

The place of water in the Ndaou religion of Zimbabwe



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Dates:

Received: 12 July 2024

Accepted: 13 Sept. 2024

Published: 17 Oct. 2024

How to cite this article:

Dube, E.E.N., 2024, 'The place of water in the Ndaou religion of Zimbabwe', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(2), a10041. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.10041>

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There is a gap in studies focussing on Ndaou traditional religion and water. Most research addresses nature conservation rather than examining how water is perceived by the Ndaou people. This study aims to explore the relationship between the Ndaou and water, filling the gap in understanding the significance of water in the Ndaou traditional religion of Zimbabwe. The study was based on a literature review focussing on published works, available as open access on the Internet regarding the Ndaou people and their relationship with nature. It was presented from an emic perspective by the author, who was born and bred among the Ndaou people of Zimbabwe. The author was conscious of the need not to impose his own views. Triangulation of information from other sources was utilised to ensure the integrity of the data presented in this article. The main findings indicate that the Ndaou people of Zimbabwe have a complex relationship with water, which they regard as sacred. They believe that water is protected by spirits. Taboos assist the Ndaou in safeguarding water resources for both present and future generations. The study concluded that Ndaou traditional leadership, along with the broader Ndaou community, should take further action to preserve wetlands and water resources. The sacredness of water among the Ndaou must be upheld to ensure the sustainability of these vital resources.

Contribution: The article contributes to the discourse on water and spiritualities, focussing on the Ndaou people of Zimbabwe. The place of water among the Ndaou had not been explored before. The article contributes to the Journal's focus on sustainable development goals, specifically number 6: Clean water and sanitation.

Keywords: water; Ndaou people; Ndaou traditional religion; sustainable development goals; indigenous knowledge systems.

Introduction

The article focusses on the place of water in the Ndaou religion of Zimbabwe. The Ndaou live in the Southeastern parts of Zimbabwe, specifically in Chimanimani and Chipinge Districts. The border with Mozambique separates the Ndaou who live in Zimbabwe from those who live in Mozambique. Focus in this article will be on the Ndaou who live in Zimbabwe, and the place that water has in their worldview. This literature study, presented from an emic perspective by the author who was born and bred among the Ndaou people of Zimbabwe, will use open-access literature available on the Internet, on conservation studies, to single out common themes regarding the importance of water among the Ndaou. Triangulation of data from different sources will ensure that the author does not simply impose his own views. The article acknowledges that water is important for all human beings, across the globe. It is for this reason that the article commences with a brief explanation of water as the United Nations' sustainable goal number 6. Various themes on water among the Ndaou will be considered in this article, among them taboos and their place in the preservation of water among the Ndaou people, water as a source of life and food among the Ndaou people, and water bodies as habitats for spirits among the Ndaou people. The conclusion will reiterate that water is believed to be sacred among the Ndaou of Zimbabwe and that it is guarded by different spirits, ranging from water spirits to ancestral spirits, among others. The conclusion also recommends that the Ndaou traditional leadership and Ndaou people, in general, revitalise and continue to uphold the Ndaou indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) pertaining to the preservation of water.

The United Nations sustainable development goal number 6: Clean water and sanitation

The United Nations established clean water and sanitation as a sustainable development goal (SDG) number 6 in 2015 (United Nations 2015). The SDGs do not focus solely on water. They were established as a clarion call 'to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity' (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] n.d.). Sustainable

Note: Special Collection: Interreligious Dialogue, sub-edited by Jaco Beyers (University of Pretoria, South Africa).

development goals aim to ensure universal access to safe and affordable drinking water, sanitation and hygiene by 2030, with a focus on equitable access and special attention to the needs of women, girls and vulnerable populations. The goals also target improving water quality by reducing pollution and minimising hazardous chemicals, increasing water-use efficiency and implementing integrated water resources management through transboundary cooperation. Additionally, the SDGs seek to protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes to ensure sustainable water management and conservation (Nhamo, Nhemachena & Nhamo 2019; United Nations n.d. [a and b] Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Sustainable Development 2024).

