

Article

Marriage as a Site of Gender Construction: A Genealogical Analysis of Ritual, Identity, and Social Belonging Among the Vatsonga of Southern Africa

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Abstract

Marriage remains a central social institution among the Vatsonga, functioning not merely as a union between individuals but as a cultural institution through which gender identities, kinship relations, ritual obligations, and communal belonging are constructed and transmitted across generations. While scholarship has extensively explored marriage and gender in African societies, limited attention has been paid to the genealogical processes through which Vatsonga marriage rituals have historically shaped gender identities within changing social, political, and religious contexts. This article examines marriage as a site of gender construction by analysing the relationship between ritual practices, identity formation, and social belonging among the Vatsonga of Southern Africa. Using the genealogical approach of Michel Foucault and the theories of African feminists and decolonials, this study employs interpretive qualitative methodology, which entails the analysis of interdisciplinary literature in African philosophy, anthropology, gender studies, theology, and ritual studies. As a result of this analysis, it becomes evident that marriage rituals continue to play a great role in constructing masculinity and femininity, as well as kinship and community. At the same time, however, these rituals are dynamic and have undergone changes in light of colonialism, Christianity, urbanization, migrations, constitutional democracy, and modern concerns regarding gender equality. This article does not present marriage rituals of Vatsonga as static and monolithic practices, but rather shows their historical contingency, cultural dynamism, and continuous negotiation amid social change. Therefore, this study calls for critical engagement with marriage rituals in order to protect culture as well as to ensure gender equality and the dignity of all parties involved. With regard to the application of genealogy to marriage practices of Vatsonga, this article brings new perspectives to current debates on ritual, gender construction, African epistemologies and the decolonisation of marriage studies.

Keywords: Vatsonga; marriage; gender construction; ritual practices; social belonging



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1. Introduction

Marriage is another very significant social institution among the Vatsonga. It goes beyond the establishment of a relationship between two people and creates relationships between different families, clan groups, dead ancestors, and the wider community (Mbiti 1990, p. 131). In Vatsonga society, marriage is a cultural institution that helps transmit cultural values and traditions from generation to generation by means of kinship ties, group identity, and social responsibility (Mbiti 1990, p. 133).

Marriage becomes another institution where gender identities can be constructed. Gender does not depend on biological factors but is shaped by specific social and cultural activities that form gender roles and norms (Butler 1990, p. 25). Among the Vatsonga, gender roles are defined through marriage ritual practices and become modified in accordance with social changes (Dube et al. 2024, p. 119).

Despite a considerable number of studies on the issue of marriage and gender in Africa, the existing literature perceives African marriage as an undifferentiated phenomenon and ignores the heterogeneity of indigenous communities (Tamale 2020, p. 97). Furthermore, little is known about the genealogical processes involved in transforming gender identities by means of Vatsonga marriage rituals. The purpose of this study is to fill in the identified gap by investigating the relationship between marriage rituals and gender identities within the Vatsonga community.

In this research, a genealogical method by Michel Foucault will be used alongside the findings from African feminist and decolonial theories in order to conduct a qualitative interpretive analysis of documentary materials regarding the transformation of gender identities through marriage rituals under the influence of historical, religious, and socio-political changes (Foucault 1977, pp. 135–39). Instead of glorifying and condemning the customary marriage rituals, this study analyses their role in maintaining cultural traditions and gender relations.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the following research question: How are the gender identities of the Vatsonga constructed, negotiated, and transformed via their marriage practices so that they could belong? The main contribution of this paper lies in presenting a genealogy of the marriage practices of the Vatsonga in view of the need for contextualization of African marriages and gender justice (Afolabi and Etieyibo 2023, p. 235).

2. Theoretical Framework: Genealogy and Gender Construction

This research is grounded in three interrelated theoretical approaches: genealogy from the perspective of Michel Foucault, the performativity of gender, and African feminism. Each approach allows this study to critically analyse the process of formation through which gender identities are formed in relation to the Vatsonga marriage customs.

