

# An Ethnographic Study of the Functions of Xitsonga Taboos in the 21st Century

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## Abstract

Taboos have historically played an important role in the upbringing of indigenous children by protecting them from harm while encouraging morality and discipline. This article examines the importance of taboos in the 21st century by analysing Xitsonga taboos that target girl and boy children. As an ethnographic study using a qualitative research method, data was collected through interviews as the primary source, and these were supplemented by observations as the secondary source. Informants were conveniently sampled from Vatsonga elders who are perceived as custodians of Xitsonga culture within the Malamulele area in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study shows that taboos are still relevant in the upbringing of children. Furthermore, the study highlights that Xitsonga taboos can be an effective tool to address and tackle some illnesses, issues of unemployment and moral decay amongst the youth. Finally, the study recommends some robust steps in bringing forth the use of taboos to address current challenges through the application of African epistemology.

**Keywords:** taboos; oral literature; morality; ethnography

## Introduction

Xitsonga is a language spoken by the Vatsonga tribe. According to the South African 2011 Census, it is a home language of 4.5% of the South African population (Halala and Mtebule 2014, 1). There are also speakers of this language in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. In these two countries, the language is also referred to as Xichangana or Shangaan. The use of Shangaan to refer to Vatsonga is mostly taken as derogatory in South Africa. Nkuna (2015) points out that Vatsonga are also found in Mozambique (11.3%), Swaziland (1.7%) and Zimbabwe (0.8%).

Xitsonga is grouped as S50 in Guthrie's classification (1967, 71) and is thus not closely related to any of the other Bantu languages spoken in South Africa, like Sesotho (S30) or IsiZulu (S40). However, in light of the synchronic similarities that the different Xitsonga dialects share with the Nguni and Tekeza languages, Baumbach (1987, 2) suggests that Xitsonga be classified under the Tekeza cluster of the Nguni group (Zerbian 2007, 65).

The Vatsonga have many taboos that encourage and influence people to conform to certain values and norms in society. These taboos, in their various categories, are applicable from the tender age of a child till adulthood. For instance, a person, young or old, is discouraged from pointing at a grave with a finger from a distance. If one does so, it is believed that the very finger that was used will bend permanently. This taboo is meant to encourage people to visit their deceased loved ones' place of rest. Instead of one saying, from a distance, "my granny" or whoever the grave belongs to "sleeps there!" one will come closer and say "my granny sleeps here." Vatsonga believe that when one visits a grave there will be spiritual greetings and some form of connection between the visitor and the departed.

Traditionally, Xitsonga taboos and other traditional ways of inculcating social norms and values were respected and observed by all members of the community. However, researchers such as Baloyi (2020), Mkhari (2014) and Malungana (1999) have noted that this has drastically changed, as today's youth see them as too primitive and barbaric to observe. Essel (2018) believes that democracy has also implanted among Africans the attitude to undermine and turn against their African strategies of curbing unacceptable behaviours.

This ethnographic and descriptive study of Xitsonga taboos highlights the importance of taboos as a critical component of Vatsonga's oral literature. The study also presents this element of orature as an effective tool that addresses the youth's social challenges, including illnesses, high unemployment rates due to laziness and moral regeneration or decay. Taboos also open scope for the creation of positive influences by encouraging the Vatsonga youth to look after their environment in this 21st century.

## Literature Review

Taboos are an integral part of human traditions. They were introduced in order to regulate the moral order of societies. The word “taboo” is defined by Steiner (1967, 143) as “any prohibitions which carry no penalties beyond the anxiety and embarrassment arising from a breach of strongly entrenched custom.” Steiner’s definition implies that some breach of a taboo can yield unpleasant results such as humiliation and psychological turmoil on the side of the culprit. Freud (2004, 21) believes the meaning of “taboo” diverges in two contrary directions: on one hand, it means “sacred” and “consecrated,” and on the other hand it means “uncanny,” “dangerous,” “forbidden” and “unclean.” Taboos have always been respected and observed as unwritten laws. A taboo “denotes an abstract concept which one is traditionally not expected to ask questions about; an observance that one keeps so as to avoid unnecessary misfortunes and dangers” (Baloyi 2020, 3). Thorpe (1996) is quoted by Omobola (2013, 224) as saying that taboos exist in society to avoid accidents, instil respect for elders, teach moral values, explain things that are difficult to understand, have respect for religion and culture, obey rules of cleanliness, and guide against being wasteful. Omobola (2013, 222) argues that while certain taboos are only prevalent in a specific culture, there are taboos that are thought to cut across all cultures. For instance, swearing, cannibalism and using profane language is not acceptable in any culture.

