

Mwali: A God of War or a God of Peace?

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1. Introduction

The Shona and Kalanga people believe in a High God known either as Mwali or Mwari¹. Among the Shona, where there is a thriving cult of lesser spirits (the *mhondoro* cult), there is no direct oracular cult of this High God, as is the case among the Ndebele of Southwestern Zimbabwe and the Bakalanga of Northeastern Botswana (Fry 1976). Mwali is generally believed to be the Creator God. The Shona refer to him as *Musikavanhu* (the creator of human beings), *Matangakugara* (the first to exist), *Matangakuswika* (the first to arrive) and *Matangakurwonwa* (the first to be seen). A Kalanga poem of praise refers to Mwali as *Mbumbi we butale* (the Creator of the universe).

Mwali has three manifestations. First is the Father, who is known as *Sororezou* 'head of an elephant' (Shona), or *Shologulu* 'the big headed One' (Ikalanga). The second manifestation is the Mother, known in Ikalanga as *Banyanchaba* 'the defecator of Tribes, or the Mother of Nations'. Last is *Lunji* 'the needle' (Ikalanga) the Son, who runs errands between the Mother and Father. There are numerous Shona and Kalanga traditional prayers, myths and praise poems that demonstrate the believers' acknowledgement of Mwali's three manifestations².

¹ Writing mainly from a Kalanga perspective, I prefer to refer to the High God as Mwali.

² See Ranger (1967; 1999). Unless otherwise stated, when we talk of Mwali, we refer to the male manifestation.

The bulk of the literature on the Mwali cult is devoted to the debate on the conceptualization of the nature of this High God³. The most lingering and controversial question in the discourse on the Mwali cult is whether Mwali is a God of war or a God of peace⁴. This question is best answered by exploring the extent to which Mwali can or cannot be involved in politics of violence. The debates on whether or not the cult of God Above can sanction war or insurrection against governments, whether cult officials can be involved in the organization of such insurrection, and whether or not cult centres can be used for rallying support for such activities, date back to the colonial discourse on the cult; particularly the white settlers' accounts of the role of the Mwali cult in the rebellions of 1896-1897 in Southern Rhodesia. In the settlers' accounts the cult officials are reported to have been involved in the organization of the rebellions. Cult messengers travelled between the war-front and the cult centres carrying messages and instructions from the cult officials at the centres and the leaders in the bush (Selous 1896). Although there is a general consensus among these early writers on the role of the cult in the 1896/7 Shona and Ndebele uprisings, there was one dissenting voice. On the basis of his intimate knowledge of Mwali⁵, W.E. Thomas (1896) dismisses the simplistic association between Mwali and the politics of violence. He argues that Mwali, the god of seasons and crops, could never have been involved in the rebellion. He characterizes this High God thus:

³ Drawing his inspiration from the Kantian logical analysis and Kaufman's argument on the theological construction of the concept of God, Walsh (2002) distinguishes between concepts of God and the nature of an external and objective reality called God. Writing from a social anthropological perspective, I make no such distinction in this paper.

⁴ See Selous (1896); Hole (1896); Grey (1896); Thomas (1896); Baden-Powell (1897); Nobbs (1924); Ranger (1967; 1989; 1991a and b); Danciel (1970); Cobbing (1976); Werbner (1977; 1989).

⁵ Thomas grew up among the Ndebele people, and got to know their customs and traditions closely. His knowledge of the Mwali cult is therefore more accurate than the reports written by travellers and company officials who apart from their scanty knowledge of the cult also had political interests to serve.

Mwali is a god of peace and plenty, and never in the knowledge of the natives has He posed as the god of war; for not when Mzilikazi entered the country did He help Makalanga to withstand the Matabele; nor did He ever pretend in any way to assist the Matabele *impis* which went out to war during Lobengula's time; nor did He ever assist Lobengula (or ever pretended to do so) when the whites advanced against him in 1893. He blossomed forth as a god of war for the first time during the late Matabele rising in this present year, and even to this day the natives in Matabeleland say: 'who ever heard of Ngwali being a God of war or armies?' (Thomas 1896:39).

The debate between W.E. Thomas and Selous has a modern counterpart in the Werbner versus Ranger debate on the role of the cult in the rebellions. Ranger (1967) spearheaded the modern discourse on the role of the Mwali cult in politics of violence. Although his first major work on the Mwali cult was intended as a critique of the major conclusions of colonial discourse on this matter, he unintentionally supported the argument⁶. The basis of Ranger's acceptance of the role of the Mwali cult in the 1896/7 Ndebele and Shona uprisings is his notion of the 'crisis conception,' which states that in a crisis situation, a traditional religious cult may play 'uncharacteristic' roles. Therefore, in the war situation of 1896/7, Mwali, a God of peace, temporarily suspended his abhorrence of blood and opposition to war (Ranger 1967). Rejecting this argument, Werbner (1977:294) argues that:

I have never heard people of the cult say that God Above is associated with the power of war or that He calls for armed struggle against a regime, however oppressive.

Ranger's (1967) early version of the crisis conception underplays the significance of the existence of a diversity of interest groups within the cult domain. It overestimates the cult's ability to rally support for a single military course (Werbner 1989). Ranger fails to account for the reasons why all interest groups and officials of all cult centres did not respond in the same

⁶ See D.N. Beach's (1975) critique of Ranger's argument on the role of the Mwali cult in the 1897 Shona uprisings.

way during the crisis situation of the 1896/7 Ndebele and Shona uprisings. Three out of the four main shrines advocated a rising and it was in the areas where those shrines were influential that the rising broke out. The dissident shrine was that at Mangwe, in the southwest of present-day Zimbabwe. The chief officers there advised the people to stay out of the movement and the priests themselves took a leading part in warning whites, including missionaries, of the danger they were in. Under their influence the peoples of Plumtree and the southwest continued to 'sit still' (Ranger 1967:48). The reason for their neutrality possibly lay in their perception that the rising would not serve their interests very much (Werbner 1989:291). Possibly, their perception of Mwali as a God of peace rather than a God of war militated against their involvement in a bloody revolution. Therefore, our awareness of the divisions that cult officials have to contend with—such as cultural and ethnic affiliations and a diversity of other interests, including political expediencies (Werbner 1989:245,290,291)—leads to the conclusion that the cult's major hindrance to participation in war lies in 'the winning of consent' (Werbner 1989:293). These divisions, and their concomitant problem of failure to win a consensus, should in turn lead to different conceptions of what Mwali can and cannot do. Consequently, we should be ever wary of saying 'never'—like (Thomas 1896:39).

Nonetheless, Ranger's (1967) major work on the cult, which basically concludes that the Mwali cult was instrumental in the organization of the 1896/1897 rebellions has profoundly influenced many modern scholars writing on the role of the cult in Zimbabwean politics⁷, and the continuing discourse among the people themselves. To investigate further the extent to which Mwali can or cannot be associated with politics of violence, this paper focuses on the role of traditional religions in the recent Zimbabwean liberation war⁸. In his most recent work on the cult Ranger

⁷ Examples of scholars who concur with Ranger include: Schoffeleers (1976); and Daneel (1970; 1998). On the other hand, Werbner (1977, 1989); and Cobbing (1976) reject Ranger's suggestion that Mwali cult officials played a significant role in the organization of the 1896/1897 Ndebele and Shona uprisings.

⁸ This paper is mainly based on fieldwork conducted in Southern Matabeleland (Zimbabwe) in 1993.

(1989; 1991; 1992) continues the same old argument. He asserts that Mwali cult officials were involved in the recent liberation struggle, and that guerrillas sought protection and guidance from several Mwali cult centers in Southern Matabeleland, such as Hloka Libomvu and Bembe. The main objective of this paper is to identify the image of Mwali that emerges from the post liberation war discourse (available literature and ethnographic evidence) regarding the role of the Mwali cult in politics of violence. Any contemporary contribution to this debate must investigate the cult's association with politics and politicians in the last twenty years.

2. Methodological Reflections

My perception of the Mwali cult imposes an approach or methodology, which has serious implications for our reflections on God. There is a difference between a federative and regional cult. Schoffeleers (1978:10), who sees the Mwali cult as territorial or federative, defines this type of cult as a 'cult which cuts across ethnic boundaries and unites different ethnic and political groups'. The terms 'territorial' and 'federative' mistakenly imply that the Mwali cult domain is congruent with some political territorial boundaries. The Mbona cult of Malawi (Schoffeleers 1978) and the Komana cult of the Batswapong of Eastern Botswana (Werbner 1989) are territorial cults, because their spheres of influence are limited and co-terminal with territorial boundaries. On the other hand however, the Mwali cult domain extends over an area of more than a thousand square miles, cuts across ethnic, cultural, political and national boundaries. It is therefore, more inclusive than a territorial cult. In Werbner's terms, it is a regional cult: that is, 'a cult of the middle range—more far reaching than any parochial cult of the little community, yet less inclusive in belief and membership than a world religion in its most universal form' (Werbner 1977a:IX, 1979:58). Therefore, Mwali is not a God of a small or local community.

