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Significance of Women in Vatsonga Culture: An Africana womanist perspective

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ABSTRACT

Tsonga women are an integral part of the society and they play a crucial role in portraying African culture. Most people are much concerned about gender equality at the expense of positive aspects of African culture which values different roles played by women and men in the society. This paper focuses on Vatsonga women. The Vatsonga culture specifically assigns various functions to women as a way of preserving their culture. It may be viewed as if there is no equality between men and women when looking from the Eurocentric perspective. It is the aim of this paper to discuss the importance of women in Vatsonga culture. It also shows that in various aspects of life women have important roles to play in a Tsonga society. Their powers should not be underestimated since they can also help make crucial decisions in resolving disputes and other important matters. This paper discusses the notion of gender equality by taking into consideration what women themselves know what they are capable of in Vatsonga society unlike some quarters of the society would perceive it. Some consider it to be a situation in which there is equality in every aspect of life. The paper demonstrates the significance of women in the preservation and safeguarding the Vatsonga culture from an African perspective using Africana womanist theoretical framework.

1. Introduction

Women cannot be underrated when it comes to various roles they can play in the society. There is no culture which can define itself fully without women. Women have more important roles in a Tsonga traditional society other than being regarded as wives and mothers (Chitlango and Balcomb, 2004:187). Since time immemorial women have been active in driving the agenda of any given society. Okrah (2017:2) avers "Before Africa came under the dominance of any foreign powers, women had a position of influence in society". This means African women played crucial roles in society. Vatsonga women are not

an exception since they contribute immensely in shaping, preserving and perpetuating Tsonga culture. This is done in various forms. This paper aims at pointing out the significance of women as an integral part of the Vatsonga culture. It draws some experiences by Vatsonga women in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Their positions and their functions in Vatsonga societies across the borders are more or less the same. Those in traditional Vatsonga societies basically have a similar worldview.

2. Theoretical framework

The arguments in this paper are centred on the Africana womanism. This is an Afrocentric theory whose proponents are Clenora Hudson Weems, Ifi Amaliume, Mery E. Modupe Kolawole and others (Dove, 1998:535). Africana womanism describes the role of African mothers as leaders in regaining, cultural integrity, justice, truth and so on (Dove 1998). According to this theory women feel that they should struggle together with their male counterparts against any forms of oppression and they have to name and define themselves. This means Africans need a self-identity other than being identified or defined from a point of view which is not theirs. Vatsonga as part of the African society have their own culture to safeguard, hence basing on this African womanist theory we can discuss the importance of the roles played by women in the Tsonga culture.

3. Cultural and gender issues

Dove (1998) writes about Africana womanism which is basically an Afrocentric theory where she speaks against the oppression of women living in male-centred western society. Her paper points out the issue of racialization of the world and writes against white supremacy. In her paper, Dove interrogates the relationship between Africans and Europeans before and during the colonization of Africa. She argues that one of the factors which led to domination of Africa was the clash of cultures. It was also recognised that European domination affected cultures of some cultural groups other than that of African people. Culture is one aspect which can define a group of a people. Dove addresses culture as a weapon of resistance and as a basis for defining a new world order. She puts emphasis on the experiences of mothers, who look to their re-Africanization as the solution to challenging alien social structures and inappropriate values and behaviors among African women and men (Dove, 1998:516). This current study is not necessarily looking at theory of Africana womanism, but it focuses on the significance of Vatsonga women in enhancing the Xitsonga culture using the Africana womanist perspective. It draws from experiences of Vatsonga women and their views on cultural and gender issues. This chapter is not going to focus on western women as discussed in Dove's article. It dwells on African experiences mainly on those aspects which include Xitsonga culture.

