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## Full Length Research Paper

# MYTHICAL LEOPARDS (*PANTHERA PARDUS*) OF THE VHAVENDA

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### Abstract

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Spiritual connections and contacts of people with supernatural characters sourced from the environment explains the deep-rootedness of Vhavenda religiosity on gods, and subsequently explains their world as being highly influenced of Occultism. Amongst the various clans constituting the broader Vhavenda tribe, occultic activities and rituals expressed through festivals and individual communication with supernatural characters are common. Modern scientific thought view these beliefs as created illusions, fantasy, mythical and deep-rooted primitive religiosity and spirituality. This paper reveals that the majority of those who practice Occultism amongst the selected clans of the Vhavenda viewed their supernatural characters as postulating Mwali; the Vhavenda god with these characters as the guides. Some believe that their characters are in the class of Jesus Christ and Prophet Mohammed who are guides in the Christian and Islamic faiths. Conclusions drawn are that while some of the supernatural characters believed and accepted as genuine by some of the participant clans in this paper could also be created illusions, fantasies, mythical and fictitious.

**Keywords:** Ancestors, Jewish-Christian, Leopard, Mwali, Mythological, Occultism, Panthera pardus, Vhavenda

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## INTRODUCTION

Modern research has established that Africa, like all other regions of the world has had immense cultures, traditions and religions. These cultures, traditions and religions influence the greater factors of the day-to-day socio-economic systems of the peoples of Africa at large (Dukor 2014; Musehane *et al.* 2012). Some of these cultures, traditions and religions are built on celestial bodies such as the moon, sun and stars, and they bear notable spiritual significance and meaning to Africans. On these bodies Africans fashion amongst others their religions and spirituality. For example, while a falling star could be explained in terms of modern scientific processes and thought amongst most modern scholars and thinkers – especially those who have been influenced by Western civilisation, however, amongst the Vhavenda of northern Limpopo Province, South Africa, the same could be interpreted as foretelling a death of a prominent person such as a traditional chief (Musehane *et al.*, 2012).

In 1973, while this researcher was with the grandmother, sitting in what is known as *muta* (open space in front of the traditional mud huts) in the early evening just before going to sleep, we saw a bright light of a falling star, and the grandmother remarked when seeing it “*we will hear something bad...death of someone very prominent*”

Indeed the following day, a *mudinda* (messenger) was sent to my uncle's homestead from Ha-Kutama Tshikwarani to come announce the death of acting chief of the Kutama clan, Chief Khunuthu Kutama. This was in keeping with tradition because my uncle was chief of the Makhavhu clan and chief Kutama had some cordial relations with the Makhavhus. In Western cultures and tradition, how a falling star could foretell death of someone might sound weird and characteristically naïve or simply mythical. But suppose this event was based on myth, how then could one explain the prediction the old lady had on the death of Chief Khunuthu Kutama? Some without experience of this might call the incident co-incidence, or to the extreme, witchcraft. One does not need to be a spiritist or diviner to read such meanings. It is not witchcraft. It is generational indigenous knowledge. In fact in Africa, it was common for tribes to foretell events from natural phenomenon. For example, amongst the Tonga of Monze District in Zambia, they could predict weather out of certain phenomenon for example (Nanja 2011). A bolt of lightning which injures someone or whatever – for example, livestock, might be viewed amongst the majority of Blacks in South Africa as an act of witchcraft caused by certain jealous individuals on the victim(s) (Tregrove 2012) while to some modern scientific thought, the same could be an act of pure natural incident. A plethora of literature postulate that Africans were people of countless myths and voluminous superstitious beliefs which influence their day-to-day living.

One other area which has received little research attention and debate amongst Africans is religious belief systems which are mostly based on nature and environment. These beliefs influence the myths and superstitions of most of these African peoples. Amongst the Vhavenda of northern Limpopo Province, South Africa for example, there are many tribal clans whose religiosity is based on animals such as lions (*Panthera*), elephants, leopards, baboons (*Papio hadryas*) and so forth. There are fascinating stories told of some of these animals which are mostly adopted as supreme beings of worship amongst some tribal clans amongst the Vhavenda for example. The majority of these beings and stories are considered as myths in the social science circle. This paper focuses on the leopard (*Panthera pardus*) and its role and significance on the religiosity and cosmology of the Vhavenda. Having considered the cultural, traditional and religious value of some of these supreme beings – especially the leopard (*Panthera pardus*) amongst some selected tribal clans amongst the Vhavenda and the mythological narratives emanating thereof, it is however ironic that the majority of emerging archaeologists, anthropologists, historiographers and sociologists have, for decades, or at least during the growth of scientific inquiry on African mythologies ignored – especially in this part of South Africa, the larger majority of these cultures, traditions, religious practices and peoples. This paper fills that research gap.

It is evident from reviewed literature that greater interest in the mythology of the Vhavenda in particular has been immensely focused on Lake Fundudzi and the *Vhatavhatsindi* of Tshiavha in particular. The false impression created by any such research is that of Lake Fundudzi being the sole embodiment, or reflection of Vhavenda religiosity and spirituality in chief; a distorted perception this paper contends is not entirely correct. In fact, Lake Fundudzi does not solely reflect religious issues of the Vhavenda, but it instead reflects issues of a particular small clan within the larger Vhavenda tribe. In other words, to view Vhavenda and their cosmological philosophy from the perspective of the religiosity and spirituality reflected by issues of Lake Fundudzi and the *Vhatavhatsindi* of Tshiavha is grossly misleading. In fact, issues of Lake Fundudzi and the *Vhatavhatsindi* are a little over the bigger whole of the Vhavenda in general. This paper demonstrates that religious and spiritual issues of the Vhavenda cut across the many groups of this tribe, far beyond issues of Lake Fundudzi and the *Vhatavhatsindi* of Tshiavha for example.

Indeed, the Vhavenda, at national level, share the same supreme god across clans called Mwali, Raluvhimba or Khuzwane (Mugovhani 2007; Munyai 2007; Ndou 2000; Pelgrim 2003; Steyn *et al.* 2010; Tshikhudo 2004) while at clan level, the various groups of the Vhavenda also have their own supreme beings which influence the entire religious system and belief patterns of the Vhavenda. At clan level, there are diverse supreme beings with serious significance, not only at spiritual level but life in general. For instance, Tshikhudo (2004) postulated that the Vhavenda's practice of agriculture for example had to derive significant influence from Vhavenda's religiosity – especially their relations with the supreme deities. For example, Munyai (2007) found that before any consumptions of any harvest, the majority of clans

amongst the Vhavenda would be expected to offer some of the harvest to the ancestors, off course through the traditional chiefs, lest transgressors and offenders be punished accordingly by the ancestors. To collaborate on this assertion, Mafukata (2015) reported the issues of the *Maangani-a-nngwe* leopard of the Nemaangani clan which is said to have killed livestock of those who would not make offering to this leopard post-harvest. This assertion was confirmed by Nemaangani (2015). This paper has two sets of objectives, and these have been explained under the paper's methodology section.

This paper starts by giving a comprehensive introductory remarks on the cosmology of the Vhavenda tribe and narrows the same to the respective clans in the tribe. Literature review is structured to reflect on African religious and spiritual practices, spiritual and religious intermediaries amongst various peoples of Africa, the influence of African belief systems on socio-economic-political life of Africans, the influence of alien religious and cultural practices on African life and Mwali – the supreme deity of the Vhavenda of northern Limpopo Province, South Africa. The paper describes the statement of the problem and the methodological approaches employed in the study. The case study results, discussions and conclusions are thereafter comprehensively documented.

## Literature Review

### African religious and spiritual practices

Despite the fact that a large number of African traditions, cultures, beliefs and experiences are viewed by the majority of modern scientific thought as myths, these experiences continue to shape the response of Africans to life in general. According to Uzendoski (2012), who conceded that “*within the space of land/territory, the social world is not limited to the human but also includes various nonhuman beings like plants, animals, rivers, trees, and other features of the landscape*”, African life is greatly influenced by these phenomena. In support of Uzendoski (2012), Musehane *et al.* (2012) for example revealed that amongst the Vhalemba of northern Limpopo Province, South Africa; who are part of the larger Vhavenda tribe would have their heads shaved each time the moon appeared in a particular position, for to the Vhalemba, that experience explains a certain traditional, cultural or religious value system of life. Amongst the Vhalemba, the shaving of heads depending on the position of the moon practice has become culture and tradition which have been transmitted from one generation to the other since time immemorial. The Vhalemba are not alone on being influenced by the moon. Amongst others, the moon forms the fundamental feature of Islam and Jewish religiosity and spirituality for example. Both Uzendoski (2012) and Musehane *et al.* (2012) are corroborated by Ikpe (2009), who when quoting Montague (1961:20) postulated thus ‘*Man experiences everything in the light of his culture which stamps and moulds his experiences by generating the conceptions which informs him when he perceives the world and himself or his fellow man.*’ In other words, Ikpe (2009) opines that one's world view would in essence be influenced by the experiences with the natural and environmental features. In this postulation, Ikpe (2009) is corroborated by Dukor (2014).

What this paper refers to as world view as ascribed to the inferences of Ikpe (2009) and Dukor (2014), is according to Mashau (2007), *“a process that ties together the varied experience we have. It is through these experiences that we create a frame of reference that enables us to use and make sense of reality. Thus, a world view, meaning “a world and life view” can be defined as how one interprets reality”* Mashau (2007) further defined a world view as *“a construct about the make-up of life as it struggles with the questions of reality, truth, ethics and history. It is a construct that provides a point of departure, a sense of direction, a locus of destination, and a strategy of unity for human thought, life and action.”* A world view thus determines how one views God, origin, evil, human nature, value and future”

Based on the submissions postulated by a plethora of reviewed literature (Dukor 2014; Ikpe 2009; Musehane *et al.*, 2012; Mashau 2007; Uzendoski 2012), this paper contends that the experiences of certain Africans – with regard religiosity and spirituality, would, at most, be highly influential on how these African construct their world, and also perceive their world, because, to the majority of Africans, reality; truth; ethics; history; philosophy and spirituality amongst others are virtues emanating from the experiences they have with/of their supernatural world – which could be either gods or their spiritual associates. To the majority of Africans, answers for life questions are found embedded in these supreme beings. In other words, life answers, in the case of the Vhaluvhu of Nesane are perceived to be embodied in Neluswinzhe the sacred leopard of the Vhaluvhu. This might be mythical or superstitious, but the fact is that the issues are fundamental in driving life in general to these people.

