

Symbolistic Aesthetics in Ntshavheni Alfred Milubi's Poetry

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Abstract

Quite a few scholars have highlighted symbolism as a hallmark of both Tshivenda traditional and modern literature. Whether one speaks of Tshivenda folktales, drama, prose, praise poetry, ritual performances, figurative language, etc., one will find that symbolism pervades Tshivenda culture in general and Tshivenda poetry in particular. This article analyses Ntshavheni Alfred Milubi's selected Tshivenda poetry and subsequently offers an appraisal on his use of symbolism. The article further argues that, to comprehend and consequently appreciate Milubi's poetry, some knowledge of the tenets that saturate Tshivenda culture's symbolic system as a whole must be possessed. The artistic function of symbols in Milubi's poetry is notable in some of the poetry anthologies that he published alone and others to which he contributed his poems with other poets, namely: Muhumbuli-Mutambuli (1981), Vhuṅungu ha Vhupfa (1982) Ipfi ḽa Lurere (1986), Muimawoga (1990), Muungo wa Vhuhwi (1995) and Khavhu dza Muhumbulo (2001). Undergirded by Afrocentricity and New Criticism as its theoretical lynchpins, this article foregrounds Milubi's use of symbolism as a quintessential subterfuge of the Vhavana's artistic expression.

Keywords— culture, poetry, symbolism, Tshivenda, Vhavana

Introduction

There are numerous ways employed by people to express, communicate, reinvent and reinforce important knowledge, and one of those ways is symbolism (Moodley, 2008). Needless to say, symbolism, which 'has practical value and meaning' (Khosa, 2009: 12), pervades most cultures (Nengovhela, 2010). Most traditional ritual performances in Xitsonga, Sepedi, Sesotho and Tshivenda, for example, are infused with symbolic meanings (Khosa, 2009; Moodley, 2008; Motebele, 1997; Nengovhela, 2010).

Domba, for instance, not only serves an educational, didactic and/or doctrinal significance in Tshivenda culture, but is also saturated with symbolism (see Blacking, 1969; Mabayi, 2009; Matinya, 2003; Mmbara, 2009; Mulaudzi, 2001; Nemapate, 2009; Sivhabu, 2017; Stoffberg, 1982). Symbolism, in the form of cultural meanings, features so imperatively even in the Tshivenda female dress (Raphalalani & Mashige, 2018). Such socio-cultural meanings confirm that 'symbolism is culture-bound' (Nengovhela, 2010: 2). Since symbolism is

culture-bound, it follows that one must be familiar with the cultural context within which a particular symbol is used, mainly because symbolic meanings may vary from one culture to the other (Nengovhela, 2010). Other than ritual performances and traditional attires, symbolism may be encapsulated in other forms. One such a form is poetry (Mogoboya & Ratau, 2022). Symbolism in poetry is one of the factors that make it 'capable of encouraging a number of interpretations' (Mazumdar, 2014: 15). Connected to these interpretations can be numerous functions served by poetry, one of which is a depiction of selfhood (Sebola, 2020). Whatever function it may serve, the central thesis is, 'poetry embodies a people's philosophy, beliefs, values and, sometimes, their historical development' (Kipury, 1983: 198). Of particular interest in this study is the function of poetry as 'the prototype of art in symbolism' (Pedersen, 2015: 593). For polemical reasons, this article foregrounds Ntshavheni Alfred Milubi's use of symbolism in his poetry as an index into his creative and figurative expressions. Hence, this article's ideological premise is that Milubi communicates, not only his own creativity, but also the assertion of the Tshivenda poetry's distinctiveness and philosophical outlook, through his use of symbols. The article further propounds the belief that the use of symbols in 'modern poetic aesthetics are unique in possessing a repertory of authentic African features. This authenticity manifest[s] itself in the use of concrete images derived from the fauna and flora, proverbs, indigenous rhythms, verbal tropes and concepts of space and time to establish a poetic form' (Ojaide, 1996: 30). Furthermore, the essence of symbolism in Tshivenda poetry is drawn into critical focus because Tshivenda literature is, to a large extent, still relegated to the periphery of cultural curiosity (Mashige, 2011).

Admittedly, there have been notable scholarly endeavours that focused on Tshivenda poetry in the past (i.e., Mafela, 1997; 2008; Makhavhu, 1987; Mashige, 2011; Milubi, 1983; 1988; 1991; 1997; Nemukongwe, 1995; Ramakuela, 2001; Sebola, 2019; 2020; Sengani, 2008), but in-depth, systematic and broad studies on the astute use of symbolism and its communicative significance in Tshivenda poetry are still wanting. The marginal availability of such studies may, of course, be tied to the realisation that 'the issue of culture has been neglected for so many years. African scholars have done many researches, but very few in their own culture' (Khosa, 2009: 16). This article sets out to show Tshivenda poetry as a good source of symbolism (Olatéjú, 2005), in the hope to provide some illumination on its aesthetic value in Milubi's poetry. Milubi is regarded as one of the prominent poets in Tshivenda modern poetry (Sebola, 2020). By modern, it is meant the 'written and contemporary as opposed to traditional and oral' (Orhero, 2017: 148). Prior to the analysis of Milubi's poetry, it is imperative for this article to provide a succinct description of his thematic concerns in his poetry.