The first framework is Foucauldian genealogy, which focuses on the way in which practices, identities, and episteme develop in the course of historical power relations rather than through natural or inherent roots (Foucault 1977, p. 139). The application of the concept allows for analysing the evolution of the Vatsonga marriage ritual and gender identities throughout the course of history, considering the influence of such factors as colonisation, Christianity, urbanisation, and economic changes. Hence, genealogy suggests that marriage customs are not static but dynamic traditions (Foucault 1980, pp. 81–83).

The analysis will also apply the theory of gender performativity, in which the notion of gender is considered a socially constructed identity produced by acts, rituals, and cultural requirements rather than biological difference (Butler 1990, p. 33). In the Vatsonga community, marriage is one of the major institutions that facilitates performance and reproduction of cultural notions of masculinity and femininity, and at the same time allows for negotiation and transformation.

Lastly, African feminism helps to avoid essentialisation of African cultures by acknowledging the historical and cultural specificity of gender systems among African communities. Oyěwùmí (1997, p. 32) refuses to impose gender categories developed in Western culture on Africa, and Amadiume (1987, p. 11) illustrates the diversity and flexibility of gender relations in Africa. With this approach, this study is able to analyse Vatsonga marriage practices while considering their cultural specificity as well as the dynamics of transformation.

All three approaches mentioned above provide a broad theoretical framework for understanding the processes involved in the construction and negotiation of gender identities within Vatsonga marriages under changing historical, cultural, and social conditions.

3. Literature Review

The institution of marriage has always been perceived in Africa as one of the institutions whose importance does not only stem from the aspect of bringing two individuals into the marriage union but as an institution that helps establish relationships among family members, clans, and cultures. As stated by Mbiti (1990, pp. 138–40), marriage in Africa helps establish relations among families, communities, and ancestors; marriage helps maintain continuity of the culture and social obligations from one generation to another. In the Vatsonga community, marriage is a communal institution meant to maintain cultural identity and to build kinship relations.

The gender and feminists have criticised biological explanations of masculinity and femininity by proving that gender is socially and culturally constructed. Gender identity should be viewed as a result of social action (Butler 1990, p. 28). The roles that are expected to be played by a husband and wife in Vatsonga culture are socially constructed through marriage rituals and practices.

Further, the African feminist literature denies the existence of similarity among gender systems across African societies. As stated by Amadiume (1987, p. 14), the gender systems of Africa vary depending on the history and culture of the society. The views of Oyèwùmí (1997, p. 34) support that African societies should not be categorised based on Western gender perceptions, since African social systems should be understood historically. All these views refute the essentialist perception of African marriage and gender roles and call for research that would consider the cultural aspects in the study of gender.

It is clear from the literature review that many changes have occurred in relation to African marriage and gender systems because of colonialism, Christianity, urbanisation, and modernity. In particular, Kaunda and Phiri (2016, p. 215) note that these historical factors have brought about changes in terms of family structures and definitions of marriage, power relations, and gender roles in Africa. Nevertheless, there has been criticism of the idealisation of African cultures, with scholars arguing that although some aspects of African cultures contribute positively to social integration, other aspects may be oppressive toward gender equality and women's autonomy (Ofana 2023, p. 8).

While the above-mentioned studies shed light on African marriages and gender systems, there is very little scholarship that looks at how Vatsonga marriage cultures reproduce, create, and reshape gender identities over time. The current research aims at bridging this gap through a genealogical reading of Vatsonga marriages using the theories of Michel Foucault to understand how the practices of marriage shape gender, identity, and power relations among the Vatsonga people.

4. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design that involves documentary analysis underpinned by Foucauldian genealogy. A qualitative methodology is suitable for this study because it allows for an interpretation of cultural, historical, and social aspects related to marriage and gender formation (Creswell and Poth 2018, p. 45).

This study is not empirical, as it involves only secondary sources, which include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and scholarly sources on Vatsonga marriage, African gender studies, ritual studies, and decolonial theory. The choice of sources was based on their relevance to issues of marriage, gender, ritual, identity, and social belonging,

whereas sources that were irrelevant or lacked scholarly credibility were excluded (Creswell and Poth 2018, p. 153).

