

(S)places and peace of (s)place: Venda's sacred sites

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of *(s)place*. Drawing from Lefebvre's Conceptual triad, Soja's Thirdspace, and Massey's Progressive sense of place, it unveils the nuanced meanings embedded within (s)place and its significance in understanding contemporary spatial dynamics, particularly within the African rural context. Through a qualitative investigation of sacred sites in the Venda region, this work recognises the intangible values embedded within these spaces, which are crucial elements of identity, well-being, and sense of place for VhaVenda communities. The core argument centres around the necessity for cognitive, spatial, and epistemic justice in crafting what de Sousa Santos dubs a pluriversal world that acknowledges and respects diverse knowledge systems without succumbing to epistemic violence, in this case, the legacy of colonial-apartheid planning. By coining (s)place, this work contributes to the discourse of planning in Africa, offering a decolonial lens through which to view and engage with spaces and places.

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Introduction

Colonial development agendas have historically been at the forefront of socio-economic and spatial transformations, profoundly shaping the landscapes and communities of the Global South. This work seeks to redirect attention to the consequences of planning¹ practices that have altered natural landscapes, focusing on sacred sites in the African context, particularly the Venda region in South Africa. By shifting the focus to the metaphysical² aspects of planning, this work responds to the call for an alternative to the mainstream Euro-Western-centric universal reality, challenging and dismantling the colonial legacies embedded in traditional planning practices. The need for decolonial planning approaches necessitates a (re)understanding of the intricate relationships between space, place, and spirituality. As planning and development encroach on sacred (s)places³, they often cause spiritual distress due to spatial and spiritual disruptions, a phenomenon Barnwell et al. (2021) refer to as 'place-severing'. The primary focus of this work is not centred on the act of planning and development but rather on the epistemologically limited universal approach that is enforced, especially in the Global South. This approach is enforced through social and spatial violent and disruptive means, which in turn establish an environment that is conducive to epistemic violence. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) contend that epistemic violence requires the colonizer to suppress other perceived knowledge systems to maintain epistemic totalitarianism. This shift in perspective prompts a focus on the epistemic territories of indigenous peoples, whose

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intergenerational relationships with (s)place were and still are bulldozed through this limited approach (Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy 2014).

Given South Africa's colonial and apartheid history, planning and development have traditionally focused on objective, measurable characteristics such as land area, infrastructure density, and resource distribution. This predominantly physical and economic understanding of planning and development fails to capture the lived experience of indigenous communities. To reduce this shortcoming, this work proposes (s)place^{4b} as an analytical frame for pursuing a more considerate and contextually grounded approach to planning and development. (S)place, a concept I have coined, combines the closely related yet distinct notions of 'space' and 'place', seeking to (re)capture the spatial, social, and cultural-experiential dimensions of human-environment relations. The core argument of this work centres around the necessity for cognitive, spatial, and epistemic justice in crafting what Boaventura de Sousa Santos dubs a pluriversal world that acknowledges and respects diverse knowledge systems without succumbing to epistemic violence (de Sousa Santos 2018), in this case without succumbing to the subliminal continuation of colonial-apartheid planning and development practices.

While this work contributes to the discourse of rural development and planning by presenting (s)place⁵, its potential applications can and should be applied in urban spaces. The research is realized through a qualitative critical place inquiry case study in the Venda region, examining the lived experiences and planning and development's insensitive contribution to place-severing. By doing so, this work aims to advance a more culturally sensitive approach to rural development planning in South Africa and beyond.

Conceptualization of (S)place

The term '(s)place' is introduced as a critical neologism in decolonial rural development planning. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues for the need to decolonize knowledge production and planning practices in Africa, challenging the dominance of Western epistemologies. (S)place responds to this call by providing a conceptual instrument that can accommodate alternative and diverse ways of knowing and experiencing space and place. Miraftab (2009) introduces the 'insurgent planning' concept in South Africa, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and supporting grassroots planning practices. (S)place acknowledges the agency of indigenous communities in shaping their environments and the importance of local knowledge in planning processes. As mentioned, it represents a deliberate fusion of 'space' and 'place', two closely related yet distinct notions that have long been central to geographic and planning discourses. The integration of these concepts into '(s)place' offers a nuanced framework for understanding the complex interplay between physical environments and the social, cultural, and spiritual significance ascribed to them by indigenous communities. Traditionally, 'space' has been associated with physical dimensions and geometric properties, often viewed through a cartesian lens that emphasizes measurable attributes (Lefebvre 1991). In contrast, 'place' encompasses the lived experiences, meanings, and attachments that individuals and communities ascribe to localities (Seamon 1980; Tuan 1977). (S)place seeks to bridge this conceptual gap, recognizing that physical environments are inextricably imbued with social and cultural significance.