As argued by Dukor (2014) and Ikpe (2009), Africans are known to be highly religious and superstitious to such an extent that even if there have been uncountable influences of Africans by other foreign cultures and religions for innumerable decades and implacable impact of cultural globalisation (Chemhuru and Masaka 2010) such foreign cultures and religions have, instead, failed to totally eradicate or remove African religious culture and spirituality from the domains of life in general. In fact, according to Chemhuru and Masaka (2010), beliefs in the supernatural world and supernatural beings amongst Africans have continued to thrive beyond colonialism and subjugation of Africans by Western civilisation, and to date, African values, cosmology and philosophy are still highly dominant of African life in general. In support of this assertion, Dukor (2014) argues that most African indigenous societies were “incurably religious people” whose religions permeate all aspects of their culture and practices including areas of music, dance, arts, architecture and trade amongst others.

To the contrary, life in the greater Africa is still predominantly indigenous – especially amongst tribal groups such as the Yoruba of Nigeria who have resisted the bastardisation of African cultures, religions and cosmology by Westernisation and emerging religions such as Christianity and Islam amongst others, for example, in fact, for centuries (Dukor 2014; Steyn *et al.* 2010; Tienou 2009). In the so-called Vendaland of the Vhavenda, long before the arrival of Christianisation by missionaries such as Coenraad de Buys of

the Dutch Reformed Church in 1820 at the Soutpansberg area (Munyai 2007), Alexandra McKidd of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1863 (Steyn *et al.* 2010), C. Bester, E. Schwelless and R. Koen of the Berlin Mission at Goedgedacht (Steyn *et al.* 2010), it is a well-known fact that the larger section of the majority of the Vhavenda had already had firm belief in ancestors, spirits, witchcraft and magic amongst others. In fact, the majority of the Vhavenda still believe, even to date, that these supernaturals had immense influence on their daily lives. The persistence of clans such as Vhaluvhu of Nesane on their relations with their leopard Neluswinzhe is not uncommon amongst most clans amongst the Vhavenda of Limpopo Province, South Africa in particular. These beliefs are in agreement with general African religiosity and spirituality which demonstrate that, Africans – from childhood up to adulthood are initiated into these beliefs as early as birth and they live with such beliefs until death (Dukor 2014). Supposed supernatural beings such as Neluswinzhe the leopard of Vhaluvhu of Nesane are thought to be connections to the ancestors of the particular clan. The majority of Africans believe that ancestors still communicate with the living, and that ancestral spirits continuously and endlessly influence the lives of the living (Bae and van der Merwe 2008). To many – especially amongst the Vhavenda, ancestors brought the Vhavenda nation closer to their god; Mwali (Munyai 2007); who is an equivalence of the Hebrew Jehovah to the Vhavenda (Munyai 2007). Mwali is believed to have guided the Vhavenda as they migrated from the Great Lakes Region through Zimbabwe into South Africa centuries ago (Steyn *et al.*, 2010).

Modern Vhavenda religiosity and spirituality are however expected to shift to a certain extent considering that Mwali; the god of the Vhavenda is said to have disappeared from the region long time ago leaving only some footprints in an area called Lambani Village in the Thulamela area in the eastern side of what was then known as Vendaland (Tshikhudo 2004). Despite the supposed disappearance of the Mwali – especially amongst the Vhavenda, the concept of Mwali is still prominent in some parts of Zimbabwe where the faith “Mwali High God Religion” is still widely practiced (Rodlach and Dilly 2011). Africans believe that ancestral spirits are sources of good, wellbeing or misfortune to the living. Powerful supernatural beings such as Neluswinzhe of the Vhaluvhu of Nesane are thought as being the embodiment of such ancestral power on the living. Ancestral spirits derived power and influence from the fact that they are, instead, still alive, and not dead as some suppose, and these spirits might as well manifest through beings such as Neluswinzhe. The Vhavenda view ancestral spirits as the “living dead” who had attained a status nearer to Mwali through what they believe expresses what could be called “life hereafter” for those who have died (Munyai 2007).

Most Africans believe that spirits and ancestors were capable of bringing good things such as health, food, wisdom to those who respect them (Dukor 2014). In this context, supernatural beings such as Neluswinzhe would, also bring good things to those who keep protocol. This belief could be corroborated by the postulations of the Vhatavhatsindi of Tshiavha for example who believed that there was a python in the waters of Lake Fundudzi (Steyn *et al.*, 2010). The Vhatavhatsindi claim that the python would protect their crops against any possible

threat – and based on this, the Vhatavhatsindi would from time to time offer sacrificial beer (*mutomboti or mahafhe*) on the lake to appease the python (Steyn *et al.*, 2010). According to Munyai (2007), the Makhadzi (aunt of the clan) presides over the beer offering ceremonies to the python at the lake. It must be clarified that the Makhadzi need not necessarily be possessed with spirits in order to perform the rituals as opined by Mashau (2007). Whether real or mythical, these beliefs and subsequent religious practices evidently influence the lives of the Vhatavhatsindi. Modern socio-cultural anthropologists tend to exploit some loopholes in African belief systems to argue that these belief systems lacked coherence for instance. Lack of coherence casts shadow of doubt on the authenticity and validity of most, if not all these belief systems. Contending to the contrary, Osa (2014) however argued that despite these critical assumptions based on lack of coherence for example, on African belief systems, the fact of the matter is that such belief systems carry within themselves the history and philosophy of the African peoples at large.

However, African religious and spiritual belief systems tend to contradict the provisions of the Jewish-Christian Bible and faith which instructs that the dead would never have any dealings with the living, nor influence the world of the living because they are dead and would therefore never communicate with the living “*For the living know that they shall die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory...*” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). Africans believe that ancestors have infinite knowledge of the world and those who live in it while Jewish-Christianity opines to the contrary. Because of the contradictions between African indigenous faiths and Jewish-Christian beliefs as mentioned earlier, it is evident that a new context of Christianity in Africa emerges. This is a context of mixing the two faiths. Therefore, African Christian faith is almost diluted with indigenous faiths, and to find absolute Christianity without influence of African traditional and cultural beliefs becomes rare and difficult.

On this, Ikpe (2009) argued that Africa was instead introduced to a “hybrid culture” - which instead deepened further Africa's mythological beliefs. Within this new context, Afro-Christian groups such as the Aladura, Celestial Church and the Brotherhood Church (Dukor 2014), other indigenous Christian groups such as the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), Shembe or Nazarene Church, United African Apostolic Church, Old Mission, and others became common and popular because these groups do not prohibit ancestral worship and other indigenous cultures and practices – especially when practiced in collaboration with the newly acquired faith; Christianity or Islam amongst others. In fact, Dukor (2014) substantiates this assertion when reporting that amongst the Ogu people of Badagry, Nigeria, for example, adopters of the Zan-Gbeto spiritual practice and its traditional festivals also embrace within this culture Christianity and Islam. Trengove (2012) on the other hand revealed that, even amongst certain Christian groups which prohibit their members from adopting multiple practice of faiths such as Christianity and indigenous practices there were members who still practiced multiple faiths through undercover means. This provides a silent resistance by Africans against discarding their many gods and ancestral belief systems in favour of the adopted faiths of Christianity and Islam amongst others.

Simply put, Africans had been people with their own gods and spiritual expressions, and what European and Western civilisation did was not to introduce any new god and belief system but to replace one god by another, and one belief system by another. Without grinding an Axe with Nkomazana (1998) whose postulation that David Livingstone had sought to improve African social, economic, political and spirituality through Livingstone's promotion of increased colonisation of Africa and Africans, this paper contends that David Livingstone's actions were never intended to assist African course but to change one demon of slave trade by another demon of economic oppression and multiple subjugations which followed thereafter of the peoples of Africa. Everything-else, as long as it was African, according to Livingstone, had to give way to Christianity as the “principle for moral guidance” (Nkomazana 1998). Evidently, Livingstone is no different from all other missionary colonisers and oppressors of Africans, because, contrary to the postulations of Nkomazana (1998), Livingstone expressed perpetual arrogance and disregard of Africanness which he expressed by lobbying his European brothers during his well-known crusades in London to flood Africa – especially post-Livingstone for further Christianisation and colonisation, however in the name of promotion of a slave-free African and good governance sentiments. Livingstone, like all others before him arrogantly disregarded indigenous political systems and economic structures and any social systems that had existed in the region long before the arrival of first colonisers to the region (Mafukata 2015). In short, Africa of the pre-David Livingstone colonisers and the post-David Livingstone colonisers and intense Christianisation bears no material difference. Instead, if the David Livingstone theory of assisting the course of African development is allowed to stand, it could be that colonisation and apartheid, as opined by Nkomazana (1998) for instance had contributed in advancing African peoples; a sentiment many such as Mafukata (2015) would vehemently dispute. How Nkomazana (1998) views David Livingstone's colonisation and Christianisation of Africa as being positive to the continent, against the sentiments shared by many to the contrary remains mysterious indeed.

### **Spiritual and religious intermediaries amongst various peoples of Africa**

Africans and their environments are intertwined in inseparable spiritual, cultural and traditional bond which have lasted decades if not centuries. For example, in the greater part of some African regions, there are still communities where certain animals are considered sacred and therefore holding significant influence on human life (Kgari-Masondo 2014). To corroborate this view, a plethora of literature (Bernard 2003; Sullivan and Low 2014) reported that in some religions, traditions and cultures amongst certain tribes in Africa, animals such as snakes and mermaid for example remained spiritually highly significant. The belief in the influence and power of these animals amongst particular peoples and tribes shapes the minds of these Africans (Harold 2008). In addition, these faiths also influence how Africans relate with their immediate environment (Bernard 2003), and furthermore defines how these Africans design their daily lives. This assertion is corroborated by Chemhuru and Masaka (2010).

