

The Preservation of Xitsonga Culture through Rainmaking Ritual: An Interpretative Approach

M. T. Babane¹ and M. T. Chauke²

*MER Mathivha Centre for African Languages, Arts and Culture, University of Venda,
P/Bag X5050, Thohoyandou, 0950, South Africa*
E-mail: ¹<babane@univen.ac.za>, ²<mkhacani.chauke@univen.ac.za>

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ABSTRACT In South Africa the significance of indigenous rituals has diminished following the encounter with European culture. African rituals are fading away with time. Rituals are traditional sacraments that are performed in a socio-religious setting and the term can be used interchangeably with rites. Rituals of various kinds are a feature of almost all known human societies with each community having rituals that can be prescribed by the tradition of that community. This paper deals with *nkelekele* (rainmaking rituals) among the Xitsonga speakers of South Africa. The study shows that Vatsonga have unique ways of managing drought which differ from other South African kingdoms and language groups. It seeks to find out how rainmaking ceremonies are practiced among Vatsonga. Rainmaking ceremonies have always been practised among Vatsonga as a way of managing drought. The aim of this paper is to explain both the cultural and religious customs involved in rainmaking and how they should be preserved for future generations. Methodologically, a qualitative research approach is used for this study. Data collection techniques included interviews and observations. A sample of ten participants who were knowledgeable about rainmaking ritual practices was used. The study is important as it provides insight information on rainmaking rituals among Vatsonga. The study found that rainmaking ceremonies differ when performed by specific people, at different places and, time and for different purposes.

INTRODUCTION

Various African societies give much significance to ritual practices. From its Latin origin *ritus*, ritual means “a custom”. Looking at the origin of the concept ritual, Leeuw (1987: 247) provides a definition of ritual as “either implicitly or explicitly associated with “a custom” – conceived as “tradition” – and “worship”. What is clear from this definition is that the term could refer to the performance of ceremonial acts prescribed by tradition or by sacerdotal decree. It is something enacted for a specific purpose. In fact, it is a specific, observable mode of behaviour exhibited by all known societies. In the light of the above, it is therefore permissible to view ritual as a way of defining or describing humans (Encyclopedia Britannica 2014).

There are different types of rituals used for various life changes in different cultures. Among African cultures, there are rituals for initiation, death, mourning, birth, naming, mothering and rainmaking. This study argues that although some people have negative attitudes towards some of these rituals, there is still a need to practise and preserve them for future generations.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this paper is to find out how rainmaking ceremonies are practised

amongst Vatsonga and how they should be preserved for future generations. The study will explain how both the ancestral and Christian beliefs on rainmaking rituals are practised as a way of managing drought.

Literature Review

Scholars who have contributed immensely to the debate on rainmaking include Haruna (1981) who has written about rainmaking ritual ceremonies among the Guruntum and Bubbure people of Nigeria. Koster (2011) studied the rain dance ritual in modern Kenya. Maposa and Mhaka (2013) conducted their investigation focusing on water technology and climate change in Zimbabwe. Some of the scholars such as Leeuw (1987), Rafapa (2008) and Semenya (2013) have written about rainmaking ritual practices by different peoples in South Africa such as Balobedu (Northern Sotho); AmaZulu, Khoikhoi and the San people. For the Balobedu among the people in the Northern Sotho speaking communities, these scholars concur that rainmaking ritual is communally known. *Moroka* is the Balobedu rainmaking traditional doctor who takes a leading role in performing the ritual. However, the performance is done by community members upon instruction from the chief of the village. Leeuw

(1987) further studied rainmaking rituals for AmaZulu, Khoikhoi and the San people.

From the studies cited above, none has been conducted about the rainmaking practices among Vatsonga communities. Thus, this work may be viewed as an initial attempt to lay the basis for such an undertaking.

All the scholars highlighted above concur to the fact that rainmaking rituals are practised when there is an extended period of drought in the community. This ritual can be either in the form of invoking the ancestors or God or both.

