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Unveiling the Role of Hahani (Paternal Aunts) in the VaTsonga Culture of South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Down history, *hahani* (paternal aunt) played an indispensable role in the family. The paternal aunt was a family figure who was known for skillfully weaving into marital roles, conflict resolution and rituals. She displayed unique flexibility and counseling dexterity to her nieces, nephews and the entire family. Unlike other indigenous groups in Africa, the role of *hahani* is being downplayed and ignored because of modernity and the growth of families. This indigenous figure in the VaTsonga communities is however a rare gem and her role needs to be preserved before it is abrogated by disuse. This conceptual paper thus adopted the Sankofa Theory to underpin the write-up. To illuminate this subject matter, the paper focused on discussing who the *hahani* is, her marital counseling role, conflict resolution and leading indigenous rituals in the family from the lived experiences of the authors. In summation, the paper emulates the balanced power of the *hahani*. The paper argues that the *hahani's* existence within the indigenous platforms must be preserved to sustain families of young couples and assist in disciplining and putting into order those who misbehave, and instilling indigenous norms. The paper recommends the usage of local solutions to address local challenges while having a global outlook. In this way, the unique role of *hahani* must be embraced, ensuring it evolves in an amicable way without distorting and adulterating it. By engaging in the under-researched aspect of VaTsonga culture, the study contributes broadly to gender roles, culture and African family structures thus igniting the impetus of scholarship in this unique field.

Keywords: *Hahani, Indigenous Knowledge, Culture, Vatsonga, Conflict Resolution*

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INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, the role of *hahani* (paternal aunts) within VaTsonga indigenous communities has been hailed for its significance in building families and the community. These celebrated female figures ensure they give their utmost guidance and support to their nieces, nephews, family and the entire community. They have stood as beacons of wisdom, unity and stability pertaining to all issues with the family and community. With the advent of modernity, churches, and families staying far away from each other, the role of *hahani* seems to be underplayed and losing relevance. The authors argue that there is a risk of valuable cultural knowledge being lost if the role of VaTsonga *hahani* is not embraced and preserved. The disappearance of such knowledge holders (*hahani*) inevitably entails the death of VaTsonga cultural heritage, norms and values among the current and future generations. Building on the

second and third authors' childhood experiences, this conceptual paper unveils the role of *hahani* (paternal aunts) in the VaTsonga culture of South Africa.

Growing up with the VaTsonga people, the second and third authors were fascinated by the way *hahani* played a critical role in their upbringing. The two authors grew up observing *hahani* coming to give them words of wisdom, visiting relatives to resolve thorny issues and performing indigenous rituals. The first author was also thrilled by the way *hahani* was involved in the paying of *lobola* and standing with his wife to impart words of wisdom. Having been thrilled by the role played by *hahani*, the authors had a robust discussion which led to the conceptualisation of this paper to preserve this knowledge as it is not well documented. Furthermore, this is intended to ignite more scholars to come on board to document this precious knowledge.

The second and third authors having grown up and bred under the VaTsonga cultural norms and values are a living testimony and/or proof of the unique role played by *hahani*. Even though they were raised under the Christian faith, there has been a certain aura that always stole their attention when it comes to the African indigenous belief systems. *Hahani* has been this figure who played many roles and was seemingly feared and revered by everyone. In most cases, her voice was always the last and final say. Against this backdrop, the inquisitiveness of the authors regarding the meaning and significance of *hahani*'s power has ignited exploring her role within the VaTsonga culture.

At one moment, one of the authors recalls the whole family begging *hahani* to pardon them for disregarding her words. This resulted in *hahani* being compensated by the entire family. Without any speck of doubt, this curiosity of unveiling this has arched toward the problem that buttresses this study. It is this notion that has even been challenged by opposing belief systems from the church and perspectives from modernised people. At times, in other family circles, *hahani* has in many times been picked as the perpetrator behind family curses and the witch in the family. The authors have witnessed some families break down and scatter just because they did not value and/or honour the role of *hahani* in the family. In most of the cases witnessed, it has been due to failed rituals and conflicts that in the researchers' humble view could have been amicably resolved by timely interventions of *hahani*. These efforts seemingly are frustrated and displaced by those who profess to be educated and resort to other belief systems that devalue the role of *hahani*. Instead of uniting and allowing *hahani* to play her role, she is substituted by strangers who come in the name of professional counsellors and charge a hand and a limp for their services.[1] Not wishing to undermine or water down the role of professional counsellors, the authors humbly submit that *hahani*'s role needs to be evaluated and elevated to that of professionals as one undergoes years of training to guide the family.