For example, according to Chemhuru and Masaka (2010), (*zwiila*) taboos and (*u phasa midzimu*) worship of ancestral and supernatural beings for example still dominate African religious belief systems despite the effect of colonialism, Christianity, Islam, Westernisation and modernisation in modern Africa which, in the main, sought to depict and portray African cultures and cosmology as primitive (Ikpe 2009). In other words, this African view point of life based on their highly spiritual religious design, defeats the so-called hybridisation and marginalisation of African religious belief systems by intruder religions such as Christianity as smuggled into Africa by Europe (Ikpe, 2009; Kgari-Masondo 2014).

Contrary to some Eurocentric views here opined could be the postulations ascribed to one Brantlinger (1985) who suggested that “Africa grew “dark” as Victorian explorers, missionaries, and scientists flooded it with light, because the light was refracted through an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of “savage customs” in the name of civilization” While writers such as Trengove (2012) conceded that the spread of European religious practices in Africa – especially Christianity has had some profound civilisation effect on the views and life of African's religiosity and spirituality for example, the postulations of Brantlinger (1985) as mentioned earlier instead point to a European civilisation efforts gone wrong. In other words, according to Brantlinger (1985), European and Western civilisation instead took Africa and its peoples backwards.

#### **The influence of African belief systems on socio-economic-politico life of Africans**

Those who study Africa, and her various peoples and diverse tribes would attest that the socio-economic-politico dynamics of various African clan groupings have been greatly influenced by Africa's own powerful cultures, traditions and religious belief systems. In fact, Mashau (2007) found that life amongst most African communities has been greatly influenced by Occult practices for example to show that African religious orientation has had major impact on life in general. For example, while others might see Lake Fundudzi at Tshiavha as a commercial entity, amongst the Vhatavhatsindi of Netshiavha and the Netshitangani people – including Vhadau of Tshiheni who are the spiritual owners of this legendary lake in the former Venda homeland in South Africa, the lake is a depiction of their wider religious and spiritual belief system, which to these clans remains sacred and utmost superior to humans (Musehane 2012).

Like in the case of other clans who relate with animals, trees, caves and mountains for example, the Netshiavha and Netshitangani clans of Tshiavha relate to the Fundudzi lake for their Occult practices (Mashau 2007; Musehane 2012). In other words, Lake Fundudzi is, for the Netshiavha and Netshitangani clans of Tshiavha, the “supernatural agency with effect” on their daily lives (Mashau 2007). In the case of this paper, Neluswinzhe the leopard of Vhaluvhu of Nesane clan bears such supernatural significance. In other words, as lake Fundudzi demonstrates the religio-spiritual supremacy of the Vhatavhatsindi of Tshiavha, so is Neluswinzhe the leopard to the Vhaluvhu of Nesane.

#### **The influence of alien religious and cultural practices on African life**

Resultant religions and cultures - Christianity, Islam and other religions originating from outside the Africa imposed themselves over African religions and cultures as if African cultures and religions were inferior. In this paper, it is argued that African culture, tradition and religion could absorb both Westernisation and other non-African religions, and still retain their indigenous supremacy. African Occultism is an active human reality amongst Africans of all class and civilisations (Mashau, 2007), and life in Africa revolves around Occultism.

In fact, Mashau (2007) conceded that African Occultism remains integral to the dominant space currently occupied by Christianity for example, making African Occultism a challenge to Christianity, and how it is practiced in particular – especially amongst the Vhavenda of northern Limpopo Province, South Africa. In fact, scholars such as Ali Mazrui had also long conceded to this assertion some decades ago (Tienou 1991), and of late, Dukor (2014) and Trengove (2012) joined those who support Mazrui with regard the strength of African mythological religious and spiritual beliefs against alien cultures and traditions such as Christianity and Islam for example. From the assertions postulated by some of these writers on Africa's religio-spirituality (Brantlinger 1985; Dukor 2014; Mashau 2007; Osa 2014; Tienou 1991; Trengove 2012), it is evident that indigenous Africans – including those of minority tribes such as the Vhavenda of northern Limpopo Province, South Africa had their own cosmology, culture, religion, philosophy and tradition which they successfully practiced for centuries before such practices were corroded and eroded by Westernisation, and other modern world civilisations.

In fact, in support of this assertion, Brantlinger (1985) had thought that the introduction of most of the Western traditions and cultures including Christianity had taken Africa backwards rather than taking the continent and its peoples forward as many would suppose. In the process of European abolishment propaganda of African indigenous religions and absolutisation of Christianity on the other hand for example, the majority of Africans lost contact – and practice of their faiths with their many gods. Reviewed literature revealed that the greater geographical regions and peoples of the world – including Africa had various gods. For example, Sayin (2014) mentions that the Egyptians had their mythical god called Horus (3000 BC), the Greek had Attis (1200 BC), the Persians had Mithra (1200 BC), the Indians had Krishna (900 BC), and other smaller gods such as the Greek god of wine called Dionysus (500 BC), and all of these gods have been widely acknowledged as entities in social science research, but the god of the Vhavenda of northern Limpopo Province, Mwali for instance is regarded as non-existent, if not insignificant by most social science researchers.

#### **Mwali – the supreme deity of the Vhavenda of northern Limpopo Province, South Africa**

Mwali is the supreme god of the Vhavenda of northern Limpopo Province, South Africa.

There are also other names ascribed to this Vhavenda god such as Raluvhimba and Khuzwane. Mwali used to stay at Zwavhumbwa in the Nzhelele area, but later relocated to Makonde-Ha-Luvhimbi area because of some transgressions at Zwavhumbwa. Claims are that Mwali is no longer at Makonde-HaLuvhimbi but has relocated to Mubvumela in Vhukalanga; that is, Zimbabwe where the Vhavenda once settled from the Great Lakes Region. Whether Mwali is real or mythical is not the issue but the fact is that either ways Mwali exists to some Vhavenda – especially those who have not been Christianised or colonially indoctrinated to believe otherwise. In fact, Mwali remains very much embedded in the world view of most modern Vhavenda (Mashau 2007). Mwali has meaning to the Vhavenda as much as the Greeks would make meaning of all their gods. Reviewed literature has demonstrated that there were still many Africans who would not make meaning out of Western civilisations and Christianity for example. Attached to Mwali are other smaller deities or supernatural beings that are arranged in terms of clans. According to Mashau (2007), Venda Occultism is controlled by these supernatural beings which are considered vital forces that determine and influence religious and spiritual practices of the Vhavenda either through astrology, divination, witchcraft, sorcery and magic to influence human life; either favourably or unfavourably. In other words, these beings are “*supernatural agencies with effect*” on human life – with such powers driven by individuals possessed and influenced by demonic powers (Mashau 2007).

Vhavenda are known to have associations with nature – especially animals such as lions (Vhadau), Elephant (Ndou) and Baboons (Vhanyai) while others associated with many other environmental factors such as water bodies (Tshivha and Netshitangani), mountains (Singo of Dzanani), caves (Rambuda) and birds amongst others (Mashau 2007; Musehane 2012). In these beings are immense spiritual religious significance with fundamental hidden, secret, mysterious and mythological factors of huge socio-economic-political dynamics. Amongst the majority of these clans, these animals become symbolic of what they are. These animals become totems. There are various taboos on totems for different clans. Van Slyke (2006) attest to this assertion revealing that the majority of humans around the world have been firm believers in certain animals for example having significance on the socio-spiritual issues of humans. Van Slyke (2006) cites an example of the significance of a lion in the Jewish-Christian discourse – especially where Jesus is introduced as a lion of the tribe of Judah.

The social life, economic practice and political practices of the peoples associated with these beings – mostly considered supernatural amongst some of these clans are determined here. For example, Sikhau (2015) revealed that through the snake at the Tshipise hot springs at Dondwe which is associated with the Nedondwe clan, the hot springs belong to the Nedondwe clan. The Nedondwe clan controls the ownership, and even usage of the hot springs because their snake stays there. As guardian of the Dondwe hot springs, this snake is to be having powers to stop the hot springs, for example in case of intruders manipulating the ownership of the hot springs or having transgressed certain spiritual bylaws. Whether the snake is real or imagined, whether true or fictitious, existing or myth, these beliefs and practices have influence on the Nedondwe clan,

and how they relate with the Tshipise hot spiring. Most of these beings stay in what is known as scared places (Mashau 2007; Musehane 2012) or *zwifhoni* which are normally mountains, valleys, dense grooves, pools, streams and caves amongst others. That is why according to Munthali (2005), sacrifices were not only performed at rivers because wherever such beings existed humans always believed that they wielded enormous power to manipulate every aspect of human life. Through sacrifices made in these sacred places for the supernatural beings, worshipers contact with spirits, gods and souls of the departed ancestors. Those who believe and practice this kind of faith recognise the assumed influence of these supernatural beings on human life. These practices have been part of global religious practices amongst many tribes and peoples – including peoples of the Africa (Sayin 2014). According to Sayin (2014), the contacts with these supernatural beings are facilitated by the consumption of psychodelic-philosophical plants which, when consumed make the consumer attain that state of mind of connectedness to the desired spirit world.

During this state of mind, desired images, figures, illusions and hallucinations would be experienced. These archetype images could be angels, demons, satan, mythological creatures, gods, goddesses, and any other form. Sayin (2014) proposed therefore that “Most of the mythological figures and characters that exist in tribal religions, in ancient religions and also in the institutionalized modern religions, such as demons, angels, satan, semi-human animals, gods, goddesses, spirits, ghosts and many others originate from the illusions and hallucinations of ancient “ritual people” in Psychedelic Religious Rites (PRR) who had used psychoactive plants during their religious rituals and who had been very ‘high’ on psychedelic plants” This paper has interest in finding if the religious practices of some of the clans such as the Nefefe, Nesane, Nemaangani and Nefumembe for example of the Vhavenda of Limpopo province South Africa contact with the spirit world through the influence of any consumption of psychodelic-philosophical plants.

