on the other. Bell (1992:v, quoting Geertz) concludes that “[i]n ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined ... turn out to be the same world”.

Mbiti (1977), in his book *African religions and philosophy*, observes that religious beliefs are so strong and influential that communities will conduct certain rituals and practices in order to reconcile with the ancestors. These rituals, according to Mbiti (1977), are a way of cleaning the environment where it has been polluted or desecrated. Religion warns of the consequences of disobedience in human plunder and greed in the usage of the environment and nature, and exploration of the Earth. Mbiti (1977) also points out that African traditional religions hold the view that there is reason to safeguard and protect the Earth, because people share it with the ancestors who are forever its guardians, defenders, and protectors. Ancestors are committed to see how the Earth is handled and treated. Both Mbiti (1977) and Setiloane (1976) point to the fact that in African traditional religions, humanity and religion are interwoven. They point out that natural phenomena and nature are inextricably part of African traditional religious beliefs.

African traditional religions therefore suggest a strong relationship between religious beliefs and the environment. Nature, which is an important part of the environment, forms part of God's creation. The relationship between nature and humanity is a pragmatic one. It must be a relationship of care, responsibility and stewardship. The concepts that can be drawn from these authors give the impression that there is a strong connection between humanity and nature. The responsibility that humanity has towards nature/environment is that of stewardship, which is about responsible use, no indiscriminate cutting of trees, no pollution of water sources, etc. The view expressed in this literature is that humanity cannot dominate nature negatively, that is, use it for personal gain and in a greedy way. A greedy use of nature has no care for what the consequences are. The *badimo* are believed to demand that humanity be caretakers and guardians of the resources of the Earth. All the aforementioned

writers underscore this relationship, where humanity is appointed and called upon to take care of the environment, which embraces both nature and the climate.

Religious beliefs and practices amongst Africans, therefore, show a strong or binding relationship between humanity and the environment. Failure to act responsibly as the stewards of nature is not only regarded as abuse of the environment, but can also result in punishment by the *badimo*. Humanity and African communities will not risk any conflict with the ancestors, who are believed amongst the Batswana to be agents of *Modimo*, the name of the Supreme Being, the Maker and Creator of the universe. The literature shows that there is a demand for obedience and that disobedience is followed by punishment. This framework or understanding summarises the fundamental principles governing the religious beliefs and practices as well as the functions and operations of the sacred sites.

Presentation of the research findings about sacred sites

This section presents research findings on selected sacred sites identified in the north-eastern part of Botswana. Four sacred sites were studied: the Nzeze Shrine, the Tegwi Hill sacred site, the Luswingo (also known as Nlisi or Ntogwa) site, and the Lutambo Daka sacred site. The Mwali cult and their rainmaking practices and beliefs are very important to demonstrate that the environment is central to the functions of the sacred sites.

The Mwali cult

The key finding of the research is that the Kalanga, who populate much of the north-eastern part of Botswana, are predominantly connected closely to the Mwali cult, the dominant element in their rainmaking practices. Some scholars regard *Mwali* as a Supreme Being, equivalent to *Modimo* (Amanze, 2002; Nkomazana, 2005), while others see him as a spirit medium, acting as a link between the Supreme Being and the community, but higher in authority than the ancestors. Grand (1984:125), for instance, writes:

The general observation is that Mwali is an intermediary through whom people's complaints, gratitude and messages of any kind are conveyed to the high God. In other words, all matters pertaining to the welfare of the society are addressed to him. Thus, it is a common belief amongst societal members that he helps in times of need, for example, in times of natural disasters, plague and other forms of epidemics (which include pertinent poverty). In this respect he is the central figure in the Bakalanga socio-religious life, hence he is regarded a sacred figure.

The Mwali cult was for many years the strongest element that has kept the Kalanga closely connected in terms of religious traditions, especially when it comes to the

rainmaking rites introducing important environmental and ecological factors. Bhusumane (1985:34) writes that

[t]he Kalanga are well known for their proclamation and profession in one Supreme Being whom they call Mwali. They regard him as the Supreme, the Highest and He is the Creator of all things and manifests His power in the situations of the people. He can express His dissatisfaction about His subjects through suffering and other cosmological phenomena. He is the sole authority (and is also) a lawmaker and sustains the life of his subjects. He is the bringer of rain and all life comes from Him. He expects all His subjects to obey His law or otherwise suffer the consequences. The failure to observe these laws may result in cessation of rains most people believe. This can also be seen through a curse, famine, illness, death [of] livestock and so forth.

Both Grand (1984) and Bhusumane (1985) point out that there are several sacred sites connected mainly to the Mwali cult, which have heavily influenced the beliefs and religious practices of the Kalanga people. These ceremonies and practices were generally held during the summer season (Bhusumane, 1985).

