

# **The *Ngoma* Initiation Rite: A Distinctive Vatsonga Cultural Mainstay in Zimbabwe**

by

Mapindani A.

aleck.mapindani10@gmail.com

Xitsonga Language Lecturer,

Department of African Languages and Literature

Great Zimbabwe University

## **Nkomiso**

Xitsalwana lexi xi kongomanile na mfuwo tanihilaha wu twisisiwaka hakona hi rixaka ra Vatsonga va Zimbabwe (lava duvuleriwaka hi vito ra Machangana). Xi hlavutela mhaka ya leswaku Vukhomba na Ngoma i micingiriko leyti tirhaka tanihimifungho ya mfuwo wa rixaka ra Vatsonga, naswona i micingiriko ya nkoka swinene erixakeni leri. Xa nkoka eka Vukhomba na Ngoma i ku tiva leswaku vundzeni bya micingiriko leyti ahi bya mani na mani. I bya xihundla xo enta swinene naswona byi fikeleriwa ntsena hi lava lulameriweke hi byona (hileswaku lava yimbeke).

## **Abstract**

This paper is focused on an area of culture articulated by the Vatsonga of Zimbabwe, and thus generally articulates the Ngoma rite of passage as a distinctive cultural marker that owe profound social significance to its owners as an initiation practice not for public engagement, but instead, a secretive aspect of a people's sensitivities, revealed to some via reputably approved translation.

## Introduction

The famous *Ngoma* rite of passage is a celebrated cultural corner stone of the Vatsonga in Zimbabwe, hence, an unbounded phenomenon practiced by the Vatsonga in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa, and is believed to overlap the known statistical documentations and geographical limitations to countries where the Vatsonga are found in very insignificant counts.

In ordinary terms, the term *Ngoma* is used to mean a drum used in traditional dances and other related rituals. Here, the concept has figurative overtones that overlaps the surface meaning to assume an interchangeable significance with the term *Murhundzu* (the initiation rite). Thus it encompasses the ritualistic practice of the Vatsonga people engaging men of nearly all ages being taken either willingly or by force, to the bush for circumcision. It is also worth mentioning that the term *Ngoma* is used exclusively for male initiation rites, whereas female initiation rites fall under the heading *Vukhomba*.

Within Zimbabwe, the *Ngoma* ceremonial observance knows no ethnical frontiers but is common among the Varembo and the Vavenda in whose social circles the ritual marks a cultural badge of collective identification. Although the origin of the practice is elusive, the tradition has been upheld for different reasons from time beyond reckoning among Muslims, Africans, Americans and the biblical Jews among whom it symbolised loyal religious dedication and a mark of cultural identity representing the covenant between God and his people (Sibanda 2013).

In a Zimbabwean context among the Vatsonga, initiation marks a transitional phase in boys and girls that qualifies them for approval and acceptance as accomplished human beings in society (Guma 2001). Before initiation, they are deliberately made to suffer despondency through verbal disparaging, belittling, deprivations and all sorts of actions meant to make them feel the heat of being a socio-cultural outcast. Boys are usually warned against eating eggs, labeled *maxuvuri* and mimicked unmanly because they are victims of circumcisional phobia (a fear of going through the set traditional purificatory passageway). The significance of initiation ceremonies in some communities provides an important platform through which programs can reach many adolescents and intervene, particularly in addressing the widely held notion among initiates that attending these ceremonies symbolizes that one is not a child anymore and can take part in activities involving adult participants, the most significant of which being matrimonial placement (Munthali and Zulu 2007). This presupposes a popular ideology of cultural identity which forms the basis of ethnical concern. This concept of identity is intricate, and takes as read that every ethno-linguistic group is unique, where uniqueness implies that every culture has its own lens of looking at things in the phenomenal sphere of existence (Maposa 2011).

Thus, in Zimbabwe, the Ngoma initiation rite is, following the above mentioned impression, assumed to have kick started with the arrival of Matlala, a Mozambican who came to Zimbabwe and join the Vatsonga specifically for the administration of the *Ngoma* initiation rite. The name (Matlala) itself is of no specified origin and it takes no clear onomastic specifications. Thus, Matlala was a man of unfathomable cruelty and this slightly explains why most of the practised rites bore marked deeds very much similar to his hardheartedness. His inhumanity was manifest and the death of people during the *Ngoma* ritual sessions was not an unanticipated happening.

