

# Nurturing the Next Generation through Tshivenda Taboos: The Power of Tradition in Child Development

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## ABSTRACT

Tshivenda taboos play a pivotal role in child development, shaping young minds and instilling values that last a lifetime. Through age-old traditions and cultural practices, Tshivenda parents and elders pass on important life lessons orally to the next generation, fostering a sense of connection and belonging. This paper explores the power of Tshivenda taboos in promoting positive child development, drawing on case studies and personal narratives to illustrate their impact. This study argues that Tshivenda taboos are not just an outdated relic of the past, but a vital tool for promoting resilience, self-esteem, and a sense of identity in young people. By employing qualitative methods grounded in Ubuntu philosophy, the study captures profound, authentic insights from personal narratives and community voices. It challenges the notion that traditional practices are outdated, showing instead how they foster empathy, self-esteem, and a strong sense of belonging. This study preserves and elevates indigenous knowledge, making a strong case for integrating cultural wisdom into modern parenting and education. It promotes cultural pride while emphasizing community-based child development approaches. The results of the study showed that Tshivenda taboos are still significant in the upbringing of the Vhenda children as they increase empathy, sense of community, and resilience. This study recommends an emphasis on the incorporation of Tshivenda taboos into modern child upbringing practices and should be celebrated as a source of cultural pride and identity. The study again recommends documentation, digitization, and dissemination of Tshivenda taboos.

**Keywords:** nurturing, next generation, Tshivenda, taboos, child, development, Ubuntu theory

## INTRODUCTION

In the African context, family, community, culture, and traditions play an important role in child development. In Tanzania, child development and good growth depend on the parents following their postpartum sex taboos, which represent a framework for social order. When such a framework is in place, society knows who is to blame when these taboos are violated. Thus, for every risk that exists, blame is placed on a particular person by the community/ social group (Mchome, Bailey, Darak, & Haisma, 2020:1). In the Tshivenda culture, raising a child is guided by the adage '*Nwana wa muñwe ndi ñwana wawu*' ('*it takes a village to raise a child*'). Child development is the process of raising children in a way that protects and develops them to be good citizens with acceptable manners and behaviour in society. Accordingly, child development does not have a universal mechanism since children grow up in different societies, which have idiosyncrasies. Children learn about their culture in society through the process of upbringing. However, the aim of bringing up a child is common in all human societies (Ndlovu, 2020: 37).

This paper explored the role of Tshivenda taboos in the upbringing of Vhenda children. As an integral part of the Tshivenda Indigenous Knowledge Systems, taboos inculcate values of ubuntu, whose extinction means the death of the Tshivenda language.

## Overview of Tshivenda taboos

Traditionally, in the Tshivenda culture, it is believed that if one transgresses socially or goes against set societal orders and expectations, there are some varied calamities that befall individuals and their families or the entire community. Some of these social norms and expectations, otherwise called folkways, have

developed into what is then considered taboos. These taboos regulate societal behaviour by forbidding certain behaviours. The enforcement of these taboos is two-fold; at the individual level, where one fears facing misfortunes as a person or their family, and at the community level, where the traditional leadership ensures maximum adherence; otherwise the entire community gets affected by natural phenomena like droughts and disease epidemics, that there has been some transgression, some of the ways of remedying the wrongs are through traditional compensation to the aggrieved person, family, or community and appeasement of the spirits. The processes towards achieving these ends usually involve material resources, human labour commitment, and torrid rituals, so much so that people are deterred from infringing the taboos. Members of the community are restrained from hurting, killing, or provoking others. Individuals, families, and communities are also discouraged from annoying the spirits of the dead, which reside in rivers, caves, or forests. The term *zwiila* 'taboos' refers to statements that forbid certain forms of behavior in both children and adults. An act that goes against a taboo among the Vhavenda community provokes the anger of the midzimu/gods' spirits. To stop the desire to breach the taboos, there are consequences for each taboo that befall the family/clan/community captured in the phrase '*ni songo*/ do not' and the consequences '*ni do* / you will'.

