

The poetry of Sigwavhulimu: On creation and death

Munzhedzi James Mafela

Department of African Languages, University of South Africa

P. O. Box 392, UNISA 0003, Pretoria, South Africa

mafelmj@unisa.ac.za

W.M.R. Sigwavhulimu is a leading poet in Tshivenda. His poetry is concerned with creation and appeals to supernatural beings, religious matters, death and pain. This article investigates the extent to which Christianity has influenced Sigwavhulimu in his poetry, with the focus on religious poetry dealing with creation and death. Sigwavhulimu reflects on the rich contribution that religious verse has made in conveying many aspects of Christian understanding. The poet sees God as the centre of true creation. He does not believe in the theory of evolution, but accepts an account of the creation of the world as reflected in the book of Genesis. He also differentiates between man's creation and God's creation. Sigwavhulimu depicts death as something frightening that is dreaded by people. Two types of death are identified: the death of an organism as a whole and the death of the soul. People are urged to fear death of the soul. According to the poet, medical practitioners and traditional healers cannot avert death. He urges people to search for a long-term solution that lies in the acceptance of God in order to avert death.

Introduction

Wilson Muligwe Ratshalingwa Sigwavhulimu is a leading Tshivenda language poet. He was the first Muvenda poet to publish two celebrated modern poetry collections in Tshivenda in the 1970s. His first collection of poems, entitled *Tsiko-tshiphiri (The secrets of creation)*, was published in 1971, and the second, *Mirunzi ya vuvha (Shadows of being)*, in 1975. Together with Ntshavheni Alfred Milubi and Rashaka Frank Ratshitanga, Sigwavhulimu published a third collection of poems entitled *Muungo wa vuhwi (The echo of silence)* in 1995.

In his poetry, Sigwavhulimu covers themes such as creation, supernatural beings, religion, death and pain. His poetry concerns itself with the human experience i.e. emotions, aspirations, defeats, enjoyment, suffering, cowardice and courage (Milubi, 1991:36). Sigwavhulimu's poetry reveals that he is a born poet who writes with inspiration. According to Musehane (1989:6), poetry without inspiration is poetry lacking an essential element. Poetry must be more than what meets the eye. Ntuli and Swanepoel (1993) state that Sigwavhulimu's themes are original and can be associated with themes in the literatures of other languages where poets also deal with the art of poetry, human aspirations, frustrations, love and death. Sigwavhulimu's work makes a considerable contribution to Tshivenda literature in particular and African literature in general. It is fitting at this point to mention that Sigwavhulimu is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and many of the poems in his collections reveal that he is aware of the existence of the Christian God (Musehane, 1989:6).

This article investigates the extent to which Sigwavhulimu's poetry was influenced by Christianity and how the poet explores and reflects on the rich contribution that this religion has made by conveying many aspects of Christian understanding and experience to the society. Christianity is a major religion, stemming from the life, teachings and death of Jesus Christ. It is considered to be the largest of the world's religions, with the death of Jesus Christ as its starting point. According to Butler (1981:152):

The birth of Christianity took the form of [a] public proclamation by [the] followers of [the] crucified Jesus of Nazareth that this dead man had 'risen' or 'been raised by God' from death to heavenly glory and triumph that was heavy with meaning for the future.

Therefore, Jesus's resurrection is the foundation of Christianity. The life of Christians has its source and goal in eternal life. The focus of the discussion in this article is on that portion of poetry that concerns itself with creation and death in relation to humankind.

Creation

In the Christian community, speculation concerning creation is based on the creation myth, as it appears in the book of Genesis, and the birth of Jesus Christ. In the introduction to the book of Genesis, it is said that 'The name *Genesis* means "origin". The book tells of the creation of the universe, the origin of the human race, the beginning of sin and suffering in the world, and about God's way of dealing with humanity' (Good News Bible, 1996:3). Christianity professes belief in God as the creator of all things visible and invisible. Gunton (1992:21–22) cites Dunn (1980) who states:

Christ, because he is now Lord, shares in God's rule over the creation and believers, and therefore his Lordship is the continuation and fullest expression of God's own creative power.

