

Proverbs, Misreading And The Youth: Implications And Remedial Interventions In Contemporary Society

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Abstract

Modern-day Vatsonga seemingly find it difficult to use, let alone decipher the meaning of proverbs. This is because traditional values and norms are no longer observed. Several factors contribute to this, namely, modernisation, globalisation and what may be termed cultural schizophrenia. In lieu of this, this article analyses the essence, relevance and role of Xitsonga proverbs in transmitting indigenous knowledge among Vatsonga. As a point of departure, the article highlights prevalent inconsistencies in the use of proverbs and further proffers remedial interventions towards the valuation and correct usage of Xitsonga proverbs. Reliant on the qualitative approach, data was collected from different books and purposively selected from Xitsonga speaking participants. The collected data from books was analysed by means of textual analysis whereas data acquired through interviews was interpreted using the thematic analysis technique. It was found that the usage of Xitsonga proverbs is challenging due to a lack of understanding of the roles they play in society. As part of the tradition, paremiology is suggested to the society.

Keywords: Beliefs, culture, idioms, proverbs, and roles.

Introduction

Proverbs are powerful sayings that are very common in nearly, if not all languages (Akanbi 2015). A proverb is viewed as a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form, and which is handed down from generation to generation (Mieder, 2004). Ebonso (2012) describes proverbs as metaphorical folk assertions that are acute in their claims, succinct in their formulations, and distinguished by the widespread acceptance of the truths they reflect. In the words of Shabangu (1994), a proverb is a precise sentence that reveals some truth backed by experience and observation.

Proverbs contain the wisdom and insights that humankind has gained through observation and experience, and as so-called “monumenta humana” they are the everyday and common sense philosophy of all people (Mieder, 2008). Proverbs are very ancient, and they exist in many communities, looking closely, some proverbs show similarities. Trench argues that proverbs reflect the mores and morals of the community, and one single proverb may exist in different communities and countries (Trench 1854). Proverbs are found in most cultures, and are often very ancient (Baldick, 2008). A proverb is an important aspect of human communication and has been a prominent linguistic feature in virtually all languages such as Yoruba, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Spanish, French, English, German, Dutch and all African languages because it pertains to human communication (Adamo, 2015). Ehondor (2017) compares proverbs with metaphors, as sayings or stories intended to assist learning, either formal learning or in informal, family or folk learning. This characterises proverbs as an acceptable form of communication in and out of cultural contexts, providing meaning and explaining phenomena, exhibiting traits of a theory (Ehondor, 2017).

Tradition transmits beliefs and principles from one generation to another generation, and these beliefs and principles reflect a culture’s personality, aesthetics, and history. Tradition includes proverbs, proverbs that have been passed down through generations in a culture, shaping life with their figurative meanings. Despite the fact that their meaning is figurative, proverbs are part of every culture’s tradition. The impact of established wisdom in Xitsonga proverbs is heightened by references such as: *va vurisile vakhale loko va ku*: (our forefathers correctly or rightfully pointed out that). Though Xitsonga proverbs talk about animals and other

natural things, they are directed to people. Our forefathers used life experiences to form proverbs. It is important to understand Xitsonga proverbs hidden meanings at all costs. African proverbs contain observations gathered from common everyday events and experiences concerning the nature, life and behaviour of human beings as well as of animals, birds, plants and other natural objects, and even supernatural objects and beings (Kudadjie, 1996, p.8).

According to Miender (2001), proverbs form part of the integral elements of African culture. Proverbs can be understood where literacy is low and appreciated by the most educated. They are guidelines of individual, family, village and community behavior, built upon repeated real-life experiences and observations over a period of time" (Miender, 2001). Xitsonga, like other languages has proverbs that provide daily direction to society. Because of modernisation, modern Vatsonga rarely utilise proverbs. Maluleke (2018) examines the use and function of Xitsonga proverbs, concluding that Vatsonga are unaware of the functions of Xitsonga proverbs, and as a result, they misunderstand and misuse some of their traditional proverbs. This raises concerns that the original meaning of the Vatsonga might be lost across generations. When proverbs are misconstrued, they lose their original meaning. Proverbs state the truth about life, they are never debated or modified because they represent traditions (Saayman, 1996, 121). Given that they state the truth about life, it follows that Vatsonga speakers should not interfere with their origin. It does not debate or explain anything; instead, it just reveals us a big truth in the most profound way (Ehondor, 2017). If the current generation of Vatsonga are not taught how to use proverbs correctly, their proverbs will be distorted. According to Boateng (1983: 331), proverbs are "validators of traditional procedures and beliefs," and he warns that rejecting black African heritage will leave the black African with a sense of lost identity. Boateng's (1983) argument can be employed in the contemporary usage of Xitsonga proverbs, that if Vatsonga or Xitsonga speakers continue to look down and misunderstand their proverbs, their African way of living, which, in this case can be directed to knowing the roles of proverbs and using them correctly, identity can be lost. In the event that they lose their original meaning and forms, they lose their roles in the society. Studies in paremiology have been carried out in the twenty-first century) however, no study has been conducted in an attempt to analyse the misinterpretations of Xitsonga proverbs in the contemporary society, and its effects.