Sadly recent news, for example, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) News stated that only 17% of the SDGs are on track, with most of them not registering some good progress. The 2024 SDGs report revealed that nearly half of the 17 goals are showing 'minimal or moderate progress', while over a third are either 'stalled or regressing' (SABC News n.d.)

The place of water globally and in other religions

There is general consensus among scholars about the importance of water to all people across the globe, and its sacrality in different religions. Schelwald-van der Kley & Reijerkerk (2009:43) avow that it is because of water's life-sustaining elements that it has necessitated a plethora of beliefs, both on the religious and spiritual planes. A common feature in all these religions, as given by the two scholars, is a reverence for water. Schelwald-van der Kley and Reijerkerk (2009:43) detail how Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Taoism, Baha'i and the 2012 movement view and treat water. This article draws from their initiative, to present what can be called the place of water in Ndaun religion of Zimbabwe.

African traditional religions, indigenous people and their beliefs on water

Indigenous people the world over have similar beliefs regarding the place and the sacrality of water. Schelwald-van der Kley and Reijerkerk (2009:46) mention that indigenous people themselves can best explain the relationship they have with water. The scholars notice that perceptions of water by indigenous people are either misunderstood or neglected by Western societies. Schelwald-van der Kley and Reijerkerk (2009:46) make reference to an official declaration made by indigenous people at the 3rd World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan in March 2003. The declaration spelt out clearly that indigenous people the world over had a peculiar relationship with mother earth and a responsibility to future generations. The declaration further stated that indigenous people hold water as sacred

and sustain all life. It stressed the need to care for and conserve fresh waters and oceans, both for those living now and for future generations. They also reiterated that indigenous traditional practices were dynamically regulated systems. These beliefs will be evinced in the discussion on the place of water among the Ndaun in this article. In essence, one could say that the Ndaun share similar views with other indigenous people of the world regarding the place and significance or sacrality of water.

For Schelwald-van der Kley and Reijerkerk (2009:44), some people across the globe believe in water spirits, while others believe that water has inherent supernatural qualities. Water spirits can be in serpentine, human or mermaid forms, or any other form in between these. According to Schelwald-van der Kley and Reijerkerk (2009:44), 'The serpentine form tends to dominate in Western and Southern Africa, whereas the half or wholly human mermaid form prevails in Northern and Central Europe'. Whether at sea or in lakes or rivers, these water spirits are believed to be the causes of certain misfortunes, including drowning (Schelwald-van der Kley & Reijerkerk 2009:44). Malignant water spirits, whether at sea or in lakes and rivers, are believed to be the cause of all kinds of evil related to water.

Water in African traditional religions: The case of the Ndaun people of Zimbabwe

Who are the Ndaun people of Zimbabwe?

The Ndaun people are a small linguistic group located in South-eastern Zimbabwe (Muyambo & Maposa 2014:23; Sipeyiye 2020:91). They are concentrated in Chimanimani and Chipinge, although they also spill into Mozambique. The Ndaun had always been grouped together with other Shona linguistic groups: the Manyika, Korekore, Karanga and Zezuru, until Ndaun was recognised as an independent official language in a new constitution in 2013. The new constitution of Zimbabwe (chapter 1, section 6) recognises Ndaun as an official language, no longer as one dialect of the Shona language, among other dialects (Sipeyiye 2020:91; Zimbabwe 2013).

Chipinge and Chimanimani districts are under the leadership of several traditional chiefs. Sipeyiye (2020) mentions that:

The Chipinge area comprises seven Ndaun chiefdoms, namely Garahwa, Gwenzi, Mahenye, Mapungwana, Mupungu, Musikavanhu and Mutema, while the Chimanimani area is home to five Ndaun chiefdoms: Chikukwa, Mutambara, Muusha, Ndima and Ngorima. (p. 91)

There is an intricate and intrinsic relationship between the Ndaun people and the environment. For the Ndaun, the physical environment is closely connected with the spiritual world (Sipeyiye 2020:85). Rivers, pools, wetlands, forests, rocks and animals, among others, all belong to the spiritual world, which manifests itself in physical features (Rusinga & Maposa 2010:201–202).

