



Proverb, Gender And Oppression: Reflections On Xitsonga Traditional Literature And The Position Of Women

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ABSTRACT

This paper tacitly captures the plight and social recompense of a Tsonga woman within the sociocultural legalities as unveiled through an analysis of Tsonga proverbs. Is a revelation of masculine hegemony through the instrument of Xitsonga proverbs. It expresses the 'foul-tasting' gender-interactive ambiance that characterise the dilemma confronted by Xitsonga Women midst their male counterparts. It manifests the gender based mistreatment, harassment and imposed psychological, social and gender-sexual malaise that attend women within the sociocultural framework of the said ethnicity through the use of proverbs. Their association with and to men is that of a Master-servant to Horse-rider relationship. The paper is meant to unveil the fact that proverbs are/were instrumental in use by men to manipulate and silence women, at times yielding to unpleasant results. With this ideological mindset, the paper epitomises the feminist approach and ideologies in interrogating and attempting at arresting the indestructible male-manufactured and perpetuated advances that favour their sex at the dire expense of women as a whole. data has been collected during the years 2011 through interviews and documentary analysis. Some of the findings of the study include males' axiomatic understanding that females are some form of their chattels and that their power over females allows them to do whatever they want with them.

Keywords: proverbs, Tsonga, masculine, tradition, male dominance

Introduction

The greater number of African societies reserved for women a place which is clearly inferior, approaching that of a domestic animal.

Hardy in May (1983:12)

A proverb can be conceived of as a precise sentence composed through sieved and analytic wisdom by experienced language people. Each language has its own proverbs, notwithstanding the fact that proverbial similarities cut across different ethnic groups among Africans. In the composition of proverbs, animal names, names of trees, birds, human beings or nature in general can be used. Little et. al. (1973:1695) concur when they define a proverb as a condensed sentence that is regarded as sifted truth and a product of human experience and observation. This truth, it is said, is known to all. This means that the truth portrayed in proverbs is one that has been screened over long periods of time through human experience in their everyday life. According to Maungana na Babane (2000: 66) a proverb is further extensively explored in the following way:

Xivuriso i xivulwa xa mfuwo xo koma lexi tirhisiwaka hi ku angarhela ku paluxa vutlhari...Ntirho lowukulu wa xivuriso i ku vula mhaka hi xitalo ku tlula ririmi ra masiku hinkwawo. (A proverb is a precise oral tradition saying that is generally used to portray wisdom...the major task of a proverb is to explore issues in detail far more than the use of ordinary every day language.)

This eloquently posits that proverbs are linguistically powerful sayings that can be employed to verbally explore human wisdom figuratively. Proverbs render to language, the a dignified linguistic jacket to artfully address every day issues in ways that are skillfully divorced from every day ordinary conversations. It is a saying in less or more fixed form marked by “shortness, sense and salt” and distinguished by popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed (Finegun, 1984: 393). Of interest here are the words “popular acceptance” and “salt” which indicate that proverbs have been regarded as sources of truth that are distinct in orientation. They give to language soundness and a sense of specialty. This is further reinforced by Gombe (1995: 45) in the description below:

Proverbs are, or were, used in ...courts in order to sway the minds of the audience to one's point of view. The proverbs, being a people's heritage, reveal the views and the thinking of the past. They embody its most basic traditional values which are the fruits of the experience of generations in their struggle for existence...they are a model of compressed and forceful language and have the sanction and approval of the community.

From the above quotation, we can safely conclude that proverbs were regarded unanimously as a home truth. If conflicts would arise in any community and those vested with the powers to preside over issues use proverbs, they would without any objection resolve all issues. This is because of the nature of proverbs as very critical points of reference that were associated with gray-haired and respectable in society who were responsible for preaching sense in others, especially the still growing generation.

