The *domba* Language Variety as a Vehicle of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

Among Vhavenda, *domba* is an indigenous initiation institution that both men and women attend. This is a unique indigenous institution which prepares young men and young women together in order to understand the importance of marriage, child-birth and other aspects of life. And as a result, this paper outlines the use of the language variety associated with this institution as well as its educational significance among the Vhavenda. The use of this variety, when *domba* is in session, plays an important role in educating young men and women to be responsible for their families and properties. In addition, cultural values and norms which are no longer observed today in many African communities are also taught by this institution. Although this variety promotes safe sex and sex only after marriage, it has also served as a breeding ground for a gendered variety of the language because it advocates that men and women should not be treated equally. Despite some difficulties, an understanding of the role played by the *domba* language variety in education by the Venda people and of the education received by initiates in this institution will allow us to recapture the space we need to reinvent ourselves, and to fashion knowledge systems and strategies to ensure a responsible adult life. This will empower us to become independent people capable of producing a value system worthy of our dignity.

Introduction

The modern world has resulted in rapidly changing behavioural norms and values, with pressure from all sides to conform, reject or to rebel against them. This paper looks into the institution of the *domba* and the *domba* language variety as a vehicle for perpetuating and conserving indigenous knowledge systems which are imparted to young men and women. In this institution, traditional cultural values and norms that are often no longer observed in urban areas are addressed through a discussion of the use of the *domba* variety.

Over the past two decades, elderly people have been interviewed in rural communities situated in the Vhembe and Mutale districts of the Limpopo Province with a view to develop an understanding of the role played by the *domba* variety and initiation schools as a way of passing down indigenous knowledge systems.

There are several types of initiation schools among the Vhavenda, including *vhusha* and *musevhetho* for girls, and *murundu* and *vhutuka* for boys. However, the *domba* is the main initiation institution.
attended by both young men and women. Although all these institutions play an important role among Vhavenda, the purpose of domba is to initiate young men into manhood and young women into womanhood. In other words, they are taught the secrets of life and how to take responsibility as adult members of their communities. It is at these schools that the gender roles are differentiated. Ntuli, in Odora-Hoppers (2002:61), notes: “both male and female initiation programmes sought to prepare youth to take control of their lives within the broader community”. In almost all these schools, male and female roles are prescribed and, from their inception, indigenous languages have been used to impart the required knowledge related to these roles. Although these schools are no longer attended regularly by the members of the community as it was the practice in the past, the role they have played over the centuries in reflecting a traditional worldview cannot be easily put aside.

**Domba language variety: theoretical perspective**

*Domba*, like any other institution, has its own codified variety that should be regarded as a social norm. This variety assists the *domba* attendees in maintaining their social identity. Anyone who attends *domba* should be able to speak this variety. He/she should be able to use it or should have a proper knowledge of norms of lexical items, expressions and norms of usage. According to Wardhaugh (2006:22), this type of social variety “determines how speakers perceive and organise the world around them, both the natural world and social world”.

In addition, Mulaudzi (2012:63) has noted that the natural world and the social worldview reflect an African cultural worldview which is the philosophy underpinning the total way of life in any given African society. According to Martin and Nakayama (2003), such a way of life may be seen as a system of thought, a pattern of behaviour, a system of values and material creation in a society that has evolved through interaction with the environment. The African cultural worldview is, thus, comprised of several specific elements, including values, norms, beliefs and religions.

It is through such a variety that the initiates and those who have already graduated from this institution are able to distinguish themselves from other social groups by reflecting the elements of a particular African cultural view. With regard to this, Hudson (1980: 24) points that the variety’s linguistic items make it different from other language varieties. In addition, Saville-Troike (1982:51) says, “there is variety of language codes and ways available to its members”. Therefore, the emphasis of this article is on the lexical items and expressions which characterise the *domba* variety as a medium of instruction. However, an understanding of *domba* is a necessary background to a further discussion of the *domba* language variety.
DOMBA

According to Stayt (1931:112), domba is a co-educational initiation school for both young men and young women. It does not operate like a normal school, because it takes place when there is a number of grown-up girls ready to participate. Also, it is necessary that there be a good harvest and plenty of food which will be discussed in detail later. The domba prepares the girls for marriage by teaching them the true significance of marriage and childbirth. They are also warned, through the same means, of the pitfalls and dangers they are likely to encounter during their lives.