It is very important that we understand why taboos exist in most societies. Qanbar (2011, 87) asserts that if people can understand why a taboo exists, people will understand the values and realities in society—it will shed light on the social customs, religion and beliefs of a community. Chigidi (2009, 175) avers that “every society and every culture has its own ways of socialising its own children so that they may grow up to become responsible and socially compliant citizens.” Omobola (2013, 223) believes that taboos play a very important role in society. Amongst others, he believes taboos provide a set of rules serving as a moral guidance or a law to ensure that peace and security are present in the community; they are a means of social control and without them, there will be chaos; and lastly, since people always know that behind any prohibition lies the true meaning of taboos, they are preserving harmony and the well-being of the communities concerned. Baloyi (2020, 2) is of the view that while the neglect of taboos cannot entirely shoulder current morality challenges amongst Africans, “the relegation of taboos ha[s] contributed to this problem.”

Although researchers of oral traditions agree that taboos are an important and integral part of African lives, Malungana (1999) and Baloyi (2020) argue that some taboos are discriminatory against women, and push gender roles and oppression. The taboos that prohibit women from decision-making within their communities and families are examples. According to Malungana (1999), the Xitsonga taboos that forbid women from speaking in public community meetings, that forbid women from speaking without soliciting permission to air their opinion from their husbands, and that forbid women from deciding on the bride price of their own daughters, respectively, are perfect

examples of biased taboos. An example of a Xitsonga taboo that pushes for gender roles in a family is the one that prevents a boy child from eating from the pot (Mkhari 2014). The rationale behind the taboo is to prevent rain from falling when the young boy eventually marries. This was meant to keep a boy child away from the kitchen because, at the time, a kitchen was considered a woman’s place.

### Xitsonga Taboos, Their Structure and Categories

It is very important for one to note that Xitsonga taboos, as in most cultures, are structured in a negative form. The phrase *U nga* (do not) prefixes all taboos. This is what Chigidi (2009) describes as the prohibition part of taboos. After the prohibition statement, an emphasis is made that indeed what has been said should not be done with the statement *swa yila!* (it is taboo!) which ends with an exclamation mark to emphasise the seriousness of the taboo. After the avoidance statement, there will be a statement of intimidation saying that if you disobey the taboo, something bad will happen to you; it can either be death, being disabled or some other kind of misfortune. The above notion is also supported by Chigidi (2009, 177) when he says:

In its form, the avoidance rule is made up of two parts: the first part is a kind of prohibition—“thou shall not do this”—and the second part consists of a statement expressing the consequence of violating an interdiction. The statement expressing the consequence comes in the form of, at least to the one who gives the avoidance rule, a necessary lie.

Xitsonga taboos follow a similar structure, as outlined by Chigidi (2009). The structure of Xitsonga taboos is summarised in Table 1 below:

**Table 1:** The structure of Xitsonga taboos

STRUCTURE	EXAMPLES
<b>Prohibition part</b>	<i>U nga pfuki u famba u nga songangi mikumba, swa yila!</i> (Do not leave home without preparing your bed, it is taboo!) <i>U nga thurisi n’wana lontsongo hi darata, swa yila!</i> (Do not pass a baby through a fence, it is taboo!)
<b>Surface meaning</b>	You will fall when you walk on the street. He/she will steal.
<b>What the taboo avoids</b>	It is just hygienically not right to leave your room untidy. He/she might get hurt by the wires.