METHODOLOGY AND DELINEATION OF THE STUDY

This paper wants to explain how rainmaking among the Vatsonga is practised and how it should be preserved for future generations. To achieve this, the study follows a qualitative research approach. This approach focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live (Holloway 1997: 1). The techniques used to collect data for this study are in-depth interviews and observations. These techniques require that the researchers spend much time in direct personal contact with those being studied in their natural settings. The belief of these techniques is that if you want to understand the way people think about their world you need to get close to them, to hear them talk and observe them in their day-to-day lives (Bogdan and Biklen 2007: 35). For the in-depth interviews, sampling is important because the total population is too large and the scope of the problem too wide. In order to select participants for this study, purposive or judgemental sampling is used. A sample of ten participants is selected purposively considering their knowledge as a key factor. They are both royal family and village elders who are custodians of the rainmaking and overseers of the practice. Furthermore, the data as presented in this paper consists of first-hand information drawn from the authors' own observation and supplied by eye-witness participants and a combination of both. Observation was conducted on more than one hundred people who participated during a particular rainmaking ceremony.

In this paper, the researchers decided purposively to use one Vatsonga community (Shikundu village) which consists of eleven vil-

lages under Chief Maluleke H.J. (Xikundu). Shikundu village is a Local Government Area in Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa. This community is selected purposively on the basis of its typicality. The people called Vatsonga are one of the ethnic linguistic groups in South Africa and they speak Xitsonga. According to South Africa's 2011 census, the speakers of Xitsonga constitute 4.5 percent of the total population in the country. This language is also spoken in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Swaziland whereby the people are interchangeably called Machangana, Shangani or Shangaans (Halala and Mtebule 2014: 1). The community where this study was conducted is in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The main reason why the study focused on this community is because they still practise the rainmaking ritual.

RESULTS

The results for this paper show that there are different ways of performing rainmaking rituals amongst Vatsonga. During drought sessions, ancestral worship by members of the royal family is one of the rainmaking strategies performed by the elderly woman together with the selected members. Moreover, community participation in rain ritual is another strategy which is practiced by cleansing the whole community. The study further shows that Bandu rainmaking ritual is another form of ritual which is performed during slight drought. The results further show that the practice of religious rainmaking was found to be very common amongst Vatsonga.

DISCUSSION

Rainmaking Beliefs

The lack of rain which could be regarded as drought is viewed as a moment that requires ritual intervention (Koster 2011). The entire livelihood of people depends mainly on rain for water which could fall either by invoking some form of God. Mostly, droughts are common natural phenomenon in Southern Africa. Rainmaking ritual among African communities and Vatsonga for the purpose of this paper was practiced even prior to the colonization of Africa. Semenya (2013) argues that rainmaking ritual practice is an ancient science that the Pagans

utilized to water their farms in times of drought. In all the communities where this ritual is practiced, the purpose is to influence the weather conditions during the drought periods to cause rain for the benefit of both humans and animals.

Before the advent of colonialism in South Africa, Vatsonga like any other South African kingdoms such as AmaZulu, Balobedu, Khokhoi, Vavhenda, the San people and others, performed rituals without fear. However, the arrival of the Europeans marked a significant turning point in the history of this age long tradition and culture in the process of promoting western culture. Colonial administrators believed that African ritual practices in general and Vatsonga rituals in particular are barbaric and superstitious. Mapara (2011:16) contends that the European missionaries were of the misconception that African religion promoted belief in witchcraft and encouraged people to worship their ancestors instead of God. It is indeed true that Africans were wrongly called feticist, animist or paganist and primitive until they adopted western culture.

African ritual practices have been despised by Europeans since they set their foot in Africa. Colonialism had a negative impact on African traditional culture, and for the purposes of this study, Vatsonga. Vatsonga structures with regard to ritual practices have changed gradually under the impact of colonial rule. This resulted disorientation among Vatsonga since some of their cherished values were denied validity. It needs mentioning that their traditional ethnic religions were greatly weakened by the effects of colonial rule. So far this has created a religious vacuum haphazardly replaced by Christianity, which opposed almost every aspect of African culture. To the missionaries in the early days, Vatsonga were denied most of their ritual practices such as initiation rites, ancestral worship, rainmaking and other indigenous practices. This was not unique to Vatsonga culture, but to many Africans. Schmidt (1992) concurs by pointing that a number of measures were adopted in order to suppress such as traditional practices among Africans.