True creation is from God the father. God, the creator of the universe, created all the natural laws and processes that man has discovered (Gish, 1990:105). Sigwavhulimu, like all other Christians, sees God as the centre of creation. He does not believe in the theory of natural evolution or the gods. He accepts creation as propagated in the traditional biblical book of Genesis. In his poem, *Tsiko-tshiphiri*, Sigwavhulimu says:

*Tshiphiri tshe tsha fuka tsiko yaqu,
Ndi swiswi lo tibaho ndivho-vhuthu,
Yone ndivho i ri itaho vhathu
Vhatsila vha mavhumbuḁu,
Thavha dzi no rembeḁa dza wa,
Sa mutsila wadzo a no moḁa,
A vhuzelela ngohoni.*

*Ro bebwa nga Iphi,
Ri ralalela Iphini.
(Sigwavhulimu, 1971: 27)*

'The secret that covered your creation,
Is darkness that covered knowledge about humanity,
The knowledge that makes us to be people
Craftsmen of mounds,
Mountains that loosen and fall
Like their craftsman who falls down,
And goes back to reality

We were created by the Word,
We live for the Word.'

The central message in the poem is that the creation of all things on earth is a secret because it is very difficult for people to accept that the Word created all things on earth. It is only the believers, in this case Christians, who believe that the Word was responsible for the creation of all things. According to the poet, all people were created by the Word. The term *Iphi* 'Word' starts with a capital letter *I*, which denotes a reference to God. In the Holy Bible, whenever reference is made to God, the initial letter of the term is a capital letter. This indicates that all things on earth, besides man, came into being through the command of God. With regard to the creation of man in Genesis 1:26 (Good News Bible, 1996), God said:

And now we will make human beings; they will be like us. They will have power over the fish, the birds and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small.

This extract indicates clearly that human beings were physically created by God. Man was made from soil, whereas woman was made from the rib of the man. By indicating that we (human beings) were created by the Word,

Sigwavhulimu emphasizes that human beings were created by God, hence the use of a capital letter in the first letter of *Ipfi* 'Word'.

Sigwavhulimu differentiates between man's creation and creation by God. According to the poet, while humankind may have been designated as the ruler of the earth and its inhabitants, it cannot create any beings who have eternal life. All that is created by humankind comes to an end. This is revealed in Sigwavhulimu's poem *Kha mbumbo ya Carl von Brandis (To the statue of Carl von Brandis)* when he says:

*Mbumbo yau ndi mbumbwa-nga-mbumbo,
Mbumbo yo u vhumbaho ndi maanḁa ḁifhedzi,
Ndi mbumbo ndangwa nga tshifhinga sa mbumbo yau.*
(Sigwavhulimu, 1971:23)

'Your statue is a creation by creation,
The creation which created you is a wasted effort,
It is the creation which is controlled by time as is the case with your creation.'

The poet is talking about a statue of a respected person who contributed much to the lives of his people (Afrikaners). In this regard, Carl von Brandis represents all people who did good things while on earth, and who deserve praise and commendations, yet the poet does not see any value in erecting statues of important people like him; after all, the statue cannot bring Von Brandis back from the dead. The poet criticizes creation brought about by humankind. According to the poet, man cannot create something that will live eternally. In this way, he sees the creator of a statue as someone who has wasted his efforts because, in the end, the statue will disintegrate. He therefore sees man's efforts to create as being fruitless.

In the poem *Tshinoni makumbani (A bird in the nest)*, the poet uses the *bird* and the *nest* to symbolize people and the protection of their children respectively. The whole poem is focused on the bird's protection of its brood. This is what people do to their creations in a practical life situation. The poet sees this exercise as a waste of time because creation by man does not live forever. Humans protect their children from the time they are conceived. Once they are born, parents will take great trouble to protect them against natural hazards such as diseases. This is revealed in the following lines:

*U vhea makumba phandani dza muri
Ho vha u tinyisa vhuhali ha zwi tshilaho,
U si ḁivhe u a tinyisa vhuhali vhuhulu
Vhuhali vhune ha ḁo xwatudzḁa vhubebi hau.*
(Sigwavhulimu, 1971:34)

'Putting the eggs in the fork of a tree
Was to avoid cruelty by the living organisms,
Failing to avoid the worst cruelty
Cruelty that will end your parenthood.'