The nature of domba and its supervisors

The origin of the domba is unclear, but meaning can be inferred from the noun form, domba. The noun, domba, is derived from the verb stem -dombela, which means to become more mature. This is reflected through the various phases of the domba, that is, the tshikanda, ludodo and domba proper (Mulaudzi 2010), all of which are discussed in detail. Stayt's (1931:112) maintains that the man who is in charge of domba is known as “Nyamungozwa” and is a song leader. He is assisted by a woman, known as “Nyamatei”, who supervises the girls. These two people direct the mentorship programme in which older girls and boys mentor those younger than themselves.

The semantic meaning of the mentors’ names explicates their role within this institution. The noun Nyamungozwa is formed by adding the prefix Nya-, meaning “the mother of”, to the noun mungozwa, which means “the woman who has just given birth”. This noun appears to have been borrowed from the Shona word mungozwa (“the woman who has just given birth”), which means a woman who is nursing a baby of up to a month old. Although the semantic meaning of the name Nyamungozwa is feminine, within the context of the domba it explains the role played by the man in charge of the domba process. He is regarded as the mother (one who nurtures) of all the initiates and, as such the initiates are obliged to listen to him. The role played by Nyamungozwa, in this institution, affirms the role and position of women in the community. The name Nyamatei, a title assigned to a woman who supervises the girls, is likewise formed by incorporating the prefix Nya-, the plural prefix ma- and the verb stem -tea meaning to “lay the foundation”. This maternal figurehead conveys the basics of life to the initiates. Both Nyamungozwa and Nyamatei see to it that the domba is properly run and that the initiates carry out all its instructions in order to graduate. The supervisors perform these duties in the same way as all mothers who look after the home and the children as secondary. This dispels the myth that women play a minor secondary role in African communities.

Domba has three phases, with the first known as tshikanda followed by ludodo. The last phase is known as domba or domba proper, because it is during this last phase where the teachings reflect real life experiences. These first two phases are explained in detail in the paragraphs that follow. Like
other initiation schools, domba has its own language variety which is characterised by lexical items and unique expressions which are peculiar to this variety. Lexical items and expressions which characterise domba are, therefore, discussed according to these two phases.

**Domba phases**

*Tshikanda*

According to Van Warmelo (1932:53), the phase known as “tshikanda” (a piece of raw hide) is a secret initiation rite for females and so named because the initiates’ attire is made of raw hide. This phase takes place on the first day of initiation before ludodo and domba proper. During the tshikanda, vhadabe (initiates from the last domba session) teach the initiates the principles or formulae of what is traditionally right, customary, ethical and obligatory. This is the phase in which cultural values and norms, which are often no longer observed in modern-day urban areas and some African communities, are also addressed. Once the initiates have gained knowledge of these formulae and the appropriate terminology, they are regarded as the foundation of the future generation and are thus referred to as vhatei. The noun vhatei derives from the verb stem -tea which means “to lay the foundation”. Vhatei gather outside the entrance of the main gateway known as “khoro” which is also an access route to the rest of the village. This is the place where the men usually gather and where strangers wait before they make any contact with members of the community. The vhatei, like outsiders who are not privy to tshikanda, wait at the khoro before they proceed to the hut known as tshivhambo for initiation. The noun tshivhambo, which appears to have been formed from the verb stem -vhamba meaning “to crucify”, implies physically taxing treatment the initiates. The name tshivhambo suggests that vhatei are taught to endure hardship and are given their first lesson in the python dance. During this phase, a thahu (an ornament) is presented to Nyamatei and it forms part of the proceedings of tshikanda. The presentation of thahu to Nyamatei is in recognition of her status and is symbolic for motherhood.

This phase focuses on female initiates as does the second phase or ludodo.

*Ludodo*

This is the second phase of domba which takes place two days before the domba proper. The noun ludodo is formed from the verb stem -dodoma meaning “to run quickly with frequent halts”, “to cower down and hide”. This name is indicative of some of the practices which the vhatei engage in during ludodo. These practices express the beliefs of the Venda people. According to Stayt (1931:113), the significance of ludodo is to teach physically mature girls about the hardships of
marriage, the signs of pregnancy and what childbirth entails. During ludodo, the vhatei also receive lessons in the python dance. The domba dance is associated with the python because this snake is part of a fertility rite. The initiates imitate the movements of the python when they perform the domba dance. Although they are allowed to practise u ķavhula (meaning to practise pseudo coitus), penetration during sexual activities with men is prohibited. If one of them is found to have had sexual penetration, the initiate will be punished by the vhadabe. The punishment meted out to such a girl is known as tshipata. The noun tshipata is formed from the verb stem -pata meaning “to squeeze or compress”. As this noun tshipata suggests, the vhatei are punished by squeezing their fingers between two sticks known as tshipata. This practising of u ķavhula teaches the initiates that a mature woman should have a male lover and this will make her acceptable to society. In addition, they are also taught to sing various songs which will be performed when domba commences. While they are practising these songs, a big drum known as gangaliºgovhamilenzhe, and a smaller drum, thungwa, are beaten.