However, some of the Vatsonga communities continued with their ritual practices despite criticism from missionaries and colonial administrators. When colonialism made deeper and more permanent inroads into African culture in general and Vatsonga culture in particular, a rain-

making ritual performance was looked down upon by many Vatsonga communities. This was done forgetting that rainmaking ritual was one of their traditional cultures which has affected their socio-economic and cultural lives (Schmidt 1992).

Much effort needs be made to study the rain-making ritual practices in different South African ethnic linguistic groups. According to Semenya (2013:2), rainmaking rituals differ from tribe to tribe and from nation to nation. Therefore, it is necessary to explain rainmaking ritual practices among Vatsonga. This work may be viewed as an initial attempt to lay the basis for the documentation of rainmaking ritual among this people. This paper describes and explains some of the special events that the researchers observed during the cultural rainmaking ritual performance and religious praying for rain in the Shikundu communities.

In times of drought, when the council of elders to the chief see many dry rivers, death of both domestic and wild animals as a result of reoccurring drought in their communities, they remind the chief about the cultural ritual practices to be performed. Rainmaking is the obvious ritual that can solve the problem. The intervention of God or gods is to be invoked because generally, drought impacts very negatively on both humans and animals and needs both traditional and religious drought management strategies to control it. Without question, rain is highly needed to rescue such a situation. Hence a ritual for rainmaking is required with the main aim of requesting the gods or God.

According to the participants, the last rain-making ritual performed at Shikundu for all the eleven villages was in 1992. This rainmaking ritual ceremony was necessitated by the fact that between 1988 and 1992 these villages experienced a most severe drought.

It was found during this study that some members of the Shikundu communities are of the view that rainmaking rituals which were previously practiced are disappearing due to modernity. This was clear when observing that those who had participated during the 1992 rain-making ritual ceremony declined to be interviewed. However, due to persistent rain shortage, this ritual practice was resuscitated. Some of the participants alluded that they have tried all modern solutions but in vain until they invoked their long forgotten traditional ways to

summon rain. This was done by invoking the powers as had been done by their forefathers.

Worship of Ancestors by the Royal Family

Although the researchers in this study were not given the opportunity to observe the members of the Shikundu royal family performing their ancestral worship, one participant confirmed that the traditional practices of the family required that they be conducted before participation by members of the larger communities. Before the members of the communities assembled at the prescribed venue, the elder women together with the selected members of the royal family meet to appease their ancestors. This is done in the form of ancestral worship. Although the permission to observe the ancestors worship and community participation in the rain ritual was requested and granted prior to the ceremony, ancestral worship by the royal family was done secretly and details were not disclosed to the researchers as they were considered confidential.

It is worth mentioning that two participants who were part of the ceremony confirmed that sacrifice was done in the form of slaughtering a sheep for royal ancestors. This was done with the belief that the royal ancestors would listen to them and make the rain come down. Makgopa (2005:64) argues that according to African culture, there is a unique and special bond that exists between the dead and the living. Furthermore, he indicates that through their spiritual powers, when the nation is dying from drought, rainmaking rituals such as ancestors worshipping are performed to appease the living-dead. The Shikundu royal family believed that by the spilling on the ground of a sheep's blood together with traditional beer was one of the forms of appeasing ancestors to listen to their request for rain.

Community Participation in Rain Ritual

According to the culture of Vatsonga, the chief, elders of the royal family, the council to the chief and village elders are the ones who oversee the smooth running of the communities under their jurisdiction. When there is drought in the communities, they are the ones to initiate both the ancestral and Christian rainmaking rituals. In times of drought, participants are of the

view that the chief and his/her council members consult a traditional healer(s) who throw bones to find out the cause of drought because it is believed that lack of rain in a village is usually associated with sin or conflicts amongst residents or leaders (Semenya 2013). It is after the consultation with a traditional healer that community members would be informed about the date when the rainmaking ritual would be performed.

