

# The Critical Role of Selected *Swiyila* (Taboos) in Rural Democratic South Africa: A Theological Perspective

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## Abstract

In South Africa and other countries, there has for many years been a plea for moral regeneration. Moral decay is fast taking over, while sickness, poverty, crime, violence and other calamities are rapidly engulfing our beautiful nation. In an effort to reintroduce morality into the lives of South Africans, this research represents an investigation into whether African taboos—which in the past governed and directed the lives of African people—may perhaps provide a solution. As society and lifestyles have changed, taboos have come to be ignored. If we look back into our history, when taboos were still held in high esteem, we see that moral decay did not occur at the rapid pace at which it is taking place today. This leads one to consider whether it is through having abandoned those taboos that we find ourselves in the present untenable situation. The intention of the study was, therefore, to explore whether taboos are and could still be vital for morality in African society.

## Tsonga Abstract

*E tikweni ra Afrika-Dzonga na man'wana ka ha ri na xirilo xo vuyerisa vumhunu. Ku onhaka ka vumunhu swi le ku humeleleni hi xihatla, loko mavabyi, vusweti, vugevenga, ku lwisana na swin'wana leswo vava swi karhi swi funengeta tiko ra hina lero saseka. Yin'wana ya tindlela to vuyisela vumunhu eka vutomi bya Ma-Afrika-Dzonga, ndzavisiso lowu wu yimela ku vonisisa loko swiyila swa Ma-Afrika, leswi aminkarhini ya khale swi fambiseke no kombisa tindlela ta vutomi bya Ma-Afrika, swi nga ha nyika swin'wana swa swintshunxo. Tani hi leswaki vaakatiko na mahanyelo swi cinceke, swiyila swi tekeriwa ehansi. Loko hi languta le ndzhaku ka ntiva-swa-khale, loko swiyila swa ha tekeriwa enhlokweni, hi vone leswaku ku onhaka ka vumunhu a swi nga humeleli hi rivilo leri hi ri vonaka namuntlha., leswi endlaka leswaku munhu a*



Phronimon

<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/Phronimon/index>

Volume 21 | 2020 | #6906 | 15 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/6906>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online)

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*ehleketa loko ku nga ri ku tshika swiyila leswi, leswi endlaka leswaku hi tikuma hi ri eka xiyimo lexo ka xi nga olovi ku cinca. Xokongomelo xa tsalwa leri iku kambisisa loko swiyila swi nga ha pfuneta ku vuyisela vumunhu exikarhi ka Ma-Afrika.*

**Keywords:** taboos; tradition; culture; Tsonga; mourning

## Introduction

During an episode of the daily devotional programme, *Ripfumelo ra Ndhavuko*, that was aired between 05h45 and 06h00 on June 12, 2017 on Munghana Lonene FM, the speaker discussed the importance and relevance of Tsonga taboos in reducing crime and other related problems in South Africa (SABC 12 June 2017). The discussion suggested a clear connection between the abandonment of taboos and the increase in moral decay. Although many African tribes have respected taboos, the Lovedu and Tsongas, in particular, have paid close attention to observing these as elements affecting their welfare and the welfare of their kin. For instance, it is believed that the breaking of a taboo will lead to drought (Forde 1988, 79). Vorster, Stevens, and Steyn (2008, 3) state that amongst the Tsonga, agriculture-related taboos and beliefs associated with the female fertility cycle (menstruation, pregnancy and lactation) receive the most attention. However, some African cultural observances are fading into obscurity, as many African people are becoming more Westernised. In this regard, Dudula (2016, 10) makes the following observation: “Parents used to tell old tales to their children. The stories contained messages that taught the kids how to respect the people and how to forge their paths in life.”

