

# ORATURE IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT: VATSONGA AS A CASE IN POINT

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## Abstract

It has been argued that oral narrative is one of the oldest forms of literature among the Bantu people. It can still be contended that oral literature is the repository of the critical knowledge, philosophy, and wisdom for non-literate societies. This literature through narrative in the form of poetry, song, dance, myths and fables, as well as texts for religious rituals provides a portrait of the meaning of life as experienced by a given society at its particular time and place with its unique existential challenges. Oral literature plays a vital role in different aspects which include socio-cultural, economic and religious issues. It forms a popular culture which is not merely folksy, domestic entertainment but a domain in which individuals in a variety of social roles are free to comment on power relations in society. In African societies, and in this particular instant, among the Vatsonga, oral literature plays a very significant role in reconstructing society.

**Keywords**— Oral literature, Culture, Vatsonga, Africa, entertainment, heritage

## ORATURE AND A RECAP ON VATSONGA HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION

Oral literature is a creative text delivered by the word of mouth. Akporobaro (2006) defines oral literature as synonymous with folk literature, and it is a broad term which may include ritual texts, epic poems, folktales, creation tales, myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, life histories or historical narratives. According to Adejumo (2009), oral literature is a creative text delivered by the word of mouth. It refers to the heritage of imaginative verbal creations, stories, folk beliefs and songs of pre-literate societies which have evolved and passed on through the spoken word from one generation to the next.

The Vatsonga people are a diverse tribe which is found in different countries like Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa and Swaziland (Mesthrie, 1995) In this case Xitsonga language can be referred to as a cross border

language. 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 (Babane and Mushwana, 2022). The use of Shangaan to refer to Vatsonga is mostly taken as derogatory in countries like South Africa and Zimbabwe. Nkuna (2015) points out that Vatsonga are also found in Mozambique (11.3%), Swaziland (1.7%) and Zimbabwe (0.8%) (Babane and Mushwana, 2022)

Geographically, Xitsonga, has spread over a wide area in the South-Eastern part of Southern Africa. In all countries where there are Vatsonga people, they have their oral literature which include narrative, poetry, song, dance, myths and fables, and texts for religious rituals, however these cultural practices might have a little bit difference due their geographical

locations thus the way folktales or dances are performed in Zimbabwe might have some slight differences in South Africa, Mozambique and Swaziland even if it is the same dance. 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 ESSENCE OF ORAL LITERATURE AMONG THE VATSONGA**

### **Oral Literature can serve communicative Purposes**

Oral literature constitutes an artistic means of communication. Communication can be done through the use of playing the drum. There was a number of beating a drum used by the Vatsonga in Mozambique, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. This communicated whether there is a meeting or some warning to the inhabitants of a given place in cases where an enemy might have evaded the place. It has provided a platform for recording cultural heritage which can effectively perform several functions such as entertainment, warning, education, healing, information, indoctrination and encouragement, in a simple and direct way, free from complex theories and models. Finnegan supports this by pointing out that in traditional African society, there is a use of nonverbal communication through drum language. According to Shitemi (2009:87) oral literature is fused and integrated in peoples' daily interaction through communication, language use and other modes of transmitting knowledge like norms and social ethics. It was through their indigenous knowledge system to understand and know the meaning of every sound of a drum. For example, some cultural practices like girls initiation ceremonies (vukhomba), have a certain type of beating a

drum showing that the practice is being performed at a certain place. They go to the bush during the day and return home during the evening. All women who are willing to come and spend the evening with the girls are allowed, even the young girls who have not reached the puberty stage. However, around nine or ten when they beat a drum singing the song "vamakulanhunhu fambani ndhaweni" which means that young girls must go home and only elders should remain. If one is at his or her home and hears that sound of a drum he or she will know that children are being dismissed. In this case, oral literature plays a pivotal role in communication.