Even though these professionals play a critical role in helping families, their services come at a cost unlike those of *hahani*. Unfortunately, some of the professionals who intervene in families, fail to address the spiritual connotations of the challenges that families encounter. *Hahani*, who is ascribed to as the family library, is pushed to the edge by those who have abandoned their ways to other belief systems and is left to pick the leftovers of those who have the privilege of being at the dinner table.

It has been vehemently argued that the disappearance and/or erosion of the role of VaTsonga *hahani* attracts more harm than good within the VaTsonga community. Directly and/or indirectly, their disappearance and/or the erosion of their role has witnessed the breakdown of marital lives, division of family members, multiplication of children who are social outcasts and many more. This created gap demands the resuscitation and continuous preservation of Tsonga cultural values, norms and traditions. Giving *hahani* her indigenous role and promoting intergenerational knowledge transfer mitigates potential negative implications within the VaTsonga culture.

This study drives a narrative that *hahani* is a catalyst for change in Vatsonga communities, opening doors to educational and entrepreneurial opportunities for women and men alike. Moreover, she actively encourages and facilitates leadership opportunities for her nieces, contributing to the empowerment of the younger generation. In broader community contexts, *hahani*'s influence extends to championing gender equality, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable society. All this is argued by the current authors as being on the verge of extinction if proper measures are not taken. Considering

[1] Cyndy Baskin, *Strong Helpers' Teachings: The Value of Indigenous Knowledges in the Helping Professions* (Canadian Scholars' Press, 2022).

the fundamental roles of *hahani* within Vatsonga communities, it is evident that her contributions extend far beyond the confines of the family. The authors concur that she is a celebrated symbol of resilience, wisdom, and empowerment. She is a role model when it comes to shaping the social fabric of her community, especially in this time and age where moral decadence is the order of the day leading to numerous social outfits.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper was guided by the path to connect the past to the present and the future. Sankofa is a theoretical framework that encourages and advances that people need to reassert a sense of urgency by reflecting on their past in order to move forward.[2] Sankofaism strongly believes that people need to learn from their past in order to shape one's presence and future. It further emphasises that with great insight and understanding of the past, people will be in a better position to deal with some of the problems they are confronted with today.[3] Generally, in most African communities, including the Tsonga community, people are faced with a number of challenges ranging from the high rate of divorce, assimilation of indigenous culture, economic hardships, gender-based violence and many others. The basis of some of these problems emanates from the current detachment from existing realities, roots and traditions. Against this backdrop, Sankofa guides mankind to reflect on the past, traditions and cultures in the quest to find solutions to problems that humans are confronted with.

This paper adopted this framework to examine the role of *hahani* in the VaTsonga community. It did so by reflecting on the role played by *hahani* in the VaTsonga community and getting an insight and understanding of it and determining how those roles can assist in shaping the present and the future. Such a position will assist in an attempt to seek African solutions to African problems. It will further serve as a reminder to embrace and honour the African heritage and history, and to use that knowledge to create a better future for the African child.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the uniqueness of this paper, the authors adopted a desk-based study coupled with the authors' experiences. The study adopted a Phenomenological research approach. The authors have vast experiences of data collection and presentation with the first author being a Y2 National Research Foundation (NRF) rated scholar. This experience is humbly said in a bid to give leeway to introduce a hybrid methodology that can be used where authors do not want to spend time collecting data, especially in an area where they want to provoke other authors to start writing about the subject matter. The usage of such a methodology proves to be the best when authors incorporate their lived experiences in an area that has limited literature and intends to ignite other authors to contribute to the field. Adding to existing scant literature, the authors argue that the authors' lived experiences provide rich and deep data compared to data-driven research which at times provides little context and authenticity descriptions which are a mammoth task for outsiders to appreciate. This unique methodology can also aid and contribute to ethnographic literature by bringing in the authors' lived perspectives that provide the rich information required by ethnography. Emotional capture and the gained moral guidance from personal experiences are very critical as long the authors are able to guard biases and exaggerations that can be brought by failure to bring reflexivity. Out of the abundance of care and to ensure ethical considerations are met, the authors ensured that they were impartial in the presentation of their narratives to eliminate bias and distortion of facts. This was fortified by having the first authors as an outsider vis-à-vis the second and third authors who are grounded Tsongas. Such a composition of authors brings critical thinking and the contextual eligibility needed for such a work.