The article has so far established that many religions view water as sacred. The Ndaу people of Zimbabwe have a deep respect for water and see it as vital for life and well-being. Their traditional beliefs emphasise the interconnectedness of the human world, the natural world and the spirit world (Sipeyiye 2020).

Taboos and their place in the preservation of water among the Ndaу people

Water sources are considered sacred and protected by taboos. These restrictions ensure respectful treatment and prevent overexploitation. Muyambo and Maposa (2014:26) emphasise the sacredness of water resources. They notice that the 'Ndaу link the water bodies with the concept of *kuyera* [sacredness] and the people should approach them with a sense of awe and unquestioned homage'. Taringa (2006:210) concurs, stating that water bodies or wetlands serve as habitats for animals associated with spirits. For the Ndaу, these water bodies are highly respected; they are places for rituals and are governed by taboos.

Muyambo and Maposa (2014:26) give an example of traditional wells, which are believed by the Ndaу to be habitats for aquatic animals, including frogs. One is not supposed to remove these frogs from the water. They tell the story of a woman who mistakenly scooped a frog from a well, together with some water. By the time she discovered the frog, it had already died, and the well dried. She was punished for the offence and rituals had to be done to restore the well. Such taboos serve to preserve the water sources, among the Ndaу people. Muyambo and Maposa (2014:27) reiterate the fact that 'these taboos are related to beliefs in *njuzu* [mermaid]. Since water is regarded in high esteem, they also mention that most Ndaу clans have the pool [*dziva*] as their totem'.

As already established, the Ndaу strongly believe that taboos have continued to offer immense protection to water resources (Muyambo & Maposa 2014:27).

Stories abound of what some people who failed to respect and observe the set taboos suffered as a result. Rusinga and Maposa (2010:206) report that a participant in their study told them a tradition about a man who bathed with a bar of soap in a pool in the Matsika River, which is believed to be sacred. His belongings are said to have disappeared. Such stories serve as a deterrent to others who may want to ignore the taboos as well. Mutigwe and Chipfakacha (2022) focus their study on the religious taboos and the punishments which are meted out in a way to protect and preserve the environment.

Water as a source of life and food among the Ndaу people

Water is understood by the Ndaу people as a source of life and food. The Ndaу people's traditional beliefs promote sustainable practices. For example, taboos limit how much

fish can be caught, preventing overfishing. Similarly, restrictions around using certain containers to draw water from sacred pools help conserve the resource. Mutigwe and Chipfakacha (2022:16) detail how water is a source of fish for the Ndaу. They add that when Ndaу people fish, they are guided by taboos to avoid *mbau* [greed]. Fishers using *mambure* [nets] can find themselves having caught big numbers of frogs, snakes or tortoises. It is important for the Ndaу fishermen to catch only that which is sufficient for food and a little surplus to sell, without depleting the resources unnecessarily and without allowing greed to overtake them.

Water bodies as habitats for spirits among the Ndaу people

There is a strong belief in water bodies being habitats for the spirits among the Ndaу. Growing up among the Ndaу, the author heard a lot of stories about water spirits and mermaids [*njuzu*], among others. Some sacred pools were believed to harbour mermaids who would hang their clothes to dry along the river banks, surprising the local Ndaу people who would not have seen anyone washing any clothes there. Sipeyiye (2020:93) concurs with the aforementioned, affirming that the Ndaу believe that the natural world is a habitat for spirits and that sacred shrines, wetlands and woodlands are the foundation of survival.

Wetlands have already been indicated to be habitats for the spirits. *Matoro* [wetlands] are believed to be sacred. They harbour animals and reptiles associated with the spirit world. These include snakes and *njuzu* [mermaids or water spirits]. These animals and reptiles are guardians of the wetlands and water bodies, on behalf of the spirit world (Sipeyiye 2020:96–97). Any Ndaу person in Chimanimani and Chipinge knows to approach these wetlands and water bodies with a lot of reverence. Specific instruments such as gourds and wooden containers are to be used to fetch water. Metal instruments are not permitted for this is believed to anger the spirits, causing the water sources to dry up (Sipeyiye 2020:97).

