

Things of the sky: Cultural astronomy and onomastic creativity in selected Tshivenda poetry



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Cultural astronomy remains a vital component of indigenous communities across the world because it represents the preservations of their scientific knowledge. This knowledge consolidates various dimensions of indigenous knowledge systems on navigation, cosmology, religion, time, seasons, ritual, myth, ceremony, law, agriculture, food, economics and social structure. In the consolidation, one notes their concept and perception of objects such as the sun, the moon, the stars, months and seasons expressed in various modes, including poetry. Hence, in this article, eight Tshivenda poems were purposely selected for their thematisation of the foregoing objects and provision of the Vhavana's knowledge production around them. Four poems came from Daniel Malivhadza Ngwana's *Vhakale vha hone*, two poems were from Ralson Ramudzuli Matshili's *Zwiala zwa Venda*, one poem was from Mashuwa Tshindane's *Mutambo wa muhumbulo* and one poem was from Ntshavheni Alfred Milubi's *Ipfi la lurere*. Relying on the thematic analysis technique, the article shows that, in naming astronomical objects, not only is the Vhavana's onomastic ingenuity revealed but also their astronomical knowledge. The Vhavana's notions of onomastics, cosmology, selenology and astronomy can in this regard be viewed as meta-narratives translatable into myth, religion, ritual and philosophy.

Contribution: Given the current discourse on the decolonisation and Africanisation of knowledge in South African education, this article might assist the design of pedagogy on Africans' view of the harmony between the chthonic world and terrestrial life.

Keywords: astronomy; calendar; culture; folklore; indigenous knowledge; onomastics; poetry; Tshivenda.

Introduction

This article, the product of cooperation between a student of African-language literature and folklore and a researcher of onomastics in South African communities, represents an idea that indigenous literature might be examined more profitably from the perspective of multiple disciplines rather than one. Moreover, as literature and onomastics share a basic interest in how people express their identity, culture and philosophy, among other things, it seemed that their separate approaches might be usefully combined to illuminate a common interest effectively. Therefore, this article proffers that Tshivenda poetry thematises the Vhavana people of sub-Saharan Africa's indigenous philosophies, even in their naming of *things* and *beings* (Sebola, Abodunrin & Maqadzhe 2022). They also look to the sky, not only for practical information and answers to the questions of their existence but also for the production of poetry on celestial bodies (Oruru et al. 2020). This is because, the Vhavana, like other African communities, have been in search of (scientific and yet indigenised) explanations that could guide their transition from mere traditional belief to the acceptance and understanding of nature (Lee et al. 2020). Therefore, the sky, in all its splendour, is to the Vhavana and other Africans, more like a canvas and a natural laboratory – a source of indigenised astronomical education (Karttunen et al. 2017; Mokgoatšana & Mashego 2020; Oruru et al. 2020). Thus, celestial bodies such as the sun, the moon and the stars in all their distinctive and unique characteristics have a profound influence on the climate, place-based ceremonies, weather, celestial architecture, navigation and socio-economic activities among Africans (Binneman & Davis 2020; Lee et al. 2020). Astronomical objects such as the sun, moon, galaxies, rainbow, mist and clouds are usually assigned names, both in Tshivenda and across African cultures (Oruru et al. 2020). These objects are assigned names because Africans can tell that the objects have unique and distinct purposes, which could be determined by considering their size, shape, light intensity and colour, for instance (Oruru et al. 2020). Undergirding their observation of the sky is the belief that there is a synchronistic and causal relationship between celestial bodies and the seasonal arrays of life on Earth (Snedegar 1995).

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The United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008) values 'indigenous astronomical knowledge', not only for its relevance to people's identity, heritage and land (Edwards & Heinrich 2006), but also for its significance in the transmission of traditions to future generations (Nakata et al. 2014). Nakata et al. (2014) further stated that indigenous astronomical knowledge is transmitted to successive generations through oral and material traditions, such as folktales, dance, song, poetry, rock art, ritual and ceremony, artefacts, stone arrangements and everyday social practices. As people's relationship with the sky also finds expression through artistic inspiration such as song, poetry, myths and folktales, this article considers the thematisation of cultural astronomy in Tshivenda poetry as an endeavour worthy of scholarly attention. It aims to draw Tshivenda cultural astronomy from the 'margins' to the 'centre' of discourse on how Vhavenda, like other Africans, generate astronomical epistemologies and pedagogies as part of their indigenous knowledge systems. To satisfy the article's exegetical ambitions, the following research questions framed the discussion of the article: (1) *How can African-language literature be read with a view of capturing and collecting indigenous knowledge for the future utilisation by indigenous communities while retaining its practical, cultural and social significance and relevance for its custodians?* (2) *How can African indigenous knowledge, as contained and conveyed through various modes, that is, poetry, be structured and featured in curricula offered at basic and tertiary institutions of learning on astronomy and indigenous heritage?* (3) *What are the best ways of exploring, presenting and visualising indigenous astronomical knowledge in a transparent and meaningful manner, for both indigenous and international communities?*

In responding to these questions, efforts are also made to elucidate the uniqueness and meaning(s) of the names assigned to celestial bodies that were treated as themes by the selected Vhavenda poets. The authors' intuitive and sociological knowledge of Tshivenda culture and folklore also assisted the analysis of the poems.

Celestial bodies in African culture

The rainbow, sun, moon and stars often receive notable attention and thematisation in Tshivenda folklore. This is mainly because of their size, brightness and role in the counting of days, weeks and months, resulting in their being helpful in calendar development. The 'lights in the sky' helped the Vhavenda and African communities throughout the ages to track seasons; navigate forests, deserts and the marine world; tell or keep time; and observe fertility cycles (Gosh 2019; Karttunen et al. 2017; Oruru et al. 2020; Urama & Holbrook 2009), although the latter is disputed today (Mokgoatsana & Mashego 2020). In times past, Africans believed that there was a synergy between a woman's menstrual cycle and the full moon, which probably explains why among Vhavenda, when a woman menstruates, it is called *u vhona nvedzi* (to see the moon). Mokgoatsana and Mashego (2020) affirmed that in the

olden days, women were reported to have their periods synced with the full moon.

To the Banyoro of Uganda, the new moon signifies production, which is why:

[W]omen are told that they can predict the period they are able to conceive from the time the new moon appears. Such a period is characterized by limited or no rainfall. The moon appears thirteen times in a year, hence the number of times a woman sees her periods. (Oruru et al. 2020:47)

Generally speaking, African traditionalists believe that the appearances of objects in the sky, such as the sun, rainbow, clouds, mist, moon and stars, symbolise times, seasons, disasters, fortunes and occurrences of events, which could be either detrimental or beneficial (Oruru et al. 2020). Furthermore, the full moon cycle yielded lessons in lunar education about the cryptic messages on the lunar surface. For instance, children could be taught to see a woman on the moon breastfeeding a baby, carrying firewood, a bucket or, to some extent, a man carrying an axe, right from the time when they could look to the sky (Mokgoatsana & Mashego 2020; Oruru et al. 2020). Others could see figures in the night sky that were related to religious omens and myths related to gods (Oruru et al. 2020). In fact, African cultural astronomy is permeated by mythical figures and even divination strategies that rely on observations of celestial bodies and several other sky-related beliefs, traditions and ideologies (Urama & Holbrook 2009).