Towards an Understanding of Milubi's Thematic Preoccupations

Milubi's prominence in Tshivenda poetry and literature in general is recognised by several scholars. For instance, Makhavhu (1987) recognises Milubi as a protest poet who views the oppression of his people in a very serious light. Makhavhu further acknowledges that Milubi's poetry is a living example of what a bona fide Muvenda poet can achieve in writing good poetry in his mother tongue. For Maqadzhe (1985: 4), 'there is nothing which affects him [Milubi] more than human suffering and the dark confusion of mankind as well as the hazy spiritual values which he finds in the world. Most of his writings, which include poetry and

drama, are pervaded by a sense of human suffering'. Ramukosi (1997: 5) echoes Maqadzhe in saying: '...suffering, life affliction and sorrows of existence are the main concern of Milubi's tragic literary art works. In this way he shows concern for evils that are destroying human values'. Mafela (2002: 126) also bolsters the former scholars' assertions: 'In [Tshivenda] literature, Milubi...risked his life by writing about topics that most writers and nearly all publishers did not dare to touch. In his writing, he reflects on the various forms of oppression inflicted on the poor...'. Milubi must have deemed it incumbent to embrace the mantra: '...the duty of a poet is to be the spokesperson of the society of the community in which he/she lives' (Manyaka, 2000: 260-61). This is why

In Milubi, then, we see a meeting point of two opposing forces. While his poetry is sometimes politically committed, it does not lose its aesthetic hold...Milubi also comes as someone who sees in the past a memory which can construct the present. This post-colonial aspect of Milubi is also combined with postmodern ideas of despair, lack of hope and the total chaos that this world is in (Ramakuela, 1998: 86-87).

In the eight broad canons of modern African poetry, namely; 'pioneer poetry, modernist poetry, disillusionment poetry, civil war poetry, alter/native poetry, apartheid poetry, Niger delta/eco poetry and contemporary poetry' (Orhero, 2017: 145), Milubi's poetry predominantly falls within the ambit of apartheid poetry. Apartheid poetry, according to Orhero (2017: 160), 'is informed by the South African black experience'. Apartheid was institutionalised by discriminatory laws which limited the freedom and total life of black South Africans, Orhero (ibid) further avers. During the apartheid regime, 'blacks were not allowed to go to the same schools, attend churches, and live in the same places with whites. Blacks were not allowed to vote or to be voted for. The

aboriginal blacks were thus reduced to mere tenants in their land' (Orhero, 2017: 160). It was in this period that some poets, including Milubi, wrote to address these divisions and talk to the conscience of the white oppressors. For Milubi (1988: 146), poetry became 'a response to, and an evaluation of, our experience of the objective, bustling world and our ideas about it. Poetry is concerned with the world as responded to sensorially, emotionally and intellectually'. In this response, the thematic preoccupations of Milubi's poetry and apartheid poetry in general, include: 'segregation, protest, pain, inequality, racism, oppression, etc.,' and 'their major technique was the protest form, critical and socialist realism, imagery and symbolism' (Orhero, 2017: 160). Among its major thematic concerns, this article intends to show how Milubi stylistically uses symbolism to present the extremities of the conditions of black people during the apartheid era and other issues characterising human existence. The yardstick for determining the aesthetic hold of Milubi's poetry requires paying stringent attention to his use of language, precisely, his mastery of figurative language. But first, the methodological and theoretical lynchpins of this article must be explained.

Methodology

To satisfy its hermeneutic and exegetic ambitions, this study adopted the sociological, stylistic and descriptive approaches, aided by 'the intuitive method' (Netshisaulu, 2012: iii), where the analysts also identified symbol usage in Tshivenda culture introspectively. A more data-driven methodology was also assumed through the systematic identification of words in selected poems and a prearranged set of headings, namely: religious symbolism, animal symbolism, birds and insect symbolism and other uses of symbolism in Milubi's poetry. Also abetted by previous research on symbolism, the study systematically identified

symbols in the selected texts containing Milubi's poetry, namely: *Muhumbuli-Mutambuli* (Milubi 1981), *Vhutunga ha Vhupfa* (Milubi 1982), *Ipfila Lurere* (Milubi 1986), *Muimawoga* (Milubi 1990), *Muungo wa Vhuhwi* (Milubi, Sigwavhulimu & Ratshitanga 1995) and *Khavhudzwa Muhumbulo* (Sigwavhulimu, Milubi, Ndhlovu & Phalanndwa, 2001).