While Western planning theories have traditionally emphasized rational-technical approaches, several influential scholars have acknowledged the metaphysical dimensions of placemaking and spatial configuration. Norberg-Schulz's (1979) work on the *genius loci* recognized the spiritual essence of place and argued that architecture meant the visualization of the spirit of place – a concept that goes beyond mere physical attributes. This metaphysical understanding was further developed in Lynch's (1960) study of imageability, in which he posited that urban spaces possess properties that evoke powerful images in any viewer, suggesting an almost mystical relationship between people and place. Alexander's (1979) concept of quality without a name was explicitly concerned with the ineffable aspects of successful places and described a metaphysical central quality that is the basic criterion of life and spirit. Similarly, Relph's (1976) phenomenological approach emphasized that placeness contains both material and immaterial dimensions and recognized

that the spirit of place exists primarily in the eyes of the beholder. These Western theoretical foundations, while not explicitly spiritual in the indigenous sense, demonstrate recognition of the metaphysical in spatial planning and development. From an academic sense, the preceding Western theories serve as a bridge for introducing more explicit indigenous spiritual planning approaches such as (s)place, which are particularly based on indigenous epistemologies and decolonial frameworks.

In South Africa, (s)place takes on particular significance due to the country's complex history of spatial inequality. Hendricks and Pithouse (2013) argue that the legacy of apartheid spatial planning continues to shape South African urban and rural areas, creating enduring patterns of segregation and inequality. It provides a means to critically interrogate these historical injustices by considering both the physical aspects of space and the metaphysical and lived experiences of place. Sebiloane (2015) emphasizes the importance of understanding indigenous knowledge systems and their relationship to land in South African rural planning. (S)place offers a framework incorporating traditional African cosmologies and their spatial manifestations. This is particularly relevant in rural areas where spiritual connections to the land remain strong and play a crucial role in community identity and social cohesion. A key strength of (s)place is its recognition of the spiritual dimension of space and place. This is particularly relevant in Africa, where many rural communities maintain strong spiritual connections to the land. Mndende (2013) argues that traditional African spirituality is deeply intertwined with land and place, and any approach to rural development must consider this. The concept integrates these spiritual dimensions into planning and development processes. As Ngcoya and Kumarakulasingam (2017) demonstrate in their study of rural KwaZulu-Natal, recognizing the spiritual significance of landscapes can lead to more culturally sensitive and effective development interventions.

(S)place aligns closely with calls for more participatory approaches to rural development planning in South Africa. Williams (2006) argues that meaningful community participation is essential for considerate post-apartheid development. Its emphasis on lived experiences and place-based identities provides a theoretical basis for such participatory approaches. Moreover, as Mashamaite and Madzivhandila (2014) demonstrate in their study of rural Limpopo, recognizing local conceptions of space and place can enhance community engagement in planning processes. (S)place offers a framework for planners to engage with these local conceptions, potentially leading to more inclusive and effective development interventions.

Reading (s)place with Lefebvre, Soja and Massey

The concept of (s)place is inspired by Henri Lefebvre's conceptual triad, Edward Soja's Thirdspace and Doreen Massey's progressive sense of place. Reading (s)place, through his conceptual triad of the perceived, conceived, and lived space, Lefebvre contends that perceived space refers to the material and physical environment; conceived space denotes the abstract representations and mental constructs of space, while lived space encapsulates place-making's experiential, symbolic, and affective dimensions (Lefebvre 1991). He argues that these three modalities constitute what he dubs the 'truth of space' – which refers to the socially produced, politically contested, and culturally embedded nature of humans, spatiality. Henri Lefebvre further argues that space is not a neutral container but a dynamic process shaped by social, cultural, and political forces. Speaking to (s)place, he notes that dominant social forces, particularly the state and capital, play a key role in producing space and often marginalize alternative conceptions. Soja expands on Lefebvre's ideas about space. He argues for a more complex understanding of spatiality, believing that traditional binary oppositions, such as real versus imagined space or physical versus mental space, limit our understanding of how space is experienced and produced. In Soja's 1996 work titled *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, he proposes the idea of Thirdspace to transcend these binary oppositions (Soja 1996). Thirdspace is a conceptual space encompassing physical and mental dimensions and their interplay. It represents a space of encounter where

different perspectives, experiences, and meanings converge. While Soja advocates a more complex understanding of spatiality, this work advocates a metaphysical understanding from a spiritual perspective. On the other hand understanding space with Massey, in her 1993 work titled *Power-geometry and a progressive Sense of Place, in Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, through ‘progressive sense of place’ Massey contends that space should be understood in a social context (Massey 1993). Parallel to this work, in light of the colonial-apartheid planning, she argues that social relations, power dynamics, and historical processes constantly shape space.

Lefebvre, Soja and Massey’s work assists in digesting the concept of (s)place. It is evident from the preceding deliberations that (s)place is not merely understood as a geographical location or a static entity but as a dynamic and multifaceted concept that embodies the interconnections between space as a physical dimension and place as a social construct. It encompasses the lived experiences, cultural significances, and historical narratives that converge to define a particular spatial entity. In essence, (s)place transcends the dichotomy between objective space and subjective place, highlighting spatial configurations’ inherent complexities and multiplicities. However, what makes (s)place significant is its acknowledgement of the metaphysical dimension, which in this case is the spiritual. Therefore, the ‘(s)’ also represents the spiritual dimension of (s)place, recognizing the sacred and transcendent qualities that can be attributed to certain spaces and places. In essence, (s)place recognizes the interconnectedness of physical, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects in shaping our experiences and meanings of the spaces and places (Ross 2013). This metaphysical approach to understanding (s)place emphasizes the importance of preserving and conserving sacred places, as they hold cultural, historical, and spiritual significance to indigeneous communities and individuals.