Evelyn Kissi, "Sankofa: The Critical Nkrumahist Theory," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 12, no. 7 (2018): 154–75.

[3] James M Jones and Jordan B Leitner, "The Sankofa Effect: Divergent Effects of Thinking about the Past for Blacks and Whites," in *Time Perspective Theory; Review, Research and Application: Essays in Honor of Philip G. Zimbardo* (Springer, 2014), 197–211.

DISCUSSION

The Concept of Hahani in Vatsonga Communities

Okrah avers,

> "Before Africa came under the dominance of any colonial powers, women had a position of influence in society."[4]

VaTsonga society is traditionally organised around patrilineal lineage, where kinship ties and family relationships play a crucial role. *Hahani*, as the sisters of the father, occupy a unique position in this kinship system, acting as influential figures within their extended family networks. Unlike the distorted narratives that have been given, African women had the important roles that they played in the communities and the families. VaTsonga women in their families were regarded as *hahani*. *Hahani* is a respectful woman who plays a unique role in the family and is the cultural custodian of the family. Maluleke argues that African culture was oppressed by Western culture to the extent that African culture is mixed and diluted.[5] The VaTsonga people, a Bantu ethnic group residing in the northeastern part of South Africa, have a rich cultural heritage that shapes their social structure and values.[6] Central to this cultural history is the role of *hahani*, or paternal aunts, within the community. This literature review aims to delve into the significance and multifaceted contributions of *hahani* in Vatsonga culture, shedding light on her roles, responsibilities and influence on various aspects of community life.

Scholars like Matshidze and Nemutandani acknowledge that *hahani* (known as *makhadzi* in TshiVenda) is recognised as the custodian and transmitter of all cultural traditions, values and norms.[7] She always plays her role in passing the knowledge from one generation to another, and is also known for preserving knowledge of the family by passing it down the ancestral line. In the same way, *hahani* ensures that there is a strong continuity of the cultural heritage and identity of Vatsonga. In Sothotho, *hahani* is called *rakgadi* while in Shona she is known as *tete. Tete* is a paternal aunt and holds an important role in the family being a woman who advises her nieces and nephew, but also who can play a marriage counsellor for her brother and *muroora* (sister-in-law). Amongst the Shona speaking, the role of *tete* is often feared and respected for many different reasons.

In Vatsonga communities, the role of *hahani* is of paramount significance, serving as a vital support system within families and the broader community. Chauke, Madlome and Chauke have extensively explored the multifaceted roles and responsibilities that *hahani* assumes.[8] In royal families, *hahani* can seamlessly step into the shoes of the chief when the chief is preoccupied with other royal duties, exemplifying the integral role she plays in the leadership structure of the community. Within the family unit, *hahan*i is a source of guidance and mentorship, offering valuable advice to nephews and nieces. Her wisdom and life experiences are instrumental in enhancing the overall well-being of the family and its extended network of relatives. *Hahani* is renowned for her remarkable conflict resolution abilities, effectively mediating disputes and restoring harmony within the family. She acts as a beacon of wisdom in navigating marital conflicts and encouraging women to strive for personal and collective progress. However, these roles have not been captured in literature hence the researchers' quest to engage the subject.

Importantly, *hahani* takes a stand against abuse within marriages, providing a safeguard for those facing such challenges. When marital conflicts arise, *hahani* is often called upon to mediate and resolve these issues. Her intervention plays a pivotal role in preserving the sanctity of marriages and, in some cases, preventing women from being stigmatised due to being unmarried. This protective role of *hahani* reinforces the societal fabric and norms of Vatsonga communities. Nevertheless, *hahani*'s role transcends

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[4] Kwadwo Okrah, "The Dynamics of Gender Roles and Cultural Determinants of African Women's Desire to Participate in Modern Politics.," *Global Engagement and Transformation* 2, no. 1 (2017).2.

