



The one-sided view of VaTsonga marital endurance, *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu*: A challenge to pastoral care



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Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu is a Xitsonga idiomatic expression implying that the road to marital success is for a wife to endure hardships. This idiomatic expression is firmly embedded in patriarchal beliefs, as it is only applicable to wives and not husbands. From time immemorial, the VaTsonga people have been aware of the complexities of marriage. Although they regard it as being a vital step towards full adulthood and maturity, they have several sayings which point out that marriage is not an easy undertaking, such as the well-known saying, *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu*. The purpose of this article was to examine the VaTsonga idiomatic expression *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu*, as well as its impact on VaTsonga marriages and patriarchy in VaTsonga marriages. Furthermore, the study provided recommendations to pastoral caregivers to promote gender equality and discourage the abuse of women in Tsonga marriages. A literature review methodological approach was adopted in this research to indicate that the idiomatic expression *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu* chimes well with the patriarchal mindset of VaTsonga people with regards to marriage in general. Culture is patriarchal and this is general knowledge; therefore, this article argued that women are told and taught to accept male patriarchal rule along with the injustice and hardships that it causes them. Hence, this article challenged practical theology to play a role in fighting against this Tsonga patriarchal rule of marriage.

Contribution: In the light of the above-named challenges, the one-sided view of VaTsonga marriage endurance and its patriarchal nature was discussed. Practical theology was called to respond to these issues, as it can play a significant role in challenging pastoral care to respond to such patriarchal VaTsonga idioms.

Keywords: Tsonga; marriage; practical theology; pastoral care; culture; African; *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu*; tradition.

Introduction

The VaTsonga ethnic group is situated in South Africa. Marriage is a particularly crucial step to those who believe in it; it is also considered to be an especially crucial step among the VaTsonga people. Mathumba (1988:135) declares that marriage is important to an African man's life because getting married opens the doors for a man to take part in the affairs of the country and to assert his male authority with confidence. VaTsonga cultural beliefs and norms exploit single or unmarried women to the extent that being single is frowned upon; hence, many are drawn into the vortex of marriage and end up being victims of gender-based violence (GBV). Therefore, patriarchal male attitudes and women's forbearance contribute to GBV. In African marriages, because divorce is also considered taboo, many African women are coerced to remain and endure physical violence by trying to escape the stigmatisation of being unmarried. Religion, like culture, tends to encourage the establishment of a family as an important socialisation agent. *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu* is a Xitsonga idiomatic expression used only to encourage women to persevere in marriage through hardship, namely that equality in marriage contributes to GBV. This idiomatic expression is often used to encourage women to stay in abusive marriages as a sign of perseverance. Furthermore, little is said about whether married men should do the same because of the patriarchal beliefs that are so embedded in African societies.

This study will examine the VaTsonga idiomatic expression, *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu*, as a VaTsonga perspective on marriage and then challenge practical theology to be the lacuna that will exist between the interaction of theory and praxis to achieve will in society (Ikenye 2016:34). Practical theology prides itself on taking and studying human experiences and stories, both in the church and society. Marriage is part of human experiences; therefore, this article encourages equality in VaTsonga marriages, as demanded of both men and women in VaTsonga marriages by Christian teachings. The study will also provide recommendations to pastoral caregivers to promote gender equality and abuse of women in Tsonga marriages.

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It is notable that there are other sayings that imply marital hardships, such as *Yindlu yi funengeta swinyingi* [A house is like an umbrella under which the dirty linen is placed]. That is, quarrels between husband and wife are commonplace but are treated as confidential. *Vukati i Mbilu* [It takes endurance to maintain a marriage] means that there are many challenges in a marriage which can only be overcome through patience and forbearance. *N'walu WA yindlu wu tiviwa hi n'wini* [The owner of the house is only privy to the soot of his or her house] means that quarrels between husband and wife should be kept confidential. However, *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu* is patriarchal and one-sided in nature and promotes abuse and timidity in marriages.

While the authors are fully aware of the importance of cultural beliefs among the VaTsonga people, the article also points out the importance for mental transformation, hence also the pastoral care recommendations at the end of the article. There also exist idiomatic expressions such as *Nhonga a yi aki munti*, translated into English 'a knobkerrie is not a solution to your marital problems', which means GBV against women is not a solution for marital challenges. A literature review methodological approach, which involves the analyses of previously available research, will be adopted in this study. According to Snyder (2019), evaluating research findings from various sources assists in answering research questions more adequately compared to a single study. The authors of this paper belong to the VaTsonga ethnic group and have observed how some men in the VaTsonga culture are not invited to be part of certain decision-making processes in the family unless they are married. Although formal education and advancements in technology have altered traditions and the culture of the VaTsonga, most practice is still deeply rooted in VaTsonga rural areas.