The same phenomenon has been observed in other South African languages, such as Sesotho. According to Possa and Makgopa (2010), cultural changes are unavoidable as society evolves. They indicate that because proverbs are an aspect of culture that has existed since time immemorial, they are also affected by these changes, and it is because of this dynamism that some Sesotho proverbs have variants with shifted meaning. Proverbs and other styled folklore are perceived as outdated in many ways and are no longer given space in the twenty-first century (Mushwana, 2021, 2). According to Ngugi (2012), the number of students enrolling for African language courses has been dwindling in the recent years in many universities in Africa. Due to these factors teachers, parents and learners generally have a negative attitude towards their mother tongues as languages of instruction. Most parents see the usefulness of English language in terms of its future utility for their children (Ngugi, 2012).

Methodology

This study relied on the qualitative approach to collect data from different books and selected Xitsonga speaking participants. Qualitative research, according to Dornyei (2007), comprises data collection methods that provide mostly open-ended, non-numerical data, which is subsequently analysed primarily by non-statistical methodology. The qualitative research method focuses on examining and responding to exploratory and descriptive inquiries about a topic.

Data collection

In this study, the researchers employed unstructured in-depth interviews. An unstructured in-depth interview is one in which the interviewer approaches it with the goal of discussing a small number of topics, sometimes as few as one or two, and frames subsequent questions based on the interviewee's prior response (Hunn, Fox & Mathers, 2002). Unstructured in-depth interviews allowed the interviewers to learn more about a given issue without having a structure, prior plan, or expectation for how the interview will go. Ten elders aged 60 years and above from Mhinga Village were sampled. The sample comprised of five women and five men.

Data analysis

Textual analysis was used to analyse data collected from books. According to McKee (2001), textual analysis is a methodology, used to gather and analyse information in academic research. In this study, textual analysis was applied to interpret proverbs gathered from a variety of written materials. Data analysis was

according to emerging themes from data gathered through interviews and textual analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for analysing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyse, and report repeated patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006). It is used to analyse to classify and present themes (patterns) that relate to the data (Alhojailan, 2012). Thematic analysis is an apt qualitative method that can be used when working in research teams and analysing large qualitative data sets (Nowell et al, 2017). Nowell et al (2017) further argues that thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions. Thematic analysis is used to analyse, classify and present themes (patterns) that relate to the data (Alhojailan, 2012). In this case, data collected from participants through interviews was analysed and interpreted accordingly and given the best appropriate explanations.

Theoretical framework

This study adopted the Afrocentric theory to resolve the misinterpretations and challenges of proverbial expression within Vatsonga society. The Afrocentric theory refers to an approach to African culture that emphasizes the role of Africans within the context of their own historical experiences and cultural traditions (Asante, 2014). The Afrocentric theory places African people at the centre of any analysis of African phenomena in terms of action and behaviour (Chawane, 2016). The theory advocates for an African-centred approach to ideologies that are to solve African problems and challenges (Mushwana, 2021, 3). The adoption of the Afrocentric theory also serves as a recommendation for the incorporation of folklore and proverbs into educational curricula. This resulted in a better understanding of the roles and the application of proverbs to Vatsonga contemporary society. Asante supports the claim by asserting that children who are centered in their own cultural information are better students, more disciplined, and have more motivation for schoolwork through observations, inquiry, and discussion (Asante, 1992, 29).

Findings and Discussions

The Youth and the Misinterpretation of Xitsonga Proverbs

Proverbs can be situated under in-group solidarity markers and figures of speech/rhetoric, specifically the metaphor, which is an expression used to refer to something that it does not literally denote in order to suggest a similarity (Ehondor, 2017). In this section, the proverbs are retold using the formulaic

expression, “vakhale va vurisile loko va ku” (our forefathers correctly pointed out that), as a strategy hinting to the hearers that the saying is a firm and founded moral expression passed down from sieved experiences of old age. This makes it beyond doubt and can serve as a yardstick for the current generation. The following are some of the misinterpreted proverbs by the contemporary youth.

