

## Consuming Christianity: Deconstructing Missionary Accounts of Cannibalism in Vendlan in the Late Nineteenth Century

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Berlin missionary accounts of warfare among Tshivenda-speakers make a number of references to cases where the bodies of fallen enemies were “abused” or “defiled” by, or on the orders of, the rulers of victorious factions. A number of these accounts also describe the purported consumption or use of body parts severed from the vanquished. Based on my training in African history and social anthropology, my first reaction upon encountering these tales was to reject them. Stories about cannibalism were arguably the most extreme form of “othering” perpetuated by Europeans against Africans. In their obsession with cultural evolutionism, they dichotomised what they saw as their own developed “civilisations” and African “savagery” or “barbarism”; the “light of civilisation” and the “darkness of heathenism”.

Over time, and after a number of differing readings, I have come to a different conclusion. By means of a case study of conflicts involving various factions among the Mphaphuli people during the late nineteenth century, I wish to argue that it does not really matter whether the events described in these accounts “really” happened or not. Rather, what is important, is that the contending parties allowed, or even encouraged, the missionaries to believe that they did.<sup>1</sup> From this starting point, I attempt to deconstruct some of their possible meanings and value for missionaries and Africans.<sup>2</sup>

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1 In making this assertion, I wish to avoid the debate initiated by William Arens about whether or not cannibalism “really” existed, or the attempts by authors such as Marvin Harris at producing a cultural materialist account of cannibalism/anthropophagy based on nutritional requirements and available food resources. These are, I would argue, irrelevant to the present discussion. See especially W. Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1979); M. Harris, (a) *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures* (Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1978), especially pp 110-125 & 134-136 & (b) *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture* (Vintage Books, New York, 1980), especially pp 188-190 & 333-341 and M. Sahlins, “Artificially maintained controversies: Global warming and Fijian cannibalism”, *Anthropology Today*, 19, 3, June 2003, pp 3-5 (together with replies by G. Obeyesekere and W. Arens, “Cannibalism Reconsidered, Responses to Marshall Sahlins”, *Anthropology Today*, 19, 5, October 2003, pp 18-19).

2 Literary theorists generally have a rigid interpretation of the term “deconstructionism” which refers specifically to uncovering the layers of hidden meanings within discourses. I suspect that they would find my use of the term too loose. However, in my reading, historians are free to, and frequently do, use the term in a looser context. As I use it here, “deconstruction” refers to the historian’s use of what (s)he is able to glean about the (conscious and unconscious) ideological biases of the authors of texts; arising from, and interacting with, the wider social

### The context

In the late nineteenth century, the heartland of Vendale lay between the Limpopo and the Luvuvhu Rivers.<sup>3</sup> At this time, the local strategic and military situation was periodically extremely tense. The Vhavenda were the last of the African groups in the Transvaal to be subjugated by the South African Republic.<sup>4</sup> Beyond pressure from encroaching settlers, the area was dominated by three great *mahosi*: *Khosi* Makhado (Ramabulana), *Khosi* Tshivhase and *Khosi* Mphaphuli. There were also a considerable number of lesser *mahosi* and *magota*, who exhibited varying degrees of independence. From time to time, the various groupings vied against each other for supremacy, leading to realignments in the balance of power.<sup>5</sup> Complex laws of succession also meant that the death of a *khosi* was frequently followed by a succession dispute among his sons. These battles could be hard-fought and relatively bloody.<sup>6</sup>

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context in which they wrote; to interrogate their writings. In doing so, the historian also makes use of what (s)he knows about the context in which the events occurred derived from other sources. These ideological biases include those arising from issues such as the political, cultural, economic, racial and gender background of the author.

- 3 *Berliner Missions-Berichte* (hereafter *BMB*), 1891, p 451; *BMB*, 1898, p 7; C J Conerly, "The Surrendering of the Lands in the Northern Transvaal of Mahosi Davhana, Makhado, Mphaphu and Sinthumule", B A Honours, University of Cape Town, 1990, pp 47, 55-56 & 78-82; D Mcdonald, "Vendale", *The Blythwood Review: A South African Journal Review: A South African Journal of Religious, Social and Economic Work*, 10, 110, February 1933, p 12 and R Wagner, "Zoutpansberg: the dynamics of a hunting frontier, 1848-67", in S Marks and A Atmore (eds), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (Longmans, London, 1980), pp 322-323
- 4 *BMB*, 1860, p 63; 1863, p 3; 1866, pp 69-70 & 1868, p 102; J C A Boeyens, "Die konflik tussen die Venda en die Blankes in Transvaal, 1864-1869" *Archives Year Book for South African History*, 53, II (The Government Printer, Pretoria, 1990), pp 66-82 & 110; J W N Tempelhoff, *Townsppeople of the Soutpansberg: A Centenary History*, (Greater Louis Trichardt Transitional Local Council, Louis Trichardt, 1999), pp 19-25; J W N Tempelhoff and H Nemudzivhadi, "Riding the Storm of Change: Makhado, Venda and the South African Republic (1864-1895)", *New Contree*, 45, September 1999, pp 104-106; U van der Heyden, "The Fighting Tradition of the Venda People", *Sechaba: Official Organ of the African National Congress of South Africa*, January 1986, pp 10-12 and Wagner, "Zoutpansberg"
- 5 *Bawenda-Freund*, 6, 23, Oktober 1888, p 67; *Bawenda-Freund*, 11, 42, Juli 1893, p 161; *BMB*, 1878, p 490; *Mitteilungen des Vereins "Heidenfreund"*, 5, 18, 1 Juli 1887, s 1, p 2; G P Lestrade, "Some Notes on the Ethnic History of the Vhavenda and their Rhodesian Affinities", in N J van Warmelo (ed), "Contributions towards Venda History, Religion and Tribal Ritual", *Union of South Africa, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications*, III (The Government Printer, Pretoria, 1932), p XXVII and R Wessmann, "Philippus Thai, ein Treuer Nationalhelfer im Bawendalande", *Missionsschriften für Kinder*, 46 (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft, Berlin, s a [1902]), p 1. The Berlin missionaries recorded Makhado as Makato, Tshivhase as Tschewasse or Schewasse and Ranwedzi (Masindi) Mphaphuli as Pafuli or Pafudi. Attempting to translate the terms *khosi* [plural, *mahosi*] and *gota* [plural, *magota*] opens a debate on the nature of leadership in African societies which I do not wish to enter into in this paper. Thus, unless in quotation, I avoid using the terms "chiefs" or "headmen".
- 6 See, for example, S M Dzivhani, "The Chiefs of Venda", in N J van Warmelo (ed), "The Copper Miners of Musina and the Early History of the Zoutpansberg", *Union Of South Africa, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publications*, VIII (The Government Printer, Pretoria, 1940), pp 37-40, 42, 44-46 & 49-50; E Gottschling, "The Bawenda, A Sketch of their History and Customs", *Addresses and Papers read at the Joint Meeting of the British and South African Associations for the Advancement of Science held in South Africa, 1905*, III, (South African Association for the Advancement of Science, Johannesburg, 1905), pp 195-221; M M Motenda, "History of the Western Venda and of the Lemba", in N J van Warmelo

