

Rain Petitioning as an Indigenous Agenda: Fusing Ecological Traditions with the Modern IKS Philosophy

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Abstract: This paper is a critical investigation of the Zimbabwean Tsonga rain petitioning ritual namely *nkelekele*, with critical insights on how it manifests scholarly levels of Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Among the Tsonga, it is believed that the rubbish on the environment can result in the absence of rain. In this ritual, the participants clean up the environment and burn the rubbish at the dumping place. The findings revealed that, there are various forms of indigenous knowledge systems in this rainmaking ritual which include cloud formation, cleaning the environment, preventing outbreak of diseases, avoiding the spread of veld fires, protecting children's health as well as livestock rearing. The basic, initial purpose of *nkelekele* was to ask rain from the ancestors. However, it has been observed that there are critical lessons and observations that can be drawn from the ritual in light of a people's unrecorded indigenous knowledge system agenda.

Keywords: *Nkelekele*, Indigenous knowledge system, rain petitioning ritual, Tsonga

1. Introduction

Since age-old times, Africans have been bonded to their traditional religion, attaching their faith to the invincibility of the 'mystic world', feeding authoritatively into a pool of communally gained knowledge. The renowned practice of inducing rain amongst the Tsonga, popularly addressed under the tag *nkelekele*, has for long been approved to have been the antidote relieving drought-hit years. The Tsonga, like any African indigenous people have a peculiar way of activating, reacting and suppressing undesirable or desirable climatic conditions. Under normal situations, the climate will address the concerns of the indigenous people at certain expected points spanning the year in question. African indigenous peoples have been closely linked to climatic awareness, and such alertness has been richly recorded across historical discourses on weather and climate. Interestingly, their (African) assertive and receptiveness has not been built on pure academic and scientific empirical ventures, but sorely on indigenous epistemic responsiveness based on natural socio-religious inquiries. The intricacy of the matter has largely been devoted to the belief that the afterworlds have a valuable role to play in the diurnal activities of human life. In such belief systems, the interplay between the African climatological treatises and the modern day understandings of meteorological study has nowadays led to compromised uncertainties among many an African society. This chapter addresses and critiques the long standing African traditional machinations of inducing and manipulating rain and climatic conditions among African ethnicities, zeroing down to the Zimbabwean Tsonga ethnic group as a special case in point.

In the analysis of religious practices among the Tsonga people, it is clearly unjust to avoid, deliberately, some discussion on the aspect of Indigenous Knowledge System. Indigenous knowledge system refers to the traditional knowledge that is found within a certain group of people. It is not adopted from other cultures or learned from any scientific experimentation. In the mind of Grenier (1998), Indigenous Knowledge is "the unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around the specific condition of women and men indigenous to a particular geographic area". Such knowledge is understood to umbrella all issues of life, such as management of the natural resources, and it is/has been a way of survival to the very people who generated these systems. It can also be noted that such knowledge is found among people of the same culture. According to Chahine 2013 in (Shizha and Kapoor, 2010) indigenous knowledge systems have been, not long ago, established by the International World Organisations as highest global concerns to be looked into for the benefit of traditional and local communities in their struggles for improved and sustainable developmental livelihoods, especially in developing countries. Different forms of IKS are presented in this ritual as follows:

Nkelekele is the traditional method of petitioning rain practised by the Tsonga. It is conducted by women who wake up early in the morning and walk all over the area half-naked, collecting dirty and such related stuff upon the environment. Those unwanted stuff were to be burnt on the river side at the end of the collection exercise. It is believed that when the environment is dirty, it becomes uncondusive for the reception of rain. This belief shows

people's indigenous knowledge, which is the knowledge that is innate in a particular group of people. Warren (1991) defines indigenous knowledge system as the body of knowledge of a group of people in the same geographical area. It is very broad since it stretches to all domains of life which are political, social, religious and economic spectrum. In this paper, indigenous knowledge system (IKS) will be analysed with special reference to one of the religious practices of the Tsonga, *nkelekele*. The conduction of *nkelekele* ritual may differ from one geographical location to another, though considerable similarities can be observed. The Tsonga people are found in different countries which are Zimbabwe, South- Africa, Mozambique and Swaziland. Apart from that, they are located in varied geo-spatial settings, hence the understanding that practices such as *nkelekele* may be performed differently from one region to another among the Tsonga speakers.

