

# The Role Played by Nicknames and Totems in the Development of Tshivenda Surnames



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## ABSTRACT

Vhavenda, like many other indigenous African cultural groups, respects totems dealing with animals, reptiles, plants and other objects in their daily lives. Animals, trees, reptiles and other things are believed to inspire the Vhavenda community in several ways. The main purpose of this study is to demonstrate the role played by nicknames and totems when developing surnames in Tshivenda. Vhavenda have their way of believing and worshipping their God and gods. Some of these practices are the same as those of other African ethnic groups, while some are not. This is influenced by the totems that the Vhavenda community has. A totem and a nickname are some of the things that Vhavenda respect most and take seriously in their lives. This research paper seeks to investigate the different roles that totems and nicknames play in the culture of the Vhavenda ethnic group, specifically in the development of Tshivenda surnames. The paper will also show that totems and nicknames are not just fictitious but something that is appealing in their (Vhavenda) day-to-day lives. The methodology used in this paper is a Qualitative Research Methodology where the researcher gathered and analysed non-numerical data in order to gain an understanding of individuals. This will be accomplished by analysing different Vhavenda traditional rulers' nicknames and totems in some of the Vhavenda communities to find out what roles they play in the development of totems and nicknames as surnames in Tshivenda.

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## INTRODUCTION

A totem, as defined by Procter, is “An animal, a plant or object thought by certain tribes, especially North American Indians, to have a close relationship with the family group or a representation of this, especially on wood.”<sup>1</sup> The name of a totem is given to a clan or to a group of people who have a common origin. The animals, reptiles, plants, or objects referred to are immensely respected by such a clan or a group of people due to the enormous influence and relationship it has for that group.

Africans use animals, reptiles, plants and other natural objects as totems designated for the family, a new name resembling a coat of arms or a new emblem or a new symbol from which day to day becomes a way of life for that family. This new name or surname, in some sense, revitalises and revives the clan and gives it new hope and confidence.

<sup>1</sup> P. Procter, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Great Britain: Longman, 1985), 1170.

According to Dzivhani and Mudau, “*Mutupo ndi muano wa lushaka lwa vhathu*”, which is loosely translated as ‘a totem is an oath of a group of people.’<sup>2</sup> The fact is that a clan's totem shows an oath of a particular clan, especially when one recites it.

Human beings are not the greatest and most important part of the earth; rather, they are just a part of the earth, a part of nature, a child of Mother Earth, and only a part of the spirit. This is true for the Vhavanḁa community. In almost everything they do, they do according to what nature wants them to do. They are part of nature and children of the Mother Earth.

It is presumed that the Vhavanḁa community uses totem surnames coming from animals and reptiles rather than totem surnames coming from trees and other natural objects. This paper will therefore investigate whether this culture is caused by revering animals and reptiles as their founders, ancestors, or guardians in their daily lives.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In terms of Section 28 of the Constitution of South Africa, “Every child has the right to a name ...” This means that every child must have a name by which he/she will espond. This name should be provided by the parents after the birth of the child. When providing such names to their children, African parents generally take into account several factors, which include their religious orientation, cultural orientation, and circumstances that occurred at the time of the child’s birth. When names are given following the parents’ religious orientation, it helps them preserve their religion while where names are given following the parents’ cultural orientation, it helps them preserve their culture. Where names are given following the circumstances around the family, such names remind parents of the event that once took place in their lifetime. The Constitution does not provide for nicknames that one may assume as he/she grows. This means that nicknames may not appear in an identity document. In essence, the Constitution provides for real names and only such should appear in one’s identity documents.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researcher collected data from published and unpublished books, journals, dissertations and magazines. These documents are analysed critically to find out whether Vhavanḁa has different totems and how these totems have influenced the development of Vhavanḁa names as surnames or nicknames. The findings were authenticated and verified by people familiar with Vhavanḁa totems.