Theoretical Perspectives

This article employed a dual theoretical framework, namely; Afrocentricity and New Criticism, as its anchor. Afrocentricity was considered appropriate in this study, firstly, because it envisions the empowerment of Africans 'through articulating philosophical positions which take the context and cultural particularities of African places into account...This empowerment in turn leads to a reclamation of the intellectual space denied to Africa during the racist project of colonialism' (Oelofse, 2015: 136). The Afrocentric framework views phenomena from the perspective of the African person and seeks in every situation to appropriate the centrality of the African person (Chawane, 2016). Secondly, as an African ethno-philosophy, Afrocentricity, may play a critical role in recording and recovering tenets of the Vhavanḁa's folk philosophy through the analysis of Milubi's poetry. This is important, especially when one considers that 'the black experience worldwide, has borne the burden of Western history: the history of negation' (Adeleke, 2015: 200) and 'the diminution of African worldviews and expressions' (Mashige, 2011: 13). Focusing on Tshivendanḁ poetry also allows for the emphasis and centralisation of the knowledge and contributions of the Vhavanḁa to the intellectual horizons and as such, their ethno-philosophical suppositions start to fault the view that they are inferior. Essentialising symbolism as part of the Vhavanḁa's philosophical constructs also necessitates the incorporation of the New

Criticism Theory. New Criticism Theory 'was made popular by college instructors who realised that formalist criticism provided a useful way for students to work along with an instructor in interpreting a literary work rather than passively listening to a lecture on biographical, literary, and historical influences' (Kirszner & Mandell, 2004: 1569-70). Thus, the whole body of criticism concentrates solely on the work of art as an object and subjects it to a close analysis in order to discover its intrinsic worth (Harmon & Holman, 1996). In New Criticism, as done in this study, the reader sharpens his or her perceptions and thinks about the multiple shades of meaning, syntactic constructions, patterns of imagery and symbols in a work of art (Milubi, 1991; Harmon & Holman, 1996).

Symbolism in Milubi's Poetry: Analysis and Interpretation

Western rhetoricians often consider 'two categories of figures of speech: **scheme**, 'meaning form', which changes the ordinary pattern of words, like hyperbole, apostrophe, ellipsis, and antithesis and **trope**...that changes the general meaning or words, like simile, metaphor...symbol' (Fadaee, 2011: 19 emphasis added). Thus, symbologists, in this case poets, may employ either scheme or trope, or both categories in their poetry. This study focuses only on literary trope, with special reference to symbols, as used in Milubi's poetry. Milubi's poetry often subsumes metaphoric and sacramental symbolism. By sacramental and metaphoric symbolism, it is meant 'symbols used in myths and customs' and 'significant symbols used for natural phenomena, like a lion which is a symbol of courage' (Fadaee, 2011: 20), respectively. The next section is subdivided into: religious symbolism, animal symbolism, birds' and insects' symbolism and general uses of symbolism in Milubi's poetry.

Religious Symbolism in Milubi's Poetry

Among the numerous symbols that Milubi uses in his poetry are religious symbols, particularly those that are common in the Christian faith (Sebola, 2020). This is evident in the poem, *Vhatendi* (Believers):

Mutendi ndi ufhio fhano?

O tokaho sa tshifhambano

Midzi ya mbilu yawe Golgotha.

Vhatendi wee!

Danda le la tokwa Golgotha

La nembeledza vhutshilo

Inwi lo ni nembeledza naa?

(Milubi, Sigwavhulimu & Ratshitanga, 1995: 14 emphasis added)

(Who is the believer here?)

Who is as firm as the cross

His/her heart's roots are at Golgotha

Believers!

The log that was planted at Golgotha

And hung the life

Are you hanging it too?)

In the poem, the poet implores believers (in Jesus Christ) to imitate Jesus. This imitation entails crucifying oneself like Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross. The word *danda*, an augmented form of *thanda* (wood), symbolises the cross upon which Jesus Christ was crucified at Golgotha. Golgotha represents a place of complete surrender and ultimately, death. The poet considers true believers to be those who

have 'died to self' and no longer do their own will, but the will of God. In another poem, *Muvhuso wa nama* (The kingdom of [the] flesh) (Milubi *et al.*, 1995: 24), the poet (Milubi) equates the value of believing and following Jesus Christ with ultimate worth and wealth, which he supports with words such as *musuku* (gold) and *thwavhaḁi* (costly stone). Religious symbols pervade Milubi's poetry both as a reflection of his faith in Jesus Christ and also as a depiction of the dominance of Christian faith in the modern Tshivenda culture (Sebola, 2020).

