

The Relevance of Xitsonga Oral Tradition¹

S.J. Malungana

1 Introduction

There are three problems which I address in this article. The *first concern* is that often voiced by the elderly within African culture, namely that they observe the uncultured rules of morals, bad manners, lack of accepted etiquette and lack of respect among youths. The *second concern* is more general. The indigenous South African languages and their traditions have not received adequate attention in education, research and study. This is especially true in schools. The *third concern* relates to the fact that publishers do not publish indigenous cultural materials. All three these elements hang together, causing the marginalisation of African indigenous culture in South Africa.

In order to address these three concerns, I argue in this article for the relevance of taboos using Xitsonga oral tradition as example; for the importance of introducing the teaching and learning of traditional culture in schools on a broader scale; and the publishing of traditional cultural materials.

2 The Meaning and Function of Taboos in Xitsonga Oral Tradition

Xiyila (taboo) is a Xitsonga word for supernatural injunctions against socially undesirable conduct or behaviour practised by an individual. In oral tradition, a *xiyila*

¹ This article is developed from three papers. 1) 'The Meaning and the Functions of Taboos in Xitsonga Oral Tradition (Folklore)' delivered at the 4th SAFOS Biennial International Conference, 26-28 September 1996; 2) 'Why Teach Oral Tradition in Learning Institutions?' delivered at the National Conference of the Indigenous Languages of South Africa, 4-5 July 1997 at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein; 3) 'Book Publishers and the Indigenous Languages in South African Oral Tradition' was read at the FILSA Conference, University of Venda, Thohoyandou.

in its broadest and most abstract meaning, could be defined as a rule of prohibition covering what one may call, the community's unwritten oral law. Junod (1927:573) who wrote on *xiyila* in Xitsonga defines the term 'taboo' as:

Any object, act, or person that implies a danger for the individual or for the community, and that must consequently be avoided, this object, act or person being under a kind of ban.

Taboos are forms of cultural beliefs of avoidance which are used constantly in the daily lives of the Vatsonga. From a cultural point of view, 'taboo' functions in oral tradition and is transmitted from generation to generation. It may be understood in terms of essence and/ or process.

In terms of *essence*, the 'taboos' of a culture represent the most basic elements or essence of that culture. In the context of oral tradition, a culture's system of 'taboos' is a system of beliefs and practices of avoidance by means of which a certain group of people struggles for perfection of their daily activities in terms of how they perceive the nature of the supernatural as well as human life as such. These unwritten oral customary laws or rules of conduct should never be broken but be obeyed at all times. If broken, the community perceives the individual or the community itself to come into some form of danger. This danger can be perceived to come from supernatural, natural as well as social sources. This is why 'taboos' can be said to prevent individuals but also the community from danger. As such, the breaking of a *xiyila* (taboo) among Vatsonga, may be of great offence of to both the supernatural and the entire society.

In terms of *process*, 'taboos' regulate the processes of social interaction and community relationship maintenance, continuance and development. The social processes which 'taboos' facilitate, maintain and continue community and ensure that it not be broken up. Since they also regulate the social processes among the individuals and groups within community, the 'taboos' also ensure that community development takes place within socially shared, collectively understood, and historically grounded arrangements².

Taboos perform a wide variety of *functions* in any given society, especially in Vatsonga communities. They reflect a people's life, thinking and daily activities.

² Taboos should not be neglected in the study of any oral tradition-based culture. Whether the focus of research is on the *essence* of a culture or cultural *processes*, in both areas of attention, cultural analysis cannot do without dealing with the important function 'taboos' play in traditional culture. This is important especially concerning Vatsonga culture because it is in the culture's taboos, that one may find the mirror of that culture.

In order to understand some of the functions taboos have in Vatsonga culture, I provide a few examples³.

2.1 Taboos Dealing with Decision-making for Women

The oral laws of taboo are applied to women especially on decision-making.

i It is a *taboo* for a mother to decide on the bride price of her own daughter during a lobola meeting. She is not allowed to speak, even if she may have brilliant ideas. The reason is that she may spoil the smooth running of the discussion or interaction of the relevant parties.

ii During family disputes, it is taboo for a woman to speak before her husband allows her to do so. The man is the head of the woman. Among the Vatsonga a man is in charge of women. But this does not mean that he should look down on his wife for example or treat her badly.

iii It is a serious taboo for females to speak at public meetings. They are only allowed to listen. They are strictly forbidden to speak. Women are to remain silent at meetings. They are not permitted to speak. They must be kept in the background as the oral law taboo itself lays it down. If they have questions to ask, they should ask their husbands at home. According to Vatsonga cultural habits, it is not right for a woman to raise her voice at meetings. Even if a woman may be able to articulate views clearer than men, they may not break this taboo. The rationale is that this taboo prevent or avoid competition between the sexes.

iv It is also a taboo for women to speak in tribal courts. They are also not allowed to even ask for clarifications at public assemblies. They should ask their husbands at home. Women who do not have husbands, must ask their married friends.