As Gelfand (1979, 156) puts it, some of the consequences were believed by everyone, but others were empty threats employed to discipline children. The consequence of not following a taboo is also called the surface meaning of the taboo. It is usually meant to restrict and create an element of fear in society. Behind a surface meaning there is

danger, immorality, cruelty and miscellaneous things that are anticipated to happen. According to Chigidi (2009, 177), surface meanings

are used for the purposes of directing activities and behaviours into acceptable channels ... [They] are also meant to avoid immediate danger, injury, embarrassment or any other unpleasant consequences.

Chigidi (2009) followed Gelfand's (1979), Bozongwana's (1983) and Tatira's (2000) way of categorising taboos according to their themes. These themes include those that conscientise children on health-related issues, those that warn against danger and bad behaviour, and those that prevent cruelty. This work categorises Xitsonga taboos into three main categories: linguistic taboos, avoidance taboos and superstitious taboos.

### **Linguistic Taboos**

Qanbar (2011, 88) defines a linguistic taboo as "any word or phrase or a topic that if mentioned in public causes embarrassment and a feeling of shame, or provokes a sense of shock, and it is offending to the hearer's sensibilities or his beliefs." In Xitsonga, there are taboo words that one cannot say in public. This includes words referring to sex organs and swear words. Instead of one referring to a male sex organ as *mbolo*, one should say *xirho xa xinuna* (a male sex organ), *pipi* (pipe) or *xirho xa le xihundleni* (a secret body part). This notion is also supported by Mbaya (2002, 225):

In traditional Africa, as a result of their lack of decency, shocking character or immorality and in order not to hurt the other members of the society, many terms are never used in the lives of some individuals although the latter know them perfectly.

On the other hand, in Xitsonga a young person cannot say to an elder person, "you are lying." One rather says, "you missed the point" or "you forgot something." It should be noted that linguistic taboos do not carry any intimidation or consequences when one disobeys them. Within the Vatsonga-speaking community, there are some taboo words that are not acceptable among particular Vatsonga areas, but they are acceptable in other parts within the same tribe. An example is to say someone went to the toilet or to the loo. The Vatsonga inhabiting Giyani area regard this as taboo, while those of the Ritavi area see no wrong in saying somebody went to the loo. Linguistic taboos are meant to be observed by all members of the community. If one fails to do so, it can lead to a harsh punishment (Mbaya 2002).

### **Avoidance Taboos**

These are taboos that are meant to encourage people to conform to certain norms and values that their society believes in. The surface meanings that are usually said when one disobeys these types of taboos are meant to restrict people from doing things that will harm them, put them in danger, encourage bad habits, or result in other forms of undesirable indulgences or consequences. Chigidi (2009) asserts these taboos are meant to instil fear and intimidate people. A good example of these kinds of taboos is the taboo

that restricts boys from eating leftovers from the pot. It is said that if a boy does so, when he gets married it will rain. This kind of taboo is meant to discourage boys from staying at home and waiting for their sisters to cook so that they can eat the leftovers from the pot instead of going out to look after their father's herds. This taboo is also gender-specific in nature. Traditionally, men were taught not to involve themselves in what happens in the kitchen, including cooking, washing dishes or cleaning.

### **Superstitious Taboos**

Most of these kinds of taboos apply when death has occurred in a family or when there is a new-born child. Close relatives within the family are advised to abstain from engaging in sexual intercourse. For example, if a mother or father dies in the family, all the children are restricted from engaging in sexual intercourse. It is believed that if one does so, the child of the deceased mother or father will get sick, which could result in death. It is also prohibited for a girl child to have intercourse with a man within three months after the girl has aborted or lost a child. If such a mishap occurs, the man that she slept with will get sick and may eventually die. The baby would also get thin and sick. It should be noted that most of these kinds of taboos are still mostly observed amongst the Vatsonga, both in rural and urban areas, and even amongst those who have converted to Christianity.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