Chitlango and Balcomb (2004) discuss the aspect of *ntumbuluko* (creation) in relation to gender issues. In their paper they discuss the notion focusing on

theological issues. They first of all try to define the term *ntumbuluko* where they come up with various definitions ranging from creation to cultural issues. In trying to define the term *ntumbuluko* they divide it into three different categories; – that to do with the national or communal, that to do with the tribal, and that to do with the clan and the family. They add that *Ntumbuluko* is built by the laws that are given to people and they liken it to the situation in which God gave man the law to live by. Failure to abide by the law would be called sin. In other words *Ntumbuluko* is the foundation or cornerstone where each and every law is based on upon (Chitlango 2002:43). They further argue that since *Ntumbuluko* is just like a divine law which regulates life, it must never be tempered around with. They also mention that *Ntumbuluko* has power to change people's lives and this happens when they believe. Some of these laws are rituals which protect men from women's impurities (Chitlango and Balcomb, 2004).

Chitlango and Balcomb (ibid) also discuss the oppressive aspect of *ntumbuluko* where they condemn the rituals of sexual cleansing done on widows. The widow is supposed to have sex with the brother in-laws and the father in-law. This aspect of *ntumbuluko* was also extended to the church where some women in one of the churches in Mozambique were not allowed to partake the Holy communion when they are having their menstruation periods. They were not also allowed to preach in church. Some also consider it a taboo to see a woman pastor in church. Another negative aspect of *ntumbuluko* discussed by Chitlango and Balcomb is treating women as wives, that is women can only be defined in relation to their husbands. They go further arguing that there are better things in African tradition which can leave women in a better position rather than maintaining the status quo. Chitlango and Balcomb (2004) further explore the liberating aspects of *ntumbuluko* where a woman can be treated as a mother and their roles are more defined in Vatsonga culture. According to this aspect, women are considered to be very useful in the society since they can work as advisers (*masungukati*) and counsellors.

Applying the aspect of *ntumbuluko* discussed by Chitlango and Balcomb, this study focuses on how its different dimensions are linked to gender issues drawing from the Vatsonga women's experiences. Vatsonga as a nation have their aspirations and these shall be discussed to see how they try to safeguard them. It argues that the role played by women is not to use them, but they are part of this culture in which they are strongly found rooted in. It is beyond the scope of this study to look at *ntumbuluko* from a clan or family level. The focus is on the national level where by this group tries to keep its culture alive. In other words it looks at Vatsonga people as a nation despite them being divided amongst different countries in southern Africa. This current study will not focus on the oppressive nature of *ntumbuluko* but rather focuses on the positive role played by women in enhancing the Vatsonga culture. It gives practical examples on how Tsonga women can shape their society by practicing their cultural traditions which have been handed down from generation to

generation. This is what has kept the Tsonga culture striving under stiff conditions which were brought about by modernization.

Maluleke (2012) addresses the issue of culture, tradition, law and custom focusing on how these aspects impact on gender equality. Ramphela in Maluleke (2012:1) avers that “Culture is like an umbrella under which some people like to hide from rain, and also to shade themselves from the sun. But sometimes you need to fold it”. This saying implies that culture may cover some people in various aspects of life, but there are instances in which it might be an impediment to some. Maluleke used this speech to point out that some cultural practices may be beneficial to all members of the society, but there are some which are harmful to certain groups such as women. Cultural practices which are regarded as harmful are early and forced marriages (*Ukuthwala* as practised currently), virginity testing, widow's rituals, '*ukungena*' (levirate and sororate unions), female genital mutilation (FGM), breast sweeping/ironing, the primogeniture rule, 'cleansing' after male circumcision, and witch-hunting (Maluleke, 2012:4). These seem to disadvantage women since it is not done at their own will. Maluleke argues that a blind eye is turned to such practices in the name of culture and they go unchallenged.