Children were also taught that a glowing halo around the full moon and a rainbow signified the renewal of spirit and purpose, a spirit drawing water or the death of a prominent person, respectively (Mokgoatsana & Mashego 2020; Oruru et al. 2020). For the Batswana people, knowledge about the stars was useful in reproductive health, agriculture, rain-making and disaster management, among other things (Koitsiwe 2019), whereas for the Nyae Nyae !Kung Bushmen [the San] (Binneman & Davis 2020), the sky was the dwelling place of all the divine beings and spirits of the dead, or the dwelling place of God (Oruru et al. 2020; Slotegraaf 2013). The /Xam San are said to have believed that the stars were formerly people, while some !Kung San taught that stars are, in fact, 'small creatures that look like porcupines – having little legs, ears, teeth and covered with tiny spines'; for the Ibibio of Nigeria, stars are the 'Sand of the Moon' (Slotegraaf 2013:63). Certainly, there might be minimal documentations of indigenous astronomical knowledge and artefacts in sub-Saharan Africa (Slotegraaf 2013), but there is undoubtedly a rich oral tradition about indigenous astronomy – a body of knowledge that interfaces with folklore, onomastics, religion, ritual, agriculture, literary studies, economy and social hierarchies (Binneman & Davis 2020; Holbrook 2007). Through this knowledge, people of old could predict climate change and trends of events accurately (Oruru et al. 2020). However, with the advent of industrialisation, globalisation and urbanisation in sub-Saharan Africa, these oral traditions with their local peculiarities of the African worldview have been significantly marginalised (Snedegar 1995). Presently,

this knowledge, particularly in Tshivenda culture, remains insufficiently documented because of colonial violence, ethnocide and dispossession of the custodians of this knowledge (Binneman & Davis 2020). Where the knowledge currently exists, it largely remains a mere floating segment of culture.

This article offers a partial reconstruction of the aspects of Tshivenda cultural astronomy as espoused in poetry to provide insights into the Vhavanḁa's culturally constructed world. By cultural astronomy or indigenous astronomical knowledge, reference is made here to the study of social understandings and applications of astronomical knowledge (Urama 2008; Nakata et al. 2014). This is important, particularly in (South) Africa where there are ongoing discourses on the decoloniality of being, knowledge and power (Sibanda 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to consider seriously what indigenous Africans have to say about astronomy, something that obviously cannot be covered in totality in one article. Nevertheless, a succinct reflection is provided here on the Vhavanḁa people of South Africa as a representative sample of what the wider community of sub-Saharan Africa has thought and said about astronomical matters related to the moon, months, seasons and stars in their oral traditions and published poetry. Given the wayward nature of folklore itself, a freely eclectic approach seemed appropriate so that textual analysis and discussion might benefit from every promising insight or avenue, be it onomastic, symbolic, psychoanalytic, ethnographic, historical, literary, structuralist or functionalist. However, for analytical convenience, an overarching theoretical framework had to situate this article in the ongoing discourse on decoloniality (Zondi 2021) and the Africanisation of epistemology and pedagogy in South Africa (Dinsa et al. 2022; Sebola & Mogoboya 2020).

Theoretical perspective

There is a proliferation of African voices in search of 'a decolonial turn' towards revisiting and rethinking knowledge production, historiography and praxis in Africa (Zondi 2021). Whether these voices' ideological outlooks advocate 'Afrocentricity' (Legodi & Shai 2021), 'African Humanism' (Rafapa 2005), 'Pan-Africanism' or an 'Afro-sensed approach' (Shokane, Masoga & Blitz 2020) is a debate for another article; of particular interest here is their recurrent yearning for intellectual and cultural decolonisation in Africa. By this, it is meant, among other things, 'the Africanisation of knowledge and education in Africa' (Muchie 2020:v). The whole gamut of Afrocentricity, African Humanism, Pan-Africanism and the Afro-sensed approach essentially contests and even confronts continued colonial traditions in knowledge production and education – all of which spearheads the view that decolonisation and decoloniality in Africa are incomplete.

The search is largely a protestant one because firstly, it intentionally comprises a radical criticism of Eurocentric ideologies that masquerades as universal standards in the fields of intercultural communication, rhetoric, philosophy,

literature, linguistics, psychology, education, anthropology and history (Asante 1998). Yet, the critique is radical in the sense that it advocates a turnaround and an alternate view of phenomena and *noumena* about Africa, Africans and the world. This stance, argued Asante (1998), is necessary in both the African and the European world. Secondly, reliance on decoloniality as a theoretical lens through which to view phenomena and *noumena* helps in generating an understanding of the ways in which people construct substantial realities, that is, *indigenous astronomy*. Thirdly, a decolonial stance allowed the authors the latitude to reflect critically on the prospects of consolidating the local peculiarities of indigenous knowledge into the broader discourse of epistemology in South Africa.

Fourthly, the deployment of decoloniality as a theoretical base permits the discussion to highlight the agency of the Vhavanḁa (Africans) in the equation of social, scientific, economic and political transformation. This is important because the people who have been consigned to the peripheries of society can now be perceived as agentive actors on stage, albeit actors who once functioned from a position of 'less power' (Asante 1998). Fifthly, a decolonial outlook allows for an intellectual attack on the supremacy of dogma, relying firstly on *historical* and secondly on *analytical* apparatuses. The historical attack proffers a set of facts on recounting events and phenomena, that is, indigenous astronomy, allowing a more valid explanation of the agency of African people to surface, even in the conditions intended for their subjugation (Asante 1998). The analytical attack scrutinises the theoretical frames of domination and assesses such domination in the literary, onomastic, linguistic, social, aesthetic, cultural, political and economic spheres. Therefore, decoloniality, whether it gravitates towards Afrocentricity, African Humanism, Pan-Africanism or Afro-sensed bases, seems a cogent and complete metatheory that can amply cogitate the multi-dimensions of the African cultural experience, onomastics and philosophy. Decoloniality, then, harmonises best with elucidations of what has been called African 'cultural astronomy or ethnoastronomy' (Spinelli et al. 2019:1), which concerns itself with the astronomical knowledge developed by different cultures and how this knowledge proves germane to the daily lives of traditional groups (Spinelli et al. 2019). Also appropriately referred to as 'indigenous astronomy' (Lee et al. 2020:3) and 'endogenous ... astronomy' (Urama & Holbrook 2009:48), this astronomy 'is the study of humans and their relationship to the sky' (Holbrook 2016:1). This article attempted to bring Tshivenda (African) astronomy much closer to modern astronomy, where both the Vhavanḁa and other African communities with rich oral traditions of indigenous astronomy could have opportunities to share their knowledge of 'the sky'.