The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) radio station, Munghana Lonene FM, which is broadcast in Xitsonga, invited listeners to send WhatsApp messages and e-mails to express their views as to whether *swiyila* (taboos) continue to be observed today. Naturally, in a programme lasting merely an hour, the opinions of only a certain number of people could be given, but the majority considered taboos still to be relevant. The burning issue of moral decay, which is very problematic to the South African nation, is the reason I also came to think of the old taboos as a way in which black people used to govern their lives. It is a fact that with Western civilisation and modern developments, it will not always be easy to apply taboos in our lives. This is a particular problem in situations where people are living in urbanised areas in the absence of elderly people who knew these taboos; however, it is a valid point to argue that (in the past) their use eliminated unwanted calamities and problems. It should also be understood that the author is not trying to say that this was the only reason why moral decay has spread so fast, but to argue that amongst other factors, the relegation of taboos have contributed to this problem.

For Gluckman (1962, 9), traditional Tsonga society was characterised, amongst other things, by rituals and taboos, including rites of passage from one status to the next. Niehaus (2002, 1) considers the fact that Wits University security staff refused to return

their old uniforms after new ones had been purchased, arguing that it was taboo to hand in their old clothing. This kind of statement opens a discussion as to what constitutes a taboo.

Although the English word “taboo” is used as a translation equivalent for the Tsonga *swiyila*, the meaning of the latter extends further than simply “supernatural belief or avoidance.” It denotes an abstract concept which one is traditionally not expected to ask questions about; an observance that one keeps so as to avoid unnecessary misfortunes and dangers. For Junod (1927, 573), the system of taboos must be understood as the community’s unwritten oral law, disobedience of which implies danger and is punishable by the community. Traditionally, African people were ruled by chiefs and kings who did not have the written constitutions we know today; in that context, taboos formed part of the regulating mechanism that helped people to avoid dangers. Malungana (1999, 38) is, therefore, correct in stating that breaking *xiyila* (singular of *swiyila*) was a great offence to both the supernatural realm and the entire community. While Maposa (2016, 8) explains taboo as a traditional sacrament which is performed in a socio-religious setting, it can also be said that *xiyila* is the system or art of setting things apart as forbidden because they are either sacred, unclean or cursed.

The concept of sacredness here emphasises the uniqueness of this avoidance or set of oral rules. The English word “taboo” is derived from the Polynesian “tapu” (meaning “forbidden”), and was first used in English by the great explorer, Captain Cook. In the context of traditional Africa, taboos have been embedded in African traditional religion. The sense of forbiddenness conveyed by the Polynesian word (Gyekye 1995) is reflected in Chemuru and Masaka’s (2010, 123) understanding of taboos as avoidance rules that forbid members of the human community from performing certain actions, such as eating certain kinds of food, walking in or visiting certain sites that are regarded as sacred, being cruel to animals, and using natural resources in an unsustainable manner. The Polynesian origin of the English word has received the attention of Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (1988, 278), who describe the concept as including any sort of prohibition regarding certain times, places, actions and events. Even though some taboos would have been biased, according to Horsthemke (2015, 71), the dire consequences of violating them, justified them. Jaura and Kusnierik (1999, 3) explain that: “Taboo is a forbidden area. Members of a community take that community’s taboos as given and natural. A taboo represents a border one is not supposed to cross. Crossing such a border is considered to be, in milder cases, inappropriate, and, in worse cases, offensive.”

It is important to note that taboos rely on the concept of unquestioned punishments and rewards. People observed taboos without question, out of fear that something bad would happen to them and to the community that disobeyed them. There are parallels here with those theologians who exaggerate teachings about hell and other bad things to scare people into attending their churches—some theologians use the punishment of sin to

keep people in faith rather than inviting people to faith on the basis of the love and caring nature of God.

According to Njoku (2014), taboos have their roots in the efforts of early humans to explain nature and their own existence, to propitiate fate and invite fortune, and to avoid evils; they were introduced to regulate the moral order of society. Ntsan'wisi (1973, 14), a former professor of Xitsonga at Turfloop, suggests the following reason for the establishment of taboos: "They are coined to express different phases of life. Some people are more imaginative and creative than others, and the expression that they use to explain certain experiences and phases of life, may be so appealing. They originated before the Bantu people started on their migration to various parts of Africa."