A human being is likened to a bird in this poem. The above lines illustrate that human beings fail to give their creation everlasting life. The fork of a tree is a temporary solution to protecting the eggs. The same holds for human beings. The poet is worried about people who do not seek the permanent protection of their creations from God; this leads one to conclude that the effort of human beings in creating living organisms is a waste of time. A person can create something that will live on this earth, but he cannot imbue it with eternal life. In his poem *Munna na musadzi (Man and woman)*, the poet further criticizes man's creation. To him, a human being is a creation by a creation, and so has no power to craft something which will live forever. This stems from the sin that was committed by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Because of this sin, much suffering has entered the world. Worshipping

God is imperative if one wishes to live forever. The following lines show how the poet feels about creation by man and woman:

*Munna na musadzi kha vha lile
Vha lilele u bebwa ha mbumbo yavho,
Ine ya fa nga u bebwa.
(Sigwavhulimu, 1975:11)*

‘Man and woman should cry
Crying for the birth of their creation,
Which is assumed to be dead at birth.’

He pleads with man and woman not to rejoice when their creation is born. Instead, they should cry for the newborn baby, which he believes should be assumed dead at birth. What he means is that creation by human beings will never have eternal life.

This is the view held by Christians: that true protection from death can only be found in God. Only God can create a being with eternal life. Because humans cannot create a person who will live forever, people should worship God to receive eternal life. If they wish to be authentic Christians, they should place Christ at the centre of their lives. By so doing they will receive eternal life. This is supported by Strydom (1996:110) when he says that human beings were created in God’s image, i.e. capable of intelligent perception, creation, being free, being able to love and communicate; with consciousness and a conscience; and able to know and serve Him.

Sigwavhulimu’s perception of creation in this regard has its roots in Christianity. Although Vhavenda people believe that there is a supreme being who created all things on earth, this being is not God. They speak of a creator of the world who was a good god, and they call him Khuzwane. But, after creating the world and all that is therein, he retired to a lazy rest, and allowed everything in the world to proceed as it pleased (Wessmann, 1908). Stayt (1931:230) mentions the god of the Vhavenda, Raluvhimba, who is said to be linked to the beginning of the world, supposedly living somewhere in the heavens, and connected to all astronomical and physical phenomena. Unlike Khuzwane, Raluvhimba is closer to the God of the Christians in that he is connected with the beginning of the world and lives somewhere in heaven. However, he differs from the God of the Christians in that he is not linked to eternal life, whereas creation by the God of the Christians is. According to Vhavenda belief, there is no difference between creation by human beings and creation by their God. All will join the ancestors in the spiritual world.

The poet offers a solution to the problem of creation. This solution is based on Christian beliefs. According to the poet, the real creation is with God. God must create people who do not die. In his poem *Khumbelo kha Jehova (A request to Jehovah)*, the poet is literally crying. He pleads with God to create people who will live forever. In the following lines, he says:

*Jehova! Iwe Jehova!
Ri sikele vhuthu vhu sa tshili
Vhuthu vhu sa fi.
(Sigwavhulimu, 1975:7)*

‘Jehovah! You Jehovah!
Create for us humanity that does not live
Humanity that does not die.’

According to the poet, the creation should neither live nor die. The poet uses contradictory terms (*vhu sa tshili* – ‘that does not live’, and *vhu sa fi* – ‘that does not die’) to depict his imagined real creation. This raises the notion that Sigwavhulimu’s suggested creation should not be in the present form. In this present form, one is created to die if one does not serve the Lord. However, in the form suggested by Sigwavhulimu, one will receive eternal life that

is not characterized by earthly problems. Sigwavhulimu does not direct his plea to the gods as would be expected among the Vhavenda; instead, he directs it at God, the God of the Christians.