Animal Symbolism in Milubi's Poetry

Animal symbolism characterises Tshivenda mythologies, legends, folktales, proverbs, poetry and virtually much of the religious beliefs of the Vhenda (Nengovhela, 2010). In Tshivenda culture, 'some animal symbols contain a secret code and reveal their meanings only through written and oral traditions' (Nengovhela, 2010: 27). A poem such as *A si naho tshawe* (One who lacks/A poor person), animal symbolism may yield connotative meanings in Tshivenda:

A si naho tshawe

U shanduka mmbwa,

Mmbwa a shanduka.

(Milubi, 1982: 1 emphasis added)

(S/he who is poor

Becomes a dog

A dog s/he becomes

Mmbwa (dog) is a domestic animal, usually a pet, often distinguished by loyalty to its owner. 'Dogs are good animals. They are generally seen in a positive light: loyal, faithful, honest and willing to fight for the owner' (Nengovhela, 2010: 33). Such loyalty is typically demonstrated by the dog's constant

accompaniment and the readiness to defend its owner against any form of harm. Here, a dog symbolises protection. Dogs, however, can also symbolise negative connotations in Tshivenda culture. For example, a dog may symbolise uncontrolled lust due to its habit of copulating in public (Nengovhela, 2010). Hence, a promiscuous person may be called *mmbwa* (dog). Here, a dog symbolises immoral behaviour. *Mmbwa* may also symbolise poverty in Tshivenda culture. Nengovhela (2010: 34) says: ‘A dog is known for depending on its owner; it owns nothing, everything is supplied by the owner’. Just as a malnourished dog is likely to become mangy, a poor person is also likely to show signs of impoverishment, resulting in people’s disdain. The central idea of the poem is that a poor person without any helper, is not different from a mangy dog. The word *mmbwa*, is also used in the poem, *Tshifhinga* (Time):

Iwe tshifhinga

A u tshifhinga

U tou vha **mmbwa**

I vhuvhulaho phephoni ya **vhuriha**

U tou vha lone **tarelwa**

Li no dziḁa nga u shaya lone dakalo

(Milubi, 1990: 22 emphasis added)

(You time

You are not time

You are truly a dog

Which moans in the cold of winter

You are the actual wolf

Which howls for lack of joy)

In the poem, the word *mmbwa* (dog) not only symbolises time, but also reveals that time is disregarded the same way a dog often is. Here, the word *mmbwa* symbolises indifference. The plausible reason for the dog howling in the cold of winter is that it has been abandoned. This implies that people do not take the essence of time into cognisance. Time keeps ‘howling’, that is, chiming away the hours without anybody taking it seriously. If time, just like a dog, could howl, it would have voiced its frustration with people’s indifference to it. Time is also equated with *tarelwa* (wolf). *Tarelwa* in Tshivenda is a wild (feral) dog or wolf. *Tarelwa* is a free-ranging dog, and because of this, it is rarely tamable. Time cannot be tamed, it ranges freely and wildly. It is not under the sway of people. Like wild dogs, which are aggressive and predatory and therefore, not easily captured, so is time.

Another animal that assumes symbolic meanings in Tshivenda is a pig. The Vhavenda usually think of pigs as dirty animals (Nengovhela, 2010). In Tshivenda culture, a pig also symbolises a person who does not care about life. For these reasons, a pig generally symbolises negative connotations: overweight, greed, or unattractiveness (Nengovhela, 2010). The poem, *Muvhuya a hu na* (There is no good person), confirms:

Muthu ndi nguluvhe,

I no dzhena matopeni

Ya bva i na thophe,

U a zwi funa naa

Muthu sa nguluvhe?

(Milubi, 1982: 8 emphasis added)

(A human being is a pig,

Which steps into the mud

And comes out muddy
 Are you happy with this,
 A human being as a pig?)

Nguluvhe (pig) in the poem symbolises gluttony, fatness, uncleanliness and the love of filth. These symbolise a person who does not care about his or her life and health. The pig's gluttony and greed lead to its fatness and overweightness. A pig also enjoys rolling in the mud, thus leading to its reputation of being careless. A pig symbolises people probably in light of their 'nauseating' deeds. The words *matopeni* (in the mud) and *thophe* (mud) symbolise people's filthy deeds, much to the disdain of the poet. Here, a pig symbolises moral (and spiritual) impurity. *Matope* (mud) symbolise 'sin(s)'. In the poet's view, sins defile people the same way mud defiles the pig. *U dzhena ha nguluvhe matopeni* (the entrance of a pig into the mud) essentially implies that the pig was once clean but deliberately muddied itself. The rhetorical question, '*U a zwi funa naa muthu sa nguluvhe?*' (Are you happy with this, a human being as a pig?) is meant to evoke a sense of repentance, which may lead to a 'clean' life. Here, the pig symbolises helplessness (Nengovhela, 2010). People need to be redeemed from their sinful nature although the poet does not disclose who can cleanse people's 'muddied lives'.