Berlin missionaries established three stations in Vendaleland between 1872 and 1877 – Ha-Tshivhase (later called Beuster or Maungani), Tshakhuma and Georgenholtz.<sup>7</sup> While several out-stations were established from these, the main *mahosi* were resistant to allowing the founding of further main stations in their areas or those of their subordinate *mahosi* and *magota*.<sup>8</sup> My own reading is that what they were attempting to do was to give themselves access to missionaries through intermediaries without allowing them to establish themselves too close to the royal capitals or establish too great a presence in Vendaleland. One of their aims in doing so was that they hoped to be able to use the missionaries as mediators between themselves and the encroaching Boers, but still keep them at a distance from the socio-political centre.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it was only in 1899, after the defeat of Makhado and the seizure of large sections of his former lands, that a fourth Berlin station could be established, on lands given to the Mission by the Boer authorities.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond the political context, the ideological context should also be examined. The missionaries were not neutral observers. Whatever they saw, was filtered through male, bourgeois, late nineteenth century, German, Christian missionary eyes. They also had to justify their presence in the area – both to themselves and to their superiors and friends of the mission at home.

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(ed), *The Copper Miners of Musina*, pp 54-57 & 59-60; E Mudau, “The Dau of Tshakhuma”, in N J van Warmelo (ed), *The Copper Miners of Musina*, pp 75-76 & 78-79; H A Stuyt, *The Bawenda* (Oxford University Press, London, 1931), pp 17, 208-209 & 210 and N J van Warmelo (ed), *Contributions towards Venda History*, pp 6, 12-15, 15-16, 20-22, 24-32 & 35-36

- 7 Anon, *75th Anniversary of the Berlin Mission Station Tshivhase, 8 November 1872 – 1947* (Pamphlet distributed for the celebration, no publisher [Berlin Mission Society], s 1, s a [1947]); W Gründler, *Geschichte der Bawenda-Mission in Nord-Transvaal* (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft, Berlin, s a [1897]), pp 23-91; G Sauberzweig-Schmidt, (a) “Georgenholtz im Lande der Bawenda”, *Neue Missionsschriften*, 33, (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missions-Gesellschaft, Berlin, 1891) & (b) “Ha Schewasse, eine Hütte Gottes unter den Bawenda”, *Neue Missionsschriften*, 32, (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft, Berlin, s a [1896]) and Kirchliches Archivzentrum, Berlin (hereafter KAZ): Stationschronik von Georgenholtz, p 1 in Acta der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft betreffend Missions-Station Georgenholtz, Abt IV, Fach IIE, Nr 13, Stations-Synodalakte Band I von 1906 bis 1962, p 125
- 8 *Bawenda-Freund*, 11, 42, Juli 1883, p 161; *Bawenda-Freund*, 6, 23, Oktober 1888, p 67; *Bawenda-Freund*, 14, 54, 2 Quartal 1896, p 292; *Bawenda-Freund*, 14, 55, 3 Quartal 1896, p 310; *Bawenda-Freund*, 31, 2, April 1914, p 22; *Bawenda-Freund*, 33, 4, Oktober 1916, pp 11; *Bawenda-Freund*, 35, 2, April 1918, p 5 and *BMB*, 1873, pp 132-137 & 213; *BMB*, 1874, pp 123-143; *BMB*, 1875, pp 231 & 368 and *Mitteilungen des Vereins “Heidenfreund”*, 5, 16, April 1887, pp 2-3
- 9 See, for example, A Kirkaldy, (a) “‘Digging in the Archives’: *Khosi* Masindi Mphaphuli, *Khosi* Makwarela Mphaphuli and the Berlin Missionaries in Vendaleland, c 1876 – 1897” Unpublished paper presented to the Biennial Conference of the South African Association of Archaeologists, 6 July 1998, Thohoyandou, pp 18, 37 & 43 & (b) “Makoarele’s return to ‘the darkness of heathenism’: *Khosi* Makwarela and the Berlin Missionaries”, in U van der Heyden and J Becher (eds), *Mission und Moderne. Beiträge zur Geschichte der christlichen Missionen in Afrika anlässlich der Jahrestagung der VAD und des 12. Afrikanistentages vom 3. - 6. Oktober 1996 in Berlin*, (Rüdiger Köpper Verlag, Köln, 1998), especially pp 122 & 128
- 10 Stationschronik von Georgenholtz, p 2; *BMB*, 1899, p 696 and G Sauberzweig-Schmidt, “Klaas Kuhn, ein Missionar aus den Hottentotten”, Vierte Auflage, *Dornen und Ähren vom Missionsfelde V* (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missions-Gesellschaft, Berlin, s a ), pp 31-32 See also *BMB*, 1899, pp 94, 326 & 643; *BMB*, 1900, pp 259, 304, 306, 680, 694, 696 & 706

So far, this kind of analysis of missionary writing is well-known and documented. What has not been looked at in many other accounts, is the idea that the missionaries were also an audience for the public performances of the *mahosi* and their people. This may have influenced the way that people behaved and/or what they allowed/persuaded the missionaries to see/hear. This, I argue, was clearly illustrated by the way that the missionaries wrote about the person and the actions of *Khosi* Makwarela Mphaphuli, son and sub-ruler of *Khosi* Ranwedzi Mphaphuli, one of the three great *mahosi*.<sup>11</sup>

### The Mphaphulis

In a work currently in publication, I argue that one of the greatest difficulties faced by the Berlin missionaries in Vendaland during the last three decades of the nineteenth century was that of making, and keeping, a significant number of converts. Between 1874 and 1899, at best, only 0,29 per cent of the African people in the environs of Ha-Tshivhase Mission Station had formally converted to Christianity. Corresponding figures for Tshakhuma and Georgholtz were 0,38 per cent and 0,62 per cent respectively. For Vendaland as a whole, the best figure was 0,35 per cent. This dismal rate of conversions was seen by the missionaries as being a direct reflection of the power of the *mahosi* – they were simply so powerful, and played such an important religious role, that their people had no desire to convert to Christianity. The only solution, as they saw it, was to convert a *khosi*.<sup>12</sup>

From early on in their relationship with him, the missionaries believed that *Khosi* Makwarela Mphaphuli was close to converting to Christianity and that this would provide the key to conversion of his people. In their diaries and published accounts, they portrayed him as an exceptional man, standing well above his peers and his subjects intellectually and morally. A diplomat, a clever military strategist and a dutiful son, he was superior both to his brother Tshikalange – who had strong designs on the throne - and his father, a cruel man who fomented conflict between his sons as a means of protecting his own position.