## Rite Strengthening

The notion of rite-strengthening is a piercing yet widely believed conception among the communal supporters of the *Ngoma* initiation rite. History tells that every session had to take away the life of at least one human under the same seemingly shadowy belief of rite strengthening. With the advent of Matlala, the *Ngoma* rite was introduced with such a soldierly stance that the season ushered in a term of social, spiritual and psychological meltdown; at times with a mixture of melancholy and the celebratory oozing of culturally ‘liberated’ spirits. Mapindani (2014) unveils the nature of Matlala and his rite strengthening philosophy as follows:

*Wanuna loyi a ri ni tihanyi swinene lero vanhu van'wana lava a va ya engomeni a va ya fela leyo va dlewe hi yena hi xikongomelo xa ku tiyisa murhundzu. Hikokwalaho ka miehleketo leyi, na namunthha ka ha khorwiwa leswaku murhundzu wu tiyisiwa hi ku fa ka munhu. Loko munhu a nga fanga murhundzu a wu vonaki wu hetisekile.*

*(This man was so cruel that some people who went for initiation rites could die as a result of his deliberate actions intentionally aimed at strengthening the rite. Up to this day, there is still a belief that the death of a person strengthens the rite. Except a person dies, the rite will not be esteemed up to standard).*

Contrary to the ingrained beliefs closely tied to the initiation rite, the modern world is insidiously invading with more power intended to modify the rite for calculated better results. The government and interested non-governmental organisations have come on board to witness and support this ethnic-linked phenomenon, and possible measures meant to improve its viability for human benefits. Currently, there are unlikely cases of death, since most of the activities are conscientiously administered, and not monitored by approved health practitioners.

In regards to time, the initiation rite is an irregular event that takes place after the order of a local Chief (usually following years of undisputable bumper harvests). During drought-hit years, initiation ceremonies may be indefinitely called off, and as for youth who may be considered ready to shoulder adulthood callings, may be compelled to wait for yet another year before undergoing the transitional critical workout (Kwinika 2005).

The ceremonies take place during Winter, and since Winter is also a season for female initiation rites, the female rites are temporarily stopped giving way to the domineering male alternative. Thus, playing the drum (music) is silenced, and when began, after the male secret society initiates have graduated, the female initiation rites are resumed.

Considering that the initiation school is a customarily seasonal event, and during the height of the season everyone, especially the uninitiated have to tame their actions in obedience and honor to the atmospheric order of the season. A diverse culture of activities may be temporarily stopped or banned and any action considered offensive is dealt with at a scale improper to the usual way of resolving communal cases. In some cases, old uninitiated beings are painstakingly dehumanized by youngsters as a sign of the power bestowed to the initiates, and partly to evoke their consciences into joining the practice. Heavy fines and thorough corporal admonishment being part of case resolutions are often administered with a *thuba* to silence many men and women who could initially had thought this rite a trivial ceremony worth contravening. Sibanda (2013) gives a supporting reinforcement to the kind of scenario that characterize the *Murhundzu* seasonal outlook in the following way:

*Human trespassers are not to be treated with ‘kid gloves’. They may be sjamboked, turned away or even forced to go under the traditional knife...For instance, in Chiredzi district, in Sengwe area, an uncircumcised medical doctor was blocked from operating for thinking that he was an expert. He was told that he should first be circumcised traditionally so as to be regarded as ‘educated’ by the Shangani community.*

Seen this way, the rite is an important function that the owners regard with great veneration. And in Zimbabwe the *Ngoma* initiation rite is still considered one of the most appealing activities that even outsiders aspire to join. Among the Vatsonga, there is no better college or university, and uninitiated academic doctors and professors are bound to submit before a youthful initiate if they are to be accepted into society.

## Ethical Meditations

The subject of initiation takes a delicate facet and thus poses among the most sensitive matters that make up the backbone of the Vatsonga people's cultural whole. Hence there are Milawu ya ngoma (initiation secret laws), Ririmi ro enta ra le ngomeni (sacred language of the initiates), as revealed in:

*Ririmi leri vulavuriwaka engomeni ri tiviwa hi vona vini.  
Swigwamatshuku swa layiwa leswaku swi nga tshuki swi boxa  
tingoma eka vavasati (Rikhotso 1985:44)* (The language used in  
the initiation school is peculiar to its users. The initiates are  
charged not to reveal the initiation secrets to women)

And additionally, Micingiriko ya le ngomeni (activities done by the initiates and others in the bush), Ku enta ka mfihlakalo wa ku yimba (the deep secret behind initiation rituals), Matshinyelo ya vayimbi (the nature of penalty administered to initiates), and the Xivumbeko xa muti wa vayimbi (the architectural design of the initiation squatter camp) which make the backbone of what frames the initiation rite as a reputable discipline among the Vatsonga. Hence, the *Ngoma* observances are tightly secretive and any form of misdemeanor leading up to unguided disclosure of any secret aspect is liable to heavy penalty licensed by the responsible elders.