Marriage in the African context

Marriage is defined by Ayisi (1997:15) as a union between a man and woman, created for the purpose of procreation. Ogoma (2014:95) are of the view that marriage is a public affair which involves the broader society. In African cultures, the most common type of marriage is traditional marriage, which involves a variety of normative marriage customs. Other types include court marriages established under the law and 'Western culture' marriages. Traditional marriages involve customs such as the payment of a bride price, also known as *lobola* or *lobolo* (VaTsonga language).

Despite the continued prevalence of traditional marriages, other forms have gained traction, and other informal forms of unions have become popular. Ogoma (2014:99) is of the view that Westernisation, modernisation and Christianity have contributed to the gradual change in the marriage system. Parents play a limited role in the choice that people make when deciding to get married, and the institution of the family has changed drastically compared to the traditional view of the family. Mawere and Mawere (2010:225) argue that 'the gradual breakdown of the influence of the lineage' and policies that have promoted gender equality have

contributed to the changes in the marriage system. These changes in the marriage system have contributed to the breakdown of some marriages and GBV in marriages. However, modernised societies are of the view that customary practices such as the payment of *lobola* have also contributed to GBV in marriages. Therefore, the next section will discuss the effect of *lobola* on GBV.

Lobola in the African culture

Lobola is a custom where a groom's family provides a gift to the bride's family in the form of cattle or cash with the view of building relations between the two families (Baloyi 2013:3; Matope et al. 2013:192; Montle 2020:160). The custom of *lobola* is most prevalent in Southern African countries, and although it is often regarded as a prestigious occasion, it has been blamed for inequalities and gender abuses in marriages. In their study on abuse of women, Moloko-Phiri, Mulaudzi and Heyns (2016:254) found that *lobola* is highly valued by women and it makes them feel respected, especially if it is paid by a reputable family. However, once *lobola* is paid, some women are stripped of their rights and forced to remain in abusive relationships. Matope et al. (2013:195) as well as Montle (2020:161) argue that during the process of *lobola*, women are excluded, and this is the point at which inequality in marriages is initiated.

Studies have found that there is a link between *lobola* and abuse of women in marriages. Moono et al. (2020:40) found that *lobola* infringes on the rights of women to their children and often leads to them being viewed as husbands' property; hence, in the Tsonga culture when *lobola* is paid, the children born in the marriage are the man's children, and the women are merely the women who carried them. Furthermore, the study showed that some believed that *lobola* allows men to control their wives, and thus they are entitled to their wives' obedience. Chiweshe (2016:235) argued that although *lobola* was traditionally designed to foster relationships between families, it has been commercialised to a point that it resembles a 'marketplace where women are bought and sold'. Hence, when a man pays a huge amount towards *lobola*, he believes he now owns that woman and can do with her what he pleases, seeing her as his property. Therefore, the custom threatens the achievement of gender equality, as women's sexual rights are infringed upon and they are exposed to sexually transmitted diseases. Chabata (2012:12) also found that the commercialisation of *lobola* in Zimbabwe has worsened GBV. Some women are of the view that the abuse they receive from their husbands is due to the large amount of money paid for *lobola*, even though *lobola* should be seen as a custom where a groom's family provides a gift to the bride's family rather than as buying the bride.

Overview of the VaTsonga culture

Chauke et al. (2021:1797) argue that even though VaTsonga people are part of African society, they have their own culture that is held dear. The authors enhance views by Chitlango and Balcomb (2004:187) that women are more than just wives

and mothers, as regarded by society; they have more important roles to enact in a VaTsonga traditional society. Baloyi (2009) argues that:

It has become a normal way of living to some husbands to beat their wives, whilst it has become a norm for women to accept such treatment with both hands. From a traditional point of view, many men think that wife beating is part of their marital rights and privileges. (p. 161)