There is a distinction between 'the worship of local gods' and universal religions. The worship of local gods binds a local community, and engenders attachment to a particular place. On the other hand, universal religions, which revolve around more inclusive deities, give freedom from place⁹. While a functionalist approach is more appropriate for the study of

⁹ See Tuan (1977:150 - 152) for more information on the distinction between the worship of local gods and universal religions.

local cults, it is painfully inadequate for dealing with regional cults and universal religions. A study of the Mwali cult calls for an approach that can make sense of many opposing elements within the cult itself, the problems of the competitive interaction of different categories of pilgrims at the various cult centers, the implication of exclusive and inclusive aspects of the cult on reflections on the image of God, and the cult's relation with other competing cults within the same domain. The multi-dimensional (pluralistic mode)¹⁰ approach is most appropriate for studying this cult. This approach liberates us from the narrow Durkheimian tradition and the constraints of deterministic theories. Furthermore, the approach rejects any notion of homogeneity of beliefs and practices within the cult domain. It proceeds 'on the assumption of considerable heterogeneity and diversity among pilgrims' (Naquin and Yu 1992:8). This approach acknowledges that different categories of supplicants are likely to construct different images of Mwali and sacred centrality. Furthermore, different socio-political conditions may produce varying conceptions of a single deity. On the basis of the ethnography below, we test the validity of this hypothesis.

3. Mwali and Politics of Violence: Theoretical Perspectives

Although Ranger has written most extensively about the role of the Mwali cult in the politics of violence, I choose to focus on Daneel's (1998) reflections on the image of Mwali, which among other things, discuss the role of Mwali in the recent Zimbabwean liberation war. Daneel's main argument is that the involvement of the Mwali cult in the recent Zimbabwean armed struggle is indeed a continuation of what started prior to the 1896/7 rebellions in Southern Rhodesia, which are commonly referred to as the First *Chimurenga*¹¹. Below is the image of Mwali that emerges from Daneel's reflections on the recent Zimbabwean liberation war.

¹⁰ For more information on the advantages of this approach, see Eade and Sallnow (1991).

¹¹ During the war, Robert Mugabe made a rhetorical link between the recent liberation war and the rebellion of 1896-7, by referring to the recent Zimbabwean liberation war as the second *Chimurenga*. According to Mugabe, the Battle of Sinoia (the first attack of the guerrillas war) provided

Mwali has always been involved in politics. For example, He intervened on behalf of the oppressed as King Lobengula intensified his raids on Shona chiefdoms (1998:97). After conquering the Shona, Lobengula subjected them to untold cruelty. From one cultic cave Mwali promised the Shona divine intervention (Daneel 1998:97). Consequently, He caused the downfall of the Ndebele monarchy by bringing in the white settler government in 1893, which, in turn, led to the disintegration of the Ndebele monarchy. Since the collapse of the Ndebele monarchy was brought about by Mwali as punishment for Lobengula's arrogance and cruelty against the Shona, Mwali cult priests did nothing to rally the Shona chiefs in support of the Ndebele against the newly established administration of the British South Africa Company (Daneel 1998:98). Therefore, from the point of view of the Kalanga and Shona people, Mwali emerged as a liberator God during the Ndebele rule (Daneel 1998:97).

Daneel's position *vis-à-vis* the role of the Mwali cult has been greatly influenced by Ranger (1967). He contends that the whole of the Mwali cult's organisation 'acted as a central source of information and a means of co-ordinating resistance over a wide area.' Although Mwali cult officials did not provoke the rebellion, it played a significant role in ritually approving, supporting and co-ordinating a large-scale liberation struggle (Daneel 1998:98). Mwali's 'militant pronouncement' provided 'mystical legitimisation'¹² of the struggle, as well as powerful inspiration for coordinated and sustained action against the enemy over a wide area (Daneel 1998: 998, 100). The cult's extensive network was used to convey a defiant Mwali's declaration of war on the white settlers. At the outbreak of the rebellions, Mwari apparently issued the following directive from the oracular shrines:

'the connecting link between the First Liberation War (*Chimurenga Chokutanga*) fought by our ancestors in 1896 and 1897 and the second Liberation War (*Chimurenga Chechipiri*) which we are now fighting' (Robert Mugabe, 'The Sinoia Tradition,' *Zimbabwe News*, Vol. 10, No. 2, March-April; cited by A.H. Rich 1983:137).

¹² This is indeed acceptance and reproduction of Ranger's (1996:96) assertion that the cult 'set a seal of ritual approval on the decision of the community as a whole'.

These white men are your enemies. They killed your fathers, sent the locusts, caused this disease among the cattle and bewitched the clouds so that we have no rain. Now you will go and kill these white people and drive them out of our father's land and I (Mwari) will take away the cattle disease and the locusts and send you rain (Fleming, quoted in Ranger 1967:148).

Accepting Ranger's crisis conception, which justified Mwali's intervention in the 1896/7 Ndebele and Shona uprising, Daneel (1998:9100) asserts that although Mwali is essentially a God of peace and unity, 'when alien intrusion or unjust rule disturbs the intertribal political harmony, Mwari emerges as a militant deity, *the God of war and peace, and the God of justice opposing oppressive rule*'. Consequently, the 1896/7 rebellions in Southern Rhodesia 'saw a defiant deity going uncompromisingly on the offensive on behalf of the entire black community against white intruders' (Daneel 1998:100).

After the 1896/7 rebellions in Southern Rhodesia, the relationships between Mwali and the white colonialists on the one hand, and black and white on the other, normalized. For example, 'Mwari could still describe black-white relations in terms of the *sekuru-muzukuru* (maternal uncle-sister's son) relationship, which in Shona kinship is the most cordial relationship ...' (Daneel 1998:106). Mwari even indicated a certain fondness for the 'white *vazukuru*,' who were granted the customary privileges in their black uncle's house and yard (Daneel 1998:106). However, things changed in the period between 1967, when the recent armed liberation war began, and 1980, when the armed struggle ended. Mwari's conciliatory attitude towards the colonial government soon changed. Daneel captures this change thus:

As the struggle escalated the oracle made a *full declaration of war*. The gist of Mwari's messages throughout the struggle was: full condonation of militancy and support for the ZANLA and ZIPRA fighters who were trying to regain the lost lands; divine confirmation that this time *chimurenga* would succeed in replacing colonial rule with black majority rule ... (Daneel 1998:106 - 107).

Consequently, an intimate relationship developed between Mwali and the nationalist armed cadres. Guerrillas regularly visited Mwali cult shrines to request Mwari's power and guidance for the struggle. Mwali taught them 'how to fight, where to move and how to avoid dangerous situations...' (Daneel 1998:107). They received strategic directives from Mwari, directly relating to the day-to-day conditions of guerrilla warfare in the immediate environs of the shrines (Daneel 1998:107 - 108). Apart from these guerrillas, senior officials of the black nationalist parties (or their representatives) also visited many cult centres, particularly the Bembe and Dzilo shrines, to consult Mwari about the conduct of the war (Daneel 1998:108). There is therefore, no doubt of the 'close involvement, pervasive presence and divine initiative of Mwari,' since Mwari instigated, controlled and sanctioned the liberation struggle (Daneel 1998:110). The image of Mwali that emerges from all this is of a:

... liberator God, a God of justice, who hesitates neither to declare war on behalf of his/her oppressed people, nor to intervene militantly in a protracted struggle, both directly and through a war council. Thus the deity who sanctioned the rebellions of the oppressed black people in 1896, ... turned once again into a warlord in order to reclaim lost lands for the dispossessed and re-establish just and peaceful co-existence of all his/her subjects. In the minds of my informants there was no doubt that this liberator, Mwari of Matonjeni, was truly the original Creator God of Africa (Daneel 1998:111 - 112).

One may contrast the above views with Werbner's (1977) argument on whether or not Mwali can be involved in politics of violence. Firstly, we may note that Werbner draws much inspiration from Thomas (1896) as referred to earlier. His acceptance of Thomas's conception of Mwali leads to his rejection of Ranger's crisis conception, which has been the basis of arguments for the involvement of Mwali in the perceptions and activation of a politics of violence. Second, although Werbner did some research in South-western Zimbabwe, the bulk of his fieldwork and research on the Mwali cult was carried out in the mid 1960s in North-eastern Botswana. This is an area that has enjoyed peace and stability. I provide a perspective

on his views on the conceptualisation of the Mwali below¹³.

