

A Quest for Cultural Emancipation through Traditional Attire in Mphambo Village, Vhembe District of South Africa

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ABSTRACT The use of traditional attire as a cultural and an expression of social identity has become more prevalent amongst female Tsonga youth particularly during traditional ceremonies and/or cultural festivals. This might stem from the quest for the South African youth to reclaim their African identity and ways of life. The paper sought to understand the drive behind wearing traditional attire, which is currently fashionable amongst youth at Mphambo village, Malamulele municipality in Limpopo Province. The paper followed a qualitative research approach which is ethnographic in design. The purposive sampling method was used to select ten key informant participants. Thematic data analysis was used to organize raw data into meaningful themes and descriptions. The findings discovered that female youths staying in rural areas frequently wear fashionable traditional attire called *xibelane* during festivals. The female youths enjoy the freedom, respect, and honour from elders through wearing *xibelane* and *nceka*. The paper also revealed that *xibelane* stands out to represent an emancipated social identity, which communicates one standing in the community and belonging to one's culture in a society.

INTRODUCTION

The Tsonga are a diverse people generally including the Shangaan, Thonga, and Tsonga with about 1.5 million people in South Africa, and some 4.5 million individuals in southern Mozambique and Zimbabwe (Siyabona Africa Report 2016). Tsonga people are well known for their colourful clothing, specifically amongst women wearing *xibelane* (a wrap-around pleated skirt) and the *nceka* (which is the overlay wrap-over). During festivals, women wear *xibelane* and *nceka* whilst dancing to their cultural music. According to Ntombela (2015), the wearing of traditional attire is declining because of western philosophy that permeate all cultural norms and systems. Although Tsonga attire is facing the same challenge, it remains fashionable amongst female youths at Mphambo village. Wayne (2015) argued that African clothing mean so much to many people than simply being a fashion statement. Tailors do not make clothes simply for appearance sake, but rather each symbol, colour, and shape of the attire have a specific purpose or meaning such as creativity and allegiance to tribal roots.

Problem Statement

The advent of a globalized market economy has been a contributor to economic develop-

ment in many countries. However, it also contributed much in stifling local cultures which are presently facing a threat of disappearance. In spite of this, young South African women are managing to nurture and maintain African clothing in Mphambo village. It is therefore imperative for this paper to investigate the influence of young women going for traditional attire at this phase of development in the new dispensation. Hence, the paper sought to explore the influential factors behind the prevalence of wearing *xibelane* by born-free youths at Mphambo village of South Africa.

Objectives

The following were the objectives of the paper:

- ♦ To explore the social benefits of *xibelane* in Mphambo village
- ♦ To understand the prevalence of wearing *xibelane* by female youths at Mphambo village

Literature Review

Women in any given culture tend to encapsulate their identity according to their immediate cultural milieu (Mortada 2010). "As a child,

she performs the role of the dutiful daughter, as a wife, she takes care of her household and expected to give birth to offspring, and as a mother, she raises her children and builds a family” argued Mortada (2010). Women thus lead their lives based on expectations from their family, society, and community. In this regard, ethnicity becomes a source of positive identity for women rather than a stigmatized identity. Gender becomes one dimension of self-identity that can be symbolically communicated through clothing. Women make meaning through clothing and appearance to communicate ethnic identity and differentiation (Zurn and Faude 2013). Differentiation, in this regard, refers to the notion of clothing or elements of clothing helping individuals to differentiate themselves from others, as through self-expression and personal creativity. Dawn (2010) points out that “our appearance as people is greatly affected by the clothes we wear”. Nowadays, youngsters argue that they learn to go with the flow and therefore taking up new trend is seen as a better option. A handful of people of clothing believe that their traditional clothes represent their customs and identity. To let go of it will be like discarding one’s own identity. Ethnic identity portrayed by women clothing is related to traditional elements such as bright colours which in turn communicates femininity. Femininity, according to Lewis et al. (2017) relates to the transmission of what you are as women, and not to hide what you are. It has to do with being proud of your own attributes. The reason to show womanly curves or parts of the feminine body is the need for a clear differentiation between men and women. In this regard, gender is socially constructed to shape our understanding of what is to be male or female. Girls are thus traditionally encouraged to be concerned with appearance; beauty and protect tradition as a kind of duty. The traditional dress presents an African charm and a liberated appearance from heartfelt opposition to Western influence.