In another poem, *Maria musidzana (Maria, the lady)*, Sigwavhulimu (1975) sees another solution to true creation in pleading with the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ, to request the Holy Spirit to create a creation who will have eternal life. Musehane (1989:48) says the poet requests the Virgin Mary to ask the Holy Spirit who made her pregnant, to bless one of the women as she was blessed. This woman could then give birth to an immortal nation, since the present nation is born to die. This refers to Jesus Christ who was born of the Virgin Mary. The Holy Spirit impregnated Mary so she could give birth to Jesus Christ. An angel from God told Joseph, Mary's husband-to-be, that she had conceived by the Holy Spirit and that she would have a son who would be named Jesus, which means Saviour, because he would save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21, in Good News Bible, 1996). Jesus Christ not only defeated the many difficulties he experienced on earth, but also ultimately defeated death. In this regard, the poet pleads with the people on earth to live like Jesus Christ so that they will be in the position to conquer death and sin and to receive eternal life.

Sigwavhulimu's view of the solution to the problem of creation is based on Christian beliefs. His poetry expresses his basic Christian insights into some of the elements involved in the human consciousness about the creation of human beings. He insists that the Creator (God) should be known, served and loved.

Death

Death is defined as the irreversible cessation of life, i.e. the termination of human life. Death has traditionally been seen as the departure of the soul from the body. Based on Christian belief, the death of the human being originated from humankind's disobedience to God's instructions. The first man and woman were instructed by God not to eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden. The two did not obey God's instructions and ate the forbidden fruit. God then said to the man that because he had listened to his wife and eaten the fruit that he had been instructed not to eat, he would go back to the soil from which he had been made (Genesis 5:17–19, in Good News Bible, 1996). According to Christian belief, this is why people should worship the Lord while still on this earth and ultimately avoid death. However, the Vhavenda, as already indicated, see death as a continuation of life. The Vhavenda believe that death originated from the centipede as expressed in the following Tshivenda myth:

The centipede was once sent by the gods to mankind with the message that they would all be resurrected after death. But the centipede, as is well known, only moves very slowly, and on its way lingered for some time underneath a tree, where it found and ate some fine fruit. Meanwhile the chameleon had been sent by the same gods with the message that men would not be resurrected after death. The chameleon was the first to reach the people and told them that they would not be resurrected after death. When, ultimately, the centipede arrived and delivered his message, people said to him: 'You lie; you do not tell us the truth. For the right messenger has been here, and has told us that we shall not be resurrected.'

The myth cited above, depicts the philosophy of the Vhavenda. It shows that they accept that when one dies one will never be raised from the dead. According to the Vhavenda belief, death means joining the ancestors. Stayt (1931:240) says:

to them death is a transition between life of this earth and the life in the spiritual world, where the dead continue the lives begun on earth, still exerting a powerful influence on the relatives.

To the Vhavenda there is a happy life after death for all. Similarly, Christians believe that there is life after death, but this is only experienced by those who worshipped God while still on earth. According to Christian belief, there are two types of death, i.e. the death on this earth and the death in the life hereafter. The earthly death is considered

purely a biological event, and is believed to be a pathway to eternal life; the spiritual death, on the other hand, is the result of the free choice of the wicked, and it exerts a subtly attractive power over its adherents (Book of Wisdom 1:16, in Good News Bible, 1996). It is not willed by God; it is a consequence of a personal, moral choice. God's intention was to love and be loved; creation has to be free, and human beings in particular, have to have free choice (Strydom, 1996:110). The spiritual death completely separates an individual from God. The two types of death stem from the fact that there are two kinds of existence, i.e. the earthly life, which is built in this world, and the supernatural life given by God through Jesus, a life which does not end with death and which no one can take away from us. The ways of the earthly life lead people to think only of themselves, their children, and their own affairs, thereby sealing themselves in a cocoon woven from their self-esteem, and ending inevitably in the emptiness of certain death. The belief in a supernatural life offered by God through Jesus, gives Christians the courage to live in a manner that merits the gift of a much more profound and real existence, to the point of sacrificing their earthly life for this eternal life.