Methodology

As indigenous astronomy can be conveyed through myths, legends, proverbs, songs, stories and *poetry* (Koitsiwe 2019),

this article employed the qualitative (and reflexive) approach to analyse eight purposively selected Tshivenda poems mainly for their thematisation of Tshivenda astronomical objects. The poems were produced by four reputable Vhavanḁ poets, namely, Daniel Malivhadza Ngwana, Ralson Ramudzuli Matshili, Tshindane Mashuwa and Ntshavheni Alfred Milubi. Ngwana and Matshili may be classified as 'traditional' poets, not only for their pioneering works in the publication of Tshivenda poetry anthologies in the 1950s and 1960s but also for their documentation of the Vhavanḁ's indigenous knowledge systems. Mashuwa and Milubi may be classified as 'modern' poets, but write much of their poetry under the influence of the 'traditional' spirit of Tshivenda; hence, their poetry is permeated by themes drawn from indigenous knowledge systems. For these reasons, four poems were selected from *Vhakale vha hone* (Ngwana 1958), two poems were from *Zwiala zwa Venda* (Matshili 1967), one poem was from *Mutambo wa muhumbulo* (Mashuwa 1972) and one poem was from *Ipfi la lurere* (Milubi 1986). The selected poems provided insights into what can be read as the Vhavanḁ's thoughts on *nwedzi* [the moon], *minwedzi* [months], *khalaṅvaha* [seasons], *ḁuvha* [sun] and *ṅaledzi* [stars]. These astronomical objects were also the titles of the selected poems. Hence, the thematic analysis technique was used to explore the nomenclature that identifies and characterises these objects among the Vhavanḁ.

Discussion

Nwedzi and the Vhavanḁ's calendar

Among the astronomical wonders that the Vhavanḁ are drawn to are the *nwedzi* [the moon], *musengaṅhadzimu* [rainbow] and *ṅaledzi* [the star(s)], all of which guide the Vhavanḁ into decoding times and seasons. This section discusses the Vhavanḁ's perception and concept of *nwedzi* with heavy reliance on a poem that treats the moon as its focus. In Tshivenda culture, the term *nwedzi* essentially refers to two things, namely the *moon* and a *month*, although the meaning also extends figuratively to refer to a woman's menstrual cycle. *Nwedzi* played a pivotal role among the Vhavanḁ as they relied on its appearance and position in the sky to start farming on their new year. Their farming activities would commence upon the sighting of the first moon in *Khubvumedzi* [September] before the Gregorian calendar to which they adapted was introduced. On rare occasions, the Vhavanḁ would notice a solar eclipse, where the entire sun would be momentarily blocked out.

At that point, the Vhavanḁ would speak picturesquely of *mutshakavhili* [solar eclipse], which was perceived as a strange event, one that was associated with negative things.¹ The Vhavanḁ believe that phenomena such as *mutshakavhili* [solar eclipse] and *midzinginyo* [earthquakes] occur because their high god, *Nwali* (Sebola 2022), is visiting them and is probably angry about their contraventions of his instructions. If they continued to practise what *Nwali* did not like, he would unleash drought as a punishment, which was a

misfortune to the Vhavanḁ because they largely relied on subsistence farming for their livelihood. Because of drought, their rivers and grazing lands would dry up, resulting in most of their livestock dying, until the elders in the community propitiated *Nwali*. During *mutshakavhili* [solar eclipse], people were also prohibited from watching the event as it was believed that *Nwali* was passing. They were supposed to either hide or close their eyes until the event was over. If one watched this phenomenon, they would be struck by lightning and burnt to ashes, the Vhavanḁ believed. For reasons such as these, the sky and the moon feature prominently in Tshivenda folklore, cosmology, mythology and poetry. For instance, a Tshivenda poem titled 'Nwedzi' [Moon] by Ngwana (1958:34–35, emphasis added), sheds light on how the moon is perceived in Tshivenda culture:

<i>Nwedzi wo tshena</i>	The moon is bright
<i>U vhone tshela nṅe</i>	It gives me light
<i>U a ntakadza</i>	It gladdens me
<i>Ndi luvhone lwanga.</i>	It is my lamp.
<i>Nga u penye nwedzi,</i>	May the moon shine
<i>Ndi ṅodou tamba</i>	I want to bathe
<i>Zwavhuḁi na vhaṅwe;</i>	Quite well with the others;
<i>Ri tshi ḁiphina muṅani.</i>	Enjoying ourselves in the threshold.
<i>Nga u penye nwedzi,</i>	May the moon shine
<i>Ndi ṅodou ita</i>	I want to
<i>Tshanndzunguluwe,</i>	Spin around
<i>Tsho dya Vhakoma.</i>	It devoured the Headmen.
<i>Ndi ṅodou ita</i>	I want to play
<i>Tshidula tsha Musingaḁi,</i>	Musingaḁi's frog jump
<i>Vhakoma vha tshi ya Dzaḁa,</i>	Headmen going to
<i>Dzaḁa, Vha fhirisa muḁinda phanda.</i>	Allowing the servant to lead.
<i>Nga u penye nwedzi;</i>	May the moon shine;
<i>Ndi ṅodou ita</i>	I want to narrate
<i>Ngano ndo dzula muṅani;</i>	Folktales seated in the threshold;
<i>Ra fhedza nga u ita khube.</i>	And conclude by playing
<i>Nga u penye nwedzi;</i>	May the moon shine.

While the poem above reads more like a children's rhyme, intended mainly for entertainment and leisure, there are, however, several codes and symbols embedded in it that coordinate the reader's understanding of Tshivenda indigenous astronomy. Firstly, the poem itself shows that the Vhavanḁ are deeply riveted by the moon, so much so that their fascination culminates in the development of poetry about it. Secondly, the poet's diction is deliberately aimed at informing the reader about what generally happens in Tshivenda culture during the new moon. The lines '*nwedzi wo tshena*' (the moon is bright), the repetition of '*nga u penye nwedzi*' (may the moon shine) and the verbs '*tamba*' (play), '*ntakadza*' (gladden me) and '*ḁiphina*' (enjoy oneself) affirm

1. See https://members.tripod.com/the1_victor/travel/Africa02/eclipse.html

that the appearance of the new moon signifies joy, happiness and prosperity in Venḁa. The adjective '*tshena*' (white) not only refers to the colour that the observer sees when looking at the moon but also refers to 'brightness', thus presenting the moon as the source of light. Hence, the poet uses the verb '*vhonetsshela*' (enlighten; provide light), communing with the moon as a navigation system. Without the brightness of the moon, it becomes difficult to see clearly, because the moon is '*lvuhone*' (lamp; light). The poet implores the moon to shine – *nga u penye nwedzi* (may the moon shine) – because its shine will enable him (and even children) '*u tamba*' (to play) and narrate folktales. Therefore, the appearance of the new moon makes room for oral transfers from the elders to successive generations and playing of indigenous games, the latter often facilitated by children's songs such as *Tshanndzunguluwe* and *Tshidula tsha Musingadi*, in Tshivenda culture.