The Ndaу depend on the spiritual world for guidance. The spirit world punishes and rewards the Ndaу based on how they interact with nature (Sipeyiye 2020:93). Sipeyiye (2020:93) asserts that just like other African societies, 'the Ndaу hold that every plant, animal and natural phenomena is a bearer of the divine'.

The Ndaу hold the view that all water bodies, water sources and other natural phenomena are habitats for clan, territorial and ancestral spirits, which ensure that the Ndaу get the provision of balanced and nutritious food (Mutigwe & Chipfakacha 2022:9).

Doro remakoto (rain-making ceremony)

Regarding the place of water among the Ndaу, one should not omit to say something about the rain-making

ceremonies that the Ndaу engage themselves in, especially in times of drought. The rain-making ceremonies involve brewing some beer and some elaborate rituals on the mountains, which only the traditional leadership, the elderly and the menopausal women can participate in. The Ndaу call this *doro remakoto* [rain-making ceremony]. The rituals are characterised by vulgarity. The ceremony is believed to be a way of connecting with the departed (ancestral spirits) to implore them to channel the petition for rain to *Mwari/Musikavanhu* [God]. The ceremony, when it is conducted, is usually followed by some heavy rains to end long periods of drought (Mutigwe & Chipfakacha 2022:11–12). These traditional rain-making ceremonies continue to be held during periods of drought, highlighting the importance of IKS among the Ndaу.

The sacrality of nature among the Ndaу people

The sacrality of nature is a common theme among both the Shona and Ndaу people of Zimbabwe. Indigenous knowledge on these matters is very crucial for the sustenance of nature and human life among the Ndaу. Taringa (2014:53) notes that mischievous comments about the state of trees and vegetation, as well as their reckless destruction are believed to anger ancestral spirits, which can result in the disappearance of the offender or other forms of punishment. Along the same lines, Sipeyiye (2020:97–98) adds that loitering in sacred river valleys and floodplains has the risk of putting the loiterer at risk of losing direction and straying further in the valleys [*chahwihwi*]. Sipeyiye (2020:97) reiterates the fact that river valleys and flood plains are sacred because they are considered to be habitats of ancestral spirits. The Ndaу maintain a cultural practice where children who are born as stillborn and those who pass on before they start teething are buried in river valleys, where they are said to have returned to the spirit world. Only postmenopausal women conduct these burials, for purity reasons (Sipeyiye 2020:97).

Western interference with indigenous knowledge systems regarding water preservation

The aforementioned traditional practices demonstrate how indigenous knowledge can be valuable for contemporary environmental management. Unfortunately, colonial and post-colonial eras have sometimes undermined these practices. Matsapa (2023:56) submits that ‘The colonial and post-colonial eras have also brought intense setbacks in Environmental Science (cf. Sipeyiye 2020:85)’. Westerners brought with them a different worldview, which did not necessarily hold traditional views on water preservation in high regard. If anything, they undermined almost everything that had to do with the Ndaу people’s culture and ways of life.

Neglect of the environment and ensuing devastating consequences among the Ndaу people

The growing world population has affected some of the Ndaу people’s ways of taking care of natural resources, including water. This neglect is believed to be what causes calamities to befall people, in the form of cyclones, floods, droughts and landslides (Chanza et al. 2020). Scholars often give the example of Cyclone Idai, which ravaged Chimanimani District, destroying lives and infrastructure (Chanza et al. 2020; Matsapa 2023:57, 66; Sipeyiye 2020). Rusinga and Maposa (2010:202) concur with the view that the Ndaу use natural resources in a responsible way, guided or guarded by the taboo systems that the Ndaу society has put in place. For instance, Rusinga and Maposa (2010:205) submit that the said taboos help to guard against needless plundering of forest products and help protect water sources and water species, among others. Rusinga and Maposa (2010:205) add that the taboos are in such a way that Ndaу people fear even making irresponsible or needless comments about the natural phenomena for the fear of disappearing or any other punishment that the spirits could mete out to offenders. The Ndaу, therefore, hold the view of the sacrality of nature. It is for this reason that water sources, wetlands and water bodies are to be guarded jealously, among the Ndaу.