The domba proper

This is the last phase of domba which is attended by both males and females (Stayt, 1931:112). It takes place on the third day and is the start of the domba proper, because this is where the practical teachings which reflect real life experiences take place. The beginning of this phase is known as domba ķo tshoηa or u kwasha gumbu. The expression domba ķo tshoηa (meaning to break through a fence) indicates that domba is in progress. This expression suggests the disruption of normal family life and indicates that other activities performed by the community should be stopped for the moment. The expression u kwasha gumbu, meaning “to let the unknown be known”, indicates that the initiates are believed to know nothing when they first come to domba. By attending domba, the initiates will learn all the secrets of life. At this stage, the vhatei, comprising of physically mature boys and girls, are brought u wela tshivhambo or to be initiated. The expression “u wela” is used to signify the initiates crossing over into another state of adulthood by being initiated.

During domba, knowledge is imparted through practical lessons which reflect practical life as already noted. This makes domba a complete institution when demonstrative lessons known as maʃano (shows which demonstrate practical life) are presented to the initiates. The lessons are significant because the initiates, or vhatei, learn about sex, marriage, and childbirth and are forced to perform certain feats of endurance which humiliate but harden them. This is confirmed by Stayt (1931:124) who explains that the education initiates receive is intended to produce well-rounded, people-centred individuals. The following are some of the demonstrative lessons of domba, known as maʃano:

a. Ngoma ya singwele (the demonstrative lesson of falling). The noun singwele is derived from the verb stem -wela. The purpose of this lesson is to teach female vhatei to be faithful to their husbands. If they are not, they may find themselves in trouble. The main purpose of this
lesson is to encourage husbands to be faithful to their wives even despite the emphasis being on the wives unfortunately.

b. *Ngoma ya mbudzi na nngwe* (the demonstrative lesson of the goat and leopard). This is demonstrated by male initiates who play the role of drunken men. While they are drinking beer, the goat which they are supposed to slaughter is killed by a leopard. In this lesson, male *vhatei* are forewarned to protected their property and to be alert.

c. *Ngoma ya mvhero* (the demonstrative lesson of the young married man). The noun *muvhero* is derived from *muvhera* meaning “young married man”. During this lesson male *vhatei* are taught to defend themselves if they in trouble.

d. *Ngoma ya Thovhela na Tshishonga* (the demonstrative lesson of Thovhela and Tshishonga). This is demonstrated by male initiates who play the role of Thovhela and Tshishonga. These two characters are married men. When a fight breaks out, Tshishonga is defeated and his wives are taken by Thovhela. Through this lesson, male *vhatei* are taught to be strong and to protect their wives.

e. *Ngoma ya nyalilo* (the demonstrative lesson of crying). The deverbative noun *nyalilo* is derived from the verb stem –*lila* (cry). During this lesson, male *vhatei* are taught to show their manliness and dominate their female partners during sexual intercourse.

f. *Ngoma ya tharu* (the demonstrative lesson of the python). *Domba* centres on woman, and here the python refers to a woman. *Vhatei* (only males) are warned not to have sexual intercourse with a woman if she has had an abortion or a miscarriage. If they do, they will die. The woman is equated with a python swallowing an animal or a human being, which then dies inside the python’s belly.

g. *Ngoma ya sali* (the demonstrative lesson of embers). Here the initiates are taught the hardships of life by being forced to hold hot embers. The noun *sali* is formed from the noun *sale* meaning embers.

h. *Ngoma ya mavhavhe* (the demonstrative lesson of pain). The noun *mavhavhe* is derived from the verb stem –*vhavha* (pain). During this lesson, the initiates are ordered to engage in strenuous physical exercise and, if they fail to do it properly, they are severely beaten. The purpose of this lesson is to prepare them to face hardships after graduating from the *domba* institution.
i. *Ngoma ya muṱoṱombudzi* (the demonstrative lesson of the grasshopper). Muṱoṱombudzi is a female grasshopper that represents all women. It is bigger than the male grasshopper. During this demonstrative lesson, the female vhatei are taught that men are superior to women. This is demonstrated when a female, who is disguised with rushes and grass as a grasshopper, thrashes the male initiates. But is defeated in the end. This is not a balanced lesson because it portrays women as weaklings.

j. *Ngoma ya phalana* (the demonstrative lesson of the small impala). The noun *phalana* is derived from the noun *phala* (impala). During this lesson, the vhatei, who are referred to as *phalana* (small impala), learn that whatever they do, the chief, or *phala* (impala), should get a share of the proceeds.