### **The Locality of the Vhavanḁa Group**

Vhavanḁa is an African indigenous group who reside in the far northeast, neighbouring Mozambique to the east, Zimbabwe to the north, and Botswana to the west. This group is presently scattered all over the nine provinces of South Africa, per the 2011- Census. Vhavanḁa is a language group consisting of a wide range of different sub-groups with different dialects, totems and nicknames as surnames, which are derived from various things such as animals, reptiles, plants and natural objects. Totem surnames are real surnames to the many Vhavanḁa’s who were trying to distance themselves from the then Banana Governments led by one of the intruders or foreigners coming from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Tanzania and Ethiopia. These totem surnames are the ones that this research will mainly focus on. These surnames have an outstanding relationship with various totems because nicknames have a great influence on totems in Tshivenḁa and play an important role in the development of surnames. Surnames mean real surnames, not surnames that come from nicknames or those that came during the arrival of missionaries or those that came with traders and those who were working in mines such as Musina, Gauteng, Mpumalanga, and Mapungubye, etc.

In Tshivenḁa, there is a proverb that says, “*Mutupo u tevhela ñombe*”. The literal translation is “The totem follows the cattle”, which means that “a child takes the totem of the father”. This is because it is the father who paid *lobola* (bride price) with eight cattle, hence, the child’s totem must be like the father’s. This means that a totem, amongst the Vhavanḁa community, is something that is in their blood or at the core of their understanding of life and their culture. The preceding statement also suggests that there is no child whose surname does not have a totem or does not belong to a particular totem group.

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<sup>2</sup> S.M. Dzivhani and E.N. Mudau, *Mahosi Venda Na Vhadau Vha Tshakuma* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 1958), 8.

## DISCUSSION

### **The Vhavenda's respect for animals, reptiles, plants and objects**

In the Vhavenda community, as might be to many other Africans or non-African communities, a totem is a name used by a particular family or a clan. Such a name might be for an animal, a reptile, a tree, or any other living and or non-living object. A clan becomes proud and gets united by such a name and starts to associate itself with the animal, reptile, or tree to which the totem refers, for the rest of its life. The totem plays a key role in nation-building. Vhavenda, like other African language groups, respect animals, reptiles, plants and many other things that that appeal to their daily lives. These animals, reptiles, trees and other that they believe in inspire them in one way or another. That is why, for example, the Vhavenda community would not kill an animal or reptile for the sake of killing it; destroy trees and plants just for the sake of destroying them. They will only destroy such things for a purpose. The natural powers that the animals, reptiles, plants and other objects have on them are not lost yet. They still hold the powers and knowledge they can use in their daily activities. The emphasis is that they should not lose the connection that their forefathers used to have with their culture, as they are also cultured beings.

The original surnames of Vhavenda clans, which are derived from various totems, include the following: Nḁou, Muṭavhatsindi, Singo, Mudau, Kwinḁa, Munyai, Mukwevho, Mbedzi, Mulaudzi, Mugweṅa, Mulovhedzi, Muluvhu, Mufamaḁi, Muronga, Muṅarini, Murundwa, Mundalamo, etc. These surnames are derived from totems developed following the relationship between the people, the environment, plants and animals. Plants, animals and natural objects play an important role in the lives of the Vhavenda community, and for that reason, people named themselves accordingly. This led to people revering animals, plants and natural objects with which they associated themselves.

They even abstain from consuming those animals, reptiles, plants and natural objects from which their totem was derived, since one cannot conserve and consume at the same time. In essence, this suggests that these animals, plants, reptiles, and natural objects will be considered taboo in the family or clan. In fact, they believe that these totems inspired them either spiritually, physically or otherwise in time immemorial. The sexual relationship and marriage between men and women who share the same clan name are strictly prohibited since they are related. In essence, this suggests that endogamy is not promoted.

### **The Origin of Nicknames as Surnames**

A surname is defined as 'the name that one shares with the other members of one family, often the last name'.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that surnames originated from totems. Long before the arrival of Whites or missionaries to Africa and the Vhavenda community, Vhavenda were using their totems as surnames. No one was called by his or her nickname or what we currently call a surname, which was not related to his or her totem.

