

## The Significance and Appropriateness of Tshivenda Proverbs in New South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** This paper aims at investigating the significance and appropriateness of some Tshivenda proverbs under the new legal order of democracy in South Africa. Post-apartheid South Africa is facing a huge challenge of moral degeneration. Traditionally, cultural norms and values among the South African society, and the Vhavenda community for the purposes of this paper, used to be transmitted through word of mouth. Recently oral literature, particularly the expression of proverbs seems to be vanishing among the Vhavenda community. The vanishing of this important genre seems to be negatively impacting the moral fiber of the entire South African society and the Vhavenda community in particular. The paper is qualitative in nature and data was collected using the qualitative techniques of data collection. In fact the interview technique was used as the primary method for collecting data from Vhavenda traditional leaders, as they are the custodians of the customs. Data was also collected from secondary sources.

### INTRODUCTION

Creative works of oral African literature are increasingly endangered. This is a result of globalization and socio-political changes, whose speed is sweeping through almost all the continents, societies and communities at neck-breaking speed. These changes often affect smaller societies and communities in that undue pressure is exerted on them to such an extent that, amongst others, their traditional knowledge practices are challenged or threatened (Finnegan 2012). In such instances, some traditional knowledge practices are modified, varied and even abolished. In most instances, when this happens, it negatively impacts the customary practice of the particular group of people or society. This paper seeks to investigate one of the Tshivenda folklore expressive genre namely, proverbs. The paper will look at its significance and the appropriateness of this customary practice in the new political democratic order.

### METHODOLOGY

The researcher has for the purposes of this paper used qualitative methods for the collection of data from both the primary sources and

secondary sources. Traditional leaders and some elderly members of the Vhavenda community were interviewed to obtain data necessary for the achievement of the set objectives of this study. Data was also obtained from literature including the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act (Act 108 of 1996).

### RESULTS

This paper established that Tshivenda proverbs, to a large extent continue to express the subordination of women even under the democratic legal order of the new democratic South Africa. This further deepens women's disadvantaged conditions.

### DISCUSSION

South Africa is a multilingual and multicultural country with several ethnic groups, some of which include the Tswana, the Swazi, the Vatsonga, the Ndebele, the Xhosa, the Zulu, the Pedi, the Sotho and the Venda. Each of these ethnic groups has a peculiar tradition and customs. Though the ethnic groups differ in terms of their tradition and customs, there are some practices that cut across all cultures, for instance, the use of proverbs in their conversations.

Within the last two decades though, there has been a crumbling of the oppressive apartheid legal order, which was replaced by a new democratic legal order. During the apartheid political order, it was assumed that diversity within South Africa is static and does form part of a natural order. Under the new legal order of democracy, the state has the responsibility to ensure that the values enshrined in the Bill of Rights are enforced and applied to all the citizens of the country, irrespective of their culture or beliefs. These values include amongst others, human dignity and equality. The Bill of Rights prohibits unfair discrimination on the grounds of gender and sex (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act No. 108 of 1996).

The coming into effect of the new legal order does not only seem to have affected the apartheid legacy, but also other spheres of life, including customary practices. This means that different social groups, systems of customary law and cultural or religious beliefs have been affected. Thus, customary practices that are not in line with the provisions of the Constitution must be modified, varied, abolished or eliminated to ensure compliance.

### **Understanding the Concept Customary Practice**

A key to understanding the concept customary practice is in understanding the meaning of the terms custom and practice.

In understanding what a custom is, the following definitions provide guidance.

Soanes and Stevenson (2009) define a custom as, “a traditional way of behaving or doing something that is specific to a society, place, or time”.

Wolff (2006: 498) also defines a custom as a, “long-established practice common to many or to a particular place or institution and generally recognized as having the force of law”.

Webster (2011) on the other hand advances the following definition as, “an action or way of behaving that is usual and traditional among the people in a particular group or place”.

In order to understand what a practice is, the following definitions provide guidance.