[5] Mikateko Joyce Maluleke, "Culture, Tradition, Custom, Law and Gender Equality," *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal/Potchefstroomse Elektroniese Regsblad* 15, no. 1 (2012).

[6] Mbhanyele Jameson Maluleke, " The Role of Bible Translation in Enhancing Xitsonga Cultural Identity" (University of the Free State, 2017).

[7] Pfarelo Matshidze and Veronica Nemutandani, "The Role of the Vhavenda Women in Managing Marital Conflicts in Thulamela Municipality, Thohoyandou: An Indigenous Perspective," *Agenda* 30, no. 3 (2016): 70–79.

[8] O R Chauke, S K Madlome, and W Chauke, "Significance of Women in Vatsonga Culture: An Africana Womanist Perspective," *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology* 18, no. 7 (2021): 1796–1809.

familial duties. In some families, she becomes a vocal advocate for human rights and gender empowerment. Her role becomes especially crucial in families where women lack a voice. In these instances, the *hahani* emerges as the voice of the voiceless, championing the rights and interests of women who might otherwise be marginalised and dehumanised.[9] This advocacy extends to challenging gender-based stereotypes and traditional gender roles, aligning with the work of Maluleke in promoting gender equality.[10]

Who is Hahani

In the VaTsonga culture, *hahani* is the paternal aunt (father's sister) and is highly respected in the family and the community. In some families, they are more than one paternal aunt, then who assumes the role of *hahani*? The first female sibling in the VaTsonga family assumes the role of *hahani* and the first male sibling assumes the role of *malume* (maternal uncle) to his sister's children. Being *hahani* in the VaTsonga culture is a big deal and it comes with a huge responsibility. It is actually a blessing for each and every Tsonga family to have a female sibling who will serve as *hahani*, because some of the day-to-day activities of the VaTsonga families require the active involvement of *hahani.*

The VaTsonga people perceive the paternal aunt as a second mother to her brother's children. *Hahani* is expected to provide emotional support, guidance, and discipline to his brother's children. The roles of *hahani* range from transmitting cultural and moral values to her nieces and nephews and ensuring that they understand and respect their family norms, values and traditions. As much as *hahani* in most cases are married into other families, their in-laws and their husbands are concientised during the negotiations for *lobola* about the responsibilities and the roles of the person they are marrying.[11] The husbands and the in-laws are informed about the roles and the responsibilities of their bride in the family because, the family knows that it will frequently require the wisdom, guidance, and support of their sister. It also becomes easy for the in-laws and the husbands to release *hahani* when their services are required in her families. *Hahani* serves as the engine of her brother's family.

Hahani play a pivotal role in the marriage process of her brother's children. *Hahani* is responsible for officiating and to a certain extent, arranging a marriage for her nephews or nieces, and may even select a potential spouse for them based on their family background, character, and other factors. *Hahani* have the best interest of their brother's children, which is why sometimes they even go to the extent of selecting potential spouses for them, in order to protect them from making wrong choices which will later hurt them or collapse. *Hahani* even goes as far as making their own children available for marriage to their brother's children. Such is done in order to strengthen the family ties and with the hope that they treat each other better since they are cousins.

Hahani perform crucial roles in the rite of passage of their nieces and nephews.[12] For example, when the children go to initiation school, *hahani* come and perform rituals (*ku phahla*) that inform the ancestors of the family about the journey that their child is about to travel. *Hahani* ask the ancestors to go with the child, protect and support the child throughout his initiation school journey. Even when the child is coming back from the initiation school, *hahani* must come again to receive back the child and also thank the ancestors for looking after the child throughout the initiation school journey. In the VaTsonga culture, a boy or a girl is considered to be a fully grown woman or man after having passed through this process (rite of passage) since there are important teachings that take place in the initiation school.

Hahani serves as mediators between their brother's family and the family's ancestors. Most of the family ceremonies and rituals are handled by them. The *hanani* is mostly well trained to handle such responsibilities by her mother who is also *Hahani* to her brother's children and *Hahani* of her family. *Hahani* also have a responsibility to train the upcoming generation of *hahani*.