### Previous studies

The significance of the study derives from its intention to unravel Tshivenda taboos and their function in the development of Vhavenda children. The literature review examines the concept of taboos as presented in previous studies. Taboos are culturally bound, and they prohibit children and adults, the community, from engaging in unacceptable behaviour, and there are consequences for violating the taboos. Taboos are found in all human societies to control human interaction among themselves and also interact with their immediate environment and wildlife. Taboos discourage certain forms of behavior among human beings. They cultivate proper behavior in children's development among the Vhavenda Society. Taboos are avoidance rules and are a reflection of society and culture. People have social attributes, and their lives are restricted and regulated by society (Mengxun 2020:88). Every family has ways and practices that are meant to socialize members so that their behavior and ways of conducting themselves in public are within the expected norms as per their traditions and culture. To achieve those expected norms and standards, society has some rules that have survived the test of time and have become part of social laws, meant to restrain and or regulate people's behavior. Over the years, it has been these social rules that have, to some extent, controlled and policed society. These are taboos (Dodo 2015:1). Taboos combine cultural knowledge, religion, and psychology to protect and groom children (Ndlovu, 2020:38). They are taboos for children, and elders, and they are taboos that are used to conserve both the environment and wildlife. In support of Ndlovu (2020), Gelfand in Chigidi (2009:175) grouped these avoidance rules into six categories according to themes, namely, those that talk about living way, precisely, successful pregnancy, avoidance of danger, good behavior, healthy living, and those conveying religious teachings.

Pfukwa (2001), in his study of roles played by taboos in Zimbabwe's liberation war, studied the practical usage of taboos. He showed the significant role played by taboos in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle and he classifies the taboos he discusses into categories, but he also classifies them according to those that are related to land, those that are related to wild animals and birds, and those that are related to people.

Chidgidi (2009) examined Shona Taboos as a language of manufacturing fears for sustainable development. The study sought to explicate the system of taboos or avoidance that the Shona people of Zimbabwe engage in as a way of influencing members to conform to society's values and norms. The results of the study showed that Shona taboos, as an indigenous way of educating and knowing, are now being marginalised; therefore, the author advocates for the preservation of the rich intangible heritage since it is seen as a potentially effective tool in the fight against the HIV/ AIDS pandemic.

Chivasa and Mukono (2017) discussed the contributions of the taboo system to peace among Shona Communities in Zimbabwe. The study aimed at examining Shona taboos that instill peace among the Shona community. The results of the study showed that the problem of electoral violence calls for more than just efforts by the government to enforce law and order to address the menace; however, an appeal to the taboo system that is not based on law enforcement agents but on respect for the inborn humanitarian seed. The findings also revealed that the emergence of electoral violence in 2008 indicates a shift from what Shona

society historically accepted as normal, and it was clear that electoral violence was a symptom of the disregard of the taboo by modern Shona communities, which made them easy prey to political elites. As a peace-building strategy, the study recommended that since violence is becoming humanity's second nature, the taboo system has the potential to effectively promote and sustain peace among the Shona communities of Zimbabwe.

Makamure and Chimininga (2015) did a study on totem, taboos, and sacred places, analysing the environmental conservation and management practices of the Karanga people. The study aimed at examining some of the beliefs and practices of the Karanga people that lead to the conservation and management of the natural environment. It noted that among the Karanga people, an unconscious appreciation of certain environmental taboos, totems, and sacred places informs esoteric, environmentally based knowledge that is meant to promote a sustainable use of nature's resources. The study results showed that the conservation, protection, and management of the environment have been the cornerstone of the Karanga ethos, culture, and traditions. The Karanga people have developed and maintained traditional knowledge and practices for the conservation and management of the natural environment, which were all fostered through their religious beliefs.

Unlike other scholars, Chemhuru & Masaka (2010) did their study on environmental taboos of the Shona people and propounded that taboos (*zviera*) form an integral part and parcel of the Shona morality. Among Shona people, environmental taboos have a pivotal moral role towards the ontological well-being of both the person and the environment at large. Prohibitions and restrictions through taboos on unsustainable use of certain plant species, forests, mountains, rivers, pools, and nonhuman animals, among other ecological species in the ecosystem, is not a new epistemology among the Shona people, but restriction reflects a long tradition. The study results showed that Shona taboos are crucial in preserving the environment, protecting water sources, the natural vegetation and wildlife, and endangered nonhuman species.

Gadilatolwe (2017:42) examined the concept of taboos as a socialization, acculturation, and communication strategy among the Bayei of Botswana. The study's purpose was to document and analyze the use of taboos as a strategy for socialization, acculturation, and communication among members of the Bayei community in North-Western Botswana. The study observed that the Bayei use taboos for guidance and protection in their daily socio-economic activities, such as during fishing, hunting, and in rites of passage. The study concluded that taboos have a practical value in nurturing, upbringing, and development of Bayei children, and of interest is the fact that the taboos significantly contribute to the Bayei philosophy of life. The authors again observed that taboos reflect and provide insights into Bayei spirituality and philosophy. Finally, the study concluded that among the Bayei, taboos are at the core of social, economic survival, identity, and continuity as a cultural group. From the above scholarly views is evident that there is a scholarly gap that needs to be filled, as all scholars engaged in studies about taboos did not study Tshivenda taboos used in nurturing a Muvenda child.

