

Review

Arranged marriage practices of the Vhavenda community of the Vhembe district, Limpopo province, South Africa

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The Vhavenda groups in the Vhembe district are related to each other. What is not known is how they come to be related. The reason is that they get married to their relatives. The other question is how family are involved in such marriages? Does any person arrange for someone to marry someone else? This paper seeks to investigate arranged marriage practices within the Vhavenda community. In particular, it seeks to probe the involvement of family members and tribal leaders in arranged marriages to establish their *modus operandi*. The paper is also motivated by the fact that the Vhavenda people are a close-knit community. This suggests that their consanguineous marriages may be deliberately organised. The research will focus on the people of the Vhembe district. The research will be carried out using the sociological approach (qualitative research design methodology) in the collection of data. The respondents will form part of the focus group, which will help them to express their views pertaining to arranged marriages.

Key words: Arranged marriage, practices, Vhavenda community, Vhembe district, Limpopo province, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Before embarking on the deliberations of this topic, it would be appropriate to define the relevant concepts pertaining to it. The main concepts are arranged marriage and practice. The Webster's Family Encyclopedia (1993: 7(1647)) defines 'arranged marriage' as the arranged socially, and sometimes legally, acknowledged union between a man and men and a woman or women, such that the resulting children are recognized as legitimate offspring of the parents. Although societies vary greatly in the rules that govern marriage, such legitimacy is always important in determining rights to property, position, rank, group membership, etc. ---others insist on marriage within a particular group (endogamy) or outside its (exogamy).

In British English the word *practice* is a noun while

practise is a verb. It is used as an uncountable noun. The word 'practice' involves doing something regularly in order to improve one's ability at it (Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary). This is supported by Longman Language Activator, which states that 'practice' refers to activities that people do in order to improve their skills or regular activity. Therefore, an arranged marriage practice refers to putting marriages in an orderly and socially acceptable manner by someone other than the couple itself, usually their parents.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This research gathers data from published and un-

published books, dissertations, magazines and made use of the qualitative method to collect data from respondents. Also, this research interviewed senior members who are married among the Vhavenda community. The reason for this choice is that they are the ones who know most of the culture/tradition of the Vhavenda community as far as marriage is concerned. The data are then accentuated or verified.

ARRANGED MARRIAGE PRACTICES OF THE VHAVENDA COMMUNITY

The Vhavenda community of Vhembe, an African cultural group, has a peculiar cultural marriage practice. Parents have an obligation to ensure that their children are trained on how to become suitable marriage partners from a cultural perspective. This is done to ensure that their children meet all the cultural expectations. For this reason parents send their children to cultural initiation schools, where they progress from phase to phase, starting at an early age.

In the Tshivenda culture, only a girl that has been through the *domba* ceremony is eligible for marriage. Similarly, only a boy who has been through the *thondo* is eligible for marriage. If a girl has not attended this school, when suitors come to the family to propose for marriage, parents would reply on behalf of the girl that she should first attend the Domba school. This is a school meant for ladies who have reached a marriageable stage. A girl who has not attended this school is not fit to be married because she is considered to be still 'young'.

In the Tshivenda culture, marriage is not just an affair between two individuals, but also an alliance between two families. It is regarded as a sacred institution precisely because it involves the welcoming of a new member into the clan. For that reason, it cannot be left in the hands of an individual to decide, that is an individual may not choose his or her own partner for marriage. It is the responsibility of the head of the family to organise marriages for their children. The aunt (father's sister) in the family serves as both an overseer and a consultant. The two families, that of the groom-to-be and that of the bride-to-be, engage in the formal processes of negotiating on behalf of their children.

If a male has reached a marriageable stage, he would report to the parents through acceptable ways of communication. If he comes with a suggested name, the parents would not just accept it. They will first send people to investigate the suggested name's parents that they would be looking at whether she is from a good family; a family of parents who do not bewitch people. Another aspect is whether she behaves appropriately. If she is found lacking in these aspects, the parents will not allow the young man to marry the lady. However, if they are satisfied with the family, they would send an intermediary to the girl's family to propose the girl for the boy. If he does not suggest a name, the parents will take some time

to search among the local girls. If none of the local girls are suitable, the family will find out from relatives who are far away if they can make any recommendations.

In all their deliberations, they take the needs and desires of the two families into account, from a cultural perspective. They believe that the needs and desires of the family are the ideal basis on which to establish a lasting marriage. Romantic love is never considered important in marriage, as it is considered to be a Western culture. During the formal process of negotiations the families need to come to a mutual agreement regarding the bride price (*lobola*), usually in the form of cattle, that the groom has to give (pay) the bride's parents. *Lobola* is an age-old Tshivenda custom that brings the families together. It is a gesture of gratitude on the part of the groom's family for looking after and bringing up the young bride.