■ *The role of the messengers and the mediator-priests*

Another important finding is the role that was played by the messengers and the mediator-priests of Mwali. In the 1970s, my own village Jackalas 2² used to participate actively in the Mwali rainmaking rites and ceremonies. At that time, the village religious leader was a highly respected old man by the name of Mtshaywa. He was regarded as the village messenger of Ntogwa. Whenever a delegation was sent to inquire from Ntogwa about a variety of issues, especially in matters pertaining to rain, he was always the leader of the team. Before they left, there would be a week of rain *indazula* dances, prayers and ceremonies accompanied by the singing of traditional rain songs in preparation for the visit to the Siviya Shrine,³ where Ntogwa was presented with the people's requests. Before the delegation set off for the journey, it was obligatory that traditional beer be brewed as part of the rainmaking ceremonies and carried by women who walked behind the village messenger. On arrival at the Siviya Shrine, the beer was presented as an offering to Mwali. Led by Mtshaywa, the women were instructed to leave the calabashes full of traditional beer at the entrance of the cave (shrine). As they walked towards the cave, the women and the men accompanying them were expected to walk backwards, with eyes focused on the ground. It was believed to be a taboo to look directly at the cave or in the direction from which the voice of the mediator-priest was coming. These rules were

2 Jackalas 2 is some 30 km north-east of Francistown. It is located along the Botswana-Zimbabwe border. It is a predominantly Ndebele-speaking community.

3 The Siviya Shrine was located at a hill along the Ramokgwebana River, along the Botswana-Zimbabwe border. It is located east of the Siviya village, which is about 16 km north of Jackalas 2 village.

to be strictly observed.⁴ The common dances performed at the *kgotla* included *ndazula*, *hooso/woso/hoso*, and *hosanna*.⁵ The dances were a way of preserving the cultural heritage of the community. They were accompanied by *ingoma* (traditional songs) and drums. The dance starts with a man dancing alone, but is then joined by others as the intensity of the drumming, singing and dancing gains momentum during the rainmaking ceremonies.

Another prominent messenger of Mwali, who actively worked in the villages of Mathangwane, Gulubane, Tlhalogang and Borolong, was Mokobo Mongwa (Tobela) (Grand, 1984). Mongwa and his children were accused of exploiting people by collecting gifts in the name of Mwali. This resulted in succession power struggles between Mongwa's children (Grand, 1984). In Senyawwe, Mbage, through visions and dreams, rose to the position of a messenger-priest of Mwali in the 1980s. The messengers are believed to possess the spirit and power of Mwali to be able to perform these spiritual functions, such as interpreting messages and addressing people in their language and conducting rituals. For the appeasement of Mwali, they did not only offer traditional beer, but also offered tobacco snuff, which was left at the entrance of the shrine. After the death of Ntogwa, snuff was replaced by money collected from the people. From this, it would appear that Mwali's taste was dynamic, changing with time. The use of money led to selfishness and greed on the part of the messengers and medium priests, which has contributed to the loss of interest in these beliefs and religious practices. Greed and selfishness were believed to pollute the environment and cause poverty, while enriching the medium-priests and the messengers. This resulted in curses and punishments in the forms of drought, pestilence, and other societal challenges.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the coming of Ntogwa, a famous medium priest of the Mwali rainmaking cult, whose invigorating leadership led to new hope and interest amongst the north-east Kalanga people. He started as a dancer, after which he became a messenger and he was later promoted to the office of a medium priest. It was during Ntogwa's time that the practices of the Mwali cult were revived and reinstated with strict religious observation. Through his leadership, people were encouraged to adhere to certain religious rules (Monyatsi, 1984).

With the coming of Ntogwa as the medium priest, coupled with the long distance to Njelele, new oracles were found, and old ones revived in the area. Elderly men and women, as well as virgin girl dancers carrying calabashes of traditional beer, visited the shrines as part of the rainmaking ritual and to consult Mwali's medium

4 Personal observation.

5 The Ndebele people settled amongst the Kalanga. This was not a Nguni acquisition of the dominant group, the Kalanga (Chebanne, 2019).

priest. Gifts were presented to the medium priest with thanksgiving, praise poems, and *woso* and *ndazula* dances as part of the offerings and sacrifices as demanded by Mwali, followed by their petitions. The following section briefly discusses four major shrines devoted to the Mwali rainmaking rites.

■ *The historical development of sacred sites*

The section shows that there is a relationship between the rituals, the place or location in which they are performed, and the environment. Moser and Feldman (2014:1) in their book, *Locating the sacred*, confirm that

[r]eligious ritual cannot be studied as a disembodied event or series of events – removed from its location and separate from the physical of its performance. Instead the ritual must be examined in its specific material and topographical context in which ritual action impacts its physical setting while, simultaneously, the location in which the ritual is enacted informs and guides the religious practice.

To localise the study of the relationship between religion and the environment, we will first examine the Nzeze sacred site, also known as the Mapoka Great Sacred Shrine (*daka*). The Nzeze shrine, which gets its name from the *nzeze* tree, is situated five kilometres from the Mapoka village. The shrine is just an open space where people meet for their religious practices. It lies under a big *nzeze* tree, which is of great religious significance in the rainmaking practices throughout the Kalanga region. It signifies fertility, knowledge, life source and resilience. It is said that at the official opening of the Nzeze Shrine, Mwali appeared in the form of a snake, an incident that is not only vividly remembered, but also highly regarded and repeated with great conviction by older members of the society. It is also said that the occasion was signalled by the ringing of bells, which was followed by heavy winds from which they say a big and mysterious snake suddenly appeared and was seen for some minutes before disappearing into the whirlwind again. This, they say, was immediately followed by a heavy rainfall.