## Theoretical Framework

To shed light on this study on the role of taboos in child development, the theory of *Ubuntu* was employed. *Ubuntu* theory emphasizes the importance of interconnectedness and shared humanity, which is a perfect fit for this study (Nkosi & Daniels, 2007; Msengana, 2006; Maluleke, 2000; and Du Toit, 2005). It emerges as an important foundation for socialisation among the youth (Theron & Phasha, 2015). In the *Ubuntu* ethic, people are interdependent and responsible for one another. This sense of relationship is also evident in Tshivenda idiom, where a child is a child of the community (*nwana wa muṅwe ndi nwana wau*), which implies that it takes a community for the development of a child. Ndlovu (2013: 992) concurs with Du Toit (2005) by stating that in Ndebele culture, the philosophy that governs social relations is that of *Ubuntu*. Such a philosophy demands that one should have a humane attitude towards other human beings. Mugumbate and Chereni (2020: v) state that *ubuntu* refers to a collection of values and practices that black people of Africa or African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing: an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental, and spiritual world.

Ubuntu theory, therefore, is of significance to this study as it aligns perfectly with the way Tshivenda taboos foster a sense of community and belonging, while also emphasizing the importance of personal responsibility. Therefore, Ubuntu will promote positive child development through Tshivenda taboos. Ubuntu theory also emphasizes the concept of humanness that encompasses caring, sharing, respect, and compassion, which is also encouraged in Tshivenda taboos.

## DATA AND METHODS

The study used qualitative methodology. Qualitative research is suitable for the study of societal phenomena that might not be quantified statistically (Cresswell, 2014). The qualitative research paradigm was found to be relevant as the researchers sought to understand and interpret traditional practices that contribute to molding a complete and responsible Zimbabwean citizen, particularly Muvenda child.

In terms of data collection, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used as data generation tools. Data was collected from elder Vhavana people who had experience of Tshivenda Taboos from both genders. Tshivenda language was used to collect data, and data was later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. In terms of the in-depth interviews, 10 knowledgeable participants were interviewed in two sessions of 45 minutes each, spread over a month. The researchers used video recorders to record the interviews. Video recorders proved useful because they enabled the researcher to observe the paralinguistic features of the interview. Issues of research ethics, such as informed consent, voluntary participation, and protection from harm, were adhered to. When data saturation was reached, the interviews were stopped. The interviews were guided by a flexible research protocol. This is in line with what qualitative scholars advocated (Ritchie et al., 2006; Guest et al., 2006; Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2014).

Focus group discussions were organized with groups of 6 villagers who included the elderly, middle-aged, and young adults. This was meant to get a balanced understanding and perception of the Tshivenda taboos. The researchers were part of the groups and moderated the discussions. The discussions were recorded on video, and all ethics concerning the participants were adhered to.

## Findings and Discussion of Broader Themes

Data collected from the interviews, focus group discussions, and observations made on children as they interact with each other, if they were still observing their cultural taboos, were analysed in line with themes that emerged through thematic analysis. The first stage of data cleaning was done through reducing, re-reading, and re-organizing the data by sieving the most relevant data by categorising related and significant codes concerning Tshivenda taboos' contribution in child development. Data was recorded and re-read several times to avoid omission and repetition of data. Thus, categorized data was grouped into codes and developed into recurring broader themes, which were finally analysed.

Taboos are forbidden phenomena in Tshivenda. Tshivenda language and taboos are intertwined and inseparable entities. Taboos act as traditional education (Indigenous Knowledge Systems) for the Vhavana people and are, therefore, the backbone of the identity of the Vhavana people.

### Taboos focused on modelling respect for children.

Respect is one of Ubuntu / vhuthu's philosophical values, which helps to develop a child and shape their behaviour so that they become humble and conscious of their actions. According to Tshivenda culture, it is disgraceful for the community and parents to raise an irresponsible child who cannot take care of themselves in adulthood. Vhavana people base child upbringing on taboos to nurture socially responsible adults. They understand that taboos can teach children to lead a respectful and meaningful life and to become good members of their community by teaching children about societal values and norms. Tshivenda taboos are used to nurture children to respect older people. It is taboo to find children looking at the elderly while bathing, as this is deemed unbecoming behaviour and disrespectful. As narrated by Participant One, *'Nga Tshivenda zwi a ila u tolela vhathu vhahulwane vha tshi tamba, nwana a tolela vhahulwane vha tshi tamba u a bva*

*tshimora' [It is a taboo in Tshivenda culture to look at elders while they are bathing; if a child does so will develop a growth.]* Such is cautioned in the taboos:

*Ni songo tolela vhathu vhahulwane vha tshi tamba ni do bva tshimora*

(One should not look at elders while bathing, you will develop a growth (bigger, painful pimple)

*Ni songo lavhelesa vhahulwane vha tshi tamba ni do bva bundu matoni*

(One should not look at elders while bathing; you will develop a big, swollen pimple in your eyes.)