A cat is another source of animal symbolism in Milubi's poetry. In Tshivenda culture, a cat is associated with cleanliness (Nengovhela, 2010). Whenever a cat relieves itself, it ensures that it covers its excrement with soil. However, a cat, particularly a black cat, is associated with negative symbols, e.g. bad luck and witchcraft, in Tshivenda culture. Furthermore, a feral cat is disliked in Tshivenda because of its predatory nature. Hence, when such a cat is caught, the immediate response is to attack it:

Goya vha li pwashe, vha li xoye xhoho
Maluvhi a thusukane.

(Milubi, 1986: 30 emphasis added)

And crush the feral cat, and smash it on
 the head

And its brains scatter)

Goya (feral cat) lives outdoors and does not allow itself to be handled or domesticated. *Goya*, cat often an aggressive apex predator, defying all attempts of socialisation and domestication, symbolises foreign and wicked oppressors in Milubi's poem. The word *xhoho* (head) symbolises the leadership of the colonial (apartheid) government. *Xhoho* has *maluvhi* (brain), symbolising the system of intelligence that drove the apartheid government. The poet implores the oppressed to rise defiantly and valourise their voice against oppression. Animal symbolism is also evident in the poem, *Ndi mudzumbamo* (It's hide and seek):

Ri tou vha **dziphele**

Vhukuseni ha **nngu**

(Milubi, 1990: 55 emphasis added)

(We are hyaenas

Clothed in the fur of sheep)

Dziphele (Hyaenas) symbolise evil, bad luck, unhappiness and impatience in Tshivenda culture. *Phele*, as a carnivore, acquires its food predominantly through hunting and theft. Thus, it is in its nature to feed itself by shedding blood. Domestic animals such as goats and sheep, for example, are never safe in the presence of a hyaena. As a predator, the hyaena often attacks its prey when they least expect it. Hence, it may even hunt at night. It is because of this characteristic (of hunting at night) that the hyaena is also associated with witchcraft in

Tshivenda culture. Witches and wizards are said to operate during the night in Tshivenda culture. It is believed that witches and wizards ride on hyaenas during the night. The comparison of hyaenas with human beings is intended to highlight people's deceptive and cruel nature. The image of a hyaena covered in *vhukuse ha nngu* (sheep's wool) shows that people can camouflage their wickedness by pretending to be good. Unlike hyaenas, sheep are 'a symbol of meekness, holiness and devotion in Tshivenda culture' (Nengovhela, 2010: 37). Of course, sheep also have negative connotations such as stupidity, blind submission and defencelessness. People with the nature of sheep are rarely suspected of mischievous deeds. Hence, the hyaena pretends to be sheep in order to deceive and ultimately attack its prey. The wolf also enjoys taking advantage of sheep because sheep also suffer and die in silence when slaughtered. This attitude in Tshivenda culture symbolises a person who always consents to things that are detrimental to him or her, doing so to avoid hurting other people's feelings. Another common animal symbol in Tshivenda culture is a donkey. This symbol is used in the poem, *Ndi nne ipfi* (I am the voice):

Ndi nne ipfi

Ipfi-ipfi mulomo wa mbongola

Ipfi la vha ongolelaho

Ndi nne ipfi la ngoho

(Milubi, 1986: 16)

(I am the voice

The true voice of the donkey

The voice of those who are lamenting

I am the voice of truth)

The poet identifies himself as the voice that fights for truth. Here, we see the projection of Milubi as a protest poet. He protests, not only against injustice but also against falsehood. He stands for truth, whatever that truth may be. In the poem, he likens himself to the *mbongola* (donkey) or *mulomo wa mbongola* (the donkey's mouth). *Mbongola* is a domestic animal, commonly used for laborious tasks like ploughing, pulling the cart and carrying heavy burdens (Sebola, 2020). In the poem, *mulomo wa mbongola* symbolises protest against oppression. The donkey, a symbol of oppression and enslavement, now resists the suffering it and other donkeys have been subjected to. The poet represents all the oppressed people and protests on their behalf.