Relying heavily on Thomas' conception of the Mwali cult, Werbner holds steadfastly to the view of the Mwali cult as a cult of peace and tranquillity; a cult that abhors bloodshed and war; a cult which has a universal axiom that militates against sanctioning any violent rebellion within its domain (1977:211). Second, Mwali is both involved in and transcends local politics. Therefore, He cannot be used by one section of the population against another (1977:212). Consequently, Mwali had nothing to do with the revolt of 1896, because He is a god of peace, and is mainly concerned with the unity of the people and fertility of the land.

4. Mwali and Politics of Violence: Nationalist Leaders

At the beginning of nationalist politics in the early 1950s Joshua Nkomo, Grey Bango, Jason Moyo and Edward Ndlovu visited the Dula shrine to ask for guidance from Mwali in their struggle for independence¹⁴. Since this legendary visit to Dula by these politicians in 1953, both the shrines at Dula and Njelele have been frequented both by politicians of the now defunct ZAPU and by army officials of the ZIPRA forces during and after the liberation war in Zimbabwe. Individual guerrillas also visited the shrines during the course of the liberation war. Below is an account of the cult's association with some important ZAPU politicians.

4.1 Joshua Nkomo

Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo is the son of Nyongola Ditshwantsho Nkomo, the

¹³ Werbner's work being reviewed here was meant as a response to Ranger's (1967) work on the role of the Mwali cult in the 1896/7 rebellions. The reason for discussing Werbner's argument here is to demonstrate how two contrasting images of a single deity emerge from the literature.

¹⁴ The account below is based solely on my interview with Mrs. Thenjiwe Lesabe in May 1993. Mrs. Lesabe is the Member of Parliament for the Umzingwana Constituency within Matabeleland South. She is an old acquaintance of the late Joshua Nkomo. Joshua Nkomo refused to speak to me, and instead referred me to Thenjiwe Lesabe who, he claimed, 'knows everything.'

son of Ditshumo Nkomo¹⁵. Joshua's association with the cult is a well-known fact. His grandfather was the first member in his family to be associated with the Mwali cult. Joshua Nkomo's birth is portrayed as divinely influenced (Ranger 1992:8; Nthoi 1995). Therefore, his association with the Mwali cult started even before his birth. His role and significance in Zimbabwe's struggle for liberation are well-documented facts that need no further elaboration here (Nkomo 1984). His association with the Mwali cult as a politician began with his legendary visit to the Dula shrine in 1953, in the company of other members of the Trade Union Movement of the then Rhodesia.

He, together with Grey Bango, Edward Ndlovu (late) and Jason Moyo, visited the Dula shrine in 1953. They had initially wanted to go to Njelele, but lost their way and unintentionally landed at Dula. On arrival at the shrine keeper's place in the early evening, they narrated the purpose of their visit to the shrine. The shrine keeper told them that since the shrine was only open to elderly people, they could not be allowed to consult the oracle. In despair, they went back to a certain Mr. Mlilo's (a teacher at Dula Primary School) place and told him of their predicament. Mlilo advised them not to go back to town, but to sleep at his home. He also undertook to wake them up around twelve mid-night and lead them to a place where they could join the procession to the shrine without being noticed by anybody. Early in the morning, the young politicians joined the supplicants on their way to the shrine, under the cover of darkness.

After the keeper had greeted the Oracle, the Voice called Joshua and Grey by their names (as son of Nyongola and son of Luposwa respectively) and asked them why they had come to the shrine. The other supplicants were very surprised for they were not aware that these young men had made their way to the shrine. Joshua Nkomo then told the Oracle that since the country was experiencing great problems, they had come to ask for guidance and assistance in their efforts to achieve independence.

After the Voice had received assurance that these young politicians had not been sent by Lobengula, they were given a good hearing. Joshua

¹⁵ Prior to being elected the second Vice President of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Dr. Joshua Nkomo was the leader of the Ndebele dominated ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union). He passed away in 2000.

Nkomo and his colleagues were told that their struggle for liberation would go well. They were told that the country would get its independence after a long war lasting about thirty years. Botswana, Malawi and Zambia would get their independence before Zimbabwe. Joshua Nkomo was assured divine protection during this long war of liberation.

According to his biography (1984), Joshua Nkomo himself neither makes claim to divine birth, nor does he explain his involvement in the Railways Trade Union Movement, and his subsequent involvement in nationalist politics, as divine vocation. Significantly, and contrary to the myth propagated by Thenjiwe Lesabe (see Ranger 1989), Joshua Nkomo does not claim to have been promised divine protection during the turbulent years of the protracted Zimbabwean liberation war. In fact Thenjiwe's rendition of the dialogue between the Voice and Joshua and his companions (on their legendary visit to the Dula shrine in 1953) is different from both Nkomo's and Grey Bango's accounts¹⁶. To see Thenjiwe's narration simply as a misrepresentation of facts and history is to completely miss a very important point. It is basically her impression management in an attempt to co-opt the Mwali cult, in pursuit of her political ambitions. Corollary to this is the question of why Joshua Nkomo chose to have the history of his association with the cult narrated by another person. The reason for this runs deeper than the mere fact that he was too busy to talk to me, and that he trusted the memory of a close acquaintance. Joshua Nkomo's decision to have the myth of his divine birth, and the history of his association with the cult narrated to me by a third person allows and encourages its propagation. Furthermore, a 'disinterested' presentation of the myth also enhances its plausibility, authenticity and legitimacy.

Joshua Nkomo has visited Dula and other cult centres several times after this historic visit and even after the liberation war. After the liberation war, he visited both Hloka Libomvu and Njelele shrines more than twice. In 1980 after the war had come to an end, Sili Ndlovu, the keeper of the Njelele shrine welcomed guerrillas at Njelele. There was, however, no cleansing of the guerrillas at Njelele. Nkomo visited the Njelele shrine then. In 1982 he visited Sitwanyana Ncube, the then keeper of the Njelele shrine—to organize

¹⁶ For Grey Bango's account, see Ranger (1989); and the account of my discussion with him below.

a proper welcome of the guerrillas at the shrine.

Nkomo has also been directly involved in manipulating and co-opting the cult in various ways. He has for a long time maintained a very close association with the cult, and in particular, with Sitwanyana Ncube (one of the claimants of the priesthood of the Njelele shrine). In order to win over the cult and ordinary people in the Matopo Hills, he addressed a major political rally at Njelele, in which amongst other things, he announced his bid to convert the shrine into a major international pilgrimage centre (see Ranger 1989 and 1992). Such a move would have promoted the preeminence of the Njelele shrine over other cult centres. No wonder, therefore, that there later emerged in Southern Matabeleland, the now common reference to Njelele as *umthombo we lizwe* 'the fontanelle of the nation' (Ranger 1989 & 1992). Joshua Nkomo is reported to have chastised David (cult priest) for allowing photographers to take his [David's] picture, very much against the tradition of the cult (Nthoi 1995). This was an attempt to stamp his authority at Njelele. (Reference has already been made about how he portrayed himself as 'in charge' of the Njelele shrine).

4.2 Grey Bango¹⁷

Grey Bango was born on 7 December 1920. He is the son of Luposwa, who was the son of Mbubi. He is the grand-grand son of Zhobane, the legendary Mwali cult priest of the Njelele shrine. He knew at an early age that consulting the oracle of Mwali at major shrines could solve serious personal and communal problems. This was despite the fact that his grand parents had only stopped consulting the oracle after the murder of Zhobane¹⁸.

Grey Bango is a friend of Joshua Nkomo, who has tried to influence him and others, has even gone to the lengths of trying to capture command of Njelele through a *sangoma* kinswoman. In his personal capacity, and as a politician of Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), Grey Bango visited both Njelele and Dula several times during and after the liberation war. During the liberation war, when Joshua Nkomo was detained, Grey Bango

¹⁷ This account is based on my interview with Grey Bango in May 1993, at his farm near Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

¹⁸ See Ranger (1967) for more information on Zhobane's murder by white soldiers at the end of the Ndebele uprisings in 1897.

repeatedly visited both Dula and Njelele, according to him, in order to consult the oracle of Mwali, the outcomes of which he communicated to Nkomo. He attributes ZAPU's poor performance in the first post war Zimbabwean elections to Joshua Nkomo's refusal to heed certain Mwali's instructions, which he was not prepared to divulge.

