

Frontier Continent – Behind the Epistemological Secrecy of Oral Africa: A Case of Xitsonga

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to uncover the distinctive and conservative nature of African cultural and ideological scope, with a particular focus on how and why the Vatsonga people firmly object the deliberate and unmonitored disclosure (to strangers) of the revealing wisdom, mystery and life spices that enviably advertise within the gamut of their traditional world and livelihood. Stretching from this shall be the notion that the value and integrity of the Vatsonga people is largely, if not wholly bestowed, in experiencing and knowing what the external world is either ignorant of or has some superficial insight into it but is devoid of tangible access to fully grapple and identify with it. The paper takes an Afrocentric stance, a theory seeking a non-European way of conceptualizing the African experience (Asante, 1978), deriving arguments from the di-racial debate of sidelining African values in favour of Western civilizations. It considers, as its point of departure, the essence of the traditional knowledge that lie other wisely idle, in Xitsonga culture, and especially in the banks of the sedentary grey-haired populace whose efforts have often been interpreted in disparaging terms by Westerners. In this line of argument, the paper will take into perspective the core of the Xitsonga culture in which all the Xitsonga's world view, oral tradition, styles and ways of surviving are pivoted and revolving.

Keywords— Vatsonga, secrecy, Africa, traditional, stranger, culture

I. Introduction and Background

"I've finally learnt that some things in life have more merit when they're kept secret" Ashton Kutcher.

African epistemology and world view set it aside as a peculiar continent, divorced in some measure from the survival and philosophical outlook of global empiricism and technology. It is in essence, though faded, of late, by colonial invasion, a self-contained continent with life sustaining elements of its own kind, far detached from the borders of Western empirical maneuvers. This, therefore, binds well the notion that making an effort to understand a people without taking into perspective their culture makes them exist in a borrowed space, a cosmos which fabricates their history, and solidifies their thought and practice in a Eurocentric context

(Karenga, 2007). It is this scenario that creates a myopic populace within the African continent in which people feel too minute to consider themselves human. A scenario which makes people think that what they know is not knowledge enough for international consideration unless and until it is booked down off the oral fashion of human 'primitivism'. This unleashes the understanding that "imperialism bequeathed Africa with two main unforgettable experiences namely the denial of African identity and the tendentious imposition of western thoughts and cultural realities and perspectives" (Chukwuokolo 2009: 31). Against this backdrop, Niane (1997: viii) acerbically declares:

Unfortunately, the West has taught us to scorn oral sources in matters of history, all that is not written in black and white being considered

without foundation. Thus among African intellectuals there are those who are sufficiently narrow-minded to regard “speaking documents” ...with disdain, and to believe that we know nothing to our past for want of written documents.

In this regard, the paper rejects the defeatist cosmology that shrouds most Africans’ attitudes and propensity – the read acceptance of imposed inferiority complex and the willing give away of the self-awarding superiority complex. Thus, it is therefore critical to attempt at bringing back to life the dormant, lost and disempowered traditions that played vital roles in shaping Xitsonga’s cultural outlook, and to consider how those epistemic vestiges can be employed to address the current communal and especially economic challenges.

As a point of departure, Western ideologies and theoretical frameworks that endeavour to understand and access the core of Xitsonga mystic and secretive practices shall pave way for a retrospective trace of African phenomena and especially from an African outlook. This should be the complementary stage in doing away with Western disparaging such as relating Africans as primitive and primarily ruled by ideas of magic, totemism, and their failure to differentiate between themselves and the animal realm (Finnegan, 1975).

II. Methodological approach

The study adopts the qualitative research paradigm. Interviews and non-participant observation were used in the collection of data. The researcher chose qualitative interviewing, for it facilitates the understanding of how the subjects studied see the world and it assists in capturing the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences (Patton 1990 in Makondo 2009).

