

Title

Reviving BaTonga culture to support community development: A case of Zambezi Valley communities, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The Tonga culture in the Zambezi Valley has lost some value due to various driving factors which speeded the atomisation of culture amongst BaTonga people in North-Western Zimbabwe. The main thrust of the paper is to identify major causes of cultural decay in the Zambezi Valley communities, assess the impact of cultural decay and suggest solutions that are aimed at preservation of BaTonga culture in ways that promote community development. This study was carried out in the Zambezi Valley communities of Binga, Nyaminyami, and Hwange with a sample size of 30 people targeting Tonga people. Mixed methods and simple statistics were used to quantify the data collected during the research. Ethically, local leadership (chiefs and village heads), heads of departments in the districts were consulted to seek permission to carry out the research. The key informants and focussed group discussion participants were carefully selected to include old men and women who were displaced from Zambezi River during the construction of the Kariba dam in 1950's as well as group of able-bodied men, women and youth to obtain detailed information on the phenomenon which is under review. The need for this research therefore arose due to unbridled increase in disappearance of cultural values and norms among BaTonga people along Zambezi Valley in Zimbabwe.

Key words

Efficacy, Community development, Culture, BaTonga and Zambezi Valley

Key dates

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Introduction

In Africa, it is very difficult to separate people from their culture and this entails that they are deeply ingrained and entrenched to it. Sociologically, it is believed that society is shaped and designed by culture. Culture is classically defined as the total way of living which is socially accepted by people in the society. It is the design for living held by members of a particular society. In order for a society to operate functionally and effectively they must ensure and maintain strict and constant adherence to the various components of culture. In the 21ST century, culture of minority society has suffered from the abyss of cultural erosion induced by advent of Christianity, technology, displacement and urbanisation. Through this milieu, the paper will discuss the major causes for cultural decay for Tonga culture, its effects and suggest solutions for preservation of BaTonga culture in the Zambezi Valley communities in Zimbabwe.

Methodology

The researcher collected information from the participants using qualitative methods, use of questionnaires, focussed group discussion and key informants were used to mine detailed information on the history of BaTonga and preservation of culture. The researcher also visited BaTonga Community Museum in Binga Rural district to interview the Curator and to collect data on the archives. During the research, convenient sampling in villages was used coupled with observation. Face to face interviews were done in public and community gatherings during maize handouts which gave the research a direct convincing concern to interview the old men and women who were relocated from the Zambezi River in 1950's by Federation government. These interviews revealed the attitude, belief and perception on how they understand the subject under review. The photographs were also used with the consent of the owner and privacy was also promoted in the due course to preserve the ethics of the society. However, it is interesting to note that the use of questionnaires was also used in conjunction with the triangulation process in which the researchers collected the data or information in various points to investigate the phenomenon at a different angle of elevation. The group discussion forum and public meetings were used as methods of collecting data on cultural decay of BaTonga people in the Zambezi Valley. The tables were used to show variables and indicators of the above phenomenon. Primary source of information and secondary data were used as well as academic reviewed articles.

Table 1. The comparison of the participants in the 4-focus group discussion (FGD's) carried out in 3 districts of Binga (Sinakatenge and Manjolo), Nyaminyami (Mola) and Hwange (Songwa). December 2021 to January 2022

District	Village	FGD's	Mal es	Femal es	Tot al
Binga	Sinakatenge	1	6	6	12
	Manjolo	2	7	5	12
Nyaminyami	Mola	3	4	6	10
Hwange	Songwa	4	5	7	12

Findings and discussion

The causes of cultural erosion

The causes of cultural decay are varied and immense in the Zambezi valley society given that some of the norms and values has been discarded and avoided. The traditional dance and inheritance of properties is no longer being practiced in Binga, Hwange and Nyaminyami due to various factors which inhibit cultural practices in the society. The advent of Christianity, urban migration of youths, growth of technology, displacement, and gradual deaths of old people. These factors are the major and most persuasive factors that have fuelled the atomization and decomposition of culture of the minority groups in the society. These causes are therefore explained in detail below to show case the extent at which they contribute to the ultimate demise of culture and traditions in the Zambezi valley communities.

Christianity

The Creator of the Tonga people is Leza (Hambulo, Muleya, Letseka, 2023). The Creator Leza is respected, revered, remembered and worshipped through Mizimo or past deceased members of the family and community. Christianity was introduced by the European missionaries in nineteenth century and it destroyed the safety net for orphans, elderly people and the poor. Daun (2000) defines Christianity as a book religion and as an institution concerned with moral life. In the Zambezi valley society, Christianity attempted to shift Tonga people from their Leza and Mizimo that brought rains and fortunes to the Zambezi valley communities. One older man during the interview echoed that:

Zilyo zyasu zilokugwa abanyama akambo kakuti basi Nsondo bavula muchisi, bantu tabachi tobelezyi pe zyiitiko zyangsiku.