The word ‘practice’ is a noun while the word ‘practise’ is a verb. The word ‘practice’ is used as an uncountable noun. It involves doing something regularly in order to improve one’s ability at it (Sinclair et al. 1989). It refers to activities

that people do in order to improve their skills or regular activity. In other words, doing something regularly makes one better.

From the above definitions, a customary practice can be understood as a traditional habitual activity, which is common to a specific society in a specific place. It is essentially a way of life of a people that has been practised from time immemorial. A practice becomes a custom if it is long established and is passed from generation to generation by people in a particular group. Such practice must be freely engaged in without coercion, force or fraud, to be a custom. Such a group’s habitual practice is usually unmodified and is transferred from one generation to another as already alluded to above.

### **Transmission of Customs**

Customs are usually transmitted from one generation to another through various ways. Traditionally, African customs are conveyed from one generation to the next through the word of mouth. These are mostly informal and include through oral tradition or folklore. Folklore is an expressive genre, which consists of legends, music, oral history, proverbs, jokes, popular beliefs, fairy tales, stories, riddles, ceremonies and rituals. Moon (2009: 9) equates folklore to oral literature when he says “oral literature... simply means literature delivered by word of mouth... and this represents the verbal aspect of folklore, which comprises riddles, puns, tongue-twisters, proverbs, recitations, chants, songs and stories... drama, poems, dance, myth and drum language”. The above expressive genres are important in the transmission of the traditions and customs of all African people. Besides entertaining, these expressive genres serve to teach moral values and sometimes survival strategies. This means that customs are used to regulate social life. Of all the forms of expressive genres, proverbs are the most concise but not necessarily the simplest form.

### **Proverbs**

A proverb is a saying, which expresses a generally accepted truth or belief of the folk. It is one of the expressive genres in African literature, which used to be transmitted from generation to generation through the word of mouth. According to Mieder (2004: 3), “a proverb is a

short, generally known sentence of the folk, which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form, which is handed down from generation to generation". Proverbs are metaphorical in that they do not mean what the words are actually saying. They are figurative and should not be interpreted literally. Their figurative mode abounds in metaphor. They comment about human life and action through reference to non-human activity. In other words, generalizations can be made about animals or birds in a proverb, implying a comment on human affairs. The Venda proverb which says "*maanda a ngwena ndi madi*" means the strength of the crocodile is the water. This proverb has nothing to do with the crocodile and the water in its interpretation. The figurative interpretation or implication of this proverb is that one is strong when he or she is among his or her kinsmen or a person is strong when supported by his or her own people. The proverb uses an animal, the crocodile and a non-animal, the water, to comment on human affairs. Proverbs may be short or long, depending on the particular ethnic group and the way they are composed. This is confirmed by Finnegan (2012:15) who says "there are no general rules for the formation of Bantu proverbs and particular peoples have their own favorite forms, but certain common patterns are apparent". Proverbs have a fixed syntax and are presented in a poetic form. In other words, their sentence structure remains the same in all contexts where they are used.

Proverbs summarize the society's experiences and observations into nuggets of wisdom. This means that proverbs are significant expressions of society's wisdom. Mieder (2004:9) says, "...Proverbs are a significant rhetorical force in various modes of communication, from friendly chats, powerful political speech and religious sermons on to lyrical poetry, bestseller novels and the influential mass media". In the context of stories and songs, proverbs are usually told in the summation of a point or as an introduction to the particular performance. Proverbs are found everywhere, thus, there are proverbs for every imaginable context. Unlike with the activities of riddling and storytelling, the citing of proverbs is not a specialized event where people would gather, for instance around the fire or table to tell proverbs. In fact, proverbs are not

independent citings, but dependent on the particular context. Thus, they occur informally for a purpose within the particular context. Regarding the application of proverbs, Mafela (2005:28), says, "They can be used in any speech-act situation". They are thus, part of human existence and social communication.

### Classification of Proverbs

Proverbs are classified differently by different scholars. The following is the classification of proverbs by different scholars.