As a politician and Trade Unionist, he always remembered what he had learnt about Mwali during his youthful days. After the first general workers' strike of the late 1940s, the white settler government had declared a state of emergency in all the urban areas. Government troops had unleashed violence on black demonstrators, killing many in Bulawayo. Consequently, a war situation prevailed countrywide. Grey Bango then remembered what his grandfather had told him; i.e. that when a war situation erupts (like it did when Zhobane was killed) recourse should be made to Mwali. He then mobilized his colleagues in the Trade Union movement to consult the oracle. It was then agreed that the Executive Committee of the Trade Union, comprising J. Z. Moyo, Joshua Nkomo, Benjamin Mandlala Sikhwili Moyo, Edward Ndlovu, and Grey Bango himself, should visit the Dula shrine. This shrine was chosen because Mwali's Voice was believed to have moved to Dula, after Zhobane's murder (Ranger 1967).

In 1953, the above-mentioned gentlemen visited Dula. On arrival there in the late afternoon, they found many elders at the shrine keeper's place. As expected, they informed the shrine priest and the elder of the purpose of their mission to the shrine—i.e. to ask for advice from Mwali about the proper action to take in the face of the war situation prevailing countrywide. The elders chased them away because the shrine was only accessible to elderly people. They then approached Mlilo the Headmaster of the Dula Primary School and explained their plight to him, and that they were going back home. Mlilo advised them not to return to Bulawayo in vain, but rather to join other supplicants on their way to the shrine, under the cover of darkness. They spent the night at Mlilo's place.

Towards dawn, Mlilo awoke them and they joined the procession of supplicants to the shrine. Their presence was unknown to cult officials. Suddenly, Mwali's Voice was heard welcoming the son of Luposwa (Grey Bango) and the son of Nyongola (Joshua Nkomo) to the shrine. It also chastised the elders for having chased these gentlemen away. The Voice wondered why the elders had chased away these young men who had

approached the oracle on a matter of such significance. As a result of the importance of their business, the oracle resolved that no other supplicant was to be attended to that morning.

Before Mwali advised the delegation on what course of action to take, He narrated a long history of the nation's disobedience and punishment. This narration was punctuated with Mwali's sobs and crying that continued for about fifteen minutes. They were reminded of how Lobengula¹⁹ had sinned and flouted Mwali's commands, as a result of which the white man had invaded and taken over the running of the country. Mwali also told them that He was already aware of the current bloodshed and a state of war that prevailed throughout the country. These afflictions were visited on the people as punishment for Lobengula's shortcomings. At the end of this narration, Mwali promised that independence would come to Zimbabwe only after a further thirty years of strife and bloodshed. However, these nationalist leaders were promised divine protection during this protracted period of war and bloodshed.

Apart from this legendary visit, Grey Bango has undertaken numerous other subsequent visits to the shrine. During the liberation struggle, when Nkomo was in Zambia, Grey visited the Njelele shrine on behalf of ZAPIU and Joshua Nkomo, its leader. Grey Bango recalls that he once visited the shrine to consult the oracle about Joshua Nkomo's security and protection. This visit to the shrine came at a time when the Smith regime was vigorously hunting down Joshua Nkomo. The oracle instructed Grey Bango to carry a message to Nkomo about how to take care of their weapons of war. The Voice also cautioned Nkomo and his guerillas against the killing of innocent people during time liberation war.

On another occasion, Grey accompanied a young woman from Zambia who was sent by Joshua Nkomo to consult the oracle at the Njelele shrine. The woman had come to get more instructions from Mwali about the conduct and direction of the liberation war. Apart from reiterating his

¹⁹ Lobengula was the Ndebele's second King. He is reported to have ordered Chief Ndiweni Faku to massacre all members of the Mbikwa priestly lineage of the Njelele shrine (Schoffeleers & Mwanza 1976; Bhebbhe 1976). He also banned public performances of *wosana* (Mwali cult adepts) dances within the Ndebele kingdom (Ranger 1967).

support for the liberation struggle and assuring Nkomo and other nationalist leaders of his protection, Mwali expressed his distaste for the killing of innocent civilians during the liberation war.

After the liberation war, Grey Bango undertook several visits to the shrine. For example, during the *Gukurahundi* period²⁰, he together with Nkomo, visited the shrine in order to find out what to do about the state-sponsored massacre of the Ndebele. They were told that this problem would come to an end if they followed Mwali's instructions. Unfortunately, these instructions were not followed to the letter. In Grey Bango's view, the failure to follow these instructions led to the political problems that later faced Nkomo and the country at large. In his last visit to the shrine in 1991, he was told that when Lobengula's kingdom collapsed as a result of his sins, there was no rainfall. Now that his friend Nkomo was reluctant to visit the shrine any more Mwali would withhold rain. This was not done, hence the devastating drought of 1991/92.

4.3 Thenjiwe Lesabe (MaKhumalo)

Mrs. Thenjiwe Lesabe is a member of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU (PF) and also the Member of Parliament for the Umzingwana constituency. After the death of Zimbabwe's First Lady, Sally Mugabe, she was appointed the leader of the ZANU (PF) Women's League, having long been Sally Mugabe's deputy in the ZANU (PF) Women's League. More recently, she was appointed Minister of Women's Affairs in the President's office. Thenjiwe Lesabe, a former member of the now defunct ZAPU, was very active in Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) [the military arm of ZAPU] during the liberation struggle, having been based in Zambia, where she was responsible for the welfare of all women recruits and combatants. She has worked very closely with Joshua Nkomo in both ZAPU and ZIPRA.

Thenjiwe's accounts of the relationship between the Mwali cult and ZAPU/ZIPRA officials are also part of an on-going discourse on the Mwali cult: *vis-à-vis* its role in politics, how its leadership is manipulated and co-

²⁰ This refers to the period of internal strife following the first national elections in Zimbabwe, which was characterized by government's violent suppression of 'dissident elements' in Matabeleland.

opted by, and how in turn it co-opts alternative sources of power and authority (e.g. politicians and cultural organizations). Therefore, in order to make sense of Thenjiwe's accounts we must understand something of her personal agenda.

Thenjiwe Lesabe, a feminist, a mission educated Christian belonging to an established church, and something of an Ndebele cultural nationalist, emerges both in the literature on the cult and in my personal discussion with her, as a culture broker. It is a role she plays up, representing herself as someone with the most intimate knowledge of people and cult events and practices largely unknown to women of her age, and to others of her circle or category. She emerges as herself something of an oracle, with authority to pronounce on history irrespective of her own social personality and interests. What are her motivations? All this has to do with her stakes in politics. It is part of her larger intent to manipulate and co-opt virtually any source of power and authority (including divinity) in pursuit of her own political ambitions, and her own construction of Ndebele ethnicity.

As a former member of the once famous Ndebele dominated ZAPU, and like many of her former colleagues, she had to come to terms with the political realities (missed opportunities) occasioned by her party's poor performance in the first general elections. As an educated woman (who quite possibly has read Ranger's 1966 and 1967 accounts on the role of traditional religious leaders in the 1896-1897 rebellions) and a religious person; as well as a politician and something of a Ndebele cultural nationalist, it appears she made recourse to traditional religion, in her struggle to seize the moral high ground.

Thenjiwe Lesabe holds the view that there was an intimate relationship between Mwali cult centres and ZAPU politicians and ZIPRA forces during the liberation war. She also depicts this cult's support for the liberation war as a continuation of its involvement in the 1896 Ndebele uprisings. Her affection for history is responsible for her very interesting conception of the recent Zimbabwean war of liberation. The Mwali cult is at the centre of Thenjiwe Lesabe's conception of the war of liberation.

In her view, the Zimbabwean liberation war was actually blessed or sanctioned by Mwali. It was also a punishment from Mwali for the shortcomings of both cult officials and the political leadership of the country. Mwali was very displeased with cult officials who revealed secrets

of the Njelele shrine to outsiders. Such revelations include the 'incident' in which cult officials at Njelele showed white men the talking stone that was kept within the shrine. The white colonial officers came and carried away this stone. The stone, I understand, is kept in some museum in Britain. The sins of cult officials angered Mwali. In the first case, this is why Njelele ceased to speak and, lastly this is why this bloody war was sent on all the people of Zimbabwe. The other reason why Mwali punished his people with this protracted war of independence is because of Lobengula's mistakes. Lobengula was very stubborn and unlike Mzilikazi, his father, his relationship with the Oracle was not very good. Thrice he was called to the shrine to be advised about the coming of the white men and he refused to visit the shrine. Mwali then got fed up with him and allowed his kingdom to fall at the hands of the white man.