Reviewed literature reveal that it does seem however that those who practice such beliefs are compelled do so, not voluntary. Based on the supernatural powers possessed by the spirit beings which could, bring bad luck to transgressing humans or good luck to those who appease these beings, it is evident that human behaviour in relation to these beings would be determined by the morality of humans such as keeping of certain taboos and practices. For example, a visitor to Lake Fundudzi would have to “kodolela” the lake exposing the buttocks to it before leaving the lake area, or there could be consequences (Musehane 2012). Musehane (2012) reports that Fundudzi is called “dzivha la Nyankodolela” as a result. In fact the Vhadau of Tshiheni who also reside within the vicinity of Lake Fundudzi have their own clan song they sing while praising one amongst their clan “...*Mudau wa Tshiheni tsha Nyamphunga...tsha Nyankodole...wa kodola u nyele phakho...*” meaning, “He is a Mudau of Tshiheni of Nyamphunga...he who exposes his buttocks...in order to excrete into the Fundudzi caves” This poem ignites the pride of being a Mudau of Tshiheni and association with Lake Fundudzi. Vhadau of Tshiheni draw inspiration from Lake Fundudzi the same as the Vhaluvhu of Nesane draw inspiration from Neluswinzhe the leopard.

## Statement of the problem and Research objectives

### Statement of the problem

This paper is promoted by the assertion that a number of scholars opined that there has been a call to attempt to revive African traditional cultures and religions as evidenced by the resurgence and renaissance of the so-called African Traditional Religion since Africa's independence (Tienou 1991). From the resurgence and renaissance of African Traditional Religion expedition, there has, - especially in the 21st century, been increased and intensified quest amongst those who study Africa; Africans and Europeans alike and her peoples to empirically inquire of Africa's past, present and her future – especially in relation to cultures, traditions and religions. The presupposition of the resurgence and renaissance of African Traditional Religion expedition, in the main, is that African indigenous traditions, cultures and religions have been largely considered irrelevant, backward, unreliable, distorted and primitive – especially by Africa's colonisers and Western civilisation (Brantlinger 1985; Ikpe 2009; Mafukata, 2015). This assertion is further strengthened by William Carey who opined that the greater number of Africans “*are still in pagan darkness , .... They have no written language, consequently no Bible, and are led by the most childish customs and traditions.*”

*They are in general poor, barbarous, naked pagans, as destitute of civilisation as they are of true religion*”(Tienou 1991). Some, - especially those who promoted superiority of the rest over Africans; the so-called the “*colonial intellectual enterprise promoted by early missionary thinking*” cohorts opined that the “*primitive cultures*” of Africans have to be transformed “*from barbarism to civilisation*” (Dederen 2008) through what Brantlinger (1985) termed “*abolitionist propaganda*” of imperialist colonisers of Africa. However, Brantlinger (1985) argues that the perception of Africa as a continent of anarchy, uncivilised peoples, inferior races, bizarre customs and superstitions – which are labeled as complex beliefs in Bernard (2003) - is in fact a myth largely promoted by absolutist propaganda based on imperialist tendencies of Europe and the greater part of the West. The example of this imperialist and superiority of the West over Africa tendency is displayed amongst others by Girard and others (Ikpe 2009; Mafukata 2012).

The assertion by William Carey suggests that Carey does not bear any respect whatsoever of the massive West Africa civilisation in Timbuktu, Mali and the Egyptian civilisation which have been globally and widely acknowledged, even by notable scholars of Africa and her peoples, although reservedly so by European scholars as being part of global fundamental civilisations of all times. Compounding distortions of Africa's anthropological issues as expressed by William Carey and the like, is African peoples' lack of documenting their own history. Africa's issues are mostly written by non-Africans whose views are mostly ill-informed or purposively distorted. On this account, Professor Archie Mafeje vehemently protested to an extent of arguing that the study of Africa's anthropological issues need to be totally abolished – however, if studies in the view of the West (Mafukata 2015). As a result of Africa's lack of writing her own anthropological issues, could not be a reflection of true African anthropological issues.

A presentation of a distorted historical, cultural, traditional and religious characterisation is therefore forwarded to the global audience on Africa. The fact that the majority of African anthropological issues are not properly written, the rest of the world mythicallises whatever is African anthropology. In fact, this has been the norm worldwide against indigenous peoples. To corroborate this assertion, Sayin (2014) reported that the native cultures of the Amazon for example, never had written history and these peoples would, therefore, pass on their ancestral sacred knowledge through unwritten legends, told and articulated by the elderly to the younger generations. As a result, modern history of the peoples of the Amazon was limited, if at all ever available. Based on this, Amazonian anthropological issues are mostly perceived as mythical. On the one hand, Mafukata (2015) reported that some tribes in South Africa for example had fundamental omissions of their histories because of lack of information largely resulting from lack of authentic modern knowledge management systems and archives.

In fact, Mafukata (2015) argued that smaller tribes such as the Vhavenda of northern Limpopo Province, South Africa lacked documented history – with only portions found intermittently. In addition, most emerging anthropologists, sociologists and historiographers – especially amongst those who write on issues of the Vhavenda of northern Limpopo Province, South Africa, mostly concentrated on issues concerning Vhavenda traditional leaderships. This approach created perception that Vhavenda's issues were only around traditional leaders and their peoples. Not much is written about commoners and their influence on the issues of this tribe. This paper demonstrates that apart from traditional chiefs and their clans, there are still commoners amongst the larger Vhavenda tribe whose issues were immensely significant in the discourse of this minority tribe in South Africa. This paper therefore goes beyond the norm in as far as most modern Social and Cultural Anthropological studies which often seeks to document African anthropological issues without critically looking at how such issues impacted on modern thinking on this discipline with regard Africa and her peoples at large.

For example, if the Greeks have so many gods (Sayin 2014), which are accepted amongst most modern anthropological thoughts as authentic and valid, what makes the similarly deity Mwali; the god of the Vhavenda tribe of South Africa mythical? Evidently, O'Brien *et al.* (2004) were right to argue “each researcher will have his or her own set of criteria for accepting a piece of evidence as relevant and credible and there is no doubt that bias enters into this process” In mythicallising most of African anthropological issues, this paper argues that this might not necessarily based on facts but bias and most crucially the researcher's point of view. O'Brien *et al.* (2004) could mitigate this assertion in their postulation “*whoever does the telling (of a story) will have a point of view*” It is regrettable that most of the conclusions on African mythology – especially of the Vhavenda are made within the context of these points of view, which as argued earlier may not necessarily reflect the real issues of the stories. This approach is actually not uncommon in social science research as Mafukata (2015) reasoned and argued that “*the point of view might not be the story*”



## Main Objectives of this paper

This paper opines that despite adverse attempt to sabotage African religious and spirituality that govern the cosmology of African peoples, there are still some tribes and clans amongst Africans who still hold on their distinct belief systems – and the Nefefe, Nemaangani, Nefumembe, Nesane and Nethengwe clans are a case in point. The main objective of this paper is to investigate issues of the Vhaluvhu of Nesane at Sane Village and their mythical leopard (*Panthera pardus*) called Neluswinzhe to demonstrate the relevance of the statement of the problem as explained before. The specific objectives of this paper are to:

- Characterise the Vhaluvhu of Nesane with regard their religious, spiritual, traditional and cultural practices as in relation to their leopard (*Panthera pardus*) Neluswinzhe.
- Investigate other related issues of religious and spiritual myths involving other neighbouring clans to the Vhaluvhu of Nesane – especially those which involve leopards (*Panthera pardus*).
- Investigate the authenticity and validity of these leopards (*Panthera pardus*) as supreme beings of religiosity and spirituality amongst the Vhaluvhu of Nesane – and those other clans which might be found to have relations with leopards in their religiosity and spirituality.
- Investigate developments and evolution of indigenous religious and spiritual practices of the Vhaluvhu of Nesane in relation to their leopard (*Panthera pardus*) – especially at the infiltration of indigenous faiths by Western cultures and civilisation and Christianity in Africa.
- Argue that African religions and spirituality are relevant and still have a role in global social life interactions and practices just as the rest of religions and civilisations are considered so.

## Research questions

This paper was guided by the following main research questions

- Are the issues around Neluswinzhe manifestations of hallucinations, imaginations, and illusions of the Vhaluvhu, or real issues not well understood?
- Is there anything used to ignite “a state of mind” which visualises what does not exist in the real as real (Sayin 2014) in the Neluswinzhe issues?
- Did Neluswinzhe the leopard of the Vhaluvhu of Nesane clan physically exist, or was it imaginary?
- Is Neluswinzhe still existing today?
- Is Neluswinzhe a wild or domesticated leopard?
- If this Neluswinzhe exists, is this leopard still the same one which existed for all these years?
- Is Neluswinzhe one leopard or many who exchange roles?
- What was the *modus operandi* of Neluswinzhe?
- How does the Neluswinzhe issues differ with other issues of other leopards of clans such as Nefefe, Nethengwe and Nemaangani for example?

## Theoretical framework

First, this paper builds its analysis and conclusions asserted to and submitted by Mashau (2007) who hinted thus “*The underlying premise of African occultism is the belief in a spiritual world with spiritual forces that have power to inflict harm on the living. In the traditional African world view suffering of every sort – illness, barrenness, drought and death – is normally explained in personal terms: “there is always somebody”. This “somebody” often belongs to the world of the occult: a “spirit” has brought pain to human beings and must therefore be repelled or accommodated*” This assertion assists the cause of understanding and chronicling the Occultic religious belief systems of the Vhavenda – especially the Vhaluvhu of Nesane in particular – especially with regard gods, supernatural world and beings and their cosmology in general.

Secondly, this paper builds its analysis and conclusions on assumptions that supernatural religious beings can cause or stop whatever affects humans – especially those who own or are owned by such supernatural beings. It is based on these assumptions that this paper hopes to also establish in the process whether these issues are real, imagined or mythical. This assertion is necessitated by the writings of Sayin (2014) who postulated that some of these beliefs were in essence manifestations of hallucinations, imaginations, and illusions caused and induced through consumption of psychodelic-philosophical plants which lead to “a state of mind” and consciousness of visualising what does not exist in the real as real – opining that there were mythical beings and their influence on human life thereof. Contrary to Sayin (2014), who seems to generalise conclusions on mythicity or unmythicality of issues, in some cases, this paper postulates that while there could be some notable differences, and similarities between mythical stories, or beings regarded as mythical and/or real, each story has to be treated individually. This is because the validity, reality, and even mythicity or unmythicality of a particular story should not make the other story real, valid or mythical.