### **Oral Literature as an Instrument for Instilling Discipline in Children**

In addition to the above, in African societies, particularly among the Vatsonga, there is emphasis over the practice of traditions and oral elements such as folklores, myths, legends, proverbs and oral poetry in the training of an African child. Folklore can assist in training children to emulate good behaviour so that they will not get into trouble in the future. They grow up knowing the consequences of greenness, stealing as well as laziness through teachings from folklores and myths. For example the folk of the elephant and the hare, where the elephant used to go and steal pumpkins in the field of a hare during the night. The hare became troubled not knowing the thief. The elephant was very lazy he survived through stealing. It continued to go and steal until only one huge pumpkin left. The hare went to the field in the evening before the elephant arrived and cut a hole through which she entered inside the pumpkin with a knife and salt. As usual the elephant arrived at the hare's field very hungry and that is when the hare realised that the elephant was the thief who finished all her pumpkins. Upon arrival, the elephant swallowed the pumpkin whilst the hare was inside it. The hare started to cut a small piece of liver and added some salt and started to eat. The elephant experienced excruciating pain and ran about hitting some trees. The hare continued to cut some pieces of

meat inside the elephant's stomach until it lost its power and fell down near the community. People killed it and shared pieces of meat, and that was when the hare came out and escaped. These types of folklore teaches good behaviour as children will grow up knowing the dangers of stealing and they will become hard workers.

### **Oral Literature as Source of knowledge**

Oral literature plays a pivotal role in the Vatsonga culture because it's a source of knowledge which is helpful to their society through the use of proverbs. Lebeloane and Madise (2011) argue that many Africans have a rich and generous heritage which takes the form of proverbs. These proverbs to transmit and preserve some of their highest achievements such as knowledge, skills and attitudes. The Vatsonga people also have their proverbs which they use which also assist them in their day to day living. Proverbs like any other forms of oral literature, express the collective wisdom of the people, reflecting their thinking, values and behaviours. According to Malunga and Banda (2004) proverbs unlock wisdom, clarify vision and unify different perceptions. They are often used to build relationships for instance, the Tsonga proverb "*rintiho rin'we a ri nusi hove*", encourages unity and togetherness. It also encourages hospitality and cooperation. In addition to that, there is also another Tsonga proverb which says, "*wanuna i nhwembe loko yi kula ya nava*", this proverb show the socio-cultural practice of the Vatsonga people when it comes to marriage. It means a man is free to marry as many wives as he can. Long back the Vatsonga married so many wives for example six or seven that was their culture. A wife can even give her sister or brother's daughter to be married by his husband. They made such decisions so as to be loved so much by their husband. Oral literature literature also made polygamy to be understood and known in the Vatsonga culture.

### **Oral Literature and the Preservation of Heritage**

Another role of oral literature is to preserve heritage. Among the Vatsonga, children are taught about their clans at an early stage. For example, their history. Grandparents narrate their history through oral literature. A child can narrate the history of his/her clan through orature formulaic techniques learnt from grandparents. They also inform them about their grandfather's property, for example, fields and grazing lands. Even if the fields are no longer used as farms they know that they belong to their grandfathers. Heritage can also be preserved through narration of history. Oral literature has been an important method of self-understanding, creative relationships and establishing equilibrium between body, soul and environment. Through oral literature, communities have been able to pass through values, attitudes, knowledge and modes of practice for generations Kimani (2010). Mirambo (2010:121) posits that oral literature embodies history, cultural values, heritage philosophy and beliefs of a people. He argues that through literature people learn a lot about societies and hence an instrument of cultural education.

### **Oral literature and the Preservation of Language**

In addition to the above, oral literature protects the language thus things like folktales, riddles, songs and other examples of oral literature are passed from generation to generation by the word of mouth. Practices like songs preserve the language since it is preserved and handed down to other generations. Some folktales are narrated with songs inside. These songs also help the audience to understand as well as to easily remember the moral of the folktale if some questions are asked. Sone (2009:159) emphasises that Africans had an educational philosophy specially adapted to their times, traditions and their philosophy of life in various ways. Hence, this philosophy helped to sustain the language as all forms of oral literature were orally transmitted. This shows

that the Vatsonga people as part of Africans also have their own philosophy of preserving their language through oral literature.