The man was sharing an experience that their crops were being devoured by wild animals due to people who have divorced worshipping Leza and turned to Christianity. The Pentecostal churches in areas such as Tyunga, Luunga and Manjolo (in Binga) Mola, Jongola and Siakobvu (in Nyaminyami) and Songwa, Dinde and Musuna (in Hwange) have lured the youngsters through musical instruments and melodious songs sung by praise and worship teams.

Youth migration

Youth migration is the movement of youth from the birthplace to areas that promises a better life for them. The migration of youth poses various problems to the area of

origin. Culturally, the societies lose the active groups with creativity and innovations. And the old people lose active and able-bodied people who assist them to play drums for traditional ceremonies like Ngoma yabuntibe, chilimba and Mapwayiila. These are common in Tonga tradition along Zambezi valley communities. One woman in Sinakatenge village during the interview session echoed that:

Baana bachikula bakatuchija bakaya kumadolopo, nkwakafwa akabulo tiimba kukubeleka.

The woman reiterated that youths has departed the rural setting of Sinakatenge to urban area to search for employment and there are very few who are coming back home after they get employed. This alone it's a clear indication that culture has been left for old people only and the youth has detached and divorced themselves from the norms and values that are practices in the rural areas and they grabbed new way of life (town-life). From this research it has been realized that the migration of youth is one of the factors which has contributed to cultural erosion of Tonga in the Zambezi valley communities. The sporadic movement of youths from the rural area to urban area is a fatal blow to cultural decay of BaTonga people as they have left a hole that will take time to be filled in the Society. These youngsters are flooded in towns such as Bulawayo and Harare and some have become permanent residents. They have been completely engulfed by the rising city (Mo gaga mwakafwa kabulo tiimba) and the aroma of foods in the chicken inns and restaurants. Youths are like flies they can be easier caught with milk than vinegar.

Growth of technology

The advancement of technology has a bearing on the decay of BaTonga culture even though it is said that technology has brought more good than harm in the Society. The technological growth here includes network connections which enabled WhatsApp communication by use of smart phones which are available in rural areas. Almost everyone in the rural areas has a phone whether young or old. With this type of advancement in communications, families are now disintegrated as they are no longer visiting each other but instead they just communicate through phones hence hindering physical interactions. The village head at Mola averred that.

Bana bangu kuti twamana kulya kupela ngabazuula kuma Wasapu kupela tako uchambula amwenzinyina pe agobelo.

The Village head said that his children after eating Sadza for dinner, they all glide on WhatsApp chatting with other friends online and this had led to the dismissal of the culture of discussing issues as a family. Technology has ushered new things which had eroded cultural practice such as Nkoolola, an initiation where girls received teaching on proper behaviour and respect for self and others from the traditional female teacher (Muntanga et al, 2019). With all this, it reflects and shows that social media advanced by technology has an upper hand to diminish and debase the value of BaTonga culture in the Zambezi valley communities.

Displacement of BaTonga people

The relocation of BaTonga people from the Zambezi Valley in 1950's by the government of federation to pave way for the construction of Kariba dam. During this period there was an exodus and dispersal of people from the valley and they settled on the upland 70 to 100 km away. One Oldman from Tyunga attested that

Our ancestral spirits were left in the Zambezi River during the process of displacement since their graves were enveloped and covered by water.

The above sentiments are embodied in the district anthem of Tonga people where it details the wailing and sniveling of our ancestors on the other side of the river (*Mizimo yabo ila lila ilamvwinka mutala alwizi*). Muwati (2015), using the lyrical content of the district song, gives voice to the Tonga people and allows them to tell their own story from their personal perspective. It's a unifying song for BaTonga people, the song is sung in schools as well as in public gathering at district level as a way of reflecting back on the Tonga culture and how they were living in the Zambezi valley highlighting its beauty and value. Joshua Chikozho et al, (2021) says that the district song poignantly recounts how the ancestors of the Tonga people are wailing on the opposite side of the Zambezi River and showcase how the Tonga people were disproportionately disconnected from their origins in the context of their culture. The anthem constructs the Kariba dam as a font of historical memory and a symbol of communal dislocation and repressed cultural potency. It elaborates a painful sense of disconnection between the dead and the living. From the research, it was realized that more than 27 000 people were displaced from the Zambezi basin to places like Gokwe and Lupane where they mingled with Ndebele and Shona people. It is through this migration which gave birth to the beginning of cultural debasement and degradation of Tonga people. Over and above, inter-marriage worsened the situation where Tonga women are now being married by other tribes and this led to cultural crosspollination and assimilation meaning to say Tonga culture was now diluted. The umbilical cord of Tonga people has been disconnected by the process of displacement and it's one of the major causes of the misfortunes facing Tonga people in today's lives. During the interview one traditional leader said that