Osei (2006) is of the opinion that religion is useful, but not a necessary condition for the existence and existential application of taboos. Within its historical context, Omobola (2013) understands "taboo" as a term for a set of cultic or religious prohibitions instituted by traditional religious authorities as instruments for moral motivation, guidance and objectivity to protect the sanctity of their shrines and wellbeing of worship in their respective communities. Parrinder (1969, 89), on the other hand, sees ancestors as originators and custodians of taboos, while Fisher (1997, 108) understands a taboo as an offence against ancestors and the Supreme Being. Khosa (2009, 10) argues that any offence against or disobedience of these taboos invites *mindzhukano* (curses) and even death.

### Why Taboos are Important

Mkhari (2014, 1) makes the comment: "*Namuntlha vutomi byi hundzukile, a swa ha tiveki leswaku i mani a faneleke ku tsundzuxa un'wana exikarhi ka mutswari na n'wana. Xilungu xi lunge tiko, timfanelo ti teke vulawuri ni vutihlamuleri ehenhla ka vatswari, vana hi vona namuntlha va lawulaka vatswari, vana va tseme mibya. Swiiyila swa tolo na tolweni swi fuhlekiwe le mpfungwe le! Xivutiso eka vanhu ngopfu-ngopfu Vatsonga hi leswaku xana hi lo dyoha yini na swona hi kongome kwihi?*" Translated from Xitsonga into English, this reads: Today life has changed, it is no longer clear who should advise the other between parents and child. Civilisation changed the country, rights took control and responsibilities from parents, children are controlling their parents, they no longer listen. Yesterday's taboos were pushed aside. The question, in particular to the Tsonga people, is: Where did we go wrong, and where are we going?

In his research, Mkhari argues for the relevance of the Tsonga taboos, which seem to have lost ground due to Westernisation. Malungana (1999, 37) expresses a similar view, arguing that the indigenous South African languages and their traditions (taboos included) have not received adequate attention in education, research and study, and Wiredu argues that in addition to being a political imposition, colonialism was also a cultural one, relegating traditional customs, including taboos, to the periphery. The philosophical approach of black Africans came to be changed through education that was delivered in a foreign language to compel people to internalise a foreign vocabulary,

which undermined many things about Africa and Africans (Wiredu 1998, 1). It is important to ensure that indigenous knowledge, inclusive of taboos, finds its way back into the lives of African people, and it is for this reason that the decolonisation and Africanisation of both our education and our churches becomes a priority (Ukwuegbu 2008, 315). This article argues that indigenous knowledge in this dispensation could assist in taking a stand against moral decay, for instance through the correct interpretation of taboos.

In his novel, entitled *Tolo Anga ha Vuyi* (Yesterday Does not Return), Freddy Rikhotso (1985) argues that the Tsonga customs are disappearing, and that they should be preserved through being committed to writing and publishing. Xitsonga-speaking people are concerned that their taboos, which used to assist in teaching, modelling and educating their children, have been neglected and that the control exercised by parents through those taboos, has been diluted. The role and importance of taboos from history have been emphasised by Mashego (2000, 32), who explains: “Breaking a taboo usually means a serious punishment.”

The present article is a critical examination of the relevance of the role of *swiyila* (taboos) within the context of democratic South Africa following the colonial period, which succeeded in undermining the importance of these customs and left black people without alternative strategies for curbing unwanted behaviour (Emmanuel 2013, 2).

Although there may be different approaches to and different programmes for moral regeneration, it is argued here that some traditional taboos, which in the past shaped the morality of black people, can still be relevant in the fight against moral decay, even though taboos have been associated with “primitive society” and made out to be of no relevance to the modern way of living (Boamah 2015, 29). The Western scientific world has neglected, even demonised, African taboos in many ways, and there is no record of them in the writing of African scholars. Taboos have been associated with paganism, with only scientifically proven knowledge being regarded as reliable—yet before the West placed its stamp on Africa, taboos were the directives of human life on that continent. The shaping of one’s life from birth to puberty, marriage to death was governed by strict taboos handed down to Africans from their ancestors. The study does not intend to deal with all taboos, but instead to focus on a selected few as examples.

The context for the study is rural South Africa, and in particular Tsonga society, where even though the democratisation of the country has introduced changes, local chiefs continue to exercise certain powers. A rural context was selected, since town and city life is very complicated and no single culture dominates, and the study therefore could not be expected to exert an influence in an urban environment.