Once *lobola* is paid, the deal is sealed. The groom and the bride cannot object; they have to abide by their parents' arrangement.

Arranged marriage is the only way to marry in the Tshivenda culture, and it is believed to ensure stronger and happier marriages than any other way.

Parents also arrange marriages for their children to enhance family friendship

This is clearly described in Sigogo's (2002:296) drama book entitled *La da hafha ji a kovhela*. In the introductory part of the book we find Mr. Maswuhanyise offering his daughter Vhulahani, to Mr. John Khavhatondwi, his friend. Mr. Khavhatondwi has been divorced twice previously and lives with his children from the previous marriages. Mr. Maswuhanyise's reason for his daughter to Mr. Khavhatondwi, who is old enough to be her father, is to strengthen the friendship of the two families. She refuses the offer and eventually elopes to get married to Vhangani whom she loves. They leave for the Reef where Vhangani finds a job. They live there together as husband and wife. Having been unsuccessful in his endeavour to marry his daughter to his friend, Mr. Maswuhanyise ends up crying like a baby.

Arranged marriages for children by women friends

Sometimes marriages are arranged by women friends. If the friendship has been good, the women may agree to be married to the same man. That is why there is a song which says it is good for the wives of the same man to wear matching outfits, which means it is good for women with the same husband to have the same preferences.

In other cases, women who are friends may want their children to marry each other. This is to cement the friendship that exists between the two women and their families.

Parents also arrange their children's marriages. If a

young man visits the home of a girl, the parents will excuse themselves to give him a chance to propose. This happens only when the parents are in favour of a relationship between their daughter and the young man. This may eventually lead to marriage. However, when the parents are not in favour of the relationship, they will not excuse themselves, thus making it impossible for the young man to propose love to the daughter. Many Vhavenda families were established in this way.

Sometimes women who are friends may let their favourite man marry one of their friends' sons. If the two women are friends, they will always be together. In that way, the young man can propose love to one of the women. The friend will then excuse herself to give the young man a chance to propose the other woman. In Tshivenda, young men who are friends will marry women who are also friends in this way.

Arranged marriage for financial benefit

Sometimes well-to-do families with children who have reached a marriageable stage are seen attracted to each other. The girl or the boy from a rich family does not want to marry from a poor family for financial reasons. There is likelihood that a boy from a rich family will marry a girl from a rich family. It is believed that both the husband and wife are afraid of the problems that emanate from a poor family.

This type of marriage is reflected in Maumela (1991), where marriage is not out of love. Two persons come into a marriage just because one is after material things attached to one's life. This type of love has been depicted in Maumela (1991:1-2), wherein a girl called Tshinakaho wants to marry Ndaedzo if and only if he becomes a ruler. The girl says that she can only marry Ndaedzo only if he is enthroned to the chieftainship. If not, she says that she will not marry him.

In this marriage the two arrange that the girl will marry Ndaedzo after he has been enthroned to chieftainship. In this book *Vhuhosi vhu tou bebelwa* by Maumela, the girl in question is not in love with Ndaedzo.

On Thursday, January 31, (2013:02) there was a news item that appeared in the Sowetan entitled *Songama marries 12 Year -old*. This happened in the Limpopo Province, where is reported that, 'a 13-year old Limpopo girl is now the second wife of a local sangoma in a village near Mahwelereng in Mokopane. That girl was married early this month to a man, 44 years her senior. ---The mother said that her daughter was diagnosed with epilepsy and would faint at any time. She said her daughter's situation worsened as time went by and she was advised to seek help from the sangoma. " We took her to the sangoma, where she underwent treatment for two years. And she was healed" her mother said", she said the 57 year-old sangoma told the family that the girl was being troubled by ancestors and that she needed to be closely monitored. The sangoma offered to marry the

girl and the family had no choice but to agree to his (the sangoma) suggestion because they wanted her to be healed. The girl's uncle, who is 47, echoed the mother's sentiments. He said the family was poor and could not afford to pay for the girl's treatment, which forced them to accept the marriage. Although the marriage was later nullified by the courts, this trend is similar to the Vhavenda sangomas who marry a person because the family cannot afford to pay for that person's treatment.