Traditional Dress Displays a Life Narrative

Batty (2014) points out that traditional dress is directly linked to the culture because it represents the way people’s social practices have been developed over the years. Culture involves attires, languages, dances, and music. The clothing styles usually change over time for a variety of reasons and have special meaning to individ-

uals who share that culture. Batty (2014) reiterates that as people we live in a storied world in which we constantly act our life narratives, from dressing in the morning to unwinding at night, to hitting the town during weekends. Each narrative offers a strong emotional subtext, filled with meaning that alters as it travels through and beyond each narrative. Although environmental changes can have drastic effects on trade of goods amongst countries which cause the quickest shift in a culture’s clothing style, many Africans combine traditional African styles with Western style, which is indeed a fashion throughout Africa and the rest of the world. The fact that certain colours are synonymous with a particular culture is worth noting. Even though Europeans colonized the African continent resulting in many cultures being forced to abandon their traditional ways of dressing, some cultures specifically Tsongas preserved their identity through *xibelani*. Although the colour and texture of the clothing are currently modernized, it is still reflecting and retaining the old traditional style.

Sobol et al. (2016) point out that with the world becoming a global village through free trade pressures, many people are raising questions about what will happen to Africa’s rich and diverse culture of people heritage and the traditional clothing. In essence, globalization according to Sobol et al. (2016) is a phenomenon that seems to promote a new economic order. Globalization has been more visible in terms of trade and the information highway. What has not been explored is the globalization of culture, especially those aspects of culture that are generally acceptable and beneficial in a global village such as the dress consumers.

It is a concept that has taken root across the world. Although its tentacles reach far and wide, the traditional dress has enabled people to honour the past, celebrate the present and provide a legacy for the future (Charles and Lu’s 2015). According to Munts (2012), traditional clothing is not only the source of enjoyment during special occasion but serve also as a glue that communicates and keeps families united from one generation to the next and across the miles that often separate people, both literally and figuratively.

Traditional Dress as a Communication System

Lewis et al. (2017) view clothing as a means of communication. According to them clothing may imply social affiliation (the use of clothing

or elements of clothes to express group membership), social status/gender (the use of clothing or elements of clothing to indicate femininity or masculinity), and social status/age (the use of clothing or elements of clothing to indicate youth or the lack of it/ maturity). In this regard, being a youth is associated with the social identity associated with shorter clothes/dress whereas maturity is associated with clothes that cover the body.

Chaney and Goulding (2016) argue that identity is a dimension of social relationships and that dress/attire communicates not just how consumers see themselves, but also how they want to be seen by others. Attire is used both to differentiate a group/tribe from the others, and to mark the membership of reference group. According to Sobol et al. (2016) globalization has its own set of cultural attendants which exercise a profound influence on the life of people everywhere. Globalization eclipses, or at least subordinates all previous ways of answering the need and of dealing with vicissitudes of human life. All other ways of life are diminished and marginalized at a stroke of modernity.

Barnard (2014) points out that people externalize their identity either through ethnicity, personality or heritage representation spaces that have to be understood in new ways. Hence, traditional attire enables people to understand who they are, where they come from, and where they are going. Clothing/dress is a visual communication ranging from the colours of the attire, the design of the clothes, and even the material used. This idea is supported by Sobh et al. (2012) who view the role of attire by traditional women as a political and a social tool to defend their identity. This idea is also supported by Lenzerini (2016) who emphasize that adoption of African dress is a political act which expresses resentment and rejection of the women who are viewed as powerless, uncivilized and lacking in prestige and status. Such thinking is influenced by the context, the life goals and the self-conceptions consumer hold as important.