African cultures advocate for perseverance in marriage on the part of women, even in the face of abuse from their husbands. This view has been passed on from generation to generation in the Tsonga culture, despite the saying that *Nhonga a yi aki munti*. A quintessential example of this socialisation was demonstrated by Anon (2007:10), who provided a narration of how a man who was arrested for beating up his wife did not understand the reason for his arrest, as he felt that it was within his rights as a husband to beat up his wife. He peddles his ignorance by plying the police with the following question: 'I do not understand why I am arrested for beating my own wife' (Anon 2007:10). To affirm the views of the authors on *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu*, the authors will highlight similar Xitsonga idioms on marriages such as *Vukati bya katinga* [marriage is like a frying pan], meaning it should be expected that marriage is difficult, and everyone who wants to get married must be prepared for the roasting (Junod 1990:180; Sibuyi 2011:31). There are other debasing idiomatic expressions, equating women to serpents, which make it easier for men to treat them in the same way as they would treat snakes. One of these idioms says *Ku teka nsati I ku hoxa nyoka exinkwameni* [When a man takes a woman to the altar, it is tantamount to putting a snake in one's handbag] (Chitlango & Balcomb 2004:186; Junod 1990:181). One such identity in VaTsonga society is that of the mother. VaTsonga people, like all people universally, are extremely attached to the *mamani* or *manana* or 'mother' but oppressive of the *wansati* or 'woman'. Mbiti (1969), writing from an African perspective, argued that this idiomatic expression highlighted the importance of remaining in abusive marriages in the VaTsonga culture and how to endure challenges of marriage. Baloyi (2013:2) opines that even though wife beating has horrible consequences, it has been practised in some traditional African societies to control women. This implies that men exercise 'control over' women to assert male dominance and for male people to assume power over women.

Patriarchal perspective of the idiom *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu*

According to Ademiluka (2018:339), the term 'patriarchy' originated from the Greek *patriarkhs*, which means 'father of a race' or 'chief of a race'. Patriarchy, therefore, means 'the rule of the father'. Patriarchy is very much a part of African life, and it is deeply entrenched in the 'norms, values and customs'. Patriarchy remains deeply entrenched within the fabric of our society, to such an extent that most women consider it to be a normal way of life. Chauke et al. (2021) argue that:

Whenever a woman faces problems in her marriage, she has to approach the auntie for counselling. If there are any conflicts between her and the husband, the auntie 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 auntie 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. (p. 1802)

Some African cultures define 'abuse' as a petty issue and not a good enough reason for a woman to file for divorce. Some women in African cultures take pride in how they persevered through years of domestic violence in their marriages and encourage younger married women to do the same, referring to the idiomatic expression, *Vukati Va Kandza hi Mbilu*. The system of patriarchy was conceptualised as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. There are six structures of patriarchy. They are: paid work, housework, sexuality, culture, violence and the state. Ruether (2002:108) declares that patriarchy is clearly a universal political structure which privileges men at the expense of women. '*Libitla la mosadi ke bohadi*' means 'the grave of a woman is at her in-laws' (Baloyi 2001:41). This idiom is also articulated by Mabunda (2013:1), who argued the following in one of her poems: *Ku katinga ka vukati swi tiva hi lava nga ndzeni ka byona*, meaning 'the steam of the marriage is only visible to those who are in it'. These arguments indicate that the issue of roasting in marriage entails exceedingly difficult challenges, particularly on the part of women. Maluleke and Nadar (2002:11) say that another saying relating to abuse of women is *Vukati VA kandza hi mbilu* [to be successful in marriage, a woman must persevere]. Mubangizi (2012:40) stated that although the term *lobola* can be defined variously, he defines it as 'bride price', 'bride wealth' or 'dowry'. *Lobola* or dowry used to be in a form of cattle, and once the cattle were released, the receiver guarded them jealously. A woman who would come back home would disturb her family's wealth, so she was told to endure. When a man cheated or was in a polygamous marriage, she had to endure. To affirm this, Mubangizi (2012:41) states that the fact that polygamy is only practised by men marrying several wives and not vice versa could be interpreted as discriminatory to women. According to Durojaye (2013:2), women across the world have, because of religious and cultural practices, continued to encounter gender inequality as a norm. It must be acknowledged that South African law recognises polygamy and *lobola* through the *Recognition of Customary Marriages Act*. Baloyi (2016) argues that:

One wife can only be married and have sexual intercourse with one husband, but the husband can have more than one wife and have sexual intercourse with them. Since treachery and fornication had always been suspected, strict rules and regulations were put in place to ensure that a wife never cheats on her husband, even though the husband may cheat.