Purposive sampling, a sampling strategy invariably called Judgmental sampling (Bless et al. 2013), Purposeful sampling or Criterion-based Selection (Preissle 1993) was also used in identifying the respondents during the data collection process. The researcher adopted this strategy since it allows the researcher to exercise

some degree of judgment about who will provide the best perspective on the phenomenon of interest and then invites participants into the study (Gray 2014; Sharan 2009; Creswell 2013:156 and Michael 2001).

III. Theoretical framework

This study is guided by Afrocentrism, a theory “directed towards achieving the particular end of ensuring that the African heritage and culture, its history and contribution to world civilization and scholarship” (Chukwuokolo, 2008: 14). Believed to have been propounded by Asante (1987), the theory places African cultural traditions, values and worldviews at the centre of every undertaking, such that the African way of doing thing takes precedence over and above Eurocentric perceptions and guidance. It strives to trace back and retrieve the lost identities, moral values as well as epistemic conceptions that weave the socio-political fabric in an African context. Asante talks of Afrocentricity as, “literally, placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior” (Asante, 1987: 6 in Milam, 1992). Thus, in the application of this theory, Milam, (1992: 20), avers:

Knowledge which is inherently Eurocentric is abandoned. All knowledge, whether it comes from the traditional disciplines or from Black, African, and African-American Studies, must be scrutinized for Eurocentric bias

In this light, the theory is an attempt to destabilize and undo the iron-pinned notion that Eurocentrism is the basis for a solid foundation in the sieved civilization of humanity. Seen this way, the theory will principally guide and situate the present study within the confines of Afrocentric delimitations. It will assist the writing by controlling the flow of ideas, at the same time giving credence to the perspicacity of the African cause in its entirety.

IV. Statement of the problem

The racial divide that mark Eurocentric and Afrocentric paradigms are critical dimensions in

the making, edification and social rebuilding of human integrity, self-esteem and confidence in oneself as an individual. The self-given prerogative that the West obtained has, in the process of African mystification, stolen way all that is African replacing it with the negated ideologies schematically hewn to tame permanently, the African humanity forever. It is therefore crucial to revisit the African cultural stature in a way that will somehow awaken the masses into realizing the value invested their cultural wealth.

When we succumb to western pressures, that is when we relinquish the ways that our African ontology informs our epistemology, we undermine ourselves. More specifically, when we negate, forget or deride the reality of multiple ways of knowing, of the utility of subjectivity and objectivity in tandem, or the limitless possibilities when the social and natural sciences work in a complimentary fashion, then we are negating a principle fundamental to the philosophy of our culture (John, 1992, p. 8).

Who are the Vatsonga? Towards a Contested Exploration of Ethnic Identity

The term Vatsonga is employed to designate an otherwise socially, politically and linguistically (and in many platforms) misunderstood, misrepresented and ethnically disparaged people who are found in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa and/or some percentages in Botswana, Swaziland, Malawi and Zambia. In one sense, Vatsonga is readily availed as their formal name with Xitsonga being their language. In other countries, save South Africa, the people are holistically known by the name Machangana (a collective term for the subjects – all languages included- of Soshangana Manukosi, a Nguni by origin, who because of the Tsongas' acquiescent acceptance of strangers, have made them succumb to his malice, political manipulation and subjugation). Since most of the defeated people where the Tsongas, every speaker of Xitsonga, wherever they are is labeled a Muchangana after his coined appellation. This linguistic and social misrepresentation is made explicit by Mathebula (2013:7-8) in the following astringent citation:

Most existing literature refers to all Tsonga people as Shanganes, which clearly reduces the history of the Tsonga people to the 1800s with the founding of the Shangane tribe written by earlier authors and contemporary conservatives as Shangaans. Even some of the Tsonga people who do not fall under the Shangane tribe have accepted being called Shangane, apparently because they have indoctrinated so or they are suffering from utter ignorance.

In Mozambique, just like in other countries where this language is spoken, the Vatsonga have been, for political motives (Hachipola 2009), universally labeled Machangana, Vahlengwe and scarcely are they referred to by the name Vatsonga. Just like Hlengwe which is a dialect of the Tsonga and specifically for the Chaukes, Shangaan is a dialect of Tsonga and should specifically be attached to those who either once fell under the political exploits of Soshangana or his/their descendants.

