

# Mwali of Njelele and the Story of Ba-Kalanga

Unlocking the foundational history of pre-Colonial Zimbabwe and its relevancy today

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## **Introduction**

The Mwali of Njelele story is an unexplored intangible inheritance of Zimbabwe. Unless the rain making worship system of Njelele is fathomed a greater chunk of the history of Zimbabwe will remain unresolved. History authors have unknowingly or deliberately avoided telling the story of Ba-Kalanga which unlocks deeper understanding of the history and life dynamics of the people of Southern Africa prior to colonisation, Njelele included.

Njelele worship system was never fixed on a particular rock or mountain as people are made to believe. Njelele ‘cult’ was a highly mobile one. It’s not the mountain that had the powers neither of rain making nor of healing the nation against pestilences. The Mwali god was not always on the specific mountain of Njelele in Matopo. This is simply the last known place of national significance where Mwali’s voice was heard. Just like the Ark of the Covenant in times of Moses this power was moving with the chosen house of priests. The voice and power of the “cult” was where ever the priests pitched their worship “tent” of Mwali (*ntolo wa Mwali*).

## **The historical establishment of Njelele**

The Mwali worship system had been in place probably during the Mapungubwe empire as well as the Nzimabgwe and Kame empires. The last well known trek of this cult was from Vendaland. This was brought by the Lubimbi/Malaba clan during which it had several stopovers between the Transvaal and Njelele of Matopo. The stopovers included Tjizeze, Makwe, Dula/ku Mbudzi and Njelele (Patrick Hadledzi Malaba - interview May 2010, also P.Nyathi 2004, I.G. Cockcroft 1972, J. Wetzel 1983).

Rain making shins were later decentralized under the guiding spirit of Njenjema the founding priest of the current Njelele. It is, therefore, possible to find other shins regarded as Njelelele or a claim that other shrines such as Manyang’wa were established by Njenjema. There are also stories alleging that Njenjema sparked the liberation war in 1893 and was later short dead by Cullen Raid. This can only be the second or third priest after the real Njenjema.

## **The priestly lineage of Njelele**

“In 1968 Chief Malaba, then approximately 90 years of age stated emphatically that his father [Grandfather] had come into present day borders of Zimbabwe as youth, and that the Njelele *wosana* (priest) Nje[n]je[ma] who established the Njelele shrine arrived long before him during the Mambo dynasty. He supplied the priestly names as Njenje[ma], Pinga (Pininga), Mbikwa Ncube (who was priest during Mzilikazi era), thereafter, it was Shulu (Tjulu) Timila Ncube. After Shulu, Nyaya Ncube’s son Tabulawa Moyo of the Lozwi clan took over. This was a departure from the correct family. Nkombogwa Ncube claimant to priesthood appeared from Gwanda district. Tabulawa opposed the claim, and a cursing session took place on top of Njelele Mountain, not long Tabulawa died in 1960 and Nkombogwa succeeded. After Nkombogwa was took ill two years later there was no claimant,” (Cockcroft 1972, J. Wetzel 1983).

The word Njelele probably comes from Njenjema the founding priest of the Njelele Cult. Njelele is also a Kalanga name for a type of hawk which were (are) believed to symbolize imminent rain if they are a group and fly in circular manner “continuously” (*mayile*).

Njenjema was of Ncube (Wudo) - Lubimbi/Malaba clan. Njelele has always been manned by Priests of Ncube (wudo). The clan totem indicates that baboons/monkeys are a taboo to eat. Baboons are known for staying on mountains they see things from afar. They are like guards of a territory. There is a common saying in Kalanga when the new moon appears its said; *hhulo wakabon’wa ne wudo* meaning yesterday the moon was seen by baboons. It is this perceived advantage of the baboons that cements the Ncube (wudo) people to be custodians of the mountain god of Njelele. They see things good or bad first on behalf of the community.

### **Worship system**

The Njelele god was a god of peace and not war. Ba-Kalanga and the Nzi Mabgwe (village or homestead of stone) builders had always been a peaceful people who were accommodative of the tribes that were immigrating from the whole of Southern Africa. Some were coming voluntarily while others were victims of natural disasters and wars. Njelele as a regional shrine attracted different tribes who made pilgrimage to it. The worship system never looked at individual’s problem but community or regional problems - a major integrating force. The Njelele area was peaceful prior to the arrival of the Ndebele and during the reign of Mzilikazi (excluding his first two years of absence). In fact Mzilikazi executed his indunas for their failure to be accommodative of the indigenous people they found here, which was a major shift from his policy to build a nation together with them. This is notable in his submission to the Njelele god and paying tribute with a heard of black cattle, for he wanted to be at peace with the land. Mzilikazi was careful to treat the shrines of Mwali (Mlimo) with respect...” (O. Ransford 1968). In other words Mzilikazi paid tribute to the Mwali priests. The heir to Mzilikazi’s throne (Lobengula) was removed from the royal residence due to threats from his own kith and kin and he went to live under priestly Malaba Ncube (P. Nyathi Sunday News articles).

