

AT THE HEART OF AFRICAN RAINMAKING

Lesibana Jacobus Rafapa, Department of English,
University of Venda Private Bag X5050 THOHOYANDOU 0950
E-mail: rafapalj@univen.ac.za

Article published in: *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* vol. 18 (1) July 2008, pp. 51-62

Abstract

This paper reports on findings regarding one African community that has practiced rainmaking until the early 1960s. Rainmaking among Africans was recorded in 19th century travel writing by imperialist Europeans such as Rider Haggard in his books *Ayesha: the Return of She* (1905) and *King Solomon's Mines* (1885). In keeping with the agenda of imperialism and colonisation, the art of rainmaking among Africans was reduced to writing in a distorted, Eurocentric manner. Therefore, an Afrocentric investigation of the religious-cultural practice of African communities to bring about rain is warranted. It is hoped that the resulting balanced view of African rainmaking rituals will, among others, discourage Eurocentric tendencies of seeing its exponents such as The Rain Queen Modjadji as inscrutable exotica. Rain Queen Modjadji has been immortalised with the same attitude regretted by writers such as Caitlin Davies (2003). Davies (2003) remarks how subaltern victims such as Sara Baartman and El Negro were removed to museums in places like Spain and London as curious exotica to be studied by the "naturalists" of the 1830s. Research into the disappearing phenomenon of rainmaking among Africans should preserve the indigenous knowledge as well as purge it of Eurocentric distortions. A sample of 10 informants was used, determined by the role categories historically known to have been a feature of rainmaking among the African community under the spotlight.

Introduction

There are lots of misconceptions about folklore which need to be corrected (Makgamatha 2000). In a world in which the West is known historically to have "othered" peoples of broad cultural clusters that are different from the European broader cultural affinities, including Africans, some distortions about the oppressed nations' folklore have been made deliberately to advance hegemonic discourse that seeks to denigrate any semblance of creative knowledge in peoples other than European. It is for this reason that Roginsky (2006) puts distortion and other manipulations of folklore alongside ethnicity and gender as instruments of supremacist domination and means towards "othering".

The objective of this project was to obtain facts from participants in the rituals, about the rainmaking phenomenon that has characterised African communities over the centuries. One community that has practiced rainmaking until the early 1960s was used as a sample. This should help to dispel the homogenisation, by some Eurocentric writers, that Rain Queen Modjadji is the sole example of the Africans' ability ritualistically to bring about rain. The intention is also to discourage Eurocentric tendencies, of seeing facts around the Rain Queen metaphysically as inscrutable exotica. Such a portrayal of African cultural aspects as strange, inferior objects for amused study has been observed by writers such as Caitlin Davies (2003) – hence her incisive critique of attitudes surrounding two such subaltern victims in the persons of Sara Baartman and El Negro. The bodies of these epitomes of African cultures were snatched from their graves and packed off to museums in places like Spain and London as curious exotica (Davies, 2003) to be studied by protagonists of European imperialism manifesting themselves in the 1830s on the scientific terrain as "naturalists".

Aims and Objectives

The research sought to investigate rainmaking among Africans in order to find out which intuitive knowledge about this art is objective and accurate, and which is subjective and distorted. Audio-recorded responses distilled in this process were tested scientifically for verity before they could be consolidated into a report, so that distortions could be removed.

The need to guard against the possible harm of intuition is attested to, for instance, in methods used by Malairajan et. al. (2006) in which they do not just take for granted the folkloric ascription of pharmacological activities to some Indian medicinal plants, but test the accuracy of such traditional knowledge through laboratory analyses. My approach of refining facts in the present study no less rectified lax intuition about the traditional African art of rainmaking than it balanced out its earlier written accounts. Makgamatha (2005:5) rightfully censures “so-called folklore anthologies that were written hurriedly to beat a deadline” by “most students and researchers of folklore in our country” thus erringly ignoring going “to the folk to collect folklore data for analyses”.