Even though these taboos may be perceived as oppressive, they are not. They do not allow men to treat women badly. They are no mere objects which can be handled and ill-treated by men in the name of taboo.

³ For some of the taboos, I provide the taboo as it is stated in the oral tradition, followed by a rationale or the meaning of the taboo and then with what the taboo serves to prevent. The preventative function also has an element of concealment built into it. As such, the taboo creates a space for someone in terms of which that person or persons have to function but it also conceals spaces or activities for that person who is prevented from participating in the activity.

2.2 Taboos Dealing with Decision-making for Men

i Taboo: *Wanuna a nga pfumeleriwi ku nghena endlwini ya ntswedyana a kunguhata timhaka ta xihlangi ni nsati, swa yila.* (A man is not allowed to get into the bedroom of his wife who has recently given birth and decide matters on the newly born baby, it is a taboo.) The reason is: *A nga fa mahlo.* (He may become blind). This taboo also has a preventative measure built into it: *Ku siveriwa wanuna ku etlela ni nsati wa yena loyi a nga ni n'wana lontsongo hikuva a nga tlhela a tika.* (It prevents a man from being tempted of engaging in sexual intercourse with his wife, who may fall pregnant again). This is a traditional taboo which controls the sexual behaviour of men.

ii A man is prevented from seeing his own new-born child for some specified period of time in his own house however much he may desire it. This oral law prevents a man from interfering with the activities surrounding the child. For example, a child may be deformed or may need immediate medical attention. If this is the case, a man will just be in the way of the goings on around the child.

iii Concerning a new-born child, the man is expected to save up money to buy what the infant may need as well as for any possible medical expenses.

iv A man is also prevented from even talking to his wife and help her plan on the infant. Should he have important messages for his wife, he has to convey them through a female who functions as intermediary between him and his wife.

v Taboo: *Wanuna a nga fanelanga ku kunguhata timhaka ta vukhomba bya n'wana wakwe, swa yila.* (A man is not allowed to plan about initiation matters for his daughter, it is a taboo). The reason is: *A nga penga.* (He will become mad). The preventative measure of this taboo is: *A nga tiva milawu ya vavasati/ Ku siveriwa wanuna ku vona n'wana wakwe endlwini ya vukhomba.* (He may come to know initiation formulae for women. The taboo prevents a man from seeing his daughter in the hut where she is undergoing traditional initiation training).

As in the case for women, these taboos can allow for exploitation of men by women. A woman may demand a lot of money from the man while he may not know how it is spent or have any say whatsoever about the planning and running of the initiation function for girls. Everything is decided upon and planned by his wife in partnership with other women whereas the daughter is his. The question here arises as to how one can allow that a man be kept in the background when he sees things happening in his own family in the name of taboo and not allowed to utter even a single word in the decision making processes?

Further, it is unfair that the very man who should not involve himself in the planning of the function is proscribed by customary oral law to provide every request made to him by his wife without murmur. The smooth running of the function depends upon his involvement financially, but not with the arrangements.

These elements of traditional culture may be perceived as exploitative of men.

2.3 Taboos Dealing with the behaviour of Children

Among the Vatsonga, there are many taboos which children must observe. Here are a few examples:

i Taboo: *Loko vana va tlanga hi ku hoxana hi misava, swa yila.* (If children play by means of throwing soil/ sand to one another, it is a taboo). The rationale is that this may prefigure a death in the family: *Swi vula leswaku ku ta va ni rifu emutini.* The preventative measure is: *Ku sivela leswaku va nga tlunyani mahlo hi misava.* (To prevent children from getting soil in their eyes).

ii Taboo: *Ku ba n'wana laha ku nga ni lavakulu, swa yila.* (To beat children in the presence of elders, it is a taboo). The rationale is that elders may claim that it is they who are being hurt: *Lavakulu va ri ku biwa vona.* (Elders claim that it is they who are being beaten). The preventative measure is: *I xikombiso xo eyisa lavakulu.* (It prevents giving signs of disdain to the elders).

