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EDITORIAL NOTE

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From Policy to Practice: Governance, Education, and Social Transformation in Africa:

Welcome to the October 2026 issue of the Journal of Contemporary Society and Education (JCSE). The sixteen articles assembled in this volume reflect the journal's commitment to rigorous, interdisciplinary scholarship on the pressing social, political, and educational challenges confronting contemporary Africa. Together, they illuminate a central tension of our time: the persistent gap between policy ambition and lived reality.

Several contributions in this issue grapple directly with the question of governance and service delivery. Motadi examines the opportunities and barriers shaping digital transformation in South African government departments, while Moloto and Pillay explore technology's influence on governance at the local municipal level. Akindele, Sanni, and Lamidi assess citizen satisfaction with public transportation in Lagos State, offering an important reminder that the legitimacy of the state rests on the quality of everyday services. Juta and Alao interrogate the democratisation of the administrative state through South Africa's Government of National Unity, and Okudolo examines decentralisation and the effectiveness of local political leaders in Nigeria. Kambiri's analysis of governance challenges in managing internal displacement further underscores the consequences of normative commitment without implementation capacity. Agbor's critical perspectives on the operational independence of Elections Cameroon and the Constitutional Council round out this focus on democratic institutions.

Education remains a cornerstone of social progress, and this issue devotes considerable attention to it. Mtshali and Meyiwa assess the role of climate change education in maritime studies, while Modiba asks whether rural secondary schools are adequately managing learners with special educational needs associated with HIV/AIDS. Babalola interrogates the legal and policy complexities of foreign partnerships in Nigerian higher education, and Shabangu examines how school management teams respond to violence in rural South African schools. Nephawe and Mudimeli offer a distinctive contribution on the indispensability of English as a lingua franca in interpreting selected Pauline epistles.

The issue also foregrounds questions of gender, culture, and well-being. Nesane and Amaechi explore *Mamalo* as a resource for gender equality and women's empowerment in Limpopo, while Gudani, Khosa, and Nomatshila examine adolescents' perceptions of child support grant management through a family systems lens. Matheere offers an

exploration of the life journey of traditional healers in rural Limpopo, and Nkuna and colleagues provide an analytical study of compounding and naming in Siswati personal names. These articles remind us that social transformation is experienced at the level of culture, family, and community.

Collectively, these contributions demonstrate the vitality and breadth of contemporary social science research in Africa. They challenge scholars and policymakers alike to move beyond policy pronouncements toward meaningful implementation. We thank our authors and reviewers for their dedication and trust that this issue will stimulate further inquiry and debate.

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**MAMALO AS A RESOURCE FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN
EMPOWERMENT IN VHEMBE DISTRICT COMMUNITIES OF LIMPOPO
PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the traditional practice of Mamalo (bride-price) within the Vhavenda culture and its implications for gender equality and the restoration of women's dignity. It argues that despite Mamalo's indictment as enabler of gender-based violence (GBV) in recent literature; there is a notable gap in understanding how the belief systems that underpin these practice can be used as a resources for restoring women dignity and gender equality. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study engages individuals from the Vhembe District in the Limpopo province of South Africa, through non-probability sampling and in-depth one-on-one interviews to gather insights into the Mamalo belief systems and its significance for marriage in the Vhavenda culture. A systematic thematic analysis of the data revealed that the Mamalo

marriage framework within the Venda culture emphasizes the importance of marriage as a source of unity and family collaboration. When correctly interpreted in the “spirit of the culture”, Mamalo can serve as a resource for promoting gender equality and restoring dignity to women. By recognizing the positive aspects of this traditional practice, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how cultural practices can be aligned with the goals of gender equity and empowerment of women in Africa.

Keywords: *Bride-price, Gender-Based Violence, Mamalo, Marriage, Violence, Women, Patriarchy, Beliefs, Oppression,*

1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of *Mamalo*, commonly referred to as ‘bride-price’ in other contexts, has long been a focal point of cultural significance within various African societies (Luvo & Saunders, 2022), particularly among the Vhavenda people in the Limpopo province of South Africa. Traditionally, *Mamalo* serves as a ceremonial acknowledgment of the union between two families, symbolizing respect and the establishment of familial ties (Kgadima and Leburu, 2022). However, in contemporary discourse, *Mamalo* has come under scrutiny as an alleged enabler of gender-based violence (GBV) and a perpetuator of gender inequality (Malesa and Sekudu, 2022; Mensah, 2023). Critics argue that the commercialization of bride price commodifies women, reducing them to objects of exchange in a patriarchal system that often subjugates their rights and dignity (Mudimeli and Khosa-Nkatini, 2024). While this perspective highlights important issues related to

GBV, it tends to overlook the complexities and potential positive dimensions of traditional practices like *Mamalo*.