This research was conducted with the hope of counterbalancing the harm of such unjustifiable research methodologies as well as take Afrocentric research further in this area. Shai’s *Bogoši bja Kgošigadi Modjadji* (2006) falls in the latter category. Apart from such intended intra-Afrocentric refinement and consolidation of knowledge about the African religious practice of rainmaking, in the same stroke its Eurocentric distortions should be corrected by the Afrocentric vantage point that I adopt in this study.

It is hoped that material collected during field work did go a long way towards weaving together an undistorted national narrative of black South Africans, which written accounts alone so far have not yielded. The specific narrative of the focus of this study (the Mamaala community) is but just a thread of the broader tapestry that should be the composite story of Africans told by Africans themselves and obtained by means of approaches that are not elitist. “The printed (published) tales which are analysed” in cultural historiography or studies of folklore “are not representative of the many variants which exist in popular versions” (Burden, 2000:293). The focus group of this study was expected to supply such necessary “variants which exist in popular versions” of the traditional art of rainmaking among Africans, as opposed to examples in flawed mould cited above and labelled by Burden (2000:293) as “printed (published) tales”.

Research methods

While the pursuit of my research was to come up with a well-defined and focused piece of oral history, my technique was also that of gathering research material using the research methodology referred to by some writers as oral history (see Burden 2000). This is because among the denotations of the concept oral history is that of seeing it as “a process or an information or a research methodology in addition to the end result” or as a “technique of gathering material” (Burden 2000:291-92).

In the way the above writer explicates oral history as a methodology, its salient achievements should include:

- Amplifying the voices of the oppressed peoples in an enlightened and democratised world.
- The addition of oral evidence to the evidence of traditional sources.

- Viewing of information provided by ordinary people, which is often of a practical nature and highly localised, as crucial to a complete understanding of a cultural past.
- Correlation of objects and those who used them by employing verbal transmission of information in order to supply the full context for such a relationship.
- Negation of skewed conceptions of historiography in which documents of events of epic loftiness were usually the building blocks of history, and ordinary people only made a chance appearance – with this leading to a situation observed by Caunce (1994:13-14) in which “facets of human life simply disappear”.

A sample of 10 informants was interviewed during field work. Their accounts, prompted by my oral use of questions on the questionnaire, were audiotaped and later transcribed for easier analysis of the data collected. First, three members of the Masenya ruling clan to whom the rainmaking clan were subjects, were interviewed in order to find out which people in the village had knowledge about the disappearing practice of traditional rainmaking. The research team was informed that such people with rainmaking knowledge were descendants of actual supreme performers of the past during rainmaking, as the latter were all dead. They participated in rainmaking in the days of their youth. Members of the Mamaala rainmaking clan fall within five categories determined by specific rituals they performed.

Five elderly informants from the sample of 10 were interviewed informally to cross-check information supplied by members of the Masenya royal family. These were village elders who knew filial ties among members of the village community, apart from belonging to the rainmaking clan. It was verified that indeed the forebears of the members of the community identified by the traditional leadership were custodians of the knowledge and overseers of the practice. It was further verified that participants in such rituals indeed fall within six interlinked categories.

The role categories are those of:

- high priests and priestesses who were sole custodians and ultimate performers of the rainmaking rituals,
- female virgins who fetched water for use during such religious practice,
- male virgins who went on a sacred hunt on the nearby mountains and in neighbourhood forests,
- village men and women who performed roles that involved the whole village,
- elderly people who oversaw functions of these groups
- and specific people determined by means of familial connection who performed special rituals.

These five categories informed the choice of questions used during field work and determined which individuals to include or exclude at a particular interviewing stage.

All 7 informants who had roles in rainmaking, including the 5 who played a part in earlier informal interviews, were then interviewed formally. The nature of questions directed at them and the manner in which this was done were informed by what was learnt during the two earlier interviews. From 25 May 2007 when field work was started, final interviews were conducted on 3 and 4 August 2007.