Statement of problem

The jointed and assorted life for a man and a woman is one very difficult combination on earth. A man by nature, is physically more powerful than a woman, and the different cultural groups, encompassing Christian traditions put it clearly that a man is and should remain the head of his family. The different explanations given by males that support why a man should be the head of his family are countless. Most unfortunately most of these explanations points out that men are free to exercise their power in any way possible with less considerations on whether their spouses are being affected negatively or not. They most believe that they have the right as head of families to do whatever they want with the females. Such use or misuse of power in the guise of being the ‘head’ normally gets over-exercised to a level where men over dominates the scenes by harassing, scolding, beating females, including limiting their access to what they should be getting and enjoying as full and equal human beings. It is clear that these proverbs are used by males as yardsticks to pin females down and give males access to infidelity and other unfruitful relations which are considered risky especially in these times in which sticking to a single faithful partner is key.

Theoretical underpinning

In this study, the feminist theory has been used to buttress the study. This theory is very critical in this study since it assists in giving highlights to the various ways in which man exploit and abuse females. Such exploitation takes place in various ways encompassing sexual harassment, not respecting human rights, preventing females from accessing work, school, positions of authority and mostly, the exploitation of females through the execution of traditionally restrictive laws. Using this theory, the writer will try to underpin issues of inequality among the Vatsonga through the analysis of Tsonga proverbs.

Literature review

Babane and Mapindani (2012) explored the oppression of Tsonga females by Tsonga males through the instrument of proverbs. In their analysis, they indicated that females are by nature under the oppressive prowess of males. That is they are exploited by their husbands, their fathers or other males within their vicinity. They also indicated that proverbs are used precisely as an axiomatic phrase that no human can or should argue against. Babane and Mapindani also indicate that even girls should not waste their time but to learn their chores early in preparation for their later marital offices. This early training will assist them in mastering the expected duties that will allow them to please their wives.

In their analysis, it is also clear that the proverbs reveal how females are presented as problems to their male counterparts. In some instances, the analysed proverbs indicate that even if males engage in extra-marital affairs, their females should just consider it fit because human males are viewed as having different and powerful sensual feelings than females. It is fit to highlight that Babane and Mapindani's paper was written to unveil the relationship between Tsonga males and females and how the males use their shrewdness and power to exploit females, which is the core of this paper. This means that the present paper will tape proverbial nuances from Babane and Mapindani's paper in order to fine tune it.

Gubbay (1999) underscore the theme of female exploitation in the hands of males. In the research under review, matters to do with human rights is discussed to a higher level. It is also noted with concern that there is a binary perception between human right and women's rights, as if women are not human. This, however,

it is argued that research has discovered disparities in how men and women enjoy human rights - women are far from accessing what is broadly considered human rights and therefore the need to still contest for their rights from other platforms like 'women's rights'. such exclusion of women from the mainstream human rights pool is, in the unfolding of the research attributed to a numbers of causalities, encompassing cultural traditions that for years have given females a second class position in society. This research is important in the writing of the present paper in that it will inform how Tsonga culture and tradition have contributed grossly to the exploitation of females over the years.

The Nehanda Centre for Gender and Cultural Studies (2023) explores the contemporary associations between males and females within Zimbabwean political circles. The research unveils deep nuances regarding the disparaging and harassment of females by males and the attendant discouragements that follow such exploitative practices. As evidenced in the paper, females who choose to partake in political campaign are heavily discouraged and verbally reduced to nonentities as they are caricatured and depicted as mammals who cannot lead people. This is unveiled in the following acerbic way:

Yo are as ugly as a Chimpanzee, we don't need you to lead us, go
back to the zoo madam. (16)

Such scathing disparaging are not only oppressive but bear long term wounds in the spirits of those who are displayed as far from humanity, and therefore render their efforts to either uplift themselves or assist in communal rebuilding useless. It is clear that the pamphlet does not speak to the specific Tsonga ethnicity or its womenfolk but the matters discussed therein are critical in opening the researcher's eyes to critical analyse the proverbs that embody the oppression of females.