In attempting to understand the roles and functions of Xitsonga taboos in the upbringing of children in the 21st century, the study used an ethnographic design and a qualitative research method. Ethnography, as defined by Hammersley (2018), is a research method that seeks an understanding of cultural aspects of the way a group of people live and perceive life within their own space. It is used to examine the behaviours of a group of people who share common social and cultural phenomena (Wilson and Chaddha 2009). Interviews were used as a primary source of data collection for the study. The researchers visited the Vatsonga elders to gain their views on the way in which the youth live and to shed some light on the consequences of their lifestyles. This information was gathered from the Malamulele area in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. This is one of the areas where the Vatsonga are dominant. Different taboos were also collected during these visits which lasted over a month. The researchers' own experiences as Xitsonga cultural activists also played a role in supplementing the primary source of data collection. After the compilation of several taboos, the researchers subcategorised these taboos according to their themes. Four subthemes, namely, taboos that prevent illnesses, taboos that encourage hard work, taboos that address moral decay, and taboos that encourage the youth to save their environment, were then selected to be analysed in this study. Two examples of Xitsonga taboos under each subcategory were selected and analysed.

When analysing the data, the researchers employed Flick's (2006) steps that need to be followed in a qualitative research methodology. The researchers familiarised and

immersed themselves with the phenomenon to develop ideas and theories. After familiarising themselves with the data, the researchers began to identify pieces of information that are similar or different, the processes, functions, tensions and contradictions, as they categorised the information. The study was then divided into the different themes. Text relevant to specific themes was clearly identified and marked. Sections that are the same were placed under the same heading, and using a highlighter the location from which the text was taken was clearly recorded. Finally, the researchers interpreted the information.

## Theoretical Framework

The study is premised upon Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. According to this sociocultural theory, the way in which children learn in life is based on their social experiences. It argues that a child's world is driven by language and other cultural aspects (Newman 2018). They internalise all that they learn around them to control and guide the way they behave. In simple form, this theory suggests that whatever children learn at a young age builds their minds and their way of thinking. It is therefore momentous for them to be brought up in a cultural environment that inculcates high morality and socially acceptable behaviour. For young men and women, learning taboos from a tender age culminates in respecting and sticking to what they have been taught. In this case, they become positioned in a way that allows them to tackle some challenges related to illnesses, moral decay, and preserving nature as one of the major factors in fighting climate change (European Commission 2009).

## Data Presentation and Analysis

Several taboos directed specifically at girl and boy children were collected from the Vatsonga elders during the interviews. These taboos have been categorised into four subthemes and are analysed below.

### **Taboos that Prevent Illnesses or Injuries**

The Vatsonga have taboos that prevent and prohibit the youth from acting in a way that will jeopardise their physical well-being.

- a) *U nga dyi mihandzu yimbisi, swa yila!* (Do not eat unripe fruits, it is taboo!)

It is believed that if one eats unripe fruits, one will lose one's hearing. Since hearing is an important sense in a person, children always avoid eating unripe fruits. This taboo is meant to prevent children from eating unripe fruit because they will develop sores on their lips due to the liquid that fruits have when they are not ripe. Furthermore, this taboo was used for control purposes in the sense that elders are the ones who inform children when the fruits are ready to be eaten.

- b) *U nga juveli misisi erivaleni, swa yila!* (Do not cut your hair next to a living area, it is taboo!)

Cutting your hair in a living area, whether it be next to a house, outside or where people sit and eat under the tree, is not acceptable amongst Vatsonga. If one does this, it is said the hair will never grow again. This taboo tries to prevent children from removing their hair in places where the hair can mingle with and contaminate food, thereby causing sickness.

### **Taboos that Encourage Hard Work**

There are also taboos that encourage the youth to work hard in life and to assist with chores at home.

- a) *U nga rhwali khoswa ra mati, swa yila!* (Do not carry a half-empty bucket of water on your head, it is taboo!)

Previously, people used to fetch water from rivers or communal pipes using buckets that they carried on their heads. Hence, this proverb came about. It is believed that if a lady carries a half-empty bucket of water from the river or communal pipe, she will bear ugly children. This taboo is meant to encourage hard work. Thus, instead of promoting laziness by letting young ladies fetch little water, which will not even suffice for a day, ladies are, through this taboo, directed to carry a full bucket of water on their heads.

- b) *U nga kukuli yindlu navusiku, swa yila!* (Do not sweep the house at night, it is taboo!)

