

The *domba* Language Variety as a Vehicle of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

Among Vhavenḁa, *domba* is an indigenous initiation institution that both men and women attend. This is a unique indigenous institution which prepares young men and young women together in order to understand the importance of marriage, child-birth and other aspects of life. And as a result, this paper outlines the use of the language variety associated with this institution as well as its educational significance among the Vhavenḁa. The use of this variety, when *domba* is in session, plays an important role in educating young men and women to be responsible for their families and properties. In addition, cultural values and norms which are no longer observed today in many African communities are also taught by this institution. Although this variety promotes safe sex and sex only after marriage, it has also served as a breeding ground for a gendered variety of the language because it advocates that men and women should not be treated equally. Despite some difficulties, an understanding of the role played by the *domba* language variety in education by the Venda people and of the education received by initiates in this institution will allow us to recapture the space we need to reinvent ourselves, and to fashion knowledge systems and strategies to ensure a responsible adult life. This will empower us to become independent people capable of producing a value system worthy of our dignity.

Introduction

The modern world has resulted in rapidly changing behavioural norms and values, with pressure from all sides to conform, reject or to rebel against them. This paper looks into the institution of the *domba* and the *domba* language variety as a vehicle for perpetuating and conserving indigenous knowledge systems which are imparted to young men and women. In this institution, traditional cultural values and norms that are often no longer observed in urban areas are addressed through a discussion of the use of the *domba* variety.

Over the past two decades, elderly people have been interviewed in rural communities situated in the Vhembe and Mutale districts of the Limpopo Province with a view to develop an understanding of the role played by the *domba* variety and initiation schools as a way of passing down indigenous knowledge systems.

There are several types of initiation schools among the Vhavenḁa, including *vhusha* and *musevhetho* for girls, and *murundu* and *vhutuka* for boys. However, the *domba* is the main initiation institution

attended by both young men and women. Although all these institutions play an important role among Vhavenda, the purpose of *domba* is to initiate young men into manhood and young women into womanhood. In other words, they are taught the secrets of life and how to take responsibility as adult members of their communities. It is at these schools that the gender roles are differentiated. Ntuli, in Odora-Hoppers (2002:61), notes: “both male and female initiation programmes sought to prepare youth to take control of their lives within the broader community”. In almost all these schools, male and female roles are prescribed and, from their inception, indigenous languages have been used to impart the required knowledge related to these roles. Although these schools are no longer attended regularly by the members of the community as it was the practice in the past, the role they have played over the centuries in reflecting a traditional worldview cannot be easily put aside.

***Domba* language variety: theoretical perspective**

Domba, like any other institution, has its own codified variety that should be regarded as a social norm. This variety assists the *domba* attendees in maintaining their social identity. Anyone who attends *domba* should be able to speak this variety. He/she should be able to use it or should have a proper knowledge of norms of lexical items, expressions and norms of usage. According to Wardhaugh (2006:22), this type of social variety “determines how speakers perceive and organise the world around them, both the natural world and social world”.

In addition, Mulaudzi (2012:63) has noted that the natural world and the social worldview reflect an African cultural worldview which is the philosophy underpinning the total way of life in any given African society. According to Martin and Nakayama (2003), such a way of life may be seen as a system of thought, a pattern of behaviour, a system of values and material creation in a society that has evolved through interaction with the environment. The African cultural worldview is, thus, comprised of several specific elements, including values, norms, beliefs and religions.

It is through such a variety that the initiates and those who have already graduated from this institution are able to distinguish themselves from other social groups by reflecting the elements of a particular African cultural view. With regard to this, Hudson (1980: 24) points that the variety’s linguistic items make it different from other language varieties. In addition, Saville-Troike (1982:51) says, “there is variety of language codes and ways available to its members”. Therefore, the emphasis of this article is on the lexical items and expressions which characterise the *domba* variety as a medium of instruction. However, an understanding of *domba* is a necessary background to a further discussion of the *domba* language variety.