The Vatsonga are a people with a very rich bank of knowledge system. This knowledge stems from experience and a not-easy-to-understand sense of instinct that they use to unlock spectacular mysteries in life. Such knowledge will encompass a host of issues such as mythical insight, technology, superstitions and a host of philosophical reflections that do not only characterise the people concerned, but go beyond to embody their enviable wittiness and social (as opposed to academic) educatedness.

Some Aspects of Secrecy among the Vatsonga

In this light, knowing what someone or some stranger does not know is the basis for defining the Vatsonga epistemological integrity, and it is out of this complexity that they attain their definition as a people. Against this background, Western efforts to materialize and evaluate Africa's unwritten oral, mystic and sage phenomena through its empirical and technological interventions have demystified to the negative, both the oral and integral complexion that gave the Vatsonga people their place and name.

Traditionally or communally owned secrets can be as important as trade secrets which in most countries are legally protected and invaders can

be charged for violating the rules that govern their protection and disclosure. In the words of Niane (1997), all true learning should be a secret. Following this assertion, Africans should not be convinced to disclose their ‘true learning’ to people who may not understand the essence bestowed in their knowledge. It is therefore up to them to decide on the nature of information that they may publicise and that which they may withhold.

V. Initiation

Initiation, being a deeply embedded practice that almost holds the key to Tsonga ethnic cultural marker, has been viewed and recognised as one of the cornerstones in distinguishing the Vatsonga to the many neighboring ethnicities. Initiation has been initiated to bring a bridging ‘pavement’ between youth hood and adulthood, where youngsters are traditionally aligned to the ways of living of their people. The end of the exercise should mark a difference between frivolous life styles and seasoned graduates who are ushered into the community as mentally, socially and psychologically. Here, only a handful of issues are told to outsiders. The deeper facts (*milawu*) are kept secret and anyone who lets the cat out of the bag will be taken to task. Even community members who are not graduates of the initiation school are cautiously warned not to breach initiation rules, or draconian measures may be taken. The culprits are normally exposed to malicious through beatings, using long, inhuman, freshly cut sticks called *Thuba*. Depending on the nature and extent of the crime, the offended members of society can appeal to the nearest chief for compensation on breached rules who may call for a goat, a cow etc. depending on how offensive he/she has become.

VI. Traditional healers

N'angas do not want to simply reveal their knowledge to every Dick and Harry without getting paid. Their medicinal knowledge will only be revealed to those who will go under their apprenticeship and usually being paid for their instructional endeavours. This partly explains

why some conflicts arise between traditional healers and those who would go to them for reasons of research and not to seek medical attention. They regard themselves as people in business and therefore expect some payments for their every service.

VII. Inherited self-help knowledge

People with some acquired knowledge do not usually want to expose it that easily. They will usually keep it for themselves and will only teach, usually, one selected child so that the child may carry it over to the next generation without carelessly disclosing it to the public. A certain artist who saw someone making observations of how his crafted work was carried out angrily rebuked him saying: “Do you want to take away my inheritance that easily without first paying me? We can't operate that way!” Viewed this way, it is almost a taboo to reveal a secret to people who are not part of the very group that should own it. It is also senseless to let people grab away services that you should be depending upon for survival. For example within a traditional community, a secret healing method may be handed down from generation to generation of traditional healers and kept secret from other members of the community (Tong, 2010).