In transmitting indigenous knowledge through '*ngano*' (folktales), '*khube*' (a humorous game in which the players guess which player has hidden a stone in their clenched fists and/or bulged cheeks) and singing songs, historiographic and identity information is also provided, hence the mention of *Dzafa* (the Vhavana's archaeological and heritage site). Therefore, in praising the moon, the poet also elicits information about its centrality in the expression of Vhavana's selfhood, culture and esoteric wisdom. The appearance of the moon makes the nocturnal environment conducive, not only for lunar education but also for the transmission of knowledge about seasonal changes, much of which are accompanied by ritual and ceremony as well as celebration. This is why in Tshivenda culture, the moon also determines calendar making, including the naming of months.

Naming months in Tshivenda culture

Although Vhavana currently use the Gregorian calendar, there was a time when they depended on the observation of the sun, moon and stars to decode the times and seasons of the universe. This further gives credence to the idea that in African philosophy, a calendar is not some arbitrary organisation of days, weeks and months of the year, but a record of the spiritual and physical order and administration of the affairs of the universe (Koitsiwe 2019). For the Vhavana, this record informed their activities, be they agricultural, ceremonial, ritual, commercial or spiritual. With this in mind, reading a Tshivenda poem such as the one penned by Matshili (1967:17–19), '*Minwedzi yashu*' (Our months), gives the reader a unique perspective on how the Vhavana appropriated the Gregorian calendar to their indigenous knowledge about divisions of a year:

<i>Phando ri fhanda nwaha muswa na mulala,</i>	In January we divide the new year from the old
<i>Mitavho yo dala masimuni;</i>	The fields are full of what has been planted
<i>Zwivhuya zwa nwaha muswa ri a zwi lila;</i>	We yearn for the good that comes with the new year;
<i>Ndi nwedzi wa u ranga kha nwaha.</i>	It is the first month of the year.

For the Vhavana, January is named *Phando* mainly for two reasons: (1) it is a month in which the sun is scorching hot and (2) it is a month that introduces a new year in harmony with the Gregorian calendar. The noun '*Phando*' derives from *phandu* (searing heat), which is also derived from *fhanda* (divide; split); in other words, the sun is so hot that it feels like the head is splitting (*fhanduwa*). The latter verb '*fhanda*' also alludes to the notion that this month separates the old year from the New Year, a meaning that the poet applies to the preceding quotation. Although the month is hot, yet even amid the heat, farms are populated by crops and other agrarian products; hence, the poet speaks about '*mitavho yo dala masimuni*' (abundant crops in the fields). Therefore, complaints about January's heat are neutralised by people's gratitude for the plentiful harvest in view. Initially, for the Vhavana, this month was not necessarily identified as a facilitator of a crossover from the previous year, but as one in which people would also be 'splitting' their harvest for consumption and for preservation in the granaries. The meaning of the deverbative '*phando*' can also extend to mean 'separate for the purposes of distinguishing'; as in this time, it could be clearly distinguished who ploughed their fields and sowed when rainfall came in September and who did not. Whereas a searing heat generally brands January, the second month of the year assumes different connotations for the Vhavana. According to the poet:

<i>Luhuhi mvula a i litwi,</i>	In February, rain is never scarce,
<i>Milambo i fetema vhusiku na masiari;</i>	Rivers flow full day and night;
<i>Vhathu vha kumbwa ha sala zwililo;</i>	People are swept away, leaving behind cries;
<i>Ndi nwedzi wa vhuvhili kha nwaha.</i>	It is the second month of the year.

The second month, *Luhuhi* (February), is known for heavy rains and flash floods in Venḁa. Rivers often burst their banks because of heavy rainfall, explaining why '*Milambo i [tshi] fetema vhusiku na masiari*' (Rivers overflow day and night). Because of heavy rainfall and floods, people's shelters and other belongings are usually swept away. As a result, for most Vhavana, February is associated with the loss of loved ones, homes and possessions. On the contrary, the month is perceived as a month that cools the heat of the previous. The rains enable the grass and other plants to retain their 'green', which is a benefit to the wild and domestic animals that graze. Overall, *Luhuhi* heralds the arrival of *tshifhefho* (autumn) season (to be discussed later). *Luhuhi* is followed by *Thafamuhwe* (March), which the poet described thus:

<i>Thafamuhwe muselwa u phirimela a guma nga thafu,</i>	In March, a bride's leg sinks up to the calf,
<i>Marubini ndi vhutya-tyava,</i>	In the ruins, it is quagmires everywhere,
<i>Ri suka matope sa zwiguluzwana;</i>	We mix mud like piglets;
<i>Ndi nwedzi wa vhuraru kha nwaha.</i>	It is the third month of the year.

The first line of the stanza above hints at how the name *Thafamuhwe* probably came about. It is a compound noun, comprising *thafa/thafu* (calf, the back of the lower human leg) and *muhwe* (groom). Possibly because of the heavy rains of February, most places in Venda remain excessively muddy in March. People not only struggle to walk but also have their legs sinking into the mud up to their calves. The poet does not clarify how *muhwe* (groom) features in the naming of the month, but the point advanced is that March is not a good month to travel, even for the groom who might want to visit his *muselwa* (bride) because of the muddy roads. If the groom insists on visiting his bride or vice versa, they should be prepared to reach the destination mud-covered. Seemingly, the sludge in March is so widespread and deep that movement is almost impossible, considering how people sink to the level of their calves. However, after the muddy month comes *Lambamai* (April) whose conditions are the complete opposite:

<i>Lambamai nwana u lamba mme,</i>	In April, a child denies its mother,
<i>Nga mufuro u kundaho vha</i>	Because of a full belly, that even the gluttonous cannot bear;
<i>Ri la ra zwimbelwa dzithumbu;</i>	We eat until our stomachs are constipated;
<i>Ndi nwedzi wa vhuṣa kha nwaha.</i>	It is the fourth month of the year.

The noun *Lambamai* comprises two words, *lamba* (refuse; deny; reject) and *mai* (mother). April for the Vhavanḁa is the month of abundance. There is so much food (emanating from plentiful harvest) that a child no longer needs its mother's breastmilk; hence, it is called *Lambamai* (Reject (your) mother). According to the poet, even the gluttonous eat until they are tired of eating. People eat their harvest to a point of constipation. The enjoyment of food overlaps with the next month, *Shundunthule* (May), whose meaning is:

<i>Shundunthule nthule muhwalu wanga,</i>	In May, we are relieved of our burden,
<i>Mavhele na zwiliṅwa zwi vhuṣa hayani;</i>	Corn and crops are brought home;
<i>Vha rulana zwirundu zwa mihwalu.</i>	They help one another lay down baskets.
<i>Ndi nwedzi wa vhuṣanu kha nwaha.</i>	It is the fifth month of the year.