This taboo came about to prevent people from doing their daily chores late at night. The Vatsonga forebears realised that young ones will play from morning till evening. So they came up with a threatening taboo that says if one sweeps at night, one will not get married. It is every girl's and boy's dream to one day see themselves with a better half. With that in mind, young people will try to avoid sweeping at night, fearing that they might be blocking their chances of getting married.

### **Taboos that Address Morality**

Amongst the Vatsonga there are taboos that address moral issues in relation to boys and girls. They use taboos "as a moral ambience or moral codes intended to create harmony and order of existence of the universe" (Magesa 1997, 75).

- a) *U nga teki makwenu, swa yila!* (Do not marry your blood brother/sister, it is taboo!)

Marriage between blood relatives is prohibited in many Vatsonga tribes. To stop children from marrying each other, they created a taboo that says if one marries a blood sister or brother, the couple will bear a disabled child. Although this has been proved scientifically, the taboo is meant to discourage marriage between blood relatives. This was done because the Vatsonga believe that a marriage is a way to have new relatives.

If one marries one's own sibling, there will be no new relatives. Again, if divorce occurs between the couple, there will be hatred and divisions within a blood family.

- b) *U nga yimeli lavakulu, swa yila!* (Do not stand before the elders when they are seated, it is taboo!)

For a child to stand and talk before the elders is regarded as disrespectful among Vatsonga. When a child finds the elders seated, he or she should kneel down and say whatever he/she wants; hence the taboo came about. It is said that if a child stands before the elders, the child's legs will ache. This taboo encourages good morality.

### **Taboos that Encourage Children to Save our Environment**

Climate change is a serious challenge the world is currently facing. Conscientising the youth about the importance of nature conservation can play a significant role in addressing this challenge. In Xitsonga, there are taboos that encourage people to save the environment.

- a) *U nga hahluli xisaka xa xinyanyana, swa yila!* (Do not destroy a bird's nest, it is taboo!)

It is believed that when one destroys a bird's nest, one's father will lose his job. Children always observed this taboo, knowing that if their fathers lost their jobs, they would suffer. This kind of taboo is meant to prevent children from destroying birds' nests and disturbing their reproduction processes.

- b) *U nga tipfuni endleleni, swa yila!* (Do not relieve yourself by the road, it is taboo!)

Nobody in the world would like to see the excretions of a grown-up person; hence this taboo came about. It is believed that if one excretes on the path where people walk, one's mother or oneself will bear disabled children. This taboo was created for health purposes and for preventing the pollution of the air where people walk. Besides, it is just immoral for one to leave one's excretions in a place where everyone will see or smell them. People used to observe this taboo, fearing that they will have disabled children in their family, which in some families is deemed a curse.

### **Recommendations**

Taboos should not be perceived as tools that create fear amongst the youth; they are, rather, "social leashes" that can be used to address human social challenges, including illnesses, high rates of unemployment as a result of laziness, and moral regeneration or decay, and can be used to encourage our youth to look after the environment they live in. The teaching of folklore in South African school curricula has been given very little attention. A robust incorporation of teaching the oral tradition in language teaching and

arts and culture curricula in schools can be effective in discovering the importance of taboos in modern societies. The migration of Africans from rural areas to flourishing urban settlements and their financial breakthroughs have contributed to the decline of the African way of raising children. Parents and elders, whether in rural or urban areas, rich or poor, are advised and encouraged to go back to their roots and look for positive ways of inculcating children to conform to their cultural norms and the values of their society.

## Conclusion

Based on the researchers' own experience and observations and information that was found during the data collection process, it can safely be concluded that the Vatsonga youth believe that there is no space in their lives for teachings gained from taboos, folk narratives and other aspects of folklore. Some parents also feel that these aspects are fit for the uncivilised, and they are unconsciously dragging them and their children back to the Stone Age. This point of view is evident among the middle-class, educated, and urbanised parents. The above discussions have shown that indeed taboos are still relevant in the 21st century to disciple and encourage children to conform to acceptable values and norms in society. In the process of conducting this research, it became evident that the use of taboos as a means of social control in people's lives, young and old, is weakening. The migration of people from rural settlements where taboos originated to towns and cities can be blamed for this decline.

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