Each of the eleven community members were to gather at their respective headman's kraal early in the morning on the day of the rainmaking ritual ceremony. Like many other African tribes, senior members of the communities are the ones who participate actively in rainmaking rituals. The observation made during this study was that not everybody was allowed to take part, but only older women who are past menstruation were involved in this special ceremony. Elderly men could only be there as observers. Some participants pointed to the fact that these old women should either be widows or no longer sexually active. However, married women who are living with their husbands are allowed to participate on condition that they abstain from any sexual activity for at least a week prior to the rainmaking ritual ceremony.

It was observed and later confirmed by the participants during interviews in this study that these old women were tasked with the responsibility of cleansing the whole community by collecting old objects such as papers, old clothes and all dirty materials. While collecting these objects they would be singing one song with the lyrics "*Hi lava mpfula nkelekele whe' hi lava mpfula*," literally translated to mean 'we need rain by cleansing our villages, we need rain'. After collecting all the dirty materials, they go to an open place outside the village where they prepare a concoction of traditional medicine given by the chief or headman from the consulted traditional healer on the dirty materials and burn them while repeatedly singing the same song. Participants also reported that a group of special elderly women led by one from the royal family will also burn the sheep which was used in the morning for ancestral worship. Some of the participants indicated that while burning the sheep and dirty materials, they would be half naked singing and dancing happily for the anticipated rain. Thereafter they go back to the chief or headman's kraal to give the report on what transpired at the burning ceremony.

The observation made during this study was that on their arrival at the point of their assembly, there would be a clay pot filled with rainwater and the elderly woman of the royal family would be requested to hold and then allow it to drop and break, spilling the water. The villagers will then ululate and rain would immediately start falling. The same sentiment of the clay pot was shared by Semenya (2013: 2) by indicating that in Pedi tradition there would be different medicines that are stirred into the clay pot filled with rainwater.

***Bandu* Rainmaking Ritual**

Bandu is one of the Vatsonga cultural rainmaking rituals which is practiced during slight drought. Participants argue that *Bandu* is practiced by certain groups within the culture of Vatsonga and it does not involve all communities under the same chief. One may therefore not be wrong to mention that a headman whose community is affected by drought may arrange with his/her community members to appease the gods for the rain by performing a rainmaking ritual in the form of *Bandu*. However, *Bandu* rainmaking ritual should be performed after the permission from and blessings by the chief. A traditional healer will be consulted to inform the headman how to perform the *Bandu* rainmaking ritual.

During this study the researchers observed that this type of rainmaking ritual is performed collectively by both men and women. Participants are of the view that only family men and women are eligible to participate for *Bandu* rainmaking ritual. When this ritual is to be performed, men and women assemble at an open space such as a playground seeking to understand the root cause of the poor rainfall. According to the participants, the members of the community are bare breasted at the assembly point. They sit down on the ground and start confessing all their sins to the entire community members. This is done because it is believed that lack of rain is usually associated with sins committed by certain members of the community. When the people have confessed their sins, they start singing songs of praise and request the ancestors of the royal family to bring rain. Their belief is that the ancestors will not disappoint them by not bringing rain to save their land. By bringing down the rain the gods and ancestors will be fulfilling their own obligation.

Rainmaking ritual among the Vatsonga is practiced both traditionally and according to Christian belief. The practice of religious rainmaking is also common in other African communities. Mbiti (1988: 2) alluded to this by saying that “wherever the African is there is his religion: he carries it to the fields whether he is sowing or harvesting a new crop... if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room....” Therefore the following paragraphs discuss the rainmaking ritual practices through Christianity.

Praying for Rain

Since the arrival of the Europeans in African communities, the worldview of African people has changed to become more religious in nature (Mbiti 1969). Vatsonga are no exception. Apart from the cultural rainmaking ritual practices discussed above, this study also investigates the Biblical beliefs and practices of Shikundu communities pertaining to rainmaking. This study found that praying for rain is usually done during severe drought whereby elders, pastors and all members of different churches come together for this ritual.