Maluleke begins by giving a background on African culture. She argues that African culture was oppressed by western culture for quite a long time to the extent that on top of African traditional elements, it now has some foreign features. In her study she explains the difference between western and African cultures where she points out that the former are more individualistic, only focusing on personal achievements, whereas the latter are collectivistic and concerned with communal welfare. The collectivistic nature of African cultures is linked to *Ubuntu/Vumunhu* which the western cultures failed to get rid of. This is a good aspect which benefits all people. On those aspects which do not benefit all people, Maluleke bemoans some inequality which manifests itself in the South African constitution which protects the right to culture at the expense of gender equality. Maluleke (2012:7) argues that the girl child is not protected by this constitution since it makes her suffer in the name of culture when she avers that “These compromises on women's right to equality can thus be interpreted to mean that women, as opposed to men, do not have inherent rights”. This means there is no equality on gender. As a result Maluleke points out that cultural practices should not prejudice anyone based on gender, but must be revived in a way which respects human rights, democracy and equality. This revival must also be based upon the spirit of *Ubuntu* and the legal context of the constitution.

Maluleke's study shows how culture may infringe on the rights of women whilst favouring men. She however, recommends a balance between culture and rights for all. *Ubuntu* should be a key to achieving all this. Basing on *Ubuntu* as well, this current study looks at women from a vantage point of Xitsonga culture. Afrocentric ideas and the understanding of equality shall be used in a way which will not take away the importance of women in a Tsonga

society. Rather than talking of the ills of culture, the study focuses on positive aspects which define women as heroines of Xitsonga culture. More so, those harmful cultural practices mentioned in Maluleke are not practiced among Vatsonga in Zimbabwe.

Still discussing on the interface of culture and gender equality, Kaganas and Murray (1994) show how these two compete as highlighted in South Africa's Interim Constitution. In their paper they aver that the president signed a constitution proclaiming a new order which was based on the principle of equality. Kaganas and Murray examine the right to participate in cultural life as contained in the Bill of Rights. The study goes on to discuss the issue of culture and equality. Their analysis shows that equality should take precedence over culture and they consider the latter to be flexible to the extent that it can be changed or challenged.

However, people's rights to participate in their culture should be respected. Practices which are not included in the customary law should not be given much attention. In supporting this claim, Kaganas and Murray (1994:417) aver that *"As for cultural practices or values that are not enshrined in customary law, we would argue that in relation to these too, the equality provision should override cultural claims and that cultural practices should be subject to it"*. This means culture is respected though in some instance it is ignored to honour the rights of individuals.

The study further interrogates the issue of culture and tradition. Williams (1980) avers that culture is always in the process of being reshaped. He argues that culture emerges from dynamic social and economic relations. In the same vein, Kaganas and Murray (ibid) argue that traditions are invented and they have been influenced by the colonial system. This implies that even Vatsonga traditions have been changing to some extent since time immemorial due to external forces. The way in which gender and equality issues are perceived by Western or former colonial powers are different from old African views. Even if traditions are influenced, this current study would like to show that Vatsonga still hold to some cultural values, customs and traditions which depict their true identity.

Most scholars who write about gender issues try to portray a picture that there was always inequality in which should have been passed on from previous generations. In this case they describe women as the oppressed. However there are some scholars who came out with different views basing on what they found. Ogbomo and Ogbomo (1993) examine the social, political and economic roles of women in society using pre-colonial Iyede as a case study. Their paper shows that women had a better status in pre-colonial era. It also identifies different practices which either enhanced or reduced the status of Iyede women. The paper goes on highlighting some activities which increases women's visibility and influence in the community. These are involvement in rituals and in economic activities. However, Ogbomo and Ogbomo found that

there are some practices such as widowhood, politics and circumcision rituals which oppress women.

It is also noted that some practices like FGM diminished women's status, but this view is not a uniform one. Putting it clearly, Ogbomo and Ogbomo (1993:437) aver that "*Depending on which side of the divide one is operating from, the practice either diminished or enhanced the status of women. To the feminist, it decreased women's status, while the traditional African female would argue it does not. Rather it enhanced it.*" The perspectives through which different cultures perceive this ritual differ. Finally what they concluded is that gender relations among Iyede people in the 1990s shows a status of women which is different from that of the pre-colonial era. The status of women seems to be lower than it used to be in the pre-colonial era because of systems which disrespect and abuse them. Vatsonga women do not go through FGM even if they practice initiation rites. In that sense we can safely say there is no abuse among Vatsonga women. Their practices actually increase women's status in a traditional Vatsonga society. They understand it from a cultural perspective that it is a good thing to get through this rite of passage. This current study actually values this role played by women as something which enhances Tsonga culture.