Whereas the Tshivenda taboos mentioned above seem to refer to bodily health, they also play a pivotal role in children's psychological fears of suffering from health complications in case of any transgression.

### Conservation of Flora and fauna

Vhavana people had their ways of developing children to be good citizens, valued the sustainability of natural resources, such as traditional fruits, especially *mafula* marula fruits, which are of significance to the Tshivenda community. *Mafula* fruit is one of the Tshivenda indigenous fruits, which is of great importance. Therefore, there are taboos designed to protect the environment on which society depends. *Mafula* fruits play a very significant role in the Tshivenda community. Culturally, the fruits are green and they turn yellow when they are ripe, and this is the time they have to be consumed before they rot and become inedible. Ripe marula fruits are used in the production of traditional beer called *mukumbi*. Also, *mafula nuts (thebvuu)*, which are extracted from the hard shell of the seed, are used to season relish as an alternative to peanut butter (*dovhi*). *The nuts* are valuable food for sons-in-law and men in the family because they are believed to enhance virility. The bark of the *mafula* tree is used as a traditional medicine to cure stomach aches and women's problems. Again, *mufula* is a cash natural plant for the Tshivenda community, as its nuts and traditional beer could be sold. With all these roles mentioned above, children were taught not to tamper with the unripe *mafula* fruits, as this would mean disaster to the whole community, as a lion would devour those who tampered with the tree. *Mufula* tree is a sacred tree in Tshivenda culture; therefore, tampering with it would result in the gods '*midzimu* being angry and sending a lion to devour the clan or the community. Because of this, children were taught to wait for the fruits to ripen to avoid provoking *midzimu*, and such a moral is captured in the taboo '*ni songo la mafula a magaga ni do pandiwa nga ndau*' do not eat unripe *mafula* fruit, you will be devoured by a lion. This was made to conserve the natural environment for the sustainability of the *mafula* fruits. (Participant two)

In the Tshivenda community, indigenous fruits were preserved through teaching children to eat ripe fruits. This is also done to avoid danger in children, as children tend to climb and throw sticks and stones at unripe indigenous fruits (*u thakha na u namela, na u tshipiwa nga mafula*). All these were prevented through the use of taboos, as in climbing these trees, there is a danger of children falling and breaking bones. Participant three had this to say: '*Nwana a la khwikhwi kana mphwe dzi sa athu vhibva o vha a tshi mbo di bva makwilikwizha a zwimba mikulo a fhedza maduvha a sa li zwiliwa*' [If a child eats unripe wild grapes, s/he would immediately suffer from tensils and s/he will spend some days failing to eat food].

This is also seen in the taboos:

*Ni so ngo la mphwe dzi sa athu u vhibva ni do zwimba mikulo.*

(One should not eat unripe traditional sugar cane, will cause tensils)

*Ni songo la khwikhwi dzi sa athu vhibva ni do bva makwilikwizha*

(One should not eat unripe wild grapes; one will suffer from tensils, views from group discussion 3).

Tshivenda community beliefs are deep-rooted in their culture, where they believe in preserving their environment and all that makes up the environment for sustainability in order for children to grow up knowing the consequences of eating unripe fruits, which also causes food insecurity.

## Taboos as a way of teaching children to preserve natural resources

Tshivenda community interacts with its surroundings, and other animals depend on the ecosystem for their survival. Both human beings and animals depend on each other for their survival. Both flora and fauna should be preserved for posterity. Participant four mentioned that: *'Nga mvelele yashu ya Tshivenda zwiilaila zwi a tsireledza mupo washu, zwipuka na zwickokovhi'*. (In our culture, taboos protect natural resources, wild animals, and reptiles.)

The Tshivenda taboos promote the preservation and protection of natural resources. In Tshivenda, the wanton killing of creatures, no matter how small or insignificant they are, is not acceptable. This shows the Vhavenda people's appreciation of the functioning of the ecosystem. *'Mvelele ya Tshivenda i gudisa vhana u sa vhulaha tshingavha ndi tshifhio tshine tsha tshila hu nga vha muthu kana tshi si muthu. Hezwi zwo vha zwi tshi iteliwa u tsireledzela zwipuka zwine zwi sa kone u dilwela zwine zwa nga madula na khomboṭololo.* (Tshivenda culture often teaches children to avoid killing any living thing, either human or nonhuman. This is done in order to conserve helpless creatures like frogs and snails, Participant six. Such heavy caution is contained in the taboo:

*'Ni songo vhulaha tshidula tivha li ḑo xa'*

(One should not kill a frog; the pool will become dry.)