Thus, after the establishment of a missionary presence in Vendaland, Ranwedzi Mphaphuli, who was perceived to be an enemy of the mission, was portrayed as:

a really cruel man, who took pleasure in a great deal of bloodshed and was often the instigator of battles between his two sons and their followers. He often had the bodies of fallen enemies brought to the capital village, where he defiled them and allowed them to lie unburied in the open country. Out of the bones of the same, he had war pipes [musical instruments] manufactured. From time to time, by his command, at great celebrations, human flesh was cooked together with the meat of oxen. Individual pieces were then placed in the thorn-bushes; from there his people had to take the pieces of flesh with their mouths and eat them, without touching them with their hands.<sup>13</sup>

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11 While Makwarela eventually came to succeed his father as *khosi*, during the period when his father was still alive his actual position was that of a *gota*. However, in common usage, a *gota* is referred to as *khosi* by his subjects. To show respect to somebody, one makes them greater than they are. On the other hand, people in positions of power often make people under them in the hierarchy smaller than they are. Throughout this paper, I refer to Makwarela as *khosi*.

12 A Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul: The Venda and the Missionaries*, (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 1994, in publication)

13 Wessmann, "Philippus Thai ein Treuer Nationalhelfer im Bawendalande", *Missionsschriften für Kinder*, 46 (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft, Berlin, s a [1902]), pp 1-2

Using hearsay against him to better construct Mphaphuli increasingly as “a really cruel man”, a warmonger, and, worse still, as a “cannibal” – the quintessential savage ruler - was a deliberate ploy. This could be used to emphasise the necessity for the continued missionary presence in the area to the mission authorities, and the congregations who funded them back in Germany. It could also be used to justify supporting any attempt by missionaries or settlers to win his people away from his authority – in their interpretation, he was simply too evil to continue to be the supreme authority over them.

Makwarela, on the other hand, was soon seen as:

a half-civilised Mowenda [MuVenda], he goes around neatly dressed in the European manner, has all sorts of household goods, some [of which] he himself skilfully manufactured, plays [the] concertina, possesses horses and learns to read and write quickly He is intelligent, quick-witted, skilful and is interested in everything One can have a far better conversation with him than with any of his people He does not beg; yet he has many wives and is still buying more<sup>14</sup>

But Makwarela had not yet been re-made in Christ. For the missionaries, this “half-civilised” exterior masked a far darker personality. Describing his early meetings with Klaas Koen, who would become the missionary to his area in 1877, mission sources recorded that the fact that Makwarela:

was nevertheless a raw heathen ... attested to by two human heads placed on top of poles Recently he had attacked a certain chief and killed him, together with his son The heads were signs of his victory Kuhn [Koen] argued that this was wrong and pleaded with him for them to be removed<sup>15</sup>

Modern scholars have managed to explain practices such as the display of the severed heads and the destruction of the corpses of enemies in more analytical ways. For example, in the context of Shaka and the Zulu kingdom, Carolyn Hamilton has drawn attention to E.V. Walters’ argument that Shaka’s autocratic and harsh rule - frequently seen as a sign of his madness – can be interpreted differently as “the effective use of terror as a principal means of government.”<sup>16</sup> In another intriguing, but at the same time profoundly disturbing argument, in her study of the Aztecs, Inga Clendinnen has looked at warfare, anthropophagy and the violence of ritual killings as forms of performance art intricately bound to the creation, maintenance and expansion of the state and social existence.<sup>17</sup>

Arising from the nineteenth century middle-class self-consciousness they were moulded to absorb in their training in the seminary, the early missionaries in

14 KAZB: Tagebuch der Station bei Ha Makoarela (Nicolaus Koen), 13 Juli 1877; *BMB*, 1878, p 490 (quotation) and G Sauberzweig-Schmidt, “Klaas Kuhn”, p 14

15 G Sauberzweig-Schmidt, “Klaas Kuhn”, p 14

16 C Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1998), p 18, discussing E V Walters, *Terror and Resistance: A Study of Political Violence with Case Studies of Some Primitive African Communities* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1969)

17 I Clendinnen, *Aztecs: an interpretation*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991) Following the lead of Gananath Obeyesekere, I differentiate between cannibalism and anthropophagy The former indicates “cannibal talk” in the wider context of contact and othering, the latter a complex ritual practice (G Obeyesekere, “British Cannibals’: Contemplation of an Event in the Death and Resurrection of James Cook, Explorer”, in K A Appiah and H L Gates (eds), *Identities* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1995), pp 7-32

Vendaland were unable to exercise these kinds of explanations.<sup>18</sup> It was by attacking, not understanding and explaining, practices such as these that the Mission would make advances and justify their presence in Vendaland to themselves and their superiors and friends of the Mission back home in Germany. In missionary discourse, either the enlightened exterior or the hidden “dark heart” of Makwarela’s personality – what I have called elsewhere the “top hat” or the “cannibal” side – would have to triumph.<sup>19</sup>

Missionary descriptions of their interaction with Makwarela make it clear that, for more than a decade, they believed that the light would defeat the darkness and they would win his soul for Christ:

He left his people in no doubt that he found it pleasing when many of them went to learn - and himself was the most regular at hearing the preaching and at learning in the school<sup>20</sup>

With great determination, he also learned to read and write. He also mastered the art of tailoring which, at that time, was unknown to his people.<sup>21</sup> To those who were enrolled as catechists under the instruction of the missionary, he presented well-made European clothing [which he had made himself]<sup>22</sup> Later, when other people were also taught by the missionary, he helped to show them how to cut and sew decent clothes for themselves.<sup>23</sup>

The missionaries were convinced that Makwarela felt “the truth of the Word of God deeply and seriously” but “the fear of diminishing his power and prestige as a chief” and his worries about “his many wives, the number of which he was always increasing, prevented him from seriously moving to convert” to Christianity.<sup>24</sup>

However, in my interpretation, the real world of everyday life and the politics of power in Vendaland at the time was very much more complex than that allowed for by missionary absolutes. From early on in his relationship with them, Makwarela had tried to tell the missionaries this by stating that he was not yet ready to become a Christian. To do so while many of his subjects remained unconverted would diminish his position as their ruler. He nevertheless had no objection to his people converting. Should they do so, he would have no objection to becoming the Christian king of a Christian people.<sup>25</sup>