Proverb: *Vakhale va vurisile loko va ku: u nga onheli xihlovo, mundzuku u ta nwa kwihi xana?* Our forefathers correctly pointed out that: do not pollute the well where will you drink tomorrow?

Meaning: *u nga soli munhu loyi a ku pfunaka hikuva mundzuku u ta ku tshika u xaniseka.* (Do not criticise a person that helps you because you will suffer when they abandon you.)

The interpretation given above confirms the genuine meaning of the proverb (*U nga onheli xihlovo, mundzuku u ta nwa kwihi xana?* (Do not pollute the well, where will you drink tomorrow?)), which suggests that you should not wrong those that helped you, they may not help you again. The word ‘xihlovo’ (well), signifies a source of help, in this case, people whom you associate with who may be relatives, friends or any whose considerations of you makes them generate some kind of assistance for one’s betterment. Disappointing such people may dissuade them of further extending their hands towards the one in need of help since they consider it no longer necessary to keep assisting someone who is not considerate.

Misinterpretation:

The modern generation interprets this proverb literally, claiming that the genuine meaning of the proverb is exactly what the proverb states. Little did they know that proverbs are created in a figurative form. The proverb may discuss various aspects of nature, but it is speaking to people. This proverb refers to the meaning hidden behind its figurative meaning rather than the literal meaning. Most participants assert that this proverb suggests that one should not demolish or pollute a well because if one did, where would one get their water tomorrow? This kind of misinterpretation could be caused by a lack of familiarity with the proverbial expression.

Proverb: *Vakhale va vurisile loko va ku: Ku dya ngopfu a hi ku hlula ndlala* (Our forefathers correctly pointed out that: Eating too much is not to defeat hunger.)

Meaning: *ku tirha ngopfu u nga wisi a hi ku heta ntirho.* (Working excessively without rest does not ensure completion of work.)

Misinterpretation

Youth frequently misinterpret the aforementioned proverb, especially after eating, when they claim that overeating does not completely satisfy hunger. Modern Vatsonga are unaware that they are applying this proverb's literal meaning rather than its figurative one. The actual meaning of the proverb is that working too much does not guarantee that you will finish your work.

Proverb: *Vakhale va vurisile loko va ku: Ku hlula xirhami i ku kufumetana* (Our forefathers correctly pointed out that: To overcome chilliness is to warm each other.)

Meaning: *ku twanana ku tisa nhluvuko.* (Unity brings development.)

The proverb's meaning is that unity is strength. As a result, if unity is strength, progress will follow. It, in a sense, discourages individualism by cultivating a spirit of unity and collectivism when carrying out activities, which is far better than the struggling efforts of one individual.

Misinterpretation

Morden day Vatsonga, particularly the young crop, frequently use the proverb's literal meaning *ku hlula xirhami i ku kufumetana* (The way to overcome chilliness is to warm each other) as if it is the real meaning. Proverb misinterpretation is caused by a lack of knowledge. Certain speakers are unable to distinguish between literal and figurative meaning.

Proverb: *Vakhale va vurisile loko va ku: A ndzi tswalanga huku, ndzi tswale munhu* (Our forefathers correctly pointed out that: I did not beget a hen, but a human being.)

Meaning: *Loko mukon'wana a tata minkondzo evukweni, vatswari va nhwanyana va ku: ku hava tihuku to dlaya siku rin'wana ni rin'wana! A a teke, a famba.* (When a bridegroom keeps visiting his in-laws without giving the due *lobola*, they would say: We have no hen to kill (in order to receive you) everyday, marry our daughter and take her with you – Junod, (2017)

This shows that the proverb's true meaning is that a groom should wed his wife in order to stop repeatedly visiting his in-law's home. When a bridegroom visits the in-law's home, they prepare a chicken for him. If he keeps visiting without marrying

the daughter, his in-laws will get tired of slaughtering a chicken for him.

Misinterpretation

Many Xitsonga speakers believe that this proverb means that one should not forget as quickly as a chicken. They also claim that it is a phrase used to warn a child not to easily forget like a chicken. Some of them associate this proverb (*a ndzi tswalanga huku, ndzi tswale munhu*) with the figure of speech "you forget as quickly as a chicken" (*ku rivala onge i huku*).