## The Cultural Significance of *Ngoma* Initiation Rites

*Ngoma* initiation rites, together with its counterpart *Vukhomba* (the female corresponding rite), is what basically and decisively marks the Vatsonga ethnic group's cultural distinctiveness. In practice, the rite may not be as significant to "aliens" as it is to its owners. To the trusty members of the cultural insignia, the rite cuts across their soul to the deepening resides of staunch religious levels that any devotee would love to embrace with due reverence. As part of what gives evidence to the importance of this celebrated rite, the following concepts serve part of the purpose:

- Researchers in the field of health have drawn positive conclusions about *Ngoma* initiation rites. That is men who have gone through the rite are at a better and safer position than uninitiated men in terms of contracting Sexually Transmitted Infections, the AIDS Pandemic included. The Tsonga rite of male circumcision is seen to be an efficacious tool in reducing vaginal to penile transmission of HIV by 60% (Mandova et.al. 2013)

- An initiation graduate is a socially accepted being among the Vatsonga compared to a *xuvuri* (a demeaning term for an uninitiated male) who poses as a social misfit-moreso in the hit of the initiation season.
- An initiate is a better placed being in society. He is qualified for most if not all traditional or even governmental positions that may be vacant. For example, a community may reject and disqualify a candidate intending to be voted into a parliamentary, councillorship, headmanship position on the basis of his being a *xuvuri*.
- An initiated man is a community's valuable asset among men and women of his locality. This means that he commands great respect by virtue of his ritual license without taking into consideration his age.
- Boys are introduced to the hardness of times in life so as to become men of great bravery and responsibility in their future socio-cultural and political orientations. This asserts the relatable notion that initiation ceremonies in Zimbabwe, are "rites of passage" designed to prepare both boys and girls for their future roles as fathers and mothers (Kwinika 2005).

## Naming among the Vatsonga

Xitsonga special naming is closely attached to the initiation name-giving, self-naming and nicknaming as all candidates of initiation schools replace their names with new initiation ones whose significance mean nothing more than signifying a liberated man (from the animalistic, frivolous and womanish nature that assumedly and provocatively typify the uninitiated lot). Thus birth names are not names in the real sense but place holders that serve a temporal space of time up until initiation becomes an accomplished cause. Having a birth name only is tantamount to being a child, and therefore a human of no calculable social value in life. Thus all humans of dignity encompassing headmen, chiefs and those occupying certain enviable traditional posts within the Tsonga environs are loyal graduates of initiation colleges, or else they are disapprovingly deprived of such as a measure to ensure that they undergo the traditional "pipeline" for reasons of communal approval. Common and less sensitive<sup>i</sup> amongst these names are:

*Masenyanzi*, the name is not very clear from a Tsonga language point of view. However, a critical look would point to either a Zulu or Ndebele origin in which it connotes elements of urgency in executing duties. The plight of the matter is that, modern day initiation rites do not hammer much on the semantics of given names, and this creates a linkage on the significance of names that might otherwise send a good message.

At times names are given following observations made by those responsible for looking after the initiates. Names like *Hatlani*, from the verb “*ku hatla*” (implying premature engagement) are normally given to youngsters who attend initiation schools at their tender ages. Since the practice does not create age boundaries, children often mix with adults as one stream and such nomenclature will especially help mark their age differences. However, graduates are normally classified according to the year of their initiation, and not by taking into cognisance their physical or otherwise sense of maturation.

It is with much concern that the naming practices and conventions of modern naming among the initiates is slowly fading away. This is because of the mentors failure to make clarity to the initiates the importance of naming as well as the meaning attached to a pool of names from which the initiates are instructed to choose. Names like *Musengi* (the judge), *Hanyani* (be alive), *Muzamani* (originating from Zulu, connoting the one who tries) do not take initiates far beyond their somewhat gloomy speculations, which in many times may come out wrong.