Okrah (2017) examines the dynamics of gender roles and cultural determinants of African women's desire to participate in modern politics. This paper attempts to recapture women's contributions to African traditional systems of government. It also suggests if these systems could be used to suit modern political structures to enhance appropriate and responsible governance in African countries. Okrah argues that foreign scholars see women as people who are only tied to petty issues rather than participating in politics. What makes them see things in this way is the fact that they do not understand the socio-cultural setting of Africans and hence they do not understand the issue of division of labour. They understand issues in their own foreign ways. However, since the way of life keeps on changing, women also expect to be involved in politics and governance. They have a significant population but that does not reflect in parliament and government. There is a limited number of women in top posts and women seem not to support each other to get more seats (PANW, 2010).

Okrah appreciates the importance of women in African traditional governance but feels this could be transformed to suit the modern system. This current study also second this view and goes further showing that Vatsonga women's contribution was cultural and should still continue to be cherished in the present-day society. It also supports the issue of not using foreign views as a template to measure traditional indigenous practices. This study goes on to defend the position played by safe cultural practices in enhancing Vatsonga culture. It also shows that it is not the number of political posts which show that there is a balance in gender, but it is the quality of leadership offered basing on the beliefs of Vatsonga people on political systems.

4. Role of Women in Vatsonga Culture

Vatsonga women play a very crucial role in enhancing Xitsonga culture and this cannot be compared to issues related to gender imbalance in other aspects of life. In this section we endeavor to show how important women are in making Vatsonga culture visible. It points out things which are highly valued in Vatsonga society and making women themselves feel that they have a significant role to play. This is against a background that women are oppressed and they are not given equal chances with men. Some practices which others claim show inequalities that are caused by cultural gender imbalances which were passed on from generation to generation are explained fully.

Traditional conflict resolution and counseling

Traditional conflict resolution was and is still very useful in the African society. Vatsonga still practice some aspects of traditional conflict resolution in this contemporary society and this role is played mostly by elders. Women are not an exception in this. Kariuki (2012:11) avers that “*Conflict resolution by elders is based on social/cultural values, norms, beliefs and processes that are understood and accepted by the community*”. This means that the methods used are culturally constructed and people in that particular community have a common understanding regarding the processes followed. In intra-personal conflicts taking place in girls and boys, it is the duty of the aunties to intervene and give necessary counseling which help them overcome problems. For instance, if a girl is getting married or has been impregnated the auntie mediates the process and helps bring peace between the girl and her parents if she did not do it according to their expectations. The same applies to boys the aunty can play the role of facilitating the marriage process. Whether it is the method of *ku tlhakisa* (abduction) or the traditional way of marriage the aunty takes part. In the former she is the one who plays a leading role in facilitating, guidance and counseling.

Whenever a woman faces problems in her marriage, she has to approach the aunty for counseling. If there are any conflicts between her and the husband, the aunty is there to resolve the differences. Sometimes she may need to be taught how to treat her husband in a respectful manner following what is commonly accepted in the society. The aunty also counsels her niece if she might be having thoughts of quitting the marriage. She will also share experiences which help her see that her problems could be minor than what she thought in the beginning. Vatsonga culture like any other African culture, do not encourage divorce, especially over petty issues. They have a proverb which says “*vukati va kandza hi mbilu*” meaning marriage needs a strong heart which can persevere in difficult times. Women would not encourage another woman to leave her husband over issues which can be solved. Vatsonga believe in the growth of a clan, so by persevering women are enhancing their culture. They do not understand this perseverance as abuse as human rights groups would perceive it.