Different kinds of clothing such as traditional dress influence the cultural attire with great impact. The researchers (Bemis 2013; Bruzzi and Gibson 2013) argue that fashion and dress can be influenced by a person's national identity, ethnicity or race, or either by personal or in a governed fashion. Traditional dress fashion is a cultural phenomenon that is concerned with

meanings and symbols. It should have to mean to people and symbolizes the social group's togetherness and belonging.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of this paper is based on identity which is captured by social identity and identity theories propagated by Hogg (2016) in understanding peace and conflict. Hogg (2016) argued that social identity represents a person's knowledge about where one belongs to a social category or a set of individuals who hold a common social identification and view themselves as members of a social category. It follows that individuals who identify with the group feel a strong attraction to the group, independent of individual attachments within the group.

The in-group identification leads to a greater commitment to the group, and have less desire to leave the group, even when the group's status is relatively low. Thus, the central cognitive process in social identity (theory) is depersonalization or seeing the self as an embodiment of the in-group prototype rather than as a unique individual. Self-verification, therefore, underlies behavioural processes such as role taking, role making, and group formation as the person acts to portray the identity.

According to Keyton (2011), people do not always need words or speak to communicate. Clothing is one of the ways of achieving the transmission of information without speaking. One thing that clothing says about a people is the identity one has established for themselves. When young women wear traditional attires, they identify their self-image as an adherent to cultural norms and reconstruction of their self-worth.

Batty (2014) argued that attire says much about people, about relative times in their culture, nation, and value system. Traditional attires bring both the young and old closer to each other. According to Disele et al. (2011) traditional dress has become a marker of cultural identity and is used to express identity in national ceremonies or cultural activities. There is a saying amongst Tsonga speaking people that if loosely translated say "a young person or child needs blessings from elders to succeed and make it in life"- meaning that young people should observe tradition. Hence, the paper seeks to explore

contemporary appropriations of Tsonga attire benefits amongst the youths in the current context.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted within the paradigm of socio-cultural studies. It draws on cultural studies through discussions on how people's lives have been influenced by globalization, particularly in terms of culture, and focuses on the connections between fashion and identity, which have become the central theme of cultural studies from a gender perspective (Rantanen 2013; Stephens et al. 2013). When examining cultural identity, it is important to consider how human beings construct meaning through practices of symbolic representation (Howarth et al. 2014).

By exploring the participants' mode of dress the researcher inherently investigates how meaning is created, and thus reality constructed, not found (Bryman 2012). The intention is to focus on how the participants appropriate that constructed meaning and interpret it in their individual ways, which then finds expression through their dress sense. A purposive sampling was used to draw a sample of ten key informants' namely four adult females, three youths, and three adult males with heritage knowledge of the culture and the objective of the study. Data collection method used an unstructured interview to solicit the objective of the study. According to Babbie (2017), face to face interview relates to the process where the researcher asks participants questions to collect data and to learn more about beliefs, opinions, the ideas, and behaviors of the participants. An unstructured interview was adapted or changed to meet the participants' level of understanding and to gain first-hand information from the participants regarding their cultural attire and shared behavioral patterns. Participants were all interviewed by the researchers whilst the data was being tape recorded.

The participants were given the opportunity to narrate their "lived experiences" during a one to one unstructured interview (De Vos et al. 2011). A voice recorder, field notes, and observations were used to capture the context/process. In the analysis of data, the researchers used selective coding that closely corresponds with typical behavior that has been observed in the field or concepts that most adequately describe the central notion of the research study (Du Plooy-Cel-

liers et al. 2014). In this regard, conceptual coding used data reduction through the identification of themes. The reduction process resulted in aggregate data of a small number of themes and sub-themes.