The month is named *Shundunthule* (Help me put down my load) because, during this month, bounteous agrarian products are brought home in full baskets; hence, one asks others for help to offload the basket(s) from their head. These agrarian products are brought home for consumption and to save in the storehouses for the days of famine. The month is essentially typified by a notable degree of leisure and ease, even though the people are cognisant that very soon, the crops will wilt, as the summer rains virtually disappear and a chill in the air is felt every now and then – preparing them

for the wintry cold, brought in by the sixth month, *Fulwi* (June). In this month:

<i>Fulwi majari a a fhuṣhurea,</i>	In June, leaves fall off trees,
<i>Vhana vha tamba thulwi,</i>	Children playfully make heaps of soil,
<i>Phepho i tandula shango loṭhe.</i>	The cold surrounds the whole land.
<i>Ndi nwedzi wa vhuṣanu-na-vhuthihi kha nwaha.</i>	It is the sixth month of the year.

June is not only a month in which it is cold in Venda but also one in which the plants that were green and full of fruits begin to lose their leaves. The etymology of the word *Fulwi* is unclear. However, a morphological and semantic analysis of the noun hints at a connection between *Fulwi*, the verb *fula* (graze) and the noun *fulo* (campaign). This is convincing given that, in the month of June, *majari a miri a [a] fulwa* (tree leaves are grazed [by the winds and dry weather]), subsequently falling off the trees, wilting and dying. *Fulwa* is a velarised form of *fuliwa*, where the speech sound [i] was delinked and subsequently deleted in the noun (Milubi 2004). The meaning of *Fulwi* could also be linked to the figurative utterance, *majari o bva fulo* (tree leaves have left on a campaign), making the month on which this happens, *Fulwi*. By some stretch of imagination, one can also add that the noun *Fulwi* also foregrounds the idea that during this cold month, people kept their pots on the fiery hearth for longer periods to keep their edibles and bathing water warm or hot. In this sense, June becomes a month in which *a hu fulwi khali* (a pot is never removed from the hearth). Closely connected to the meaning of June in Tshivenda culture is the meaning of the seventh month, *Fulwana* (July):

<i>Fulwana majari a tsaleli a fara lwendo,</i>	In July, the remainder of the leaves take a journey,
<i>A tovhele ho yaho manwe,</i>	And follow where the others went,
<i>Ri lala ro pfuṣa milenzhe nga phepho;</i>	We sleep with bent legs because of the cold;
<i>Ndi nwedzi wa vhuṣanu-na-vhuvhili kha nwaha.</i>	It is the seventh month of the year.

In most parts of Venda, during the month of June, tree leaves wilt and fall off, which in the poet's mind connotes leaves having undertaken a journey. The wintry cold and dryness ushered in by *Fulwi* intensifies in *Fulwana*. The month is named thus because it is an attenuation of *Fulwi*, hence, the affixation of the diminutive suffix *-ana*. Because of the intense cold in July, people often sleep with their knees bent to try and keep themselves warm. Although most of the trees would have lost their leaves and greenness in both June and July, *Thangule* (August), as the name suggests, will totally rob the trees of whatever leaves and buds may have been left by the weather of the preceding months. To this effect, the poet says:

<i>Thangule miri yo tangulwa yoyhe,</i>	In August, all the trees are robbed;
<i>Muya u hwala phanga na hatsi;</i>	The wind lifts the roof and the thatch;
<i>Phepho i pharamudza ngevehe.</i>	The cold stretches the ears.
<i>Ndi nwedzi wa vhuṭanu-na-vhuraru kha nṵwaha.</i>	It is the eighth month of the year.

The month of August is generally associated with vehement and dusty winds in Venḡa. Consequently, some people's roofs, particularly thatched roofs, are lifted off houses, while dry and leafless trees are uprooted in some cases. For this reason, the month is named *Thangule*, from the verb 'tangula' (rob), because it robs trees of their residual leaves and people's shelter. It lays nature bare, leaving both domestic and wild animals as well as people exposed to the elements. Compounding the problem is that August is not only windy and dusty, it is also cold. The poet leaves it to the reader to imagine how the month is viewed by a family that loses their home and livestock because of its violent winds. However, after the mayhem of August, people are relieved when a new month, *Khubvumedzi* (September), arrives:

<i>Khubvumedzi tshiranzhe tshi a mela,</i>	In September, the first plants emerge,
<i>Mvula ya tseula i wela fhasi;</i>	The early rain falls down;
<i>Zwo eḡelaho zwi a karuwa.</i>	All that was asleep awakens.
<i>Ndi mukukumedzi nṵwedzi wa vhuṭanu-na-vhuna.</i>	It is a lobbyist, the ninth month.

The Vhavenḡa believe that the month *Khubvumedzi* (September) begins when the crescent moon can be seen for the first time and when 'the lower two giraffe stars' (the Southern Cross) are just below the horizon and the upper two are just visible. Tshivendḡa indigenous astronomy holds that when the 'giraffe' stars are seen close to the south-western horizon just after sunset, they indicate the beginning of a cultivating season. The noun *Khubvumedzi* refers to both the astronomical features (stars) and the early rains known as *tseula* that fall, not only to drench the soil that has been dry since the beginning of winter but also to usher in the spring season. The suffix *-medzi* in the noun derives from *-medza* (cause to sprout or bud), alluding to the rains that cause plants to sprout and buds to emerge. The sprouting and budding include the emergence of *tshiranzhe* (first crop), which continues into the next month, *Tshimedzi* (October):

<i>Tshimedzi ndi a medza,</i>	[In] October, I cause sprouts,
<i>Mbeu i bonyolola maḡo;</i>	A seed opens [its] eyes;
<i>Musaleli u ḡo ḡa u vhona.</i>	One who lags behind will eat nothing.
<i>Ndi nṵwedzi wa vhufumi.</i>	It is the tenth month.

October is named *Tshimedzi* (that which causes sprouts or new growth). The name comprises the prefix *Tshi-* (Class 7 noun prefix in Tshivendḡa) and *-medzi* (cause of growth). It is the month that makes much of what was seeded in September to sprout. Rain continues to fall in October causing seeds to germinate and break through the soil. It would not be far-fetched to designate *Tshimedzi* as also a spring month in Venḡa, as there is abundant rain, vegetation comes out in flower; birds chirp and most animals frolic for joy. Significant signs of fruition in both the wild and the domestic spaces abound in *Tshimedzi*, extending to *Lara* (November):

<i>Lara ḡi sia miḡavho masimuni,</i>	November leaves the crops in the fields,
<i>Vhathu vha lora zwe vha zwala;</i>	People dream about what they sowed;
<i>Shango ḡo dalafhala nga zwimedzwa.</i>	The land is green because of plants.
<i>Ndi nṵwedzi wa vhufumi-na-vhuthihi</i>	It is the eleventh month.