As its locus of enunciation, I put it that the concept of (s)place finds resonance in decolonial rural development planning, particularly in post-colonial contexts. By acknowledging the plurality of voices, histories, and narratives within spatial contexts, (s)place promotes a decolonial approach to rural development planning, fostering inclusive and participatory processes that honour diverse perspectives and experiences. Therefore, the concept of (s)place emerges as a pivotal framework for understanding and engaging with spatial dynamics within the realm of decolonial rural development planning. By building upon Henri Lefebvre’s conceptual triad and simultaneously engaging with scholarly works in spatial theory such as works of Doreen Massey and Edward Soja, (s)place offers a nuanced perspective that integrates physical and metaphysical, social, and cultural dimensions of space and place. Its relevance extends beyond theoretical discourse, serving as a guiding principle for transformative and inclusive spatial practices prioritizing spatial justice.

The substantiation of (s)place lies in its capacity to capture the spiritual essence of spatial experiences and the socio-cultural dynamics embedded within spatial configurations. Drawing from the above scholars, (s)place offers a nuanced perspective on the contested nature of space and the multiplicity of meanings attributed to space, place and its peace, leaning towards the metaphysical – spiritual, to be exact.

Peace of (S)place

The aspect of ‘peace’ emerges as a critical framework for understanding and addressing the profound spiritual and spatial disruptions⁶ caused by colonial and apartheid legacies in South Africa. The incorporation of ‘peace of (s)place’ into decolonial rural development planning is essential for achieving spatial justice and healing in South African communities.

In the African context, this spiritual dimension of space is profoundly significant. As Mndende (2013) argues, traditional African spirituality is deeply intertwined with land and place. The forced removals and land dispossessions of the colonial and apartheid eras have not only resulted in physical displacement but have also shattered spiritual connections to ancestral lands. Therefore, peace of (s)place responds directly to the spiritual unrest and disorientation caused by the displacement of indigenous communities from their ancestral lands. This displacement represents what Tuck and

Yang (2012) term settler colonialism, a process that not only appropriates land but also disrupts indigenous ways of being and knowing. In South Africa, this process has had profound impacts. As Kepe and Hall (2020) demonstrate in their study of land restitution in the Eastern Cape, the loss of ancestral lands has resulted in economic hardship and spiritual and cultural dislocation. The peace of (s)place provides a lens for understanding these multi-dimensional impacts of displacement.

The pursuit of peace of (s)place necessitates a decolonial approach to rural development planning. In his 2018 work, Ndlovu-Gatsheni emphasizes the importance of decolonial approaches in Africa. He argues that these approaches should actively confront the pervasive influence of Western epistemologies and instead acknowledge and embrace the diverse ways people understand and interact with their surroundings. In the context of rural development and planning, this means moving beyond purely technical or economic considerations. As Theron and Mchunu (2016) contend, effective rural development in South Africa must engage with local knowledge systems and cultural practices. Therefore, (s)place provides for this engagement to emphasize the importance of spiritual connections to land in development processes.

At its core, peace of (s)place represents a call for spiritual reconciliation and spatial justice. This aligns with what Sebiloane (2015) terms transformative rural development, which seeks to address not just economic inequalities but also cultural and spiritual dimensions of rural life, similar to Kepe and Hall's (2020) argument. Peace of (s)place extends this understanding by explicitly recognizing the spiritual wounds inflicted by displacement and dispossession. As Ngcoya and Kumarakulasingham (2017) demonstrate in their study of rural KwaZulu-Natal, recognizing the spiritual significance of landscapes can lead to more culturally sensitive and effective development interventions.

Application of (S)pace

As discussed, (s)place holds particular relevance for rural development planning in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa, where top-down, technocratic approaches have often failed to account for the nuanced realities of rural communities. As Escobar (2011) argues, such approaches often overlook the place-based struggles and cultural worldviews of marginalized populations. In the South African context, this oversight is particularly problematic given the country's history of spatial apartheid and rural underdevelopment. As Ntsebeza (2011) notes, the legacy of colonial and apartheid-era spatial planning continues to shape rural landscapes, perpetuating patterns of inequality and marginalization. This parallels what Theron and Mchunu (2016) term grassroots development, which prioritizes local knowledge and experiences in planning processes. In South Africa, this (s)place is crucial for addressing the historical marginalization of rural voices in development planning. As Cousins and Walker (2015) argue, post-apartheid rural development policies have often failed to adequately engage with rural communities' diverse needs and aspirations. It provides a framework for centring these lived experiences. It allows planners to move beyond a 'one-size-fits-all approach to rural development, instead fostering interventions rooted in different rural areas' specific spatial and cultural contexts.

Another crucial aspect of applying (s)place in rural development planning is the reintegration of indigenous knowledge systems, what Ndlovu-Gatsheni refers to as Re-membering in his 2023 work titled *Memory, Knowledge and Freedom: From Dismemberment and Re-Membering*. These knowledge systems have historically been marginalized in development planning despite their potential to contribute to sustainable and culturally appropriate interventions. (S)place, emphasizing the spiritual and cultural dimensions of space and place, allows for reintegrating these knowledge systems into planning and development processes. This aligns with what Vasudevan and Novoa (2022) term pluriversal planning, which recognizes and values diverse ways of knowing and being. In Africa, pluriversal planning is particularly relevant given the rich diversity of indigenous knowledge systems across different communities. Recognizing and integrating these knowledge systems can lead to more effective and sustainable rural development interventions.