Despite the critical dialogue surrounding *Mamalo*, there remains a significant gap in understanding the underlying belief systems that inform this practice and how they may, in fact, contribute to the restoration of women's dignity and the promotion of gender equality. The cultural narratives surrounding *Mamalo* are not merely transactional but are deeply embedded in the social fabric of the Vhavenda community (Hodzi, 2024). These narratives reflect a belief in the sanctity of marriage as a means of fostering unity, collaboration, and mutual respect among families. Thus, a nuanced exploration of *Mamalo* could reveal its potential as a resource for empowering women rather than relegating them to subordinate roles.

This study aims to investigate the intricate relationship between the *Mamalo* practice and the belief systems

that guide marriage within the Vhavenda culture. It seeks to explore how these traditional frameworks can be reinterpreted to align with contemporary aspirations for gender equity and women's empowerment. Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

1. *What are the core belief systems that underpin the Mamalo practice within the Vhavenda culture?*
2. *How do these belief systems positively influence perceptions of marriage and the roles of women within the community?*
3. *In what ways can Mamalo be recontextualized to promote gender equality and restore dignity to women?*
4. *What are the potential implications of these findings for broader discussions on cultural practices and gender equity in Africa?*

Ultimately, this research seeks to challenge prevailing notions of bride price as solely a mechanism for oppression. Instead, it aims to highlight the complexities of cultural practices such as mamalo, and their potentials for women empowerment and promotion of social change. Through this lens, Mamalo can be seen not just as a relic of a patriarchal past but as a meaningful practice that, when approached with cultural sensitivity and understanding, has the capacity to uplift women and contribute to a more equitable society

2. CULTURAL BELIEF SYSTEMS AS RESOURCE FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The significance of cultural belief systems in shaping gender dynamics and societal structures cannot be overstated. Admittedly, certain cultural beliefs can perpetuate male dominance, often resulting in gender-based violence (GBV) and the oppression of women in many contexts, other cultural beliefs as Mshweshwe (2020) highlights can emphasize gender roles and reinforce normative equity roles. This perspective underscores the critical need to examine how cultural practices, while often viewed through a lens of oppression, can also serve as avenues for empowerment and social change.

In most cultures, marriage for example draws from the culture belief system that family ought to be maintained and extended for the benefit of the society. As a cultural institution, marriage holds profound significance across various African societies. It is not merely a personal union but a social contract that often defines one's standing within the community. Mudimeli and Khosa-Nkatini (2024) emphasize that marriage is traditionally viewed as a necessary life duty, with societal pressure compelling individuals to conform to cultural norms surrounding marriage. The desire for procreation and social acceptance often drives this compulsion, leading many to

marry for reasons beyond personal choice.

Baloyi (2022) elaborates on this, asserting that marriage serves as a vital force in sustaining societal structures. It is characterized by a distinctive cultural value system that encompasses social norms, taboos, and rites of passage integral to the marriage process. Chisango, Mafa, and Maunganidze (2022) further note that successful marriages elevate women's status within their communities, while unmarried or divorced women face societal stigma. This duality highlights both the pressures and potential pathways for empowerment inherent in cultural marriage practices.

While the conventional narrative often frames cultural practices like bride price as mechanisms of oppression, a more nuanced perspective reveals their potential as resources for women's empowerment. The traditional practice of Mamalo, for instance, can be understood as a reflection of cultural values that promote family unity and collaboration. When interpreted in the "spirit of the culture," Mamalo has the potential to serve as a tool for restoring women's dignity and promoting gender equality.

Other cultural practices such as the traditional women's collective associations and mutual support (women's societies) found within many societies contain a range of values and

principles that can contribute to women's empowerment and broader social transformation when interpreted within contemporary contexts. Here, such practices traditionally encourage notions of communal responsibility and share responsibility for protecting women, supporting their participation in decision-making, and challenging practices that undermine their dignity and well being. They also provide resources for strengthening women's agency and participation in community life. Arguably, cultural belief systems provides significant value for gender equality. While often critiqued for perpetuating gender inequality, they can also serve as vital resources for women's empowerment and social change.