Unfortunately, these regulations were within the patriarchal framework. (pp. 3–4)

VaTsonga perspective on marriage

The majority of modern VaTsonga women demand to be treated as equals by their male counterparts. Despite financial independence, some women continue to be bound by traditional norms and values of subservience and servitude to preserve their marriages. As it is with most African cultures, married women are more respected compared to single women in the VaTsonga culture. *Lobola*, as in many Southern African countries' traditions, is part of the VaTsonga people's culture. It is expected of the man to send his family to the women's family to negotiate the *lobola* for his bride. This is done as a token of appreciation to the bride's family and as a sign of paying respect to the elders, the family and the community. It is a significant element of marriage among Africans, and there are strict rules to which to adhere. According to Chauke et al. (2021:1803), this is one of the reasons why women aspire to get married even at an advanced age. This is especially important from an Afrocentric perspective, as it defines who they are as African woman.

In the VaTsonga culture, when a couple is faced with challenges, elders deliberate on their case, and these elders are not professional marriage counsellors. They rely on elders' sayings such as *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu* to remind a woman to endure her marital challenges, and in the Christian faith, the couple is often told to go home and pray over their challenges, even if the challenge is domestic violence. To affirm this, Junod (1990:121) argues that this aspect of marriage among the VaTsonga people is regarded not as an individual affair between two spouses only but an affair of the wider circle of the family. When a man marries a woman in marriage, he establishes a range of affinal social relationships between the husband's family and the wife's family (Schapera 1957:111). When a woman is about to get married in the Tsonga culture, elders will sit with her and inform her what is expected of her as a wife marrying into a new family. It is common among African cultures for women to be taught how to behave, as affirmed by Khosa-Nkatini, Wepener and Meyer (2020):

[M]any women in Africa believe that they should not question culture and tradition but should do as they are told. In Africa, it was believed that everyone must grow up and get married. (p. 5)

Marriage is of importance among the Tsonga people as it is for many other African ethnic groups. Alie et al. (2011:2) state that children are raised and conditioned them to accept marriage as the ultimate way of life. According to Baloyi (2011:120), the VaTsonga culture emphasise that marriage is not just between two individuals and that a woman does not only marry her husband, but she also marries his whole family too. When a woman faces challenges in her marriage, she consults her in-laws and not her own family because she is no longer considered as part of her own family. According to Baloyi (2011:120), a married women is 'owned by her in-

laws and in some cases before reaching decisions on a certain matter; she would be expected to consult with them first'.

The agony of singlehood

Ogoma (2014:94) argues that just like several social terminologies, marriage is a contentious concept. Marriage and the idea of marriage can be universal, but there is no one general acceptable definition of marriage. Marriage occupies a prominent position in the affairs of Africans. According to Mbiti (1969):

For African people, marriage is the focus of existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet unborn. All the dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed, and revitalized. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator. (p. 133)

Though some women prefer to remain single, marriage remains an important indicator of female status (Obbo 1980:106). According to Ademiluka (2021:1), in the African traditional society, marriage is an obligation for every normal person. The most important reason why Africans get married is the desire to have children. In the past, the most important reason people wanted to have children was the need to have heirs who would sustain the paternal lineage. In the present, most Africans want to get married and have children because it is preserved as the normal course of life.

Mbiti (1991:104) suggests that marriage is considered a sacred duty which every person must perform, and anybody who under normal conditions refuses to marry is committing a major offence in the eyes of society; without marriage, a person is not considered to be complete, 'perfect' and truly a person. To affirm this, Ademiluka (2012:1) argues that a woman's status is her children, and to have children one must be married. The importance of marriage is sensible to Africans, even though in Christian theology (both in the Bible and in Christian tradition), celibacy might be regarded as virtuous because both Jesus and Paul were single. However, in Africa, the focus is on biblical scriptures and African beliefs that marriage is important.

According to Agazue (2013:7), the culture that prohibits childbearing outside marriage or single parenting affects women more than men. This makes women more desperate for marriage; they may not want to be shamed for having children outside marriage or single parenting. In Africa, due to the superlative views of the sanctity and usefulness of marriage within much of Christian theology, celibacy and singleness are often frowned upon (Agana 2018:92). According to Baloyi (2010:725), single people in the African community are also subjected to social stigma. There are people who do not necessarily get married because they want to but because they feel the pressure of being single.