[9] Aimée Boutin, *Maternal Echoes: The Poetry of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and Alphonse de Lamartine* (University of Delaware Press, 2001).
[10] Maluleke, "Culture, Tradition, Custom, Law and Gender Equality."
[11] André Jonas Chitlango and Anthony Balcomb, "Ntumbuluko, Theology, and Issues of Gender in the Tsonga Worldview: Towards an African Woman's Theology of Liberation in Mozambique," *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 86, no. 1 (2004): 180–89.
[12] Chitlango and Balcomb, "Ntumbuluko, Theology, and Issues of Gender in the Tsonga Worldview: Towards an African Woman's Theology of Liberation in Mozambique."

Hahani is not only important in her family but also plays an important role in community affairs, and may serve as a mediator in disputes, provide advice and counsel to community members, and even participate in important cultural rituals and ceremonies.[13] Overall, the role of *hahani* in VaTsonga culture is one of the respected responsibilities. *Hahani* is an important figure in the VaTsonga families and communities, and her contributions are highly valued and appreciated.

Roles of the Hahani in Vatsonga Communities

a. Marital role

In view of the marital role within the family, the authors plumbed into the hidden gem and ever-evolving but enduring significance of *hahani*'s roles within the Vatsonga culture, highlighting their historical roots and contemporary relevance in modern South African societies. The longstanding historical practice of *hahani*'s active involvement in familial and romantic matters has persisted both before and after colonisation, emphasizing its cultural continuity, sanctity and importance in the modern community. The authors walk down the memory line to capture the marital role bestowed to *hahani* and ferret in ways that can bring emulation to this role while trying to resurrect it.

Regarding the male children who are too shy to propose and marry, *hahani*'s influence extends to the realm of matchmaking and marriage arrangements. From what the authors have seen over the years, *hahani* actively participate in the process of identifying potential partners for individuals within the community. Before embarking on this task, the *hahani* thoroughly examines the background, character, and traits of prospective partners. She also considers the suitability of the families involved, ensuring compatibility and shared values. Once a match is deemed appropriate, the *hahani* engages in negotiations with the families involved. She may facilitate meetings between the prospective partners, allowing them to discuss their future together or commence the courtship process.

In Vatsonga families, when an unmarried boy impregnates a girl from another family, her *hahani* serves as the intermediary. She is responsible for accompanying the pregnant girl to the alleged boyfriend's family to discuss the situation and negotiate the necessary reparations for the perceived damage caused. This process involves active engagement between both families to resolve the issue collectively. Additionally, the *hahani* offers guidance and support to the pregnant girl during her pregnancy. She also assumes the role of a counsellor, providing emotional and practical support to the pregnant girl throughout her pregnancy. This includes offering advice and guidance on the various aspects of pregnancy, and ensuring the well-being of both the expectant mother and the unborn child. After a baby is delivered, *hahani* would take her ritual role of guiding the mother in protecting the baby. They are well versed in the traditional child-rearing practices that are taught to the mother before a ritual was done to allow the child to go out and meet people. They would guide the mother pre-natal and post-natal to ensure her safety and that of the child. *Hahani* would guide in the removal and disposal of the umbilical cord, bathing the child, and attending to diseases that are known to attack babies.

A study by Khosa-Nkatini, Hundzukani and Khosa sheds light on the significant role that *hahani* plays in Vatsonga families, particularly in the context of marriages.[14] Traditional Vatsonga culture values women as skilled counsellors in resolving conflicts within marriages. *Hahani* plays a crucial interpersonal role within families, particularly in the marital dynamics of both young and elderly couples. Furthermore, she serves as a peacemaker during *lobola* negotiations, facilitating the process with a calm and traditional approach. Against this backdrop, looking at the high divorce rates in South Africa[15] (and not limited to South Africa alone) which has far-reaching consequences in affecting children and family members involved,[16] *hahani*'s role remains indispensable. If played well, her role can lead to low levels of stress, depression, panic attacks, and, in some cases, even mental illness which escalate in the modern dynamic

[13] Chitlango and Balcomb, "Ntumbuluko, Theology, and Issues of Gender in the Tsonga Worldview: Towards an African Woman's Theology of Liberation in Mozambique."