Proverb: *Vakhale va vurisile loko va ku: Xibodze xa mughana a xi chayeriwi not* (Our forefathers correctly pointed out that: Do not whistle to a friend's tortoise.)

Meaning: *U nga tshembeli eka swilo swa un'wana* (Do not rely on what others have.)

Misinterpretation

Participants argued that the above-mentioned proverbs suggest that one should not adore a friend's wife in an adulterous manner. Misinterpretations of this nature reveal Xitsonga users' confusion with their proverbial expression. They would understand the meaning of this proverb if they were taught or informed about it.

Adults and the Misinterpretation of Xitsonga Proverbs

Proverbs: *Vakhale va vurisile lokova ku: Mbuti yi dya laha yi nga khungiwa kona* (Our forefathers correctly pointed out that: A goat eats where it is tied.)

Meaning: *Nandza u endla xin'wana ni xin'wana lexi a komberiwaka ku xi endla.* (A captive does everything they are instructed.)

Misinterpretation

The above-mentioned proverb is misinterpreted in several ways; some believe it means that individuals, especially children are well raised at home or where they live. Others claim that this proverb suggests that people eat what they are given or where they stay. Their response towards this proverb clearly indicate that they do not have the idea of the meaning behind this proverb; people's ignorance leads to such situations. Adults would understand the proverb's original meaning if only the elderly had taught them about it.

Proverb: *Vakhale va vurisile loko va ku: Homu yo famba hi ndlela a yi hetu nsimu* (Our forefathers correctly pointed out

that: The ox which eats alongside the road does not finish a whole field of mealies.)

Meaning: *muhundzi a nga hetu swakudya*. (A visitor does not finish your food).

This illustrates that the proverb's actual meaning is that a visitor will not consume all of your food (*muhundzi a nga hetu swakudya*). This encourages hospitality among the Vatsonga by cultivating a spirit of generosity to visitors. This understanding is characteristic of the natural hospitality of the Africans in general, and the Vatsonga in particular.

Misinterpretation

The above proverb means that a visitor will only eat once and would not empty your granary, unlike someone who eats every day. This reflects the natural hospitality of the Vatsonga. This proverb is incorrectly applied and misunderstood in today's society for just self-interest. For example, *Loko munhu loyi a nga na vukati a ri na muhlekisana a hi nandzu hikuva o hungasa, u ta tlhelela ekaya a nga sukangi nchumu* (If a married individual has an illicit lover, they are not at fault and will return to their house after all).

Proverb: *Vakhale va vurisile loko va ku: Hlomisa ri fanele ku sungula hi ku gingirika* (Our forefathers correctly pointed out that: A young wife must work hard at first.)

Meaning: *Munhu u fanele ku nghena ntirhweni lowuntshwa hi ku lehisa mbilu*. (A man must assume and undertake his new job wholeheartedly.)

Misinterpretation

Nowadays, many abuse or force *hlomisa* (a young wife), especially in polygamous families to take care of all the household duties and other tasks. People claim that the proverb is accurate in what it states, the literal meaning *hlomisa ri fanele ku sungula hi ku gingirika* (a young wife must work hard at first). The elder wife will eventually give up on doing some of her duties as a wife and claim that a young wife must put in a lot of effort because Vatsonga ancestors said it in a proverbial form long ago. It is necessary to correct this misunderstanding.

The Roles of Xitsonga Proverbs

Xitsonga proverbs teach, warn, advise, comment on or ridicule someone's conduct, and to help settle disputes (Machaba (2011, 150). Shabangu (1996) shares the same idea of roles of Xitsonga proverbs in the nineteenth century as follows:

To teach

Proverbs teach people within the society the important aspects of life. For example: A proverb that states that *mhunti yo tlulatlula mangulwe wa yi siya* (the duiker jumping here and there is left behind by the little red buck) Junod, (2017: 32). This proverb can help people understand that if they do not work at their own pace, they may fail before achieving their goals. They must therefore work at their own pace (Shabangu, 1996: 452). This proverb means that a man who pursues many objects does not achieve what a calmer one does peacefully. The role of proverbs is essentially to propagate those values and principles that are educationally important in governing human behaviour for the benefit of society (Monyai, 2003: 66).

To discipline

Proverbs are also used to discipline, correct, rebuke and caution people that do not engage in inappropriate behaviour. For example: A proverb that states that *u nga hluvi xinyanyana u yimile* (do not pluck a bird while you are standing), cautions people not to make secrets public. If one plucks a bird while standing, all the feathers fly away with the wind (Junod, 2017: 79). Shabangu (1996: 453) also reinforces the significance of this proverb by pointing out how such proverbs can help people not to let cats out of bags when discussing matters that are not yet of public consumption.