In my reading, whatever his personal feelings about Christianity, Makwarela’s position as a ruler and a likely successor to his father conferred on him (subject to Ranwedzi Mphaphuli’s overriding authority) the status of supreme secular and religious authority in his area, the representative of his people and the channel of communication between the natural and supernatural. It was inconceivable that a person in such a position could turn his back on the ancestors and adopt the new God

18 For extensive discussion of the class background of the missionaries, their training and their dominant ideologies, see A Kirkaldy, “Capturing the Soul: Encounters between Berlin Missionaries and Tshivenda-Speakers in Late Nineteenth-Century Vendaland”, PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 2002, Chapter 3

19 A Kirkaldy, “‘Of top hats and cannibals’: Some Thoughts on Missionary Accounts of the Consumption of Human Body-Parts in Vendaland, c 1876-1897”, in N Duncan, P D Gqola, M Hofmeyr, T Shafer, F Malunga and M Mashige (eds), *Discourses on Difference: Discourses on Oppression* (The Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society, Cape Town, 2002), pp 211-243

20 *Bawenda-Freund*, 14, 54, 2 Quartal 1896, p 293

21 Sauberzweig-Schmidt, “Klaas Kuhn”, p 15

22 *Bawenda-Freund*, 14, 54, 2 Quartal 1896, p 293

23 Sauberzweig-Schmidt, “Klaas Kuhn”, p 15

24 *Bawenda-Freund*, 14, 54, 2 Quartal 1896, p 293

25 *Mitteilungen des Vereins „Heidenfreund“*, 5, 19, 1 Oktober 1887, p 3

– to do so would probably have cost him his throne. It would certainly have resulted in severe social dislocation.<sup>26</sup> His father had strongly warned him about this.<sup>27</sup> Prepared to embrace change, but cautious about destroying the social fabric, he realised that Christianity on missionary terms would stand in the way of his duties as king. Moreover, if he had any fears for his personal safety should he convert, these would have been very real. It is likely that the case of Khashane Mamatepha provided Makwarela (and other rulers in Vendaleland) with a salutary example here. An independent *kgoši* who paid tribute to Queen Modjaji, he was forcibly deposed by her in 1882 as a result of his conversion to Christianity. The Queen seems to have felt that the combination of Khashane and Missionary Fritz Reuter at the Medingen Mission Station in her area provided a threat to her authority. *Kgoši* Mamatepha was martyred for his faith in 1884.<sup>28</sup> It is extremely likely that the case would have been known, and commented on locally. Not only was there interaction between Tshivenda-speakers and the people of Modjaji through ties of trade and marriage, but Missionary Schwellnuss from Tshakhuma acted as mediator between Khashane, Reuter, Modjaji and Albasini, the local Superintendent for Native Affairs. He would presumably have discussed the case with converts and others on his return. These events clearly made a significant impression on Missionary Beuster from Ha-Tshivhase.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, there was the issue of conflict to deal with. Under conditions of warfare, conversion could well have been equated with treason, undermining the fighting-strength of the army. This was the situation that existed at the time, for in August 1886, Tshikalange led a night-time raid into Khosi Tshivhase's territory "killing two men and two women, and stealing fifteen head of cattle." This prompted a retaliatory raid by Tshivhase's forces, unleashing a series of raids and counter-raids.<sup>30</sup> Faced with the escalating conflict, the missionaries attempted to negotiate, if not peace, at least some lessening of the degree of violence. Visiting Mphaphuli's capital village at the beginning of November 1886, Missionaries Beuster and Wessmann (completing his year's orientation at Ha-Tshivhase) witnessed what I interpret to be a highly symbolic public ritual performance. Participation in the most dramatic roles of the ritual was not open to anyone. The central role was played by the *khoši*, ruler of the people and the link between the living and the ancestors. His main assistants were people who had gained respect by their age and (either directly or implicitly) their courage and their prowess in warfare. It seems that having killed an enemy in warfare was a prerequisite for taking part. At the very least, judging by the age of the participants, one had to have considerable experience of warfare:

In the meantime, the war-drums resounded. The chief and an old, abominable-looking and even more abominably gesticulating woman - who was supposed to have once stoned to death two of the enemy, during a war - these two, together with several old men, danced a wild war-dance. We heard people singing war songs approaching from the distance.<sup>31</sup>

26 See especially Kirkaldy, "Capturing the Soul", pp 330-337

27 *Bawenda-Freund*, 14, 54, 2 Quartal 1896, pp 294-295

28 *BMB*, 1882, pp 186 & 372-374; *BMB*, 1883, pp 187 & 375-379; *BMB*, 1884, p 121; *BMB*, 1885, pp 181-182 & 395-396; *BMB*, 1886, pp 216-217 & 1887, pp 421-422 and B Sundkler and C Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000), p 396. See also H T Wangemann, "Khashane Mamatepha, Ein Lebensbild aus Nord-Transvaal", Zweite Auflage, *Neue Missionsschriften*, 22 (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft, Berlin, 1890)

29 *BMB*, 1883, pp 376-377

30 *BMB*, 1887, pp 486-487

31 KAZB: Tagebuch der Station Ha Tsé vase (Carl Beuster), 13 November 1886, p 47. See also *BMB*, 1887, p 487

The big war drum which played a central role in the drama is reminiscent of *Ngoma-lungundu*, the legendary sacred object, protective force and secret weapon of the VhaSenzi ancestors of the three great ruling houses during their migration southwards from Zimbabwe into Vendale at some time prior to 1700.<sup>32</sup> Since the Mphaphulis traced their origins to this lineage, it is likely that the symbolism was deliberate. In addition, the actions performed with the severed hand of the dead enemy warrior may be interpreted as an allusion to the origins of the name Mphaphuli - “the hacker off of hands” – adopted after the founding ancestor of the group saved himself from being killed in a plot by hacking off the hand of his intended assassin.<sup>33</sup> The purportedly less concealed symbolism of the actions performed was explained by Beuster:

The big war-drum immediately resounded and, with our own eyes, we had to see how a wild [savage] warrior jumped about in front of the war-drum. In the one hand he had his weapon and in the other, tied to a long stick, he had the hand of a slain enemy; the hand of the wounded person who had been murdered the previous day. The body itself, tied to stakes, was brought into the court-yard. The big war-drum was dragged to where the body was and wild [savage] dances were performed there. Mpafuli [Mphaphuli] himself, stepped over his conquered [dead] foe and sat down on his chest, while the dancing warriors surrounded him. Then he suddenly shot up, tearing through the yard with enormous leaps; he pointed his bow and arrow in various directions, as a sign that his foes in that direction would quickly meet with the same fate. In all the time that I have been missionary amongst these heathens, I have never before experienced such a horrible, awful sight as this. Who would have thought that such conditions would once again return to here.<sup>34</sup>