iii Taboo: *Mufana a nga dyeli embiteni, swa yila.* (A boy does not eat from an earthenware pot, it is a taboo). The rationale is: *A nga neriwa hi mpfula loko a ya evukweni loko a kurile.* (Rain may coincidentally fall on him when visiting his in-laws when he is a grown up). The preventative measure is: *Ku sivela vafana ku nghenelela timhaka to sweka.* (To prevent boys to get involved in cooking matters).

iv Taboo: *Mufana a nga faneli ku korisela vuswa enkombyeni a dya, swa yila.* (A boy must not clean out a wooden spoon by wiping porridge with his fingers and licking it off, it is a taboo). The rationale is: *A nga pfimba mavele.* (His breasts may swell). The preventative measure is: *Ku sivela vafana ku nghenelela eka timhaka to sweka.* (To prevent boys to get involved in cooking matters).

2.4 Taboos Dealing with Death

Among Vatsonga, death is most feared and there are many taboos related to it.

i Taboo: *U nga tshami ehenhla ka sweko, swa yila.* (One should not sit on a hearth-stone, it is a taboo). The rationale is: *U nga ta fela hi nuna kumbe nsati.*

(One's spouse may die). The preventative measure is: *U nga tshwa marhaku*. (One's backside may burn).

ii Taboo: *Manana a nga byeriwi swa le tikhobeni, swa yila*. (One should never talk to a mother about initiation matters for girls, it is a taboo). The rationale is: *A nga fa*. (She may die). The preventative measure is: *A nga tiva to xaniseka ka n'wana wakwe*. (She may know about the ill-treatment of her child).

iii Taboo: *U nga tibohi hi ngoti, swa yila*. (One should never tie himself or herself by means of a string, it is a taboo). The rationale is: *U nga ta fela hi vatswari*. (One's parents may die). The preventative measure is: *U nga tisunga hi ngoti*. (One may commit suicide).

2.5 Taboos Related to Fire

Sometimes a woman observes the fire taboo until her child is able to walk, and she is forbidden to cook with others. The rule applies for at least a month after giving birth.

i Taboo: *Ntswediyana a nga sweki hi ndzilo, swa yila*. (Woman recently confined should not cook on fire, it is a taboo). The rationale is: *U kukumuka khwiri*. (Her stomach may swell). The preventative measure is: *N'wana a nga tshwa*. (The child may burn).

ii Taboo: *Ku oka ndzilo emitini, swa yila*. (To fetch fire from a hearth in other villages, it is a taboo). The rationale is: *U nga rhamba valoyi*. (One may invite witches unaware). The preventative measure is: *U nga hisa nhova/ tiyindla*. (One may burn the veld/ houses). This taboo assumes that one may transport evil with the fire. Consequently, the taboo prevents taking it from one village or house to another.

2.6 Taboos Related to Marriage and Love Making

Taboos have a bearing on proper Vatsonga marriage and love making. For example, in marriage, Vatsonga prefer exogamy to endogamy. They therefore adhere to the rule prohibiting marriage within the clan or even sexual relations between close kin through the incest prohibition. Fortes (in Firth 1980:186) also maintains that: 'The incest taboo is universally thought of and stated as the prohibition of sexual relations between specified kin.'

i Taboo: *U nga teki makwenu, swa yila*. (Do not get married to sister/ brother, it is a taboo). The rationale is: *Ku hlayisa vuxaka* (One should create healthy relations within the clan). The preventative measure is: *Mi nga tswala swigono*. (One may give birth to a deformed baby).

ii Among Vatsonga it is a taboo for a man to have sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman since menstrual blood is described as dirt. It is said that a woman may harm a man with this kind of blood. Should a woman not observe this taboo, her behaviour may be associated with sorcery. Hence, among Vatsonga, there is an Idiom which says: *U loyiwile* (He is bewitched).

iii If a wife is menstruating or nursing an infant, it is taboo for her husband to sleep with her. If it happens, she may lose her cycle. In addition, Vatsonga men are not allowed to be present at the place of birth and an elaborate postpartum sex taboo exists. That a man may not sleep with his wife after she has given birth may continue until the new-born baby walks. In general, sexual taboos are strictly enforced until the infant walks properly and birth blood has completely stopped.

iv Furthermore, it is said that the blood which comes out during birth and miscarriage is likewise a terrible taboo for a man. Hence, in Xitsonga, there is a taboo which says: *Swa yila, ku ya emasangwini ni wansati wo humeriwa hi khwiri*. (It is a taboo, to have sexual intercourse with a woman who has had a miscarriage). The rationale is: *U nga tshwa*. (One may burn). The preventative measure is: *U nga vabya/fa* (One may become ill or die).