Challenge to pastoral care

Kurgat (2009:9) briefly defined enculturation as the ongoing dialogue between faith and a specific culture, while

evangelisation is the process of change in an individual who belongs to a defined social grouping and who is profoundly linked to a cultural tradition. According to Kaur and Kaur (2016:2220), the content of diverse cultures varies, but the basic structure of culture is universal in every culture, as it comprises elements such as beliefs, values, norms, symbols and language. From a Christian theological perspective, 'inculturation is a process whereby the already faith embodies in one culture, encounters with another culture in these encounters' (Magesa 2004:5). Baloyi (2010:728) argues that Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:7–8 writes that there is nothing wrong in staying single, particularly if such a person has a gift of being single. This means that being single is not just a wish but also a gift. When teaching the Word, preachers need to be aware of the diversity of the congregants. As argued by Kurgat (2009:91), evangelisation is about keeping in mind a person's cultural background, tradition and social grouping when you preach the gospel to them. However, the authors of this research do not imply that the truth of the gospel should be changed to suit congregants but to be within context. Baloyi (2016:5) highlights important matters also spoken by Paul about marriage in the New Testament; he did not indicate that any inequality should exist between two married people. The question as to who has the authority, the wife or the husband, helps Paul emphasise the point of equality. He argues that '[t]he wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife, no one owns his body (1 Cor 7:4)'.

The role of the church in creating awareness on GBV and domestic abuse is well documented in recent studies (see Adjei & Mpiani 2022:NP3538; Chisale 2018:5; Knickmeyer, Levitt & Horne 2016:108). Knickmeyer et al. (2016:102) showed that men often defended domestic abuses by citing religious ideologies that support male dominance and women's submission. The Bible verse from Ephesians 5:21–23 that states that women should submit to their husbands and the husband is the head of the wife is used as justification. Using interviews and observations, Chisale (2018:5) found that women are discouraged from speaking out about domestic abuses, and this is justified biblically. The participants in the study highlighted that Proverbs 21:9 ('It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife') is often cited as justification for the silence of women regarding domestic abuses. Adjei and Mpiani (2022:NP3538) also found that religious ideologies are often invoked to justify and legitimise domestic abuses and male dominance over women. As such, the church has a significant role to play in promoting gender equality in marriages through their doctrines, as well as making perpetrators accountable for their abusive actions (Magezi & Manzanga 2020:4).

This study challenges churches to create awareness on the importance of perseverance in marriage for both spouses. Teaching in the church should not only focus on the importance of marriage, but teachings in the church should

also highlight that marriage and celibacy are both acceptable before God and speak out against women staying in abusive marriage because of the fear of divorce as a sin. Biblical teaching about GBV, discrimination against single women or mothers and patriarchy must be as clear as the preaching of marriage. The church must not shy away from adhering to such teachings, regardless of the criticism the church may receive. This is one of the problems that leads to the escalation of many other issues such as GBV, resulting in women being killed by their husbands in the name of *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu*.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the VaTsonga idiomatic expression *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu*, as well as its impact on VaTsonga marriages and patriarchy in VaTsonga marriages. Furthermore, the study sought to provide recommendations to pastoral caregivers to promote gender equality and to discourage the abuse of women in Tsonga marriages. The study briefly discussed marriage in the African context and the custom of *lobola*, which precedes traditional marriages. Traditional marriages are still prevalent in African countries, despite the influence of Westernisation, modernisation and Christianity. However, factors such as the commercialisation of *lobola* have contributed significantly to gendered violence in marriages.

Gender-based violence is also prevalent in the VaTsonga ethnic group. Idioms such *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu* are used to remind a woman to endure her marital challenges, and in the Christian faith, a couple is often told to go home and pray over their challenges, even if the challenge is domestic violence. This study has shown that the idiomatic expression, *Vukati VA Kandza hi Mbilu*, is patriarchal and one-sided in nature and promotes abuse and timidity in marriages. Furthermore, women are discouraged from speaking out about domestic abuses, and this is justified biblically. Therefore, there is a need for practical theology to respond to this ideology of Tsonga marriages and to challenge pastoral caregivers to look at the perspective of marriage among VaTsonga people. The church has a significant role to play in promoting gender equality in marriages through their doctrines, as well as making perpetrators accountable for their abusive actions.

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Authors' contributions

H.P.K.-N. contributed to the conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing of the original draft, project administration, data curation, resources, review and editing of the manuscript and funding acquisition;

D.K. contributed to the conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, writing of the original draft, project administration, resources and review and editing of the manuscript.

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