Mapindani and Babane (2016) explores the problems surrounding the relationship between males and females through the analysis of Tsonga idioms. The analysis which is underpinned by feminism perspectives deeply unveil the dire need for affirmative steps to be taken towards the revitalisation of gender norms to keep trends with contemporary approaches towards human rights protection especially in favour of the vulnerable class - females. In the unfolding of their research, it immediately becomes evident that the traditional setup of African communities in general, and the Tsonga society in particular, have been dominated by males who had no regard for the female folk, but desired to please themselves even to extremes where life becomes dangerous for both spouses. Though the analysed paper was written on Tsonga idioms, which is not the exact focus of this paper, the research will go a long way in buttressing the current research for a fruitful result.

Discussion

Females are oppressed in marital relations through the use of proverbs like 'Wanuna a nga kuri'. the proverb is a masculine negotiation to excuse men from the blame of extramarital affairs and polygamous relationships at the expense of their spouses. From the proverb, men are presented as different creatures who remain valid and vigorous in their association with females because they are immune to expiation. That is, old age is for females but for males even in their old age, they remain potent and still legitimate enough to take part in sexual affairs with numerous females. This masculine rule becomes critically exploitative when it is considered in terms of its male-sidedness. That is it only allows males to indulge in these affairs but females are not mentioned as having the same privilege. According to Mapindani (2011) such acts are evil as he presents it in the following way:

Leswi swi endla leswaku loko wansati a dyuhala nuna wa yena a famba
a tilavela vavasati van'wana lava ha tsakamaka. Hi ndlela leyi, u va a
tshikelela nsati wa yena wa xiteko loyi a n'wi papalataka a nga ha
tikarhateri yena. (this leads to tradition where a man is entitled to look
for fresher females when his wife grows old. This oppresses his original
wife who is now left behind and no longer considered seriously)

With reference to the above citation, and in pursuit to how males view themselves as people who do not grow but remain young and vigilant sexually, men resort to exchanging females as they grab young girls who are years below them. This tradition has, however, been reported to bring into families endless conflicts, with some encompassing cases of infidelity as the old husbands struggle in vain to gratify their youthful wives (Berer and Ray, 1993:185)

Among the traditional Tsonga societies, women have suffered largely through men's use of negative language. Some proverbs have indicated the despise and shame that are hampered upon females. The proverb 'Nkuwa ro tshwuka ri na xivungu endzeni' is an incisive instrument to remove all confidence and self-esteem in many a beautiful women. The proverb means that a beautiful lady (female) has some hidden negative propensity that cannot be easily seen. This suggests that all females who present as well built externally must be thought

of as ugly internally. That is, their actions and conduct may not be good since it follows that when one is physically enticing she is internally corrupt and evil. This notion is presented by V.D. Salane in the following poem:

*Wansati u sasekile ehandle
(a woman is beautiful on the outside)
Endzeni u xurhe makhombo
(her inside is full of troubles)
U tele hi vumbabva bya lunya
(she is full of malicious larceny)
U ni nyiko yo hambanisa maxaka ni vanghana
(she gifted in causing conflicts between friends and relatives)*

Through the instrument of this literary piece, Salane reflects how females are exploited through literature. This is a clear embodiment of how they are presented as ugly images who are very dangerous in the lives of males. The line 'endzeni u xurhe makhombo' underpins the discrepancy between a female's photogenic external appearance and her actions that can only be externalised to reveal her true personality when a man's supposition to decide on marrying her or not becomes too late to be reversible. This gives a sense of oppression to a female who may otherwise not be that evil eternally.

The above proverb tallies with the equally oppressive proverb 'Nsati wa mavele u nga tshuki u navela', which also looks obliquely upon beautiful females as evil creatures that present sour marital results. 'nsati wa mavele' meaning a woman with protruding or sizable breasts, can be used to symbolise a woman with seducing and enticing looks that normally attracts males. The proverb presents such females as evil or conflict-causers in many a family. Such a proverb gives an impression that some research has been conducted and researchers came up with the conclusion that all females who are good looking are trouble causers. This cannot be so because people are different and they behave differently though they may be beautiful. It can also be conceded that ugly females can also be ruthless and blamed for evil deeds in society.

