

The Properties of the Celestial Bodies in Tshivenda Culture

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Abstract

Everyone sees the celestial bodies such as the sun, moon and the stars crossing the sky. No one really knows their importance in life of human beings, animals and plants although their properties affect their daily lives. The paper seeks to investigate the importance and properties of the sun, moon and stars to establish the extent they affect the lives of everything in the world.

1. Introduction

The New Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol 17 of (1999:798) speaks of the celestial bodies as the sun, the moon and the stars. The sun is defined as:

“The dominant body of the solar system, the sun is Earth’s nearest star, eight light-minutes 93,000,000 miles away from it. It is a typical star, approximately midway between the largest and the smallest, the brightest and the faintest star known.

Some of the cultures on earth worshipped the sun as a deity and was the subject of physical study. The sun emits energy overall wave lengths, from X-rays to radio waves. Approximately 40% of the emitted energy is in the visible portion of the spectrum, 50% is in the infrared and the remainder is in the ultraviolet. It is considered as the:

Star around which the earth and the other components of the solar system revolve. It is a dominant body of the system, comprising of more than 99% of its entire mass. The sun is a source of an enormous amount of energy, a portion of which provides the Earth with the light and heat necessary to support life. The New Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol 11 (199:387)

2. The context of heavenly bodies for Africans, with reference to sun “Duvha”: A perspective of Vhavenda people.

The sun “duvha” is the most important heavenly body for African communities and the Vhavenda people in particular. The concept ‘duvha’ has two meanings, namely a day and a sun. Reference as to which meaning the speaker is referring to, is drawn from the context. Africa is a sunny continent but its communities use the sun to their own advantage. Most of their technological activities in relation to food preservation are dependent on the sun. Africans have adapted their lifestyles to suit the harsh sunny conditions. The sun denotes that they should go and work in the field as there is no weather disturbance. Hence, a sunny day is the most effective day for Africans. In African communities food does not rot. Every food in access is dried up in the sun for future use.

Dried seeds are given to relatives to farm with. These are relatives or ex-neighbours who come to visit. The dried seeds can also be cooked as food for the journey when visitors travel back home.

2.1 The Vhavenda and the concept ‘sun’

The Vhavenda people rely much on *duvha* ‘sun’ for their well being. During autumn we have a lot of fresh vegetables. Vegetables in excess are dried up to be used during winter when there is scarcity of them. The leaves are dried up cooked or raw. When leaves are cooked first and then dried up, we call this ‘*mukusule*’. Those that are dried up raw, we call ‘*mutshovhotshovho*’.

Like in all African cultures, ‘*duvha*’ is the source of energy. When it is winter, people bask in the sun to warm themselves. During summer, water in containers is put in hot spots. This is bath water. In summer the sun heats water for a variety of use. Hot water in containers makes it easy for ladies to boil water for porridge in a short space of time.

The sun assists in washing clothes. Soaked clothes placed in hot spots help ladies to remove stains. Vhavenda people value the sun highly. When there is excess meat, they dry it up under a shade in a hot day. The sun is used as a preservative for many of African food. This preservative is free from chemicals.

Beans are eaten fresh and dried. When they are fresh they are cooked and are eaten with porridge but when they are dry they are cooked and are eaten as part of African staple food. Ground nuts are important kind of food for Vhavenda people. When crushed, they are mixed with dry or fresh vegetables. This makes a wonderful flavour in cold days.

The Vhavenda people like other African communities boast to have reaped several bags of mealies, dried vegetables, dried fruits, nuts and a variety of beans. The only hope for the communities to boast acquisition of excess food is the sun. Every activity revolves around the sun. African learners are much acquainted with the earth revolving around the sun for 365 and quarter days because all activities are regulated by the sun.

2.2 The Sun as a culture determinant

As Africa is a hot continent, this affects people’s culture, mainly on clothing. Bright colours repel heat. The yesteryears people used to be half-naked. The upper part of the body remained uncovered. One would rarely smell bad because the upper part of the body was exposed to fresh air. Most of the deodorants are air pollutants and they aggravate respiratory sicknesses.

Males were expected to endure harsh sunny conditions and this made their bodies to adapt accordingly. The sun as a natural source of energy makes chopped wood to dry for cooking fire. It makes grass to dry up for roofing and for household use.

2.3 The Sun as an object of divination

The sun in most of African figures of speech is personified. It is made to assume a human personality. The Vhavenda people would say ‘*li otsha nama*’ literally translated, ‘the sun roasts meat.’ This emphasises the perception that the sun is a powerful heavenly body. Though so many kilometres away from the earth, it regulates what happens on earth.

Stories are told of age when at times the sun was seen as red. It was said that the gods were crossed at the rulers and their subjects.

2.4 The Sun as the equation of Greetings and Time

The Vhavenda people like other African cultures’ greetings revolve around the sun. In the morning they refer to the rising sun, mid day they refer to the position of the sun for time. Time to African cultures refers to the position of the sun at any given time of the day. Surprisingly, during cloudy day they can still determine the position of the sun.

The sun is a natural time. Shadow sticks determine the time of the day. By using the shadow sticks African people were able to understand directions. Shadows of trees or buildings denote time of the day.