DOMBA

According to Stayt (1931:112), *domba* is a co-educational initiation school for both young men and young women. It does not operate like a normal school, because it takes place when there is a number of grown-up girls ready to participate. Also, it is necessary that there be a good harvest and plenty of food which will be discussed in detail later. The *domba* prepares the girls for marriage by teaching them the true significance of marriage and childbirth. They are also warned, through the same means, of the pitfalls and dangers they are likely to encounter during their lives.

The nature of *domba* and its supervisors

The origin of the *domba* is unclear, but meaning can be inferred from the noun form, *domba*. The noun, *domba*, is derived from the verb stem *-dombela*, which means *to become more mature*. This is reflected through the various phases of the *domba*, that is, the *tshikanda*, *ludodo* and *domba* proper (Mulaudzi 2010), all of which are discussed in detail. Stayt's (1931:112) maintains that the man who is in charge of *domba* is known as “Nyamungozwa” and is a song leader. He is assisted by a woman, known as “Nyamatei”, who supervises the girls. These two people direct the mentorship programme in which older girls and boys mentor those younger than themselves.

The semantic meaning of the mentors' names explicates their role within this institution. The noun *Nyamungozwa* is formed by adding the prefix *Nya-*, meaning “the mother of”, to the noun *mungozwa*, which means “the woman who has just given birth”. This noun appears to have been borrowed from the Shona word *mungozwa* (“the woman who has just given birth”), which means a woman who is nursing a baby of up to a month old. Although the semantic meaning of the name Nyamungozwa is feminine, within the context of the *domba* it explains the role played by the man in charge of the *domba* process. He is regarded as the mother (one who nurtures) of all the initiates and, as such the initiates are obliged to listen to him. The role played by Nyamungozwa, in this institution, affirms the role and position of women in the community. The name Nyamatei, a title assigned to a woman who supervises the girls, is likewise formed by incorporating the prefix *Nya-*, the plural prefix *ma-* and the verb stem *-tea* meaning to “lay the foundation”. This maternal figurehead conveys the basics of life to the initiates. Both Nyamungozwa and Nyamatei see to it that the *domba* is properly run and that the initiates carry out all its instructions in order to graduate. The supervisors perform these duties in the same way as all mothers who look after the home and the children as secondary. This dispels the myth that women play a minor secondary role in African communities.

Domba has three phases, with the first known as *tshikanda* followed by *ludodo*. The last phase is known as *domba* or *domba* proper, because it is during this last phase where the teachings reflect real life experiences. These first two phases are explained in detail in the paragraphs that follow. Like

other initiation schools, *domba* has its own language variety which is characterised by lexical items and unique expressions which are peculiar to this variety. Lexical items and expressions which characterise *domba* are, therefore, discussed according to these two phases.

***Domba* phases**

Tshikanda

According to Van Warmelo (1932:53), the phase known as “*tshikanda*” (a piece of raw hide) is a secret initiation rite for females and so named because the initiates’ attire is made of raw hide. This phase takes place on the first day of initiation before *ludodo* and *domba* proper. During the *tshikanda*, *vhadabe* (initiates from the last *domba* session) teach the initiates the principles or formulae of what is traditionally right, customary, ethical and obligatory. This is the phase in which cultural values and norms, which are often no longer observed in modern-day urban areas and some African communities, are also addressed. Once the initiates have gained knowledge of these formulae and the appropriate terminology, they are regarded as the foundation of the future generation and are thus referred to as *vhatei*. The noun *vhatei* derives from the verb stem *-tea* which means “to lay the foundation”. *Vhatei* gather outside the entrance of the main gateway known as “*khoro*” which is also an access route to the rest of the village. This is the place where the men usually gather and where strangers wait before they make any contact with members of the community. The *vhatei*, like outsiders who are not privy to *tshikanda*, wait at the *khoro* before they proceed to the hut known as *tshivhambo* for initiation. The noun *tshivhambo*, which appears to have been formed from the verb stem *-vhamba* meaning “to crucify”, implies physically taxing treatment the initiates. The name *tshivhambo* suggests that *vhatei* are taught to endure hardship and are given their first lesson in the python dance. During this phase, a *thahu* (an ornament) is presented to Nyamatei and it forms part of the proceedings of *tshikanda*. The presentation of *thahu* to Nyamatei is in recognition of her status and is symbolic for motherhood.