Sigwavhulimu speaks of two types of death in his poetry: physical death and spiritual death (ultimate death). One would expect him to speak about one type of death only, i.e. physical death, because his community, the Vhavenda, only believe in the death of the physical body, but he is mostly concerned with spiritual death, and physical death receives a secondary position in his poetry.

In some of his poems, he depicts physical death as something frightening that is so dreaded by people that when they become ill, they seek assistance from fellow men (traditional healers and medical practitioners) to escape it. It is presented as a crucial obstacle to be overcome. In his poem *Murunzi wa goni (The shadow of an eagle)* the poet says:

*Zwikuwana zwi khuda milenzheni ya muthu,
Zwo dala fulufhelo la dzhavhelo vhukuma,
(Sigwavhulimu, 1975:36)*

‘Chickens hide at man’s legs,
Full of hope that they have found a permanent sanctuary,’

Here chickens symbolize people, whereas man’s legs symbolize traditional healers and medical practitioners. The function of traditional healers and medical practitioners is to protect people against death. This is to show that when death approaches, people seek help from their fellows, forgetting that these will never provide them with permanent security. Here, the poet rebukes people who do not fear the real death, i.e. the death of the soul, which will deny them eternal life, but instead fear physical death which is considered an entrance into eternal life. The poet does not regard traditional healers and medical practitioners as offering a permanent way to avoid death. To him, the only permanent way of avoiding death lies in the acceptance of God. Medical practitioners and traditional healers are criticized because they cannot offer people a permanent way of defeating death. They can only postpone death. This means that man cannot control his own death, but can only delay it temporarily. In the poem *Murunzi wa goni*, the poet compares death to an eagle which terrifies chickens. Chickens symbolize people who, when they see death approaching in the form of illness, become restless. The poet tells the people that they should not fear earthly death. Instead, they should look beyond the farmyard, beyond the obvious, not protecting themselves from death on earth but striving for everlasting life (Mafela, 1996:81). The ultimate goal of life on earth should be to be with Jesus. People’s fears of death seem to derive from their apprehension concerning the loss of those things they enjoy in life, the destruction of their physical appearance and the pain accompanying death. Instead of fearing death, people should entrust their deepest needs to God as they journey towards eternal life. They should rely on Christ to help them face up to their problems on earth.

Sigwavhulimu further sees death, i.e. physical death, as a bridge from one point to another. This bridge leads people to an everlasting life because it is the entrance to eternal life. In his poem *Tshanduko (Transformation)* he says the following about people who die:

*Ri mbindimela zwaloni u yo pfunda,
Ra kona u wetshela mivhunduni i dudelaho
Mivhunduni hu sa foḏei inwe tshanduko.
(Sigwavhulimu, 1971:45)*

‘We are buried in the graves to remain in seclusion,
So that we can cross over to the warm lands
The lands that do not need any other transformation.’

The warm land mentioned in the poem above is the eternal life. This means that when people die, they will be buried in seclusion to await the coming of Jesus Christ, when they will rise again and enjoy everlasting life. The warmth mentioned in the poem symbolizes something good. In the life hereafter, happiness reigns and there is neither illness nor suffering. No one will try to discover ways of protecting another against death. The Bible of the Christians propagates this. However, not everybody will receive eternal life. Only those who search for the acceptance of God and pray to Him while still on this earth will receive eternal life. Traditional Vhavenḏa do not worry about eternal life; and as a result, they are not entitled to pray to anybody because they do not believe in the resurrection after death. They all believe they will join the ancestors after death.