Children were cautioned to avoid killing reptiles as this causes trouble for the whole community. Chemhuru & Masaka (2010: 131) decry the nonhumanness among some Africans who kill small reptiles and aver that among the Shona, just like in other societies, people may be tempted to kill defenceless and innocent creatures, such as frogs, for fun. Such unchecked destruction of the seemingly unimportant elements of the natural environment can have a negative impact on the ecosystem. Singer (1985) avers that "when we, humans, change the environment in which we live, we often harm ourselves." Thus, the wanton destruction of endangered species has adverse effects not only on such species per se but also on human beings at large. Hence, the Tshivenda environmental taboos teach people to be mindful of endangered nonhuman animal species and the natural environment. In addition, these taboos teach children/people to desist from being cruel to defenseless and harmless creatures within the environment.

**Taboos taught children to become hard workers and encouraged hygiene among girls.** In Tshivenda culture, laziness is discouraged, and every household work has to be done during the day. To discourage laziness, children are taught to be hard workers and also to observe hygiene by using the taboo *ni songo swiela nḑu vhusiku ni khou vhidza vhaloi literal* (do not sweep the house at night, you are calling witches). In the African context, Tshivenda communities include witches who are feared. There is a general belief that witches travel during the night; therefore, no work should be done during this time. The advantage of doing work during the day is to avoid the danger of throwing away small objects like needles, also the job is done thoroughly during the day. The taboo *ni songo swiela na ntsha mathukhwi nḑa vhusiku ni khou thatha vhadzimu*, literal meaning *do not sweep the house and remove dirt during the night, you are driving the spirits away*, teaches smartness in the process of upbringing a girl child, also to avoid misplacing things by sweeping during the night. This taboo also teaches children to take note of the presence of *Vhadzimu* gods, that during the night they are protected by the spirits, which should not be interfered with as they guard the family; therefore, they should not be disturbed. By so doing, children grow up being observant of all things related to taboos. Participant six on taboos that pertain to encouraging children to be hard workers and encourage hygiene said: *'Mvelele yashu a i tendi uri vhana vha swiele nḑu vhusiku. Mishumo yoṭhe ya muḑini itea u itiwa masiari ngauri u ita mushumo vhusiku zwi sia mushumo uyo u songo itiwa zwavhuḑi ndi hafho vhana vha vhasidzana vhane vha iledzwa u swiela nḑu vhusiku. U swiela nḑu vhusiku hui ta uri vhana vha xedze zwithu. U swiela hu katela mishumo yoṭhe nga dziḥwe ḡdila vhana vha khuthadzwa u ita mishumo yoṭhe masiari uri vha aluwe vha na vhuḑifhinduleli'*.

(Our culture does not allow children to sweep the house at night. All work has to be done during the day because doing work at night is not thoroughly done; that's why children are cautioned not to do work at night. Sweeping the house at night will make children lose things. Sweeping includes all household work, which is

*why children are encouraged to do all household work during the day so that they to grow up as responsible parents.*

From the study, it emerged that taboos are vital among the Vhavenda people because they help transmit values related to hygiene issues. Girls are groomed to be responsible and hygienic mothers as they grow up and have their own families to take care of, hence the saying '*muḏi ndi muḏi nga mufumakadzi*', the presence of a wife makes a home to be there. This implies that a woman is the one who takes care of the family because both the children and husband depend on the wife for cleanliness and all household chores at home. Therefore, a woman is an important figure in a family who should be groomed properly for her to be a responsible mother.

Though the Tshivenda taboos moulded a girl child into good motherhood age, taboos have their potentially limiting aspect, as most taboos were developed to groom a girl child while a boy child was neglected, left alone to watch himself as he grew up, and this has a negative impact on boy child development, especially in this era.

### **Taboos as a way of teaching children Gender roles**

Vhavenda people are a patriarchal society and ascribe different social roles and responsibilities to different sexes. Taboos teach children about the division of labour and gender sensitivity. *Ni songo kokota lufo ni ḁo mela maḁamu* (do not eat thick porridge from a cooking stick, you will develop breast) was meant to define gender roles. The kitchen is normally for the mother and the girls, whilst the boys herd cattle and perform other duties such as tilling the land. In this regard, both genders grow up knowing their roles. However, emerging feminist discourses challenge such taboos as the causes of gender discrimination. Participant 7 has the following to say: 'U ya nga nga kuvhonele kwanga zwo vha zwi si zwavhuḁi u ṽambisa bodo na puleithi, na lufo khaladzi anga o dzula' [According to me, it was not fair for me to do household chores while my brother is sitting watching me enjoying]. This sentiments shows how Tshivenda taboos were now perceived by the younger generation as they view it as unfair and gender discrimination. This shows how taboos are perceived and practiced by the new generation today, as witnessed by voices from younger generations. Such taboos could potentially reinforce outdated or restrictive norms that limit children's freedom or development, especially in this new generational era, where issues of gender mainstreaming are cross-cutting issues, and children want to taste the truth of everything said.