### Critical Discussion of some Selected Tsonga Taboos

The selection of the taboos that I am going to discuss below is guided by some of the social ills of our nation that indicate a moral decay of our society. It will be possible that

some taboos which are negative will be mentioned, but the main focus of this selection is to highlight some of the taboos which helped in the shaping of black people's life. As in many African countries, among some South African peoples the birth of twins was considered unusual, unnatural and monstrous; the twins and mother would be viewed as guilty and could be put to death to clear the land (Schapera 1927, 117). The birth of twins was viewed as a form of contamination of the community, hence the reference to the land in this context is in fact a reference to the community. According to Tsonga tradition, one of the twins was killed or buried alive, while in other traditions both twins will be buried alive. Suspicion directed at twins is also depicted in some Nigerian films, such as *New Direction*, in which the mother of new-born twins is instructed to throw them both into a running river. This is a bad taboo, because the taking of human life contradicts appreciation for the value of life, and particularly having as many children as one can in the African context. Not all groups observe this taboo, however; among the Ovaherero, the birth of twins is considered a fortunate event in the life of the family.

It has been argued by scholars, such as Afeke and Verster (2004, 47), that some African Christian women remain trapped in and negatively affected by culture and tradition. For this reason, Choabi (2016, 3) examines theological challenges associated with pastoral care and counselling. For instance, African widowhood is often governed and regulated by rituals and taboos. It is taboo for a widow to remarry or have sexual intercourse before her mourning period is over. It is taboo for a widow to be seen outside the home for the period of her mourning, except to carry out tasks such as fetching water. Droughts, thunderstorms and poor harvests were often attributed to women having disobeyed this taboo (Mathye 2003, 8). In the chapter entitled "Woman to Woman Oppression," Baloyi (2015b) reveals the oppression associated with African widowhood, including at the hands of other women. Taboos were used to enforce this oppression; for instance, it is taboo for a woman not to undergo rituals like sex cleansing (Baloyi 2016), which violates her sexual rights as well as her human rights in terms of today's Constitution. Issues such as confinement of the widow and seclusion constitute humiliating forms of taboos, which merit revision.

Amongst the Tsongas and some other African groups, a menstruating woman was barred from many things. Mathye (2003) explains that a woman is not allowed to have sexual intercourse while she is menstruating, as "There is a strong belief that disregarding this sexual norm can cause her husband serious illness, even death." The interesting part is that this taboo also applied to men, as expressed by: *Swa yila ku wanuna a hlanguana na wansati la nga emasikwini* (Malungana 1999, 34), meaning that it is taboo for a man to have intercourse with a woman who is menstruating. Chitlango and Balcomb (2004, 186) report that it was believed that failure to honour this taboo would cause a woman's husband either to develop a hernia or suffer impotency. A similar taboo is observed in Nigeria, where it is believed that a man who has contact with a woman who is menstruating will be swallowed by a mythical snake; as a result, during their menstrual period women are even excluded from settlements (Moloantoa 1982, 1). In former Transkei and Ciskei (Eastern Cape), during her menstrual period a

woman was regarded as having *umlaza*. Amongst the Sotho-speaking people, such a woman is considered “hot,” and it was believed that any man who had sexual contact with her would first experience aches in his body, after which his stomach would swell and his intestines would burn. It was believed that if this man were not healed, he would become crippled and die (Moloantoa 1982, 2). According to Mkhari (2014, 49), a woman who is menstruating is barred from entering the cattle kraal. In their article entitled “Pastoral Care to or with Sex-starved Pregnant Women in an African context,” Baloyi and Manala (2013) discuss more or less the same taboo, but in relation to pregnant women. For the Tsonga people, as for some other African groups, it is taboo for a woman to enter a cattle kraal or even touch or step over yokes for oxen, trek chains, spears and sticks out of fear that these items would subsequently break while in use (Moloantoa 1982, 3). Some cultures forbade women from entering the kraal specifically while they were menstruating, but among the Tsonga people, all females were forbidden to do so.