In some instances, women suffer in the hands of men through battering or involvement in unnecessary quarrels. Among the Vatsonga, a proverb can be given to polish this up as normal by saying 'A kuna nhompfu leyi nga riki na marimila'. the proverb is used to knock sense into females who find themselves entangled in conflict-laden marriages that they should just take it easy and consider it natural because all families (metaphorically nhompfu) are laden with fights and quarrels. Deduceably, the proverb stems from men's desire to cunningly manipulate and dominate over humanity - in this sense, females. Women may be beaten, harassed in multifarious ways and reduced to nonentities yet remain silent and consider it normal because it is something that almost everyone everywhere is experiencing. Delamont (2001:108) in anticipation of this issue points out how certain causes for such conflicts are misplaced in the ensuing way:

Women report being beaten up because ...they asked for money to feed the children, they asked where their men had been, He was drunk, he had lost at gambling, they had smiled at a butcher, they were asleep when he came home, because, because, because...at the root of the violence is the man's belief that he has a right to control his wife...

This citation points out how Tsonga traditions employed oral tradition to situate females in certain positions. Women were regarded as men's property to be used whenever and in whatever men required to use them, moreso because of allegations of having bought them off their parents. It is here that many men have argued that the African legacy of paying lobola before marriage rites should be reversed because some parents commercialise their daughters by charging very high prices which then create stress to the new family and eventually culminate into conflicts.

Unfortunately, such marital discords and conflicts have ended up in reports of cases to do with divorce, suspension of marriage ties and even death in some severe cases. This all is viewed as a result of the patriarchal nature of traditional Tsonga societies which affords males extreme power over and above females. This exaggerated power is seen when men afford to opt for extramarital affairs and still regard it as normal when it is, in these contemporary times, very risky. Armstrong (1998:4) points out how males devote themselves to the oppression of females in cases where females are vulnerable and helpless thus:

A woman fears that if she seeks help or leaves the abusive relationship, she risks being beaten even more, or even being killed. Men use this fear as a weapon to keep women silent.

The above citation reflects the nature and covered nuances of the traditional African societies that the Tsonga male-crafted proverbs endeavour to cement. Females are presented as perpetual victims of a male promoted system and their attachment to males present them as servants to their 'bosses'. marriage is equated to a prison where the prisoner cannot do what they want, not to mention liberating themselves. In some reported cases, husbands can beat their wives until they pass on. Such dangerous marital ties cannot be escaped because the proverbs and some strongly masculine sayings used in most traditional courts by those who preside as officials will convince the females and their parents that marriage is meant to be borne through such sayings as 'vukati I mbilu'. the saying can be interpreted as marriage is laden with problems and those who go for it should be prepared to stand all the challenges. In view of this, it is plausible to consider critics' views that "....we must encourage men to replace risk-taking behaviour with responsibility (Kofi Annan and Mutinhiri, 2004:7).

Research Findings

- Men assure themselves that they the rights to treat females the way they feel like treating them since they are entitled to rule both families and their respective communities.
- Females are nothing without males and they therefore must obey males without enraging them.
- Females were born exclusively to wait patiently for their time to be married away and not for any special business.
- Many have the rights to engage in multiple sexual relationships but no heresays about extra marital affairs should be reported
- The greatest tasks bestowed to females is bearing children for them and making every effort to exercise their obedience and female duties to please their men.

Conclusion

In this study, male-female relationships among the Vatsonga have been highlighted, with a view and concern on how exploitative (in the contemporary world) masculine traditions have gained control over femininity. As has been observed through the analysis of selected proverbs, the male-dominated tradition did/does not take females seriously, as full human beings, but females are meant to occupy spaces meant for either children or animals. In essence, domesticated animals meant to be controlled all the way by 'males' presumed to be sensible and fully human. In one sense, the responsibility of females is vested in the power, control and wisdom of males since they are thought to be not 'whole' enough to account for their own lives. It has also been observed that, in many instances, men look for females merely to used them as objects that can gratify their sensual gusto, otherwise they are not viewed as equally human. This gives an overall view of how the traditional Tsonga society viewed females and how this scenario can be contested in modern societies where human rights is a topical issue.

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