Measures to Ensure Trustworthiness

In ensuring that the findings reflected the truly shared experiences and behavioural patterns of Mphambo village, the researchers sought believability based on coherence, insight and instrumental utility, and truthfulness (Creswell 2014) through a process of verification rather than through traditional validity and reliability measures. The strategy of credibility to ensure truthfulness was achieved by prolonged engagement with participants in their natural setting. The strategy of transferability was enhanced by the thick description of their narratives in order to achieve applicability. Dependability was achieved through coding and recording of data. To ensure conformability, audiotapes were repeatedly replayed to capture the true meanings.

Ethical Measures

Permission was sought from each participant to undertake the interviews. Measures were taken to ensure that participants remain anonymous by not linking the responses to an individual participant. Written consent was obtained from each individual participant and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Consent was also granted to each key informant before being recorded on a tape during the interview session (Babbie 2017).

Information shared during the course of the interview were not discussed with anyone outside the research team, and that they could withdraw anytime they felt uncomfortable during the course of the study. It was highlighted to each participant that under no circumstances were they under duress and that their participation was strictly on the voluntary basis.

RESULTS

Participants Responses to Traditional Attire

A female traditional leader had this to say: *"At the age of sixteen, a young woman is given rules and regulations about her culture and its*

attire. In the olden days, when a young woman wears her xibelane and its accessories, it opened doors for her to get a proposal from husband to marry her. Her beauty is brought out by her (xibelane) and nceka."

A male traditional leader had this to say: "During our youths, we used to wear tinjovo when we had social functions, and when we went for hunting and fishing. It was great then, in an open free world where people understood each other and compete to be the best regardless of gender."

Appreciation of Tsonga dress by elders is evident in their praises. Attire is regarded as something that brings out the beauty of both male and female in their culture. It plays an influential role in matrimony. One of the female youth had this to say:

"Wearing xibelane and being able to dance along with one's peers during a family function makes one's family happy." Another female youth had this to say "I enjoy wearing xibelane especially when I have xiseveseve, (celebration in which friends give each other gifts) feeling free, and showing off one's culture to the world. It is all about our identity, our belonging, and pride as young Tsonga women."

Gender Appreciation of Traditional Attire

As the interview continued a female youth went on to put on her traditional attire *xibelane* and *nceka* to express her delight. She had this to say:

"I feel good and look beautiful in my xibelane compared to western dress. When I wear my traditional attire that is, xibelane and nceka just gets along with my body and soul, it boosts my pride, and give me respect. For us as a community, a married woman put nceka across the shoulder and it should be feet-long, whilst for young women, it is knee-length long."

A male youth participant had this to say regarding a woman wearing *xibelane*: "I prefer watching and admiring young women wearing xibelane than the western dress. Western attire tends to add more accessories and make one become more complicated."

All the youths were open and honest about their feeling about traditional attire. Not only females understood the beauty of wearing traditional attires, males also preferred and admired

the beauty of a woman who has worn traditional attires. Nowadays Tsonga male youths find wearing traditional attires (*tinjovo*) uncomfortable. Another male youth had this to say:

"I hardly wear tinjovo nowadays because it is something that leaves my body exposed. I prefer to wear tinjovo for a special occasion. It is necessary to wear tinjovo to dance and welcome one's elders, traditional leaders and other important guests invited for the special occasion such as the installation of chiefs."

A female traditional leader had this to say: "In Tsonga culture, men do wear their tinjovo, but not as frequently as Tsonga women. Men prefer to wear tinjovo during big and special occasions. Women, on the other hand, wear xibelane and nceka in any family function. They wear it even at home and in town. They are the custodian of our culture."

Attire as a Means of Communication

A female traditional leader had this to say regarding respect given to a woman wearing *xibelane*:

"When a woman or a young lady wear xibelane and walk on the street, all men both young and old give her respect and admire her. Similarly, elderly women showers her with blessings and will always wait to greet her with pride. Aged people are very proud of a person who embraces cultural values; it makes a person feel special and important in their community."