It must be mentioned that the *nzeze* is a protected tree, believed also to possess important medicinal value. It is also believed to contribute towards creating climatic conditions that contribute to the formation of rain clouds. This is essential in that it encourages the community to preserve indigenous trees for purposes of enhancing positive climatic conditions and the general environment. Monyatsi (1984:26) has described the usefulness of the *nzeze* tree as follows:

Nzeze is originally a tree but has great significance with regard to rainmaking especially in the Bokalanga area. People of this area use Nzeze branches to remove the foam of beer from the calabashes when they consult Mwali. Sometimes the branches are used as *maabe* (a kind of skirt usually made of beads) for the virgins who collect mud from any place where rain might have

fallen, and splash the mud right through the village. They use Nzeze branches for splashing the mud and it is believed that rain is being attracted. There is a belief that during the hunting of *zwamwi* (things that are believed to stop rain by bad omen). Nzeze branches are collected and burnt with whatever they would be burning. The smoke is believed to bring new life or luck and as such, rain can fall. They value nzeze so much that they built a great daka (worshipping place) under a big nzeze tree in Mapoka.

Noli Gunda, one of my interviewees, described the Nzeze Shrine as follows:

When I grew up, I found people going to the Nzeze Shrine. A *hosanna*, called Gogo, used to regularly perform religious activities from this very place. Due to her old age, she had to be transported on a sledge to this place. After her death, she was succeeded by Njejema and later on by Ntogwa, who originated from Zimbabwe, and became a mediator-priest of the Mwali cult at the Tegwi hill, near Mapoka. Ntogwa was accompanied by a leading *hosanna* called Machakaile, who helped him in the performance of religious functions. As a mediator-priest, Ntogwa could pray for rains, predict the future and heal people from different diseases. In due course, a hut was built there for this purpose, but as time went on, especially with the death of Ntogwa, it was neglected and destroyed by cattle. There were many mysterious stories told about Ntogwa. Some were to the extent that at first nobody knew if he was a woman or a man because of his voice, which was like that of a woman. However, his gender was later realised when he impregnated a woman.⁶

The messenger was usually accompanied and assisted by both male and female dancers called *dziwosana* and young virgins who carried calabashes of traditional beer during ceremonies. The medium-priest praises Mwali and presents the people's petitions. This is accompanied by different rain dances: *dantshiwa*, *woso*, *kobodolo*, *ndazula* and *mayile* that are believed to cause rain. The dancers wear feathers and *nzeze* branches, which symbolise wind and rain. Following the dance, the wind is said to begin to blow to induce nucleated particles and condensation that form raindrops. Coupled with this, rain dances are believed to cause thunder that also results in rain formation. Ritual dances, therefore, are believed to influence the modification of the weather. The whistles and drums are believed to produce sounds that attract the attention of Mwali. Music and dances are generally believed to have special powers that control the formation of rain clouds and consequently forming raindrops.

The second sacred site studied is the Tegwi Hill that is situated at the Ramokgwebana village, which is about thirty kilometres east of the Mapoka village. The sacred place is beside the Tegwi Hill, about 200 metres from the Botswana-Zimbabwe railway line. The Tegwi Shrine was established by Vumbu Ntogwa, who originally came from Zimbabwe. The development of the shrine had greatly been influenced by

6 Noli Gunda, Mapoka Village Kgotsa, interviewed in 1995 and reviewed in 2018.

a place in Zimbabwe called Manyagwa, named after a man, called Manyagwa. The Manyagwa people are said to have believed in Mwali whom they accepted as a Kalanga, Ndebele and Shona God at the time. Ntogwa came to the Kalanga of Botswana and established his own shrine at Ramokgwebana on the Tegwi Hill. The Kalanga in Ramokgwebana welcomed this development and respected the Tegwi Hill Shrine, because they believed that their god stayed at that mountain. Prayers and sacrifices were, from that time until today, held annually at that place. However, the headquarters of the Mwali cult are still believed to be at Venda, at the Njelele Hill. The shrine came into existence because Ntogwa claimed that he had been sent by Mwali through a dream to be his messenger amongst the Kalanga of Botswana. He therefore claimed to have been given immense power and information from Mwali.

When asked how old the place was, one of my interviewees said:

I don't know how old the place is as everybody found the place in existence. Even John Mackenzie and David Livingstone found it in existence. Some people argue that Ntogwa did not establish the Tegwi Hill Shrine, but simply revived what was already known to exist among the Kalanga before he came as a mediator-priest.⁷

This could imply that the Kalanga people at Ramokgwebana were worshipping Mwali long before the advent of Ntogwa. They only went to the Njelele Shrine in Zimbabwe for major celebrations, which occurred only once or twice annually.