The participants during this study reported that when there is severe drought in their communities, the chief or headman together with his/her council members approach the Shikundu Pastors Committee to organise a mass prayer for rain. These authorities know that the rituals of rainmaking are recorded in both the Old and the New Testaments.

The observation made during this study was that praying for rain for Shikundu communities usually takes place at the Tribal Authority where adults and church members meet to pray for rain. During this prayer, spiritual songs are sung and all church pastors from all the eleven villages are expected to preach the word of God and pray for rain. Participants reported that Prophets are also given the opportunity to prophesize and call for the rain to come down.

It is strongly felt by some of the participants that according to the Biblical verse scripture rain prevention or rainstorms are controlled by God and it is the responsibility of the Christians to ask for rain through prayer rituals. This study argues that there is a strong need to involve God when there is persistent rain unpredictability and lack of modern solutions to overcome drought in the communities.

It is believed that when God is angry with his people there will be no rain. In the book of 1 King 17:12 the Bible says that if God's people turn their backs from him to worship other gods in the manner of Baal, God will withhold rain from the land and the results will be drought. The message as cited in this verse shows that God is the God of jealousy who does not want his people to have relationships with other gods.

To show that God has all the powers to withhold rain, the Bible in the book of 1 King 17:1 says "as the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word". This was pronounced by Elijah who was sent by God to deliver this punishment to his people because of Ahab's idolatry. However, when people live according to the word of God and are obedient to him, he will open the heavens for the rain to pour the land which is in need of rain (Deuteronomy 28: 1-4).

In support of the verse scripture above, many participants concluded that obviously, rain is from God. This is then stated in the following "As for me, I would seek God, and to him would, I commit my cause [...] he gives rain upon the earth and sends water upon the fields (Job 5:8 and 10). These verses allude to the fact that rain is from God and not gods through traditional rainmaking rituals. As a way to encourage the Shikundu community members during the prayer for rain ceremony, pastors emphasized the fact that it is right to ask for rain from God as a community in order to receive a promise mentioned in Zechariah 9:17.

It is reasonable to understand that if God has answered their prayer, rain begins to fall and there will be joy in all the affected villages. Accordingly, the members of the communities are also reminded to give thanks to God since it is He who makes rain according to his own will. This is informed by the Biblical scripture where Prophet Joel in chapter 2:23-32 repeatedly thanks God for the rain. The kind of religious celebration for the anticipated rain observed during this study included singing, beating of drums, movements, dancing and praying by the entire community. It is interesting to say that this is done in appreciation of the favorable results of rain from God.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion of this study, research and debate on rainmaking rituals will probably en-

gage the attention of scholars for some time to come, but many of these scholars generally believe that rainmaking rituals are both traditional and religious. Although the cultural practice of rainmaking is considered by many as outdated, backward, and irrelevant, this study showed that in spite of Christian religious pressure, many participants felt that rainmaking ritual practices are still culturally relevant and should be performed when there is drought in the land. Furthermore, a reiteration of the needs to believe that gods and man are not responsible for rainmaking was also emphasized and that from the Biblical point of view God the almighty is the giver of rain to sustain his people and other creatures.

The study has highlighted that rainmaking rituals among Vatsonga communities are still performed traditionally and through Christian belief to invoke the ancestors and God for rain during drought periods. The researchers in this study concur with rainmaking rituals as practiced by Vatsonga culture and through religious prayers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the conclusion drawn in this study, recommendations that follow are made for the promotion of rainmaking rituals among Vatsonga. These should be seen as being in accordance with the cultural stipulations. Rainmaking rituals should be encouraged. All traditional healers in the communities should be given the opportunity to throw their bones to invoke rainfall. The authorities in the Department of Arts and Culture should view the issue of rainmaking rituals as reality and not myth. The promotion of rainmaking rituals should be seen as a step towards self-identity and self-realization. The recommendations made in this study are significant because they cater for both traditional and Christian aspects of rainmaking rituals.

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