"Women are expected to dress respectfully. For women to dress in a decent way her body must be covered and show respect to the elders in the society. Elders are excited when they see young women wearing traditional attires. It shows respect to the elders of the community", said a male traditional leader.

In Tsonga tradition, women participate more in the cultural activities. Women maintain the pride and interests of their culture in the form of *xibelane*. Wearing *xibelane* elevate young women socially and enable them to receive some form of validation to themselves. It is in line with Chaney and Goulding (2016) assertion that clothing is a tool used in legitimizing the sub-culture and its values and its uniqueness.

During dancing women shake their hips and move with the traditional music that is being played; their *xibelane* move in the direction of

the hips' movement. *Xibelane* represents the beauty of a woman and displays that a young lady is ready and prepared to take the responsibility of womanhood in a society as prescribed by her tradition. Tsonga people respect their culture and everything in it.

Young Tsonga persons who wear and embrace *xibelane* are shown and given more respect by the community for putting on the most treasured attire in one's culture. In essence, Western dress is viewed as an attempt to strip all women of their cultural heritage and to promote the notion that indeed they are uncivilized.

Elderly women in the communities prefer wearing their *xibelane* everywhere they go. It makes them feel more comfortable and original. A traditional leader had this to say:

"Young people should walk on the steps of their elderly and ancestors. It is what is expected of them. A good mannered young person should emulate her elders unlike many who are consuming new fashion trends." During the interview, most of the participants gave positive responses to the question of having to seek blessings from elders in the community.

One woman traditional leader explained the issue of respect for traditional attire and said: *"Our elders respect our xibelane and nceka because it represents our history and identity. We, Tsonga people, are well known for wearing colourful traditional clothing. It means a lot to our elders to be noticed and well known. Elders respect a woman who is wearing Tsonga cultural attire."*

Another female traditional leader had this to say: *"We respect our xibelane because we wear it in the time of joy and celebrations. We do our traditional rituals wearing it. It is one of the important clothing for a Tsonga woman. When dancing, everyone who is around become filled with joy and happiness. Onlookers share smiles on their faces because the colourful clothing brightens up everyone's mood and day. Hence, when wearing my xibelane at home, I am already a little bit in the festival mood. It creates a sense of anticipation on my part for the festival."*

Attire is everything in Tsonga culture. *Xibelane* and *nceka* impact on both Tsonga women and men as a way of life and embracing of one's culture.

DISCUSSION

The paper focused on the effect and influence of *xibelane* on youths. The participants

were drawn from youths, elderly and key heritage knowledge holders such as traditional leaders and elderly traditional dance performers. The participants described explicitly the importance and benefits of *xibelane* and dance to the youths. The findings indicated that there are values in wearing *xibelane* and engaging in a dance performance by all regardless of gender and age to provide self-respect and dignity.

The findings showed that youths are divided on the issue of traditional attire. Some are moving away from their traditional roots and embracing the Western fashions clothing. Some rural elderly women still understand the importance and relevance of wearing traditional attire. The paper discovered that even though youths are moving away from their roots, they still know and celebrate their ancestral roots by participating in traditional activities wearing traditional clothing in cultural ceremonies and social functions. This concurs with Charles and Lu's (2015) argument that people understand the significance of wearing traditional dress on social, cultural and religious occasions. The traditional attire evokes emotions of pride, belonging and praises amongst elders.

The findings also show that traditional attire does not only allow consumers to create a break with ordinary life but acts as the avenue to the extraordinary experience of liberated communal life. It is a custom for Tsonga girls to learn the *xibelane* dance to express pride in their cultural heritage. *Xibelane* dance is used on occasions such as the *mkhinyavezo* and *ku chachula*, as well as accompanying other traditional dances such as the *makhwaya* and *mchongolo* during social functions. This concurs with Chaney and Goulding's (2016) assertion that the combinations of clothes and accessories are selected carefully for social function as part of an overall package that enables free play. The social function becomes irresistible magnets pulling people close together.