vi Abortion is also considered a taboo among Vatsonga. There is a strong belief that the blood from a miscarriage is the same as abortion blood. Vatsonga regard the blood shed at an abortion as burning (*ya hisa*). The taboo related to abortion says: *Swa yila, ku etlela ni nsati wo kulula*. (It is a taboo to sleep with a woman who has committed abortion). The rationale is: *U nga tshwa*. (One may burn). The preventative measure is: *U nga vabya/fa*. (One may die).

vii Some husbands who work very far away from their homes and only come to their permanent homes after a long period, are usually forbidden by their mothers to have sexual intercourse with their wives on arrival. These wives sometimes have miscarriages or abortions during the absence of their husbands. In most cases, some husbands working far away from home are potentially open to have their wives aborting unwanted babies. Hence, some mothers partly act as self-appointed marriage- sexual- or love life- guards. But today, mother-in-laws no longer have full control over their daughter-in-laws since oral tradition is considered, especially on this issue, to be a thing of the past. In general, however, taboos still play an important role as a powerful medium of social control.

2.7 The Functions of Taboos: A General Perspective

Grunlan and Mayers (1984:227) summarise the functions of taboos as follows:

Taboos serve at least three functions. First, they keep the faithful in line. For example, the Mormon Church excommunicated a woman for publicly supporting the Equal Rights Amendment, which was opposed by the church. Second, they establish lines of separation to delineate the group and increase group solidarity. We often see this in extreme fundamentalist groups who view all other Christians, including Evangelicals, as apostate and separate from them. Third, taboos are used to help maintain social controls, as for example, the incest taboo

Taboos have many functions and they can be used for many purposes. They can be exploited too as I have indicated in the overview on taboos related to men and women. Even so, they order different phases of human behaviour, as well as social and religious processes. They articulate diverse bodies of tradition, all of which are embedded in the sacred but also in the mysteries and myths which maintain community. Generally, taboos constitute a system containing many rules and regulations which all together function as media for social ordering and control. As such, they articulate the essence of a culture. Therefore, research into cultural introspection, cultural identity, oral tradition, nation building, history but also the developing of future scenarios for communities cannot ignore the important roles 'taboos' play in culture. Given this fact, the following two sections deal with the introduction of oral tradition studies in formal education and the role publishing should play in this regard.

3 The Introduction of Indigenous Languages and Traditional Culture Studies at School

Modern institutions in Africa consider traditional structures and customs as things of the past. Anything related to custom or cultural habits are often discarded. But such attitudes rarely occur among European people. They rate their languages and their traditions as the best and even the colonised used the languages of the coloniser to express their views. This reflected a racist view because it is certainly not by chance that anything 'black' was and still is perceived by many as negative. Hence, people talked about black languages, the traditional cultures of black people, black workers, black business, black society, black magic, black women, black men but also black consciousness, black power and even black-on-black violence. Even though they are not used in this way, all these concepts relate to their binaries in terms of whiteness, indicating some perception of white superiority.

Colonisation and apartheid are things of the past. The African people do not have to conform to these legacies anymore. We have to look at our own cultures and traditions and study that which forms the essence of who we are and where we want

to go and what we want to achieve. This essence is provided by our oral traditions as articulated in our own languages⁴.

3.1 The Teaching of Oral Tradition in South Africa

The teaching of oral tradition in South Africa's indigenous languages is either totally neglected or only done in haphazard fashion. In general, it is a neglected field of study in our learning institutions and not adequately taught in any given learning programme. Given that this genre is the bedrock of any indigenous culture and language—not to say, one of the richest resources for the study of mother-tongue language or indigenous languages—this is outrageous. Tradition is not everything but if it is not treated as relevant, its marginalised status will continue to reflect prejudice against traditional African cultures and bias for the European.

Oral tradition is an enriching experience for learners. They receive entertainment and sound cultural teaching in the form of folktales, folksongs, riddles, proverbs, idioms and other aspects of oral lore such as cultural habits and taboos. To the coloniser and even modern European—who have their own oral traditions in terms of which they are brought up despite their literacy and even information technology—all these were deemed primitive. Now that South Africa has its own education specialists, this situation must be changed. This genre need to be fully accommodated in curricula. If it does not happen, the indigenous languages and cultures will not flourish as was the case with Afrikaans over the last 50 years or more.