To advise

Proverbs are very important in society because they are used to advise people. For example, A proverb that states that *mpfundla wa le rihlapfini a wu khomiwi hi timbyana* (the hare living on the fence of the village is not caught by the dogs), can be used to advise people to be aware of their surroundings because thieves may be very close to them. The meaning of this proverb is that a thief cannot be discovered if s/he lives in the village, because s/he knows all the habits of the community and uses her/his cunning to cover him/herself (Junod, 2017: 43). This proverb is critical in the sense that it endows wisdom to the community by informing them that not all thieves come from outside but the worse of those may be amongst themselves. This also discourages thieves of continuing with their habits since they get to know that they may be suspected of their evil deeds.

To encourage

Proverbs play a significant role of encouraging people that are in difficulties to remain calm. For example: A proverb that

states that *ndlopfu a yi wi hi rimbambu rin'we* (Shabangu, 1996: 453), (an elephant does not fall or die of one rib), might be used to encourage a person who is in distress not to give up, they should keep on pushing, one day all shall be well. This proverb means that a strong man does not lose heart because of a single misfortune (Junod, 2017: 13). They rather have to preserve, be optimistic and anticipate for better days and opportunities despite the experienced circumstances. This proverb therefore offers a strong, communally approved platform for strengthening dissuaded spirits in society.

To judge

Passing judgements is also done by means of proverbs and because of that, they often appear in legal contexts (Ehondor, 2017). Proverbs are important because members of the society can use them to judge when facing a situation. For example, a proverb that states that he who swallows a large stone has confidence in the size of his throat, *ximitantsengele xi tshemba nkolo*, (Shabangu, 1996: 453), might be used to pass judgment on someone who caused a difficulty for themselves. This proverb (he who swallows a large stone has confidence in the size of his throat) means that when you begin something, you must have the strength (courage) to see it through. During court sessions, the use of proverbs enables the avoidance of lengthy accounts which helps both to save time and to give an apt account of events (Mandova and Wasosa 2013: 872).

To beautify language

Xitsonga proverbs play an important role by beautifying the language. In the case of explaining difficult statements, people can use proverbs to make their statement and make it sound better even if it is a difficult situation. Because of their high rhetorical significance, speakers use them to add beauty and strength to the arguments (Machaba, 2011:150). It is very much significant to beautify some of the conversations or when making announcements in Vatsonga culture. For instance, it is not easy as it sounds to tell someone about the death of their relatives or someone close to them. The best way to let someone know about death related cases is to use proverbs. For example, *humba yi olele nkuma* (the snail collected the ash) Junod (2017). The proverb mentioned above means that a person is dead. This proverb is used to say someone is dead in a polite way, though there is nothing polite about death, but it is way much better than saying that *swimanimani u file* (so and so is dead) in Xitsonga.

Why people misinterpret proverbs?

Proverbs and other styled folklores are never thought of or even given a chance to see what role they can play in the decolonization of the school curriculum in Africa (Mushwana 2021: 2). This also applies to Vatsonga culture, misinterpretations of proverbs are caused by the lack of knowledge and ignorance. We are living in the twenty first century, where Africans look down at their cultures. They end up adopting the western way of living, by doing so, it puts their traditional way of living at jeopardy. Modern society is characterized by an accelerating pace of life, rapid political, socio-economic transformations, globalization and multicultural world development (Kotova et al, 2021). Another thing is that paremiology is partially taught at schools, of which learners receive limited knowledge. Furthermore, elders who were supposed to teach the young ones about the traditional proverbs turn out to be ignorant or look down upon their tradition as well. Mvanyashe (2019) supports this claim by asserting that “limiting the use of proverbs to language teaching has deprived learners of learning about their cultural beliefs and customs”.

Conclusion

According to the findings of the study, the majority of Xitsonga speakers and users are unaware of the function of Xitsonga proverbs. They continue to misinterpret proverbs due to a lack of comprehension. It appears that modernization and technology have an impact on how Vatsonga perceive their heritage. To avoid misinterpretation and difficulties with proverbs, users must be educated on the functions and significance of tradition (which in this case is proverbs). It very important for Vatsonga to normalise using proverbs in their daily conversations, by doing so, it promotes and keeps the proverbial tradition alive.

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