A nickname is defined by Procter as: "A name used informally instead of (some) one's own name, usually given because of one's character or as a short form of the actual name".<sup>4</sup> This is confirmed by Netshisaulu says that: "A nickname is a familiar, funny or humorous name given to a person or things instead of or as well as the real name."<sup>5</sup> Neluvhalani defines a totem by saying that: "*Mitupo yo ḁisendeka kha zwiṭpuka u imela zwiṭanga kana miṭa nga ha mazhinda a Thovhele Shiriyadenga ane a ḁivhea e ene wa u itela Vharwa vhave khaedu ya u ḁivhiwa nga maanda ane zwisike zwa vha nao uri zwi tsireledzwe u bva kha Khamba u swika kha Nḁou*" which translate Totems are based on animals to represent houses or families about the prince of King Shiriyadenga, the one who was known for challenging his prince to be known for the braivary that the arborigins have which must be protected from a Tortoise to an Elephant".<sup>6</sup> Vhavenda used to give nicknames that were not in any way related to anything other than to what they went through or what they could do best, hence their nickname/s. Using nicknames as surnames is a practice that has been in place since time immemorial within the Vhavenda community. Can one justify these nicknames as original and permanent surnames? Obviously not. Their usage cannot be

<sup>3</sup> Procter, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*.

<sup>4</sup> Procter, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 736.

<sup>5</sup> N.C Netshisaulu, *Tshivenḁa Tsho Vhibvaho* (Johannesburg: World Wide, 2022), 3.

<sup>6</sup> M.C Neluvhalani, "Examining the Migration Theory of Black Africans into South Africa: A Decolonial Perspective" (University of Venda, 2017), 73.

justified as such since this distorts their originality and reality about themselves. Currently, most of the surnames among the Vhavenda are nicknames without connection to their totems. Examples are *Bulannga* (plank cf Afrikaans), *Masheleni* (money), *Maberegisi* (perskes cf Afrikaans), *Sibadela* (hospital), *Manngo* (mango), *Tshigidi* (skiet cf Afrikaans), *Hamula* (hammer), and *Basigidi* (basket), etc. Using such names as surnames erodes the connection of people envisaged by the totems.

The following sections provide the origin of some Vhavenda's nicknames that have evolved into surnames today.

**a. The Tshivhase nickname as a surname**

Before Chief Tshivhase became Tshivhase, he was known as Chief Raluswielo, which was also a nickname. Chief Raluswielo was an arrogant warrior who wanted to wipe out or sweep away all his enemies or those who fought against him. As a result, he was given the name Raluswielo because of all his activities of wiping out and sweeping away all his challengers. Due to this, the people gave him the nickname Raluswielo. From there, he ambushed the Chief Nephiphiḁi with his people while they were fast asleep and burnt their residences and everything they had. As a result, people nicknamed him Tshivhase and praised him as: “*Tshivhase miḁi-ya-vhathu, wau wa sala wo tshena ya vhaḁwe i luhungu.*” This literally means he is the one who burnt other people's homes and left his standing while others are left in darkness over the fire. Since then, the original surname of that group, which is Masingo, disappeared, and the group acquired the name Tshivhase as a clan name because of the chiefs' behaviour.

**b. The Mphaphuli nickname as a surname**

The Mphaphuli surname was given after one member of the Amandebele clans tore the arm of an enemy at Kekana village using his battle axe. From that day, the surname of this group changed from Musi to Mphaphuli from the verb ‘fhaḁhula > Mphaphuli’ which literally means to hack off, or sever a man's arm in battle.