Loosely structured questionnaires were used, with the intention of reminding the interviewer what information to seek in relation to the role of each category in the rainmaking rituals that were historically carried out among the Mamaala people. Basically, questions that the study sought to have answers for were:

- Who was first associated with the art of traditional rainmaking in this village and why?

- How were rain rituals performed?
- Why did the practice end?
- What best can be done to preserve the indigenous knowledge of rainmaking as was practised by the Mamaala people?
- Can the practice be revived?

Care was taken first to interview informants separately to try and avoid earlier responses influencing later ones. Only after interviewing these informants in isolation were group interviews then conducted. Answers given in isolation on a common question were then compared, in order to establish concurrences and discrepancies. Memory problems had to be accommodated due to the fact of distance in time of the practice the study is trying to excavate. The human element of subjectivity also had to be kept in check. As Sherner (2006) once remarked, our intuitions about certain facts of life in general and more specifically culture sometimes go wrong while bias may “often” lead to inaccuracies. For these reasons, group interviews were conducted in the wake of individual ones in order to ensure that clouding of facts was cleared. Triangulation was further done by allowing members of different role categories from the one under focus to be present and contest, correct, corroborate or complement information where possible.

Results

- (a) Founding Headman Madikoti Masenya (born circa 1722) started ruling circa 1762 when he and his followers seceded from King Langa of Mapela. He and his followers left a place called Dithabeng/Hans and crossed the Pholotšhi river to the southeast, onto the outskirts of King Mokopane Kekana’s territory. This was the birth of GaMasenya village which even today is still under King Kekana of the Mokopane Ndebeles. GaMasenya village is 23 kilometres west of the Limpopo town of Mokopane in South Africa. Within a few years of this event, a woman called Mmatemiša Langa’s husband’s grandfather, also formerly a subject of King Langa of Mapela but also a member of the Mamaala ruling clan of Langa, also crossed the Pholotšhi river with his followers and stayed on land adjacent to Headman Masenya’s. It was circa 1765 when the grandfather-in-law of Mmatemiša Langa thus founded GaMamaala. For a while the two villages had separate rulers.

When this founder of GaMamaala died, the father to Mmatemiša’s husband started ruling at more or less the same time as Headman Malose Johannes Masenya (the successor of Madikoti) circa 1848. By the time Malose Masenya was succeeded by Regent Lesetja Jack “Thabana” Masenya circa 1928, Mmatemiša’s husband had died. A brother to Mmatemiša’s husband was the Mamaala ruler and his wife, Mmasampoko (married from the Tsweleng clan), assisted the elderly Mmatemiša with the rainmaking function.

Mmatemiša received her calling to perform rainmaking rituals just before Regent Jack Masenya ascended to leadership. Her fame in this practice reached its peak in the prime of this regent’s rule. It would seem that Mmatemiša was born circa 1856 and died circa 1940. Mmasampoko survived until Regent Jack Masenya handed over headmanship to Malesela Frans Masenya in 1946, but both her husband and Mmatemiša did not live until Headman Malesela Frans Masenya’s time.

Mmatemiša’s husband had a half brother by his father’s junior wife. This half brother married a woman named Ramatsobane Alushia Langa, popularly known as Ngwana Mashishi. Ngwana Mashishi took over rainmaking priestesshood traditionally belonging to her in-laws, after Mmatemiša’s death. Ngwana Mashishi performed this function during the latter part of Regent Jack Masenya’s rule and during the early years of Headman Malesela Frans Masenya’s

traditional leadership. What emerges from this Mamaala rainmaking narrative is that each rainmaker would have lived under the teaching of her predecessor before being left on her own following such a teacher's death.

Before her death in 1969, Ngwana Mashishi reached consensus with her Mamaala subjects to submit to Masenya's headmanship following the untimely death of her husband – thus leaving only rainmaking priesthood in the custody of the Mamaala clan. As Ngwana Mashishi bore no son, she married a woman known as Ngwana Seretlwe (meaning nee Seretlwe) to bear her children, according to the culture of her people. Ngwana Seretlwe took over officially as the rainmaking priestess in 1969 and continued this over a large portion of Headman Frans Masenya's rule.