#### Content

Classifying proverbs according to content, Mafela (2005: 28) indicates that "there are proverbs on religion, kinship relations, hope and despair, caution, warning against belittling others, parts of body, bad influences, warning against pretense, foresight and preparation, wisdom and foolishness, good fortune and fate, domestic animals, changes in times and seasons."

#### Theme

According to the international classification system of proverbs, proverbs are classified into 13 main themes, which largely represent basic aspects of human life (Mieder 2004: 16). The following is a list of the main themes, each accompanied by the relevant example in Tshivenda.

- Practical knowledge of nature: *A hu na plene li no fa li songo gonya luwa* (No baboon dies without having tried to climb up the precipice).
- Faith and basic attitudes: *Ya Mudzimu i bva dzinweni* (The beast of God comes from many).
- Basic observations and socio-logic: *Hu bikelwa vhunanga, vhutsila vha vhona nga mato* (They cook for traditional healing, the art is seen by eyes).
- The world and human life: *Ipfi livhi a li yi mulwadzeni* (A bad word cannot be said to a sick person).
- Sense of proportion: *Nguluvhe ye ndi ndou, mananga a bva nga mulomoni* (The pig tried to imitate the elephant and the horns came out through the mouth).

- Concept of morality: *Mmbwa ya la inwe a i noni* (A dog that eats another does not get fat).
- Social life: *Muthu ndi muthu nga vhanwe* (A person is a person because of others).
- Social interaction: *Munwe muthihi a u tusi mathuthu* (One finger does not pick mealies).
- Communication: *Wa sa ri vhudza u tshi ya u do ri vhudza u tshi vhuya* (If you don't tell us when you go, you will tell us when you come back).
- Social position: *Vhuhosi vhu tou bebelwa* (Chieftainship is born for).
- Agreements and norms: *Mutali u la kanwe, tsilu li la kanzhi* (The wise eats once and the fool eats several times).
- Coping and learning: *Tshi hulaho tshi tshi lwa ndi ndau na nngwe* (The one that grows with fighting spirit is the lion and tiger).
- Time and sense of time: *Tshisima tsha kule tshi vhulaisa muthu dora* (The spring that is far worsens one's thirst).
- Man: *Munna ndi ndou, ha tshili nga muri munwe fhedzi*. (A man is an elephant; he does not live on one tree).
- Woman: *Musadzi ha na gota* (A woman does not have a headman).
- Efficiency and its conditions: *Tsha kule tshi wanwa nga muhovhi*. (What is out of reach is attained by the one who uses a hooked stick).
- Home life: *Vhana vha khotsi vha thukhukana thoho ya nzie* (Siblings share the head of a locust).
- Life and death: *Mudzimu ha rumi tshi no lamba*. (God does not send he who refuses).
- Passage of time to conceit: *A i pfi dzwaladzwala nyanombe, i nga do vhuya ya dzwala i songo swika*. (One does not instruct a cow to calve, for it will not calve unless the time for that has arrived).
- Power: *Vhuhosi vhu tou bebelwa*. (Chieftainship is through a lineage).
- Cunning: *Khangala ruda mato, vuluvulu lo fa nga vuhwawho*. (Black mamba, open your eyes, puff adder died because of good naturedness).

### *Explicit Content and Implied Allusion*

Finnegan (2012:21) classifies proverbs into explicit content and implied allusion. Following here is the classification of proverbs according to explicit content accompanied by the example of a relevant proverb in Tshivenda:

- Animals: *A hu na pfene li no fa li songo gonya luwa* (No baboon dies without having tried to climb the precipice).
- Birds: *Funguvhu lo li thilaiwi, la fhira mudi to kovhela* (The raven said none shall advise me and flew past the village after sunset).
- Insects: *Vhana vha khotsi vha thukhukana thoho ya nzie* (Siblings share the head of a locust).
- Mice: *Nwana wa mbevha ha hangwi mukwita*. (The baby mouse does not forget the mouse track).
- Rats: *U tshi dza muro wa muvhuda, ranga u ya tshilaloni*. (If you doubt the meat of the hare, start by visiting its sleeping place).