In November, as the poet affirms, people's minds are always occupied with the preservation of their crops, even to a point of dreaming about what they sowed in their fields. Heightening their obsession is the fact that the rains experienced in the spring season and now into summer will yield a plentiful harvest, and therefore, they constantly live in fear that pests and thieves will tamper with their crops at night. The poet also hints at the etymology of the name *Lara* (November), which resonates with *u lora* (to dream). He seems to suggest that the name was derived from Vhavenḡa farmers' perpetual thinking about the safety and security of their green fields during the night. In hopes of devising security plans, they would spend their nights either sleepless or constantly longing to wake up to go and ensure that there were no trespassers. On the whole, in November, much of the land of Venḡa is green because of the crops, forests and other agrarian products that have been revived by abundant rain and cultivation. *Lara* is followed by *Nyendavhusiku* (December):

<i>Nyendavhusiku ḡa kovhela u laḡe mbaḡo;</i>	In December, when the sun sets, rush home;
<i>Vhusiku vhu na vhaḡe vhaḡo;</i>	The night has its own people;
<i>Vhaendi vha kovhelelwa vha a eḡela.</i>	If the sun sets on travellers, they spend the night.
<i>Ahaa nṵwaha wo fhela ri thoma muswa.</i>	Ahaa, the year has ended, we begin a new one.

Nyendavhusiku is a compound noun, comprising *nyenda* [travellers] and *vhusiku* [night], meaning those who or which travel at night. In *Nyendavhusiku*, it is believed that there are nefarious nocturnal *beings* or *things* that may be deadly to those who travel at night. For this reason, the Vhavenḡa advise against travelling at night in December. If the sun sets while one is still travelling, it is either such a person should rush home before it is even too late or should seek a safe

place to lodge for the night and resume their journey the next day. Although it is unspecified in both Tshivenda folklore and mythology, as well as in the poem, the evil of the night and its nocturnal creatures often alludes to (ritual) murderers, rapists, kidnappers, witches, carnivores and predatory ogres. As crops would have risen to the height of an average human being, one might not even notice those who intend to ambush others. Also, at this point, the first fruits might be ready for consumption, and as such, women might carry some home in baskets for their families, which might attract robbers, if the women travel at night. Therefore, the Vhavana did not name their months just for the sake of naming; they looked at the lunar phases and therefrom derived names. This is also notable in their naming and interpretation of seasons.

Seasons in Tshivenda culture

The seasons in Tshivenda culture are *tshilimo* (summer), *tshifhefho* (autumn), *vhuriha* (winter) and *luṭavula* (spring). These seasons also draw the interest of some Vhavana poets, a case in point being Mashuwa's (1972:8) poem 'Venda Tshilimo' (Venda in summer):

<i>Yo na Venda fura-u-lale,</i>	It has rained in Venda – fill-your-belly-and-sleep,
<i>Shango lo naka lo dilila,</i>	The land is beautified and green,
<i>Miedzini, magovhani na mivhunduni</i>	In the water courses, valleys and hills
<i>Hoṭhe hu na lukuna.</i>	Everywhere is exquisitely clean.

Summer typically occurs from December to March in Venda. It is often a season in which the land of Venda is green because of the abundant rains that come with it. Although inconvenient to some extent, people nevertheless live in anticipation of thunderstorms because they are important phenomena to the Vhavana. They are believed to help nature to survive during this hot season and to help crops grow better and yield a harvest. The poet mentions that the whole land is green, and there is plenteous water in the valleys and rivers in summer. During this season, people have plenty of food to eat. For those who love the beauty of nature, Venda is advertised as full of awe-inspiring sceneries, as the next stanza attests:

<i>Shango loṭhe ndi lidala,</i>	The whole land is green,
<i>Maṭo a lavhelesa hoṭhe a takala,</i>	Eyes look everywhere and become delighted,
<i>Matsina maṭo a a sea-vho sa mulomo</i>	So, eyes can laugh like the mouth does
<i>A mbo fura sa thumbu?</i>	And even become filled like a stomach?

During summer in Venda, the sun is the most visible and strong, which means everything in nature gets substantial energy from it to support life, breeding and feeding. The

warmth of the sun thus creates 'perfect' conditions for people, plants and animals. This is also a good time to enjoy outdoor activities such as sight-seeing; hence, the poet speaks of Venda's natural land as so delightful to watch in summer that even one's eyes will smile at the beauty. Not only that, summer in Venda also allows one the opportunity to witness the following:

<i>Tshilimo Venda zwi takala zwoṭhe,</i>	In summer, everything in Venda is happy,
<i>Miedzini ri pfa nga khuwa dza Vho-Tshihwenu,</i>	In the water courses, we hear the shouts of Tshihwenu,
<i>Thavhani ri pfa nga vhazwala vha tshi tou hwedeba,</i>	On the mountains, we hear the cries of the baboons,
<i>Ngeno muthu mishumo hu hone yo vuwa.</i>	While for a human being, chores are numerous.
<i>Vhusiku sala nduni vha bva vhoṭhe,</i>	Everyone leaves the house before dawn,
<i>Hu mme, hu nwana a hu na a salaho,</i>	The mother, the child, none is left behind,
<i>Vhe Mukhandala, Mukhandala wa sa lima u ḡo tswa</i>	Mukhandala, Mukhandala, if you don't till, you will steal
<i>Nwana khuvha ha li muiwe nala ro fhiwa roṭhe.</i>	Everybody must eat from the sweat of their
<i>Ndi tshone tshifhinga tshi sumba vhabva,</i>	This is the time that exposes sluggards,
<i>Vhashumi vha tshi vhonala nga mabiko.</i>	While hardworkers are distinguished by their sweat.