### **Taboos as a way of teaching children sustainable livelihoods**

Vhavenda children were forbidden to tamper with cattle as cattle were deemed a significant domestic animal for the Tshivenda community. The Tshivenda community, then and now, depends on cattle for its survival. Cattle gave them milk, which was used in different Tshivenda dishes, including making tea. Both pasteurized and sour milk are used for relish, milk is used for cooking Tshivenda indigenous vegetables, for the production of Tshivenda indigenous yoghurt, milk cream is also used for the production of body creams, for cooking *mashonzha*, and milk is a source of income for Vhavenda people. With all these functions of milk to the Vhavenda families, Vhavenda children are forbidden to milk cows directly into their mouth '*u komba kholomo*' *u hamela mafhi mulomoni*. This is captured in the taboo:

*Ni songo komba kholomo ni ḁo bva zwimora.*

(One should not suck milk from a cow directly into his mouth; he will develop boils).

It is taboo to suck milk from a cow. Doing so might cause diseases in the cow, which might affect the cow and the calf. This indirectly impacts food security and disturbs to daily smooth life of the Vhavenda family as they depend on cattle for food.

### **Taboos as a way of conserving wildlife through totems and fearing for oneself/ clan**

Vhavenda people live and observe their connectedness with their immediate environment. In their natural environment, they observe wild animals, plants, birds, and fish, and discovered that these species interact daily with their life, and they term these species totems. According to MacMillan (2002: 1520), a totem is an animal,

plant, or object that has religious or spiritual importance for a particular group of people. These totems bind together the entire clan or tribe as one. This totem represents a bond between the clan and the totemic figure. In Tshivenda society, totems are used for religion and social cohesion; therefore, they are the pre-foundation of laws and regulations, which are used in the development of a Muvenda. Children were taught to respect the totemic animal, object, bird, or plant. Children were cautioned not to hunt, kill, or hurt the animal, object, bird, or plant totem as it is a violation of cultural and spiritual life in Tshivenda societies. Tshivenda totems are as sacred as the Tshivenda societies.

This concept of totemism in Tshivenda was and up to today is meant to conserve and manage the environment for the sustainability of the species to avoid its extinction. Therefore, children were told that it is a taboo in Tshivenda societies to kill, hunt, or hurt an animal or plant totem. For example, those of the Ndou (elephant) totem killing/ hurting and hunting an elephant is considered a taboo, while those of the Munyai totem are forbidden to kill a bird called '*thengu*'. This means a clan or family from the Ndou totem or bird totem called *thengu* is a taboo for them to hunt and kill an elephant or a bird called *thengu* as a source of meat. The Vhagenda people hold that if one eats the totem, they will either fall sick or the one who eats the totemic animal or plant will lose all their teeth. In this regard, Vhagenda children were taught these avoidance rules in their tender age to avoid this misfortune. For the consideration of non-human animals, totemism is significant as the Vhagenda would fear violating the taboos because of the severe consequences that would befall the family or clan. This would promote the sustainability of some species as they are part and parcel of the everyday survival of human beings. The observance of taboos promotes a virtuous life that fosters a desirable environmental ethic, while the breaking of taboos leads the moral agent to a vicious life that disregards not only the moral standing of the environment, but also its sustainable use (Makamure & Vengesai 2015:9). The ecosystem is made up of different animal such as the elephants, lion, zebra, giraffe, leopard, and also plant species such as mahogany tree, *mufhanda tree*, mununzu, mubvumela and mukhuthu trees. Among these, there are also merciless animal species that are being killed, such as fish, pangolins, pythons, and birds. In this regard, human beings cannot live in isolation or without these animal species. The Vhagenda have found ways of preventing the unsustainable use of such animal species by bestowing them as their totems, which were respected and honored. The use of totems prohibited both children and the old generation from the unsustainable use and cruelty to creatures that one uses as a totem. Munyai in Beit Bridge East, Tshaswingo Village, concerning the consequences of one who eats a totem said, *zwi a ila u la mutupo, wala mutupo u do kulea mano othe*' which means it is a taboo to eat a totem animal, if you eat your animal totem you will lose all your teeth (Taringa 2019). Among the Tshivenda community, it is a taboo to eat one's totem animal. In this, the Tshivenda concept of totemism is a strategy that helps to conserve and control the use of various animal species and ensure that the Vhagenda people have adequate natural resources for the benefit of both the present and future generations to come and this is done through prohibiting of one group or a family or a clan among the Vhagenda communities is prohibited from eating certain animals, plants, birds and fish as a way of controlling the use of such animals in the Tshivenda communities. Duri & Mapara (2007) postulated that taboos concerning totems were institutional wildlife conservation measures meant to preserve various animal species so that they could be saved from extinction due to unchecked hunting. Kilonzo et al (2009:41) posits that a taboo can be thought of in terms of a "cultural or religious custom that forbids people to touch, use, or mention or do certain things or words".