The third sacred site is known by any of the three following names: the Luswingo / Nlisi / Ntogwa Daka site. It is situated on a cave ten kilometres west of Jackalas 1, a village in the north-east district near the Ramokgwebana border. The sacredness of this place is said to have originated from the time when Vumbu Ntogwa, who was a *wosana* dancer, came from Zimbabwe and settled at Jackalas 1. Inspired by Mwali, he directed the people to that sacred place. Some huts were built by the community near the place to accommodate the visiting *Dziwosana*. The sacred place is now said to be in ruins, since Ntogwa left Jackalas 1 some years ago and settled in a different area of the north-east district. The status of the shrine declined even more after his death. Greed, negligence and irresponsibility on the part of his successors have been the major contributing factors. As a mediator-priest, he was seen as providing a link between the people and Mwali. The people would follow this man to this place and when they got near it, they would face in the direction of the sunset, that is, away from the sacred place. It was a rule. No one was supposed to face the cave. Disobedience was believed to lead to blindness or some other severe punishment. The people claim that Ntogwa used to get into the cave and present the petitions of the people to Mwali. It is said that the people could identify his voice from

7 Mushabi Thela, Mapoka Village Kgotla, interviewed in 1995 and reviewed in 2018.

that of Mwali. Ntogwa travelled with women and dressed like them; they danced together for rain and it is believed that it would rain immediately.

Lutambo Daka is the fourth sacred site, which is situated on a hill in the eastern part of Botswana within Jackalas 1 village. The sacred place developed when people went to the hill to ask for rain, thinking that the ancestors had forsaken them. A man named Nsinamwa, who was once one of the messengers of Ntogwa, led the people to the sacred place and told them what to do when they got there. They brought traditional beer, tobacco, beads and crushed grain for the ancestors. When their prayers were accepted, it is said to have rained heavily afterwards. It therefore became a practice for people to go there for sacrifices and prayers.

■ *Religious objects, stories and events*

These religious objects, stories and events demonstrate the power of sacred sites. The spirits of the ancestors are believed to manifest themselves in the environment in the form of wind, rain, etc. (Carmichael et al., 1994).

There are many stories and occurrences associated with sacred sites. One of the popular stories is about two people who went to the shrine without permission and disappeared until a black ox was sacrificed at the sacred place. Rituals performed in honour of Mwali were accompanied by dancing and singing. They included the following:

1. The brewing of traditional beer and placing some in a special calabash at the entrance of the sacred place to collect the empty container the following day, which is a sign that Mwali has accepted the offering.
2. The collection of money from the community for Mwali has become very popular, especially after the death of Ntogwa. This has become a source of conflict because of suspicions that the messengers are enriching themselves.
3. Animal sacrifice is an essential element of ritual performance in the Mwali rainmaking cult.
4. Thanksgiving ceremonies for the rains and harvest. Before or at harvest time, the messenger cuts corn cobs from the fields and ritually gives some of them to Mwali as first fruits (Grim & Tucker, 2014). It is for this reason that Grim and Tucker (2014:92) write: "The nurturing powers of Earth are displayed in all the world religious traditions that celebrate food with rituals of planting, harvesting and thanksgiving" (cited in Carmichael et al., 1994:173).

When asked to describe what takes place at the Tegwi Hill Shrine, Mr Muchoko (interviewee) said:

The only thing, which I heard when I went there because of sickness, was the voice that I could not tell whether it was from Mwali or somebody else in the cave. The voice was very soft and directed to the mediator. Rocks, trees and

other objects around the place are associated with the shrine and cannot be cut or removed. Everything in the vicinity of the shrine is said to be sacred. Nothing should be touched without the permission of the mediator-priest or his messengers. When the *dziwosana* dance during the ceremonies and other occasions, their dresses are not blown by the wind. They dance until they fall into a trance. Whenever Ntogwa finished asking for rain from Mwali, it immediately fell to clear his footprints. Although the rain falls behind and before him, he does not get wet. Ntogwa is said to have died at the age of about three hundred years old.⁸

For Carmichael et al. (1994), caves and mountains are regarded as the abode of spirits and source of life, shelter and protection. They are also often regarded as the entrances to the underground and places of origin of fertility spirits. The Nzeze Shrine has two important arenas nearby. The first is a flat rock, where the *maele* dancers have performed for years. The place of dancing, called *nonga*, has become visible. The second arena is used by men to roast the meat of the wild animals they killed during *zwamwi* hunting,⁹ while the women dancers underwent ritual cleansing exercises. This is performed as an offering to appease Mwali. This sacred place of worship was located by a man called Sikhuthu after people saw two snakes cross each other at that spot and then stand upright to face the people. From that time onwards, the people believed that the shrine was an abode of the ancestors and that it was to be treated as sacred, thus highly reserved and protected.