Thirdly, this paper focuses on the Occult practices and belief systems of the Vhavenda of northern Limpopo Province, South Africa. Venda Occultism postulates that the supernatural beings associated with clans are powerful forces capable of determining the fate of those belonging to the clan, and those outside others who are opined to have transgressed and violated certain practices against such beings. Transgressors of protocol against these beings might suffer misfortunes such as illnesses, strange deaths, bad luck and loss of livestock amongst others. Mashau (2007) reasoned that “invisible somebody” amongst the Vhavenda is believed to bring such misfortunes to transgressors and offenders. This belief shapes and influences the mind set of most Africans – especially based on the fact that most Africans are ardent believers in most of this mythical supernatural world (Harold 2008). Through issues of the supernatural beings mentioned earlier for different clans, this paper reveals that underlying supernatural beings, real or imagined influence the world view of the peoples under study. Some of these practices and influences are strangely hidden and remain immensely mysterious to a point of opined mythological insinuations.



In fact, Mashau found that Vhavenda Occultism is practiced from hidden, secretive and mysterious characters and issues based on supposed powerful forces in the cosmos which have massive influence on human life favourably or unfavourably. In a normal world, some of the postulations made by the respondents for this paper sounded cheap hallucinations, imaginations, illusion and/or pure fabrications or factually non-existent but nevertheless, such insinuations constitute the world view of those affected. In fact, Mafukata (2015) conceded that it was common to find elements of incorrectness, pure fabrications and non-existent assumptions considered factual in some African mythological discourses. Despite the fact that this paper does not deal with any god(s) *per se*, but associates to the god(s), and with belief that the investigated beings are connected to some god(s) – in this regard, this paper finds Mashau's definition of world view still relevant, and adoptable for its purpose and theoretical postulations.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Important geographical areas to the mythical stories as narrated

This paper was undertaken in the Musekwa Valley in the Makhado Local Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The area covers the geographical areas of Pfumembe-Musekwa village through the main road to Musekwa Ngundu, Divhani, Maranikhwe, Straighharid, Afton, Sane, Tshitwi, Mangwele, Dolidoli, Ndouvhada and Khomele villages. Maangani, though tactically not under the Musekwa Valley area, has been included in the study area because of the village being an influential neighbour relevant to the issues investigated.

Although a number of people still contend as to who between Chief Nephumembe and Musekwa actually was the traditional leader at Pfumembe-Musekwa Village (Mafukata 2012; Mafukata 2015), for the purpose of this paper, Pfumembe-Musekwa Village is to be viewed as having been under chief Nephumembe. This assertion contrasts the contention reported by Mafukata (2012) and Mafukata (2015) who found that some Key Informant sources of previous studies in the area opined that Nephumembe was not a traditional leader but instead a feared traditional healer and magician who had stayed at this village. It is here at Pfumembe were the magical-mythical *Dzinzilini* crete is located, and the spiritual owners of this crucial phenomenon is the Nephumembe people who administer their *thevhula* (sacrificial and offering worship) at *Dzinzilini*.

However, that Nephumembe was never a traditional leader of Pfumembe could still be disputable because, if Nephumembe was not a traditional leader at this village as some suppose, how did the village come to be called Pfumembe after Nephumembe clan? Although this question might shed some light to resolving this riddle, the issue of villages with names of certain individuals who never were traditional chiefs is also not uncommon. For example, Nemaulumu of Mauluma Village was never the traditional leader of Mauluma though the village is named after the Nemaulumu clan. Key Informant sources on the other hand contend that Chief Musekwa could only claim traditional chieftainship at Ngundu Village; a stone throw from Pfumembe Village towards the East.

Those who argue on this line postulate that Chief Musekwa's headquarters were actually at Tshianane, not at Pfumembe. Pfumembe-Musekwa Village is located in what came to be known as Kodoa farm. However, revelations were that the entire Musekwa Valley was under Chief Nedondwe who ruled the valley from Tshipise, and not Musekwa as many currently suppose (Sikhau 2015). The interest of this paper on the Pfumembe-Musekwa Village is the *Dzinzilini* crete and the role played by the Nephumembe people on the issues at *Dzinzilini*. It is therefore crucial to clarify who between Nephumembe and Musekwa has authority of the village because, this would bear significance on the relevance of such authority on the issues pertaining to *Dzinzilini*.

According to Sikhau (2015), at Maranikhwe Village, Makapile, who was the younger brother of chief Nesane of Sane Village was the traditional chief. There is not much to say about Makapile since his interests are accommodated within the Vhaluvhu of Sane – considering Makapile was a *mukololo* or/and *khotsimunene* (Prince) of Chief Gandamipfa Nesane of Sane who was given the Maranikhwe Village to lead. Sane Village belonged to a Vhaluvhu clan Chief Gandamipfa – the pitch black man – whose ancestors had migrated to the Musekwa Valley and settled at this village from the Nzhelele River Valley at Kokwane hills when other Vhaluvhu migrated towards the Southeast to the present day Ha-Mulima near Tshitale. Currently, Sane Village is under traditional chieftainship of Chief Matodzi Tshinwetshithu Nesane who replaced his father who had died in the copper mines of Musina while working there as a miner (Sikhau 2015; Tshisamphiri 2015). Chief Matodzi Tshinwetshithu Nesane was coronated as chief of the Vhaluvhu at Sane with the *ndumi* (regent) Vhavenda Vho Tshamutsinga Nesane and a *khadzi* known as Tshisamphiri Dorah Nesane who later married Nemangwele of Mangwele Village. The interest of this paper on Sane lies with the fact that the lead story – of Neluswinzhe the mythical leopard of the Vhaluvhu is based at this village, and the main characters in the mythical discourse are the Nesane people who seem to own the mysterious leopard.

Sikhau (2015) further mentioned that, for a long time, indications were that there were at most three known homesteads at Dolidoli Village where the Mushayandebvu, Madima and Raedani homesteads were located. Mushayandebvu was later called Mandevu (Mafukata 2015; Sikhau 2015). Dolidoli Village has interest in this paper based on the mysteries surrounding Mushayandebvu or Mandevu (Mafukata 2015) who allegedly used mysterious power to talk to the lions at this village not to devour people who frequently passed through the village to and from Vhukalanga, Zimbabwe.

At Tshaphithi (current Ndouvhada) Village, Sikhau and Tshitongela Nethengwe once stayed there at some point before Tshitongela Nethengwe moved to Matolo where a white man called Mr Smit stayed, together with a Mr Gumani. Mr Smit is known to have been the only white man who brewed *thothotho*; an illegal African alcoholic beverage which could be classified as spirit. It is said that while Tshitongela was at Matolo, his father Ranndileni Swalivha David Nethengwe – a Mulaudzi arrived from Tshipise under chief Nedondwe after Tshitongela had long arrived at Tshaphithi.

Ranndileni Nethengwe arrived in the valley to stay at Tshishiru (current Smokey). On the one hand, Chief Mavhungu Tshilavhutume Nephembani stayed at Khomele. Nephembani is said to have had magical powers which could repel stray lions from entering his territory at Khomele to protect his *vhalanda* (subjects). Lions which entered Khomele would have their gums and feet rot, and later die. Khomele is significant for this paper because, apparently, this was the territory under the Musekwa Valley which had been occupied the earliest. Key Informants sources who might have witnessed most of the stories under investigations are therefore likely to be found at this village.

Most crucially, as data collection progressed, it became imperative to also include an area called Madimahulu or Muteswi as it came to be known later on. More interesting issues around myths amongst the Vhavenda of the Musekwa Valley began to unfold regarding Madimahulu. Madimahulu is an area currently outside the Venda geographical area as the area is located in the former farm areas of the White South Africa. The stories and the people of Madimahulu have however serious connections to the larger Venda area – especially around Dolidoli and Khomele villages. Madimahulu is located behind the Landau mountains which stretch from Khomele to Dolidoli on the north.

### Sampling Frame and procedure

Anticipating possible challenges and limitations for this study – amongst others, limited time and financial resources in particular to undertake the study, a smaller geographical area was purposively selected amongst the greater Venda region for this study. For this reason, the results of this paper might not entirely reflect the overall religious, spiritual and cosmological belief systems and practice of the entire Vhavenda tribe, but however, bear a significant indication of how Vhavenda religiosity, spirituality and cosmology are fashioned at clan level, and how this connects with the issues at tribal level.

The so-called Musekwa Valley study area was chosen ahead of the other vast regions of Venda because of its proximity to the researcher and the rich history of the study area with regard the matter under investigation. This study was therefore conducted in eight villages of Afton, Dolidoli, Khomele, Maangani, Maranikhwe, Musekwa, Ndouvhada, Pfumembe and Sane. The mythical characters and issues in the discourse of this paper are located in these villages. Primary participants of this study were also selected from these villages having opined that such participants were to have direct information about the issues under investigation. Since the participants were expected to be scares considering the nature of the study, a snowball technique was employed to construct the list of the participants. Two groups emerged from the list. (1) those who had direct interest and knowledge on the issues under investigation, and (2) those who have some knowledge on the issues, however without having any direct interest on the same. It was imperative to include in the target group list, those with direct interest on the matter investigated. For example, since the main focus of this paper concerned the *Vhaluvhu* of Sane, the approach taken was that there has to be some members of the Nesane clan who participate in the study. The idea was to obtain information as nearly probable as possible.

