

## Heritage and how it shapes our humanity

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### Introduction

I am a Venda person, not just because of Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am', but because I belong to a specific group of people through inheritance of their ethnicity. Thus, I am who I am because of other people. Heritage teaches us a lot about our identity, ethnicity, and humanity. It reminds us of the things that make us who we are as unique groups of people. Ethnicity refers to a group of people who identify themselves as a distinct group based on their socio-cultural entities such as language, customs, beliefs, shared ancestry, and common origin (Berreman 2001). So, socio-cultural and ethnic qualities are at the heart of our heritage and humanity. However, we live in a society that is culturally alienated yet, amongst other things, the Vhavenda cultural heritage is still revealed through the identification of sacred places like; Lake Fundudzi, Mapungubwe, and Thathe Vondo Forest. So, our heritage makes us who we are because it reminds us of the unique qualities we stand for as unique groups of people, qualities such as the language we speak, the attire we wear, the music we listen to, the food we eat and the ancestral beliefs we hold in relation to ourselves. In this essay, I discuss critical elements of heritage and how they shape us as unique groups of people. To begin, I focus on language as a key component of heritage in shaping the Vhavenda people and related groups in modern societies.

### Language

Our heritage reminds us of the language we speak as a unifier of our belonging to a specific group of people. For instance, I am a proud Venda person because I speak the same language as the Vhavenda people (also known as the Vhangona people). Thus, I was born a Venda person and inherit the Tshivenda language from infancy through to adolescence. Language is one thing that a group of people identify themselves with as unique from other

groups of people with different ethnicity. As part of celebrating Heritage Day in South Africa, the Vhavenda people celebrate their language by using proverbs and metaphors as ways of addressing social problems. These proverbs include, “*Tsiwana i laiwa ndilani*” (‘you get advice along the way’), “*Tshakule tshi wanwa nga muhovheleli*” (‘those who are ambitious get good rewards’) or “*mulomo a u dalelwi nga mulambo*” (‘talking is cheap’). Our children inherit these Venda proverbs from a young age and throughout adolescence.

Again, through language as a strong component of heritage for shaping our humanity, we tell stories to our children about aboriginal Venda people and how they came to settle in different areas of the Limpopo province. Also, our children are reminded about the Vhavenda critical values and morals. For instance, “*muthu ndi muthu nga vhathu*” (‘a person is a person through other people’) or “*zwanda zwia tanzwana*” (‘we must help one another’) are amongst others, two of the most influential values we communicate through language to unite families, relationships, and societies as Vhavenda people. Indeed, language is a key element of heritage and shapes who we are as unique people. The next aspect is how the Vhavenda traditional attire is a vital aspect of heritage for shaping us as unique people.

### **Traditional attire**

Another element of heritage for shaping who we are as unique groups of people is symbolized through clothing. The clothes that Vhavenda people wear differentiate them from other traditional groups of people. For instance, the Vhavenda women are proud to wear *minwenda* which is an embroidery with many colourful lines on it. These lines express that the woman wearing it is already married. Most of the Vhavenda women still wear *minwenda* during Heritage Day and on important occasions as reminders of who they are as unique groups of people among other groups. However, in ancient days, Vhavenda men used to wear *tsindi*, a very lineal or triangulated piece of animal skin covering both the front and back of a male person. *Tsindi* is loin-cloth that is simple and easy to wear. *Tsindi* is worn the same way as modern trousers. In ancient days, however, *tsindi* was critical and an expression of manhood in the Vhavenda culture. This attire is similar to those of Khoisan or San people commonly known as Bushmen. This attire shapes us as Vhavenda people and aligns well with our musical instruments and dance. Indeed, traditional attires unify who Vhavenda people are as unique groups of people.

### **Traditional drums and dance**

The Vhavenda people also identify themselves through the music they listen to or musical instruments they play. When we celebrate Heritage Day in South Africa, we connect to the

traditional music associated with the Vhavenda people. However, music and dancing are not only used for entertainment by the Vhavenda people, they are also used as resources for spiritual healing. Thus, music and dancing are used to treat malombo and related illnesses by Vhavenda people or Northern Sotho speaking people. Malombo (or Malopo in Sepedi) is an illness that is associated with ancestral spirits. According to Kriel (n.d), such illness is characterized by its prolonged and persistent nature that involves constant pain in the head and chest, depression, and heart palpitations. However, for Lebaka (2014: 31), malopo is a cultural expression and reflection of Pedi culture.

Nonetheless, there are different types of traditional dances such as *domba*, *tshikona*, *tshigombela*, and *tshifasi* (South Africa n.d.). *Domba* is a python dance that is performed on an annual basis at one of the sacred places like Lake Fundudzi in asking for rain after drought (Morning Sun n.d.). *Tshikona* is regarded as the Vhavenda national dance, and it is performed by the Vhavenda men only. However, *tshigombela* is usually performed by the Vhavenda married women hence *tshifasi* is performed by unmarried girls. Similarly, the Vhavenda people have special drums such as *murumba*, *thungwa* and *ngoma* which they play to celebrate who they are. So, all these musical instruments and dances shape us as Vhavenda people. They differentiate us from other groups of people and makes us who we are as unique people.

## Traditional food

Our heritage also reminds us of the different types of food associated with the Vhavenda people. According to Bhat and Maanda (2010:191-193) these foods include: *delele* (wild jute plant), *delelemandande* (lady finger/okra), *mushidzhi* (spanish needle), *tshidzimba* (mixture of groundnuts, beans, and mielie grains), *vowa* (smooth pigweed), *munawa* (cow pea), *tshibavhe* (bitter gourd) and *mashonzha* (mopane worms). All these Vhavenda foods are considered healthy foods with the belief that those who usually eat them will live healthy and longer (I will discuss some of the traditional beliefs in the next paragraph). These foods make us who we are as unique people. We inherit these foods from our ancestors and to this day, we celebrate these foods on Heritage Day in South Africa.

## Traditional beliefs and sacred places

According to Vhavenda people, '*Zwifhoni a hu dzhenwi*' ('no one should enter or disturb sacred places') (Makaulule 2018). The Vhavenda people believe that *zwifho* means given by the creator or God. They believe that sacred places contribute to who we are as unique people and give us life and a sense of wellbeing. Vhavenda people also hold spiritual beliefs which is based on their ancestors. To them, ancestors are deceased relatives which are considered supernatural beings and fully functioning members of a descent group. Some

of the Vhavenda people still worship and believe in their ancestors. The customs that they have inherited from their ancestors define who they are as Vhavenda people. Thus, what their ancestors used to believe in before they become ancestors is passed from generation to generation.

### **Alienation of Vhavenda culture and related groups**

The four key components of heritage for shaping our humanity symbolise most cultural backgrounds in South Africa. However, modern societies have adapted western cultural backgrounds while abandoning theirs eventually. For instance, people (especially young people) rarely speak their own language in a day to day basis. They no longer eat the food they used to eat or the food that their ancestors used to eat. Also, traditional attire is rarely worn while people no longer listen to their traditional music. Furthermore, traditional beliefs are degraded as a result of cultural alienation.

### **Conclusion**

There is a lot we need to learn about our heritage and how it shapes who we are as unique people. Therefore, I challenge modern youth to seek to understand their heritage in this alienated society. As evident throughout this essay, I am confident that our heritage offers us our roots, our sense of belonging, our social identities, and our socio-cultural qualities as it reminds us of the things that make us who we are as unique groups of people. Our heritage shapes us through language, clothes, music, food, and common origins or ancestry.

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