■ *Rituals, ceremonies and festivals*

Rituals, ceremonies and festivals conducted at the sacred sites continue to create a positive atmosphere and assert the relevance of the religious dimension in human life. Each major village was expected to brew traditional beer and take it to the shrine for a big ceremony. According to Mr Mushabi Thela,¹⁰ participants went there in the morning accompanied by the mediator-priest. All had to put on black blankets and clothes, the colour associated with the worship of Mwali. Ceremonies and rituals are held there several times a year. This takes place when the rains come, when the people prepare for ploughing, and when crops are ready to be harvested. People also visited the shrine when there were problems like famine, sickness and drought. During the prayers, dances and ritual practices, people faced the direction of the sun, which is away from the hill. On arrival at the shrine, they would squat with their backs to the entrance of the cave to avoid annoying Mwali. In fact, to reach that position they would have had to walk backwards and advanced until they sat facing away from the entrance of the shrine (cave).

8 Mr Muchoko, Mapoka Village Kgotla, interviewed in 1995 and reviewed in 2018.

9 *Zwamwi* hunting will be fully discussed in the following pages.

10 Mushabi Thela, Mapoka Village Kgotla, interviewed in 1995 and reviewed in 2018.

The mediator-priest enters the cave where he communicates the greetings and the requests of the community. Immediately afterwards a voice, usually thought to be that of Mwali, is heard. There are, however, allegations that the mediator-priest himself speaks with a deep voice from the cave using a drum, pretending to be Mwali. Critics give this as the reason why people are not allowed to sit facing the cave, when Mwali is supposed to be still speaking. They also see this as disrespect to Mwalithe and the cause of the current drought. The older generation, however, still insists that it is the voice of Mwali (Monyatsi, 1994). They regard those who question the authenticity of the voice as committing blasphemous acts punishable by death. They also believe that disobeying rules, such as looking towards the direction of the cave, might have, for instance, sand thrown into their eyes or they might experience bad omens (Grand, 1984). As Mwali spoke, the elders responded in praise and thanksgiving saying “*eh Thobela*” or “*Mbedzi*” (Bhusumane, 1985:36-39).

Special traditional beer and porridge were also brought as gifts to Mwali when people consulted the oracle. The calabashes were found the next day full of froth but without beer. The top layer of the porridge is also found removed, which is believed to be a sign that Mwali has accepted the offering. All these have played a major role in influencing the people’s attitude towards the sacred places, as well as to the environment around the sacred place.

■ *Precautions and measures*

There are precautions and measures to be observed before going to the sacred place. The messenger goes there first to report the visitors to Mwali before the people could come closer to the shrine. In addition, gifts and sacrifices of a goat, a cow, sheep or any other domestic animal have to be taken to the shrine to appease Mwali. After that, the *dziwosana* must dance to clear the way for the visitors.

The punishment for breaking the rules, such as climbing the Tegwi Hill without permission or for leisure, is believed to be a mysterious disappearance or some other misfortune that affects the person for life or sudden death. Carmichael et al. (1994) confirm that the landscape near or around the sacred places are deemed sacred, hence cannot be utilised for personal use, cut or burnt. These places are to be respected, preserved and protected by all. They use cemeteries and tombs as a typical example. These are places of power, which points to the intersection between the material world and spiritual world (Carmichael et al., 1994). My interviewee also observed that

[o]ne person actually lost his sense of sight and hearing after he went there without permission. He had to be led to the village by someone, who found him struggling to find his way home. He was blind and deficient in his hearing ability.

Another person, a white photographer, also went there without the permission from Mwali and became blind.¹¹

It is also believed that the anger of the ancestors may cause the whole community to face the wrath of Mwali. The consequences may be famine, sickness, drought, etc. Another interview pointed out that breaking the rules governing the shrine, exposed the person and the community to danger.¹² Because of the rules governing the usage and operations of the sacred place, only two elderly people in Jackalas 1 village were allowed to go there. The sick or people with problems could only go there with the consent of the elders or the mediator-priest himself.¹³

When a person broke the rules governing the sacred place for the first time, he/she was given a warning from Mwali. If the person failed to heed the warning, Mwali could punish him/her with blindness before getting to the site or by sending a violent storm to confuse their sense of direction. Those who accompanied the mediator-priest were supposed to remove their jewellery, glasses and shoes, since these items were said to offend Mwali. The headmen were responsible for granting people permission to visit the shrine after consulting the mediator-priest. Going there without permission is believed to be dangerous, since big and dangerous snakes are believed to guard the shrines against intruders. The rules, precautions and measures governing the sacred shrines therefore contributed towards conserving the environment. Sacred sites become part of people's culture over course of time, gaining more sacred significance and promoting ecological preservation (Carmichael et al., 1994).