[14].Hundzukani P Khosa-Nkatini and Dee Khosa, "The One-Sided View of VaTsonga Marital Endurance, Vukati VA Kandza Hi Mbilu: A Challenge to Pastoral Care," *Theologia Viatorum* 46, no. 1 (2022): 167.

[15] Supa Pengpid and Karl Peltzer, "Behavioral and Psychological Outcomes of Marital Status and Transition among Aging Adults in Rural South Africa: A Longitudinal Analysis," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 2024, 1–17.

[16] Sunday A Adedini et al., "Union Dissolution-Divorce, Separation, and Widowhood in Sub-Saharan Africa: Trends, Patterns, and Determinants," *Family Demography and Post-2015 Development Agenda in Africa*, 2020, 127–45.

world. As such, *hahani*'s role becomes crucial in providing indigenous African marital therapy to help preserve marriages.

When a woman, referred to as *makoti* (daughter-in-law), marries into a new family, *hahani* plays a pivotal role in guiding her on how to navigate her role within the family. She provides all the induction classes to introduce *makoti* to all family beliefs and values. *Hahani* imparts the values and customs of the family, fostering respect and harmonious relations between the new bride and her in-laws.

The authors' experiences in the Vatsonga families have proved beyond any speck of doubt that *hahani*'s marital role and duty play a key role in encouraging their nephews and nieces to remain committed to their marriages. Furthermore, she helps maintain equilibrium within marriages to prevent divorces which have become an acute daily agony. They are trusted to provide guidance to newlyweds, especially when facing challenges in the initial months or years of marriage due to misunderstandings. In this context, *hahani* takes on the responsibility of educating newlyweds about marriage and how to cultivate a happy and harmonious marital relationship. In addition, they also play a critical role in uniting families when young men and women become parents (informally marry) before formalising their marriage. In such thorny situations, she plays a pivotal role in fostering understanding and unity ensuring the well-being of both the extended and newly formed families.

b. Conflict Resolution

VaTsonga people subscribe to the practice of traditional conflict resolution in this contemporary society and this role is played by *hahani* and *malume* (uncles). *Hahani* plays an important role in conflict resolution in the VaTsonga society. The VaTsonga society, like any other society in the world, sometimes find themselves entangled in conflicts. In such cases, *malume* and *hahani* are mostly central in the resolution of such conflicts. Conflict resolution by *hahani* is derived from cultural values, beliefs, norms and processes that are understood and accepted by the VaTsonga community.[17] The methods deployed to resolve conflicts are traditionally and culturally constructed. The VaTsonga people have a common understanding regarding the processes followed and the methods deployed in conflict resolution.

Conflicts range from marital problems of nieces and nephews, sibling fights, refusing to assume certain rights of passage like going to initiation school, disrespecting parents and many other forms of conflicts, it is the duty of *hahani* to intervene through providing necessary counselling and guidance which help them overcome such conflicts. For instance, if a child starts to disrespect his parents, skip school, drink alcohol, sleep out and behave in an unruly and foreign manner, the parents will try to call the child to order and if their efforts fail, then *hahani* will be called. *Hahani* will be the last hope as an intervention measure to maintain order and discipline for the child. Even the child knows that the involvement of *hahani* signals or shows the importance of the matter.

One of the rare skills possessed by *hahani* is the ability to resolve conflicts in a calm, guiding and objective way. They were trained for such roles and in most cases they excel in them. *Hahani* deals with cases where you find the niece got pregnant before marriage and at an early age. Mostly the parents are disappointed, emotional and angry with the child and at the same time, the child is also going through pregnancy hormones, disappointment, regret and depression. So, the two, will not be in a good position to deal with that problem. Then *hahani*, in that case, will be summoned to come and resolve the conflict between the child and the parents, find out who impregnated the child and send a delegation to that family to inform them about the damages which their child has done in her family. *Hahani* will ensure that there is peace and acceptance between the child and the parents. The same applies to nephews, *hahani* can play the role of facilitating the marriage process or paying damages if they caused damages to other families by impregnating a girl before marriage.