It is clear from these demonstrative lessons that *domba* education is closely linked to morality as it teaches the initiates to take responsibility as adult members of their communities. Respect for elders is also given priority.

The parents of all initiates, who are mostly commoners, must pay a fee known as *tshitanza* in order for their sons and daughters to be admitted to *domba*. The noun *tshitanza* means “the money which is paid by commoners, princesses and princes in order to gain entry into” *domba*, is formed by the noun prefix *tshi-* and the verb stem -*tanza*, meaning “to vomit”. In the case of *domba*, the parents hand over or relinquish control of their sons and daughters to Nyamungozwa and Nyamatei who henceforth exercise parental control over the vhatei. *Musiwana* (a commoner) wears only sheḓo which symbolises low status. Girls from the royal family put on a sheḓo (a narrow strip of cloth between the legs which hangs down from the front and behind) as well as *palu* (bluish cloth with many white or coloured spots and stripes). These last two items, the sheḓo together with the *palu*, symbolise high status. The chief's wife wears *musisi* (a cloth worn by female as a back apron) and *palu*. The combination of *musisi* and *palu* are symbolic of a high social status while commoners’ wives wear *musisi* without *palu* as a sign of their low status. This custom illustrates the stratified nature of Venda society.

On the first day of the last phase of *domba*, the most important person on the first day of the last phase of *domba* is a traditional doctor known as *maine*. The traditional doctor is assigned this important position because he makes a fire with a stick known as *tshiregu*, which is a piece of wood assumed to be female with which fire is drilled. This fire is never extinguished and is made possible by covering *hala ḷa mafhaṱa* (hot embers) with ash when everyone goes to bed. The *hala ḷa mafhaṱa* are sometimes referred to as twin babies, because the original embers resemble those that are used to light the fire the following morning.
After the traditional doctor has made the fire, the vhatei are taken to the tshivhambo where the initiation takes place. Inside the tshivhambo, each mutei climbs up two poles onto the roof and then hangs upside down like a bat. In this way, initiates are said to be performing mulema or “bat in a sleeping position”. This practice signifies an entry into a new stage as the initiates will have to do away with the practice of u ghulula (the practice of false or simulated sexual intercourse) and become responsible mature adults.

When the domba is in session, the vhadabe and vhatei form a queue known as deu and perform the python dance. This is the central feature of this institution. Every evening the Nyamungozwa plays a drum and this is known as tshilondo. In doing so, he invites the vhadabe, vhatei and others to attend the domba ceremony.

Tshilalandoima

As Mulaudzi (2010:157) has stated, the last phase of domba is called tshilalandoima because the vhatei remain standing all night, as implied by the compound noun tshilalandoima. This compound is formed by the noun prefix tshi-, the verb stem -lala, the subject concord nd-, the perfect tense marker -o and the verb stem –ima (stand). The Nyamatei, also known as mme a domba (mother of domba), orders the initiates to endure a physical feat called vhulimu (meaning to hold up the arms straight) by raising their arms above their heads. The chief however, has the jurisdiction to intercept this endurance test and may exclaim, “Vho rulwa”, meaning to let them rest. This ordeal continues all night; the following morning, all initiates are told to go to the river to bathe but separately. Men go in one direction, while the women go in a different direction. After bathing, the women are inspected to determine whether they have had sexual intercourse while the domba was in session. After this, the female vhatei shave their heads leaving a small patch on the crown, known as. Male initiates do the same. The bare patch is known as ndobo in the case of men and tshiundu in the case of women. Before the women depart for home, they put on a tsirivha, a skirt made of sheepskin (Van Warmelo 1989:421).

Linguistic components of the initiation process

In the context of linguistics, the Domba variety is taught to initiates or vhatei by vhadabe who act as the guardians of the initiates throughout their seclusion for the initiation rites. In addition, Nyamungozwa and Nyamatei see to it that domba is properly run and that the initiates carry out all the instructions of this institution before they graduate.