This phase focuses on female initiates as does the second phase or *ludodo*.

Ludodo

This is the second phase of *domba* which takes place two days before the *domba* proper. The noun *ludodo* is formed from the verb stem *-dodoma* meaning “to run quickly with frequent halts”, “to cower down and hide”. This name is indicative of some of the practices which the *vhatei* engage in during *ludodo*. These practices express the beliefs of the Venda people. According to Stayt (1931:113), the significance of *ludodo* is to teach physically mature girls about the hardships of

marriage, the signs of pregnancy and what childbirth entails. During *ludodo*, the *vhatei* also receive lessons in the python dance. The *domba* dance is associated with the python because this snake is part of a fertility rite. The initiates imitate the movements of the python when they perform the *domba* dance. Although they are allowed to practise *u ḡavhula* (meaning to practise pseudo coitus), penetration during sexual activities with men is prohibited. If one of them is found to have had sexual penetration, the initiate will be punished by the *vhadabe*. The punishment meted out to such a girl is known as *tshipata*. The noun *tshipata* is formed from the verb stem *-pata* meaning “to squeeze or compress”. As this noun *tshipata* suggests, the *vhatei* are punished by squeezing their fingers between two sticks known as *tshipata*. This practising of *u ḡavhula* teaches the initiates that a mature woman should have a male lover and this will make her acceptable to society. In addition, they are also taught to sing various songs which will be performed when *domba* commences. While they are practising these songs, a big drum known as *gangaliḡagovhamilenzhe*, and a smaller drum, *thungwa*, are beaten.

The *domba* proper

This is the last phase of *domba* which is attended by both males and females (Stayt, 1931:112). It takes place on the third day and is the start of the *domba* proper, because this is where the practical teachings which reflect real life experiences take place. The beginning of this phase is known as *domba ḡo tshoḡa* or *u kwasha gumbu*. The expression *domba ḡo tshoḡa* (meaning to break through a fence) indicates that *domba* is in progress. This expression suggests the disruption of normal family life and indicates that other activities performed by the community should be stopped for the moment. The expression *u kwasha gumbu*, meaning “to let the unknown be known”, indicates that the initiates are believed to know nothing when they first come to *domba*. By attending *domba*, the initiates will learn all the secrets of life. At this stage, the *vhatei*, comprising of physically mature boys and girls, are brought *u wela tshivhambo* or to be initiated. The expression “*u wela*” is used to signify the initiates crossing over into another state of adulthood by being initiated.

During *domba*, knowledge is imparted through practical lessons which reflect practical life as already noted. This makes *domba* a complete institution when demonstrative lessons known as *maḡano* (shows which demonstrate practical life) are presented to the initiates. The lessons are significant because the initiates, or *vhatei*, learn about sex, marriage, and childbirth and are forced to perform certain feats of endurance which humiliate but harden them. This is confirmed by Stayt (1931:124) who explains that the education initiates receive is intended to produce well-rounded, people-centred individuals. The following are some of the demonstrative lessons of *domba*, known as *maḡano*:

- a. *Ngoma ya singwele* (the demonstrative lesson of falling). The noun *singwele* is derived from the verb stem *-wela*. The purpose of this lesson is to teach female *vhatei* to be faithful to their husbands. If they are not, they may find themselves in trouble. The main purpose of this

lesson is to encourage husbands to be faithful to their wives even despite the emphasis being on the wives unfortunately.