Of great importance to Mrs. Lesabe's view of the role of the Mwali cult in Zimbabwean politics is her conception of the specialization of Mwali cult centers, according to which the Dula shrine emerges as a war shrine²¹. This conception of the shrine is linked to the questions of ritual innovation; interpenetration of cults—the Mwali, Mtuwane Dhlodhlo war cult, and the *sangoma* cults at Dula; and the colonization of the Dula shrine (particularly during the Zimbabwean liberation war), historically associated with the Mwali cult, by the Mtuwane Dhlodhlo war cult. The reported use of the red cloth at Dula, instead of the traditional black associated with Mwali, attests the colonization of the Mwali cult centre by the Mtuwane Dhlodhlo cult, of Nguni origin. The use of *ilembu libomvu* (Sindebele) 'red cloth' at Dula—a symbol of war and bloodshed, also associated with the *sangoma* cult—has led to the shrine's association with war and *abantu ba madhlozi* (Sindebele) (people of the spirits/spirit mediums). These innovations have led to the construction of the image of the Dula shrine (by ZAPU politicians in

²¹ Some evidence exists for the specialization of Mwali cult centers. During course of fieldwork, Chief Malachi Nzula Masuku refused to allow a group of traditional leaders to enter the Njelele shrine. The reason given is that the Njelele shrine is only associated with rain and fertility, and not with healing. The traditional healers were instead referred to the Dula shrine, which specializes in healing. See Schoffeleers and Mwanza for more information on the specialization of Mwali cult centers.

particular and other Ndebele cultural nationalists like Thenjiwe Lesabe), as *Hloka libomvu* (Sindebele): 'Red Axe'—the axe of war.

Consequently, and particularly in Thenjiwe's whole discourse on the Mwali cult, the Dula shrine is associated with war. The shrine's association with war dates back to the period of the 1896/7 rebellions. The shrine has power to wage and stop all wars. It was at this shrine that war against the whites was planned and it was also at this shrine that the recent Zimbabwean liberation war was stopped. It is the shrine at which Joshua Nkomo was promised divine protection; and ZAPU/ZIPRA officials frequented it during the liberation war. The spirit of Mtuwane Dhlodhlo, the Ndebele warlord lives in this shrine²². All matters concerning war come to this shrine and must be reported to Leo Mtuwane Dhlodhlo who is the current medium of the spirit of Mtuwane Dhlodhlo. All other shrine matters are reported to the usual keepers of the Maswabi family. Mrs. Lesabe visited the *Hloka Libomvu* shrine more than twice after the liberation war. On both occasions they had gone there to ask for political power for the Ndebele dominated ZAPU party and also to ask for peace.

Although there was contact between cult officials and the political leadership of ZAPU during the Zimbabwean liberation war, this was not a clearly stipulated party policy. However, there were times when the cultural committee of the ZAPU party advised and recommended that such contacts take place. For example, the political leadership of ZAPU repeatedly visited numerous cult centres during the liberation war. The purpose of such visits was to consult and seek protection and guidance from Mwali, as well as to ask for power during the war. Therefore, the military strength of the ZIPRA forces was partly a result of such visits to cult centres. In her view, the war could never have been fought and won without Mwali's assistance.

When the liberation war ended in 1980, and guerrillas assembled at the numerous assembly points all over the country, ZAPU officials went to

²² Ranger (1966; 1967) mistakenly identifies Mtuwane Dhlodhlo as Mthwani or Mbabani, the Mwali cult priest of the Dula shrine, who spearheaded the Ndebele rebellion in 1896. Cobbing (1976) correctly points out that the official Ranger refers to as Mthwani or Mbabani, was in fact Mtuwane Dhlodhlo, a Ndebele warlord, who had nothing to do with the Mwali cult. Ranger (1967) [reprinted version] has since acknowledged his mistake.

report their return to the Njelele shrine. A big feast was made at the shrine and Mwali was thanked for protecting the guerrillas, and above all, for their victory in this long war of liberation. Joshua Nkomo attended this ceremony. Since Sili Ndlovu, the incumbent priest at Njelele did not 'properly' conduct this ceremony; another 'proper' ceremony for welcoming the guerrillas was arranged by Sitwanyana Ncube in 1982, which Joshua Nkomo also attended.

In 1988, on realizing that some of the ex-combatants were being troubled by *ngozi* spirits (tormented and vengeful spirits) and that some were running mad, ZAPU officials decided to visit the shrines at Dula (*Hloka Libomvu*) and Njelele, to apologize on behalf of the guerrillas to Mwali at both the Njelele and Dula shrines. At these shrines, ZAPU leaders were first made to apologize for Lobengula's faults before they could ask for the forgiveness of the war crimes of the ex-combatants in the recent liberation war.

This is an example of the cult's concern with history and the reparation of past and present wrong-doings (including those committed by the long dead), in order for the living to be reconciled with the High God, and also to be at peace with the land itself. Those ex-combatants incorporated into the new national army, and those who were sick, were taken by their leaders to the shrines for ritual cleansing. Those who were not in the national army found their way to the shrines on their own. There was no general cleansing of the guerrillas of war crimes at any cult centre.

Even after the liberation war was over, ZAPU officials continued visiting these shrines to ask for power to defeat the Shona-dominated ZANU (PF) at the elections. During the *Gukurahundi* period, ZAPU officials also visited the shrines. When the Fifth Brigade unleashed its power and violence on the people of Matabeleland, senior ZAPU officials visited both the Njelele and Dula shrines to ask for the end of the civil war and the return of peace in the land. When the civil war reached its climax and senior ZAPU party officials realized that Joshua Nkomo's life was now at a great risk, they visited Njelele to ask for guidance. His escape into Botswana was asked for at Njelele. Sitwanyana Ncube also confirmed this during my interview with him. He claims to have performed a ritual, whose sole intent was to protect Joshua Nkomo as he fled the country²³.

²³ For ethical reasons, I withhold information on this ritual.

After Joshua Nkomo's return to Zimbabwe, ZAPU/ZANU (PF) unity talks were launched. During these talks ZAPU officials frequently visited and consulted Njelele and Dula shrines. Whenever these unity talks reached an impasse and threatened to collapse, ZAPU representatives consulted Mwali at one his numerous shrines. It was only after the Oracle at Njelele was consulted that a breakthrough was finally reached. According to Mrs Lesabe, the unity talks only succeeded because of ZAPU's close association with the Mwali cult.

Mrs Lesabe herself and Joshua Nkomo visited the *Hloka Libomvu* shrine several times after the liberation war. On almost every occasion they went there to ask for political power for the Ndebele dominated ZAPU party and also to ask for peace. She personally visited the Njelele and Dula shrines after the liberation war, and during the Zimbabwean Post Independence Unity Talks. Mrs Lesabe is strongly convinced that the liberation war would never have been won had ZAPU and ZIPRA not maintained the closest possible links with the Mwali cult centres.

Thenjiwe Lesabe's account of ZAPU's association with the Mwali cult reflects the differences within ZAPU itself, concerning their attitudes towards traditional religion in general, and the Mwali cult in particular. Such differences make it difficult to understand the actual relationship between ZAPU/ZIPRA and cult officials. For example, Dumiso Dabengwa²⁴, the former head of ZAPU military intelligence downplays the role of the Mwali cult in mapping out the military strategy of the ZIPRA forces. Although some ZIPRA cadres deployed within easy reach of Mwali cult centres occasionally visited such shrines, this was not a ZAPU policy of military strategy. Most important, these guerrillas visited such centres neither as representatives of ZIPRA, nor of their own squadrons, but as individuals²⁵.

Werbner reports²⁶ being told, by Dumiso Dabengwa (in a private conversation), that the Mwali cult was not a significant factor in the liberation war. Dabengwa is reported by Werbner to have said that guerrillas who resorted to the Mwali cult may well have been bands led by commanders who had been in revolt against the central leadership. If this is

²⁴ He is now a Cabinet Minister in the Zimbabwean Government.

²⁵ Interview with Dumiso Dabengwa at his house in Bulawayo in May 1993.

²⁶ Personal communication with me.

the position of the man, who, as the head of ZAPU military intelligence, was part of the effort within the party to professionalize the guerrilla forces and develop a sizeable, heavily armed standing army with the logistical capacity to sustain an effective long-term military strategy, which group within the ZAPU hierarchy sanctioned and encouraged the party's contact with the Mwali cult at whatever level? Who within the ZAPU hierarchy visited both Njelele and Dula shrines 'on behalf' of the organization? I pose these questions only to show that there is no agreement even within ZAPU itself on the nature and extent of the Mwali cult's association with ZAPU officials. I nevertheless, continue to use the term 'ZAPU' because Thenjiwe did.

However, some of my informants corroborated Mrs. Lesabe's account of the relationship between the Njelele shrine and 'ZAPU' and 'ZIPRA' forces. For example, Sitwanyana Ncube and his senior wife MaNyathi confirmed that both Thenjiwe Lesabe and Joshua Nkomo visited the Njelele shrine several times after the liberation war, to consult the oracle on national issues, and even to ask for personal favours from Mwali. According to MaNyathi, the last time Thenjiwe Lesabe visited the Njelele shrine was after the death of Sally Mugabe in 1992. Following her visit to the shrine, she was appointed the leader of the ZANU (PF) Women's League, and Minister of Women's Affairs in the Office of the President.