Methodology

This work employs a qualitative research design grounded in decolonial epistemologies, integrating indigenous knowledge systems with contemporary research methodologies to explore the complex dynamics of (s)place in the Venda region's sacred sites and landscapes. The research design incorporates three interconnected methodological approaches: indigenous storytelling (storied method), semi-structured interviews, and critical literature analysis, all anchored in a decolonial theoretical framework. Drawing primarily on Tuck and McKenzie's (2015) critical place inquiry methodology, adapted specifically for the Venda context, this framework was chosen for its ability to examine both the physical transformations of sacred places and the metaphysical changes in community relationships, aligning with indigenous African epistemologies that recognize the inseparability of the material and spiritual realms. The primary data collection began with the storied method, an indigenous research approach that privileges oral history and intergenerational knowledge transmission. This method involved and continues to involve oral histories shared by my elders and grandparents during cultural and traditional community and family gatherings⁷, emphasizing narratives shared by our ancestors. The preceding was and still remains to be elaborated in detail by my parents and paternal Aunts⁸ to this day, the latest gathering being a funeral in December 2024. This approach aligns with decolonizing methodologies that centre on indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge transmission.

To triangulate the oral histories and meet scientific and academic research requirements, in-depth semi-structured interviews⁹ were conducted in December 2024 across three locations in the Venda region. Through a purposive sampling method, the sample consisted of ten respondents: four from Songozwi (including three traditional leaders from the royal family), three elderly community members from Tshakhuma, and three traditional leaders from the royal family of Ha-Makuya. The interviews employed open-ended questions focusing on socio-economic realities in rural Venda societies, the impact of historical imbalances on community life, persistent influences of colonial legacies on rural development, traditional governance systems and their evolution, and community relationships with sacred sites. In addition, the research incorporated a review of scholarly literature, prioritizing works from the Global South, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and monographs, conference proceedings, policy documents, and historical archives. Data analysis employed a phenomenological approach (Ratele 2016), integrating thematic analysis of oral histories and interviews, critical discourse analysis of historical documents, and interpretative phenomenological analysis of lived experiences (Table 1).

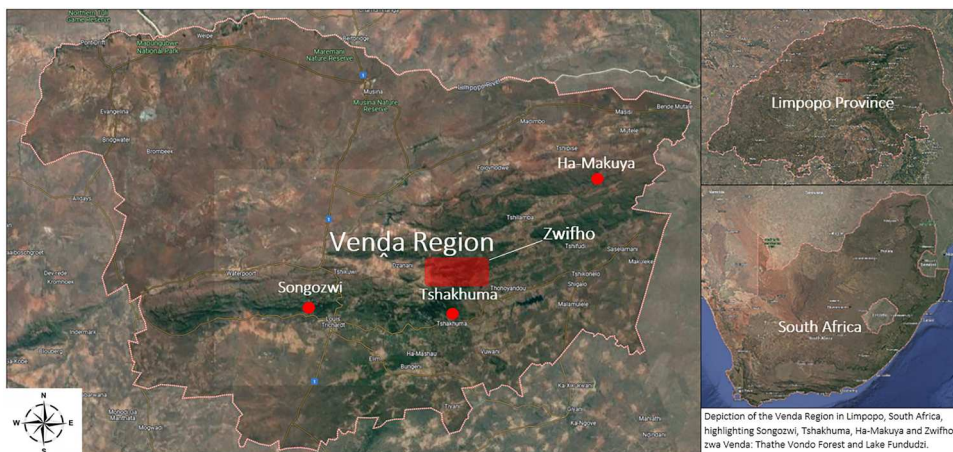
The study implemented validation strategies to ensure research credibility and reliability, including methodological triangulation through multiple data collection methods. The study adhered to both academic ethical standards and indigenous protocols, obtaining institutional ethic approvals, informed consent from all participants, respecting traditional knowledge-sharing protocols, such as protecting certain sacred information as directed by community elders, and recognizing traditional authority structures.

The study acknowledges potential limitations, including geographic scope confined to three specific locations, temporal constraints of contemporary interviews, potential gaps in historical records, and challenges in translating indigenous concepts into academic frameworks. This methodological approach represents a step toward decolonizing research methodologies, as advocated by

Table 1. Participants.

Location	Participant Category	Role/Position	Number
Songozwi	Traditional Leaders	Royal Family Members	3
	Community Member	Elder	1
Tshakhuma	Community Members	Village Elders	3
Ha-Makuya	Traditional Leaders	Royal Family Members	3
Total			10

Source: Author (2024).



Source: Author (2024) - Generated using Google Maps

Map 1. The Venda Region.

Source: Author (2024) – Generated using Google Maps

Chilisa (2019), while meeting rigorous academic standards. Through this approach, the study bridges indigenous knowledge systems with academic research requirements while maintaining the integrity of both approaches, contributing to the broader project of decolonial knowledge production in rural development planning (Map 1).