Arranged marriage on the basis of societal class

Sometimes people from the royal families marry from a specific family. One cannot inherit chieftainship if one is not from a royal family. In addition to having a mother from royal family. She should have been married by 'dzekiso' bride -price for a wife paid by parents of the husband. It should not be money that the husband has worked for. It has to be the money which married the *Makhadzi* 'aunt' of the family. This is why most royal families do not marry from commoners. They would arrange the marriages from the royal families out of which the rulers would be born. The rulers are not born from anywhere in the family. They are born out of persons from a royal family. If one is not born out of such a family, he will not inherit chieftainship, even if he is a first born in the family. These are the requirements for one to inherit chieftainship.

The empirical evidence is that royal family parents sometimes arrange marriage for their children to protect their family status e.g. royal families (The Mphaphuli's, the Rambuda's and the Tshivhase royal families, to name just but a few, do not marry a commoner). That is why a *khosi*, according to Tshivenda culture, is a person borne by a woman married from royal families.

Sometimes men want to marry girls from the same class because they are rich families. This arrangement is made by families or their children. The girl is scared of being married to a poor family because she is afraid that she would suffer also. Rich girls do not want to marry a man from a poor family. This is also true of educated families. Girls from educated families do not want to be married to an uneducated family; for fear that they would not be in the same class with new family. Usually the Vhavenda want to marry a person from the same profession. It is believed that the couple will understand each other better. This is different from a person who is a teacher who wants to marry a medical doctor. These people are not considered compatible. Rather, they marry because the marriage has been arranged by circumstances.

Arranged marriages for children for various reasons

Parents sometimes arrange a marriage for their daughter to a man as payment for a debt that the family is unable

to pay back. In order to repay back the debt the parent finds that the only way out is to use their daughters to repay the debt.

This is clearly described in Maumela's (1965:51) short story entitled *Ntakuseni na Vhomakhulu*. In the introductory part of the short story we find Mrs. Mutshinye being angry at her husband, Mr. Rabele, who had been away in the Reef (Johannesburg) for the previous eight years. She is worried that since he left for the Reef, they have not heard anything from him. He has not sent money to support the family either. Mrs. Mutshinye then borrows money from one young man called Ntakuseni so that she could support herself and her three daughters. Realising that she could not pay back the money to Ntakuseni, she arranged that Ntakuseni marry her eldest daughter. Her proposal is supported by both Ntakuseni and her daughter. Ntakuseni therefore ends up marrying one of the daughters as payment for the money owed.

Sometimes parents would arrange marriage for their daughters to a traditional healer in exchange for medical services that a member of the family had received, that the family could not pay for. In the case where the girl is too young, the man would wait for her to grow up before she assumes her marital obligations. In all these cases, the individual's feelings are never taken relentless.

Arranged marriage by the Vhalemba community

Parents sometimes arrange a marriage for their children to ensure cultural continuity for their family, e.g. Vhalemba. The Vhalemba were encouraged to marry other Vhalemba. The Vhalemba parents are expected to bring their children up according to the Vhalemba tradition (*The Story of the Vhalemba People as told by Dr. Rudo Mathivha in Johannesburg on 15th October, 1999*).

The same practice is depicted in Munyembane's (2004) where parents arrange marriages for their children to their cousins, to avoid infiltration by outsiders who might practice witchcraft. This is described in Munyembane (2004) drama book entitled *Dungunudzini la Luanakha*. In this book we find Mr. Mafharalala and his sister, Mrs. Matamela, who are cousins organising marriages. This was specifically organised to prevent Tshifhiwa from marrying Fulufhelo, whose mother, they believed, practiced witchcraft.

Arranged marriage to acquire cattle for agricultural purposes

Sometimes parents arrange a marriage because they need cattle for a span in the family. In such an instance they could arrange a marriage for their daughter to a man in exchange for cattle that are needed for agricultural purposes. The parents would then arrange for their daughter to be married in exchange for eight cows (dowry).

***Umala tshikunwe* 'Arranged marriage of unborn child'**

There are instances where marriage is pre-planned by the parents even before the children are born (*U mala tshikunwe*). This type of marriage practice is called pre-arranged marriage. A family pays *lobola* whilst the mother is pregnant. This is even before the parents know whether the baby will be male or female. If it is a male, the married mother would wait until she gives birth to a female child. It does not matter how long one waits. When the woman gives birth to a girl, the girl grows up knowing that she will become the wife of the person with whom marriage has been arranged. The girl child will marry this man even if she does not like him. The marriage is binding and she cannot refuse.

Arranged marriage for a person who is away from home

Sometimes a young man may migrate to the city to work. When he reaches marriageable age, but does not come home to do so. The mother of the man may choose a family where to propose love on behalf of her son. In such a situation, she will arrange the marriage with the second family. This is done with the belief that when the son returns, he will accept the wife. There is a belief among the Vhavenḡa that a wife does not accept a husband because of love. It is believed one may choose a girl depending on the beauty, whereas a man does not have to be beautiful.

