

MUNGOME

VhaVenda Diviners

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VhaVenda

The Venda (VhaVenda) are an ethnic group residing in South Africa, living mostly near the South African-Zimbabwean border. Originating from the Great Lakes of Central Africa, they migrated to the Southpansberg Mountains in far northern South Africa.

The Venda culture is built on a vibrant mythical belief system, which is reflected in their artistic style. Water is an important theme to the Venda and there are many sacred sites within their region where the Venda conjure up their ancestral spirits. They believe zwidutwane, (water spirits), live at the bottom of waterfalls. These beings are only half-visible; they only have one eye, one leg, and one arm. One half can be seen in this world and the other half in the spirit world. The Venda would take offerings of food to them because the zwidutwane cannot grow things underwater.

One of the most sacred sites of the Venda is Lake Fundudzi. Suspicion surrounds the lake, which is fed by the Mutale River yet does not appear to have an outlet. It is also said that you can sometimes hear the Tshikona song although no one appears to be there. The Venda people have a very special relationship with Crocodiles. The area where they live is filled with these dangerous reptiles. The Venda believe that the brain of the Crocodile is very poisonous, therefore they are given right of way by the Venda who do not even hunt them for food. - Siyabona Africa

The Venda people are not very populous but they have a rich cultural heritage. The Venda culture is closely associated with the spirit world and they express their beliefs and customs through art decorations on their structures, pottery and woodcarving. Venda traditions among the people of the Limpopo province differ from other ethnic groups. While revering ancestors, Venda beliefs include a white python and water sprites that need to be nurtured.

Water is so sacred to this group that they associate every water source with this divine Python god. They are mythical people and believe water is sacred, therefore regarding Lake Fundudzi as holy and sanctified.

What really sets the Venda apart from other groups in South Africa is the role of art in the community. Artists are called by the spirit world through unusual dreams and visions to fulfil their destinies, giving their work a supernatural energy. This places them on the same social plane as a traditional healer. - South African Tourism

Mungome

Diviners among the Venda (VhaVenda) people of South Africa are called Mungome.

For the average person, good or ill fortune, including sickness, often is controlled by his or her immediate ancestors. When there is trouble or an unexplained death in the family, a diviner (mungome) is consulted, the magical divining dice are thrown, and a prognosis is made. In many cases the interpretation will be that one of the ancestors must be appeased, usually through the ritual sacrifice of a black goat for commoners or a sheep for royals at the grave of the troublesome ancestor.

A mungome uses an intricately carved wooden divining bowl (ndilo) to discover witches. Belief in witchcraft is very prevalent even among the educated, and although the killing of witches is considered murder, it occurs regularly. When the diviner is unsuccessful, a witch doctor (nanga) is consulted. Such witch doctors are thought to have magical powers in addition to divining skills and can place spells on people, who believe that they can die unless they are cleansed by the nanga who cast the original spell. - Kwekudee



Ndilo - Venda Divining Bowl
Photo from Object Ecologies

The ndilo is circular in form, supported by three legs. It is made of wood and fibre, and has a cowrie shell placed in the centre. The rim is carved with semi-abstract markings that resemble reptiles such as pythons and crocodiles. These animals are symbolic to various VhaVenda clans. The cowrie shell is believed to represent female genitals, as well as the wealth of the chief.

The ndilo is a bowl used for divining the identity of witches.

The mungome (diviner) are thought to have been the only individuals who were permitted to access the ndilo. When the ndilo was in use, the bowl was filled with water, and seeds were placed inside. The bowl would tell the diviner a story based on the movement of the seeds on the water, in relation to the carved images beneath. When the ritual was performed, the mungome uttered their interpretations of the movement of the seeds, and their conclusions would be based on the dynamics of the community, such as who could be considered a witch. - Object Ecologies

Some Venda mingoma possess divining bowls, ndilo ya lupangwa or ndilo ya lufhali, which are only used for the detection of vhaloi. The divining bowl varies in size from an object 12 inches in diameter, like the wooden platter, ndilo, to a larger bowl about 18 inches in diameter. It is carved from a solid piece of wood to a dept of from 1 ½ to 2 inches with a broad flattened border. Realistic representations and other designs symbolizing different phases of the religious and magical conceptions of the BaVenda are engraved around this border and in the bed of the bowl. The muloi is discovered by the determining of the sibs with which he or she is connected, as in divination with the dice; the sibs are also represented on the bowl. In the centre there is a small protuberance, varying in size in the different bowls, with a large cowrie shell embedded in it; this is the mukhombo (umbilicus) and represents the mother's spirits. There is also an elaborate decorative pattern on the back of the bowl, carved around three small legs on which it stands. - Hugh A. Stayt

According to Elirea Bornman, “Evil or harmful witches or witches who unconsciously or involuntarily commit bad deeds are denoted by the term vhaloi (sing.: muloi) in Venda society.” This term is used for both male and female witches. Keep in mind, witchcraft from an African perspective is different than it is from a European/Western perspective. The term used in Africa for what we call “witches” are diviners and healers. Witches in Africa are people who intentionally cause harm to other people.

The term “sibs” refers to group relationships based on kinship.

According to interviewees recruited for the 1991 HSRC study, witches were traditionally not necessarily killed. Their punishment varied from being ostracized to having their huts burned down. Usually witches would be accepted into another village after a period of negotiation between their families and the residents of the other village. Only in severe cases were convicted witches killed. - Elirea Bornman

Sources

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