Case study area: the Venda region

The Venda region, located in the northernmost part of South Africa, presents a compelling case study for examining the need for (s)place in decolonial rural development planning. This area encapsulates the complex interplay between historical dispossession, cultural resilience, and environmental change, characterizing many rural landscapes in post-apartheid South Africa.

Situated in what was formerly designated as a bantustan, the Venda region embodies the enduring impacts of systematic land dispossession and forced removals that have profoundly affected the Vhavenda's relationship with their ancestral territories (Ramutsindela 2017). This historical trajectory talks to what Beinart and Delius (2014) describe as the broader pattern of rural transformation in South Africa, characterized by the disruption of indigenous land use systems and the imposition of colonial spatial orders. The region's history reflects what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) terms the coloniality of being – the persistent impact of colonial thought and practice on indigenous identities and ways of knowing. This allows for a critical examination of how colonial and apartheid spatial interventions have not only physically displaced communities but also disrupted traditional knowledge systems and spiritual connections to the land.

Vhavenda represent a composite entity comprising diverse clans and lineages, challenging the simplistic ethnic categorization imposed by colonial and apartheid administrations. As Fokwang (2003) notes, such ethnic constructions often served political purposes, obscuring the fluidity and interconnectedness of indigenous social formations. The diversity within the Vhavenda, including groups like the Singo, Ramabulana, Tshivhase, and others, reflects a dynamic cultural landscape that has evolved through centuries of migration, interaction, and assimilation. The distinction between 'original inhabitants' like the Ngoni and Mbedzi and 'outsider' groups such as the Tswana and Nyai speaks to the complex processes of identity formation and negotiation within the region. This complexity dovetails with Ntsebeza's (2005) observations on the dynamic nature of traditional authority and community membership in rural South Africa, where historical claims to indigeneity intersect with more recent patterns of settlement and integration.

Table 2. Empirical results and findings.

Theme	Results: Storytelling and Interview	Findings: Decolonial Perspective
Knowledge Systems & Epistemology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Western legal frameworks superseding traditional governance systems - Privileging of written documentation over oral traditions - Reduction of sacred sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognition of Zwifho as complex link points between material and spiritual realms - Validation of indigenous knowledge as a legitimate knowledge system - Acknowledgement of traditional protocols as sophisticated governance mechanisms
Power & Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fragmentation of traditional systems - External decision-making processes excluding traditional authorities - State-issued permits overriding traditional land management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Traditional leadership's historical role in site protection - Community-based protocols and taboos as legitimate governance structures - Recognition of community and traditional authority over sacred spaces
Spatial & Environmental Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Commercial development pressures on game farming and tourism - Extractive view of land as a mining resource - Separation of physical and spiritual aspects of place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding of sites as integrated physical-spiritual entities - Recognition of land as a living entity with deeper meaning - Holistic view of environmental and community well-being
Cultural Continuity & Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Generational knowledge gap - Erosion of traditional practices - Disconnection from ancestral ways of knowing and being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Direct connection between site integrity and community well-being - Recognition of ceremonies as a vital cultural practice - Importance of spiritual connections to ancestors

Source: Author (2024).

Findings

Central to understanding the Venda region's socio-ecological context is the concept of Zwifho¹⁰, or sacred natural sites. These sites, which include waterfalls, rivers, rocky outcrops, and indigenous forests, form an integral part of the Vhavenḁa cosmology and social structure. As Sinamai (2018) argues, such sacred sites are not merely physical locations but also connect the material and spiritual realms, crucial in maintaining cultural continuity and community identity. The significance of Zwifho in the Venda region exemplifies what Kepe (2009) terms the politics of the natural, where nature becomes a contested domain reflecting broader social and political dynamics. This understanding underscores the need for an approach like (s)place, which recognizes the inseparability of spatial and place-based dimensions in rural development planning (Table 2).

Empirical findings

Discussion of findings

The conceptualization of (s)place provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding the complex dynamics surrounding Zwifho in the Vhavenḁa region. As Hendricks and Pithouse (2013) argue, South Africa's spatial inequalities persist through continued colonial-modern patterns of development, making the (s)place framework particularly relevant for analyzing the tensions surrounding these sacred sites.

The findings from this study of the Venda region, Zwifho illuminate the profound tensions between indigenous knowledge systems and hegemonic developmental paradigms in rural South

Africa. Through the lens of decolonial theory, it is observed how the colonial-modern matrix of power continues to manifest through contemporary development practices that privilege extractive capitalist approaches over indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. The study reveals how the Vhavenda people's understanding of Zwifho as link points between material and spiritual realms fundamentally challenges the modern/colonial conceptualization of land as merely a resource for exploitation. The historical disruption of traditional governance systems represents a classic example of what decolonial scholars term epistemic violence, whereby indigenous ways of knowing and being are systematically delegitimised and displaced by colonial-modern institutional frameworks.

The findings regarding Zwifho demonstrate spiritual-spatial violence – the systematic disruption of indigenous connections to land through colonial and apartheid spatial planning. The concept of peace of (s)place helps illuminate how the displacement and degradation of Zwifho represents not merely physical loss but profound spiritual disruption. African spirituality is inseparable from land, making the commercial development pressures on Zwifho particularly devastating for community well-being.