Bird and Insect Symbolism in Milubi's Poetry

In the poem, *Khundavhalayi* (A rebel) (Milubi, 1982: 10), the poet likens a rebel to *tshinoni* (bird). The poem also has the line, *Tshine u fhufha fhasi tsha si kavhe* (Which flies and does not land). A rebel is essentially a person who has no regard for (good) counsel and authority. *Khundavhalayi* literally means one who has defied (and defeated) counsellors in Tshivenda. It usually refers to a child who disobeys parents' counsel and instruction. This attitude often lands a rebellious person into trouble, often resulting in people's taunts. The imagery of the bird that flies but does not land symbolises the *khundavhalayi's* unwillingness to sit, reflect and/or listen to advice. The counsellors whose advice is rejected by the *khundavhalayi* take comfort in the reality that, no matter how high a bird may fly, when it is thirsty, it will be forced to come down and drink. To them, no matter how far and high the *khundavhalayi* may go, a time will come for him or her to be humbled and thus realise the need for counsellors. The poet reveals the pride that characterises rebellious people, the kind that typically leads to destruction.

Apart from birds, insects also serve as sources of symbolism in Tshivenda culture. This is evident in the poem, *Iwe lunyonyu* (You, mosquito) (Milubi, 1986: 10). In the poem, the poet alludes to the nature of the mosquito and says, *u kavha kha uno wa kavha kha uḽa* (You land on this one and that one), depicting the mosquito's insatiability with people's blood. The line, *u kavha hau ndi tshikafhadzo ya malofha* (your landing is the contamination of blood) shows that mosquitos' stings are disease-causative agents. Once blood is contaminated, death is likely to follow, if no cure is found. The poet regards the mosquito's stings as: *Tshiga tsha lwone lufu* (The symbol of death). The blood sucked by mosquitos is further classified as *pfumo* (spear). The mosquito symbolises people who contaminate other people's blood through sexually transmitted diseases. Here, mosquitos symbolise negative things. In the poem, *Lurere lwo dzhena* (Autumn has arrived), however, insects symbolise good:

Mbilu dzashu nga dzi shanduke ḽotshi, dzi shanduke magoḽoḽo

A no ḽoḽa na maluvha oḽhe a bonyolowaho

Dzi pembele, dzi tshene dakaloni; vhutshena hadzo,

Mukhaha u sale murahu.

(Milubi, 1986: 71)

(May our hearts transform into bees, and become buzzy beetles

Which even feed on all the flowers whose petals are open

Let them celebrate, purified in joy; their whiteness,

And have milk flow behind.)

The central theme of the poem is the celebration of autumn's arrival. The poet implores people to let their hearts rejoice the same way *ḽotshi* (bees) buzz 'in joy' when they hover over blossomed flowers. Here, bees symbolise a time of joy, hope and goodness. The word *magoḽoḽo* (buzzy beetles) normally symbolises children who hastily cry when offended or hurt in Tshivenda culture. Such people have a 'touchy nerve' and because of this, they are usually regarded as *dzindenwa* ('sissies' or 'spoiled brats'). When hurt, they cry so loudly that it irritates their hearers. The irritating cry is ascribed to the beetle because of the constant sound [*ḽoḽoḽo!*] or noise it makes when it flies. In the poem, however, the sound is not an irritation, it is a sign of joy. Hence, the flowers, in the poem, symbolise a new season.

Other Uses of Symbolism in Milubi's Poetry

Thus far, it has been illustrated that Milubi's poetry employs both arbitrary and personal symbols (Fadaee, 2011). Due to spatial limitations, this section gives a brief analysis and interpretation of other symbols that Milubi construed and those that are generally common and familiar in Tshivenda culture. For instance, in the poem, *Matungo ḽhoho nda dzungudza* (I shook my head sideways), the word *ḽhoho* (head) symbolises resistance:

Nga ḽḽila ndo tshimbila

*Nga ḽḽila nda sedza,
Nda sedza zwiita muthu,*

Nda sedza zwiita muthu,

ḽhoho matungo nda dzungudza

Miḽodzi fhasi ya rotha....

(Milubi, 1981: 40, emphasis added)

(By the road I walked
 By the road I looked,
 I looked at a human being's deeds,
 I looked at a human being's deeds,
 And shook my head sideways
 Tears dropped down....)

Taken in its entire context, the poem depicts people's suffering and the resultant evocation of the poet's emotions. People's suffering is one of Milubi's thematic preoccupations. The word *miṭodzi* (tears) symbolises people suffering. The yoke of (colonial) oppression is too heavy on (black) people. The poet shakes his head, not only in utter despair and compassion, but also as an act of defiance. Furthermore, the poet shakes his head to signify helplessness, he cannot alleviate the situation. Protest is also notable in the poem, *Ro konḑelela, ri nga si tsha kona* (We endured, we cannot do it anymore):

Mukosi kha u ṭahe

Vhoṭhe vha kandwaho nga denzhe ḷa ngogofhadzo, ḷa tshaya tshilidzi

Vha khuruṭane vhoṭhe vha ime huthihi

Mabala oṭhe vha leleḑise, a leleḑe muyani

(Milubi, 1986: 30 emphasis added)