The enforced religion of Christianity and modernisation in general tampered with this practice greatly that by the time Ngwana Seretlwe died in 2004 the practice had long ceased. When the present Headman Moses Lesibana Masenya took over leadership in 1991 after the death of Headman Malesela Frans Masenya in the same year, the rainmaking practices of the Mamaala people was only a memory and this is the case even today.

- (b) The rainmaking priestess would be approached by Headman Masenya, usually around September if there was no rain. On an agreed date all traditional healers would assemble at the shrine and throw bones to find out if specific animals needed to be sacrificed to ancestors.

It is the traditional responsibility of a king ruling over a number of headmen to start the process first with all headmen and traditional healers of a kingdom before this is repeated at local level by each headman. It is believed that impediments of harmony between mortals and ancestors differ from one locale to the other.

Every village has its *moroka*, or rainmaker. Neighbouring rainmakers live in harmony and when rituals are performed they are meant for the common good of neighbouring villages.

When Mmatemiša started with her rainmaking calling, she agreed with the Mamaala villagers to erect a 3 square metre enclosure, using wattle. A specific type of liana, revealed by clan ancestors in dreams and through the bones of village traditional healers, was planted. This liana, the Succulent *Lissus Quadrangularis* / veld grape, crept exuberantly over the wattle, sealing off the inside of the shrine completely.

Inside this hut, entered only by specific village priests and priestesses selected by the rainmaker through ancestral guidance, was a huge earthen trough inside which a creature was reared. Informants who were allowed to enter the enclosure were too scared to look closely at the creature during ritual performances, but have a recollection of it as a huge reptile over a metre long, probably a snake, and dark grey in colour. In one corner of the enclosure were three ostrich eggs, used by the custodians of rainmaking to ward off destructive storm when it rained. Several gourds and calabashes were always found inside the shrine, in which various herbs were mixed with water to perform cleansing rituals associated with rainmaking. The shrine was never made a part of the residence of the rainmaking family and was communal property of the village.

The high priestesses who were primary performers of rainmaking rituals in GaMamaala were Mmatemiša, Mmasampoko, Alushai (nee Mashishi), Tsheswane Nkwana and nee Seretlwe. All of them were married into the Mamaala Langa rainmaking clan, except for Tsheswane who, together with Tsweleng people, was a descendant of the Langa blood relatives on the maternal

side. Blood ties were the criterion for the successful involvement of individuals in traditional rainmaking among the Mamaala people. The elderly among our informants indicated that members of the rainmaking clan married within the clan in order for their 'ordained' blood to stay pure and potent.

The high priests of equally crucial importance were Lesetja Matshelediša Langa (a blood cousin of Mmatemiša's husband), Johannes Tsweleng (descendent of a maternal uncle to old man Nkokotše Langa of the Mamaala rainmaking clan), Moses Setwabane Lepadima, who was found useful and ordained to perform rainmaking and harvest rituals because of his clan's totemic association with the crocodile.

Apart from making sure that the young men fasted and beat the temptation of feeding themselves on the many wild berries and roots on the mountain during the sacred hunt, Tsweleng would proceed to a secluded cave and cut off a chunk of flesh from a huge snake called mamogašwa. Before he could do this he had to strip naked and recite mystical praises that somewhat 'connected' him to sacred animals and plants that would have to be collected for rituals at the shrine. This was made possible also by the ascetic life he led as instructed by ancestors and the rainmaker, including abstention from sex for months before the rituals and walking barefoot all his life. His totem was the elephant, and only villagers with this totem were allowed to accompany young boys to the sacred hunt or perform any ritual on the mountain associated with ancestral presences and manifestations.