Domba is, thus, the term used for an initiation school for young men and women. This type of school takes place only when there are a number of physically mature girls ready to participate, as well as
when there has been a good harvest and plenty of food. It usually lasts for three months but, in some instances, can continue for as long as twelve months.

The *domba* variety is a codified secret language variety used in the first instance by the initiates, and thereafter when they are adults, to establish a specific degree of relationship with other men and women. It is used in this instance as a code to indicate that one has, in fact, been through the initiation process. The new initiates and those who have already been initiated use nouns and expressions that have been coined for the initiation process and known only to select few.

*Vhatei* must learn these lexical items and expressions when they are first admitted to *domba* and have to memorise them as they are a core part of the *domba* language variety. The *vhatei* have to use these lexical items and expressions during their stay at *domba*, because it is forbidden to use any other variety. Some of the lexical items and expressions are characterised by a neologisms (Mulaudzi, 2010:157). The following examples illustrate this:

**Table 1: Some nouns (lexical items) with a shift of diction but not in meaning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Domba variety</em></th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th><em>Standard variety</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>miHora</em></td>
<td>Sperm</td>
<td><em>Vhunna</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>tshivhaso</em></td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td><em>Musadzi</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>tshiuludza</em></td>
<td>Man</td>
<td><em>Munna</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ṭharu</em></td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td><em>Musadzi</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>masale</em></td>
<td>Menopause</td>
<td><em>Musadzi o vhinaho/musadzi a savhonaho</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ndwedzi/musadzi a sa</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Yaho maDuvhani</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>phandu</em></td>
<td>Fire</td>
<td><em>Mulilo</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Some expressions with a shift of diction but not in meaning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Domba variety</em></th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th><em>Standard variety</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Dzivha Fundudzi</em></td>
<td>Gate of the courtyard</td>
<td><em>Khoro</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Magona a lutshele</em></td>
<td>The handle of the drum</td>
<td><em>Zwa u fara ngoma</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mahatsi a mulamboni</strong></td>
<td>Pubic hair</td>
<td><strong>Vhukuse</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vho rulwa</strong></td>
<td>Let them rest</td>
<td><strong>Vho awedzwa</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U vala khoro</strong></td>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
<td><strong>Thumbu</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U vula khoro</strong></td>
<td>Give birth</td>
<td><strong>U vhofholowa</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3:** Some nouns are used during *domba* and also occur in the standard variety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Domba variety/Standard variety</strong></th>
<th><strong>Meaning</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Gangaliṱagovhamilenzhe</em></td>
<td>The name of the big drum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tshipata</em></td>
<td>Sticks to punish guilty initiates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tshiregu</em></td>
<td>The female piece of wood in which fire is drilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vhatei</em></td>
<td>Initiates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tšiṱanze</em></td>
<td>The money which is paid by commoners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nyamatei</em></td>
<td>The mother of the <em>domba</em>; female leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nyamungozwa</em></td>
<td>The mother of the <em>domba</em>; male leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tshikanda</em></td>
<td>A secret initiation rite for females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ludodo</em></td>
<td>The second phase of <em>domba</em> during which the initiates are taught the secrets of life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4:** Some expressions used during *domba* and also occur in the Standard variety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Domba variety/Standard variety</strong></th>
<th><strong>Meaning</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Hala ṱa maphaṱa</em></td>
<td>Hot embers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vho rulwa</em></td>
<td>Let them rest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

195
To be admitted to the domba institution for the first time
The start of the domba
The start of the domba
The start of the domba

Conclusion

This social variety of language has been used for decades by the Venda people to impart knowledge to young men and women before marriage. The information which they gain during domba helps them cope with life after marriage. This variety educates young men to be responsible for their wives, families and property by demonstrating lessons such as ngoma ya mbudzi na nngwe (goat and leopard). The most striking feature of the vocabulary of this domba variety is that most of the words and expressions are specifically coined for this institution. In addition, this variety also helps women to describe themselves, particularly the way in which their bodies function. Although this variety helps to promote safe sex and sex only after marriage, it has also served as a breeding ground for a gendered variety of language because it advocates that men and women should not be treated as equals. Evidence of this is illustrated in demonstrative lessons such as ngoma ya mufofoombokudzi, and ngoma ya nyalilo.

Understanding the role played by the domba variety among the Venda people allows us to recapture this space in order to reinvent ourselves, and to fashion knowledge systems and strategies to equip ourselves for a future life as responsible adults. This will empower us to be independent people capable of producing a value system that conserves a significant indigenous knowledge system and enhances a special community ethos especially through its neologism.

References


References