The research findings align contested spaces of spiritual significance, where traditional authorities' jurisdiction over sacred sites faces erosion through modern governance systems. This erosion exemplifies spatial-spiritual disconnect in post-apartheid rural development, where planning frameworks fail to recognize the metaphysical dimensions of land.

The contemporary challenges facing these sacred sites; commercial development pressures, erosion of traditional authority, and generational knowledge gaps – can be understood as manifestations of what Quijano terms coloniality of power, where modern state structures continue to perpetuate colonial patterns of domination despite formal decolonization. As discussed subsequently under secondary findings, this is particularly evident in how mining companies, armed with government permits, override traditional authorities' jurisdiction over sacred spaces. This demonstrates the ongoing privileging of Western-centric development paradigms over indigenous land management systems. However, the communities' adaptive strategies represent what decolonial theorists might term epistemic disobedience or decolonial options. Their efforts to document traditional knowledge, develop hybrid governance systems, and facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer constitute active resistance against epistemicide and demonstrate the possibility of pluriversal approaches to rural development.

The profound connection between sacred site integrity and community well-being articulated by participants challenges the modern/colonial division between nature and culture, material and spiritual. This holistic understanding aligns with decolonial conceptualisations of good living, where community wellness is inseparable from territorial and spiritual integrity. The emergence of hybrid governance systems particularly exemplifies what scholars like Escobar term pluriversal politics, where communities creatively combine traditional and modern approaches while maintaining their epistemological sovereignty. These findings underscore the urgent need for rural development frameworks that decenter Western-centric modernization paradigms and instead recognize and support indigenous ways of knowing, being, and relating to land. Such an approach would not merely 'include' traditional knowledge but fundamentally restructure development practices around indigenous epistemologies and governance systems.

The research findings support spiritually-conscious rural development planning. The emergence of hybrid governance systems around Zwifho exemplifies how (s)place can inform more inclusive development approaches. Effective rural development must recognise the spiritual dimension of space. The application of (s)place theory to understanding Zwifho reveals the urgent need for what Ntsebeza (2020) terms spiritually-integrated spatial planning. This approach would recognize sacred sites not merely as physical spaces but as integral components of community well-being and cultural continuity (Table 3).

Table 3. Desktop results and findings.

Theme	Results: Secondary data	Findings: Decolonial Perspective
Spatial and Spiritual Disruptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Land dispossession and resource extraction severing ancestral connections - Commercial forestry replacing indigenous ecology - State-issued permits disregarding cultural significance of sacred sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognition of (s)place as intertwined physical and spiritual realms - Sacred sites as integral to community identity, well-being, and governance - Land as living heritage with cultural and ecological significance
Zwifho and Cultural Heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sacred sites reduced to material resources - Development projects (e.g. mining, forestry) threatening ecological and spiritual integrity - Lack of consultation with local communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Zwifho as socio-ecological systems embodying cultural, spiritual, and ecological dimensions - Holistic understanding of sacred sites as cultural heritage - Adoption of indigenous ecological stewardship models
Thathe Vondo Forest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Commercial forestry disrupting customary tenurial systems - Mining threatening endemic biodiversity and water resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognition of forest as a biocultural landscape combining biodiversity with spiritual practices - Sacredness attributed to cultural myths and ecological uniqueness - Integration of biodiversity conservation with cultural identity
Lake Fundudzi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Afforestation and agricultural activities degrading the ecosystem - Sedimentation from human settlement impacting ecological health - Dismissal of indigenous spiritual interpretations of the lake 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lake as a site of epistemological convergence between scientific and mystical narratives - Importance of cultural and spiritual practices in ecological sustainability - Recognition of lake's role in maintaining cultural identity
Decolonial Framework (s)place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Western-centric conservation models prioritising exploitation over cultural preservation - Fragmentation of land and culture through apartheid-era policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adoption of (s)place to integrate cultural, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of land - Addressing historical injustices by reconnecting communities with sacred sites - Recognition of indigenous governance systems

Source: Author (2024).

Desktop findings

Discussion of desktop findings

The legacy of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa has profoundly impacted rural communities, particularly in their relationship with land and sacred spaces. The arrival of settler-colonists in the Vhembe District in 1836 marked the beginning of severe spatial and spiritual disruptions for indigenous communities (Nemudzivhadi 1998). These disruptions severed local communities' relationships with space, ancestors, and Zwifho (sacred sites), which are fundamental to Vhavanḁ identity and well-being. The deliberate process of disconnecting people from their Zwifho facilitated the accumulation of wealth by settler-colonists while simultaneously denigrating place-based connections and enabling mass resource extraction (Ramutsindela 2012).

The expansion of settler colonialism led to widespread land dispossession among Black communities. The destruction of indigenous ecology accompanied this process as land was converted for agricultural purposes (Cousins 2007). The physical fracturing of communities through forceful removal and segregation created barriers to accessing specific sacred or meaningful sites, hindering communal enactments and disrupting ancestral connections, social relationships, and livelihood functions. The apartheid era intensified these dislocations through violence and segregation

policies. The 1936 Native Trust and Land Act No. 18 facilitated the reclassification of land for agricultural purposes, leading to mass deforestation, defaunation, and forceful removals. For instance, the establishment of pine tree plantations around Lake Fundudzi resulted in the destruction of 55 km² of indigenous forests, directly threatening many Zwifho. Despite the fall of apartheid, unresolved land disputes and ongoing threats to sacred sites continue to perpetuate place-severing experiences. Granting prospecting rights near Lake Fundudzi and Thathe Forest in 2019 without proper community consultation exemplifies the persistent colonial logic that treats sacred spaces as open-access systems for exploitation (Bloom 2020). This lack of recognition and participatory justice causes profound distress for communities and exacerbates historical traumas.