The majority of the local people clearly did not share Beuster’s revulsion at the events that were taking place. Following normal custom, they offered their visitors food to eat. Mphaphuli and Makwarela were also not too disturbed by Beuster’s vociferous vocal objections to what he was witnessing, apparently seeing it as the kind of talk that could be expected from the missionary. However, although Makwarela had played an active role in the fighting, and was present at these acts, he had not played an active role in the ritual. This meant that, for the meanwhile, the missionaries were able to maintain their hopes for, and picture of, him.<sup>35</sup>

Freed from such scruples with regard to Ranwedzi Mphaphuli, they were nevertheless able to confirm earlier stereotypes about the *khosi*. The *Missions-Berichte* reported that “Beuster later heard that all sorts of wanton things were done to the body of the dead person in spite of his request.” Updating his original diary entry, the published version contained Beuster’s addition that:

It is said that after my departure, Mphaphuli had disfigured and smashed the corpse which I had asked to be buried. He had constructed pipes [flutes] from the bones of this victim, which will drive away and destroy the enemy, when they are blown during the war. They had heard that this man who had been killed had been a respected man, an artist in all sorts of iron crafts. Because of this, his body was valuable as it had been attributed with special

32 E Mudau, “Ngoma lungundu and the early invaders of Venda”, in N J van Warmelo (ed), *The Copper Miners of Musina*, see especially pp 10-11, 13-14, 17 & 28. See also Dzivhani, “The Chiefs of Venda”, pp 33-34. For discussion of the pre-colonial history of groups which came collectively to be known as the Vhavenda, see Kirkaldy, “Capturing the Soul”, pp 57-64.

33 Dzivhani, “The Chiefs of Venda”, pp 38 & 39 and N M N Ralushai, “Conflicting Accounts of Venda History with Particular Reference to the Role of Mutupo in Social Organization” Ph D thesis, Queen’s University of Belfast, 1977, p 164.

34 KAZB: Tagebuch der Station Ha Tsé vase (Carl Beuster), 13 November 1886, pp 47-48. See also *BMB*, 1887, p 487.

35 KAZB: Tagebuch der Station Ha Tsé vase (Carl Beuster), 13 November 1886, pp 48-49.



powers and abilities; an opportunity too good to be missed. Moreover, the witch-doctor, Magoro, is ardently hoping that during a fresh attack, a warrior of royal blood will fall into his hands, so that he can make a piece of clothing for himself from this person's skin; clothing which would protect him from all danger and which would endow him with supernatural powers. In the end he had to return to his home-land, without having fulfilled this wish<sup>36</sup>

The time was nevertheless not too distant when the missionaries would feel compelled to re-evaluate their analysis of Makwarela. According to their accounts, "1889 brought a drastic change." In May of that year, in a revival of previous conflicts between them, Makwarela and his brother Tshikalange became involved in a "bloody struggle" to consolidate their power bases as possible successors to Ranwedzi. The missionaries reported that Mphaphuli himself had been instrumental in engineering the outbreak of this conflict as he was worried about how powerful Tshikalange was becoming.<sup>37</sup>

Sporadic fighting, characterised by shifting alliances, continued for a number of years.<sup>38</sup> In contradiction to their attitude towards Makwarela's participation in the earlier fighting against Tshivhase, the missionaries came to believe that, because of the war with his brother, "in spite of all his Christian understanding," Makwarela "allowed himself to be pulled back into all sorts of cruelties."<sup>39</sup> They also strongly believed that "these battles served to increasingly shackle the chief to [his] heathen essence."<sup>40</sup> What caused them the gravest concern, however, were not the casualties which the war caused but the way in which victory was sealed in the capital after the return of the warriors. The victory ceremony involved a most dramatic ritual re-enactment of the process of destruction on the bodies of dead enemies, reportedly culminating in acts of anthropophagy, with *Khosi* Ranwedzi Mphaphuli playing an essential role in it. As Brother Johann Meister noted in his diary:

Monday, 27 July [1891]: We had promised to come [and attend to] the casualties again today. On the way, we heard that bodies of the enemies which had been carried away and the living captives were being taken to the capital of Mpafuli [Ranwedzi Mphaphuli], ... What did they want to do with them? We had no doubt that they would violate the bodies in their extreme heathen manner. But would he not also possibly lift up his hand against the captives? With Mpafuli anything is possible. Therefore we had to go to him. We found everything that had been reported to us [to be] true. Already, the warriors were awaiting the signal to begin with their abominations. I could not resist, I had to express to Makoarele [Makwarela] my great grief that he personally was taking part in such horrors, he that was so close to the Kingdom of God. He excused himself by saying that he would not have carried out these deeds were it not for his father Mpafuli. Mpafuli also promised Br. Beuster that he would do nothing evil to the captives. We did not want to wait at the capital any longer, and witness the horrors. The bodies were already laid out in the *Khoro* [public courtyard] for the Dance of the King, which would be carried out upon their dead bodies while he desecrated them with his spear. Then they were to be cut and torn into

36 *BMB*, 1887, p 488

37 KAZB: Tagebuch der Station Ha Tsévasé (Carl Beuster), 12 Mai 1889, pp 50-53; 17 bis 18 Mai 1889, pp 53-56; 25 Mai 1889, pp 56-57; 30 Mai 1889, p 60 & 5 Juni 1899, pp 60-61; *Bawenda-Freund*, 14, 54, 2 Quartal 1896, p 297 (quotation) and *BMB*, 1890, pp 238, 465 & 478-481

38 KAZB: Tagebuch der Station Ha Tsévasé (Carl Beuster), 18 Mai 1889, pp 55 & 60-61; *Bawenda-Freund*, 8, 30, Juli 1890, pp 97-99; *Bawenda-Freund*, 14, 54, 2 Quartal 1896, p 297 and *BMB*, 1890, pp 238-239, 465-481 & 484-488; *BMB*, 1891, pp 460-461; *BMB*, 1892, pp 271-272 & 551-553

39 *BMB*, 1890, p 239

40 *Bawenda-Freund*, 14, 54, 2 Quartal 1896, p 297

pieces, the bones separated out from each other and made into pipes, part of the flesh cooked and eaten, part given to the smiths to be put into the smelting oven with the iron-ore to make good iron. We left them and rode away from there.<sup>41</sup>