### **Oral Literature and Identity**

Oral literature can also reveal the identity of people of a given culture. Dances and songs can reveal the identity of the Vatsonga people. For example, dances like muchongolo, xibelani, makwaya and xincayicayi can assist the audience to identify the ethnic group to which the dancers belong. These dances are accompanied by the Vatsonga costumes which include the xibelani skirt, duku (head wrap and miceka ya ximatsatsa (wrapping garments) and (vuhlalu) beads. The type of dances and rhythm identify the Vatsonga from other groups of people. Salm and Falola (2002:60) who claim that, oral literature still penetrates some facets of daily life in many parts of Africa. It is, however, true that the occasions for its performance are not as frequent as in the past, especially folksongs, dirges, modern professional music, topical songs as well as the annual performance of the reed dance. When a dance is performed by people of a particular group one can deduct the socio-cultural space through that dance. For example, on Xinyambela dance they dance singing a song which says, "Xinombela va tekana hi vuxaka", meaning they marry each other within the Vatsonga culture. This defines the parameters that guide the Vatsonga's way of doing things, in this case, that the Vatsonga are taught to marry within the confines of their ethnic territories.

In addition to that, oral literature teaches among other things the tenets of self-restraint, humility, modesty, tolerance, patience, understanding, altruism, and transparency in our dealings with others. Through oral literature, therefore, the Vatsonga take advantage of their ability to dance, sing, chant, narrate and use language in order to show the world how they lived, who they are and what they can do. Reiterating the values of oral literature in Africa, Sone (2009:162) opines that, oral literary forms such as stories, songs

and proverbs are metaphors to guide moral choice and self-examination. They are mirrors for seeing things in a particular way. They serve as pedagogic devices and significant tools for teaching values that guide children's concrete behaviour in society, hence oral literature plays an important role in edifying the Vatsonga identity, values and culture.

### **Oral Literature and the Preservation of Socio-cultural Aspects**

Furthermore, oral literature protects socio-cultural aspects through an ethnic group's dress code. As one wears traditional costume, especially dancing costumes, it is very easy to differentiate on whether a person is a Zulu, Shona, Tsonga, or Venda speaker. Agu (2003) supports this saying another important aspect of culture expressed in dance is costume. The costume of any culture is used in their dance. When two or more groups of dancers are gathered in an arena without necessarily dancing, they can be easily identified. Hence, oral literature plays a pivotal role in maintaining and restoring identity.

In addition, ceremonies, are still being used in the moral education of the young. In defense of the existence and adaptability of oral literature, on one hand Haywood (1966:5) notes that, "folklore is not survival, but rather a living organism, still growing and developing wherever people live, struggle, hope, despair and die". To add on, dance also permeates the social life of the Vatsonga. Not only does it offer young men and women opportunity to show off themselves, thus encouraging courtship, it provides training for work and combat.

### **Oral literature and Humanity**

More so, that oral literature is an important discipline in the humanities cannot be overemphasized. In this regard, Wilson (1988:157) avers that no other discipline is more concerned with linking us humans to the cultural heritage than folklore;

no other discipline is more concerned with the interrelationships of different cultural expressions than is folklore; and no other discipline is more concerned or no other discipline should be more concerned, with discovering what it means to be human. It is this attempt to re-discover the basis of our common humanity and the imperatives of our human existence that puts folklore/oral literature study at the very center of humanistic study.

Moreover, oral literature teaches, among other things, the tenets of self-restraint, humility, modesty, tolerance, patience, understanding, altruism, and transparency in our dealings with others. Above all, it exhorts us to put our intellectual and technical competence at the service of our society. It may interest the reader to know that thanks to the folklore and literature studies as a whole since through it, one can learn to rely on his/her own insight and foresight rather than on that of others.