(Let the cry spread
 All who are repressed by the foot of
 oppression, which lack grace
 Should gather together and stand in one
 place
 And dangle lofty beating sticks, dangle
 them in the air

The word *mukosi* (a cry/a shout) usually symbolises a plea for rescue or celebration in Tshivenda culture. The shout could also be a demonstration of defiance and confidence when advancing against the enemy in battle. Thus, *mukosi* may symbolise terror or victory in Tshivenda culture. The poet implores people to shout in unison and defy the system of oppression. Oppression is equated with *denzhe* (an augmented form of foot). This foot maintains its oppressive stance over the people, hence it is called *denzhe ḷa ngogofhadzo* (the big foot of oppression). The poet is talking about the 'suppression of Africans through colonial subservience' (Fiyinfoluwa, 2013: 4), in South Africa. *Denzhe* symbolises suppression. *Ngogofhadzo* comes from the Tshivenda verb *gogovhala*, which 'bend over', usually because of a burden carried on one's back. Fruits also acquire symbolic meanings in Milubi's poetry. For example, in the poem, *Mutukana na fuyu* (The boy and the fig), the word *fuyu* (fig) symbolises a human being:

Mutukana u ima a sedza fuyu

Thamuso yaḷo ya mu lukela mambule

A no tha a fasha maṭo

Mbilu yawe ya shanduka matandavhale

(Milubi, Sigwavhulimu and Ratshitanga, 1995: 2 emphasis added)

(A boy stood, looked at a fig
 Its lusciousness knit nets for him
 Which catch the eyes
 His heart becomes forked)

Mutukana (boy) in Tshivenda symbolises youthfulness, vigour, inexperience and/or immaturity. This immaturity and presumable naivety, often have *mutukana* easily deceived or

swayed by numerous offers, leading to poor choices, rebellion against elderly counsel, etc. In the first line of the poem, we read, *Mutukana u ima* (A boy stands), which implies the boy was moving until he was halted by the appearance of the fig. The fig arrested the boy's attention. The word *sedza* (look; stare) suggests that the fig was attractive to his eyes. Hence, the line *a no fasha maṭo* (which catch the eyes) referring to *mambule* (nets). *Mambule* are often used to catch fish in Tshivenda culture. The poet personifies the fig when he says it 'knit the nets', by which he means the fig was so pleasant to the boy's eyes that his whole attention was caught by it. Upon being caught, the boy's heart lost a sense of focus, turned into *matandavhale* (forked). In Tshivenda culture, when one sits with his or her legs spread, it is said that such a person *o tandavhala*, also implying indecency. In the poem, it means the boy's heart 'beat in different directions', meaning he was madly in love with the fig. The 'nets' caught him and he was indecisive. The boy was so enticed by the fig that he did not realise the misfortune that would soon befall him:

Mutukana u vho lila u tsa

Muhuyu ndi tswavhelele

Zwipopola zwe a gonya ngazwo

Zwo kunuwa a tshi kha ḍi gonya

Fhasi tsindeni ḷa muhuyu

Hu fetema lutsinga

Lwa maḍi o sinyuswaho mulovha.

(Milubi *et al.*, 1995: 2 emphasis added)

(The boy longs to descend

The fig tree is smooth

The twigs he used when climbing

Were broken on his way up

Down at the trunk of the fig tree

There is a swirling of a stream

Of water which were provoked yesterday)

Mutukana u vho lila u tsa (The boy wants to descend [from the tree]) confirms that the boy climbed the fig tree to pluck the fig. After plucking the fig, the boy was no longer able to descend because *muhuyu ndi tswavhelele* (the fig tree has no handles). The handles or *zwipopola* of the tree that boy used to climb were broken on his way up, he then had nothing to hold onto on his way down from the fig tree. He was caught between a rock and a hard place, so to say. The poem is about a boy and a girl (symbolised by the fig). Nkehongoni (2013: 77) thinks the boy and the girl had sex which led to the girl's pregnancy and the boy's frustration. The boy only wanted to have sex with the girl; he did not love her. The boy did not consider that sexual intercourse could lead to pregnancy. The boy does not know what to do. This is the first interpretation of the poem. The second interpretation could be that the boy contracted a sexually transmitted disease, for which there is no cure:

Mutukana o rondovhela tshoṭhe

Maṭo one o rondolowa

Ḽamusi hu vho fhirwa nga mulovha

Maṭo o no sedza ḷone ditilili

Zwoṭhe zwo shanduka mamburelo.