Finally, we must look at the image of the Dula shrine that emerges from modern literature on the Mwali cult. This image has serious implications for our understanding of both the role of the Mwali cult in the recent Zimbabwean liberation war, and on our reflections on the concept of Mwali. In the interest of brevity, I focus on Ranger's writings on the Dula shrine. In the literature on the cult the Dula shrine is mainly associated with healing and a military tradition (Ranger 1991b: 10,12). This is indeed problematic for a cult whose High God is historically known for his abhorrence of blood; a God who sends war as punishment for the transgressions of his people (Ranger 1989). This raises an interesting question about the nature of divinities associated with the Dula shrine. Below, I give a summary of Ranger's (1989; 1991; 1992) depiction of the military tradition of the Dula shrine.

As a result of its military tradition and its specialization in matters of war, this shrine is referred to as *Hloka Libomvu* (Sindebele) the 'shrine of the Red Axe.' The members of the Dhlodhlo family, that is in charge of the

shrine, are descendants of Mtuwane Dhlodhlo, a leading Ndebele military commander during the famous Ndebele uprisings of 1896, who was given 'the power to wage war—which is known in Matabeleland as the War of the Red Axe' (Ranger 1989). Since then, this shrine has been associated with war. In 1953, when Joshua Nkomo and Grey Bango (leading ZAPU politicians) visited the 'shrine of the Red Axe' or *Hloka Libomvu*, not only did *Mwali* sanction the liberation war and promise to protect Nkomo, but he actually committed Himself to the war (Ranger 1991b:11). According to Thenjiwe V. Lesabe, Ranger's main informant and a leading ZAPU politician, this is what the Voice of *Mwali* said to Nkomo:

You the son of Nyangola, great-son of Maweme, you will lead this nation. When you go into the river, I'll be with you. When you hide among the small shrubs, I'll be with you. Wherever you are I'll be with you until this war is over. Nobody will touch your body. I'll fight with you, let's go to war together (Ranger 1991b:9; 1985 & 1999:217).

As a result, Dula supported the liberation war. Owing to its association with the Ndebele past history, this shrine became closely associated with the Ndebele dominated ZAPU, and therefore 'remained a regular place of resort for ZAPU leaders.' Both ZAPU politicians and ZIPRA commanders visited this shrine to take 'instructions' and hear 'predictions' concerning the ongoing war. The ZIPRA forces derived their power from the *Mwali* cult centres (Ranger 1991b:12). The guerrillas visited the shrine for blessings and protection.

A number of questions present themselves to us: a) Which shrine did Nkomo visit—*Dula* or *Hloka Libomvu*? b) Are the injunctions of the divinity at *Hloka Libomvu* similar to those of the *Dula* divinity? c) Which divinity supported the Zimbabwean liberation war? d) By whom is the *Dula* shrine referred to as either *Hloka* or *Lembu Libomvu*?

Although the above depiction of the activities at the *Dula/Hloka Libomvu* shrine is very illuminating and exciting, it is essentially a continuation of Ranger's old argument about the involvement of the *Mwali*

cult in Zimbabwean politics (Ranger 1967)²⁷. Most importantly, this current argument is built solely around Mrs Thenjiwe Lesabe's version of Nkomo's visit to *Dula*. This is despite Ranger's (1991) awareness of the glaring differences between Mrs Lesabe and Nkomo's accounts of the same visit. First, Nkomo unequivocally states that in 1953, he unintentionally visited the *Dula* shrine and not *Hloka Libomvu*. Secondly, that the Oracle pronounced that his country would attain independence after a protracted war. Lastly, Nkomo's account contains no promise of divine protection as Mrs Lesabe claims²⁸.

Ranger also ignores Grey Bango's account of what the Voice of *Mwali* said to them during that visit²⁹. Grey Bango reports that after *Mwali* had cried for a long time, He told them that a long war was coming. Like other past wars, this war was *Mwali*'s punishment for the past leaders' failure to heed His words about peace³⁰. Both Bango and Nkomo's accounts of this historic visit to the shrine clearly demonstrate that *Mwali* is a peaceful God who only sends war upon his people as punishment. Much scholarly literature on the *Mwali* cult has stressed the cult's concern with fertility and affliction, with the peace and the well-being of the land and its people from many diverse ethnic groups. Prohibitions against the pollution of the earth by war and bloodshed have long been known to express paramount values attributed to *Mwali*³¹. *Mwali* is generally known to punish his people through natural disasters like drought, floods, epidemic diseases, and even through war (Ranger 1999:218). This conception of *Mwali* clearly

²⁷ I.e., during a period of crisis *Mwali* cult priests *do* support a war policy despite *Mwali*'s primary concern with peace and the fertility of the land (Ranger 1967).

²⁸ For more detail, see Nkomo (1984).

²⁹ However, he corrects this oversight in his recent publication (1999) in which he seriously takes into account both Grey Bango and Nkomo's accounts of their legendary visit to the *Dula* shrine in 1953. Much more than before, Ranger acknowledges that Mrs Lesabe does more than merely narrate history, but also 'adds a number of claims which were probably developed as a response to later exigencies' (1999:217).

³⁰ See Ranger (1985; 1999:216 -218).

³¹ See Werbner (1977b; 1989) and Ranger 1967:14 -21).

militates against the cult's involvement in the war of liberation. While the divinity at *Hloka Libomvu* (i.e. the one that lies at the centre of the *Mthwane Dhlodhlo* war cult, with its own priest) is associated with war, the *Dula* divinity abhors war and bloodshed³². This is why all matters pertaining to war are referred to Leo Dhlodhlo³³, while ordinary matters of fertility are referred to Ncube, the priest of *Mwali*.

The present innovations at this shrine not only indicate that a new *Dhlodhlo* cult is emerging either within or parallel the *Mwali* cult. They also indicate that the shrine is slowly being taken over by the *Sangoma* cult, originally associated with the Ndebele. What are the indications? In Sindebele, *lembu libomvu* means a red cloth³⁴. While the mediums of the *sangoma* cult wear a 'red mantle or cloth,' a symbol of the blood of 'the violence of war,' *Mwali* cult adepts (*wosana*)³⁵ wear a black cloth, a symbol of the black clouds of rain that *Mwali* gives his people³⁶. Supplicants to *Mwali* shrines are required to bring tobacco/snuff and a black cloth as tributary to the High God. Even ZIPRA guerrillas 'sent gifts of black cloths to Bembe shrine in exchange for protection' and not a red cloth (Ranger 1991b:14). *Dula*'s association with red is an indication of both its significant attachment to a different and possibly opposing cult—the *Sangoma* cult, and possibly its specialist function as Ranger (1991b:11) argues. This is suggested by the contrast in the use of the colours. This new colonizing cult could be the one associated with war. Mrs. Thenjiwe Lesabe portrays this shrine as having the power to wage and end war. No similar claim is made

³² After visiting the *Zhilo* shrine, Mwanza (1972:8) reports that 'Mwari is totally against bloodshed. He loves peace...'. See also Ranger (1999:218).

³³ To date, I have not interviewed Leo Dhlodhlo on his role at the *Dula/Hloka Libomvu* shrine and his relationship with the Maswabi priestly lineage at the shrine.

³⁴ Interestingly, Ranger (1989) initially referred to the *Dula* shrine as *Lembu Libomvu* (the shrine of red cloth) rather than *Hloka Libomvu* (the shrine of the red axe).

³⁵ The *wosana* is a *Mwali* cult adept. For more information on this cult official see Nthoi (1998).

³⁶ On the colour differentiation between these cults, see Werbner (1991:187-88).

for any other *Mwali* shrine in Zimbabwe. The *Dula* shrine is associated with two divinities. Ranger (1989:7) reports Thenjiwe Lesabe as having said:

Mtuwane was Nguni, the son of Ugogo; he was given the power of war by the shrine, by *Dula*, but when referring to the war you don't call it *Dula*. You call it *Lembu Libomvu*, the Red Axe. This was when they were fighting against the whites in 1890s... At *Dula* there are two powers there. One is for war and the kingdom of the Ndebele people. That is where mostly—I shouldn't discuss that. They are secrets of the nation.³⁷

Either as *Lembu* or *Hloka Libomvu*, the *Dula* shrine has become associated with war. Operating 'in its role as the shrine of the Red Axe,' *Dula* gave support to Joshua Nkomo during the liberation war (Ranger 1999:217). Two divinities—one of peace and the fertility of the land and its people (*Mwali*), and the other associated with war and the kingdom of the Ndebele (the spirit of *Ugogo*, the originator of the Mtuwane Dhlodhlo war cult) share the same sacred space at *Dula*. This possibly answers the question of which divinity supported the Zimbabwean liberation war, and which divinity, whose abhorrence of bloodshed and war led to his narration of the history of the 'divinely ordained transition of regimes' to Joshua Nkomo and Grey Bango in their historic visit to the *Dula* shrine in 1953 (Ranger 1999:217).