Whenever a nephew or niece faces problems in their marriage, they approach *hahani* and explain their problems. If there are any conflicts between her and her partner, the *hahani* is there to resolve the differences. *Hahani* assumes the responsibility of marriage counsellor. As an older paternal aunt who is already married, she brings a lot of wisdom and experience in performing her duties as a marriage counsellor. She will provide guidance, and pieces of advice, maintain discipline and promote love and peace. To her married nieces sometimes they may need to be taught how to treat their husband in a

[17] Chauke, Madlome, and Chauke, "Significance of Women in Vatsonga Culture: An Africana Womanist Perspective."

respectful manner following what is commonly accepted in the VaTsonga society. Actually, *hahani* assumes the responsibility of teaching her niece how to treat her husband at the beginning of the marriage. But the teaching is not a once-off process, every time there are issues, before *hahani* can assist with resolving those issues, she will start with the teachings on how to treat your husband.[18]

Hahani also counsels her niece if she might be having thoughts of quitting the marriage. Currently, there are high rates of divorce. Every time young couples experience marital problems, they resort to divorce before even exploring the guidance and wisdom of those who travelled the journey before them, such as uncles, parents and *hahani*. In the VaTsonga community, divorce is highly discouraged and that is the last resort to consider in the case where one is experiencing marital problems.

VaTsonga people believe in long-lasting marriage and that is achieved through the support and guidance of figures such as *hahani*. They do so by sharing experiences which help their nieces to see that their problems could be more minor than what they thought in the beginning. VaTsonga families like many other African families do not encourage divorce. They try in all their power to contain petty issues which frequently lead to divorce. *Hahani* believes that a woman would not encourage another woman to leave her husband over issues which can be solved. Generally, the VaTsonga society believes in the growth of a clan, so having successful family units enhances their culture. Holding on to marriage even when there are challenges is not perceived as abuse as human rights groups would perceive it. It is perceived as discipline, perseverance, sacrifice, loving, and expanding the clan.[19] The VaTsonga women value and respect marriage. In the VaTsonga community, a married woman is respected more than one who is unmarried.

Some conflicts arise as a result of the inability to bear children in their family. Mostly couples will turn to blame each other for their failure to have children. In that case, *hahani* will intervene by first establishing the problem and coming up with the traditional-based solutions. For example, if they fail to have a child because the husband is infertile, the *hahani* will secretly identify a close family member with the same bloodline to come and impregnate the wife. The wife will be engaged and will also keep that secret. Those who will be involved in that conspiracy will be expected to keep that secret until their last breath in the world of the living. The identified man who does this does not have to boast of having fathered the child of his brother or cousin's wife.[20]

The deployed man is also not allowed to continue being intimate with the wife whenever he pleases. He does it once when it matters the most and to achieve the ultimate goal and returns to his family. *Hahani* have deployed such strategies to save many families and also make them thrive. It looks awkward to outsiders, but to VaTsonga society it is a good thing to do. Even if a woman fails to bear children, a sister or cousin will be brought to bear children for her sister or aunty. Those children will belong to both of them, and the family will be revived and grow. *Hahani* become an integral part of the life of their brother's children, and they are highly involved in all possible conflicts that may arise in the families of their brothers and their children.

c. Performing Indigenous Rituals

The authors submit that the maternal aunties in the VaTsonga circles are highly esteemed within their familial and communal contexts, primarily owing to their possession of invaluable knowledge and extensive experience concerning indigenous rituals. Research conducted by Constant and Tshisikhawe underscores that in VaTsonga families, during the occurrence of rituals, it is the *hahani* who assume the pivotal responsibility of facilitating and providing guidance and counsel.[21] It is information that has been relayed from those above that *hahani* enjoy special privileges and favour from their ancestors when it comes to the facilitation of indigenous rituals. Notably, *hahanis* occupy leadership roles in rituals, particularly those associated with girl-child initiation schools, rainmaking, appeasing the ancestors and libation. Regarding initiation schools, before a child (boy or girl) is cleared to attend, *hahani* is expected to do a family ritual to put a covering over the child's wellbeing and protection. Initiation school in

[18] Chauke, Madlome, and Chauke, "Significance of Women in Vatsonga Culture: An Africana Womanist Perspective."
[19] Chauke, Madlome, and Chauke, "Significance of Women in Vatsonga Culture: An Africana Womanist Perspective."
[20] Chauke, Madlome, and Chauke, "Significance of Women in Vatsonga Culture: An Africana Womanist Perspective."
[21] Natasha Louise Constant and Milingoni Peter Tshisikhawe, "Hierarchies of Knowledge: Ethnobotanical Knowledge, Practices and Beliefs of the Vhavenda in South Africa for Biodiversity Conservation," *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 14 (2018): 1–28.