### **Oral Literature and the Conservation of the Environment**

Another important role of oral literature in the Vatsonga culture is that oral literature is a pivotal tool that advocates for environmental conservation. Through myths, taboos and songs people are enlightened on the importance of preserving nature. Buell (1995) posits that oral literature conserve the environmental values and ecocritical literal analysis recognise the importance of consciousness raising through extending imaginative horizons out of the human sphere to embrace the totality of the ecosystem. Traditionally oral stories teach children how to live harmoniously and work with and not against nature. This is how the tradition of conserving the environment was passed from one generation to the other. Sugiyama and Sugiyama (2009) notes that, one sees orarutre as a window through which one can perceive past conditions, events or practices of local areas – a window to pass conditions of a pan human nature. Taboos such as “swa yila ku tsema nsinya kumbe kutshova tihunyi ta la masirheni” (it is taboo to cut down

a tree at burial places) were meant to protect those trees from deforestation. There is also another Tsonga taboo which says, “swa yila ku tshova potsa u nga potsiwa hi majaha”. Potsa it's a tree which is mostly found in Chiredzi South, that's one of the Vatsonga areas in Zimbabwe. According to the Vatsonga culture it is taboo to cut that tree, hence oral literature plays a pivotal role of minimizing the rate of deforestation and this also helps communities to have enough grazing areas for their livestock.

### **Orality and the Role of Inculcating Moral Values**

The other role of oral literature in African socio-cultural space is to portray how one is to live a morally upright standard of life. It thus retains the society's knowledge to be passed on to succeeding generations. This is supported through the use of taboos. The applicability of taboos in African life plays a pivotal role in different aspects such as health and environmental management. According to Tatira (2000) taboos are strong sanctions that discourage certain forms of human behavior. For example, the Xitsonga taboo which states that, “swa yila ku hleka xigono” meaning (its taboo to laugh at a crippled person). In this case the Vatsonga people observe these taboos in order to maintain morality and *Vumunhu* or *Ubuntu*.

Moreso, oral literature plays a vital role within socio-cultural spaces because it acts as a guide to human behaviour, and on how to live one's life through the use of proverbs. Proverbs identify and dignify a culture. They express the collective wisdom of a people, reflecting their thinking, values and behaviours, (Malunga and Banda, 2004). As a matter of fact, proverbs, in a traditional African setting, unlock wisdom, clarify vision and unify different perceptions. They add humour and reduce tension on perceived sensitive issues. Proverbs are often used to confront issues as well as to build institutions and relationships. They create strong mental pictures which can motivate people to action. No one ever dares to dispute

the message a proverb contains because it is a proven conclusion of some sort. Gulere (2000) posits thus, proverbs and riddles are some of the commonly applied forms of oral literature in diurnal communications among serious minded people. Whether in song, story recital or statement, they make a person wiser, more sociable, happier and more respectable in society. On the other hand, riddles help children to become fast thinkers and wiser.

Oral narratives can build social cohesion and develop a sense of community solidarity. In every African society stories are told to enhance the development of human relationships. Chinyowa (2001) argues that African stories are powerful tools for communicating a people's knowledge and wisdom. Apart from entertaining people, the stories help to sharpen the people's creativity and imagination, to shape their behaviour, to train their intellect and to regulate their emotions. Oral traditions inform us also about why and how ethnic groups created their sense of ethnic and cultural distinctiveness.

### **Oral Literature and the Predicting of the Not-yet-seen**

Finnegan (2012) contends that oral literature reflects the present while also predicting the future. Thus, the use of traditional knowledge excites a lot of interest coupled with anxiety in the audience. For example, proverbs reflect on a given society's norms and values as well as way of life. It is thus always restructured to suit the times and match with contemporaries in an effort to generate continued significance to society. Oral literature can predict the future through the use of taboos for example *swayila ku vona sukuvili*, meaning it's a taboo to see a snake with too head. This taboo predicts the death of someone. Traditionally, the Vatsonga would then try their level best to consult with traditional healers so as to avoid a omens, tragedies or death. If by any chance death takes its toll, the Vatsonga have a proclivity to try and find some preventive measures for the remaining family members.