Last, when Ranger (1989) first mentioned the military tradition of the *Dula* shrine, he referred to this shrine as *Lembu Libomvu* (Sindebele) ('[shrine of the] Red Cloth'). Subsequently, he (1991; 1992) referred to the shrine as *Hloka Libomvu* (Sindebele) ('[shrine of the] Red Axe'). For example, he speaks of 'Dula, the shrine of the Red Axe, to which Nkomo had famously gone in 1953...' (Ranger 1999:240). Ranger's conception of *Dula* as *Hloka Libomvu* is mainly based on the information from Thenjiwe Lesabe and Reader Ncube (Ranger 1989; 1999). Both are former ZAPU members and cultural brokers who seek both to legitimate the ZIPRA armed struggle and come to terms with ZAPU's poor performance during the 1980

³⁷ For more information on the two divinities at the *Dula* shrine, see also Ranger (1999:27).

Zimbabwean general elections.

Although Ranger (1999) states that he has confirmed this conception of the Dula shrine with other groups of people, both Thenjiwe Lesabe and Reader Ncube are mainly responsible not only for promoting the image of Dula as a war shrine, but also for reference to this shrine as *Hloka Libomvu*. Neither the Maswabi Ncube family responsible for running the Dula shrine nor any other cult leaders and the general public in the Matobo District and Matobo Communal lands refer to Dula as the Red Axe. The coinage and usage of the term *Hloka Libomvu* is indeed part of the innovations that are currently taking place at this shrine. Two divinities and three different cults (*Mwali* cult, *sangoma* cult and the *Dhlo dhlo* war cult) co-exist at the Dula centre. The current innovations at Dula mark the beginning of the process of syncretism (fusion and combination of distinctive cultural elements) and colonization of the *Mwali* cult by Ndebele traditional religious cults. This colonization of the *Mwali* cult has had significant impact on the conceptualization of *Mwali*, the divinity originally associated with this shrine.

5. **Mwali and Politics of Violence: Cult Officials and Supplicant's Accounts**

Major *Mwali* cult centers attract different categories of pilgrims coming from diverse communities from all over the cult domain. The heterogeneity of pilgrims, all coming to these shrines with their own conceptions of sacredness and ritual practice makes these shrines a real arena for multiple and competing discourses. Therefore, any attempt to come with a single and universally acceptable conception of *Mwali* is indeed a daunting task. Below are accounts from different supplicants and cult officials on the involvement of the cult in the recent Zimbabwean liberation struggle.

5.1 **Sitwanyana Ncube**

Sitwanyana Ncube is one of the rival priests of the Njelele shrine³⁸, the cult's paramount pilgrimage center. Born in 1925, Sitwanyana was nearly seventy

³⁸ During course of fieldwork, the Njelele shrine had two rival priests: the officially recognized priest, David Ndlovu and the self-installed priest, Sitwanyana Ncube.

years old when I met him in 1993. He is the son of Machokoto, who was himself the son of Chobuta of the famous Mbikwa lineage. His real home is in the Mayenga village near Maphisa, within the Semokwe Communal lands, in Chief Fuyana's chiefdom.

The Mbikwa lineage has been associated with the Njelele shrine for a long time (Schoffeleers 1978). Sitwanyana's claimed relation to the Mbikwa lineage has been the basis of his claim to the leadership of the Njelele shrine. Sitwanyana is a very intelligent and charismatic old man, who mixes politics, his religious career and everyday life in a very interesting manner. Sitwanyana, a self-professed politician, is a staunch supporter of the predominantly Ndebele ZAPU, and remains a supporter and personal friend of its leader, Joshua Nkomo. After being forced to flee from Njelele in 1985, he lived for six years, at one of Nkomo's farm at Mguza, near Bulawayo. As a result of his political leanings, he has very little sympathy for the Zimbabwean government. He scarcely talks about the Mwali cult without mentioning Joshua Nkomo, albeit in ambivalent terms, glorifying Mambo and Lobengula (dead Rozwi and Ndebele kings respectively) and expressing hostility towards his rival David Ndlovu, President Robert Mugabe and his government.

Sitwanyana's history of association with the Mwali cult cannot be narrated without making any reference to Zimbabwean politics. He has personally been associated with the cult for slightly more than thirty years. His long association with the cult has been a mixture of fortunes: i.e. lots of controversy interspersed here and there with short periods of popularity and legitimacy. He was first installed as the priest of the Njelele shrine around 1964. Despite his insistence that he is the legitimate owner of the shrine, it does appear that his invitation by local chiefs was basically intended to ward off claims from less suitable candidates. In other words, when it became evident that the Shona wanted to take over the leadership of the shrine, it was decided that Sitwanyana, a descendent of the Mbikwa house, should be invited to take over the shrine.

In 1977, the late Chief Garret Nzula Masuku removed Sitwanyana from office after having wrongfully taken over the leadership of the Njelele shrine from his former wife, Ngcathu Mayezane Ncube. During his first absence, Sili Ndlovu was made a caretaker priest of Njelele. When Sili became sick, and therefore, unable to carry out his duties, local chiefs and

elders reinstated Sitwanyana as leader of the shrine. However, the guerrillas later forced him out of office when the Zimbabwean liberation war intensified. During his second exit from Njelele and after the death of Sili, Mayabo Bhayane Ndlovu (the elder brother) to Sili) was made the priest at Njelele. Mayabo Bhayane had earlier refused to assume cult leadership because of his Christianity.

After Bhayane's death, shortly after the end of the liberation war in 1981, Sitwanyana made his second come back to Njelele. There is a general belief that Joshua Nkomo sponsored Sitwanyana's second reinstatement. He remained in office until he was attacked and nearly killed by unknown assailants, generally believed to have been 'dissidents.' He left Njelele in early 1985, after abandoning his office, and lived for six years on Joshua Nkomo's farm at Mguza near Bulawayo. Immediately after Sitwanyana abandoned his office, David Ndlovu was appointed to take over the priesthood of the shrine. However, when Sitwanyana came back to Njelele in 1991, he installed himself as priest of the Njelele shrine.

According to Sitwanyana Ncube, it is impossible to speak of the Mwali cult without making any reference to politics. During the recent liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, ZIPRA forces visited many Mwali cult centers where they consulted Mwali about their military strategies. Mwali did not only commit himself to the liberation of black Zimbabweans, but actually aligned himself with the struggle waged by the ZIPRA forces. He personally organized and officiated at ritual ceremonies held to fortify ZIPRA guerrillas. He laments the fact that Joshua Nkomo ignored some vital instructions from Mwali, which could have led to his party's victory in the first Zimbabwean general elections of 1980. For him, Mwali is both a God of war and a God of peace. Although Mwali had earlier committed himself to the liberation struggle, his intervention during the course of the Zimbabwean Post War Internal Peace Talks led to peace and tranquility in the country.

5.2 Other Accounts

Below, I present accounts collected from informants who were neither associated with national politics, nor with the Mwali cult leadership. Owing to the very nature of the Mwali cult—in that it is shrouded in so much secrecy—it is difficult to identify former guerrillas. Ex-combatants, furthermore, were reluctant to talk freely about their wartime experience.

Consequently, it was not easy to find the 'right' people with whom I could discuss the cult's role in the liberation war. The few people who were willing to talk about this topic were either outsiders to the cult leadership, or had not fought in the liberation war. Others like Siwani Ncube and Benjamin Sizungu Ndlovu were chosen by cult priests, and introduced to me as 'very knowledgeable' on the affairs of the Njelele shrine. Apart from their knowledge of the cult, they are either relatives or personal friends and acquaintances of the priests themselves. For this reason perhaps, their accounts are generally in line with their respective priests.

The ZAPU/ZANU division and opposition, which was very much pronounced in the early years of Zimbabwean independence, is still reflected in Mwali cult politics. The Hovi river, that separates the villages of Dewe (David's power base) and Halale (Sitwanyana's), roughly marks the divide for ZAPU/ZANU political affiliations, and for the politics of the Mwali cult within the current leadership dispute. Sitwanyana draws most of his support from Halale village and David from Dewe. It is hardly surprising that Sitwanyana features so prominently in Thenjiwe's accounts of the Mwali cult. A personal friend of Joshua Nkomo, Sitwanyana is a self-confessed and ardent supporter of the now defunct ZAPU; and is himself, like Thenjiwe something of a Ndebele cultural nationalist. Consequently, there is congruence in their ideas and perceptions of the role of the cult in the liberation war. It is an agreement between Sitwanyana's political mentors and him on the one hand, and his followers or supporters in Halale, and himself, on the other.