In terms of implied allusion, proverbs are classified into the following categories, each accompanied by a relevant example of the proverb in Tshivenda:

### *Keywords*

Proverbs may also be classified according to the keywords. ,

For instance, proverbs that share the word **mbwa (dog)** would be classified together as follows:

- **Mmbwa ya la inwe a i noni**. (A dog that eats another does not get fat).
- **Mmbwa a i huvhi Kama**. (A dog does not bark at the meat).
- **Mmbwa i poswa kurambo nga a i divhaho**. (The dog is thrown a small bone by the one who knows it).
- **Mmbwa phaphadzi ufashwa nga mulavhu ndi hayo**. (The dog that moves around, to be caught by snares is hers).
- **Mmbwa i re na mune i vhonala nga tshiangaladzi**. (The dog that is owned is seen by good ornaments).

Proverbs that share the word **musadzi (woman)** will be grouped together as follows:

- **Musadzi ha na gota**. (A woman does not have a headman).
- **Musadzi a si wau o luga, a u wana, u a swurela**. (Somebody's wife is kind, but if she finds you, you will have it tough).

- *Musadzi munwe ndi khaladzi.* (One wife is a sister).
- *Musadzi ndi phandamulongo.* (A woman is a family disrupter). One can even say that this proverb is oppressive to women in the sense that it is generally believed that all women are disruptive to their families, which might not always be the case.

Milubi (2004:159) classifies Tshivenda proverbs into 11 categories, which cover themes, explicit content and implied allusion. Hence, there is an example of a Tshivenda proverb accompanying all the various ways of classifying proverbs cited by other scholars discussed in this paper.

It is worth noting that in terms of interpretation, some of the Tshivenda proverbs may be interpreted in various ways. That is, they may be interpreted figuratively and/or literally, depending on its format and context. For instance, *musadzi a si wau o luga, a u wana, u a swurela* (somebody's wife is kind, but if she finds you, you will have it tough) can be translated literally that somebody's wife is good because she does not belong to you, but once she belongs to you, you will regret it. Figuratively it may mean that things are good if looked at from a distance, but on closer look, you will see its true colors.

### Significance of Proverbs

Proverbs are very important in that they regulate human life. They are concerned with what defines humanity. This includes language, values, emotions, beliefs, reasoning and social affinity. They feature in both personal relationship and social affairs. Wherever and whenever they are employed, they provide moral lessons (Mmbi et al. 2006: 98).

According to Moon (2009: 6), proverbs are used in the following practical instances:

- The treatment of substance abuse
- Psychotherapy
- Testing mental status
- Teaching children abstract thinking
- Assessing attitudes toward work and life
- Determining competency to stand trial
- Intelligence testing

The general uses of proverbs as cited by Golka (1993:71) are given below, each accompanied by an example of a relevant proverb in Tshivenda.

- To stress the importance of self-help: *A hu na gota li no luvhela linwe* (No headman tenders homage on behalf of another).
- To allude to the way in which some people are over impatient, instead of taking time to do something properly: *A i pfi dzwaladzwalanya Eombe i nga -o vhuya ya dzwala i songo swika.* (One does not instruct a cow to calve, for it will not calve unless the time for that has arrived).
- To bring a dispute to a close: *Ya longa khwanda yo nwa.* (Once it has put its hoof it has taken a drink).
- To smooth over a disagreement: *Vhathu ndi nanga dza kholomo, vha a kudana.* (People are horns of the cattle; they do collide).
- To give ordinary advice: *Tsiwana i laiwa ndilani.* (An orphan is taught behavior by the way side).
- To indicate that people eat the fruit of their own folly: *Mubva ha na nzie, nzie dzi khoroni.* (The sluggard has no locusts, even if they come into his very courtyard).
- To rebuke for one's wrong behaviour: *U sa pfa hu tunya mavhudzi.* (Failure to listen wrenches off hair).
- To persuade one party to a dispute not to be angry with someone younger: *Muhulwane u kanda mupfa a tshi u vhona.* (The elderly person tramples on a visible thorn).
- To smooth social friction: *Vhathu ndi nanga dza kholomo vha a kudana* (People are like horns of the cattle; they sometimes collide).
- To help individuals adjust to their positions: *Hu tshi fashwa buku hu si fashwe thwamba* (When the water rat is caught, and the striped mouse survives/escapes).