Although the mother may pay the *lobola* on behalf of the son, the matter may be complicated if the son does not return to the wife. In such a situation, the mother will pretend as if the woman was married for her son by someone else. This is why if the son comes home and does not accept the woman, the mother may take care of her as her (mother's) wife. In the Venḡa culture, the wife belongs to the mother. This is why the husband does not have any jurisdiction over the wife. The wife belongs to the family.

Eloping as a form of marriage

This is another accepted way of arranged marriage. Usually, the woman runs away secretly with her lover. The arrangement is between a man and a woman to run away secretly with the intention of getting married, usually without parental approval. After this has happened, the man contacts his parents, informing them that he has taken the lady without the permission of her parents. His parents will then send an intermediary with money and information, telling them that they should not panic, thinking she has disappeared, that she is with their family. The money will be used as a fine called *luḡoḡela ngeno* (find your daughter this side). When they receive the information, they will accept this arranged marriage.

Arranged kidnapping as a form of marriage

Sometimes the bridegroom is unable to meet the requirements of marriage. When a girl wants to be married, she will demand many things. Such things are *mufaro* or *tshitundwana*; basket', *u kwasha tshitolo*' to buy things for a new family. Often, these things are costly. When a young man cannot afford such things, he will follow the young woman everywhere, be it on the way to the river or to forest to collect firewood. With the help of others, he will wait for her to be alone and take the woman by force. At the bridegroom's home they will say *o khurumedzwa* (cover her face by force), meaning that one is married by force. The family of the bridegroom will send an intermediary to the family of the bride with some money as a fine, to inform them they should not look for the woman; that she is now with the in-laws. Upon receiving the news, the in-laws will accept it as an official marriage.

Arranged marriage at institutions of higher learning

Many people in Tshivenda got married after they had completed tertiary education together. Because they are always together at school, the young man and young lady may decide to tie the knot. When the two decide to marry, they will report to their families that they are in love and want to marry. In this case the two families would not have time to find out about one another. They would not even bother themselves. They would assume the couple known each other.

Arranged marriages after two families have agreed

Another type of marriage is by mutual agreement between two families. After a girl has been suggested, the parents of the bridegroom would send an intermediary to propose. After the parents have agreed, the parents of the bridegroom would arrange the cattle to marry the bride. The basic price of marriage is eight head of cattle. They will also buy some clothes for the girl. Thereafter, wedding arrangements will be made.

The intermediary pays for all the marriage rites. Thereafter, the bride requests the bridegroom to *kwasha tshitolo*, literally meaning, 'to break or smash the store to pieces', meaning to go on a shopping spree. The bride shops for all utensils for the new family. She will buy *mufaro*' *tshitundwana* basket', *mpfo* 'ladles', *phe̱ho* 'porridge stirrers' and everything else that would be used in the new family. When they have acceded, they will lead the lady to the store where these things would be purchased. Besides this rite, the bridegroom may use another way say of capturing and eloping with the girl as an acceptable way of marriage.

When the couple returns from buying the goods, a day is set when the intermediary will lead the bride to her new home. Before they leave, the bride chooses some friends

to accompany her to her new home. The person who goes with the brides to a new home should first *sela* 'come to stay with the intention of not leaving until one's object has been achieved'.

In the evening, they bid farewell and walk to the bridegroom's new home where they are accepted. After acceptance, the bride covers herself with a towel so that she is not seen.

At the groom's home, they are kept for one week in the house (in seclusion), before they are allowed to come out and perform all the house chores. They are expected to '*tswa lushika*' go to the river to draw water and pound the maize; the bride stays at her new home with her maid for a few days, then the maids return to their homes.

Although there are many ways in which one may wed, they are all accepted to the Vhavenda tradition and customs. When the bride arrives at her new home, whether eloped or kidnapped, the girl will ask bridesmaids to accompany her. However, the number of the maids would not be the same as when she was wedding.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, arranged marriages are common among the Vhavenda people. The paper has shown that marriage can be arranged by women friends for financial benefits, or arranged on the basis of societal class. In addition, marriages may be arranged for various other reasons: for example, in the case of the Vhalemba community; through cattle, for ploughing. The Vhavenda community can also *mala tshikunwe* 'marry an unborn child'. Royal families arrange marriages for a bride who is going to bear a king (*khosi/thovhele*), whereas the commoners marry among themselves, so do the Lembas. Commoners arrange their marriages as friends through their mothers, according to class. Other ways include eloping and kidnapping. They are all acceptable among the Vhavenda.

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