Siwani Ncube of Halale reports that during the liberation war, Sitwanyana came to be known generally as a priest of war. This was because he used to 'pray' for guerrillas at the shrine. When they arrived, he dressed them in black cloths in order to disguise them perfectly as ordinary supplicants who are normally dressed in black cloths. He buried their guns in his kraal. Often when the guerrillas were at Sitwanyana's place National Security forces came looking for them. When that happened, Sitwanyana denied having seen them. He hid them until he was sure that they were safe enough to leave under the cover of darkness.

Chief Malacki Nzula Masuku, who has authority over the territory around Njelele, holds a different view of the relationship between the Njelele shrine and guerrillas during the liberation war. Owing to its

conception as mainly a shrine for rain and peace, the Njelele shrine has never been associated with war. Even during the old Matabele war with the whites (Matabele Rebellion of 1896/7) the shrine was not involved and regiments did not visit it. However, during the recent liberation war, guerrillas went to the shrine mainly to see what was happening, rather than seek protection and guidance in the war. They often went there without permission or knowledge of the shrine keeper. Dissidents who harassed and chased away ordinary supplicants also visited the shrine. The Fifth Brigade also frequented the shrine to look for dissidents. However, the keeper never reported anything.

Guerrillas also visited the shrine mainly to see what was happening, rather than to seek protection and guidance in the war. They often went there without permission or knowledge of the shrine keeper. This is why during the liberation war, many cult priests used to complain of the desecration of the shrine by guerrillas. Therefore, the Njelele shrine was really not involved in the liberation war.

Let us contrast Siwani Ncube's account with the views held at David's centre in Dewe, or better still with someone who is known to be openly against Sitwanyana's stay at Njelele. A majority of the elderly people I interviewed at Dewe denied any knowledge of the cult's involvement either in politics generally or specifically in the liberation war. Benjamin Sizungu Ndlovu (David Ndlovu's younger brother) acknowledged that only a few guerrillas visited Njelele. They were however, required to remove their boots, and leave their guns buried in the sand of a little stream almost a kilometre away from the Njelele hill, before they were led to the shrine, together with other ordinary pilgrims to the shrine. A soldier without his boots and gun is for all intents and purposes, no longer a soldier. The taking off of the guerrilla's boots and guns has a levelling effect associated with Turner's concepts of liminality, *communitas* and anti-structure, through which the guerrilla is transformed into *iii Thobela* (Sindebehe) (an ordinary supplicant). It is also on the Dewe side that I gathered information about the harassment of ordinary supplicants by guerrillas. Such behaviour is not expected from guerrillas who also frequented the Njelele shrine during the liberation war.

During the liberation war, Sitwanyana was beaten up and subsequently chased away from Njelele by guerrillas. He told me that he

suspected that these were bandits acting on behalf of David Ndlovu, who was known for his support for ZANU. David's response to this allegation was that Sitwanyana, rather than himself, should know better about these guerrillas, because Sitwanyana was known to have allowed guerrillas to live at his centre, to enter and desecrate the shrine.

Related to the ZAPU/ZANU divide is ZAPU's reaction to the popular appointment of David Ndlovu as priest of the Njelele shrine. According to Thenjiwe Lesabe, 'ZAPU officials' were opposed to the appointment, not only because David was not a descendant of the priestly family original associated with Njelele³⁹, but also on political grounds. ZAPU officials were opposed to what they considered a 'political' appointment of a pro-ZANU man to the priesthood of the Mwali cult's major shrine. ZAPU then decided to flex all its muscles, and behind Sitwanyana, their disgraced candidate.

6. Conclusion

The major conclusion of this paper is that it is not possible to come up with a single image of Mwali the High God. The very nature of the cult itself is a major hindrance to reaching consensus on a number of issues within the vast cult domain. First, there is no unanimity on the name of this High God, who is known by different names among the many ethnic and cultural groups that fall within the Mwali cult domain. For example, among the Venda of Northern Transvaal the 'same' deity goes under the name *Rahuvhimba*, while among the Ndebele of Southern Zimbabwe he is known as *Mlimo*⁴⁰. This raises an important question of whether or not Mwali, Mlimo and

³⁹ This decision was based on the findings of their consultation with elders in various places within the Khumalo chiefdom.

⁴⁰ The journey of the Ndebele of Mzilikazi from Zululand to present day Zimbabwe led to their encounter with the Sotho and Tswana people, who believed in a God known as *Modimo* (Setswana) and *Molimo* (Sotho). Away from home, the Ndebele adopted the Sotho-Tswana *Modimo/Molimo* as their God. *Mlimo* is thus a poor rendition of the Sotho word *Molimo*. In fact in Southwestern Zimbabwe, people talk of the *Mlimo* cult. See Bhebhe (1978) for more information on how the Ndebele came to worship *Mlimo* in present day Zimbabwe.

Raluvhimba are one and the same. In particular, the process by which Mwali became *Mlimo* needs further research that will focus on an identification of the conceptual changes resulting from the process itself. Therefore, the current conception of the nature and function of the High God is in fact a product of interaction between people, having different cultures or origins. This is why Werbner (1977; 1989; 1991) makes much of the transcultural significance of the cult and its appeal in addressing *Mwali* to a vision of an inclusive macrocosm. Given the fact that the image of God is socially constructed, it is impossible to achieve unanimity on the conception of the nature of Mwali the High God.

Second, the construction of the image of God is an on-going process, which is done in different historical and socio-political conditions, by people with different experiences and existential circumstances. God has no intrinsic nature and image, other than that which people give Him. For example a semi-nomadic people is more likely to have a God who is not limited to a specific location. On the other hand, an agricultural society is more likely to have a fertility God. In the same way, an image of a militant God is unlikely to emerge among a people living in a peaceful and calm situation⁴¹.

While the literature on the Mwali cult produced prior to the 1896/7 rebellions makes little reference to Mwali as a God of war, the same cannot be said of the modern literature. During peaceful times, Mwali is generally perceived as a God of peace and the fertility of the land and its creatures. The Mwali military tradition is completely absent among Bakalanga of Southwestern Zimbabwe and Northeastern Botswana, because these people have never experienced a serious war situation. Among these people, Mwali continues to be encountered as a God who abhors bloodshed and conflict. However, Mwali emerges as a God of war mainly in the discourse on the cult from an Ndebele perspective. The Ndebele have had to deal with the pain of the demise of their monarchy at the hands of the white settler government in 1893; their oppression under the Smith regime that led to the recent armed struggle; the Ndebele-dominated ZAPU's defeat at the first Zimbabwean general elections of 1980, and the atrocities committed against

⁴¹ A peaceful God would have been irrelevant for the Israelites living in political bondage in Egypt.

them by the Fifth Brigade during the *Gukurahundi* (period of internal strife) in the post war period. These people needed a God that would enable them to come to terms with their existential circumstances, a God that would energize and legitimize their involvement in politics of violence.

Lastly, construction of the image of God takes place in a specific place and over a period of time. The environment under which reflections on the nature of God take place, influences the concept of God that ultimately emerges. Within the Mwali cult domain are people of different nationalities, ethnic and cultural affiliations. Reflections on the nature of Mwali take place in an environment of religious pluralism. Apart from the Mwali cult, there are several other traditional religious cults such as the *Mhondoro* cult among the Shona, the *Sangoma* cult found predominantly among the Ndebele (Janzen 1994), and the cult of shades among the Shona, Ndebele and Bakalanga. Adherents of these traditional cults mix freely at Mwali cult centers. The ritual activities that take place at most Mwali cult centers have become so syncretized that it is no longer possible to distinguish authentic Mwali cult practices from those that are not. A typical example of syncretism and hybridization of traditional religious ideas seems to be taking place at the *Dula/Hloka Libomvu* shrine, where two divinities and three different traditional cults now co-exist. The image of Mwali that emerges at *Dula/Hloka Libomvu* shrine reflects the extent of 'Ndebelization' (co-option of a shrine originally associated with the Mwali cult by the Ndebele Mtuwane Dhlodhlo war cult) that has taken place. It is an image of Mwali that Bakalanga supplicants of Northeastern Botswana would not relate with. The question of whether or not Mwali is a God of war or a God of peace largely remains unanswered. For some supplicants who have experienced war and strife, Mwali is a God of war. However, for some, particularly Bakalanga of Southwestern Zimbabwe and Northeastern Botswana, Mwali remains a God of peace. While the military tradition is strongest at Dula, where a new Ndebele war cult has infiltrated the Mwali cult, it is absent at the Tebgwi shrine in Ramokgwebane village in Northeastern Botswana. It is therefore safe to conclude that Mwali can be *both* a God of war and a God of peace.

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