Zwifho zwa Venḁa – Sacred site in Venḁa

Zwifho zwa Venḁa, in Venḁa, provide a compelling case for adopting (s)place in decolonial rural development planning. Venḁa has numerous sacred sites embodying complex interrelationships between culture, spirituality, and ecology. These indigenous sacred natural sites serve a role as living cultural heritage and repositories of indigenous knowledge and spiritual practice. Among the many sacred sites in Venḁa, three major ones stand out: Thathe Vondo Forest, Lake Fundudzi, and Phi-phidi Waterfalls (Dzomo la Mupo 2022).¹¹ Other significant sacred sites include Guvhukuvhu La Nwadzongole, Vhuḁanda, Ha-Magoro, Malale, Tshiḁtungulu, Tshivhale, Khevha, and Vuu (Dzomo la Mupo 2022). Each site holds profound cultural and spiritual significance for the Vhvenḁa, linking points for community identity, ancestral connection, and ecological stewardship.

Despite their cultural importance, many of these sacred sites face significant threats from commercial activities and development projects. Two of the most affected major sacred sites are Thathe Vondo Forest and Lake Fundudzi, which have been impacted by commercial pine tree plantations and proposed mining activities (Sinamai 2018). These encroachments pose a physical threat to the sites and disrupt their spiritual and cultural practices. The establishment of pine plantations around Lake Fundudzi has led to the destruction of indigenous forests, directly threatening the integrity of the sacred site. Similarly, granting prospecting rights near Lake Fundudzi and Thathe Forest in 2019 without proper community consultation exemplifies these sites' ongoing challenges (Musavengane and Leonard 2019).

The sacred sites of Venḁa, particularly Thathe Vondo Forest and Lake Fundudzi, present compelling evidence for the urgent need to adopt the concept of (s)place in decolonial rural development planning. These sites embody complex socio-ecological systems that challenge conventional approaches to conservation and development, highlighting the intricate relationships between culture, spirituality, and ecology.

Thathe Vondo Forest

Thathe Vondo Forest, one of the few remaining undisturbed moist forests in southern Africa, exemplifies biocultural landscape – an area where biological diversity is inextricably linked with cultural practices and beliefs. Covering approximately 3800 hectares (Sikhitha 1999), the forest is imbued with profound cultural and spiritual significance for Vhvenḁa. The forest's mythical guardians, including the white lion and the thunderbird Ndadzi, contribute to its perceived sacredness. This aligns with Cocks and Wiersum's (2014) observations on the role of biodiversity in shaping cultural identity and spiritual practices among South African communities. The forest's impenetrability and unique flora, such as the giant Nkoa mushrooms, further enhance its spiritual status.

However, Thathe Vondo Forest faces significant threats from commercial activities: (i) Commercial Forestry: Since 1945, the forest has been used for commercial forestry (Munyati and Sinthumule 2014). This has disrupted the common property tenurial system customary to the forest's traditional custodians, with pine plantations now surrounding the preserved sacred forest. (ii) Mining Activities: The Mamma Metal Group's recent prospecting for precious minerals since 2018 poses a new threat (Pikirayi and Magoma 2021). Approved without proper environmental

impact assessments, this development risks endangering endemic plants and polluting water resources.

Lake Fundudzi

Lake Fundudzi, the only natural inland lake in South Africa, holds a unique position in both scientific and cultural narratives. Its formation, attributed to a landslide by geologists, contrasts with the mystical interpretations held by the Vhavenda. This dichotomy reflects what Ajayi and Mafongoya (2017) describe as the epistemological divide in environmental management practices in South Africa. The lake faces several threats: (i) Afforestation: Since the 1990s, the lake's catchment has been afforested through eucalyptus plantations (Sinthumule and Mashau 2020). (ii) Land Use Changes: Forests are being continuously replaced by croplands and orchards, placing considerable pressure on the catchment (Sinthumule and Mashau 2020). (iii) Sedimentation: Rapid sedimentation due to increased human settlement and agricultural activity affects the lake's ecosystem (Sinthumule and Mashau 2020).

The sacred sites of Venda represent complex socio-ecological systems that challenge conventional approaches to conservation and development. Their significance extends beyond mere cultural or environmental value, embodying the interconnectedness of human existence with the natural world. As such, any approach to managing or developing these areas must be grounded in a decolonial framework that recognizes and respects indigenous knowledge systems and spiritual practices. The adoption of (s)place in rural development planning offers a path towards more just, sustainable, and culturally sensitive approaches to managing these sacred sites. By recognizing the deep connections between land, culture, and identity, (s)place can help address the multifaceted challenges facing the Vondo Forest and Lake Fundudzi, ensuring their preservation for future generations while respecting the rights and traditions of Vhavenda.