Bad as things were, they became even worse. The struggle having ended indecisively, a further struggle broke out between the brothers in 1893.<sup>42</sup> During the course of this war, starting on 30 September 1893, Makwarela's warriors reportedly had to undergo an elaborate ritual at the capital before going into the field. Missionary Reinhold Wessmann (by then, stationed at Georgholtz) claimed to have witnessed it. According to him, "Heathenism again shone through in the chief and came alive in the people."<sup>43</sup> The "really heathen festival" was worse than anything he had "experienced before". It lasted for several days, with people "from all sides" attending. There were speeches, incantations, ritual washings, feastings and sacrifices. Wessmann also wrote that "the flesh of human beings [was eaten]". The "heathens" believed that this would "make them strong and invincible and prevent them from being wounded." Having "got rid of his clothes", and with this, the trappings of civilisation, "like all his staff," Makwarela "wore only a loin cloth." He sprinkled his "people, who were also naked, ... with boiling water." Cut-wounds were then "made on their chests and on their backs. These hurt very much after they had been smeared with strong medicine and this made the people restless." Having "grabbed hold of a hot hammer which had been lying in boiling water", Makwarela then "gave everyone a hard hit of the hammer on the chest and on the back. Burning wood was also placed on their feet to prove their loyalty. Strong medicine which was sniffed at, transformed those present into ecstasy." As the ceremony reached its climax, "a thorn tree with three to four inch thorns was erected in the middle of the gathering-place. The inside of the tree was covered with boiled meat so that the bits of meat made it look like a Christmas-tree." All those who had "killed somebody in their lives were told to come forward ... [and] eat the hot meat, which was between the thorns, off the tree. They had to do this using their mouths only, without touching anything with their hands." Overcome by the excitement of the occasion, the "participants rushed forward in a wild hurry. The tree fell over and with this the whole crowd rushed onto the long thorns, which pierced their naked bodies." At the close of the ceremony, the *khosi* danced in front of his people, cheered on by the crowd.<sup>44</sup> When Wessmann later challenged Makwarela on "the futility of the feast", the *khosi* reportedly "laughed and said that the heathens everywhere are laughing at him. They say he has no power. He now wants to show them what he is capable of."<sup>45</sup>

The formulaic rendering of the event clearly shows that Wessmann was relating hearsay, at the very best – this account could have come straight from the pages of

41 KAZB: Tagebuch der Johannes Meister vom 1 Juli bis 30 September 1891, Ha Tsevasé, Acta der Berliner Missionsgesellschaft betreffend Missionsstationen, Tagebücher der Missionare auf der Station Ha Tsevasé, 1891 - 1900, (II), Abt III, Fach 5, No 14, entries for 24 & 27 Juli 1891, pp 5-9 (quotation, 27 Juli 1891, pp 8-9) See also *Bawenda-Freund*, 11, 43, Oktober 1893, pp 168-169 and *BMB*, 1892, pp 552-553 (quotation, p 553)

42 *Bawenda-Freund*, 11, 42, Juli 1893, pp 161-162 and *BMB*, 1894, pp 200, 364 & 366-367

43 *Bawenda-Freund*, 14, 54, 2 Quartal 1896, p 297

44 KAZB: Tagebuch der Station Georgholtz (Reinholdt Wessmann) 30 September 1893, pp 38-40 See also *Bawenda-Freund*, 14, 54, 2 Quartal 1896, pp 297-298 and *BMB*, 1894, pp 379-380

45 KAZB: Tagebuch der Station Georgholtz (Reinholdt Wessmann), p 40 and *BMB*, 1894, p 380

H. Rider Haggard or Edgar Rice Burroughs. Whether Wessmann had seen what he described with his own eyes or not did not matter for him, nor did it for the mission people back home. For them, what mattered was that the report confirmed their pre-existing ideas of savage people.

While Makwarela would continue to allow the mission to operate in his lands, and there were times when he still met with the missionaries, things were never the same again.<sup>46</sup> For the Berliners, Makwarela was about to descend back into “complete heathenism”. Henceforth, he was in the same camp as his father.<sup>47</sup>

It is clear that, at a conscious level, for the missionaries, what marked *Khosi* Makwarela’s return to “complete heathenism” was his alleged consumption of war *muti* containing human body parts as one of its ingredients. They did not describe his actions as cannibalism, or him as a cannibal. However, their focus on the consumption of “human flesh” as they called it (German does not differentiate between “flesh” and “meat”), clearly demonstrates that they saw his actions as *Menschenfresserei*, and not as a ritual designed to enhance the prowess and martial spirit of his followers.

For the Berlin missionaries, cannibalism, which included the consumption of body parts of enemies captured in war, was the supreme symbol of “heathenism” and “savagery”, an emblem of all that was strangest, most incomprehensible and horrible in African society. It was inconceivable to them that Christians (people who were fully “civilised” or fully “human”) could be cannibals, since humankind was created in the image of God and the human body housed the soul. One could not sink lower into “bestiality” than by consuming the image of God and the house of the spirit given by Him. Yet, the missionaries took it for granted that, since they were freed from such scruples by their ignorance of the Law of God, “heathens” (read also “savages” or “brutes”) could sink to such depths that they could treat the human body as a source of food. In their “blindness” and “superstition” they still had some idea of powers greater than themselves. As such, they could also ingest parts of the human body as sources of power. This, the missionaries believed, was the case not only in Africa but also in other parts of the world such as the South Pacific and, indeed, in the distant “heathen” past of the Germans themselves.<sup>48</sup> In their opinion, in Africa, including South Africa, it was only through the spread of the Gospel, backed up by colonial authority, that cannibalism could be eradicated.<sup>49</sup>

46 *Bawenda-Freund*, 14, 54, 2 Quartal 1896, pp 298-299; *Bawenda-Freund*, 15, 58, 2 Quartal 1897, p 352 and *BMB*, 1894, pp 201 & 368-369; *BMB*, 1896, pp 112-113 & 350; *BMB*, 1897, pp 90 & 112; *BMB*, 1898, pp 6-8 & 11; *BMB*, 1900, pp 691-692

47 R Wessmann, *The Bawenda of the Spelonken (Transvaal): A contribution towards the psychology and folk-lore of African peoples*, translated from the German original text by L Weinthal (‘The African World’ Ltd, London, 1908), pp 133-134