A basic educational principle and sound educational policy is one that includes the cultural aspects of that culture's own language and traditions. These enable pupils and students to understand the culture and environment of their own community before proceeding to learn about other cultures. Akivaga and Odaga (1983:X) maintain that:

A sound grounding of the student in his (sic) people's culture helps him (sic) to become a useful member of the society. If the student has a systematic understanding of the way his (sic) people look at the world, for instance, in deciding what is right or wrong, or the sense of justice, he or she is better able to get involved in the evaluation of good social institution which upholds the values of justice. Proper education should give the student confidence in the human values of his (sic) people's needs and aspirations so that the student may play a positive role in society.

⁴ We no longer have the colonised and coloniser. This country is our home and every language has its own roots. Hence, my book on oral tradition or 'folklore' is titled *Timitsu ta Vatsonga*. This book includes 10 aspects of oral tradition, theory and their functions.

Oral tradition should be introduced in learning areas since, through it, learners gain understanding of the culture of their own people, broaden their knowledge about the world at large in their own language, and in a systematic way enrich their own culture and language.

Oral tradition also has a bearing on nation building. If oral tradition provides a primary determinism; that is, the conditions of human's life as a social animal, then it is basis on which people can develop into respected and dignified citizens. Further, praise poets usually compose praise poems about their countries and leaders. This helps in learning to understand the history of the country. As such, oral tradition is a powerful and dynamic medium of social education. More particularly, oral tradition educate to make a pupil a cultured and respected person in society. For example, if the taboos discussed above are adhered to by a Vatsonga person, he or she is considered mature and dignified. If it is true that it is mature and dignified people from different cultural upbringings who make a nation, then, surely, the people must be firmly grounded in their oral traditions. This means that the oral traditions cannot be ignored in our schooling systems and curricula.

3.2 Oral Tradition and the promotion of Indigenous Languages

Each cultural group has its own language. This language is developed in terms of the kind of realities it deals with and the social areas of concern where it is used. This is a structural feature of language-usage. If this is the case, then to see indigenous languages as 'under-developed' or even worse, to see indigenous culture as 'backward', is a category mistake. On the one hand, such perceptions register a serious lack of knowledge of the language, its power and the traditions it conveys. On the other, such perceptions remain blind to the ways in which indigenous languages have been prevented structurally from developing in terms of scientific language, etc. If indigenous languages are introduced into schooling systems, then both these perceptions must be addressed and rectified.

According to Wenburg and Wilmot (1973:93):

People in different cultures have different meanings for words. Imperialism is certainly a different concept for us than for the people in developed countries.

This raises two points in our context. *Firstly*, people from outside South Africa or people unwilling to study indigenous languages or at least indigenous oral traditions, will not be able to understand African people. They will not be able to understand the oral and other cultural traditions of indigenous people on their own terms. In the context where we attempt to foster cross-cultural understanding and the mutual recognition of dignity in the interests of nation building, this will not be

helpful. *Secondly*, if indigenous languages and how they articulate oral tradition are not systematically developed in schooling systems, this situation will continue to marginalise African cultures and identities. The effects of such a situation will be the same as that which we experienced under colonial and apartheid schooling regimes. The dignity and identity of African people will not be recognised and advanced in public. *Thirdly*, the people from within every South African culture—the owners themselves—must take responsibility for how the oral traditions and indigenous languages are to be advanced. It is only the owners of a culture who knows the culture, its idiom and oral traditions the best. They should also develop well-founded learning and education strategies to achieve this purpose. No-one else can do so.

Oral traditions should be taught in learning institutions since it has several functions for a particular indigenous language. It is a unique art because it is mostly attached to the culture of a people. On this point, Dhlomo (1948:86) said:

Art is understanding and expressing the feelings and experiences around you. An artist must come out of himself and enter into the general emotion, thought and experience of the people.

Oral tradition is a very important art form and related to the enhancement of the creativity of people. Through it, *maskanda* music is promoted amongst the isiZulu. Among Vatsonga, *swipendana*, *switende* and *timbila* instruments were mainly used to perform praise music. These instruments were basically used by the walking or running performers. Today, they have been improved considerably and are used by experts like Thomas Hasani Chauke, Maluleke and Juluka.

In education, praise poetry is an important instrument since they facilitate recital but also creativity. In the process, praise poetry also instils a sense of culture and pride. Since this is done in indigenous language, it relates language and tradition. Moreover, where praise poetry is encouraged creatively, it may also add to the expressivity of the language, etc.