Veiled to the young, revealed to adults: considerations upon secrecy within the circles of taboos and superstitious beliefs among the Vatsonga

Superstitions and taboos among the Vatsonga are employed, from the perspective of sieved and traditionally fine-tuned experiences, to tame peculiar propensities that are either deviant or may lead to deviance if uninhibited. The grossly tradition-bound package of the tabooed “don'ts” are psychologically crafted to mitigate behaviourally skewed proclivities that deviate from the ethnic-specifications of what it means to be human. The socio-cultural machinations underlying the crafted taboos remain the “reserved sacred language of adults, especially the grey-haired, who have lived and, through their sifted understandings in life, have in the eventuality of time become part of the socio-

cultural jurisdiction that teach and direct the masses on the phenomenality of life and its livable potentials. These notional “directed vestiges” are strictly and importantly so, inhibited and kept officially secretly inaccessible to the young and still growing. Such secrecy may be done for constructional ends as children who respect what elders say (whether true or false) really make it to a healthy and securely groomed social standing in life. The following are a few examples of such:

Loko u tshama endleleni u ta huma tshumba (If you sit on the road you will develop a motor)

Vanhwana a va pfumeleriwi ku dya mandza (young girls are not permitted to eat eggs)

Loko u tshama ehenhla ka swekwo nsati wa wena u ta fa (if you sit on a hearthstone your wife will die)

Loko mufana a korhisela nkombe u ta huma mavele (if a boy eats pap from a cooking stick he may develop breasts.)

As a way to shed light on the preceding examples, the restrictions have being designed strategically to control behavioural practices, more so within the early years of individual socio-psychological development. However, the restrictions have been, since immemorial times, been socio-culturally binding since they could scarcely give a leeway for experimentation to social wayfarers, or draconian measures would be administered upon the culprit. Also, the pre-colonial mystery of African cosmology has been hovered by the authenticated embodiment and actualized manifestation of the inanimate. Hence, practitioners of misdemeanor were prone to undefined spells, sometimes leading to lose of one’s life if not disappearance. This mystery-sure world of existential fundamentality was traditionally binding and could persuade and negotiate for moral uprightness without much shared social convulsions.

VIII. Significance of Secrecy

Keeping information secret has often been criticized by academics but secret keepers have always defended themselves equally well.

Conceptually, secrecy provides a form of protection that may either already be part of an existing custom, for example where certain sacred rites or practices are known only to certain members of the community; or it may be an external protective mechanism in response to the threat of misappropriation by nonmembers (Tong 2010). Keeping information from the public domain creates eagerness in people as they strive to find out what it is all about. This makes it an ever sought after phenomenon, and therefore an important aspect. By keeping secrets, the owners’ integrity/cultural identity is maintained and safeguarded unlike commoners whose traditions are publicized and thereby rendering them a loosely regarded phenomena (De Jong 2004). It is also worth saying that the practice of keeping secrets instils in individuals qualities of Solidarity, love and trustworthy, hence they escape being erratic and unbalanced beings.

Effects of Desecretisation (*switandzhaku swa ku paluxiwa ka swihundla*)

Ku paluxiwa ka swihundla (desecretisation) results in misuse of valuables (secrets) by people who do not understand their importance. It may also open up avenues for unnecessary criticism from people who fail to appreciate their (secrets) essence, and may result in the banning of some otherwise profitable practices. It is also worth considering that strangers may grab and ill-use secrets, and may even commercialise them, either to the public or back to the owners at painful prices, thus exposing secret holders to some of the painful consequences disclosing of secret phenomena. Resources may also suffer over use and then go extinct. In this regard, Chitanga Donald (a herbalist) has the following to say:

Ndzi vona leswaku mirhi leyo tshungula ha yona yi fanela ku tiviwa hi ntsengo wutsongo wa vanhu hikuva loko un’wana na un’wanan wo va na vutivi bya mirhi leyi hi nga pfuka siku rin’wana ha ha ri hava. loko yo tiviwa hi vanhu va nga riki vangani yi nga va kona eka nkarhi wo leha.

(I consider that only a few individuals should know of these resources because if everyone knows, the few resources that we have will be exploited and very soon they may go extinct. If

only a few individuals know, they will last longer.)