During her menstrual period, a woman is also not allowed to walk in the fields where crops are growing. According to Junod (1978, 184), she is not allowed to walk among the pumpkin plants (*marhanga*) or harvest their fruit, as they may be badly affected and also cause her serious infections. Such taboos are based on the underlying belief that menstrual blood or blood at childbirth is “dirty” and renders a woman unclean (Shoko 2009, 3). Although the menstrual taboos would assist men to avoid sexual intercourse until the end of the bleeding, which can be unhealthy for some, most of these taboos either directly or indirectly made it possible for men to oppress women, and to cohabit with other women (Baloyi and Manala 2013). Another consideration would be the avoidance of contaminating the kraal or garden (where vegetables are planted), with menstrual blood. Mathye (2003, 6) reports: “A Tsonga woman must abstain from eating eggs, chicken, hooves and the tongue of cattle, to mention but a few. It is believed that a woman who eats eggs is in danger of giving birth to a bald child. This woman might also struggle during labour like a hen which runs in all directions when it is about to lay an egg.” In the same vein, young boys who were not yet circumcised were not allowed to eat eggs. Mkhari (2014) suggests that this may have been because eggs would cause young boys and girls to mature very early, thus introducing the possibility of early unwanted pregnancies.

Odofin (in Emmanuel 2013, 2) explains that besides being the measure of social restriction and obligation, taboos were the cornerstone of the whole social order and were powerful instruments in combating corruption within society. One thinks, for instance, of *Swa yila ku va n'wana a famba na vusiku*, meaning “it is a taboo for a child to walk at night.” According to the Tsonga people, the intention of this taboo was to protect young people from a range of bad things that happen at night, such as adultery and learning to drink (Mkhari 2014, 22).

Inyang (2015, 13) confirms that taboos and customs form a significant part of the African belief and value system. Another example given is: *U nga tshami ehenhla ka*

*sweko*, *swa yila*, meaning that one should not sit on a hearth-stone, as this is taboo. The truth is that a hearth-stone is usually hot after cooking, and if anyone were to sit on it, they would be injured (Mkhari 2014, 41). These taboos have played a role in shaping the lifestyle of African people for generations. So, for instance, fetching fire from a hearth in another village is taboo because there is always the risk of setting fire to someone's hut or the bush between the villages (Mkhari 2014, 42). It is for that reason that there is a Xitsonga saying: “*Swa yila ku oka ndzilo emutini wun'wana*.”

Other taboos reported by Mkhari are: *Ku tlula ndzilo swa yila* (it is taboo to jump over the fire), *Ku ba noti na vusiku swa yila* (it is taboo to whistle at night), and *swa yila ku wanuna a nghena endlwini ya nswedyana* (it is taboo for a man to enter the house where his new-born baby is confined with the mother). These are just a few examples of positive taboos. If we look for instance at the prohibition on jumping over the fire, we immediately recognise the safety implications. With regard to the prohibition on whistling at night; nights are a time of rest, and whistling creates a disturbance. The seclusion and confinement of the mother and new baby were helpful in ensuring that nothing disturbed the child until it was weaned. A man might be tempted to sleep with his wife before she had stopped bleeding after childbirth, which might have health implications, and there would be a possibility of another baby being conceived before the first one was weaned. This taboo could, therefore, have served as a means of birth control.

## Theological and Moral Role of Taboos

In the article entitled “The Impact of the Pastor’s Immoral Life in the Community: A South African Pastoral Investigation,” the author explores from a theological perspective how the pastor’s<sup>1</sup> life can influence the community either negatively or positively (Baloyi 2015a). It cannot be denied that the pastoral caregiver’s responsibility includes guiding people towards a good moral life within their communities. The argument here is that both pastoral caregivers and theologians cannot avoid theologising within the particular context in which they live, and so their theology cannot afford to avoid traditional influences such as those exerted by taboos and other traditional perceptions. Orji (2013, 97) states this as follows:

The goal of the pastor’s moral wrestling with the believers is freeing, that is, providing the soul with wings. Moral leadership also involves contending graciously with those who are arrogant or wilfully ignorant about moral truth. Real moral leaders cry out and denounce gross evil and violence when or before it happens.