During summer in Venda, even animals are busy at work; they hunt their prey and reproduce. Their sounds are even heard on the mountains. People also work very hard in summer. Those involved in agrarian activities are often seen planting vegetables and other crops. Summer is thus a season joyfully welcomed by people who have a strong work ethic. In times when Vhavana relied heavily on agriculture for survival, anybody in the family old enough to work in the ploughing fields had to wake up early to go and cultivate the fields. It was unnecessary to explain the importance of hard work because that was the main means to supplement a family's income and livelihoods. On the contrary, those who did not work did not have anything to reap at harvest time. To hasten the cultivation, the more hands on the hoes, the better. This is why the poet says even children were taken along by their mothers to go and work in the fields. The principle instilled in these children was that 'those who work hard will have something to eat'. Thus, the summer season also became a time of inculcating strong work ethics in children. This strong work ethic would see them through all the seasons of life, even outside the ploughing fields. From summer, the Vhavana *tshifhefho* (autumn), which Ngwana's (1958:56, emphasis added) poem, 'Tshifhefho' (Autumn), elucidates thus:

<i>Tsho swika tshifhinga tsha majiwa manzhi;</i>	The time of abundant food has arrived;
<i>Ngdala yo ri shengedzaho i vho fhira-vho;</i>	The famine that tortured is passing;
<i>Masimuni zwi ri diphelaho ndi zwinzhi,</i>	What we enjoy from the fields is plenty;
<i>Ndi dzimphwe na mabvani zwi diphesaho.</i>	The sweet reed and watermelons are the best.
<i>Vhana vha vuwa vha tshi la zwikoli na maranga;</i>	Children eat mealies and green melons for breakfast;
<i>Li tshi lavha vha ya mazwiluni na maembeni;</i>	At midday, they look for wild mispel and custard apples;
<i>Ndi tshone tshifhinga tsha muroho wa phuri.</i>	It is the time of the pumpkin vegetable.
<i>Vhuphani vha tshi kodela nga lunonya.</i>	At Vhuphani, they add caraway seeds to their recipes.

The preceding poem describes the abundance that characterises autumn in Venḁa, precisely at its peak in April. As stated when explaining what the month of April typifies among the Vhavenḁa, the poem confirms that autumn is a season of plentiful harvest. People eat their fill and want for nothing. However, after this season, comes winter. Needless to say, winter is the coldest season of the year, falling between autumn and spring in Venḁa. In this season, freezing temperatures are accompanied by fog, dew and mist in Venḁa. Strong winds are also common during this season. In Venḁa, winter generally lasts for 3 months from June to August. Because of the freezing temperatures in winter, people in Venḁa not only wear thick clothes but also long for the heat of the sun, as Munzhedzi's poem (in Ngwana 1958:101–102) 'Duvha Vhuriha' (Sun in Winter) confirms:

<i>Ahaa! wo ḁa iwe ḁuvha lavhuḁi;</i>	Ahaa! you have arrived good sun;
<i>Iwe nguvho ya vhasiwana;</i>	You, the blanket of the poor;
<i>Ro u lila musu u tsee vhubvaḁuvha;</i>	We longed for you while you were still in the east;
<i>Iḁa u thathe phepho ri takale;</i>	Come and chase the cold away so that we can be happy;
<i>Riṇe na vhana vhashu ri diphine;</i>	So that we and our children will enjoy ourselves;
<i>Iḁa, iḁa u ri tshidze kha murotho hoyu.</i>	Come, come and enliven us in this cold.
<i>Ro u lila hu tsee vhusiku;</i>	We longed for while it was still night;
<i>Hu tshi rothola hu tshi tou thwee!</i>	When it was as cold as ice!
<i>Na mmbwa vhusiku hu vhuḁwaikwai.</i>	Even the dog kept howling throughout the night.

In the above poem, the poet appreciates the low heat of sunlight because it is a source of warmth in winter. Hence, basking in the sun during winter is common in Venḁa. When there is no sun during the day, sitting by the fireside becomes

a necessity. Winter is not only a very cold season in Venḁa but also a season of dormancy, particularly for crops. Some plants die, leaving their seeds, and others merely cease growing until spring. Many animals also become dormant, especially those that hibernate, which may explain why the poet mentions the necessity of checking the snares even when it is freezing. Seemingly, the poet caught nothing because there is no mention of any prey caught by the poet. Winter then is mainly viewed as an unpleasant season in Venḁa. This is why people cannot wait for the arrival of a new season, spring. Spring comes after winter and foreshadows summer in Venḁa. In spring, days become longer, unlike in winter, and the weather becomes better and warmer. The coming of spring is evidenced by the appearance of the buds on the trees and bushes. In his poem 'Luḁavula' (spring), Ngwana (1958:80) described the spring season in this manner:

<i>Shango lashu a si u naka haḁo;</i>	Our land is truly beautiful;
<i>Miedzi na dzithavha zwo li nakisa lothe;</i>	Valleys and mountains beautify the entire land;
<i>Miri i thomaho u tuma lurere yo li nakisa.</i>	Buds beautify trees.
<i>Vhuriha ho no fhira na zwililo zwaho;</i>	Winter has passed with its sorrows;
<i>Zwothe zwi tshilaho zwo vha zwo lindela Luḁavula.</i>	All living things were waiting for Spring.
<i>U tsefephala ha shango hu vho sunguvhela-vho;</i>	The aridity of the land has also started to disappear;
<i>Makole a mvula a vho thoma u vhonala-vho;</i>	Rain clouds have also started to appear;
<i>Hatsi ho lindela u vuswa nga mvula ya Luḁavula.</i>	The grass waits to be awakened by the Spring rain.
<i>Vhathu vha vho thoma u lugisa malembe avho;</i>	People are starting to prepare their hoes;
<i>Makhulu vho no thoma u nanga mbeu dzavho;</i>	Grandmother/father has started to choose her seeds;
<i>Zwothe zwi tshilaho zwo vha zwo lindela Luḁavula;</i>	All living things were waiting for Spring.
<i>I a penya, i a penya ya dovha ya vhea mutsindo;</i>	Lightnings, Lightnings are also accompanied by thunders;
<i>Aiwa, u swika ha tshilimo ho no vha tsini-tsini.</i>	The arrival of summer is drawing closer and closer.
<i>Miri yo no vha na matari madenya avhuḁivhuḁi;</i>	Trees already have thick and very beautiful leaves;
<i>Minukho ya maluvha o no tou vha one madzanga ashu</i>	The smell of flowers has become our delights

The coming of spring essentially means rebirth, that is, the rebirth of nature in Venḁa. During this season, numerous animals wake up from hibernation and breed. Birds also return to their nests because of favourable temperatures. According to the poet, the appearance of beautiful flowers is one of the signs that spring has arrived. Furthermore, a lot of plants and trees are growing and new, bright green leaves appear on

them, bringing new and fresh colours. Thunderstorms also come, but not for long. Overall, the Vhavanḁa not only praise months and seasons in their poetry, but they also know how to respond to each season and what they ought to do with the conditions brought by each month and season. The discussion of months and seasons in Venḁa also compels one to offer a brief reflection on stars in Tshivhenḁa culture.