The data analysis involved the use of genealogical thematic analysis within the issue of the formation of gender identities through the process of marriage. It is important to note that genealogy is an essential part of this research since it shows how gender identities have been historically produced and negotiated rather than taking them for granted as being stable or universal (Foucault 1980, pp. 98–100).

5. Marriage Rituals and the Construction of Gender Identity

These results suggest that marriage continues to be one of the most important institutions through which gender identities are created and conveyed in the Vatsonga society. It is an institution that brings people together through the formation of families, the reinforcement of kinship relationships, and the affirmation of cultural identity. Processes like negotiation of lobola, counselling of the family members, marriage ceremonies, and the integration of spouses into their families serve as vehicles for conveying culturally accepted definitions of masculinity and femininity. Men and women are taught to take up certain responsibilities and leadership roles in society through these processes (Mbiti 1990, p. 140).

With regard to the genealogy of these gender roles, it is important to note that these gender roles should not be seen as immutable and determined by nature. On the contrary, they have been historically constructed and reconfigured through interactions with indigenous traditions of the Vatsonga, the process of colonial governance, Christian missionary activities, education, urbanisation, and socio-economic changes. As Foucault (1977, p. 143) states, the identity of the individual is constructed as a result of his/her historical relations of power and knowledge, and not through immutable truths about culture.

Furthermore, it should be noted that while marriage ceremonies strengthen family unity, social responsibility and cultural identity, there are certain cultural practices that serve the purpose of gender discrimination in favour of male dominance and decision-making authority. Therefore, it is highly important to examine these cultural practices in the context of contemporary principles of human dignity and gender equality. According to Tamale (2020, p. 94), African cultural practices should not be either ignored or blindly accepted without any kind of analysis in the context of justice and equality, without taking into account cultural identity. Therefore, the marriage ceremonies of Vatsonga may be considered as rich cultural practices that need transformation to eliminate gender discrimination.

To conclude, it may be stated that the marriage ceremonies of the Vatsonga people may be regarded as a dynamic construction of gender roles. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that the marriage ceremonies continue to foster family unity and cultural identity despite the transformation of those practices that contradict the principles of gender equality and human dignity.

6. Marriage, Power Relations, and Social Belonging

It is evident from the research that marriage within the Vatsonga community involves not only a social process but also a cultural process that functions as a means of organising power relations, social obligations, and membership in the community. Traditionally, marriage creates roles for the husband and wife in terms of issues such as leadership, childbearing, provision of resources, and family expansion. The aforementioned roles play a significant role in maintaining social order and the fulfillment of kinship obligations and the community (Mbiti 1990, p. 144). Marriage thus becomes a means of determining the social statuses of individuals in their families and communities.

However, from a Foucauldian perspective, one cannot assume that power relations are static and ordained by nature. On the contrary, such power relations are historically

constructed and continuously evolving in response to changes taking place in political, religious, and socio-economic landscapes. Foucault (1977, p. 146) asserts that institutions within society are outcomes of historical power relations that determine what people know, how they identify themselves, and the social norms that they accept. In the Vatsonga context, colonial administration, Christian missionary activities, education, labour migration, urbanisation, and constitutional democracy have led to a transformation in traditional concepts of authority, gender roles, and family leadership (Kaunda and Phiri 2016, p. 216). These changes have consequently affected marriage practices among the Vatsonga people.

In addition, according to the research, marriage remains an important element in providing individuals with social belonging in the society under discussion. Being married means being able to join a larger kin group, develop relationships within the family for the future, and receive acceptance from all the other members of the society. Thus, as Mbiti (1990, pp. 145–46) suggests, marriage is not limited to one couple because marriage leads to establishing relationships with other families, ancestors, and future generations.

However, one must admit that African feminist theory does not imply the idea of viewing marriage as the only way to achieve social belonging. Indeed, as Tamale (2020, p. 97) points out, one needs to respect unmarried women, widows, the divorced, and other marginalised groups of people while speaking about social belonging based on culture. Failure to do so might prove to be ineffective. Consequently, although marriage is one of the most important elements of culture, one should treat it as socially inclusive.