The cause for Concern: Speculations among the Tsonga people During Drought-hit Years

Among some of the Tsonga people, it is still believed that if there is insufficient rain or a total absence of rain during the rainy season, it is caused by the rubbish on the environment. Sometimes there can be assumptions that there are uncovered bones on graves that have been tempered with, or worse still, naked graves of infants aborted and buried without the knowledge of the community. Such acts, they believe, are a taboo which can result in the total absence of rain. As a way of preventing drought spells, the Tsonga people conduct the *nkelekele* practice as a religious ritual, early enough, envisaging that the ritual will induce the rains and save their lives as well as their animals.

Clean the Environment Campaigns: A Zimbabwean Move for a Clean and Healthy Environment

In Zimbabwe, the issue of keeping the environment clean is also supported by the organisation called Environmental Management Agency (EMA). It encourages all people to keep rubbish where it is required to be kept. They even conduct some workshops in different communities concerning the management of the environment. Many companies also join hands by donating disposal bins and plastics to all public places such as ranks, schools and shops where it is most assumed that people may carelessly throw rubbish on the ground. In addition to that, the current President of Zimbabwe, His Excellency Emmerson Mnangagwa used to conduct a cleaning up campaign on each and every first day of each month. Many people engage themselves in the cleaning up campaign. He even leads by example as he will be also cleaning the environment. On the face of it, it seems as if it is a new activity influenced by the modern science of preventing diseases and keeping the environment safe, yet it is a traditional offshoot from within the indigenous critical knowledge of the Tsonga people.

2. Procedures For Conducting The Nkelekele Ritual

Consultation of traditional healers

In line with the Tonga cultural traditions, there is some reason behind every problem or tragedy. Those reasons can be politically, socially, economically and religiously driven. The *tin'anga* (traditional healers) were the ones who possess the clairvoyant powers to explain the causes behind the problem(s), thereby coming up with a solution to a particular problem. If the rains fail to fall on an expected rain season, the elders who happen to be the king in question's advisors conduct a meeting with the king in order to be given permission to visit the traditional healers concerning the cause of the problem. The king and his advisors will finally decide to send the *tindleve* (messengers) who will go to consult with the traditional healers.

The traditional healers will cast their lots and inform them that they should carry out a *nkelekele* ritual. After their return, they inform the king concerning what the traditional healer would have told them. Most of the time, this ritual was held if there is no change concerning the climatic situation after the annual temporal phase of rain expectancy has lapsed. The king will then arrange and announce the day where this ritual should be held. All the communities are called to attend the meeting by the ringing of a bell, where they will be informed the day which the ritual must be conducted.

3. Gender And Age For Participants: Qualifications For Participation

In some societies, the *nkelekele* rain petitioning ritual was done by elderly women who would have reached the menopause stage. These women would move all over the areas of the community collecting rubbish that would be on the ground. Women with grown up children were also involved in the collection of dirty stuff during the *nkelekele* rain petitioning ritual. However, to a lesser extent, those women with grown up children were found at the back, following the elderly women and they were not allowed to overtake the elderly to be at the forefront. Girls and boys who are not yet married or men married to women with infants and those women with little babies were not allowed to accompany the elderly women to the ritual. In some cases, men may go in some direction covering up graves that would have been tempered with.

Timing of the Ritual

The *Nkelekele* rain petitioning ritual is not carried out any time of the day but there is a traditionally set range of time when the participants are expected to be seen moving around. The ritual was conducted early in the morning before sunrise. The starting time can be approximated to four o'clock in the morning. Traditionally, the elderly women would wake up in the morning and start collecting rubbish bits. The sun would rise when the participants would be doing their final touches, for instance, the burning of the gathered rubbish. However, it can be conceded that the practice can be conducted differently from village to village among the same ethnic group. For example, in Chingele community in Chiredzi South, Zimbabwe, the sun can rise whilst these women are in the process of collecting rubbish. This rain petitioning ritual was done during the rainy season when the expected rains would have failed to fall.