The young men would then descend the mountain with their prey and leave Tsweleng behind. A patriarchal figure of the Mamaala village, Malose Jacob Leso, whose totem was also the elephant (a mogwaša), would then join the young men at the foot of the mountain and oversee their proper procession to the precinct of the shrine as well as lead the boys in singing Mogobe wa meetse a pula / Sa thokolo tša meetse a pula (meaning: Lake of rain water / Like hard droppings of rain water).

Tsweleng would also break and drag the tree called mafakudu in North Sotho (cabbage tree; *Cusonia Spicata*) without looking back, reciting praises of the Mamaala ancestors, until he reached the mouth of the rain enclosure. Here he would place both the flesh of the snake and the tree on the ground for the presiding priestess to collect, chanting "Pula" three times. He would then join elderly female villagers sitting about at the shrine precinct, often instructed by the rainmaker to cook a special kind of beans in a huge crucible as part of broader rainmaking.

Meantime, Moses Setwabane Lepadima would have been sent by the priestess to go and uproot an isolated reed from nearby Mogalakwena river. In his old age, Lepadima was allowed to go to the river with a young boy called Lukas Marakalala, whose totem is also the crocodile, and show the young man the proper way of obtaining the ritual reed. The one to uproot the reed had to wade through the throat-high water without undressing, grab it with both hands and pull it upward so that it came out with its roots. One then had to wade out, drag it behind, and walk through the dense forest without looking back and ignoring jeers by bystanders and families hoeing the fields until the reed was presented at the mouth of the rain enclosure. Upon depositing the reed on the ground, the performer had to shout "Rain" three times. Marakalala would then have to go home as he was too young to join the elderly villagers at the precinct. Lepadima would at times be allowed to enter the shrine and offer a hand to the priestess inside.

After the first rains when seeds were to be prepared for planting, Lepadima again performed rituals assigned him by the rainmaker – of blessing the seed in order to protect the coming harvests from destructive parasites and diseases. Abstention from sex and from other defiling

acts had to be observed prior to such treatment of seed. Lepadima performed the ritual half-naked and clad only in the loin skin. His ancestors instructed him to keep this traditional garb specially for these rituals, according to his surviving wife and daughter who were part of our interviewee team.

Among our informants, Paulus Leso and Simon Nkwana played the role of sacred hunting while they were still young boys – though at different times because of their different age groups. People in this hunt had to be virgin males who had not yet gone for initiation. Invariably, the hunt had to bring back a giant lizard and two kinds of special buck called *tlhoho* and *kome*. The *tlhoho* is a kind of buck very rare and difficult to come by. Being a rock climber, the *kome* is found on mountain summits that are difficult to reach. The giant lizard, called *nku ye ntsho*/black sheep in traditional religious language has a delicate tail that breaks easily when caught without extreme care.

All animals needed for rituals have to be brought home whole and alive until they are sacrificed inside the shrine. During the hunt other animals chanced upon were caught and taken back to the shrine, for use by medicinemen who assemble there during such hunts to select whatever they may need for their own individual use in traditional healing. Upon reaching the mouth of the shrine, the male virgins dropped their prey on the ground and shouted “Pula, Pula, Pula” before leaving for their various homes. During rainmaking activities, Mamaala villagers donated their virgin daughters too who were neither yet menstruating nor initiated. These *mathumaša / makgamatšana* went to a specific part of the nearby Pholotshi river and fetched water from a waterfall. One had to put a calabash or gourd on a rock and allow the water to fall directly into it. To fill up and lift the container to the head the left hand had to be used. The container would then have to be balanced on the head without hands supporting it. As they filed from the river to the shrine the girls sang a traditional hymn for rain, *Pula ya borare e ka na, ra tsoga re gata monola*. If a container fell to the ground it was not to be picked up. Instead, the dozens of girls broke their walking and singing rhythm for a while and piously declared “Pula, Pula, Pula”, meaning “Let it rain”. Upon reaching the shrine amidst old women singing a traditional hymn befitting their age named “Mmobe, mmobe ...”, the girls would put the containers on the ground in front and shout “Pula, Pula, Pula” before departing without looking back. A select group of elderly women and men would then pick the containers from the ground and hand them over to the rainmaker without entering, after which the rainmaker would perform unknown rituals inside the rain shrine.