(Milubi *et al.*, 1995: 2 emphasis added)

(The boy is completely depleted

The eyes are protruded

Yesterday has become better than today

The eyes have stared into oblivion
All has become nothing but vanity)

It is evident that the boy is in an unpleasant situation. The boy's health and strength seem to have depleted. The probable explanation is that the boy is sick. The boy's yesterday, when he was still healthy, is better than his today, where he is weak and sick. When the poet says, *mutukana o rondovhela tshoṭhe* (the boy is completely depleted), it means the boy lost his vigour. The eyes that once saw and admired the girl have now protruded or *o rondolowa*, indicating ill-health. The heart that once turned into *matandavhale* because of lust and/or love for the girl, now considers everything to be vanity. In the poem, *Musumbandila* (Guide) (Sigwavhulimu *et al.*, 2001: 35), we also find a girl in almost a similar predicament:

Ñwananyana o adzamisa mutsinga

Miṭodzi yawe yo no shanduka tshirulu

Muṭokonyi wa zwisima ṅamusi

Sa mugoba vhudalani ha maṭari

Tshira tsho goba zwo fhela

Ñwananyana ha tsha ḍivha zwino

A yo ngo vha ṅdila-ṅdila

Ngau yo mu xedza, ya mu semela maseṭo

(Sigwavhulimu *et al.*, 2001: 35 emphasis added)

(A girl's neck is bent

Her tears have become a cloudburst

Provocateur of wells today

Like a cobra in the green of leaves

The enemy has struck, it's finished

The girl no longer knows now

It was the appropriate way

Because it led her astray, its thistles
glaring at her)

Ñwananyana (girl) symbolises youthfulness. The girl is portrayed as unhappy. The word *miṭodzi* (tears) symbolises her unhappiness. In the full poem, the girl's hopes for a bright future were dashed, leading to her current regrets. The poet uses the word *tshirulu* (cloudburst) to symbolise the girl's constant cries. Her pain was caused by *muṭokonyi wa zwisima* (the provocateur of wells) which is suggestive of a sexual encounter she had. This 'provocateur of wells' appears to have harboured evil intentions against her. The description of the male as a cobra which lay in ambush among the green leaves, confirms his nefarious motives. In the green leaves, where 'green is a symbol of life, peace and harmony' (Nengovhela, 2010: 23), the girl may have been sold false dreams by the 'cobra' and fell prey to deception. The girl slept with the 'cobra', not knowing that she was sleeping with *tshira* (enemy). In the end, the cobra, symbolic of danger and wickedness, left the girl in distress and regret. The word *maseṭo* (thistles) symbolises the discomfort and sorrow she suffered after the encounter. Her dreams and future were aborted, probably because she fell pregnant and lost all hope of ever prospering in life. A substantial discussion on the ideological signification of women as 'figs' and 'wells' and what that entails in Tshivenda culture deserves a separate article. In a different thematic context, the poem *Mukegulu na mugo wawe* (The old woman and her walking stick), also employs symbolism:

Mukegulu o guludana e nthihi

Nga zwivhili o gagadela wone mugo

Ngeno muṭodzi u tshi khou rotha shamani

O kambwa nandi

Nga yone tshayo ya a re wawe

U eŧhe mukegulu kukuđani kwa vhutshilo

(Sigwavhulimu *et al.*, 2001: 33 emphasis added)

(An old is bundled alone

With her two hands, she leans on her
walking stick

While a teardrop rolls down her cheek

She is drunk really

With the poverty of lacking one to call her
own

The old woman is alone in life

The word *mukegulu* (old woman) symbolises an aged woman. She has no one to keep her company and so, she is lonely. The word *mugo* (walking stick) symbolises the old woman's companion. She leans on her walking stick for balance and support the same way one may lean on a friend for support and help in life. *Mugo* also symbolises the old woman's hope and confidence. When she leans on her walking stick, she is confident and hopeful that the stick will not let her down; it will provide her the support she needs. However, as important and useful as the walking stick may be to the old woman, it is not a human being. She cannot talk to the stick and receive a response. This amplifies her loneliness. The absence of human fellowship is unpleasant to the old woman, hence *muđodzi* (teardrop), symbolic of her sorrow, rolls down her cheek. The poem symbolises the life of the old-aged who live and die in loneliness because their loved ones abandon them.

Conclusion

It is germane to conclude this article by asserting that Milubi's poetry is saturated with symbols whose meanings also pervade Tshivenda discourse in its varied dimensions. His poetry, as has been hopefully herein illustrated, employs both arbitrary and personal symbols. Such symbols fall within the ambit of metaphoric and sacramental symbols. In this case, the use of symbolism depicts the inevitable vicissitudes of life that confront people daily. Although most of Milubi's symbolism denotes despair, it is encouraging to note that he still urges people to face the tribulations of life with fortitude. Overall, Milubi's poetry may be considered as a significant index into the Vhenda's general use of symbolism in their poetry, folktales, rituals and folklore in general.

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