In responding to this assertion, one woman N'waXirilele says: *“a u nge siyi nuna hikwalaho ka ku a mi twananangi, wansati wa tiyisela.”* [you cannot leave your husband just because of a misunderstanding, a true woman perseveres]. This shows the extent to which women values marriage. In African culture and Vatsonga to be specific, a married woman is respected more than the one who is unmarried. This is the reason why women would not give up in trying to get married even if they seem to have passed the flowery stages. They still want to experience that dignity of being married. This is very important from an Afrocentric perspective. It defines who they are as African woman.

If there are conflicts or perceived conflicts between couples, women would advise and counsel the married couple accordingly. In the case where one might be having a problem in bearing children, women intervene timely using their traditional ways which will still leave the family with happiness which all cherish. Of course depending on beliefs some may take the solutions as evil or oppressive to women or unfair to men. For instance, if it is a man who fails, they find another relative who will timeously do the task. This is kept a secret and the man who does this does not have to boast having fathered the child of his brother's wife. With women it is very possible and many families have thrived on this method. This man is also not allowed to do it whenever he pleases, but has to come during the time where it matters most. That is when another child is needed. He will just do that and returns to his family. His family does not have to know this as well. It might seem awkward to outsiders, but to African people it is a good thing for women to have children. Women also cherish this. Vatsonga have a saying which says: *“wansati i ku tswala”* [to be a woman is to bear children]. This is a view which would haunt many no matter how in other circles people are taught to accept it as the will of God.

If it is discovered that it is a woman who fails to bear children, another wife especially a relative is brought to bear children for her sister or aunty. These children are said to be that woman's children as well since the latter has come to bear her children. These days it is not very common but it happens in few families. Their main problem is the fear of HIV and AIDS pandemic which has devastated many families. Where some does this, they now welcome the issue of voluntary testing, especially those families which are educated. It is the duty of elderly women to convince other ladies to get married to revive the family of their relative. This also applies to a situation where a man loses his wife. The elders sit down and counsel a relative to accept to marry that man in order to keep the children of her relative rather than letting a stranger do it.

Women a very important part of the Vatsonga society when it comes to traditional issues. Khosa (2017) supports this when he avers: *“In Tsonga cultural set up, women form every part of the whole social structure. Women are the central nerve, nothing of serious matter can be undertaken without proper and legitimate consent of the Matriarchs; be it marriage, Royal rituals, Coronations, burials etc.* This shows women are a very special integral part of Vatsonga society.

Leadership and advisory roles

Women are not only confined to household chores as some would presume. They also take part in traditional leadership roles. Ogbomo and Ogbomo (1993:437) give an example when they aver: “*Nevertheless, the Iyede Women and Society in Pre-colonial Iyede people came out of Benin and, like others who did so, hints abound that very early Edo society involved women leaders*”. This shows that in Africa women have been leaders during the pre-colonial era. Even among Vatsonga it was a common thing to have a female leader. Khosa (2017:1) puts it like this:

“Europeans and Shangaans were shocked and perplexed when Hosikati (Queen)Xikhumbani led an army of the Bila tribe. Having been appointed as Heir to the crown by her own father and grandfather, Hosi N’wanteva, Hosikati Xikhumbani fiercely resisted Shangaan occupation of her land and protected her people against Shangaan slave raiders.

This tells us that chiefdoms didn’t belong to men only as people in this contemporary society would think. The Bila tribe forms part of the Vatsonga society and as such it contributed a lot to their culture and traditions. Xikhumbani was a powerful chief who protected her land and people from invaders and this is why the Europeans were perplexed. Since time immemorial women contributed a lot in playing leading roles even in choosing and advising the person who will be supposed to be a traditional leader in Vatsonga culture. The aunty is also part of the advisory board to the chief. Women can help determine who should be the chief or next leader since a chief is selected using a principle that the son of the eldest wife is heir to the throne of a chief or a village head. They are the ones who keep records about birth quite well. Women are point of reference whenever clarity of issues pertaining to ages of their children is called for. They would provide with accurate records.