48 Anon, “Etwas aus der Heidenzeit des deutschen Vaterlandes Die Bekehrung der Sachsen in der Gegend von Hermansburg”, *Neue Missionsschriften*, 6 (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft, Berlin, 1890); A Merensky, (a) “Die Menschen-Fresserei in Afrika”, *Missionsschriften für Kinder*, 25 (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft, Berlin, s a [1895]) & (b) “Wie die Menschenfresser auf Tongoa Christen wurden”, *Missionsschriften für Kinder*, 23 (Buchhandlung der Berliner evangelischen Missionsgesellschaft, Berlin, s a [1895]); H T Wangemann, (a) “Die Menschenfresser im Bapedilande”, *Berliner Missions-Traktate*, Neue Folge, V, Dritte Auflage (Selbstverlag des Missionhauses, Berlin, 1883) & (b) “Gerettete Menschenfresser in Botshabelo”, *Berliner Missions-Traktate*, Neue Folge, VI, Dritte Auflage (Selbstverlag des Missionhauses, Berlin, 1883)

49 See especially Merensky, “Die Menschenfresserei in Afrika”, pp 2-4 & 16

The missionaries clearly had no understanding of the different meanings of “eating”, which may range from the purely metaphorical indication of a process of domination, to the very act of incorporating something edible. Their Pietistic Lutheran background also precluded them from exhibiting any understanding of the spiritual aspects of anthropophagy as a ritual practice. Anyway, they used the trope and the imagery of cannibalism as the ultimate weapon in their othering of non-Christian Africans, just as the Portuguese had done with the pictures brought back from Brazil by Hans Staden in the mid-sixteenth century and the British did during their wars of colonial aggression in nineteenth century West Africa.<sup>50</sup>

Surprisingly, against the background of the linguistic work of the Berlin missionaries, I have not as yet been able to trace any discussion of the morphology of the term “cannibal” in mission sources. However, as far as I have been able to ascertain, local terms for “cannibalism” de-humanise the perpetrators. Through this, they are condemned and placed beyond the pale of gentile, or “civilised”, society.<sup>51</sup> In my reading, the only exceptions to this rule could lie in acts of anthropophagy where the horror of the act was outweighed by the benefits accruing to society. War *muti* and other rituals surrounding warfare would have been just such an exception.

Missionary interpretation took no account of these subtleties. For them, *Khosi* Makwarela had simply reverted to type. In their opinion, his actions fitted neatly into the paradigm of “cannibalism” as an icon of “heathenism”, in other words, “otherness”.

50 A Kirkaldy and A Wirz, “Picturing the soul: missionary encounters in late 19th and early 20th century South Africa”, *Working Papers on African Societies*, 44 (Das Arabische Buch, Berlin, 2000), pp 41-43 For example, Alan Maxwell Boisragon argued that Benin once had a highly-developed civilisation which then degenerated into savagery with human sacrifice, the killing of baby twins and cannibalism He went on to depict the British intervention as being humanitarian See A M Boisragon, *The Benin Massacre, by Captain Alan Boisragon, one of the two survivors* (Methuen & Co, London, 1897)

51 The Tshivenda dictionary term for cannibal is *Lilema* [N J van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda-English* (J L van Schaik, Pretoria, 1989), p 128] However, many people I have spoken to have never heard this term Instead, in conversation, *lila-vhathu* is usually used (This was also the term that a Professor in the department of Tshivenda at UNIVEN gave me when I asked her “what is a cannibal in Tshivenda?” Personal communication, Prof A E Khuba, UNIVEN) This also refers to “one who takes parts from corpses for medicine” The root is the term “*la*”, meaning to eat or enjoy (be the beneficiary of) (Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, pp 128 & 124) In Tshivenda, the class 1 noun prefix *mu-* (plural *vha-*), without exception, indicates persons (Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, p 28 and D Ziervogel, P J Wentzel and T N Makuya, *A Handbook of the Venda Language*, [University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1972], p 12) For example, *munna* = man, plural *vhanna*; *musadzi* = woman, plural *vhasadzzi* and *musidzana* = girl, plural *vhasidzana*] The class 5 noun prefix *li-* (plural *ma-*) refers to objects (“things”), certain body parts, certain fruits and certain categories of aliens, for example Europeans (*likhuwa*, plural *makhuwa*) (Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, p 28 and Ziervogel, Wentzel & Makuya, *A Handbook of the Venda Language*, pp 18-19). Objects, for example, *liga* = step, plural *maga* and *litavha* = big mountain, plural *matavha* Body parts, for example, *lila*, the great intestine or colon, plural *mala* and *lino* = tooth, plural *mano* Fruits, for example, *lifula* = marula fruit, plural *mafula* Thus, literally translated *lila-vhathu* means “the thing which eats people” (as Europeans are “white things”) In an interesting parallel with accounts by Missionary Alexander Merensky and Mission Director Wangemann of cannibals being referred to among the Pedi as *Makchema* (“biters”), a member of the Mphephu royal family told me that the Tshivenda term was *luma vhatu* (singular, *luma muthu*), literally “those who bite” (Personal communication, *Vho* Lettie Mphephu-Nengudza, sister of the Late *Khosi* P R Mphephu and Van Warmelo, *Venda Dictionary*, p 146 Cf A Merensky, “Die Menschenfresserei in Afrika”, pp 5-6 and H T Wangemann, “Die Menschenfresser im Bapedilande”, pp 2-3 & 13)

The psychologically minded might speak of a missionary obsession with the violation of human bodies and ask whether this was not echoing their European experience. For one, there is a rich imagery of man-eating-man in European fairy-tales such as the story of Hansel and Gretel, but also in religion, in shipwreck stories and generally in fantasies about the wild. Secondly, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, innovations in military technology had made wars vastly more destructive than ever before. Staggering numbers of people were uprooted, dismembered and “devoured” in these conflicts. My thinking about Europe’s hidden darkness here is perhaps best revealed through a reference to literature. In Arthur Japin’s fictionalised account of the life of Prince Kwasi Boachi of Ashanti, the young royal considers the horror of the Dutch Commissioner van Drunen at sacrifices performed on the royal graves. Japin has Kwasi remarking:

As a boy, the routine executions were little different to me from the slaughter of goats. Later in life this boyhood insensibility filled me with shame, until I discovered that a man’s life counted for just as little in Europe at that time. The wars fought between 1792 and 1815 alone caused the sacrifice of one million five hundred and thirty thousand lives, not counting the loss of life in epidemics spread in the course of these conflicts. Another two hundred thousand souls died in the war between Russia and Turkey, and an equal number in the Polish uprising. At the very time that van Drunen was startled by a few heads lying on his path, tens of thousands of heads were rolling in the Caucasus.<sup>52</sup>

Beyond psychology, we should also look at the historical context of the argument about the situation in Vendaland. Stories about cannibalism are necessarily stories about contact. It thus makes sense to ask whether the “conspicuous anthropophagy” was not a response to colonial expansion, as Gananath Obeyesekere has argued with respect to the South Pacific, and Michael Taussig before him with regard to Amazonia and the Congo Free State in the period of the rubber boom.<sup>53</sup> The Berlin missionaries, for their part, happened to arrive in the Transvaal at a time when many South African societies were going through a period of severe upheaval. They either suffered from the consequences of earlier wars, or they had to fend off foreign intruders such as the land-grabbing white settlers, or they were involved in wars of succession. Hence the importance of rituals of appropriation, retribution and bonding. And these in turn supplied enough horror stories to those who had an interest to denigrate some people and to frighten others.