Over and above the significance, proverbs are used by writers in their literary works to, amongst others, justify the actions of their characters, criticize bad ethical and immoral behaviors as well as to enhance the plot of their works. This means that proverbs are used by all people, the literate and the illiterate alike. Currently, people still use proverbs in judgments, debates, arguments, speech, and sacred and secular events.

They continue to be used widely in various spheres of life, including politics, religion, education, economics and agriculture. Thus, proverbs are still relevant in today's modern technological world.

### Appropriateness of Tshivenda Proverbs

Proverbs have been there since time immemorial. They formed part and continue to form part of people's daily conversations, both formally and informally.

The following paragraphs look into the figurative meaning of the following Tshivenda proverbs in order to determine their relevancy or appropriateness in the new democratic order of South Africa:

- *Munna ndi ndou, ha tshili nga muri munwe fhedzi* (A man is an elephant, he does not live on one tree). The figurative meaning of this proverb is that a man should have many wives. In a way, this proverb promotes polygamy (which means one husband married to more than one woman at a time) over polyandry (which means one wife married to more than one man at a time).
- *Musadzi munwe ndi khaladzi* (One wife is a sister). Figuratively, this means that a man enjoys life by having more than one wife.
- *Fuyu litswuku a li kundwi tshivhungu* (A red fig does not lack a worm). The figurative meaning of this proverb is that one must be very careful when focusing on the physical appearance of a woman because she might have a bad character.
- *Khuhu ya phambo a i imbi mutsho* (A hen does not announce the dawn of the day). Figuratively, this proverb means that a woman may not initiate a proposal for a love affair. It is actually the man who should do so.
- *Musadzi a shuma, munna ndi tshinamo* (If the wife works, the husband becomes a patch). Figuratively this means that wives should be restrained from working for a salary, only their husbands should work and provide for the family, otherwise the husband will lose the respect.
- *Musadzi ndi phandamulongo* (A woman is a family disrupter). The figurative meaning of this proverb is that a wife within a family could destabilize the family's unity. In other words, women bring trouble in the family.
- *Musadzi ndi tshikwati, tshi a kwatula* (A wife is a bark that can be removed). The figurative meaning of this proverb is that a woman, though married may divorce and

move on to another marriage with ease. In other words, she is not reliable.

- *Musadzi ha na gota* (A woman does not have a headman). The figurative meaning of this proverb is that a woman may not initiate things in the family.
- *Musadzi ndi tsilu sa thoho, u vhalo lura-ru fhedzi* (A wife is a fool just like a monkey, she counts only up to three). This proverb means that a wife or a woman's mind is not broad. She never thinks of the future.
- *Musadzi ndi nyamukhithi mukhanelela dumba la munwe*. (A woman is happy to come into the old house of another woman). The meaning behind this proverb is that a person who never hesitates to take someone's property as hers.
- *Vhuhadzi ndi nama ya thole, ya fhufhuma ri la fhunzhela* (A wife's in-laws are like lean meat, we keep the froth from boiling over with a spoon). The figurative meaning of this proverb is that a wife should treat the in-laws with tact and circumspection. This is important because they are her new family members.

All the above proverbs are tilted in favor of men and to the disadvantage of women. Thus, they afford unequal treatment to men and women in their application. This could be because African customary law is patriarchal in most African countries. South Africa is no exception. Patriarchy vests authority and power in men (Wilcox and Nock 2006). It follows therefore that men, unlike women were and are the authors of proverbs. Even in the use of proverbs, it is often men than women who include proverbs in their daily conversations.