- b. *Ngoma ya mbudzi na nngwe* (the demonstrative lesson of the goat and leopard). This is demonstrated by male initiates who play the role of drunken men. While they are drinking beer, the goat which they are supposed to slaughter is killed by a leopard. In this lesson, male *vhatei* are forewarned to protect their property and to be alert.
- c. *Ngoma ya muvhero* (the demonstrative lesson of the young married man). The noun *muvhero* is derived from *muvhera* meaning “young married man”. During this lesson male *vhatei* are taught to defend themselves if they are in trouble.
- d. *Ngoma ya Thovhela na Tshishonga* (the demonstrative lesson of Thovhela and Tshishonga). This is demonstrated by male initiates who play the role of Thovhela and Tshishonga. These two characters are married men. When a fight breaks out, Tshishonga is defeated and his wives are taken by Thovhela. Through this lesson, male *vhatei* are taught to be strong and to protect their wives.
- e. *Ngoma ya nyalilo* (the demonstrative lesson of crying). The deverbative noun *nyalilo* is derived from the verb stem *-lila* (cry). During this lesson, male *vhatei* are taught to show their manliness and dominate their female partners during sexual intercourse.
- f. *Ngoma ya tharu* (the demonstrative lesson of the python). *Domba* centres on woman, and here the python refers to a woman. *Vhatei* (only males) are warned not to have sexual intercourse with a woman if she has had an abortion or a miscarriage. If they do, they will die. The woman is equated with a python swallowing an animal or a human being, which then dies inside the python’s belly.
- g. *Ngoma ya sali* (the demonstrative lesson of embers). Here the initiates are taught the hardships of life by being forced to hold hot embers. The noun *sali* is formed from the noun *sale* meaning embers.
- h. *Ngoma ya mavhavhe* (the demonstrative lesson of pain). The noun *mavhavhe* is derived from the verb stem *-vhavha* (pain). During this lesson, the initiates are ordered to engage in strenuous physical exercise and, if they fail to do it properly, they are severely beaten. The purpose of this lesson is to prepare them to face hardships after graduating from the *domba* institution.

- i. *Ngoma ya muṭoṭombudzi* (the demonstrative lesson of the grasshopper). Muṭoṭombudzi is a female grasshopper that represents all women. It is bigger than the male grasshopper. During this demonstrative lesson, the female *vhatei* are taught that men are superior to women. This is demonstrated when a female, who is disguised with rushes and grass as a grasshopper, thrashes the male initiates. But is defeated in the end. This is not a balanced lesson because it portrays women as weaklings.
- j. *Ngoma ya phalana* (the demonstrative lesson of the small impala). The noun *phalana* is derived from the noun *phala* (impala). During this lesson, the *vhatei*, who are referred to as *phalana* (small impala), learn that whatever they do, the chief, or *phala* (impala), should get a share of the proceeds.

It is clear from these demonstrative lessons that *domba* education is closely linked to morality as it teaches the initiates to take responsibility as adult members of their communities. Respect for elders is also given priority.

The parents of all initiates, who are mostly commoners, must pay a fee known as *tshiṭanza* in order for their sons and daughters to be admitted to *domba*. The noun *tshiṭanza* means “the money which is paid by commoners, princesses and princes in order to gain entry into” *domba*, is formed by the noun prefix *tshi-* and the verb stem *-ṭanza*, meaning “to vomit”. In the case of *domba*, the parents hand over or relinquish control of their sons and daughters to Nyamungozwa and Nyamatei who henceforth exercise parental control over the *vhatei*. *Musiwana* (a commoner) wears only *sheḁo* which symbolises low status. Girls from the royal family put on a *sheḁo* (a narrow strip of cloth between the legs which hangs down from the front and behind) as well as *palu* (bluish cloth with many white or coloured spots and stripes). These last two items, the *sheḁo* together with the *palu*, symbolise high status. The chief's wife wears *musisi* (a cloth worn by female as a back apron) and *palu*. The combination of *musisi* and *palu* are symbolic of a high social status while commoners' wives wear *musisi* without *palu* as a sign of their low status. This custom illustrates the stratified nature of Venda society.