Some pastors overlook this, and expect people to attend their churches purely to listen to their good preaching, which does not always encourage moral regeneration. Both in

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1 The term “pastor” in this article is used to refer to ministers whose services are guided by the theological training they received before being ordained as pastors. This implies that they are both pastors and theologians in the making. Some are already professors of theology.

action and in teaching, the pastor is expected to encourage and motivate people to be morally correct. Paul's pastoral epistles included the fact that from a moral perspective, pastoral leaders should lead by example. If we read 1 Timothy 3 verses 1 and 2, for instance, we hear Paul arguing for the morality of the leaders, and in Titus 2 verse 7, Paul says: "In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness." Even though some people may want to argue that Paul was not talking about morality here, "everything" seems to include the possibility of the moral obligation that Paul was expecting Titus to lead with. The young pastor in Titus is entrusted with the responsibility of driving the people he is leading back to moral ways by example. Ribekah Miles (1999) in her book, entitled *The Pastor as Moral Guide*, discusses some practical tools to enable pastoral caregivers to serve more effectively as moral guides. This is an indication that pastors cannot afford to ignore dealing with moral issues in their communities, and is why African traditional tools such as taboos, of which some were never harmful nor sinful, can also be utilised in the process.

It should be understood that the intention of the present article is not to argue that all taboos are good and useful, but to suggest that we can select and use those that are useful. It is important also to understand that morality is an element that must be regenerated in a particular culture. I am in full agreement with the view of Matsane (2004, 72) that the church needs to be indigenous and African in its theology in order to be able to deal with African morality. African morality is shaped, amongst other things, by taboos. This calls for the church to develop an ecclesiology that is Christocentric and at the same time rooted in African indigenous cultures. It is this kind of ecclesiology that will help the church to find solutions to her multiple problems (Ukwuegbu 2008, 307). The challenge of self-understanding and the assertion of the autonomous identity of the African church and African Christianity are central in this context. The question of self-reliance and appeal for more respect cannot be addressed without taking heed of the need for the church to be Africanised. I end this section by quoting Ukwuegbu (2008, 314):

If the African Church<sup>2</sup> does not stand up and shout, nobody will see her and nobody will listen to her. What the Church in Africa needs now is to grind her own axe, to go back to her own roots and discover issues and materials that she could bring to the bargaining table. This calls for deeper reflection and commitment by all committed to the African cause. It demands more than writing up dissertations that are lost in the confines of universities in Europe and North America. It calls for deep-structured initiatives, in which African theologians must identify those African lifestyles and values that are not common to Western men and women and were not considered in defining the doctrines of the Church; and bring these into their quest for an African Church that is as truly African, truly human and therefore truly Christian.

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2 The African church in this context refers to black churches.

It is, therefore, the duty of African scholars, particularly in the field of theology, to look for ways in which the good taboos that help build morality can be reviewed and used without blindly criticising them. Taylor (2005, 225) is in full agreement that even though morality is currently fighting to divorce itself from the hooks of Christian religion, the worldly morality to which people have always been inclined, has been held in check for many years by the existence of religion; in most cases Christian religion. It can, therefore, be inferred that the influence of Christianity on morality was for many years a good one. Now, pastoral caregivers cannot ignore the call to help and play their role in the moral regeneration of the people, using whatever cultural trait they may have within a particular context, taboos included. Of course, this will demand a careful selection of taboos which are helpful, such as “It is taboo and dangerous for a man to have intercourse with a woman who is pregnant by somebody other than himself, or who has aborted or miscarried” (Ntsan’wisi 1973, 18)—this taboo, for example, encourages men to respect other men’s wives.