In conclusion, it is clear from the results obtained above that the institution of marriage still has great importance in ensuring social cohesion and cultural continuity in the Vatsonga society. Nevertheless, as we observed above, the meanings and power dynamics associated with this institution continue to change in response to historical changes and notions of equality, making marriage a dynamic cultural institution.

7. Marriage and Social Belonging in African Communities

Social belonging forms an essential element of African philosophy since, in its conception of personhood, there exists an inherent relational nature of humans, as opposed to an individualistic one. The philosophies of Africa maintain that people only become fully human because of their relations with others, an idea captured in the philosophy of Ubuntu, which states that “a person is a person through other persons” (Tutu 1999, pp. 34–35). Marriage, therefore, is an institution that fosters social belonging, solidarity, reciprocal obligations, and inter-generational linkages.

In African cultures such as that of the Vatsonga, for example, marriage creates permanent relationships among different families, clans, and communities instead of just two persons who get married. According to Mbiti (1990, p. 106), marriage gives social recognition to couples while at the same time integrating them into large kinship networks that give them identity, support, and a sense of belonging.

Rituals surrounding marriage contribute substantially to this process of building social identity. This is shown through ritual performances such as the payment of lobola, blessings by the family, invocation of the ancestors, and community ceremonies that indicate that the process of marriage is a collective one. The involvement of parents, elders, relatives, and the community at large implies that the couple is accepted into larger social structures. Through these rituals, cultural identity is maintained, and ties are strengthened between families (Mbiti 1990, p. 141).

However, besides these advantages, marriage may also become a tool of social exclusion. If people living in a community regard marriage as a necessity and requirement for achieving adulthood, respect, and social recognition, individuals who do not marry become marginalised. African feminists warn of the danger of reproducing social inequality

through such cultural assumptions and emphasise that only those who conform to marriage will belong to the community (Tamale 2020, p. 98). Thus, even though marriage becomes one of the most influential ways of gaining identity and being part of the community, African societies face challenges in finding an inclusive way of understanding belonging that recognises the dignity of everyone.

In summary, the above findings indicate the importance of marriage as an element of belonging in African communities. Nonetheless, the value of marriage is connected not only with the preservation of cultural tradition but also with the ability of marriage to fit new social circumstances. The inclusive definition of marriage should keep its importance in strengthening families and communities while being compatible with modern concepts of equality, human dignity, and social justice.

8. Colonialism, Christianity, and the Transformation of Marriage

It is evident that Vatsonga marriage has been influenced immensely by colonialism and Christianity. Colonial administration implemented systems of law and society that would influence the perception of marriage in the local community, while the Christian missionaries propagated the system of monogamy as well as the Western understandings of gender roles (Oyěwùmí 1997, p. 121).

Through genealogy, it is evident that the impact of colonialism and Christianity on Vatsonga marriage did not lead to an erosion of indigenous culture, but a new form of marriage with the integration of indigenous practices together with religion and modernity (Foucault 1977, p. 148). Consequently, current Vatsonga marriage is a product of all these aspects.

This evidence also shows the importance of decolonising marriage discourses by critically analysing colonial histories, along with indigenous traditions. Even though Vatsonga marriage ceremonies still value the bonds between family members, their cultural background and unity of the community, there is a need to reinterpret certain elements in order to ensure gender equality and human dignity (Tamale 2020, p. 98). It is not about advocating blind adherence to African tradition; instead, it is important to preserve the cultural meaning of marriage and transform certain practices.

Thus, these findings show that marriage is a dynamic institution that evolves its meanings in the context of historical changes. Hence, decolonisation implies the necessity to critically reconstruct marriage meanings rather than preserving them as perfect ones.

9. Urbanisation, Globalisation, and Emerging Gender Identities

The results show that urbanization and globalisation have had great impacts on the way of conducting marriage and gender identities of the Vatsonga people. More exposure to education, migration for job opportunities, economic development, and global ideologies about gender equality have led to a change in the roles of husbands and wives (Cornwall 2005, p. 231).

The analysis demonstrates that the current Vatsonga marriage reflects the process of reconciling cultural tradition and modern concepts. Despite the importance of marriage in affirming family relationships, community identity, and cultural continuity, today's couples are inclined to adopt decision-making, economic contribution of women, and balanced family relations. This illustrates that gender identities are constantly redefined in response to changing socio-economic situations (Foucault 1980, pp. 98–100).