Where the main function of oral tradition is that of maintaining and enforcing culture, tradition and good upbringing, it does not merely ensure its own continuance. As corpus of oral law, it ensures good conduct in terms of custom and dignity. Oral law affects human behaviour and determines the basic good pattern of culture and therefore society at large. Oral tradition, therefore, promotes unwritten binding rules which control most aspects of our traditional lifestyle. Oral tradition regulates our personal relations. For example, it is through folktales that children gain all the rules of morals, manner, etiquette, ceremony, cultural habits and good customs. If folktales are told and folksongs are sung in the language of the people, this art will grow and flourish. It is therefore, of paramount importance that we urge our communities to ensure that oral traditions are introduced more comprehensively

in their learning institutions. If that is achieved, love of tradition will prevail among the youths. If tradition is not taught and enjoyed in terms of its true nature, it will only be a lifeless body of laws, regulations, morals and conventions which ought to be obeyed, and in reality only evaded. This is where schooling can play a vital role. For, in actual life, rules are either never entirely conformed to, are used to exploit others in the name of law and custom or are ignored, leading to misconduct and socially irresponsible behaviour.

One of the major reasons of crime in society at present is that the indigenous cultural, oral traditions and languages did not receive their due from colonial and apartheid schooling authorities. This is also true for the European courts of law. If cultural rules are adhered to and children brought up in school in terms of them, we might have been spared the talk of the so-called 'lost generation', the spread of AIDS, the irresponsible behaviour of taxi-drivers as well as all the crime related to car-hijackings and rape.

Beattie (1977:139) says:

To maintain an orderly system or social relations people have to be subjected to some degree of compulsion; they cannot, all the time, do exactly as they like. For often, self-interest may incite behaviour incompatible with the common good, and so it is that in every society rules of kinds of constraint on peoples behaviour, are acknowledged, on the whole, adhered to. The rules and the means by which they are enforced differ greatly from society to society, but always they more or less effectively secure some degree of social order.

That this should happen through the schooling system and include indigenous oral traditions and the teaching of indigenous languages in the curriculum, speak for itself. On the one hand, the African languages cannot be developed successfully if aspects of oral tradition are rejected in learning institutions. Through oral tradition, a language is able to reflect the deepest thought, feelings and aspirations of an individual from that culture. Above all, oral tradition reflects the intellectual ability and the rooted cultural beliefs and actions of a particular people in general.

3.3 Attitude

Most Africans prefer to use English rather than their mother-tongue and many are even more fluent in English. This attitude derives from the myth amongst some mother-tongue speakers that if one does not have command of English, such a person is dull, uneducated or even labelled as 'idiot'. This is off-set against the view that

those fluent in English are 'clever' or 'civilized'. This fallacy does not recognise that for the English, their language derives from myths, religious perceptions and other 'uncivilised' or 'uncultured' roots. Moreover, if one considers what has been done to humanity and nature—and is still being done—by people who speak this language, then one cannot see this language as 'civilised' in an unqualified way. Therefore, one's attitude towards one's language and traditions is of paramount importance to one's own dignity and respect. In this sense, one language should never be superseded by and gain preference above another.

4 Book Publishers and South Africa's Indigenous Languages/ Oral Traditions

In arguing for the relevance of oral tradition in the two sections above, I have firstly addressed the issue of taboos in oral tradition using Xitsonga as example. Secondly, I provided a few perspectives on the importance of the introduction of oral tradition and indigenous language teaching and learning at school. The hopes that I have articulated here, however, cannot be achieved if enough and innovative materials are not published in these areas of concern by our South African publishers. In this section, I address the obstacles to publishing; oral tradition and indigenous language materials; the relationship of African people with their languages; and book publishing and democracy⁵.

4.1 Obstacles

Not much has changed concerning the marginalised status of indigenous languages since 1994. Those who value their language will certainly agree with this statement.

Since 1994, society has become more equitable and impartial in some spheres. This happened through the introduction of 'uniform identity cards', a uniform schooling system and of late, the possibility of the introduction of equality with regard to programmes of learning. In terms of book-based oral tradition (folklore) my own research conducted since 1996, however, has shown that there still is a large gap in this area.

⁵ Some of the important concepts associated with indigenous populations are their particular relationships to land ownership, oral traditional beliefs and some cultural habits. If oral traditions on all these areas are published, it will enhance the understanding of people about their own traditions but also those of others. This may prevent the marginalising tendencies which characterised the governance structures of the past because they will be better informed about how people themselves think about their land, traditions and languages. This will enhance the quality of democracy in South Africa.

That oral tradition, the literature of indigenous people, is discriminated against by the publishing houses is evident from five responses I had on inquiry.