The Ndaу strongly believe that recklessness in terms of how one conducts himself or herself with regard to nature can cause calamities, among them floods and landslides (Matsapa 2023:66). Mutigwe and Chipfakacha (2022:19) attribute the drying up of important natural wells and pools to both climate change and breaches of religious or traditional regulations. Matsapa (2023:66) calls for the Ndaу people and the government to take into consideration the traditional knowledge base, which he believes can be instrumental in averting such calamities. The March 2019 Cyclone Idai floods and its devastation is still fresh in the minds of many Ndaу people. It has left many scars, with many of the people who were washed away by the floods still unaccounted for (Sipeyiye 2020:86).

The interconnectedness between nature and human beings among the Ndaу

Rusinga and Maposa (2010:204) observe that, just like the rest of the Shona people, Ndaу people view the natural phenomenon and society as intrinsically intertwined. The success of the society is closely linked to the success of nature. Rusinga and Maposa (2010:205) further observe that the Ndaу people have a culture of giving themselves *mitupo* [totems]. These totems can be names of animals, natural phenomena or pools. The totemic system helps the Ndaу protect the environment, for it operates on the basis of certain prohibitions that the Ndaу should observe.

The importance of integrating traditional knowledge into modern solutions

Schelwald-van der Kley and Reijerkerk (2009:43) are surprised that water, with all this reverence for it, is still wasted and polluted, taken for granted and fought over. There is a need, therefore, to treat water in ways that demonstrate the reverence that people have for it.

There is a growing recognition that traditional knowledge can be a valuable tool for addressing environmental challenges such as climate change. The Ndau people's belief system offers a prime example. Their practices demonstrate a deep respect for the natural world and a commitment to its preservation. Including such traditional knowledge in environmental protection efforts can be crucial for achieving sustainable development.

Muyambo and Maposa (2014:22) agree that the Ndau people's IKS can be utilised to protect water resources among the Ndau. They believe that this indigenous knowledge can go a long way towards impacting and correcting the effects of climate change. According to Muyambo and Maposa (2014:24) '... for any water management interventions to be effective there is need to incorporate the indigenous culture'. Chiefs and traditional authorities have always played a critical role among the Ndau to safeguard the environment. These two scholars call upon such traditional leadership to do more in the management of water resources.

Ndau traditional leadership and the preservation of water and other natural resources

On the issue of traditional leadership, Mutigwe and Chipfakacha (2022:10–11) detail that the *Ishe/mutape/mambo* [chief] is at the top of the Ndau people's hierarchy of authority. They add that the chief works with a council of advisors and that at the bottom of the hierarchy are the *mapurisa amambo* [chief's police officers], who are responsible for summoning offenders to the chief's court (*dare*). All these figures also conduct spiritual or religious roles, among the Ndau. Maposa and Mhaka (2013) add that traditional leadership ought to be consulted before any major project is commenced among the Ndau. Failure to do this has the risk of angering the territorial spirits. Stories abound of bridges, for example, which were only successfully completed after traditional leadership had conducted some rituals. It is strongly believed that unusual occurrences are witnessed if such projects are embarked on without traditional leadership communicating with the spirits of the land. Just like the others, Matsapa (2023:68) emphasises the place of traditional leadership in the preservation of natural resources.

Conclusion

The article has provided a literature study demonstrating the place of water among the Ndau of Chimanimani and

Chipinge, in Zimbabwe. It has been emphasised that water is sacred among the Ndau. Different spirits, among them ancestral, clan and territorial spirits have been shown to play some very important roles in safeguarding water sources, water bodies and wetlands among the Ndau. Taboos are one major way in which Ndau traditional authorities ensure that water resources and wetlands are not abused. The article has also demonstrated that wetlands and water bodies are believed to be providers of food for the Ndau, but all Ndau have to harvest only what they need to avoid angering the spirits and causing the wetlands and water bodies to dry up. Indigenous knowledge systems have also been emphasised to be a very necessary tool in the preservation of water resources among the Ndau, as the Ndau people grapple with the UN SDG number 6, which focusses on clean water and sanitation. Traditional leadership among the Ndau have more to do to ensure that water continues to sustain life in the current times and for future generations.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contribution

E.E.N.D. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by the author.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

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

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