In addition to that oral literature also predicted good things among the Vatsonga, for example, if you hear the twittering of a bird called "cacamela", it means heavy rains are coming. This inform people to plough their seeds knowing that rainfall is coming and their seeds will germinate. They is also a taboo which says, "loko u vona tirhiyani (black and white small birds) ku ta fika vayeni". The birds are believed to predict the coming of visitors. It can therefore be argued that the prediction of the arrival of visitors is some kind of communication, foretelling and forearming the Vatsonga to prepare for the visitors. Among the Vatsonga, the prediction of the arrival of visitors could also be assumed if people see two chicks fighting.

### **The Preservation of Indigenous Knowledge system (IKS)**

Indigenous games and songs are an indigenous way of knowing as children will be able to learn positive attributes, virtues and values like hardwork, smartness, obedience among others. Games like xitumbetumbe, xitovatovani, marobyati and mbalemale are a platform for learning physical strength, perseverance and hiding skills, conflict management, handling of success and failure. Such games therefore instil good values like sportsmanship and endurance. Other games teach children especially boys to be brave when faced with provocative situations. The game "vele ra mana wa wena" (your mother's breasts) is good in instilling bravery.

Oral literature teaches and imparts principles of morality and provides youngsters with a sense of identity and belonging. The young people will learn valuable lessons about life. Oral literature can be a source of living for example a good talented story teller or praise singer in a community can earn himself a status or title which confirms that he is recognised for his artistic contribution as an entertainer apart from collecting money for his work. Kunene (2012) substantiates this by saying that oral literature is used to teach morals, maintain

cultural values, pass methods of survival and indigenous knowledge.

### **The Nexus between Oral Literature and Traditional Religion**

Oral literature is also part of religion among the Vatsonga as evidenced by ritual performances in which song dance and poems form part of the process. Oral literature will continue to survive as it is part and parcel of the religious act. Among the Vatsonga, traditional belief systems have known songs, and such songs commonly known as *tinsimu ta swikwembu*, are believed to trigger spirits. The Tsonga people believe that singing make their ancestors descent and attend to their petitions, and that is why when they are conducting rain petitioning ceremonies like *nkelenkele*, they will be singing, ‘Nkelenkele wee!’ as shown below:

Hi lava mpfula!  
 Nkelenkele wee!  
 Hi lava mpfula !  
 Nkelenkele wee!  
 Hi lava mpfula!  
 Nkelenkele wee!  
 Xikhongolotana wee!  
 Xikhongolotana!  
 Hi lava mpfula !  
 Xikhongolotana wee!  
 Hi lava mpfula!  
 Xikhongolotana wee!  
 Hi lava mpfula!  
 Xihumbana wee!

This again spells out the importance of music in African Traditional Religion, and many of these various rituals continue to be held among the Vatsonga in which the continuity of oral literature remains iconic.

### **CONCLUSION**

To sum up, oral literature plays a significant role in the Vatsonga culture such as the promotion of communication, training, entertainment, instructing, language preservation, heritage preservation, promoting moral life, preservation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), environmental management, upholding social beliefs, educating people from younger generations, guiding human behaviour, self-restraint, humility, modesty, tolerance, patience, understanding, altruism, and transparency as well as the preservation of language and religion through songs, folktales, riddles and games. It also emphasizes the use of traditional practises such as folklores, myths, legends, games, proverbs, taboos in the training of a Tsonga child. It is clear that oral literature has meaningful contributions to make in ensuring sustainable development in the Vatsonga culture. Oral literature has provided a platform for recording cultural heritage which can effectively perform several functions such as entertainment, warning, education, healing, information, indoctrination and encouragement.

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