■ *Effects of modernity and Christianity*

Before the advent of Christianity, Friday was generally observed as a religious day reserved for the worship of Mwali by the majority of people in the north-east. The coming of Christianity, especially the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) and the Roman Catholics in this region, led to new religious practices and observances. The SDA refused to observe Friday and declared Saturday as their day of worship and rest. The Roman Catholics insisted on Sunday instead of Friday, hence breaking Mwali's orders. *Dziwosana* used to receive gifts but at present things have changed. They now gain nothing from performing these duties. In the past, an ox was slaughtered and the *dziwosana* would be offered the blood and other parts of the animal as gifts. Today this has changed. One of my interviewees blamed these changes on modernisation and Christianity, which have affected the essence of community

11 Mr Muchoko, Mapoka Village Kgotla, interviewed in 1995 and reviewed in 2018.

12 Mr Nkawo, Mapoka Village Kgotla, interviewed in 1995 and reviewed in 2018.

13 Jingo Mpofu, Mapoka Village Kgotla, interviewed in 1995 and reviewed in 2018.

and togetherness. He urges government to encourage people to persist with their traditional culture so that the nation could return to prosperity. He further suggested that Friday be declared as a day of rest, totally dedicated to the worship of Mwali.¹⁴ During the era of Ntogwa, many people, in addition to observing Sunday as their day of worship, also accepted Friday as a religious day. In recent years, however, the impact of Christianity has led to many changes and the decline of the Mwali cult activities. The increase in the number of churches in the region has greatly contributed to the decline of the worship of Mwali. With many people influenced by Christianity, traditional religious practices are today seen as unchristian and a hindrance to development. On the other hand, the elderly is reluctant to change their beliefs.

The forces of modernity have also greatly contributed to changing the spiritual landscape. The Tegwi Hill Shrine is gradually losing its religious importance. In the past, children were not allowed to go to the shrine or even climb that hill, but nowadays there are no such prohibitions. Rules of sexual relations during the rainmaking rites were strictly enforced, but today the adherents of the Mwali cult admit that these rules are deliberately broken. Western medicine is also said to have interfered with the practices as people now go to hospitals. The sacred places, which were also visited for health reasons, are said to be failing to meet their physical needs. The old people see this disobedience as having brought about many problems for the nation. The government is being blamed for encouraging people to despise their past. The complaints are that young people go there for entertainment and picnics which, they say, has led to chronic diseases such as HIV and AIDS as a punishment from Mwali for these dishonourable acts.¹⁵

The observation is that today there is a preference for the Christian practices and beliefs rather than the traditional religious beliefs and practices. The traditions of the past, especially the Mwali rainmaking cult, are resented. There is, therefore, a tendency for people to ask for rain from the Christian God (Bhusumane, 1985). The syncretistic view of Christianity, education and technology generally favour Christian beliefs and religious practices over the Mwali's rainmaking practices and beliefs.

■ *Zwamwi ritual practices and environmental stewardship*

Zwamwi are things that are believed to stop rain. The removal of these things involved what is here referred to as the hunting of *zwamwi* ritual, which was accompanied by a wide variety of traditional dances called the *dantshiwa*, *woso*, *kobodolo* and *ndazula*

14 Mr Gunda, Mapoka Village Kgotla, interviewed in 1995 and reviewed in 2018.

15 Mr Thumuku, Mapoka Village Kgotla, interviewed in 1995 and reviewed in 2018.

dances. These dances were performed by men, with women clapping their hands and beating drums of different sizes to produce a mixture of different sounds. The *mayile* dance was performed by women, while a group of men went into the forest to hunt *zwamwi* (Bhusumane, 1985). They dance in circles imitating *Njelele*, which Monyatsi (1984) refers to as the fish eagle, while Bhusumane (1985) describes it as the bird of rain. A variety of rites is performed before the ploughing begins to usher in sowing season. It is a practice whereby men go round a locality to clean the environment by collecting scattered bones, nests of crows and other big birds, dead animal skins, bird feathers, stones, sticks, cloths, papers and plastics hanging on trees and removing trees struck by lightning. All of these objects are seen as malignant and should be hunted and removed around August and September to prepare for the rain season. After the wood and other waste materials have been heaped together, a calabash of water is broken on them and branches of the *nzeze* tree added before the heap is set on fire. The smoke produced from this was believed to purify the air, dispel bad odours that pollute the atmosphere, and cause the formation of clouds laden with rain.

Ruined and abandoned huts are also destroyed because they are believed to harbour evil spirits, which prevent the formation of clouds and falling of rain. They also hunted wild animals and, if they killed any, they roasted the meat upon reaching the place where the girls were performing the *mayile* dance. The roasting of the meat was carried out as a sacrificial rite with strong religious meaning and implications. It was a process in selling the relationship between the community and Mwali (Carmichael et al., 1994). Upon the arrival of the hunting party, the girls performed a special dance called *tshukwi* to welcome the men (Bhusumane, 1985; Monyatsi, 1984). This is the climax of their dance. At this point, their faces and bodies are painted with a white paste made of fine powder from white stones. Their performance involved running around the village, singing and dancing until the “rain washed off the white paste on their bodies” (Monyatsi, 1984:27). The white colour is here used as a symbol of rain clouds. It is also believed to attract rain. If it fails to rain, which is believed to be unlikely, the old women ritually wash the girls with ordinary water in the veld outside the village.