**c. The Makuya nickname as a surname**

The surname Makuya comes from the verb “kuya”, meaning grind. This surname emerged after the young brother of Tshivhase fought against a group Vhatsonga group that was coming from Mozambique. This group of Vhatsonga from Mozambique was to inaugurate their own chief Nkotchwi, who had also usurped the land of Masala, who belonged to Vhadzanani. Fortunately, Mr. Nkotchwi left them while waiting to celebrate his inauguration and went to inform Magiledzhi Makuya. Magiledzhi Makuya, together with loyal subject Nkotchwi, decided to attack these Mozambiqueans together with their children. As a result, Magiledzhi Makuya wiped out all the people of that Mozambiquean tribe together with the children, hence Magiledzhi's name changed to Makuya. Since then, people have praised him as “*Ndi Makuya tshetshe, o kuya Vhatonga na vhana whose* literal translation is ‘*He is Makuya who ground Vhatsonga and their children*’; loosely translated, the one who ground the Vhatsonga people and their infants. Ever since then, this group has been known as the Makuya, instead of his name Magiledzhi, or his totem Singo.

**d. Lambani nickname as a surname**

The Lambani surname was given to the group of Halambani following an occasion in which one person called Lambani was given a piece of land at the place called Mafukani to rule, but he refused for his own reasons. This surname, Lambani, means “to refuse”. Oral tradition tells that the surname is derived from this person, Lambani, who refused to take it because he believed the land was very small and he wanted to get a large portion of land. Later, he got himself a larger portion of land at the place currently called Halambani. This does not justify the usage and existence of his name and the name of the place. What was this place called before Lambani fought the inhabitants of this place and defeated them? This is unfair to the history of this piece of land and his surname, which had been sacrificed by the usage of such a nickname.

Looking at the preceding examples, in these surnames, one can attest that these are nicknames that do not appeal to anything. They are not related to their totems. It is believed that when they are

uttered, the concerned groups may feel more ashamed of themselves instead of being proud of what they did to the then enemies. For them, these surnames do not depict *ubuntu* and respect in them as Africans, but have elements of violence, arrogance, cruelty and barbarism.

With Lambani as a surname, its history is simple, and there is no way in which they can keep their history in isolation. This threatens their ownership of this place since it is known to everybody that initially they did not have a place to stay but refused their portion until they fought other people who were staying there and defeated them.

## **The Origin of Totems turned into Surnames**

### **a. The origin of the Nḁou surname**

The surname, Nḁou, is derived from an animal called Nḁou's an elephant, in Tshivenda. This animal is respected by both human beings and all other animals in the jungle for its strength. This animal is one of the biggest in the jungle. There are various clans today that use the surname *nḁou*, 'elephant', as their surname. Although today they may be different, they have a common origin. There are the *nḁou* of Tavha. These are the Vhangoḁa whose origin is not known since they were in the Southern part of Africa before anyone had arrived. They are the aborigines or original Vhavenda whose origin cannot be traced easily by anyone.

The **second** Nḁou's are the Vhaḁavhatsindi of Tshiavha. They are currently scattered all over Venda. These are the Nḁous of Ha Maḁenzhe, the Nḁous of Vhuḁanda, and the Nḁous of Duvhuledza and the Nḁous of Halambani. These Nḁous were initially staying together as one clan. However, they parted ways to occupy various places which belonged to the then Vhangoḁa Nḁous. It can also be presumed that they might have had some clashes amongst themselves, and they found it better to live away from each other. Vhavenda community oral tradition shows that the Nḁou clan is the Vhangoḁa group, which is the original and first group to occupy the present Venda since time immemorial. No one knows where they come from. When all the other groups came to Venda, this clan, the Vhangoḁa Nḁous, were already there.

From the Vhavenda traditional narrations, an elephant is known as the king of all animals in the jungle. It is also known for its gentle, quiet and protective behaviour toward other small animals. Any clan amongst the Vhavenda community which associates itself with an elephant and calls itself the elephant, ((*dzi-*) *nḁou*). This group believes that it has either taken some elements from those of an elephant or an elephant that had protected or saved the lives of that clan a long time before, resulting in the group taking the name as their totem and eventually their totem surname. This totem makes them feel very proud and larger than other groups since an elephant is bigger than other animals.