Publishing house A in Pretoria East

There are many materials on this genre; they are not good. They are not based on the new curriculum. They are only used in grade 8 by the Department of Education. They have a small market. They are not based on original work. They are not financially viable.

Publishing house B in Johannesburg

'Many publishers can only concentrate on OBE now'.

Publisher C in Pretoria North

'Very slow market, provincial departments don't like to buy them'.

Publisher D in Pretoria East

'They are based on older ideas; the market is very poor and there is no competition'.

Publisher E in the Northern Province

'No market, no creativity, reduplicating already published work, and only used in one grade'.

These are the perceptions informing the reality. What is needed is a change of perception and practice. Creative materials for use at schools, should be published.

4.2 Indigenous People and Language

Strictly speaking, 'indigenous people' refers to the original population of a particular region. In general, South Africa is the land of origin of its original populations, i.e. before the arrival of Europeans. The indigenous languages are therefore the languages of the people who populated South Africa at this time⁶. It is the oral

⁶ The meaning of the term 'indigenous' or 'aboriginal' people has been the subject of much heated debate at many conferences. However, in simple terms, it means 'first peoples'. 'Aboriginal' means the 'original occupants of the land' and not illegal settlers. Even though this may be a problematic concept to use given the many African peoples who are perceived to be 'settlers' by other African cultures, it is functional in the sense that it usually indicates those people who occupied the land before the arrival of European settlers who displaced and marginalised the cultures, languages, customs and traditions of indigenous people(s).

traditions of these people which have been marginalised through more than three centuries. Should they not be recognised, South Africa's indigenous people will not benefit from the wind of democracy which is sweeping our country.

This point is also supported by the United Nations which has recognised that indigenous people suffer a particular form of discrimination globally and are custodians to a particular world heritage that must be protected. The United Nations declared 1993 to be the year of indigenous peoples, and in 1995, it launched the decade of indigenous people (Crawhall 1997:11).

Furthermore, it is said that the United Nation recognises approximately 300 million indigenous people world-wide. The number may be more.

Given the international recognition of indigenous people and the changes struggle by indigenous people to be recognised, it is important that South African institutions give full and due recognition to its different people's languages and traditions. We cannot accept that our own new democracy would continue to marginalise the languages of indigenous people(s). Since it is through language that a people draw its own essence but also organise its own social processes (see above), such marginalisation should not continue.

4.3 Book Publishing Influences True Democracy

Publishers should not discriminate by not being willing to publish the oral literatures of indigenous people. Since the book written in a given language is designed to serve as an instrument of communication both within that culture and with others who can understand the language or who can appreciate translations, the book, may be one of the most important media of fostering a sense of community and nation.

Books are meant to convey meaning. Above all, oral tradition put in print is a sophisticated medium: it transforms orality into literature. On the one hand, this is a medium through which the treasures of oral art can be conserved. On the other, it can be used for moral learning in such a way that indigenous people feel comfortable with their own schooling and learning. If oral knowledge is produced and circulated in the tangible form of book, it may advance literacy, identity formation and respect—especially seeing that there are so few books available in African languages. If this does not happen, it means that this is a privilege which still only belongs to precisely those knowledges and literatures which were instrumental in marginalising the African culture and its people(s).

The advent of democracy in South Africa also means that there should be equality in the availability of cultural knowledge. This can only happen through the publication. Freedom of the press, therefore, also demands the advancement of the writing on oral tradition. If not, democracy will remain tainted and diluted.

Institutions of higher education such as universities need material based on oral tradition for research. If materials of this genre are published, there is no doubt

that there is a market for them or that a market can be developed in this area. This genre should not be neglected. In addition, the publication of indigenous materials may provide the enjoyment of this literature by many. This means that not only the folktales and folksongs of Western traditions should be enjoyed and researched but also those from Africa. If publishers could give more freedom to authors to embark on this genre, new writers would emerge to publish books in the languages of indigenous people(s). We do not want to toyi-toyi anymore. We want to sing new songs. We want to sing praise songs advancing democracy and development.

Freedom is not something to be waited for. We have to take it and practice it. We have to do it together with those with institutional and governance power. As such, it is important to realise:

Many of you advise waiting as a strategy. Freedom and justice are not buses that make the same rounds on the half-hour and stop and open their doors and have plenty of empty seats. You can't wait for freedom and justice unless you are still waiting for yourself to realize freedom comes first from within (Wiley 1993:8).