On the first day of the last phase of *domba*, the most important person on the first day of the last phase of *domba* is a traditional doctor known as *maine*. The traditional doctor is assigned this important position because he makes a fire with a stick known as *tshiregu*, which is a piece of wood assumed to be female with which fire is drilled. This fire is never extinguished and is made possible by covering *hala ḁa mafhaṭa* (hot embers) with ash when everyone goes to bed. The *hala ḁa mafhaṭa* are sometimes referred to as twin babies, because the original embers resemble those that are used to light the fire the following morning.

After the traditional doctor has made the fire, the *vhatei* are taken to the *tshivhambo* where the initiation takes place. Inside the *tshivhambo*, each *mutei* climbs up two poles onto the roof and then hangs upside down like a bat. In this way, initiates are said to be performing *mulema* or “bat in a sleeping position”. This practice signifies an entry into a new stage as the initiates will have to do away with the practice of *u dāvuhula* (the practice of false or simulated sexual intercourse) and become responsible mature adults.

When the *domba* is in session, the *vhadabe* and *vhatei* form a queue known as *deu* and perform the python dance. This is the central feature of this institution. Every evening the Nyamungozwa plays a drum and this is known as *tshilondo*. In doing so, he invites the *vhadabe*, *vhatei* and others to attend the *domba* ceremony.

Tshilalandoima

As Mulaudzi (2010:157) has stated, the last phase of *domba* is called *tshilalandoima* because the *vhatei* remain standing all night, as implied by the compound noun *tshilalandoima*. This compound is formed by the noun prefix *tshi-*, the verb stem *-lala*, the subject concord *nd-*, the perfect tense marker *-o* and the verb stem *-ima* (stand). The Nyamatei, also known as *mme a domba* (mother of *domba*), orders the initiates to endure a physical feat called *vhulimu* (meaning to hold up the arms straight) by raising their arms above their heads. The chief however, has the jurisdiction to intercept this endurance test and may exclaim, “*Vho rulwa*”, meaning to let them rest. This ordeal continues all night; the following morning, all initiates are told to go to the river to bathe but separately. Men go in one direction, while the women go in a different direction. After bathing, the women are inspected to determine whether they have had sexual intercourse while the *domba* was in session. After this, the female *vhatei* shave their heads leaving a small patch on the crown, known as. Male initiates do the same. The bare patch is known as *ndobo* in the case of men and *tshiundu* in the case of women. Before the women depart for home, they put on a *tshirivha*, a skirt made of sheepskin (Van Warmelo 1989:421).

Linguistic components of the initiation process

In the context of linguistics, the *Domba* variety is taught to initiates or *vhatei* by *vhadabe* who act as the guardians of the initiates throughout their seclusion for the initiation rites. In addition, Nyamungozwa and Nyamatei see to it that *domba* is properly run and that the initiates carry out all the instructions of this institution before they graduate.

Domba is, thus, the term used for an initiation school for young men and women. This type of school takes place only when there are a number of physically mature girls ready to participate, as well as

when there has been a good harvest and plenty of food. It usually lasts for three months but, in some instances, can continue for as long as twelve months.

The *domba* variety is a codified secret language variety used in the first instance by the initiates, and thereafter when they are adults, to establish a specific degree of relationship with other men and women. It is used in this instance as a code to indicate that one has, in fact, been through the initiation process. The new initiates and those who have already been initiated use nouns and expressions that have been coined for the initiation process and known only to select few.