There are also two things that the clan will do to the elephant as a symbol of respect. Firstly, the clan will no longer eat its meat; secondly, the clan will never tease or vex an elephant if they come across it. What they do if they come across it and want to chase it away is they will clap their hands saying, "*Tuwai iwe muzhou riḁe ri fhire, tuwai zwau*", meaning "go away, you are an elephant, so that we can pass, may you go! When they say this, the elephant will move to give way without fighting them. This shows that the respect which exists between the clan and the elephant is a two-way respect. This shows a connection between the elephant and the people who use *nḁou* as their totem.

### **The Nḁou's oath**

When members of the *nḁou* clan make an oath, it differs from that made by members of the Mudau clan. This is interesting as no member from one clan will confuse his/her oath with that of another clan. The Nḁou's of Tavha will say, "*Nwana wa nḁou*", meaning 'the calf of an elephant', and the Nḁou's of Maḁenzhe will say '*Maḁenzhe wa gono*', meaning Maḁenzhe who is a weaning calf.

### **The Nḁou taboos**

The Vhangoḁa and Vhaḁavhatsindi's totem is Nḁou, alias the elephants, and they do not eat the trunk of an elephant because they regard it as taboo. Instead, they respect an elephant more than any other animal on earth. They even respect the spirit, honour and thank an elephant for providing them with life, nourishment and comfort.

## b. The origin of the Mudau surname

*Mudau* is the most common surname among the Vhavenda community. This surname is derived from an animal name, *ndau*, 'a lion'. Per Marole, 'The traditional narration of this clan started as a small group situated in the place presently called Tshakhuma'.<sup>7</sup> This clan, the *Vhadau* stayed together at Tshakhuma for a long period until one day, when a senior member of the family returned from the fields to find his house burning. When he tried to trace the origin of the fire, he failed. Nobody could tell him how the fire had started. As a result, together with his followers decided to search for a new home. Along the way to the unknown new home, the group split into various groups.

Out of these groups, one group decided to go to the place currently known as *Mashau*. Another moved to the place presently called *Thenzheni* while yet another group decided to move forward to the place called *Tshiheni*. This act of moving away from their original home to an unknown home divided them into different groups. However, they considered themselves original *Vhadau*. Wherever they are today, they all know that they are one, except the most ignorant and unambitious people.

## The Vhadau's oath

The *Vhadau*, as already indicated, are composed of various groups which split from one clan. However, some groups did not want to associate themselves with the other group because of differences. This resulted in their having different ways of singing their praises.

The oath of the *Vhadau of Tshakhuma* goes like this: *dombye*, literal meaning, peanuts, or vegetables without salt. The oath of the *Vhadau of Mashau* became *phunge*. The *Vhadau of Tshiheni*'s oath became *Vhulalwe, nwana wa ndau*, literally meaning the den of a cub.

## Vhadau's taboo

Although the *Vhadau* clan is split into groups, they are still the same people. They are one in the sense that they both share the same taboos; for example, they do not eat, *mutshila wa mbudzi*, 'the tail of a goat'. Why they do not do this is a theme for another paper.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, the researcher has shown that a totem is a very important symbol, resembling a coat of arms or an oath, which a clan or a family respects more than any other thing. This is due to the background or the history of that clan. It is noteworthy that within the Vhavenda community, a totem is considered more important than a surname. Most of the surnames that are used currently started somewhere in the past as nicknames. These nicknames gained popularity through their utilisation; hence, they are currently used as surnames. The utilisation of a totem in place of surnames will also help avoid endogamy and incest, which in many instances takes place with or without knowledge. This has happened in many families and clans, and it would only be discovered very late when two or more offspring were already born. It must also be stated that the respect that a totem has for various people goes to an extent where others consider the totem animal, plant, and natural object as part of themselves, and they do not even consume the animal from which a totem had been derived. In fact, they believe that these totems inspire them either spiritually, physically, or otherwise.

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<sup>7</sup> L.T. Marole, *Mwali-Raluvhimba* (Moria- Lesotho: Microprinting Works, n.d.), 4.

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