This freedom from 'within' is a freedom closely related to the injunctions and dignity oral tradition provides. As such all areas, especially that of traditional culture must be included:

Let us expand our expertise in all areas. Let us not be so quick to abandon those areas where we have a foothold already because we are so creative, in the arts and entertainment and politics and sports. Let us not give up on those quite yet merely because people say they are what we do naturally. Let us understand these fields better, so we can manage them instead of the other way around (Wiley 1993:9).

Let us follow the early footsteps of great indigenous writers, such as B.K. Mthombeni and F. Thuketani in Xitsonga, O.K. Matsepe in Sotho and Maumela in Tshivenda who have published powerful books.

We need to run our own publishing companies more and we need to run them the way Heinemann and J.L. van Schaick run theirs.

Conclusion

Taboos are unwritten rules or laws of conduct which ensure social order in African communities but also govern social processes. The taboos form part of the oral tradition as they are transmitted from generation to generation. Generally, these rules

of conduct govern the African people(s)' daily activities and conduct. They regulate people's habits, manners, customs, and ensure that all in the community meet with conventional standards and good morals. Taboos maintain social control since no one dreams of breaking the social prohibitions. One of the central taboos in this context is the incest taboo. Fortes (in Firth 1989:172) says that the incest taboo is related

to the function of the family as the agency through which the knowledge and sentiments essential for maintaining culture are transmitted from generation to generation.

Taboos make people obey their own customs. The meaning of taboos are often derived from explanations related to the supernatural. This is why many of the preventative measures do not only have common sense explanations but are also related to the bringing of misfortune upon an individual or a community. Through this mechanism, taboos make people respect and adhere to their culture.

If it is true that, despite the interference of western culture over the last four centuries as well as the rise in literacy levels in Africa's post-independent states, oral tradition, traditional culture and especially taboos still have a major influence in African communities, then this fact cannot be ignored by the African schooling systems. As I have indicated in this article, the main function of taboo is that of maintaining and enforcing the unwritten laws which bind a people together in terms of the cultural habits of their own community. This must be acknowledged in our schooling systems and by publishers because the likelihood that this will change in the near future, seems slim. Stated more boldly: For African people(s), traditional culture will never be outdated and will still be central to who they are and how they participate in social processes in future.

There is a whole history of how South Africa's indigenous people(s) have been marginalised and exploited. This has lead to many evils. One is that it has lead to the creation of the so-called 'lost generation' of rootless youth and people with no respect of the dignity of others. This has happened across the culture groups to various degrees. Given the arrival of the new democratic dispensation, this situation may be changed. It can, however, only happen if all people, their cultures, languages and traditions are treated and valued on an equal basis. For oral tradition, it means that taboos, so central to these traditions, not be neglected⁷; that the role indigenous

⁷ In this context, one should add taboos as other part of tradition are always subject to development. Even so, it must be done in community and negotiated by all involved. It should never be enforced on cultures. Even so, one must not turn a blind eye to what is the case on the issue of taboos. They are powerful in society and community and must be respected as such.

languages play in these traditions and their importance for schooling be advanced; and that the publishing houses together with innovative authors participate in this process

Department of Xitsonga
University of Venda

References

- Aktivaga, SK & AB Odaga 1982. *Oral Literature*. Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Beattie, J 1977. *Other Cultures*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Billington, R et al 1991. *Culture and Society*. London: Macmillan.
- Crawhall, N 1997. *Khoesan Rights, Identity and Language Survival in South Africa*. Paper Read, Cape Town: Pansalb.
- Dhlomo, HIE 1948. Zulu Folk Poetry. *Native Teachers Journal* April.
- Firth, R 1980. *Man and Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Grunlan, SA & MK Mayers 1988. *Cultural Anthropology*. Michigan: Academic Books.
- Junod, HA 1927. *The Life of a South African Tribe. Vol II*. London: MacMillan.
- Kriel, A 1989. *Roots of African Thought*. Pretoria: UNISA.
- Malungana, SJ 1994. *Vuphato: Praise Poetry in Xitsonga*. Unpublished D. Litt et Phil Thesis, Johannesburg: RAU.
- Malungana SJ 1996. *Swiyila swa Xitsonga. Course I Class Notes*. Thohoyandou: UNIVEN.
- Malungana, SJ 1996. *Vele ra makweru ra yila*. Arcadia: Eulitz Productions
- Malungana, SJ 1996. *Timitsu ta Vatsonga*. Georgeville: Bard Publishers.
- Wenburg, JR & WW Wilmot 1973. *The Personal Communication Process*. New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Wiley, R 1993. *What Black People Should do Now*. New York: Ballantine Books.