While the *xibelane* dance is customary for women, some men are now participating in it, especially when there is *xiseveseve* (social party). It is performed to its own distinct music and has become typical for all Tsonga music band to have females and males *xibelane* dancers. It is an open dance in which everyone can participate and it is used both in rituals as well as in church activities. This supports Ntombela's

(2015) argument that traditional attire and customs do not need to die especially in rural areas because it is part and parcel of heritage.

The beat of *xigubu* (drum) in villages expresses the mood of the people in a community, calling people to come together; creating an opportunity to give one another a sense of belonging and solidarity; a time to connect with each other and be part of a collective rhythm. Both young and old, rich and poor, men and women contribute to the society. Attire in this regard serves as the symbol of identification, legitimize culture, affiliation, and its values. This concurs with Batty (2014) argument that attire and music are used both to differentiate oneself from the others as well as to mark one's membership of reference group. It reconstructs the people self-worth through a display of confidence and feeling of being free.

Youth might not prefer wearing traditional attires to town or at schools, but on the special occasion, they embrace wearing their traditional attires. Attire creates an unstructured community of people experiencing emotions together. The paper showed that traditional attires have a great impact on youth morale especially when they went all out to impress the researchers by wearing *xibelane*. This concurs with Ferguson's (2016) view that style and the clothes a person chooses reflects and affects a person's mood, health, and overall confidence. It is evident that traditional attires and dances teach social patterns, values, and help people work, mature, praise or criticize members of the community while celebrating festivals. The *xibelane* is largely participatory in nature with spectators being part of the performance. There are no barriers between dancers and onlookers. This explains the importance of the new development in the traditional attires with regard to the change in the power balance between generations and gender in their contribution to society.

This paper builds and extends the current literature through its contribution to the work that examines the relationship between identity and attire. Attire, in this regard, transcends everyday individual identity to engage in extraordinary activities that allow one to escape the everyday grind. From the oral transcripts, it was evident that during social functions, participants have to adhere and conform to the sub-cultural uniform. From a materialistic perspective, attire can be seen as the interaction between subjects, objects, time and space contributing to identity projects. Attire helps to express group norms

and affirm it symbolically. It is a tool that is used to legitimize the culture/sub-culture and its values, and to claim its uniqueness and create the feeling of being emancipated.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study revealed that there are various social and cultural benefits in wearing *xibelane* among the female youths in Malamulele community. All participants concurred that the Tsonga cultural attire helps to boost their self-image, confidence, self-worth, and dignity. The paper showed that the rare social benefits to traditional attire are its potential to serve as the backbone and backdrop to the communal experience. For being a Tsonga, and doing what Tsonga people do is a central feature of one's identity. Tsonga *xibelane* addresses agency and reflection, doing and being, behaviour and perceptions that are central aspects of the self. Youths enjoyed the respect and honour which brought joy to the elderly which is rare in our circular society. Even though some young people embrace Western clothing, the traditional dress has stood out to present one's liberated identity and belonging. Traditional clothing serves as the symbol of identification and affiliation. It facilitates socialization, social exchange, and social cohesion through its emphasis on similarity to each other rather than the celebration of individual style. It helps create a sense of self, family and cultural identity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the preceding conclusion, it is imperative to implement the following recommendations:

- ◆ Elderly people should give support to children engaging in cultural attire and its activities;
- ◆ Government should develop and promote diversity of cultures;
- ◆ More financing and investment on cultural festivals should be done to promote traditional attire;
- ◆ Competitions for different aspects of culture such as dances, music, attires, and poetry should be promoted;
- ◆ Producers of traditional clothing should identify aspects of brand marketing campaigns that motivate consumers to buy sets of clothes for the cultural ceremonies.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The paper focused on a single context of Tsonga cultural attire from a socio-cultural perspective of dress, music, and its appearance. Further research could be conducted in other cultures which displays unique characteristics during rituals and social ceremonies.

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