Imvula ilokuleka kuwa kabotu akambo kakuti mizimo ilinyemede nkambo bama Syanene balimu Lwizi.

The man was accentuating that the scarcity of rains in the Zambezi valley communities is due to the fact that the ancestors are very angry as they are left alone and this will take time for BaTonga people to worm out from the situation of receiving erratic and unreliable rains. Their shrines have been abandoned and the rain makers are no longer having connections to appease their ancestral spirits to make rains that benefit the entire Zambezi valley communities. The lives of the Tonga since they were taken from their land their shrines and the graves of their ancestors have been hard, have been painful a struggle year out and from season to season

(Sibanda, 2013). Even though, the Kariba dam is a lifeline of the Zimbabwean and the Zambian economies, but the project has left a legacy of cultural decay of BaTonga and increased vulnerability amongst the displaced communities due to entitlement losses.

Death of old people

The population of old people who original came from Zambezi has gradually declined due to deaths by old age and natural diseases. It is natural that God calls his own people when they have accomplished their service on Earth and some are on the bed in despair waiting for the proverbial call from the heaven. Old people in the Zambezi valley are said to be the ones who own the culture since they have a close connection and living experiences with ancestors. Their presence in the society has a meaning in the preservation of culture and traditional practices. Old men in Hwange echoed that:

Our culture is silently going away gradually as we are losing old people who came from the Zambezi River basin. We have lost the stories and the history of BaTonga people and their cultural activities.

From the above said words, it is therefore clear and vivid for one to say that old people remain an important social group in preserving the culture of people in the society. The old people are not easily swayed by any wave of external culture that is brought by foreigners but they hold tightly and tenaciously to their culture like a baby sucking milk from its mother. The outbreak of the pandemic diseases like cholera and COVID-19 in the Zambezi valley communities had a bearing on the dearth of old population. Through this research, it was realized that most of the communities are no longer playing *Ngoma yabuntibe* in Christmas days due to the fact that the activity was known by old people and most of the youths knows nothing about it.

Effects of cultural erosion

Cultural decay has negative effects to children, youths and Old groups in the Zambezi valley society. The total life of people will be eroded, degraded and replaced by exogenous culture. This affects the social way of living which is accepted in the society. Through this research, it was realized that the culture of BaTonga people has lost its luster and gleam. Most of the children in the Zambezi valley are growing up without knowing what is right and wrong. Their behavior has become wild and weird such that they are unable to show respect to elders in the society. During the focused group discussion one parent reverberated that

Children of nowadays has lost respect and principles as they are no longer able to greet visitors and even to follow instructions from their parents.

The children in the Zambezi valley communities have grabbed new way of living which is alien to BaTonga culture. Parents are accusing the Civil Society Organisation by preaching the child rights in schools and in the community

during their programming. A number of ethnic groups have seen the local people regrettably abandoning their culture for other Western traits (Saidi, 2017). One woman during the interview reiterated that:

Mulaka wachiTonga uli kumenegwa amilaka imwi iswanizya Chi Shona a Chi Ndebele ikapati kumabazu ali mbuli kwa Mola, Sinakatenge a Sinamagonde.

Women highlighted that the Tonga language has been diluted by other languages especially in areas like Mola, Sinakatenge and Sinamagonde which are closer to Shona and Ndebele. Sibanda (2013) says that indigenous language including Tonga are fast vanishing throughout the World as their last speaker die, or as dominant language push them out of common usage. According to UNESCO (2006) about 2500 language are threatened with extinction by 2020. It is a lamentable scenario that the Tonga language is at threat from other languages in Zimbabwe. This is an indication that BaTonga people may gradually lose the pure Tonga dialects if they keep on grabbing and borrowing words from Ndebele and Shona. If it continues, this will mark the beginning of cultural atomization and decomposition of BaTonga culture in the Zambezi valley communities.