Sigwavhulimu has a solution to the problem of the fear of death. He pleads with people to fear the death of the soul and not of the physical body. He believes that people should strive to achieve everlasting life. They should not worry about death on earth. In *Tshiḏoni (The bird)*, the poet uses an image of a dead bird. The dead bird symbolizes man. The death of the bird has allowed it to arrive at the end of both its happiness and its sorrow. It no longer feels happiness, but neither does it feel pain. Seeing the condition of the bird, the poet pleads with the Creator of the bird to give him the strength to endure the idea of dying while he is still living on earth. Dumont (1972:1) remarks:

Throughout time, man has had to cope with the eventuality of his own death, and all cultures, even the most primitive, have dealt with death by evolving beliefs concerning its significance. Virtually universal among the primitives has been the view of death as a crisis to be endured subsequent to entering new status.

Within the Christian tradition, physical death is not simply a mere natural event, but has significance with regard to the ultimate death. This view helps people to resist thinking about the physical death, and forces them to think about the ultimate death. They will neither think about their fear of death, which derives from their apprehension concerning the loss of those things they enjoy in life, nor fear punishment in hell. The poet says:

*Yawee, Musiki wa Tshiḏoni,
Mphe maanḏa a u ṭanganya
Dakalo na vhuṭungu ipfina
Uri ndi dzule ndo rindila
Ḑuvha ḏa khunyelelo ḏi tshi swika.
(Sigwavhulimu, 1971:16)*

‘Oh! No! The Creator of the Bird,
Give me strength to bring together
Happiness and pain in the word
So that I can stay intractable
When the last day arrives.’

By linking happiness and pain, the poet illustrates that he longs to endure death when he enters a new status in the life hereafter. This will be achieved by forgetting about the loss of those things he enjoys as well as the fear of punishment in hell. To avert this fear, people should worship and pray to God. They should be concerned above all else with the Kingdom of God. This will help them to accept the idea of dying on this earth in the hope that they will receive eternal life.

Sigwavhulimu believes in God and Jesus, the Saviour. He is not concerned about life on earth. Instead, he focuses on eternal life (Mafela, 1996:82). The Tshivenda religion also recognizes life after earthly death. According to the Tshivenda religion, earthly death is a passage for all en route to a spiritual life. All people who die on earth join the ancestors: one does not need to worship or pray in order to join them. The Vhavenda perform rituals to appease their ancestors, but this is not meant to prepare for the life hereafter. Instead, the performance of these rituals is for the protection of people while still on earth; in contrast, the Christian religion preaches that people should pray and worship God to receive eternal life. This means that those who live according to the Word of God will enjoy everlasting life. People need to accept the existence of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and worship the three unities. Strydom (1996:82) says that the Church and God's Word constantly call us to a changed lifestyle, to repentance and conversion.

Sigwavhulimu encourages people to fear death in the life hereafter and to seek the Lord while still on earth. This attitude will help them to live without fear. In support of the above, Strydom (1996:2) cites St Ignatius of Loyola who said the following about the purpose of earthly life:

Man is created to praise, revere, and serve God, our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him attain the end for which he is created. Hence, man is to make use of them IN SO FAR AS they help him in the attainment of his end, and he must rid himself of them in so far as they prove a hindrance to him.

Conclusion

Sigwavhulimu's Christian background says much about his perception of creation and death in his poetry. The Tshivenda religion, in which he grew up, is relegated to the background in this regard. He encourages Vhavenda society to believe in the resurrection of the Lord in order to receive eternal life. To him, it is only God's creation that will receive eternal life. The poet shows that there is a link between creation and immortal life. Creation that is blessed by God will have eternal life, whereas creation by humankind will receive only ultimate death. In this way he emphasizes that people should revere and serve God if they intend to live an immortal life. Sigwavhulimu believes that human beings have sinned, and that this sin can be forgiven only through prayer. Prayer should be addressed to Jesus Christ because he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. People should believe in the resurrection of the dead and eternal life. Without prayer, one cannot receive everlasting life.

The analysis of Sigwavhulimu's poetry has successfully shown that the relationship between God and humankind with regard to creation and death is based on Christianity. Sigwavhulimu's solutions to the problems of creation and death are derived from his Christian experience.

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