Like his father, Ranwedzi Mphaphuli, Makwarela Mphaphuli was attempting to come to terms with the encroaching Boers, the missionaries and internal power-struggles within his society. His father attempted to gain control over the situation by

52 A Japin, *The Two Hearts of Kwasi Boachi*, translated by Ina Rilke (Chatto & Windus, London, 2000), p 41. Kwasi Boachi and Kwame Poku were two young African princes given to the Dutch by the King of Ashanti, *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua I, as security for a deal they had brokered over illegal slave trading. The two boys arrived at the court of King Willem I of the Netherlands in 1837. Kwame later committed suicide. Kwasi ended up as a tea plantation owner in Java. After the bankruptcy of this plantation, he settled in the village of Bantar Peteh. He died, following a long illness, in the military hospital at Buitenzorg on 9 July 1904.

53 M J Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study of Terror and Healing* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1987) and Obeyesekere, “‘British Cannibals’” But consider the qualifications of Peter Geschiere, who has stressed the fact that the trope of cannibalism was used by Africans and Germans alike, albeit with different things in mind. The Maka used it to differentiate between kin and non-kin, the Germans as a marker of savagery. [P. Geschiere, “Rubber and Cannibalism: The Germans, the Maka and the Rubberboom in South Cameroon (1900 - 1914)” Unpublished paper presented to the seminar on “Fantasy Spaces - The Power of Images in a Globalizing World”, 27-29 August 1998, Amsterdam.]

permitting the missionaries to operate in the lands of his son. He would thus have access to them without having to face a direct threat to his authority.

Makwarela attempted to deal with the tensions by forming a close working relationship with the missionaries. It is clear that he found the skill of literacy and the access to Western material culture which they brought useful. It also seems that he found the religion that they brought appealing. At first, it seemed likely that he would convert. Over time, and involved in a series of battles for succession with his brother, he realised that this was impossible. Conversion to orthodox mission-interpreted Christianity would alienate him from the majority of his subjects, who followed African Religion. He would no longer be able to perform the rituals essential for the maintenance of social stability. If he was not assassinated, he would either have been deposed by his father or, through the loss of most of his following, lost his succession struggle with Tshikalange.

Makwarela was trying to operate creatively in a situation of dynamic change. For him, conversion was only one strategy amongst many to deal with social cohesion, encroachment and successory struggles. The missionaries could not accommodate this. They wanted more than his royal favour - he was to be either a "heathen" or a "Christian", either a savage or a civilised man - there were no shades of grey in between. This static opposition was crucial to their entire world-view. To challenge it would be to negate all their work and sacrifice in the area.

At a deeper level, it does not matter whether or not Makwarela Mphaphuli "really" committed an act, or acts, of anthropophagy – a ritual practice which manipulates symbolism in common with the Christian Eucharist. Either by doing so, or by allowing the missionaries to believe that he had done so, he was saying that what they believed had no power over him any more. Even if, by some miracle, he had managed to retain his throne, accepting a position of leadership under and by the grace of the white God would in reality involve ruling under and by the grace of the white missionaries. Instead, Makwarela had reclaimed his throne and the right to rule his people through his birthright and the power of African Religion.

### **Abstract**

Berlin missionary accounts of warfare among Tshivenda-speakers make a number of references to cases where the bodies of fallen enemies were “abused” or “defiled” by, or on the orders of, the rulers of victorious factions. A number of these accounts also describe the purported consumption or use of body parts severed from the vanquished.

On one level, one may simply reject these tales. Stories about cannibalism were arguably the most extreme form of “othering” perpetuated by Europeans against Africans. In their obsession with cultural evolutionism, they dichotomised what they saw as their own developed “civilisations” and African “savagery” or “barbarism”; the “light of civilisation” and the “darkness of heathenism”.

In this article, I have come to a different conclusion. By means of a case study of conflicts involving various factions among the people during the late nineteenth century, I argue that it does not really matter whether the events described in these accounts “really” happened or not. Rather, what is important is that the contending parties allowed, or even encouraged, the missionaries to believe that they did. From this starting point, I attempt to deconstruct some of their possible meanings and value for missionaries and Africans.

### **Opsomming**

#### **Die Vertering van die Christendom: Die Dekonstruksie van die Verslae van Sendelinge oor Kannibalisme in Vendaland in die laat Negentiende Eeu.**

Die verslae van Berlynse sendelinge oor oorlogvoering tussen Tshivendasprekers maak gewag van ‘n paar gevalle waar die liggame van ontslape vyande “geskend” of “onteer” is deur, of in opdrag van die heersers van die oorwinnaars. Etlike van hierdie verslae beskryf ook die beweerde eet of gebruik van verwyderde liggaamsdele.

Op een vlak sou ‘n mens hierdie verslae eenvoudig kon verwerp. Verhale van kannibalisme is seker een van die uiterste vorme van die vervreemding van Afrikane gepleeg deur Europeërs. ‘n Obsessie met kulturele evolusionisme het gelei tot ‘n teenoorstelling van die eie ontwikkelde “beskawings” en die “woestheid” of “barbarisme” van die Afrikane; van die “lig van die beskawing” en die “duisternis van die heidendom”.

In hierdie artikel kom ek tot ‘n ander gevolgtrekking. Deur middel van ‘n gevallestudie van konflikte waaraan verskillende faksies binne die Mphaphuli-groep gedurende die laat negentiende eeu deelgeneem het, argumenteer ek dat die eintlike kwessie nie is of die gebeure beskryf in hierdie verslae “werklik” gebeur het nie. Dit gaan eerder daaroor dat die strydende partye toegelaat het, en selfs aktief gesorg het daarvoor, dat die sendelinge geglo het dat kannibalisme wel plaasgevind het. Op grond van hierdie benadering poeg ek dan om hierdie gebeure se moontlike betekenis en waarde vir beide sendelinge en Afrikane te dekonstrueer.

### **Key words**

anthropophagy, Venda, missionaries, Mphaphuli, othering, warfare, “darkness”, “heathenism”, violence.