Tshivenda children, in their upbringing, were taught about the significance of respecting wildlife through their totems. This is an avoidance which has to be followed by everyone of that totemic animal or bird. So, the Tshivenda concept of totemism is a strategy that helps to conserve and manage the use of various animal species and ensure that communities have adequate natural resources for the benefit of both present and future generations. This was done to ensure the sustainability of the animals and also to avoid misfortune befalling the whole clan, thereby the adage *ni songo la mutupo ni do kulea mano* meaning do not eat your totem you will lose your teeth. This made children grow up aware of what may befall them if they break the avoidance/taboo.

### Taboos as a way of inculcating respect for the mother

In Tshivenda, parents are significant figures in the family; therefore, wife, husband, and children were warned against breaking some taboos, as this will disturb the stability of the family. Mother, as the most significant figure in the family, is the pillar of the family. Again, Tshivenda kitchen artifacts were respected. Children

were warned not to play with 'mutuli' as the *mutuli* pestle is a kitchen artifact which belongs to the mother, and tampering with it would result in dying of the mother. *Mutuli* is a kitchen utensil used by women to pound meal. This is an important Tshivenda Indigenous kitchen artifact in Tshivenda culture; therefore, children should not play with it. Calabash is also another Tshivenda indigenous artifact which is used by the mother in the family, and for that reason, children were warned against moving behind the side as their mother was going to enter the calabash and disappear. Such morals are captured in the taboos:

*Ni songo dzula ntha ha mutuli ni do felwa nga Mme.*

(One should not sit on a pestle; her/his mother will die, participant nine).

*Ni songo tshimbila nga tsha murahu mme vha do dzhena tshikumbuni*

(One should not move backward, her/his mother will get into a calabash)

Chigidi (2009:177-178) postulates that the base of the avoidance rules is the principle that in order for the child to conform to societal or family or group expectations, he/she must be made to believe that if he/she does not conform, something really terrible would happen to him/her. Children were made to fear that if they did not conform, something terrible would happen to their bodies or to those people they loved most. In this case, the one who is loved most by children is their mother.

### **Taboos as a way of fearing for one's child/ Taboos instill the norm of living together and respecting different forms of humanity.**

In Tshivenda culture and African culture, not an exception that every human is given respect, and the physically challenged are also accommodated in the society. The Tshivenda people's perceptions of the disadvantaged, as expressed in their taboos, argue that the knowledge contained in Tshivenda people's taboos reveals that the less fortunate people in society, such as the physically challenged, among others, were not discriminated against. Rather, they were loved, accepted, respected, and cared for by society, not as objects but as full members who contributed to the development and well-being of society (Ndlovu 2013). The contemporary situation in Zimbabwe, whereby disadvantaged people are isolated, victimized, and treated as useless 'things' without feelings, is against principles and values expressed in Tshivenda culture. Thus, all forms of disability are treated with due respect. The evidence from Tshivenda taboos indicates that Tshivenda culture is against the discrimination of the physically challenged. It is a taboo in Tshivenda to segregate such people. The following taboos capture the ethos where both children and elderly people in Tshivenda communities are discouraged from discriminating against the less privileged:

*Ni songo sea mukawu ni do beba nwana wa mukawu*

(One should not laugh at an albino person, you will bear an albino)

*Ni songo sea muholifhali ni do beba nwana wa muholifhali*

(One should not laugh at a disabled person, you will bear a disabled child)

*Ni songo sea muholifhali ni sa athu aluwa*

(One should not laugh at a disabled person before one's old age)

*Ni songo sedza lithavhani / thoho ni do beba nwana wa muholifhali.*

(One should not look at a baboon/monkey, you will bear a disabled child)

(Views from group discussion 1)

The taboos warn the members of the community, both children and the elderly, against discriminating and mocking the disabled. These taboos make Vhavenda children aware of different forms of humanity which have

to be accepted and respected as they grow up in their given societies. Ndlovu (2013:1002) avers that if society could learn from the wisdom in our culture, then its perception of disability would change. It would also help society to notice and resolve the challenges faced by such people. In Ndebele and African culture in general, humanness is the greatest value celebrated. Its core principles are kindness, reciprocity, respect, charity, compassion, and selfishness. All these are the values of Ubuntu, and for one to qualify to be a human being, one has to comply with such regulations prescribed in such a philosophy.