<i>Vhusiku musi swiswi ʃo ri bodobodo</i>	In the heart of darkness during the night
<i>Ni a penya na vhangima</i>	You shine and stand out
<i>Mbone dzone dzine dza funga</i>	Lamps that light up
<i>Ni funga nga u sielisana</i>	You light up in intervals
<i>Tshedza tshine na taidza</i>	The light that twinkles
<i>Tshi mbo shanduka zwiseo zwa zwigidigidi</i>	Transforms into a thousands of laughs
<i>Mbone dzine nḁwana wa muthu a funga</i>	The lamps that a child of human being lights
<i>Dzi shanduka zwitaitai</i>	Become like wicks
<i>Zwi no taidza zwa dzima</i>	That blink and then turn off
<i>Ha vho sala hu swiswi</i>	And only darkness remains

Stars in Tshivhenḁa cultural astronomy

A star in English, *inkwenkwezi* in isiXhosa, *inkanyezi* in isiZulu, *nyenyedzi* in Chishona, *naledi* in Sesotho, *nyeleti* in Xitsonga, *naleri* in Setswana, *nyota* in Swahili and *naledi* in Tshivhenḁa is often the focus of African oral tradition, especially poetry, as Milubi's (1986:40) poem 'Naledzi Vhusiku' (Stars at Night) confirms:

In Tshivhenḁa traditions, there are stars called *dziḁhḁḁwa* (the giraffes), referring to the bright stars of Crux (male giraffes) and the two pointers (female giraffes). The Vhavanḁa call the fainter stars of the Southern Cross, *ḁhḁḁwana* (little giraffe). The long axis of the Southern Cross points towards a bright star called *Achenar*. This star is called *tshinanga* (little horn) in Tshivhenḁa. In Tshivhenḁa tradition, the first person to see *tshinanga* in the morning sky, heralding winter in May, would climb a hill and blow the *phalaphala* (black sable antelope horn) and receive a cow as the prize. The evening star, Venus, is visible from time to time in the west after sunset. When it appears in the evening sky, the Vhavanḁa call it *khumbela tshilalelo* (asking for supper). Comets and meteors (also called shooting stars) are regarded as signs of important events in Tshivhenḁa culture. When the Vhavanḁa saw a meteor, they would say that their high god, *Nwali/Raluvhimba*, was shooting across the sky (Mafela 2008). That *Raluvhimba* is linked to stars in Tshivhenḁa is notable in Matshili's (1967:49) poem, 'Masase' (Bright Morning Star):

<i>Hee mirafho na mavhuthu</i>	Hey, generations and multitudes of people
<i>Vhufali no vhu isa 'fhi?</i>	Where is your wisdom?

<i>Nḁivho yaḁu yo lala 'fhi?</i>	Where has your knowledge slept?
<i>Zwisikwa nga Mwali ni nga zwi vhalaa naa?</i>	Do you think you can number Mwali's creations?
<i>No kundwa nga ḁaledzi dza ḁadulu,</i>	You were unable to count the stars in the sky,
<i>Lavhelesani ḁadulu hu madekwana,</i>	Look at the sky in the evening,
<i>Ho tshena he 'wee, hu 'nedzi-nedzi-nedzi,</i>	It's so white, it's all twinkles, twinkles, twinkles,
<i>Ndi ḁaledzi dza ḁadulu mutewa nga Raluvhimba.</i>	These are the heavenly stars founded by Raluvhimba.
<i>Ehee! Mwali o ita vḁufolo,</i>	Oh yes! Mwali did wondrous things,
<i>O sika ḁaledzi khulwane kha dzoḁe,</i>	He created the greatest star of them all,
<i>Yone Masase tshedza tsha mutsho,</i>	Masase, the actual light of the dawn,
<i>I phashaa! Yone musuma-mutsho.</i>	It's so bright! It heralds the arrival of dawn. Ye swiswi
<i>tsiruwa hu dzehene tshedza,</i>	It commands the darkness to shift so that light may come,
<i>Vhuriha i ḁaha na tshilimela,</i>	In winter, it appears with the Pleiades,

In this poem, the poet is concerned because people are indifferent to the beauty and meaning of the stars. He considers their indifference to the beauty and messages of the stars as a lack of wisdom and knowledge. In the poet's mind, people should respond in reverence to *Raluvhimba* whenever they see the brightest morning shooting star, *masase*. The star is so deeply appreciated and awe-inspiring that it is not uncommon to hear a person praising a beautiful or handsome lover as *masase* in Tshivhenḁa culture. Thus, this morning star is ascribed exquisite qualities among Vhavanḁa. The poet also mentions that *masase* appears in winter with *tshilimela* (digging star; Pleiades). *Tshilimela* appears for the first time in June and is believed to symbolise new life. There are also other stars and astronomical objects in Tshivhenḁa astronomy that require intense and thorough discussion, such as *makhali* (Orion's Belt); *mulalavhungu* – the path along which the ancestor spirits walk (The Milky Way); *matshotshonono* (seen as a row of cattle, trees and stars); and *Yavḁaḁinda* (a star seen in the east sometime before sunrise), preceding the morning star *masase*, *Tshilimo* (Sirius) and *Khohamutsho* (puller of the dawn).

A reading of the foregoing poems for the thematisation of astronomical objects such as the moon, the sun, the stars as well as their role in the Vhavanḁa's decoding of times and seasons reveals that every community has its own ways of knowing. Galileo Galilei used a telescope to see four planets, but African people, on the contrary, did not need a telescope to see planets (Mokgoatšana & Mashego 2020). The Vhavanḁa do not only understand times and seasons but also

know how to interpret the movements of the moon, sun and the stars and know exactly what to do at every moment and season. Thus, for them, the universe does not exist merely for aesthetic purposes; it contains coded signals meant to guide life on Earth. That these aspects have been explored in poetry goes to show that indigenous knowledge is not only kept in the minds of the elders but has also found its way into creative literature. Therefore, this literature should be considered for analysis in search of its experimentation with various genres and ecologies of knowledge. It should actually be read beyond the parochial and usual themes such as the mood, feeling, tone and diction of the poet, to levels such as how it functions as a mirror of people's worldviews.

The analysis provided here reveals that cultural astronomy remains relevant even in contemporary times and can be considered at par with modern astronomy (Koitsiwe 2019). In the discourse on the decoloniality, decolonisation and ultimately Africanisation of knowledge in South Africa, cultural astronomy should not only be considered for inclusion in the curricula offered at basic and tertiary institutions of education but also be documented, developed and explored for posterity.

Conclusion

A qualitative analysis of Tshivenda poetry as a representative sample of (South) African-language literature reveals that literature experiments with various types of indigenous epistemology and pedagogy. Thus, an analysis of this literature in search of its thematisation of aspects such as cultural astronomy helps in drawing the worldview(s) of the marginalised from the periphery to the centre of discourse on knowledge production, preservation and transmission. The eight poems chosen for analysis are deliberately presented here to illustrate that much of African cultural astronomy is currently scattered and minimal in documentation, especially within scholarly circles. This article nevertheless attempted to show how the Vhavenda developed, classified and used their knowledge of astronomy to calculate time, develop their calendar, initiate and sustain their agricultural activities, for ritual performances and ceremonies and reproductive health. Poetry is one of the ways in which the Vhavenda have always created and conveyed their knowledge and experience of the world, making it a fertile ground for exploration in terms of astronomical knowledge in Tshivenda culture.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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