Vatsonga is regarded as a rite of passage which is critical for every child but has to be done to ensure that there is no interference of monovalent spirits since the practice is regarded highly spiritual. From the perspective of African spirituality, the latter shed light on the central role of *hahani* within Vatsonga communities, both within the family and in the broader societal context, emphasizing their indispensable contribution to the preservation and execution of indigenous rituals.

In cases of prolonged periods of intense heat and dry weather, a unique cultural practice among the VaTsonga community involves a ritual practice to induce rainfall. Such a unique practice is spearheaded by *hahani* who are bestowed the responsibility to facilitate rituals that are exclusive are require pure individuals who have reached menopause. Unending intense and dry weather conditions for days, weeks, months, or years would ignite the *hahani* to call a special meeting and plan for a rainmaking process. To unfold the latter, virgins (girls who have not known any man) are handpicked to take part in the rainmaking rituals which were shrouded in secrecy. To ensure that the rituals are conducted with the utmost focus and reverence, the rainmaking ceremonies are deliberately scheduled during holidays, allowing for several days of uninterrupted activities, often held in the chief's kraal. Since this was a community thing, a *hahani* from the royal family assumed the leading role as the leader of the rainmaking ritual. From the foregoing analysis, one cannot generalise but appraise the unique role of *hahani* that provides illuminating insights regarding rituals, beliefs and traditions that mirror the VaTsonga community norms and values.

There is a strong bond of relationship between the living and the living dead (ancestors). The ancestors either bless or curse the living. If the living live in peace and harmony this is always a blessing from the ancestors.[22] For instance, good harvest, and fertility in cattle, sheep and goats. Where the ancestors are not happy, there will be drought, disease, and no procreation. This also resonates well with the VaTsonga beliefs in South Africa. To ensure compliance, *hahani* had special roles to play for the continuous blessing of the communities. Once it was the farming season, *hahani* was said to be the first person in the family to start ploughing and planting to signify that farming time was open. The same was done when it was harvest time. Failure to adhere to such was argued to open doors of curses as it was deemed a spiritual order.

Death, mourning, and rituals are very critical events that are highly spiritual in most African spaces. These events are associated with diverse rituals that were revered and feared among the VaTsonga communities. As such, such diverse rituals were led by *hahani*. *Hahani* would monitor the bereaved to ensure that sexual intercourse is not done during this time. In some cases, she would devise means that males and females would sleep at different places to ensure that the mourning period is respected. Those who would have defaulted would have to consult *hahani* to ensure that they undergo rituals to protect themselves and their families. *Tindzhaka* is regarded as one of the sicknesses that is deadly and is contracted when one has sexual intercourse during the mourning period. Its symptoms would be developing a building stomach and coughing nonstop.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing analysis, it is vehemently argued that *hahani* holds an indispensable role within the VaTsonga culture. Her wisdom, support and knowledge in cultural preservation go all the way to her being a marriage counselor, resolving conflicts and leading key indigenous rituals. In addition, her responsibility in nurturing and giving guidance to her nieces and nephews solidifies the invisible bond in the family thereby bringing cohesion and well-being. Her invaluable contribution to the family and community is revered as it helps in sustaining inculturation and building a formidable family unity. Now faced with the disappearance of *hahani*'s role in this modern dynamic world, there is a need to guard jealously against this cultural erosion to foster intergenerational knowledge transfer in a bid to build families and maintain VaTsonga cultural heritage. The authors urge VaTsonga communities to take positive and practical measures to restore the role of *hahani* within their families and communities. This is buttressed by the Sankofa theory that advocates for the usage of local solutions to address local

[22]O Elijah and Salisu Ameh Amodu, "An Insight into the Ontological Structure of the Traditional African Religion," *Albertine Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2022).

challenges while having a global outlook. In this way, the unique role of *hahani* must be embraced, ensuring it evolves in an amicable way without distorting and adulterating it.

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