Two Key Informants emerged for the first group while four emerged for the second group. The first two informants comprised a *Khadzi* (sister to the chief considered to be the sister to the whole clan) of the *Vhaluvhu* of Sane and a *Khotsimunene* (Prince) of the Nephumembe clan. The *Khadzi* (sister to the chief – also known as aunt of the clan) of Sane had direct interest on the issues of Neluswinzhe of Sane while the *Khotsimunene* (Prince) of Nephumembe had direct interest on the issues of *Dzinzilini*. It is the *Khadzi* who must offer sacrifices and offerings to the ancestral world. For example, while performing rituals for fertility of harvest on behalf of the clan to the ancestors, the *Khadzi* would be heard saying these words “*Ndi ni fha nwaha muswa uri ni le ni takale, zwo salaho ndi zwanga na zwiduhulu, zwana na zwone zwile zwi takale-vho’ I offer you the first grains of the New Year that you may eat and be happy*” (Stayt 1931).

Evidently, the *Khadzi* mimics the role of a priest. Both the *Khadzi* and the *Khotsimunene* might not necessarily have to be Sangomas or spiritualists but normal individuals only entrusted with the responsibility to liaise between the clan and the supreme being or sacred place of the particular clan. It is imperative to clarify the status – especially from the spiritual or state of mind point of view of the source (*Khadzi*) because the data collected from this source would provide the overall basis of the analysis of the entire study – and if, for any reason, the state of mind of the source is questionable, or somewhat unsound, the entire outcome could be reasonably questionable, alternatively, dismissable. The role and practices of the *Khadzi* in this study are however in sharp contrast with the views shared by Mashau (2007) who postulated that those persons who served as contacts between respective clans and supernatural beings of the respective clans – for example, the *Khadzi* were demon possessed individuals who were influenced by demons in their respective rituals.

Amongst the five other informants of the second group, the list comprised elderly people who had stayed in the Musekwa Valley for decades. Amongst these informants were a Mr Tshivhidzo John Sikhau of Khomele Village (Born in 1913 in official records). Mr Sikhau is of a *Vhadogwa* (with genealogical connection with the northern Sotho group of Machaka at Botlokwa) descent whose totem is a *nzhivha* (dove). In other words, Mr Sikhau and his clan would not eat meat of a dove because it is their totem. However, during discussions, it emerged that Mr Sikhau might have been much older than his official age of 102 years, perhaps by a margin of between six and eight additional years.

Mr Mbulaheni Makhaya John Lutsavha of Afton Village (Born in 1939 according to official records but could have been born between 1929 and 1931). Mr Lutsavha is of Shona genealogy because his father was a mine immigrant from Zimbabwe who got married to Mr Lutsavha's mother while in South Africa, and never returned to Zimbabwe. Mr David Phaswana Ramaliba of Dolidoli Village (Born 1942 according to official records) and a Mr Nelson Pholi of Khomele Village who is a school teacher and Masters graduate in African Languages with implacable knowledge on historical issues of communities in the Musekwa Valley. Finally, Vho Thinavhuyo – an elderly lady of Pfumembe who was born approximately 1918 at Tshifume near Ha-Khakhu and

relocated to Pfumembe on marriage also provided critical information on *Dzinzilini* of the Nephumembe clan. Vho Thinavhuyo was a regular participant of *miphaso* (sacrifices) at Pfumembe when the clan visited *Dzinzilini* for rituals. She would play the *ngoma* (drum) during the dances and singings to the *zwidzimu* (gods) at the *zwifho* (sacred place) of Pfumembe – however only when invited. These respondents were to be Key Informants for the study. During the discourse of the study, there emerged the third group of participants; those who demonstrated to have knowledge of the issues under investigation who emerged during what is known in the paper as “read to others” phase. Pre-finalisation, this paper was read to specifically targeted members of the public – especially those who showed interest on anthropological issues of the Vhavenda. During this stage of the study, two crucial sources emerged. One Reverend Pfususo Godfrey Thavhanyedza from Thengwe emerged with issues of the Nethengwe sacred leopard called Nevhutahadzini and Mr Nndavheleseni Khwareli Simpson Nemaangani also emerged with the Maangani-a-nngwe issues.

### Data collection methods, instruments and data analysis

Data collection was structured into three phases and kind of sources. The first was the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) comprising the two groups as listed earlier. Secondly, literature review was employed to gather some crucial data. Literature available on issues under investigation – especially in the Venda region in general was sought. Thirdly, the “read to others” phase established new data sets from various sources.

With regard literature review for example, in the article, Mandevu, Mafukata (2015) had revealed some interesting information which proved crucial in the development of this paper. Mandevu narrated the religio-social factors of the Vhavenda in one of the villages of the study area. From time to time, issues of Mandevu (Mafukata 2015) would come into play in the discourse of this paper. During data collection, it was difficult to persuade some Key Informants to release certain information – especially the one concerning perceived supernatural characters because of taboos and visible fear on the respondents to deliberate on those issues they considered sensitive and scared issues to deliberate on. For instance, the *Khadzi* of Sane would not talk about certain issues of Neluswinzhe the leopard because she feared attacks by this leopard at night – in case she talked openly about issues uncomfortable with the leopard. At Pfumembe, informant Vho Thinavhuyo would also not talk about certain issues of *Dzinzilini* of Nephumembe because she was a commoner. She feared the consequences of the Nephumembe magical spirits at night which could attack her.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Neluswinzhe is a leopard (*Panthera pardus*) spiritually owned by the *Vhaluvhu* of Nesane clan at Sane Village, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Information is that Neluswinzhe was brought by the Nesane people when they relocated from the Kokwane hills near Matanda Village in the Nzhelele Valley to Luswinzhe at Sane more than hundred years ago (Lutsavha 2015; Nemaangani 2015; Sikhau 2015). Leopards seem to have been part of the religious identity of many Vhavenda clans for time immemorial.

For instance, the Nefefe of Fefe, Nemaangani of Maangani and Nethengwe of Thengwe clans are all associated with leopards (Lutsavha 2015; Sikhau 2015; Thavhanyedza 2015). In fact it appears that various leopard groups – especially the *Panthera pardus*, leopard cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*) and snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*) amongst others have been part of religiosity and spirituality of a plethora of tribes and ethnic groups around the world. For example, Li *et al.*, 2013 revealed that Tibetan Buddhism thrives on its religious and spiritual belief systems on the snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*).

According to Nemaangwele (2015) Neluswinzhe the leopard is regarded as the spiritual icon of the *Vhaluvhu* of Nesane. Neluswinzhe is said to be still communicating with the Nesane people from time to time on issues of every aspect of their lives. This result is in contrast with the Maangani issues of their leopard where majority of informants opined that the leopard might no longer exist. Leopards are an endangered species around the world with threats ranging from retaliatory killings and recreational sport hunting for example (Swanepoel *et al.*, 2015), and assertion that the Maangani leopard could no longer be existing might be understandable. Contrary, informants were adamant that Neluswinzhe was still alive, and that he was seen by the locals from time to time in the village. Postulations made by Key Informant Interview (KII) participants were that Neluswinzhe still formed part of the day-to-day life of the Nesane clan. For instance, whenever there was a child born into the family, the *Khadzi* has to inform Neluswinzhe of this birth. During death of a member of the Nesane clan, the *Khadzi* also has to inform Neluswinzhe of the death. During Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), the *Khadzi* revealed that even today, Neluswinzhe has to be informed of little other things such as her traveling outside Sane or Dolidoli where she currently stays.

It was difficult to establish during Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with the *Khadzi* if Neluswinzhe is one leopard or many leopards. This is in contrast with Nevhutahadzini of Thengwe who is said to have been a particular leopard apparently captured and initiated into the role. However, in the event Neluswinzhe the leopard had been captured and initiated into the role, there could be possibility that there was never anything spiritual or supreme about the leopard, but mere domestication of his behaviour. Domestication of Neluswinzhe's behaviour if that be the case would therefore bring a lot more questions on the authenticity of Nesane religiosity because, this might suggest that the whole thing is hollow and self-created. The Nesane *Khadzi* was not comfortable to divulge some information on Neluswinzhe fearing breaking spiritual protocol which might offend Neluswinzhe. Considering the doubts cast earlier on, the refusal of the *Khadzi* to reveal some issues of the leopard might suggest that both Neluswinzhe and the stories around him are mythical. However, some key informants corroborated the *Khadzi* on the issue of offending Neluswinzhe by breaking some protocol. The majority of informants believed that it was known amongst the locals that Neluswinzhe could be offended by breaking certain protocols. In fact, this assertion is corroborated by Thavhanyedza (2015) for example who revealed that when Nevhutahadzini of Nethengwe was offended, he would be seen sitting at mountain top at Thengwe facing the chief's kraal.

Locals would then know that there was something which had gone wrong in the village when they saw Nevhutahadzeni – especially if he (*kuya*) roars, it indicates to the locals of some violations of protocols amongst the locals (Thavhanyedza 2015). The *Khadzi* of Sane revealed that the consequences of breaking protocol might be huge on her side. It was revealed during Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with the *Khadzi* that taking major decisions without informing Neluswinzhe was viewed by the leopard as serious violation of protocol and practice amongst the Nesane people. For example, the *Khadzi* revealed that she relocated from Sane Village to Dolidoli Village without following protocol, and one morning when she woke up all her goats had been killed by the leopard. This story is well known amongst other villagers at Dolidoli Village to date. In early 2015, the *Khadzi* also revealed that she went to visit her daughter who had given birth to a newly born in Johannesburg without informing Neluswinzhe, and while there, Neluswinzhe visited her at night and scratched her face and breast as a warning of worse things still to come if the *Khadzi* failed to comply with protocol; returning home in Limpopo province with immediate effect. In other words, Neluswinzhe was unhappy of the *Khadzi* staying away from her home without informing him first.