## Conclusion

If Emmanuel (2013) is correct in arguing that the relevance of taboos in the maintenance of social order is evident in the present-day Ondo Province of Nigeria, then the author is free to argue that the same holds in our South African context. One thinks, for instance, of *Swa yila ku nyika munhu swilo hi voko ra ximatsi* (it is taboo to give someone something with your left hand). This taboo, like others, is all about respect for other people, which is typically African. Arguably, some taboos were intended to subjugate (and in particular to subjugate women to the selfish needs of men) and to promote inequality, which the author does not condone. However, as Paul and Elder (2006, 12) point out, even though some social groups treat women unjustly through the enforcement of taboos, taboos have a positive side in that they express the ethical truths which have shaped the lives of many people. According to Feraro (2004, 196), it was for the health and growth of the child that, after giving birth, women were expected to observe a post-partum sex taboo, in some cases lasting until the child was weaned. While there is truth in the view that the behaviours perpetrated by taboos can be considered unethical when they result in unequivocal harm or damage (Paul and Elder 2006, 12), it must nevertheless be stressed that bad taboos should not be used to discredit the good ones.

The author, in considering the South African youth of today, is in full agreement with Wasswa (1989, 1) who, in the context of the Ganda people, is of the view that young people lack clear guidance on many issues, inclusive of sexuality and sexual behaviour. Besides regulating human behaviour, taboos deepen the understanding and practice of sexual norms. The unwritten moral guidance of young people with regard to sexual matters was conveyed through taboos. Fortunately, according to Wasswa (1989, 1), most of these taboos could constitute a good basis for a Christian moral theology of sexuality, because they are in line with Christian teachings. For instance, *Swa yila ku ntswediyana a sweka endzilweni* (It is taboo for a woman who has just given birth to

cook over a fire) may have protected new-born babies and women who had recently given birth from injury. There is also a close link between illness and the breaking of taboos (Magezi 2006, 511), as also mentioned by Mwaura (2000, 72–119) in his article entitled “Healing as a Pastoral Concern” and by Ncube (2003, 108), who states:

Many Zulus’ illnesses are deliberately caused by enemies (*izitha*) or ancestral anger (*ulaka lwabaphansi/abadala*) because of jealousy (*umona*) or neglect (*ubudedengu*) by family members. Hence the efficacy of the medicine is made possible by studying correctly one’s surroundings and taking proper cautions.

In consequence, some people do not believe they can be healed in the hospital, since they are convinced that their failure to uphold certain taboos caused their sickness. According to Oxlund (2014), some symptoms associated with HIV and AIDS are ascribed by the Zion Christian Church to the breaching of moral rules and social taboos.

Like Magesa (1997, 2), I believe that if every society were to examine its own history, culture, religion and morality in order to discover its values and identity, the war against immorality would be half won. Christian missionaries made a mistake in disregarding the common stream of living history, which included taboos that helped to shape the lives of African people. Taboos have also played a role in ensuring that the African community continues to hold together, without fracturing. Magezi (2006, 518) concurs that for the sake of respect and dignity, which are important characteristics of African people, the definite taboos in place both encouraged morality and prevented people from carrying out actions that would render them outcasts. Light (2012, x) rightly argues that the greatest error made by the missionaries and their white successors was their failure to appreciate the need to root or inculturate Christianity in the African worldview. Although Van den Toren and De Wit (2015, 158) hold a different opinion, arguing that discipleship should remain theocentric and Christocentric to avoid secularisation, it is the author’s opinion that the two mentioned elements should be accommodative of the African worldview. It is unfair to practise discipleship training which does not provide solutions to the problems experienced by African people. The relevance and context of Africa cannot be ignored when theological issues are considered, which is why I would support the opinion of Wahl (2011, 211) that discipleship emphasises the importance of culture, although this may be defined uniquely.

The fact that colonialism and Western civilisation relegated African taboos to the periphery, and that we as Africans accepted this, was a gross mistake that led to our losing many of the riches of our own culture. The efforts made to undermine our own taboos and remove them from our lives, have had serious negative consequences for the shaping of the lives of the upcoming generation of young Africans. The author is of the opinion that the moral decay which the country—and even the continent—is facing, could be dramatically reduced if African taboos are made relevant to the lives of people today. As Africans we have a long history, and taboos have played a significant role in our becoming who we are. The church has the moral authority, through its pastoral

services, to fight all forms of impunity, including through the use of established taboos; thus, if taboos are sinless tools for morality, the church may indeed make use of them.

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## Baloyi

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