The Rain Petitioning Ritual and the Accompanying Music

During the practice, music plays a vital role in the religio-imploring exercise. Just like in many occasions today, music is a powerful force that sends the intended message with the expected scale of humility. As the participants wake up in the morning to collect plastic papers, animal skins, torn shoes, old garments, bones and sundry, scattered all over the environment, they will be singing the traditional petitioning song entitled 'nkelekele', which spells out that they are making enquiries for the rain. As the song is sung, the participants will be busy going around the whole village, gathering rubbish and all dirty, unpleasant stuff that will be burnt thereafter. The song gives to the participants, the spirit and level engagement attitude to dance to the tune of seriously petitioning for the rains. The repeated lines of the song choruses the insistence and soft enforcement that the assumed supplier cannot avoid.

Guiding Principles in Executing the Nkelekele Duties: Issues Around Association

It is not allowed to greet each other while conducting the *nkelekele* rain petitioning ritual. The elderly women would reach out to each and every homestead's disposal site, thus even if they might see anyone who might be awake by that time, they just collect dirty stuff and carry on with their work. In addition they do not announce their arrival or passing greeting, for example in Tsonga culture if a person arrives or passes by someone's home he/she say "*ndaweni*" or "*hi hundzile*" as a way of showing respect for, arriving or passing by someone's homestead.

Shaking hands as a way of greeting is also not allowed when conducting the *nkelekele* rainmaking ritual. If the women meet any person whom they might know during the process, they are prohibited to greet him as well as to talk to him/her. Children are not allowed to be loitering around when the ritual is being conducted. Most of the time they are encouraged to stay indoors while the ritual is taking place. Bare hands were not allowed to pick dirty as they will be walking all over, thus, sticks were used to pick dirty and put inside the bags.

Rain Petitioning and Costume

There is a certain type of dressing which was recommended while conducting the *nkelekele* rain petitioning ritual. Participants usually wore torn clothes, presenting them more or less like half-naked 'human beasts'. Their chests would be uncovered. Some of them would be found tying torn garments from their waist down unto their legs. According to the interviews, Mahutse (2020) points out that during the olden days, the elderly women who conducted the *nkelekele* rain petitioning ritual would go around the village naked, and the exercise was carried out early in the morning before anyone woke up. Men were not allowed to meet with them. If a man would accidentally meet them, he would be forced to take an opposite direction.

Dumping place

After the day's collections and gatherings of rubbish stuff, they would identify a special locale to use as their dumping place. This is where all the rubbish was to be burnt. They would make sure that there is nothing left unburnt. They would usually burn the rubbish stuff in the bush, most probably near a stream. As they go to the dumping place, some of them would be carrying clay pots filled with water. Water is used as an extinguisher to the remains of fire after burning all the gathered rubbish. Since this process is carried out in the bush, the availability and use of water is critical in preventing the outbreak of veld fires if the fire is left unquenched.

Thereafter, they would go to the king's place and some cultural activities would be done before they depart to their respective areas. However, some of the activities done at the king's place will not be discussed fully in this paper since they do not have much relationship with indigenous knowledge system. It is said that, in some instances, they would be dismissed by rain before the close of the function, but others revealed that rain would fall in three or four days after the ritual.

4. The Critical Side Of The Rain Petitioning Mission: Envisioning Outside Tradition

Avoiding the Spread of Diseases

Indigenous knowledge shown on this rain petitioning ritual prevents the outbreak of diseases like cholera and bilharzia. If the environment is dirty it also leads to water pollution. This will normally result in the outbreak of diseases that affect both human beings and animals. Also, the nkelekele rain petitioning ritual is performed during the rainy season, and this clearly indicates how the Tsonga people were aware that if the rains fall while there is rubbish on the environment, that rubbish will be taken into the rivers, brooks, wells and streams leading to water pollution. In addition, water pollution may also lead to the death of aquatic creatures, hence some important creatures like fish and its species can be found dead as a result of polluted water. This also leads to diseases like cholera and bilharzia if that polluted water is taken by people since the Tsonga people used (and some still resort to) wells, rivers and brooks as their water sources. This in a sense, unleashes the critical indigenous knowledge awareness move exhibited among the Tsonga people, without which the lives of people, animals and aquatic creatures would be endangered.

Prevention of Infection to Children

Another form of indigenous knowledge system found on nkelekele is to protect the health of children. Women with young babies who are breastfed are not allowed to conduct this ritual. The Tsonga people possess(ed) the insight that children can be easily infected with diseases, and this is why women with babies are not allowed to go with the elderly women collecting rubbish upon the environment. In addition to that, young babies are not allowed to mix with the team on campaign since, they believe(d) they can easily get infected with some diseases.