The *Khadzi* had to cut her trip short to return home. However, it is not clear how Neluswinzhe could have traveled from Sane to Johannesburg overnight; a distance of approximately 700 Kilometers. In addition, how the leopard could have known the place where the *Khadzi* had visited in Johannesburg and the house number without a guide in particular remains a mystery. It is clear to identify the incoherence of issues of Neluswinzhe as reality. The issues raised by Thavhanyedza (2015) that Nevhutahadzini of Nethengwe would scratch transgressors of protocol also raises further questions – especially on how these leopards dealt with mischief by the locals. For instance, it seems that the *modus operandi* of the leopards; Nevhutahadzeni and Neluswinzhe with regard transgressions was scratching the transgressors at night. The *Khadzi* of Sane showed the place where she was scratched by Neluswinzhe sometimes in early 2015 but the scratches could not be seen. Perhaps they had healed or they were never there in the first place. Myths usually reflect evasive evidence characterised by coherence. The story is there but the evidence to the story is rare to come by. Those who claim to be the custodians of mythical stories such as the issues of Neluswinzhe for example, are trained traditionalists who know how to evade conversations which might be self-exposing, lest the story is exposed as a fuss.

However, it is imperative that the issues of Neluswinzhe be investigated further without delving much into their coherence. As Osa (2014) opined that “coherence could be misleading”, this paper fails, so far, to dismiss the Neluswinzhe issues as incoherent and mythical because there exists a strong case of having had dismissed the issues based on the misleading incoherent factors as assumed despite the issues having some sporadic factors of sense. For instance, indeed prominent sources confirm that a leopard does exist at Luswinzhe, and that there are certain alleged behaviours the leopard which the sources see at Luswinzhe indeed does. For instance, the sources confirmed that during the Tshikona dances and music festivals, they, most of the time see this leopard staring on the crowds from the top of the Luswinzhe hills.

They assume that this leopard is the Neluswinzhe people talk about. In this case, similarities of Neluswinzhe and Nevhutahadzini are striking. Nevhutahadzini of Thengwe could also be seen staring towards the chief's kraal when unhappy, and Neluswinzhe does the same. Furthermore, if, for example, a member of the Nesane clan dies, and the family fails to bury the deceased at the right place (*tshiendeulu or tshitaka*), Neluswinzhe would, at night visit the grave site and dig the deceased out or destroy the grave site to show displeasure with how the burial was conducted. The Nesane's are amongst Venda's many royals who buried their dead at night. These are prescripts which Neluswinzhe would want the Nesane's to uphold and comply with. Evidently, it could be said that Neluswinzhe seems to be a defendant of traditional and cultural rites and practices which the Nesane's have to observe from time to time.

Neluswinzhe stays in a small mountain adjacent to the chief's kraal at Sane Village. Informants reason that there is a cave in this small mountain which Neluswinzhe uses. On the one hand, Nevhutahadzini of Thengwe stays in a cave on mountain top near the chief's kraal while the Nemaangani leopard also stayed in the mountain cave near the chief's kraal. Naturally, leopards avoid low-lying open areas where the possibility of disturbances with humans is high. The Nesane *Khadzi* also revealed that during traditional dances such as *tshikona* at the *musanda* (chief's kraal), Neluswinzhe would be seen by those at the dances coming out of the cave to listen to the *tshikona* music while watching the dances. The curiosity of Neluswinzhe in this regard is viewed as spiritual visitation by the supernatural Neluswinzhe to his people.

There are days when if, Neluswinzhe is troubled with certain things that he pushes the rocks on the mountain at night down valley to indicate to the clan that certain protocols might have been violated. One informant conversant with the Neluswinzhe and Nesane issues revealed that during the coronation of the current chief, Chief Tshinwethshithu Nesane, there were certain people who had connived to coronate somebody-else, and not him. It is said that Neluswinzhe heard of the conspiracy, and in retaliation, killed large numbers of livestock of all those who were part of the conspiracy to violate the chieftainship protocol at Sane. The connivers had to finally change their minds to install the rightful chief. The night before the installation of the new chief, Neluswinzhe heard that there would be no meat for the visitors celebrating the installation of the new chief as it was customary that livestock be slaughtered for the masses.

It is said that Neluswinzhe went to hunt and killed 15 *mbavhalas* () overnight and pulled them into the kraal to provide meat for the coronation ceremony. When people woke up for the ceremony, there were enough animals for meat supplied by Neluswinzhe. It was revealed that the new chief was arrested by the Mphephu Tribal Council police for having killed the 15 *mbavhalas* in pretense that it was Neluswinzhe who had killed the animals. The new chief was held in solitary confinement at Dzanani. Neluswinzhe heard of the detainment of the new chief and came to Dzanani growling, roaring and meowing throughout the whole night until in the early hours of the morning, and the new chief was immediately released in the morning.

Although this is a well-known story of Neluswinzhe amongst many locals which was also confirmed by three Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), the *Khadzi* of Sane would not want to comment on this, citing fear of violating protocol with Neluswinzhe. Sikhau (2015) also cited a similar story of one Nemakulidza; a leopard of the Nefefe clan of Fefe who also killed no fewer than two *phalas* (*Aepyceros melampus*) to feed visitors who had come to the Fefe Village for traditional dances and performance of certain rituals by the Nefefe clan. On further probing, although not sufficiently confirmed, this paper established that Nemakulidza of Fefe could also still be alive and still highly revered by the Nefefe clan of Fefe Village.

Considering these uncharacteristic similarities of the issues of the leopards amongst the Nefefe, Nemaangani, Nesane and Nethengwe clans, the question emanating could be that “are these leopards created beings or these issues created for a certain purpose?” The confusion is even complicated more because all the Key Informant sources would not tell whether it was one leopard or many leopards involved in the issues, however, settling to go with the story of a single leopard in each case. There are many questions arising from these assertions though. For instance, doesn't this leopard die for all these years? If the leopard did die at some point supposing it was the only leopard, how does it recreates the character? What creates doubts on the existence of Neluswinzhe for instance is the revelation that locals would from time to time see stray leopards in the nearby bush – especially in the area between Maangani to Gombani villages. The entire area is bushy and highly mountainous, and it is a known fact amongst the locals that there were leopards in the area, however in small populations. There are times the leopards would kill livestock such as goats (*Capra aegagrus hircus*) around the villages in the valley. For example, in 1985, a teacher at Gombani Primary school near Khomele Village; Mr Mutondi Khakhu was seriously injured in a fight with a stray leopard which had escaped a trap (*gwekwe*). The teacher received help from the members of the community to free him from the raging leopard.

The place where they fought is known as *Thitshere tsha nngwe* (the place of the teacher and the leopard) even up to this day. Neluswinzhe might just be one of the stray leopards seen by locals from time to time without him being a particular leopard of supernatural powers as postulated. However, other advanced investigations might have to be undertaken in the area to determine the authenticity of such as leopard – even if it involves methods and approaches employed by Jin-Lee *et al.* (2015), Pitman *et al.* (2012), Swanepoel *et al.* (2015) and Wolf and Ale (2009) in South Korea and in the Waterberg District, Limpopo Province respectively in tracing and documenting leopards – especially their population.

#### **Other related leopard characters and their issues for other Vhavenda clans**

For example, from the “read to others” phase of data collection, crucial comparative issues emerged. For example, Thavhanyedza (2015) revealed that there was a leopard called Nevhutahadzini belonging to the Nethengwe clan of Thengwe. Nevhutahadzini is said to have lived at Thengwe for decades, however, it is not clear if this leopard is still existing or not.

In fact Thavhanyedza (2015) revealed that the name Thengwe means *theya* (trap) *nngwe* (leopard); meaning trapping of leopards. The significance of this name is that there were many leopards at Thengwe of old. One of the leopards was captured and made a character of the *zwifho* of the Nethengwe clan. If the issue of the capturing of Nevhutahadzini at Thengwe and his subsequent transformation into a leopard of the *zwifho* of the Nethengwe clan could be true, conclusion drawn therefore could be that there was nothing supernatural and spiritual about Nevhutahadzini, but maybe training of Nevhutahadzini into certain behaviour. This assertion might not be far-fetched because training of animal into certain characters and roles have been part of both indigenous and exotic cultural practices for centuries around the world. Some animals such as elephants (*Loxodonta africana*) are trained into circus roles in the entertainment industry for instance.

At Thengwe, Thavhanyedza submitted that there were by-laws prohibiting the locals from trapping leopards. This was done in order to protect the converted sacred leopard, Nevhutahadzini. It was therefore illegal of locals to trap leopards because they feared the locals might, in the process, also trap the sacred leopard Nevhutahadzini; and hence the name, (*Theya-nngwe*), pronounced Thengwe. The postulations by Thavhanyedza might shed some light in the analysis of the Neluswinzhe issues considering some emerging similarities in the issues between the two. For example, since the Nevhutahadzini issues opine that the leopard was captured from amongst many others at Thengwe, it might be that Nevhutahadzini was a converted ordinary wild leopard who was “schooled into certain behaviours” not necessarily sacred and spiritual as known later. On this basis, Neluswinzhe could also have been a product of similar practices. In this regard, this paper would postulate that it remains likely that mythical supernatural leopards such as Neluswinzhe and Nevhutahadzini were created beings elevated to levels of sacredness and spirituality, without these figures necessarily having such supernaturality.

#### **The religious beliefs of the Vhavenda and Christianity: Is there any visible clashes of religions?**

What transpired during Key Informant Interviews for this paper is that despite their involvement and engagement in strange practices with regard Christianity, the majority of the Nesane people are known active members of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) whose headquarters are at Moria. During Key Informant Interviews, the *Khadzi* of the Sane people revealed that there was no contradiction because the ZCC allowed them to practice their cultural and traditional practices within the larger church doctrine and practices. The *Khadzi* further revealed that she still communicates with Neluswinzhe while continuing her membership and active role in the ZCC. This result is consistent with the assertions postulated by Ikpe (2009). Ikpe (2009) argued that most Africans are known to be highly religious and superstitious to such an extent that even if there have been uncountable influences of Africans by other foreign cultures and religious practices such as Christianity and Islam for instance for innumerable decades and implacable impact of cultural globalisation (Chemhuru and Masaka 2010) such foreign cultures and religious practices have, instead, failed to totally eradicate or remove African religious culture and spirituality.