Suggested solutions on cultural erosion

BaTonga people lost their ancestral lands and were relocated to the Arid, tsetse infested remote areas far removed from their ancestral lands. Their terrain was renamed, that is reconfigured and the BaTonga existence along the Zambezi River was overshadowed by Western Imperial maneuver deleting along the way BaTonga presence historically and historically. The research paper provides the contribution from the local leadership and stakeholders regarding the notions of preservation of BaTonga culture of the Zambezi valley communities. The village from Nabusenga ward said

We need our own College and University in the Zambezi valley communities, the BaTonga museum is not enough alone to be the hub and center of BaTonga cultural preserver but we want the Tonga language and culture to be taught in our own schools.

The village head was emphasizing that there is need for establishment of colleges and University in Binga and this will help a lot to create a venue of learning to youths and even other tribes will benefit from these institutions. The views of the old man are not lost but act as a point of departure to say the government of Zimbabwe should think of building institutions (Colleges and or Universities) in the Zambezi valley. Saidi (2016) argues that BaTonga have been able to consume their culture and express it with pride. While recognition of their language to be used in schools and media has been late in coming as well as its recognition by the new 2013 Zimbabwe constitution. Basilwizi Trust Organization in Binga took a chance to drum up awareness on the value of Tonga and also to ensure that Chi Tonga language is taught from primary up to university level. UNESCO (2006) attested that one could conclude that the Tonga make significant use of literacy practices embedded within their

proverbs for specific purposes in their everyday lives to beliefs, knowledge, we articulate values, beliefs and tradition and even past achievements. Therefore, this will contribute a lot to promote the preservation of BaTonga culture in the Zambezi valley community.

Recommendations

In this time of independence and political freedom in Zimbabwe, the Tonga need to invest in literacy development, be it in reading, writing, educational or academic advancement, information and communication technologies growth and innovative utilisation of locally available resources which should also be branded for external markets. This move will help to stop poverty and the present crisis of exploitation in their lives, while opening opportunities for their worldwide visibility. In this regard, new and honest dialogue is required between local authorities, elected officials and the Tonga themselves so that the literacy programmes are wholly owned by Binga community. Based on the study findings, the following recommendations were suggested.

- The media and education curriculum should uphold and incorporate all aspects of heritage such as the BaTonga cultural realities in order to foster tolerance, inclusivity as well as visibility and cultural development of social groups in the Zambezi Valley.
- Entrenchment of cultural competitions of *Ngoma buntibe* and *Chilimba* in schools (primary and secondary) as well as in Colleges and Universities to ensure acceptance of traditional practices by everyone in the Zambezi Valley Communities.
- Local leadership and the district stakeholders should keep on checking on the traditional and cultural practices that are practiced in the district and also to promote the teaching of Chi Tonga in schools.
- BaTonga history and heritage should be taught in schools from primary up to tertiary level so as to preserve the culture and practices of BaTonga people in the Zambezi valley.
- The Tonga community should stick to their culture including religion and language to revitalize it in order to challenge the marginalization of the Tonga language and culture.

Conclusion

The paper has done justice to give an elaborate examination on the cultural decomposition and decay of BaTonga culture in the Zambezi valley societies in Zimbabwe particularly in Binga, Hwange and Nyaminyami. Christianity, technology, urbanization and displacement of people from Zambezi River basin in 1950's was among factors which fueled cultural decay of BaTonga people. The research demonstrate that BaTonga people are a flexible tribe who are very quick to learn other people's language and culture and this makes

them to find it easy to mingle with others in across the Country. The study established several suggested solutions regarding the preservation of BaTonga people in the Zambezi valley communities and it also demonstrates how other major or superior languages in Zimbabwe have contributed to undermine BaTonga language and culture in the Zambezi valley communities.

Author biography

Willard Muntanga is a holder of Master of Science degree in Disaster and livelihoods studies with Women's University in Africa. He is an independent researcher in History, disaster, peace and conflict in the Zambezi valley community. He has published various papers on child protection, indigenous child parenting and challenges facing satellite schools in Binga rural district. He holds a B A degree in History with peace and conflict studies from Solusi University Bulawayo, Zimbabwe and an executive certificate in Humanitarian assistance and programme management with University of Zimbabwe. He also studied with Lupane State University and studied Bachelor of special honours degree in monitoring and evaluation. He holds a diploma in Agriculture food security and livelihoods which he studied with Centre for Development studies in Gweru, Zimbabwe. His broad research interests are in the field of BaTonga livelihoods and intersection between culture, politics and development in the Zambezi valley, Zimbabwe.

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