This practice was followed by the *dziwosana* dance, which is performed by the devotees of Mwali. It was performed at the *daga*, a special dancing arena where the traditional beer was brought in calabashes. There are stories that some calabashes mysteriously reach the *daga* empty, yet there is froth at the rim of the calabash as though they were still full. This is said to remain a mystery even to the women carrying the calabashes, because they are also unable to feel changes in the weight of the calabash (Bhusumane, 1985; Monyatsi, 1984).

As already pointed out, *zwamwi* are believed to be things that cast a bad omen or spell on the environment that is believed to stop cloud formation and rain. The *zwamwi* ritual practice, therefore, is the removal of malignant/malevolent spirits that are evil in nature and effect. As stated above, the practice involves men going around cleaning the environment by collecting everything malignant and that should be hunted and removed around August and September to prepare for the rain season. What happens is that certain big birds are fond of collecting dead animals, their skulls and bones, and keep them on top of trees. These are believed to pollute the environment and prevent the formation of rain clouds. They are also believed to produce an odour that affects the dissolving of clouds and moisture formation in the atmosphere; therefore, it must be removed and destroyed. When all these waste materials are heaped together and ritually destroyed by burning, the smoke from this was believed to purify the air, dispel bad odours, and cause clouds laden with rain to form. Ruined and abandoned huts are also destroyed because they are believed to pollute the environment and offend Mwali. Overall, the hunting of *zwamwi* is believed to support environmental stewardship through combatting pollution, dumping of waste materials and decomposition of waste that produces a smell which pollutes the air. It also relevant to fire, which destroys nature. It is like throwing petrol bombs on a bush fire. Religion, especially in the context of the traditional religion, places humans at the centre of all things to be stewards who accommodate, protect and conserve the environment (Amanze, 2002).

Both female and male *dziwosana* dress in black skirts and black beads. The black colour is believed to be favoured by Mwali. As they danced, the rest of the people, men and women, sang and clapped their hands in support of their performance. During this celebration, it was a taboo for them to engage in sex or talk about sexual relations. Immoral conduct, such as sexual activities, were avoided during the dance week. Even married couples participating in the dance were expected to avoid sexual relations until the end of the ceremony. Mwali was believed to punish disobedience by death. It must be mentioned that the *dziwosana* dance and singing marked the climax of the rainmaking rites. At the end of the dance, the elders went to the shrine to present their petitions and sacrifices, and to listen to the voice of Mwali. Only the elders were allowed to enter the shrine and listen to Mwali speaking. As part of ritual practice, traditional beer was poured and some food put on the ground for Mwali. It is said that when Mwali is pleased with the performance of the rituals, he sends the rain to wash away the footprints of the *dziwosana* that very same day (Monyatsi, 1984).

■ *The reasons for the Zwamwi cleansing ritual*

The community believes that the *zwamwi* cleansing ritual is carried out in order to cool, cleanse and protect the land, animals and the general environment. Pollutants

were believed to cause the Earth to become hot, impure, poisonous and desecrated, resulting in what is today referred to as global warming, causing climatic changes, including irregular rainfalls (Collier, Conway & Venable, 2009:125-141).

The Kalanga religious practices, therefore, call on the adherents of the Mwali cult to be caretakers of the Earth, to save Mother Earth, and protect the environment from pollution that destroys trees and grass as well as pollutes the air and water, and eventually kills humanity. Failure to observe the necessary land-cleansing rituals (i.e. *zwamwi*) was not only believed to lead to rain failure and drought, but also affected land fertility as well as crop and animal production, as the drought would lead to premature births and deaths.

The Kalanga traditionally found it difficult to disregard the *zwamwi* cleansing ritual, because the community demanded it and they ensured that ritual procedures were strictly followed every August/September. During this period, there is a wide range of taboos to be observed. The practices emphasise that certain trees are not to be used as firewood or cut for any purpose. Trees such as *nzeze*, *mogonono*, *mosetlha*, *morula* and *mokgalo* are not to be cut, because they are believed to be connected to very important ritual practices. Certain animals and reptiles, such as pythons, are not to be killed during this period or at any other time when they are found in the vicinity of the sacred site. These trees and animals are regarded as taboos. Failure to observe the taboos will also lead to crops being destroyed by heavy hailstorms. Observance of the taboos and performance of ritual practices create harmony between the ancestors and the people.

■ Results and further discussion of the *zwamwi* ritual

It is important to note that *zwamwi* and other causes of pollution are believed to result from the negative activities of human beings and their failure to act as stewards of the environment. Environmental pollution was seen as having the greatest impact on human health, climate change and weather patterns. The major forms of pollution relevant here are those affecting air, water and soil. Several studies have already provided evidence that connects air pollution, human health and climate change (Parsons, 1995:141-166).

The *zwamwi* ritual practice also represents the view that the wild fires that are sometimes started by humans also contribute to the lack of rain. It is for this reason that any signs of wild fires are removed as part of the cleaning process of the environment. Most important are the measures that are put in place to ensure that wild fires will not occur in the future. These fires cause high levels of pollution, which is associated with inadequate levels of the moist air that contributes to cloud and rain formation. Burnt wood, grass and other remains causing any form of environmental pollution are therefore collected and removed. The burning of trees

and grass is therefore believed to pollute the environment, for example the air, the water sources, etc. Wild fires also emit a terrible smell that pollutes the air and water.