### **Taboos prepare children to be wives and mothers in adulthood.**

Family was of great value in Tshivenḁa culture, and children were groomed to be good wives and mothers. As a girl child grows up, it is the wish of every parent for the child to have his own family and have healthy children. Young girls were discouraged from falling in love with their blood brother, as this is a taboo according to Tshivenḁa culture. Early marriage and unwanted pregnancy were discouraged through the use of taboos. Such behavior is shunned, and young girls would avoid this antisocial behavior in fear of bearing a disabled child. The following taboo captures such ethos:

*Ni songo lala na shaka ni ḁo beba vhana vha vhaḁolifhali*

(One should not have intercourse with a blood brother to avoid bearing disabled children)

Taboos on child rearing and nurturing, like most other Zimbabwe communities, Vhaventḁa people believe that *'thanda i petiwa i kha ḁi vha nḁu'* (a stick is best shaped while it's still moist/soft). Metaphorical meaning, children should be guided into the right behaviour while they are still young. The proverb suggests that Vhaventḁa children are nurtured to be responsible adults. The wisdom of the proverb indicates that it is disgraceful for society and parents to raise an irresponsible child who cannot take care of him/ herself in adulthood. Among other cultural and informal socialization methods, the Vhaventḁa use taboos to bring their children up to nurture socially responsible adults. They understand that taboos can help children lead an abundant and meaningful life and become good members of their community. Gadilatolwe (2017) confirmed this when he highlighted that taboos help to develop a child and shape their behaviour so that they become humble and conscious of their deeds. For example, [(i) when a girl-child gets her first menstruation, she is not allowed to enter the kraal as it is believed that cattle will miscarry. (ii) A boy child should not lick a wooden cooking stick; he will develop breasts. The taboos are directed to Vhaventḁa adolescents to guide them as they approach puberty. This is confirmed in the taboos *'ni songo dzhena dangani ḁa kholomo ni ḁwedzini dzi ḁo fholodza'*.

Again, it was the wish of a parent for her girl child not to face difficulties when her time for giving birth was due. Such a moral is captured in the taboo:

*Ni songo ima munangoni na huma nga tsha murahu a ni nga vḁofholowi musi tshifhinga tshanu tsho swika.*

(One should not stand at the entrance and go using the backward position to avoid delays in giving birth while she is due). (Views from group discussion two).

Vhaventḁa people believe that the entrance of a house, which is the door, resembles the birth canal of a woman. Moving backward of a girl child while standing at the door was avoided as it would result in delays when the girl is due to give birth. Young girls were cautioned to avoid this misfortune, as every parent wishes the child well when it comes to motherhood. The philosophy of life and spirituality are also embedded in Tshivenḁa taboos. The taboos show that the Vhaventḁa value and respect life as they view it as the most precious gift from God. This is evident in the way they use some of their taboos to protect and nurture the gift of life. They use taboos to protect expectant mothers and their babies from imminent danger. They are important components for actual and literal procreation and reproduction.

### **Taboos as a way of instilling good moral values and ethics in children**

The evidence from Tshivenḁa taboos indicates that Tshivenḁa culture is against bad moral values and ethics. Good moral values and ethics were taught to children through taboos. As such, it is taboo to be found without good moral values and ethics. Such moral values are carried in the taboos below:

*U so ngo pfuka mulilo u do shisha malofha.*

(One should not jump into fire; you will suffer from bilharzia).

*Ni songo dzula badani ni do mela zwimora muvhilini (as a way of avoiding accidents and also being careful on roads).*

(One should not sit on the road; he will suffer from boils).

*Ni songo la ni tshi amba a ni nga furi (in the development process of a child)*

(One should not eat while talking; you will never be satisfied.)

*Ni songo pfuka nwana a nga si lapfi*

(One should not jump over a baby/they will not grow)

*(Views from Group discussion three).*

Children were cautioned of the danger that would befall them if they broke the taboos, which included but were not the list falling into fire, accidents caused by sitting on the road, choking on food, and also falling on top of the baby. All the above taboos were used in the development of a Muvenda child to avoid the danger that is accompanied by breaking the taboos. At the end, these taboos act as guidance for children as they grow up, even without the presence of elders.

## CONCLUSION

Tshivenda taboos play a pivotal role in child development, fostering a sense of community and belonging, as well as promoting positive values and virtues. By embracing these traditional practices, we can create a more resilient and connected society, one in which children feel proud of their intangible heritage and connected to their culture. Tshivenda taboos must be celebrated as a source of strength and wisdom, and use them to guide our children to become compassionate, responsible, and resilient adults. Therefore, the study recommends conducting longitudinal research could help assess the long-term effects of taboos on child development. Finally, collaboration with educators and child development experts may support the integration of valuable cultural elements into modern practices.

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