The sun is the most effective time of African people. If they agree to meet mid day, there no options about mid day, they would all assemble. In our modern times, the sun still plays a role. Tough games are played in the late hours of the day. Cooking and working in the field are early and late activities because of the escape from harsh sun rays.

3. Properties of the moon

The New Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol 8 (19 :299) defines the moon as:

Any natural satellite orbiting a major planet. It is a sole natural satellite of the Earth. It revolves around the planet from west to east at a mean distance of about 384,400km (237,900miles)

The moon is less than one third the size of the Earth, having a diameter of only 3,476km(2,160 miles)at its equator. It is believed that the moon rotates about its own axis in 29 1/2days, which is identical to the time it takes to complete its orbit around the earth. The moon is the second largest celestial body, the larger one being the sun. The moon emits light. The light is not as strong as that of the sun. People could see during darkness because of the moon light. Among the properties of the moon the following are of importance.

3.1 Emission of moonlight

The moon has the properties of emitting moonlight. It appears when it is dark. When the sun sets down it is then the time when the moon shines. The moonlight and the sunlight are enemies that cannot exists together. They cannot stay together. The light that the moon gives is small and it is not compared to that of the sun. It enables people who walk on foot to see a little bit.

3.2 identifying different periods

The moon has the properties of differentiating or identifying different periods of lives of human kind. During new moon it is found that people who are sick psychologically they are exacerbated in their sickness. Experience tells us that the sickness is at ebb tide. During that period the lunatic should not be irritated for fear of exacerbate their psychological sickness. If they are irritated their sickness worsened. During this period of the month the lunatic persons are not at a healthy state.

3.3 Cause rainfall periods

During the new moon it is believed that that moon is in darkness. The moon, the sun and the earth are in a straight line. One cannot see the moon during that period. It is believed that there is plenty of rains because the Vhavenda community believes that the rain is washing the moon so that it should be new. This period is termed new moon. It is believed that raindrops do not like moonlight in the sky. Soon than later, one would see a small piece of the moon in the sky forming a crescent circle.

That period is determined by the position of the moon in the sky.

3.4 Determination of women periods

The moon has the properties of determining women periods of menstruation. Women do menstruate once a month. This period known as *u vhona nwedzi* 'to see the moon'. Women menstruate when the moon goes down to new moon. When the moon is dark, they would menstruate.

3.5 Vhalemba moon

According to the Vhalemba culture, a group of the Vhavenda community would observe the period of new ones every month. They observe this period by shaving their heads. When the time arrives to a new moon they are believed to pour water in a dish and have power to look in the dish of water. It is believed that they have power of seeing the new moon in the dish. It is believed that all communities would always see the moon later than the Vhalemba group of the community saw the moon as a new moon in the form of crescent in the western part of the sky.

4. Stars as celestial bodies

Stars are some of the celestial bodies. These are found in huge numbers.

The New Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol. 28(199:198) defines star and star clusters as

Stars are massive self-luminous objects that shine by radiation derived from internal energy sources of the billions of stars that make up the universe many occur in pairs, multiple systems and clusters. The embers of such stellar groups are physically related through common origin and held together by mutual gravitational attraction

The following would be discussed for their importance in the lives of the humanity.

4.1 Determination of periodicals

There are stars that are believed to have the properties of determination of periodicals. Such stars are termed *tshilimela*. The *tshilimela* consists of three stars. It is formed by three stars called *Tshidzatshapo*, *Ntangi wa kugala* and *Ngwaniwapo*. When these stars are seen in the sky, they determine the periods during which the Vhavenda farmers could till or cultivate their soil. When these stars appear or visible in the sky, they inform the Vhavenda community when to cultivate their fields, when to sow their seeds, when to hoe and when to enjoy the crops from their fields. They inform the Vhavenda farmers when to plant their seeds and stop planting maize seeds. When these stars reach a certain height in the sky one would know that *dzima* 'time for ploughing' by farmers has arrived. And period of stopping to sow maize seeds would be determined.

4.2 Fortelling death of a prominent person in the community

Sometimes people may see a star falling crossing the sky. It is termed by modern scientists as falling stars. It is believed that when one sees the falling stars, it foretells death of a prominent person in the community. It is believed that people are represented by star. The bigger the star shows the status or prominence of the person is in the community. When such a star is seen crossing the sky, one would know that a prominent person had or would die.

4.3 Determination of dawn

There is one star that comes from the east in the morning. It is seen in winter only. This star is called *Masase* by the Vhavenda community. Some Modern scientists called it Saturn. It is known as one of the planets in the sky. If one sees it rising from the east one would know that dawn has arrived. The Vhavenda woman considers it as the time of waking for pounding maize meal when it is still early.

4.4 Milky way

This is a constellation of stars seen crossing the sky. It is formed by many stars forming a wide band of stars crossing the horizon like white band of stars. When it is visible it informs one that we are nearing dawn.

5. Conclusion

It is without doubt that the sun, the moon and different stars have properties to life to such an extent that human beings and animal and plant life in general depend on. Each of the heavenly body has its importance as have been shown above. One who does not know anything about heavenly bodies may construe that these heavenly bodies are things without value to human, animal and plant lives. Man should know and understand their importance in life.

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