Conclusion

(S)place is a concept that I have coined to combine the closely related yet distinct notions of 'space' and 'place,' seeking to (re)capture the spatial, social, and cultural-experiential dimensions of human-environment relations. This work demonstrates that incorporating the concept of (s)place into decolonial rural development planning is an essential contribution to addressing the complex intersections of cultural heritage, spiritual significance, and ecological sustainability in Vhavenda communities. The research reveals how the erosion of indigenous epistemologies, coupled with the degradation of sacred forests and waters, necessitates an integrated approach to conservation that acknowledges both cultural and ecological imperatives. The findings highlight how Vhavenda mythology and mythography play crucial roles in preserving sacred spaces and fostering community identity, challenging the colonial-apartheid misunderstandings that have historically marginalized these cultural landscapes.

The framework of peace of (s)place emerges as a critical tool for addressing spiritual-spatial wounds in South Africa's rural landscape. This concept transcends conventional economic approaches to development by explicitly recognizing the profound spiritual disconnections caused by colonial and apartheid spatial engineering. The research demonstrates that spiritual reconciliation is inextricably linked to spatial justice, particularly in contexts where commercial development threatens both physical landscapes and community spiritual life.

The work reveals significant gaps in current development practices, particularly in the oversight of intangible heritage within land-use planning and spatial development. This cognitive injustice, manifested in the neglect of indigenous knowledge systems, underscores the urgency of adopting approaches that bridge tangible and intangible heritage. The prevalence of sacred sites in Venda villages managed through complex systems of clan-based stewardship exemplifies the need for development frameworks that honour traditional authority and community custodianship.

Future research should focus on operationalizing (s)place in diverse rural contexts across South Africa, specifically developing methodologies for: (1) integrating indigenous knowledge systems into formal planning processes, (2) implementing community-based monitoring systems for sacred sites, and (3) establishing programs for intergenerational cultural knowledge transmission. This work concludes that adopting (s)place in rural development planning represents a crucial step toward decolonizing spatial practices in South Africa, offering a framework that promotes development that is not only economically and ecologically sustainable but also culturally affirming and spiritually resonant with the communities it serves.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this work, the term ‘Planning’ will be used henceforth to refer to urban planning as a profession, with a particular focus on *rural planning*. Therefore, planning in this context encompasses the broader urban and regional planning field, with specific emphasis on its application to *rural development* and *spatial organisation*, recognising the unique challenges and opportunities in *rural South African contexts*.
2. More specifically, the spiritual aspect.
3. The term (s)place is subsequently discussed in detail.
4. The term ‘(s)place’ is used throughout this work to encapsulate the interrelated concepts of space and place in planning contexts. (S)place is a neologism that combines the closely related yet distinct notions of ‘space’ and ‘place’. This conceptual fusion acknowledges the complex interplay between physical, social, and spiritual dimensions in rural environments. The term reflects the nuanced understanding required in planning and development, where spatial arrangements are deeply intertwined with place-based identities and practices. A detailed discussion of this concept is provided under the heading ‘Conceptualisation of (S)place’.
5. Hereafter, the term ‘(s)place’ will interchangeably be as is and understood to be a concept.
6. This phenomenon is subsequently discussed in detail under the heading Spatial and Spiritual Disruptions.
7. These gatherings involve traditional dances, ancestral consultations, and the preparation of specific foods. Amongst many others: (i) Tshikona is performed during important events such as royal gatherings, initiations, or community celebrations. (ii) Traditional weddings involve elaborate ceremonies that integrate family negotiations, bride price (lobola), and communal feasts. (iii) Funeral traditions are deeply spiritual and emphasise respect for the deceased and their journey to the ancestral realm. They generally last for a week before the final send-off of the deceased.
8. Under the guidance of my grandmother, they play a central role in spiritual and social matters, including mediating between ancestors and the family.
9. The interviews varied in length, depending on the participants’ availability and engagement. On average, interviews lasted between one hour and one and a half hours, with some extending to two hours for more detailed discussions, particularly with traditional leaders from the royal family. This variation allowed for flexibility in exploring participants’ insights and experiences while respecting their time constraints and comfort levels.
10. Zwifho refers to Sacred Natural Sites located within indigenous forests, lakes (Dzivha), natural ponds (mativha), waterfalls (mahovhohovho), and caves (mabako). These sites are characterised by their natural surroundings and are not artificially created or demarcated like royal graveyards (Zwiendeulu) or game parks. The term ‘Zwifho’ conveys the concept of giving and receiving, representing the essential connection between these sites and our overall well-being (see Dzomo la Mupo 2022).
11. Another sacred site worth mentioning is the Mashovhela Rock Pool. It is a site for rain-making ceremonies and represents performative spaces in indigenous spirituality - locations where ritual practices are enacted to maintain cosmic balance. The recent use of this site for rain-making, coinciding with significant rainfall events, underscores the ongoing relevance of these sacred spaces in contemporary Vhavenḁa society. The interconnectedness of these sacred sites, exemplified by the belief in the Mutale River flowing beneath Lake Fundudzi, aligns with what Kepe (2009) describes as the holistic worldview prevalent in African cosmologies, where natural elements are seen as part of an integrated spiritual and ecological system.

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