Vhatei must learn these lexical items and expressions when they are first admitted to *domba* and have to memorise them as they are a core part of the *domba* language variety. The *vhatei* have to use these lexical items and expressions during their stay at *domba*, because it is forbidden to use any other variety. Some of the lexical items and expressions are characterised by a neologisms (Mulaudzi, 2010:157). The following examples illustrate this:

Table 1: Some nouns (lexical items) with a shift of diction but not in meaning

<i>Domba</i> variety	Meaning	Standard variety
<i>miłora</i>	Sperm	<i>Vhunna</i>
<i>tshivhaso</i>	Woman	<i>Musadzi</i>
<i>tshiuludza</i>	Man	<i>Munna</i>
<i>tharu</i>	Woman	<i>Musadzi</i>
<i>masale</i>	Menopause	<i>Musadzi o vhinaho/musadzi a savhonaho</i> <i>Ńwedzi/musadzi a sa</i> <i>Yaho maḁuvhani</i>
<i>phandu</i>	Fire	<i>Mulilo</i>

Table 2: Some expressions with a shift of diction but not in meaning

<i>Domba</i> variety	Meaning	Standard variety
<i>Dzivha Fundudzi</i>	Gate of the courtyard	<i>Khoro</i>
<i>Magona a lutshele</i>	The handle of the drum	<i>Zwa u fara ngoma</i>

<i>Mahatsi a mulamboni</i>	Pubic hair	<i>Vhukuse</i>
<i>Vho rulwa</i>	Let them rest	<i>Vho awedzwa</i>
<i>U vala khoro</i>	Pregnancy	<i>Thumbu</i>
<i>U vula khoro</i>	Give birth	<i>U vhofholowa</i>

Table 3: Some nouns are used during *domba* and also occur in the standard variety

<i>Domba</i> variety/Standard variety	Meaning
<i>Gangaliḷagovhamilenzhe</i>	The name of the big drum
<i>Tshipata</i>	Sticks to punish guilty initiates
<i>Tshiregu</i>	The female piece of wood in which fire is drilled
<i>Vhatei</i>	Initiates
<i>Tshiḷtanze</i>	The money which is paid by commoners
Nyamatei	The mother of the <i>domba</i> ; female leader
Nyamungozwa	The mother of the <i>domba</i> ; male leader
<i>Tshikanda</i>	A secret initiation rite for females
Ludodo	The second phase of <i>domba</i> during which the initiates are taught the secrets of life

Table 4: Some expressions used during *domba* and also occur in the Standard variety

<i>Domba</i> variety/Standard variety	Meaning
<i>Hala ḷa mafhaḷa</i>	Hot embers
<i>Vho rulwa</i>	Let them rest

<i>U wela</i>	To be admitted to the <i>domba</i> institution for the first time
<i>Domba lo tshoṭa</i>	The start of the <i>domba</i>
<i>U kwasha gumbu</i>	The start of the <i>domba</i>
<i>Domba lo ima</i>	The start of the <i>domba</i>

Conclusion

This social variety of language has been used for decades by the Venda people to impart knowledge to young men and women before marriage. The information which they gain during *domba* helps them cope with life after marriage. This variety educates young men to be responsible for their wives, families and property by demonstrating lessons such as *ngoma ya mbudzi na nngwe* (goat and leopard). The most striking feature of the vocabulary of this *domba* variety is that most of the words and expressions are specifically coined for this institution. In addition, this variety also helps women to describe themselves, particularly the way in which their bodies function. Although this variety helps to promote safe sex and sex only after marriage, it has also served as a breeding ground for a gendered variety of language because it advocates that men and women should not be treated as equals. Evidence of this is illustrated in demonstrative lessons such as *ngoma ya muṭoṭombudzi*, and *ngoma ya nyalilo*.

Understanding the role played by **the *domba* variety** among the Venda people allows us to recapture this space in order to reinvent ourselves, and to fashion knowledge systems and strategies to equip ourselves for a future life as responsible adults. This will empower us to be independent people capable of producing a value system that conserves a significant indigenous knowledge system and enhances a special community ethos especially through its neologism.

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