With the new South African democratic dispensation, however, the above proverbs seem to be in conflict with the provisions of the Constitution, which is the supreme law of the country.

Chapter 1 of the Constitution under founding provisions of the Republic of South Africa states that, "The Republic of South Africa is one, sovereign, democratic state founded on the following values:

- a. Human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms.
- b. Non-racialism and non-sexism.
- c. Supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law."

In a nutshell, the post-apartheid democratic state of South Africa is anchored on non-discrimination and the principle of equality.

Chapter 2 of the Constitution under the Bill of Rights provides for equality of everyone before the law. In the same breath, Sections 9(3) and 9(4) of the Constitution further provide that:

“The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.”

“No person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds in terms of subsection (3). National legislation must be enacted to prevent or prohibit unfair discrimination.”

This means that in order to ensure equality of everyone before the law, no person, not even the state, is allowed to practice unfair discrimination in any manner whatsoever. Thus, any practice that is contrary to the provisions above is rendered unconstitutional and constitutes a crime.

Following the above deliberations on the provisions of the Constitution, the above-cited Tshivenda proverbs are discriminatory in their figurative application. Thus, both husbands and wives or men and women are not afforded equal treatment. Women are unfairly and directly discriminated against on the basis of sex.

It suffices to say therefore that some of the Tshivenda proverbs are not appropriate under the democratic order of the country since they violate the provisions of the Constitution, in particular the right to equality.

### CONCLUSION

In this paper it has been shown that the proverb is one of the elements of folklore that carries meaning in the people’s culture and is used in the interpretation and understanding of several phenomenon around people’s lives. Proverbs have been there since time immemorial. They are still very relevant in today’s modern technological world as they continue to be used widely in various spheres of life, including in politics, religion, education, economics and agriculture. Thus all people continue to use proverbs in judgment, debates, arguments, speech, and sacred and secular events. Proverbs are also used by writers in their literary works to, amongst oth-

ers, justify the actions of their characters, criticize bad ethical and immoral behaviors as well as to enhance the plot of their works.

Therefore, proverbs continue to form part of everyday conversations, both formally and informally, and are used in context and should be understood and interpreted in line with the context in which they are applied.

However, some Tshivenda proverbs are in violation of the provisions of the Constitution of the country in the sense that they are discriminatory against women and are in conflict with the right to equality. Continual use of such proverbs in conversations furthers the insubordination and oppression of women and their rights in domestic and public spheres of life. It follows therefore that such Tshivenda proverbs that conflict with the provisions of the Constitution, have no place in a democratic legal order of the new democratic South Africa. In other words, they are inappropriate in this democratic era of the lives and may not continue to be used in conversations.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the reception of democracy, apart from the Constitution, South Africa is obliged to meet the obligations of both the regional and international human rights organizations because South Africa is a signatory to many regional and international instruments that are aimed at protecting the citizens in general and women in particular. Thus, cultural practices as well, are subject to the provisions of the Constitution. As a culture changes, so the language used to express those cultural practices should also change.

In view of the above, it is recommended that Tshivenda proverbs that are discriminatory against women and are in conflict with the provisions of the Constitution, should be modified, amended or adjusted for the purposes of bringing them in line with the Constitution, which is the supreme law of the country.

Traditional leaders and the native speakers of the language, being the custodians of customs, should help modify, amend or adjust some of the Tshivenda proverbs that are in conflict with the provisions of the Constitution.

Language practitioners should also help modify, amend or adjust some of the Tshivenda proverbs that seem to be in conflict with the provisions of the Constitution.

In cases where the inappropriate proverbs cannot be modified, amended or adjusted, it is recommended that such proverbs should be abolished or eliminated by means of a national legislation. Finally, language practitioners and the media should refrain from using proverbial expressions, which are discriminatory.

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