At times it would refuse to rain even after these rituals would have been performed. This is when village women would go and fetch water at the place where the virgins did, using the same methods as the virgins. The practice is called *diphothophothong*, derived from a cry by a designated relative of the rainmaker indicating that village women should go to *diphothophotho* or waterfalls the following morning. This time the water would be poured on the graves of the departed members of the Mamaala rainmaking clan. Water was poured starting with the most senior of the people buried in the graves. Then it would rain. The amount of water poured on the graves could determine the intensity of the rain. As demanded by ancestors communicating with the rainmaker, at difficult times the virgins could also be directed by the rainmaker to pour water at the sacred burial site, too.

There would be difficult years when the rituals seemed not to yield relief. The rainmaker would permit cleansing of the land. The same male virgins who participated in the sacred hunt then administered the cleansing rituals. Water was poured in a calabash and mixed with the bark of the Urera Tenax / mountain nettle, called *mmololo* in North Sotho. The young men assembled at the shrine and then moved across the village, circling all boundaries, singing the traditional

hymn called *Thokolo tša pula*. Each time they came across some material appearing impure or sacrilegious, they would pour a bit of the calabash mixture on such a spot, followed by a beating with a small branch of the weeping wattle / *Peltophorum Africanum* (*mosehla* in Sesotho sa Leboa / *musese* in Tshivenda). Each such cleansing activity had to be followed by the chant of “Pula”.

After traversing the village, the group then went to the mieliefield owned by the presiding rainmaker. There the calabash would be smashed to pieces, followed by shouts of “Pula”. The group of young men would then go back to the shrine where they first assembled. A male member of the rainmaker’s matrimonial family then sprinkled water over the boys. Until the mid-1960s this function was performed by a gentleman called Matshediša Langa – a cousin of Mmatemiša’s husband. Sometimes the boys would be made to carry some water from the shrine, wash their hands in it, and pour it on the thatched roof of one of the huts in the homestead of a female descendant of the Langa rainmakers’ paternal aunt or kgadi, and then pass under the dripping roof before proceeding to their various homes. In the 1960s this happened at the home of Tsheswane Nkwana as she was such by birth.

Members of specific families tied to the rainmaking clan either paternally or maternally, or ordained by virtue of totemic affiliation and integrity, had special roles. The wife of Setoabana Lepadima, Mosaine, accompanied the female virgins to the waterfall to ensure that there was no deviation from tradition. Tsheswane Nkoana was among the few village women allowed to enter the shrine or remind the rainmaker when there was need for rituals.

While still a virgin, Tsheswane’s grand-daughter, Mamoeti Shikwana, could at times be sent alone to fetch water from the river. Part of justifying this was that her totem is the crocodile – a water animal. Upon returning, some of the water from her calabash would be splashed on the roof of the shrine. The presiding rainmaker would then pass under the shower of water and enter the shrine, followed by the young girl. Inside, the young girl would pour calabash water into her granny Tsheswane’s hands. The grandmother would sprinkle the water on the body of the huge, dark reptile inside the clay trough, while the rainmaker (Alushai Langa, nee Mashishi) stirred the water in the huge clay habitat of the creature. The creature would roll in delight at such performance while the old women encouraged the young girl not to be scared.

The same informant (Mamoeti Shikwana) once performed a special role to stop rain that fell to the extent of damaging arable land. She was given a burning twig in broad daylight, which helped her walk inside rain without getting wet. She went to the royal house of one Kgathola Kekana, who had to accompany her to another royal house of Ntswitwiri in Mokopane, to fetch some important traditional medicine.