Prevention of the Outbreak of Veld Fires

In this ritual, there is also the prevention of veld fires. The dirty collected is burnt in the bush, and the some of the women who proceed to the dumping place will be carrying water that is used for putting out fire after all the rubbish is burnt. The fact that they go to the dumping place carrying clay pots filled with water shows that the Tsonga people are aware that fire can be hazardous if left unquenched. If by chance wind blows in the direction of the set fire, it may carry fire to the nearby grass, thereby setting the environment ablaze. This environmental awareness ritual is also critical in protecting the live of animals as they depend on grass, and it deeply lays a touch upon the lives of the people who may indirectly get affected as a result of the same tragedy. The nkelekele rainmaking ritual plays a pivotal role in displaying the indigenous knowledge of the Tsonga people.

The Nkelekele Philosophy and the Formation of Clouds

The Tsonga people have the knowledge of 'cloud formation', a phenomenon that is directly linked to the generation and building up of clouds that latter breaks up, falling as rain. They quite probably knew that the burning of rubbish would provide smoke that will form the clouds above. There are many ways of dumping rubbish, for example they might dig a huge hole and dispose of dirty there but they decided to burn the rubbish, mixing it with firewood so as to burn quickly as well as to provide that most needed and necessary smoke. The reason why the rains fall on the very day or a few days after the ritual can better be accounted for within the complex context of this philosophy. Thus, it can be conceded that the Tsonga people had/have their indigenous knowledge of cloud formation which results in the definite falling of the rains. Nowadays, cloud formation can be done through scientific knowledge and intervention. People believes that it is only through scientific intervention that clouds can be formed, not knowing that even the traditional Africans have their particular knowledge of executing the same, but it is only that it was not implemented and documented since the formal education system started with the Westerners.

Use of Sticks in Collecting Rubbish

The Tsonga people use sticks to collect dirty and put it inside the bags. This shows that the Tsonga people have the knowledge that it is not healthy to touch rubbish with their hands. Since there was/and they usually do not have protective clothing like gloves, they have the knowledge that they should use sticks to pick dirty to protect themselves from infection. Nowadays, when people are conducting a cleaning up campaign, they will be wearing some protective clothes like gloves and plastic coats. These protect them from falling victims of an otherwise critical undertaking that should help save their lives.

Livestock Rearing

Cleaning up the environment through the nkelekele rain petitioning ritual also shows that the Tsonga people have their indigenous knowledge system concerning the rearing of livestock. The absence of rain usually exposes and lures some livestock such as cattle to eat each and every thing that may be found on the ground because there will be no grass. For example, cattle, goats and sheep can feed on plastic papers that may be on the ground which

is very dangerous since they are indigestible. These animals can be affected by different diseases because of consuming dirty stuff due to drought. By cleaning the environment, the health of the livestock is safeguarded, hence the Tsonga people possess the knowledge that their livestock may feed on rubbish due to lack of grass become vulnerable to numerous health threatening vectors.

5. Conclusion

Nkelekele rain petitioning ritual shows that the Tsonga people have their indigenous knowledge of cleaning the whole environment. They have the knowledge that dirty/rubbish is not health to both human and animals. It is a religious practice with a hidden philosophy in it. As they burn the collected rubbish, it reveals the indigenous knowledge of cloud formation that presumably ignite the rains that usually follow after the ritual. Some concealed constructive forms of indigenous knowledge system include the prevention of diseases like cholera and bilharzia, the prevention of veldt fires, protecting the health of infants as well as preventing water pollution. Through analysis, the cleaning up of the environment may seem to have come with the Western world through education, but the Nkelekele tradition clearly indicates how the Tsongas have practiced it long back, probable well before the African Handshake with colonially purported civilisation. Due to globalization, the Tsonga people are now shunning this practice, as they are lured by the country's clean-up campaigns conducted on the first day of each and every month, as well as the environmental programmes run by the Environmental Management Agency. The nkelekele practice is now, and in most social contexts, regarded as a backward practice. Warren (1995) argues that Indigenous knowledge, particularly in the African context, has long been ignored and marginalised by outsiders. However, this is one of the major causes that led the Africans to shun their knowledge and regard the outsiders as superior.

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