The worship system of Njelele reflected peace, harmony and unity across language divides. The year commenced in August-September with a thank you offering after the harvest when everything was done in the fields. This was started with the (*wosana*) priestly dances in various parts of the region. This was then followed by pilgrimage of the *wosana* and the few select members of the community who went there to offer gifts and requests for the ensuing year. The response normally came in reverse requests for the community to clean up the land eg:

1. Picking of bones - this ensured that the land was cleaned up of any bones of animals and humans in case of unknown deaths, so that dignified burials are done.
2. The destruction of nests of hawks (*zwihaka/zwishaka zwemadzu*) was meant to balance the ecosystem to ensure that there are minimal meat eating birds which were not good for chicken rearing etc.
3. *Tenhela/Itethela* - a coordinated and combined hunting effort meant to chase away most animals that could destroy crops and kill domesticated animals. This also taught the community to unite and share an essential component in curbing hunger.
4. *Chinsa* - the first fruit harvesting which was conducted by the local elderly women and children below puberty who were moving from one farm to another harvesting the first fruit was uniting the community and exposing the need to feed first and protect the vulnerable who are elderly widows and children.
5. Walking to *daka* was meant to humble the *wosana* priests to know and understand that they were nothing but Mwali's messengers, therefore, the need to suffer for the people and not uplift themselves.

### **Language & praise songs of Njelele**

The language of Mapungubgwe (the jackals), Nzi Mabgwe (village or homestead of stones), Kamme (at my mother's) is no different from the language of Njelele. The Mwali cult was brought into the present day Zimbabwe by the Thobela Mbedzi people of Venda/ Kalanga origin (to be understood as one people of the Mapungubgwe empire. The Njelele Mwali praise songs confirm the language of the cult together with that of the chief/high priests' lineage. Compare the Mwali praise totems and that of the Malaba clan which supplied the high priests.

<b>Mwali praise totems</b>	<b>Malaba Praise Totems</b>
<i>Thobela</i>	<i>Thobela</i>
<i>Mbedzi</i>	<i>Mbedzi</i>
<i>Mazebuta</i>	<i>Venda</i>
<i>Matanhanti netiko</i>	<i>Babvumbi bevula</i>
<i>Zebe dzakakwakwatila</i>	<i>Mbibhanyi wahongwe</i>
<i>Imwi bakaMwali nkulu</i>	<i>Bankukutu selutombo</i>
<i>Imwi munahhamu lon'ompela</i>	<i>Tombo tjisipotelekwe</i>
	<i>Tjopotelekwa ikabe mibvimbi</i>

<p><i>Lino n'wiwa ne tjaba tjose</i>  <i>Mbuluki wenzilikadzi nesiyan'wa</i></p> <p><i>Baka lunji gusipfume ngubo</i>  <i>Gosimila pfuma pasi</i>  <i>Mbedzi bankwakwa usiwome</i>  <i>Unodliwanebana muhhihha netjilimo</i>  <i>Bhibhanyi wahongwe</i></p> <p><i>Imwi gumbo ivula</i>  <i>Motandabala ikabe mibvimbi</i>  <i>Imwi zana palubgwe</i>  <i>Nkukutu ungalutombo</i>  <i>Tjilambotsheduka</i>  <i>Mbilu yebutale</i></p>	<p><i>Bantandabale</i>  <i>Banotandabala ikabe mibvimbi</i>  <i>Mazana zwibuya</i>  <i>Banozana vula ikana</i></p> <p><i>Bagudu baNjelele</i>  <i>Baka lunji gusipfume ngubo</i>  <i>Gosimila pfuma pasi</i>  <i>Bampani usina mhako</i>  <i>Wakatjidza sindi yanyala</i></p>
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Note that these praise totems of the Malaba/Lubimbi are similar with those of Mwali (Mlimo) god of Matopos. This is the clan that brought this cult to the Njelele of Matopo (J. Wetzel 983, Interview with Gede Manqindi Ncube in Tsholotsho Dec 2003, J.B Richards 1942)

### **The buried knowledge systems**

In summary, Ba-Kalanga have always been mining and smelting, they were iron smiths, wood carvers, art and craft, architects, with well defined governance, history preservation systems and the art of intelligence and spying - bumhihha, bukadzaha, bukumbudzi nebumdambeli. Ba-Kalanga have always been a sharing community belima hhunde, belagisilana, bekokana kumbizi. They are and were probably the most accommodative tribe in Southern Africa especially if you consider the trek of Baleya, BaVenda, BaBirwa, BaPedi, BaLozwi, Ndebeles etc into BuKalanga. Ba-Kalanga had the most well defined national worship systems, instruments of worship, entertainment, songs and dance, fashionable attire to mention but a few. These are all buried indigenous knowledge systems that require urgent action from all.

### **Conclusion**

The voices of Njelele have gone quiet. Can they be redeemed? Probably not! Are they still significant in the light of what Apostle Paul says in Acts 17: 26 to Christians? Probably no one can answer with certainty.

Which ever way indigenous knowledge systems, the legal systems, through a true history of Ba-Kalanga we can nationally and regionally integrate in practical and relevant ways today.

A history of Zimbabwe that fails to understand Njelele, Ba-Kalanga, the ruins found in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Botswana is a fallacy and deception by the colonisers who sought simplified languages and history for their convenience. Unless we think beyond the concealing words Shona, Ndebele and Setswana then the above valuable indigenous knowledge systems remain buried. Zimbabweans and Africans have no roots that can drive their pride. Then the younger generation has no choice but to think, behave and embrace the west or the east and remain with no 'space' of their own in this world. Our resources and inherent knowledge passed on to us by our ancestors shall remain with no value to us, the region and the world at large. We shall forever be on the receiving end other cultural agendas.



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