Nevertheless, the results also indicate that there is a contradiction between the maintenance of culture and promotion of gender equality. From a genealogical view, such contradictions should not be perceived as a struggle between tradition and modernization but rather as an illustration that marriage is a living entity that adapts to changes in history

and society. Therefore, the future of Vatsonga marriage depends on the preservation of cultural values that enhance community identity and the adoption of changes that promote human dignity and respect (Tamale 2020, p. 99).

10. Recommendations

Taking into account the findings of the above research, it becomes clear that it is desirable that Vatsonga marriages should be preserved as cultural practices that promote kinship, social cohesion, and *communitas*, but which are at the same time in harmony with modern human values such as human dignity, gender equality, and justice. Communication among traditional authorities, families, churches, and communities should be established continuously to evaluate marriage practices by preserving those that contribute to the preservation of cultural identity and social cohesion, but transforming those contribute to discrimination, exclusion, and inequality (Tamale 2020, p. 89). It should be noted that the preservation of culture and social justice are compatible phenomena.

In addition to that, this study proposes that marriage education among the Vatsonga should embrace the indigenous cultural norms and human rights issues at the same time. Programs related to premarital counseling, family guidance, and mentorship should focus on mutual respect, co-responsibility, partnerships, and accountability between spouses. In this way, marriage will remain a platform for building harmonious family and community life based on equality of the genders. These activities should include participation of traditional leaders, churches, educators, and civil society organisations in defining marriage in culturally appropriate and socially diverse ways.

It is important to decolonise African marriage discourse by rejecting two opposite extremes: the uncritical adoption of Western perspectives and the romanticisation of indigenous practices. Instead, marriage needs to be perceived as a vibrant cultural institution that constantly changes due to the influence of historical, political, religious, and socio-economic factors. As Kaunda and Phiri (2016, pp. 213–14) note, African marriage cultures have been influenced by colonisation, Christianity, urbanization, and globalisation, which requires re-inventions of marriage that will reflect cultural identity and the new reality. Decolonisation of marriage discourse thus means critical revival of indigeneity without forgetting about transforming practices.

Further, this study suggests that policymakers and cultural organisations enable constructive discussions about the interaction between customary law, constitutional values, and human rights approaches. Such discussions can enhance culturally sensitive changes that can help keep the positive features of Vatsonga marriage traditions but at the same time to comply with constitutional requirements of equality, respect and non-discrimination. Such an approach will increase the relevance and sustainability of customary marriage in the modern society of South Africa.

Lastly, there should be additional research on the empirical analysis of negotiations of marriage practices, gender identities, and social belonging among the Vatsonga over generations. Comparison of rural and urban contexts, generations, marriage age groups, education levels, and religious influence can bring additional knowledge about the evolution of marriage practices in contemporary society. Future research can focus not only on the perspectives of traditional leaders but also on the views of married individuals, unmarried adults, and young people. Such research will significantly contribute to African literature on marriage, gender, culture, and identity.

11. Conclusions

This research has therefore illustrated that marriage is one of the institutions that have continued to be used as a way of constructing gender, kinship and community membership

among the Vatsonga. Through a genealogical approach, this research has indicated that marriage and gender are not static cultural phenomena, but rather historical products shaped by indigenous culture, colonialism, Christianity, urbanisation and globalisation (Butler 1990, p. 31).

Furthermore, this research has identified that marriage ceremonies among the Vatsonga people have continued to foster family unity, cultural identity and social membership. Nevertheless, it is important to critically engage with practices that tend to promote gender inequality and social exclusion. This research does not support a nostalgic return to African tradition but rather calls for a contextualised and decolonised interpretation of marriage that sustains cultural practices and advances gender justice, human dignity, and respect (Tamale 2020, p. 102).

This paper will therefore go some way toward meeting the requirement for further research on contextualised studies in the field of African marriage studies by virtue of its focus on the Vatsonga ethnic community. Future research is necessary in order to build on the contributions made by this study in terms of empirical research on Vatsonga marriages.

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