Chemhuru and Masaka (2010) further corroborated Ikpe (2009) postulating that beliefs in the supernatural world and supernatural beings amongst Africans have continued to thrive beyond colonialism and subjugation of Africans by Western civilisation – including through Christianity and Islam. From the revelation of the *Khadzi* of Sane, it is evident that, to the contrary, religious life in some parts of Africa is still predominantly and highly indigenous – especially amongst conservative tribal groups such as the Vhavenda of northern Province, South Africa. This is supported by the findings of (Tienou 2009) who reported that, amongst the Yoruba of Nigeria, for example, Westernisation failed to influence to extinction their faith – in fact, for centuries. It is not only the Nesane people who practice their indigenous faith with Christianity – in what could be an inter-faith religious practice, others elsewhere in some parts of Africa also practice that. For example, Dukor (2014) found that amongst the Ogu people of Badagry, Nigeria, for example, adopters of the Zan-Gbeto spiritual practice and its traditional festivals also embrace within this culture Christianity and Islam.

There are still communications going on between the Nesane people and Neluswinzhe. The *Khadzi* of Sane revealed this to the research team indicating that she still communicates with Neluswinzhe continuously. She however would not divulge how she communicated with the leopard citing fear of reprisals by Neluswinzhe – in case the leopard felt offended by her articulations. The communications between the Nesane people and Neluswinzhe is not uncommon for the Nesane people. This is because communicating with supernatural beings is still common amongst certain Africans in African religious practices as postulated by Dukor (2014). The supernatural characters in their variety worshiped by the various groups of the Musekwa Valley seem to have massive control of socio-economic-political life of their owners. For example, the leopard of Nemaangani at Maangani Village would kill the livestock of those who fail to *u suma* (bring to the leopard portion of the harvest before domestic consumption) as punishment to transgressors. In addition, such practices influence issues of health. Those who are sick might also seek and find divine intervention from these creatures. For Example, Nemaangani (2015) reported that a distant relative arrived at his homestead sent by spiritists and sangomas to consult his people and ancestors regarding his deteriorating health. The man was taken to the shrine at Maangani for *u phasa* (consultation with the ancestors and the leopard), and Nemaangani claims that within hours the man had recovered from his sickness. Although the Nemaangani leopard is no longer physically showing himself to the locals and the Nemaangani people as before, Nemaangani reasoned that the powers of the Nemaangani leopard were still there at the Maangani mountain – especially at the old settlement (*shubi*) were the chief's kraal used to be. On issues of religiosity and spirituality such beliefs were common. In the Jewish-Christian faith for instance, even though Jesus Christ is said to have left long time ago, it is still a long-held belief amongst practicing Christians that the same absent Jesus is still “present” and His power still heals believers from sickness and also delivers them from all manner of evil. This kind of belief is similar to indigenous religiosity and spirituality – especially amongst the Vhavenda as reflected in the Nemaangani postulations.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper was undertaken in the Musekwa Valley in the Makhado Local Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The area covers the geographical areas of Pfumembe-Musekwa village through the main road to Musekwa Ngundu, Divhani, Maranikhwe, Straighharid, Afton, Sane, Tshitwi, Mangwele, Dolidoli, Ndouvhada and Khomele villages. Maangani, though tactically not under the Musekwa Valley area, has been included in the study area because of the village being an influential neighbour relevant to the issues under investigation. This paper opines that despite adverse attempt to sabotage African religious and spirituality that govern the cosmology of African peoples, there are still some tribes and clans amongst Africans who still hold on their distinct religious and spiritual belief systems – and, amongst others, the Nefefe, Nemaangani, Nefpumembe, Nesane and Nethengwe clans are a case in point. The main objective of this paper was to investigate issues of the Vhaluvhu of Nesane at Sane Village and their mythical leopard (*Panthera pardus*) called Neluswinzhe to demonstrate the relevance of the statement of the problem as explained before. The specific objectives of this paper were to:

- characterise the Vhaluvhu of Nesane with regard their religious, spiritual, traditional and cultural practices as in relation to their leopard (*Panthera pardus*) Neluswinzhe.
- investigate other related issues of religious and spiritual myths involving other neighbouring clans to the Vhaluvhu of Nesane – especially those which involve leopards (*Panthera pardus*).
- investigate the authenticity and validity of these leopards (*Panthera pardus*) as supreme beings of religiosity and spirituality amongst the Vhaluvhu of Nesane – and those other clans which might be found to have relations with leopards in their religiosity and spirituality.
- investigate developments and evolution of indigenous religious and spiritual practices of the Vhaluvhu of Nesane in relation to their leopard (*Panthera pardus*) – especially at the infiltration of indigenous faiths by Western cultures and civilisation and Christianity in Africa in particular.
- argue that African religions and spirituality are still relevant to modern life and still have a role in global social life interactions and practices just as the rest of religions and civilisations are considered so.

Amongst others, this paper found that

- Quick and ill-informed conclusions based on methodological error and omissions

From what transpired from literature review for this paper, it has become evident that Modern Social and Cultural Anthropologists have a tendency to conclude and dismiss aspects of a character and story – especially those revealing insufficient or unproven sources “at that stage” as mythical. In taking this route, socio-cultural anthropologists sometimes dismiss certain characters and stories as being mythical too early and too soon before they could await any possible emergence of new evidence to the contrary.

Some crucial evidence to the contrary might emanate later in other unrelated studies for example. This was demonstrated in the case of “Mandevu” (Mafukata 2015) and the factors of this paper.

- Myths could be developed from real characters and stories which, in fact, were never mythical

It is the conclusion of this paper that myths can be created from real stories of certain characters and events as much as they could be created from fictitious characters and stories as well for example. In other words, the character might be something existing while the story about the particular character could, on the one hand, be a false or exaggerated factor. Even-though this paper had no particular interest on the “Mandevu” work by Mafukata (2015) for example, during fieldwork for this paper, certain informant sources brought to light certain issues of the author’s work “Mandevu” because of the link of certain factors of the issues of this paper and those of the work “Mandevu”. Based on this information on the work “Mandevu”, and the observations of issues of this paper, Mandevu provides a model of myths which could have been creations. In the work “Mandevu”, Mafukata 2015 concludes and opined that Mandevu “the character and the story” was mythical while emerging evidence points otherwise. However, contrary to this assertion, emerging credible sources prove that, instead, Mandevu the character was actually not a myth but a real human being who had lived at the Dolidoli Village at some point approximately late 1800. Some Key Informants such as Sikhau even knew Mandevu’s surviving relatives. However, most fundamentally, Mandevu was originally not Mandevu but Mushayandevu (Sikhau 2015).

For some unknown reasons to the informants, Mushayandevu became Mandevu as his story was told throughout the latter generations. Narrations as told from generation to generation mythologised Mushayandevu – especially during the time of him having become Mandevu. Mandevu never existed while Mushayandevu existed but both were one and the same person. In this context, maybe the leopard people referred to at Sane Village existed without the character Neluswinzhe having had existed at all. This remains a possibility. The implication in this context is that the Sane leopard might have been real whereas the character Neluswinzhe ascribed to the Sane leopard has, maybe created, making the leopard something-else away from Neluswinzhe the leopard of the Vhaluvhu of Sane. Therefore, conclusions drawn might be that, in mythical stories and characters, it is possible to retain the story without retaining the character. In other words, Neluswinzhe the character might have long vanished but the issues having been retained. The leopard which locals claim it is the same Neluswinzhe of old could therefore just be one of those many other ordinary leopards roaming the area without being anyhow related to Neluswinzhe *per se*. This assertion could be corroborated by the issues around Mwali for example. Mwali is said to have disappeared in Venda but his issues still retained amongst the Vhavenda. Reasoned further, Mwali’s disappearance could be that the character Mwali never had existed at all to start with, and therefore never had disappeared as opined by the Mwali believers. It might be that Mwali never disappeared because there was nothing to disappear at all.

Neluswinzhe could never have existed at all, but an ordinary leopard associated with the issues of the character fashioned as Neluswinzhe instead self-created. Simply put, Neluswinzhe might have been an imaginary character, and his issues a total fabrication told from generation to generation.

- Neluswinzhe the leopard might have existed

From the discourse of this investigation, it is sufficiently established that there has to be separation of the mythical character (Neluswinzhe) in the story, and, mythical issues of the character in the story. For example, like in the case of Mandevu (Mafukata 2015), both Neluswinzhe and Nemakulidza the leopards for example could have been existing leopards characters at Sane and Fefe villages respectively, but, it could have been mythical that these leopards were continuously the same leopards allegedly living in these villages for all these multiple centuries, and generations. In other words, the characters might have changed from time to time, but not the story. This view might be supported by the fact that a leopard can only live for approximately 35 years or so. Before concluding that the leopards would probably have been the same or different – and therefore determine the status of the character and the story; either as myth or reality, cultural anthropologists should seek to investigate further to establish more pointer information. What the sources inform with regard the behaviour of Neluswinzhe for example, might however make the story sound fictitious and mythical, but its falseness and truthfulness would not be entirely proven or unproven “at this stage” either. To therefore dismiss the Neluswinzhe character and issues as mythical would therefore only be based on what Osa (2014) termed the theory of incoherence of a story, and not facts. Osa (2014) argued that this route could lead to misleading conclusions on anthropological investigations.

- Myths still drive general day-to-day social life of the Vhaluvhu of Nesane

Issues of Neluswinzhe are fundamental determinants and drivers of the history, socio-economic and philosophical orientations and practices of the *Vhaluvhu* of Nesane whether the same are perceived as mythical, or not. The Vhaluvhu still revere Neluswinzhe and his issues fundamentally.

- Christianity has failed to eradicate indigenous religiosity and spirituality of the Vhaluvhu of Nesane

The Nesane’s adoption of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) practices and faith demonstrates and reveals that since the advent of Christianity in African communities, religious confusion set in which made some Africans unwilling or less-persuaded to discard their faith, therefore integrating the “new” faith with their indigenous beliefs to create a hybridised indigenous Christian faith. This corroborates the so-called “hybridisation” of religion in Africa theory as opined by Ikpe (2009) and Kgari-Masondo (2014).

It is recommended that indigenous religion becomes part of the formal education curriculum in South Africa in the same way as Western religions have been made in order to promote self-awareness amongst indigenous groups.



This is because the lives and cosmology of indigenous groups are influenced by indigenous religion to the large extent.

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