One major weakness, in a sense, with names given to initiates is the liberality of names and the freedom endowed with the initiates to name themselves. Contemporary naming of initiates has come with the practice of giving names without taking into perspective the ideals that entail the name as well as the nominal idiosyncratic features that should link the name to the named. Names are now chosen because they are sweet sounding, or because they imply good virtue and fortune, or because they connote courage or gentlemen-like, but they may totally have nothing in line with the circumstances surrounding the initiate’s venturesous involvement into the rite of passage course. This mystifies the significance of naming and name changing that come with initiation as an ethnic culture-bound practice.

## **Recommendations**

In the service and reserve of cultural norms, the cultural owners should take into consideration the rights of other people especially those of and within their ethnic circles who do not subscribe to their beliefs. Going for circumcision should be done by those who choose to be circumcised and not by forcing people whether strangers or of the same ethnic group. Circumcision should be administered by approved medical doctors as opposed to the traditional way of doing it which may result in loss of life or possibilities of contracting the AIDS pandemic. However, this does not take away the tradition that only initiated practitioners should be allowed to practice it, but a suggestion to incorporate traditionally groomed individuals in the health sector that may also come as a way of capacitating traditionally bound communities with the demands of the modern world health systems for their own betterment. It is also recommended that naming conventions and practices are taken seriously since naming occupies a critical role in the cultural and ideological conditioning of any ethnicity.

Having embraced these recommendations, it can be conceded that readers will appreciate the beneficial aspects that come with initiation practices, stemming from the restoration of *Vumunhu* (Ubuntu) values to the more recent sanitary discoveries in combating the HIV and AIDS scourge and other related health problems.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the essence owed to the Zimbabwean Vatsonga people's initiation rites cannot be overstressed. Though the practice is a traditional obsolete that has been denigrated in the past, its relevance is increasingly becoming current in the wake of the AIDS epidemic due to its ability to mitigate a host of sexually transmitted infections (Mandova et. al. 2013). Researches made by alien academicians point out that the Shangani rite of male circumcision constitutes a vibrant mark of continuity in African traditional cultural identity and pride (Mandova et. al. 2013), and this therefore reinforces the ethnic pride of social integrity and confidence in the belief that all ethnic cultures are of equal significance though separated by differences in cultural orientation. Its essence is manifested by the understanding that amongst the Vatsonga, Ngoma rites overrides and silences any activity taking place in the vicinity, ranging from the Vukhomba rites, uncontrolled movements to certain localities, and it definitely lays a tying grip on the degree of freedom that the general populace are indebted to have.

## References

- Guma, M. (2001) The *Cultural Meaning of Names Among Basotho of Southern Africa: A Historical and Linguistic Analysis*, Nordic Journal of African Studies, 10(3), 265-279
- Kwinika, S. (2005) *Shangaani initiation ceremonies put off as hunger bites*, *The Standard (Zimbabwe)* April 17, 2005 <http://archive.kubatana.net/html/archive/artcul/050417zimstand1.asp%3Fsector%3DARTCUL%26year%> accessed 22/07/15
- Mandova E.; Mutonhori, T. and Mudzanire, S. (2013) *The Cultural Significance and Relevance of the Shangani Rite of Male Circumcision In Light Of HIV and AIDS Mitigation In Zimbabwe*, International Journal of Asian Social Science, 2013, 3(3):584-589
- Mapindani, A. (2014) *Nxopaxopo wa Mavito yo Duvulela ya Vatsonga va Zimbabwe*, University of Venda, (Unpublished Master of Arts Dissertation in Xitsonga.)

Maposa, R.S. (2011) '*Going under the Traditional Knife': Linking African Traditional Education and the Ethic of Identity through Shangani Culture, Zimbabwe*, Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies (JETERAPS) 2(6):479-484(ISSN:2141-6990) 479.

Munthali, A. C. and Zulu, E. M. (2007) *The Timing and role of Initiation Rites in Preparing Young People for Adolescence and Responsible Sexual and Reproductive Behaviour in Malawi*, African Journal of Reproductive Health Vol. 11 No.3 December, 2007

Sibanda, F. (2013) *Beyond Identity Scars: Reflections on the Vitality of Shangani Male Circumcision in the Context of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe*, Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies (JETERAPS) 4(1): 1-7

World Winding Printing (2003) *The Holy Bible King James Version*, Jetmove Publishing, U.S.A.