The sense in which the cited conversation unravels is intricately concrete, and as it can be noticed from Chitanga's words, secrets can be kept both from strangers and non-strangers depending on the reason for keeping them secret in this case for conservative purposes. Secrets can be hidden from strangers because they may gradually or otherwise take over and perhaps out compete the secret holder in business or grab off their fame altogether. For instance, secrets like initiation may appear to be coming from outside the Xitsonga culture and the founders are not even recognised. In general, the unmonitored publication of secret phenomena may result in the secret owners' loss of dignity, unity, focus and consequently, a loss of effectiveness in whatever they do which may open avenues for inferiority complex as aliens take over or even talk ill of them.

IX. Trade Secrets and Law

The Uniform Trade Secrets Act (2005) defines a trade secret as any information that is secret, derives economic value from that secrecy, and is the subject of reasonable measures to maintain its secrecy. Varadarajan (2011) is commended for addressing the difficult subject matter of traditional knowledge within various intellectual property regimes and arguing that trade secret law can be a useful legal vehicle for traditional knowledge holders when dealing with outsider's improper acquisition, disclosure, and use of relatively secret information. This can be especially useful when considering that some secrets are products of time and money spend in research and or social accomplishments and they therefore should not be taken for a day by outside competitors. Seen this way, both outsiders and secret owners should be made aware of the dangers behind stealing or misusing other people's secrets and how owners should protect their secrets respectively. It should also be brought to the awareness of both parties that understanding trade secrets requires not only some knowledge of the law, but also an awareness of the evolving technologies, social

norms, politics, economics, and other factors that shape the use and misuse of trade secrets (Almeling, 2012).

The Commercial Value of Secretly owned Phenomena

Since there are a number of issues that deserve to be kept secret, in view of the vast sea of knowledge that the people have, certain information should not just be disclosed but with commercial ends for the benefit of the local community. Among the Vatsonga, a girl initiate who has just graduated keeps their initiation name secret until people give her some money. So is a male graduate. He will never disclose the new (initiation) name until he is given some money. The same applies to people who own special knowledge and skills in society. They use their knowledge for commercial benefits. This practice reinforces the economic significance of keeping secrets. Also, offering of some token is a deep cultural expression of honor to the initiation process as an ethnic enterprise. It is a way of showing respect and expressing the cultural value embedded in both the khomba na ngoma initiation practices.

X. Recommendations

The traditional communities must be made aware and encouraged to come up with self-help community-based projects in which they both advertise and sell their generationally descending, self-acquired knowledge. That is the traditional knowledge that researchers the globe over are absorbing into mainstream academia should be accessible if and only if it will benefit the very people who rightfully own the knowledge. If such knowledge are to be grabbed by powerful forces such as the ruling government, it should not then turn a blind eye to the traditional knowledge holders, who, in many cases, are some of the world's poorest people (Varadarajan 2011). Just as certain protected areas, e.g. Great Zimbabwe Monuments, are accessed only after paying money, so should be secret knowledge. The scarce resources that various stakeholders use in either medicinal or some other forms of enterprise ought to be regenerated as a point of departure for a strong

economic base. Policies for the safeguarding of indigenous knowledge system should be implemented to prevent the stealing, misuse and forfeiture of either sacred or general traditional knowledge by invaders.

XI. Conclusion

In this paper, the need for keeping certain traditional information secret as a way of conserving it has been emphasised. It has become clear that people who gain access to certain portions of traditional knowledge do so with the intention of commercializing it, gaining fame by posing as discoverers of such knowledge or simply making it lose its original value by talking ill of it or misrepresenting it. Yet, the search for new information that is gradually leading to advances in science and technology, combined with the economic imperative to acquire exclusive rights over commercially profitable knowledge has threatened the supply and conservation of natural resources among the Vatsonga, and impacted on the cultural lives of many traditional communities which hold valuable traditional knowledge (Tong 2010). As things stand, culprits in this technologically vibrant era can easily steal soft copies of typed and saved knowledge, unlike long gone days when secrets used to be stored in their oral (human) sources or just recently, to be stored under lock and key in hard-copy form, making it difficult to both access and walk away with the protected information (Almeling 2012).

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Resource Persons

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