- (c) All informants agreed that there is not supposed to be any conflict between westernised Christian religion and traditional African religions. According to the informants, rain falls when human beings please both God and the ancestors. The people of GaMamaala and GaMasenya always prayed to God, but revered ancestors as they are seen as mediators between human beings and God. Neither is there a cause for conflict among practitioners of African religions that may appear different on the surface, as fundamentally all African religions are underpinned by one Africanist outlook. Rain brought about by rituals led by Mmatemiša’s differs from that of Seopa of GaMatlala or that of Modjadji of Bolobedu. This is because each has a different environment of ancestors and local cleansing demands. Any two or more *baroka* or rainmakers can cooperate and share traditional medicines, as was the case between Mmatemiša and Seopa. It did not matter who taught who in forming associative relationships. Seopa, for example, was

trained in rainmaking by a certain Thobejane, but could co-operate with Mmatemiša without any friction.

The death of this art's practitioners before it could be documented fully was given as another reason for its disappearance. The death of the priests and priestesses without any conscious effort made to teach the art to the younger generation contributed to the end of this practice. The last generation of role players who used to enter the shrine and participate in undivulged rituals died in the 1970s: Matshediša Langa (1967); Ngwana Mashishi Langa (1969); Johannes Tsweleng (1976); Tsheswane Nkwana (1977) and Moses Setwabane Lepadima (20 June 1978).

Ngwana Seretlwe lived same time as rainmaker Ngwana Mashishi, but the former was more of a messenger and was never educated in this art. When the Mamaala people were moved to a new settlement nearer the Pholotši river in 1967, the shrine was left unattended among the ruins of GaMamaala. After Ngwana Mashishi's death in 1969, a certain Mr Seopa from GaMatlala took its remnants to his distant home, embittered by the shabby manner in which the GaMasenya ruling clan treated him when he tried to negotiate for the preservation of rainmaking rituals and artefacts. Seopa and Mmatemiša had been associates, as the former was a rainmaker at his own village under a distant king. The cousin of Mmatemiša's husband, Matshediša Langa later went to fetch the shrine from Seopa and kept it at his place. But when he died shortly after Ngwana Mashishi, the remains of the shrine just disappeared without trace due to negligence.

- (d) All informants believe that the indigenous knowledge of rainmaking as was practised by the Mamaala people can be preserved. They called for the reconstruction of the shrine as a relic, fencing of the graves of Mmatemiša and the dead members of her family and fencing of the graves of deceased headmen of the Masenya clan. The informants also called on government to erect tombstones in the memory of the historical figures mentioned above. They believe that eventually the gravesites and reconstructed shrine should collectively be declared a heritage site.

All categories of informants were of the opinion that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to revive the rainmaking cultural practice among the Mamaala people. They mentioned the youth's failure to draw a distinction between cultural religious practice and malevolent witchcraft as a real threat. The life-giving practice of rainmaking required that one did not involve oneself in witchcraft and its life-taking aspects. That is why human flesh, which would imply murdering for muti purposes and desecration of graves, was never used in the rainmaking practice of the Mamaala people. The word *kgokong ye ntsho*, which detractors of African religions usually associate with the use of human parts in rainmaking rituals, is actually religious language referring to a black sheep or sheep of any colour with a black head. This is the only domestic animal that is sometimes slaughtered for the ancestors of the rainmaking clan as the rainmaker may find necessary.

All informants concurred that the advent of modernity and lamentable assimilation into western mentality are a stumbling block to possible resuscitation of the traditional African practice of rainmaking.

Conclusion.

It is hoped that what was gathered during this project, by means of oral historical accounts, will end up as more representative accounts of "popular versions" of rainmaking among Africans. Hitherto written versions of the same tradition in European literature do not help much to correct Eurocentric distortions of this African cultural practice.