Women have intervened timeously where there are likely to be disputes on the succession of leaders. Traditionally it would be known who is supposed to be the next leader, but due to greedy and other reasons better known to themselves, some people will try to make life difficult for the would be leader. They may try to assassinate or disturb in various ways. However, in moments like these it is women through their motherly hearts who would try by all means to protect the person who is under threat by hiding him or her. Sometime they can take the lead themselves depending on the state of the matter as long as they are basing on the womb from which the leader is supposed to come. There is a case with one South African chiefdoms like N’wamitwa. Khosa (2017) put is in this way: “*The case of Hosikati N’wamitwa (Queen of the House of N’wamitwa of the Valoyi grouping) claiming to be the legitimate heir by virtue of blood regardless of her gender, is a much recent example of how Vatsonga recognises and validates the Matriarch Power. Her victory in a modern court of law was informed by genuine Tsonga cultural rules regarding the position of the*

Matriarch.” This means that women can be accorded their positions of leadership regardless of gender in Vatsonga culture.

To show how women intervened we can cite cases in Vatsonga history where women became leaders or protected leaderships of their own culture. Nganakati Xipisani was a ruler of the Khoseni tribe which is part of Vatsonga until 1904. Xipisani fought alongside her brother *Hosi(Chief)* Xongela whom she later replaced after his death. Another example is that of the Tembe one of the ancient Tsonga kingdom where Queen Zambili fought against Muhena and his Zulu allies and defeated them and secured a throne for her son who was a minor (Khosa, 2017). This is clear evidence that Vatsonga is a tolerant cultural grouping which is not strictly patriarchal since it allows women to take part in leading roles. The N’wamitwa case shows that a woman cannot be prejudiced of her leadership rights because of gender. This will go a long way as an example that women can be entrusted with leadership roles whenever they are entitled to it. This would remove some generalization that African societies do not accept female leaders.

Vatsonga women in rites of passage

Women are the sole custodians of these rituals since no man can conduct such activities. It is the duty of women in form of the aunty who identifies and counsels her brother’s daughters when they are ready to go for the initiation rituals (*khomba*). No one is forced to join this kind of traditional school. Girls take part according to their own will and out of interest. As mentioned before there is no female genital mutilation which takes place in *khomba* rituals. According to Vatsonga culture a woman is considered to be fully a woman after having passed through this process since there are important teachings which take place there. Women would cherish to partake in the training which is conducted by *vadzabi* (trainers). These are experienced women who understand life issues. They inculcate in the initiates *Ubuntu* or *Vumunhu* values, respect for elders and acceptable behaviour in their culture. Maluleke and Troskie (2003: 56) support the view that the puberty rites are meant for educational purposes and should be part Vatsonga life when they say: “*Initiated women and girls view the rite as a cultural practice that upholds the African culture. They described it as a school where women other than their own mothers teach initiates the facts of life*”.

Vukhomba is a confidential practice such that no one from outside would know what happens there. The initiated women are not allowed to discuss the contents of *vukhomba* in the streets. This dismisses the myth that women are taught about things which will make them indulge in premarital sex or early marriages and pregnancies. Even uninitiated girls and women in various communities suffer those same problems of teenage pregnancies. *Vukhomba* is a rite that women have managed to maintain despite those myths by outsiders. This is one of cultural elements which is valued most in Vatsonga communities. Hence women play a very vital role in preserving Vatsonga culture through continued practices of *khomba* rites. Basing on Africana

womanist framework, Vatsonga traditional women do not see anything wrong in practicing their cultural rights. Even those who do not partake in the rites appreciate the practices except those who may be having influence from other religious sects which may consider it ungodly. Otherwise vukhomba is a generally accepted passage rite among Vatsonga culture. Women are the drivers in this practice.