The *zwamwi* ritual cleansing therefore also addresses water-quality problems. The concern of the community, which is the pollution of the environment that results in water-quality problems and other challenges, remains relevant today. If this were not resolved, it will escalate as the population grows and eventually the waste problem could not be resolved.

Conclusion

This chapter has contributed to the ongoing discussion about the role of religion in the conservation of the environment. It has done this by investigating the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of four sacred sites of the Kalanga of the north-east region of Botswana and the strategies adopted by these communities to address the problem in the environment. As part of the rainmaking activities and the preparation for the coming of rain, the aim of the *zwamwi* practice is to combat the pollution disturbs geographic and atmospheric conditions. Its strategy is therefore to identify specific polluting agents that could become sources of emissions and then come up with measures to cleanse and protect the atmosphere. It must be mentioned that what makes the role of the sacred sites important in the conservation of the environment is the centrality of religious beliefs and practices that revolve around a supernatural power and the spirits of the ancestors. The value is that these beliefs and religious practices are intrinsically tied to the everyday activities of the people. In addition, these activities are believed to be governed by the supernatural. This is why prayers are said and ceremonies performed before important activities such as planting, harvesting, dancing, and singing (Carmichael et al., 1994).

The other important point that needs to be made is that *zwamwi* hunting also works towards removing water-polluting agents that would normally destroy animal and plant life. Water pollution causes many deaths, mainly due to the contamination of drinking water, which results in diseases and conflicts. The *zwamwi* laws address growing global climate challenges because pollution has become a global problem. It imposes health and clean-up costs on the whole society. Polluted air can kill many organisms, including humans. Ozone pollution can cause respiratory diseases, cardiovascular diseases, throat inflammation, chest pains and congestion as well as sleep disturbance amongst elderly people.

Finally, it must be mentioned that the *zwamwi* practice helps to increase the consciousness of the community about the negative effects of pollution and indiscriminate dumping of waste materials. It also helps with awareness education.

The Kalanga beliefs and religious practices have for years promoted environmental conservation and strategies contributing towards sustainability. The forums on the importance of tree planting, environmental care, the dangers of depleting scarce natural resources, air and water pollution are promoted. At *kgotla* meetings, climate change and the need for biodiversity are discussed and strategies to protect the environment are adopted by the community. Ancestors are believed to view the Earth as rich and bountiful, but in need of stewardship. For African communities, therefore, there is an inseparable bond between man and nature.

It is also interesting to note that pollution was the theme for the World Environmental Day on 5 June 2019, which concluded that the quality of the environment depends on people's lifestyle choices, which corresponds with the purpose of the *zwamwi* ritual practice for restoring nature. Genesis 1:29 states that God created the universe and was pleased by the condition of the plants, flowers and fruits. Grim and Tucker (2014) argue that the role of religion is to orient humans to the Earth. It teaches them that they are not isolated in the universe, but a part of the Earth from which they draw meaning through stories, practices, symbols, meditation, and prayer. These are the means by which humans and communities integrate themselves with the Earth and environment. Creation is understood to be a place that reveals divine sacredness. Humans are invited not only to partake of and share in, but also contribute towards preserving and caring for the Earth as well as using it responsibly (Grim & Tucker, 2014). Grim and Tucker (2014:106) point out: "To abuse nature is to sin against it. Domination of nature is to be avoided. However, humans have a special place in creation. Any abuse of our power, any wanton or wasteful use of the world's natural resources, is repugnant to God."

Bell (1992) has pointed out that ritualised activities based on the experience of previous generations have a great influence on communities. He also agrees with Ranger (1999:1-7, 19-29, 39-66), who observes that activities and values inherited or preserved from the past should be appropriated in such a way that they influence the current strategies in order to benefit society. Bell (1992) further suggests that we need to rethink ritual as practice and proposes a new framework within which to reconsider traditional questions about ritual. In this framework, ritual activities are restored to their rightful contexts, concretising the ways of acting in that particular culture. The point is that the ritual influences people's concepts, cultural world views, and ideological systems, which consequently influence people to regard the rituals as true or reality. Shared cultural interpretations attached to rituals promote social solidarity. A ritual has a transformative effect making the ideological real. Social solidarity is the goal of any and all ritual mechanisms (Bell, 1992).

Land gives an assurance of identity and security. It provides an eloquent mark of continuity between past, present and future, and is a source of food that can be relied on from year to year. The land is regarded as sacred, a symbol of the ultimate fount of being. The Earth is living, as are the trees, animals and rivers. To harm the Earth, to divert the rivers, to destroy a tree, are to heap contempt upon the Creator and the creative process (Dillistone, 1986). The land, the plants and animals together form a sacred whole. Land and its resources are not only a huge economic commodity; they are to be cherished by people as the sacred organism through which the blood of their own veins flows to maintain its health and productivity (Dillistone, 1986).

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