Rider Haggard reported to the European world after travelling to the place of Rain Queen Modjadji, that “the Lovedu tribe, living in the north-east of the country, were ruled over by a fair-skinned woman called Mujaji ... thought to be immortal” (Higgins, 1981:99). Contrary to this Eurocentric reduction of Queen Modjadji to a fantasy narrative character, Shai (2006:26) explains the expected death of each rain queen of the Modjadji clan as well as the ritual of making sure that the successor is the rightful heir. Research reported in this paper seeks to consolidate Afrocentric accounts of African rainmaking such as that of Shai (2006), in keeping with the observation of writers such as James Olney (1973:7), that the only way to obtain authentic facts on “what an African feels about human existence is to read his own account of ‘the life I had known’ as he seeks ‘the meaning of life’.”

Various African societies have traditionally performed rainmaking rituals differently. That is why an account of this cultural activity among the Bapedi of Kgoši Sekwati Mampuru (Nkadimeng, 1973: 3-4) shows both commonalities and divergences with how the Balobedu of Queen Modjadji performed their own rainmaking rituals (see Shai, 2006: 43-49). In the SABC 2 programme “Our Nation in Colour” (broadcast on 23 November 2006 at 21h00) and SABC1 documentary “Imani” (broadcast on 11 January 2007 at 12h30), sacred places for and traditional practices of rainmaking among the Batswana and Vhavenda are documented. These television programmes testify to yet more common features as well as differing aspects among different African cultural groups. The findings of the present study also confirm that traditional rainmaking among the African community of GaMamaala had both idiosyncratic features and common aspects with the way this religious-cultural art was practised among other African communities.

Even more importantly, information gathered through this study will ultimately be preserved in written form, so that in future, analyses of cultural historiography may be based on accurate accounts of African folklore such as the indigenous knowledge of rainmaking. This is necessary if comprehensive and non-homogenised knowledge about the African traditional art of rainmaking is to be preserved.

Nkadimeng (1973:3) concedes that this practice is threatened by the intensification of foreign manners and cultures among the Bapedi. The successive deaths of latest Modjadji rain queens in June 2001 and June 2005, together with succession disputes plaguing the Modjadji chieftaincy, are a threat to the sustenance of rainmaking practice and knowledge long associated with this dynasty. These developments justify efforts to preserve African rainmaking history which would otherwise be lost after these practices will have vanished completely.

References

- Burden, M. 2000. “Remnants of the apartheid era in Afrikaans popular language: An exploratory investigation to illustrate the importance of oral history.” In Makgamatha P.M. (ed.) *Potent Words: Studies in Southern African Folklore*. Mankweng: University of the North Press: 291-307.
- Davies, Caitlin. 2003. *The Return of El Negro*. London: Penguin Books.
- Haggard, R. 1905. *Ayesha: the Return of She*. London: Ward.
- Haggard, R. 1985. *King Solomon’s Mines*. Harmondworth: Penguin Books.
- Higgins, D.S. 1981. *Rider Haggard, the great storyteller*. London: Cassell.
- Kirshenblat-Gimlett, B. 2006. “The Grand Generation: Folklore and the Culture of Aging.” *Generations* (Spring): 32-37.
- Makgamatha, P.M. (ed.) 2000. *Potent Words: Studies in Southern African Folklore*. Mankweng: University of the North Press: 1-5.

- Malairajan, G.G. et al. "Analgesic activity of some Indian medicinal plants." In *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 106 (3): 425-428.
- Nkadimeng, H.M. 1973. *Kgoši Sekwati Mampuru*. Pretoria: J.L. Van Schaik.
- Olney, J. 1973. *Tell Me Africa*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Roginsky, D. 2006. "The relationship between nationalism and its 'ambivalent others', namely ethnicity, gender and folklore." In *Patterns of Prejudice* 40 (3): 237-258.
- Shai, M. 2006. *Bogoši bja Kgošigadi Modjadji*. Thohoyandou: Ditlou Publishers.
- Sherney, M. 2006. "Why our intuitions about how the world works often go wrong." In *Scientific American*: 295 (2): 1-13.