Vatsonga dressing and aesthetic value

Dressing is one aspect in which a cultural group can show its uniqueness. As in most African societies Vatsonga women gives a distinct cultural mark through their dressing. Elderly women would be seen dressed in *swibelana* (traditional skirts) and *miceka* (colourful cloths) always. Junod (1982: 43) describe a dress like this when says: “...vavasati a va ambarile rhoko ya ricinda leri sasekisiweke hi vuhlalo bya mavalavala.” [Women were putting on a dress which was decorated with beads of different colours]. This means this was a kind of dressing which women put during those old days. They would also enhance their beauty through *vusenga* (bangles) and *madeha* (ankle bracelets). Women also put on *tikhwini* (beads) and *xifezani* (head gear) even up to this day (Madlome and Mawere, 2017). On various cultural occasions women of all ages would be seen dressed up in this way. This is a typical dressing of Tsonga woman and this makes them unique among other cultures. Men do not have much to show in terms of cultural dressing as compared to women. Women play a bigger part in as far as dressing and aesthetic value of Vatsonga culture is concerned.

Preservation of Language

Language is a very important element of culture since it is used as its vehicle of transmission from one generation to another. Without language it would be almost impossible to maintain a viable culture. Bayramova (2016:1943) gives a link between language and culture by saying “*Fulfilling the functions of a culture bearer and transmitter, language is considered as a means of realization of communication between the representatives of the same or different ethnoses.*” This means language acts as a repository and a transmitter of culture at the same time. All the cultural terms are stored in form of a language. Women as mothers are the ones who spend most of their time with children hence they are the ones who teach them language. If they decide not teach children a language of their clan they would not be identified with it. The language taught to children is always referred to as *ririmi ra manana* (mother tongue). This is so because without women or mothers it will be difficult for children to acquire a language.

In case of Vatsonga, they could have easily lost their language and eventually their culture had it not been of Vatsonga women who fought tirelessly in their homes to teach their children Xitsonga language when men were taken as *mabulandlela* (Tsonga men turned into Amashangana’s foot soldiers) during Soshangana’s subjugation of part of their population. Khosa (2017:1) avers:

Most importantly, had it not been for Tsonga women who were forced into marriage with Shangaan men, the Xitsonga language would be dead or turned into some loose creole. The Shangaan had tried to kill Xitsonga by forcing captured Tsonga men to speak Nguni (isiLala) only.

These words mean that despite some of the Vatsonga women having been married to Shangani men, they still taught their children how to speak Xitsonga. Tsonga men who were turned into *mabulandlela* were now speaking isiLala which could have made it easier for their language to get lost. However, due to the strength of these women Xitsonga language persisted against all odds. They also taught the Shangani descendants how to speak Xitsonga until they could not speak their own Nguni dialect. The women's language, Xitsonga, prevailed and it is still being spoken up to date. Women played a very significant role to the Vatsonga culture by preserving Xitsonga language. They are still the ones teaching their children whilst men are at work. Those Vatsonga women who will be at work would find some means of getting their children to learn their language as well.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that what is referred to as inequality in terms of gender in the western world view differs from what African people perceive. Using Afrocentric views we can conclude that generally people are assigned to their specific roles which will make the society move forward smoothly. Narrowing down to the Africana-womanist theory we see that Vatsonga women play significant roles which helps in preserving their culture. These women feel that it is their duty to do so and they are not compelled by anyone to carry out these functions. It was also established in this study that women play a major role in conflict resolution and also in making important rituals a success. Their importance was also shown through their power and what they can do to give an identity to Vatsonga folk. This was proved by the fact that women take part in leadership roles. Examples were cited where women were queens and leaders at different platforms of the community during the pre-colonial and post-colonial era. Whenever women are found in such positions it would be through acceptance by their community. Women were seen defending their family rights and fighting against oppression or invasion. This shows that they are family centered and they can fight together with men until justice prevails. These are Africana womanist characteristics. Even though it might look as if Vatsonga is a patriarchal society, it is evident in this study that matriarchs are very important in safeguarding and preserving Xitsonga culture. Vatsonga women through their dressing give identifying marks for the Tsonga culture. Women have guarded Xitsonga language jealously and they are still maintaining it by teaching it to their children. By so doing they are playing a pivotal role in the preservation of Xitsonga culture. Basing on the arguments and evidence provided above, we can safely say women are very significant in Vatsonga culture.

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