Theoretically, this study draws from the theoretical lens of African feminist theory. African feminism, which provides a framework for critically examining gender relations within African institutions without assuming that such institutions are inherently oppressive or that empowerment must necessarily be achieved through the rejection of culture critically examines Mamalo, not only in terms of its potential to reproduce patriarchal power relations, but also in terms of the cultural values embedded within it that may affirm women's social worth, family belonging, mutual responsibility, and dignity (Mekgwe, 2008; Chilisa and Ntseane, 2014); Cruz, 2015). Such an

approach allows the study to distinguish between aspects of Mamalo that may contribute to women's subordination and those that can be reconstructed to promote women's agency and social recognition.

African feminist theory further draws attention to women's agency, collective solidarity, negotiation, and participation in decision-making (Mekgwe, 2008). Rather than representing women simply as passive recipients of cultural practices, the theory recognises African women as active participants who negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes transform cultural institutions. Applied to Mamalo, this perspective makes it possible to explore how women, families, and communities can reclaim the positive relational and communal dimensions of the practice while rejecting interpretations that commodify women or justify male domination. Mamalo can therefore be conceptualised as a culturally embedded institution whose meaning is not fixed, but can be renegotiated in ways that strengthen women's voice, autonomy, social status, and participation in family and community affairs.

Consequently, an African feminist reading of Mamalo can provide a foundation for cultural transformation rather than cultural rejection. It can suggest that the restoration of women's dignity requires engaging with the cultural belief systems through which gender relations are produced and

reproduced. Mamalo may therefore serve as a resource for empowerment when its underlying principles of family responsibility, mutual respect, social recognition, and communal solidarity are foregrounded, while patriarchal interpretations that legitimise control, violence, or women's subordination are challenged. So reviewing and accepting Mamalo may not necessarily require abandoning the practice; rather, it requires critically reinterpreting its cultural meaning in ways that affirm women's dignity, agency, equality, and freedom from gender-based violence.

By re-framing traditional practices like Mamalo, communities can harness their inherent value to promote gender equity and restore women's dignity. This duality illustrates the complexity of cultural practices and their potential to act as vehicles for social transformation, challenging the notion that all traditional customs are inherently oppressive. The current research is an effort to explore these dynamics, focusing on how the cultural practice of mamalo can evolve to align with the goals of women's empowerment and societal progress.

3. MATERIAL AND DATA

Given that the study aims to examine mamalo as a resource for gender equality and women empowerment in Vhembe district communities of Limpopo province, South Africa, this study adopted a qualitative research approach. This research approach

focuses on the development of explanations which are of a social phenomenon, simultaneously allowing the collection and the analysis non-numerical data (Lester & O'Reilly, 2021). This research approach is suitable for this study as it seeks to reveal lived experiences and social-cultural perceptions surrounding mamalo (Bride price) as a potential resource for gender equality and women empowerment. Furthermore, this inquiry allows for a researcher to capture rich and nuanced explanations from the participants through interactions which are open ended, providing a deeper understanding on how mamalo reinforces or transforms gender equality and women empowerment.

For data, this study utilized one-on-one interviews which were semi structured. This data collection method allowed in-depth collection of information on how the cultural practice on mamalo can be positive on the reinforce of social change for women in Vhembe district communities.

Semi-structured interviews were suitable for this study since they provided the participants with a free will to express themselves while having a two-way communication with the researcher for the collection of credible and valid information.

The study sampled 13 participants, 6 males and 7 females of which some are

married, single, separated, widow or widower. All these participants were sampled from communities in Vhembe district through non-probability sampling with the use of purposive and snow-ball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling technique was used to initially identify information-rich participants who are in possession of first-hand knowledge of mamalo. Snowball sampling techniques was then used to access other participants who are relevant for the study, who were recommended by the initial participants. This dual approach became suitable for the study as it ensures the collection of credible information. These sampled participants were considered adequate and methodically sound for a qualitative research study by looking at their understanding and lived experiences of the traditional practice of mamalo.

For analysis of the data set, this study adopted manual thematic analysis approach. By using this six-step analysis approach, all the interviews that were conducted by the researcher were first transcribed and read thoroughly for deep familiarisation of the researcher with the data. All the transcripts were coded with different markers on Microsoft word, which led to the establishment themes that links with the study objectives. These themes were later reviewed, named and presented.

During the study, several ethical considerations were maintained. All the participants who became part of the

study were briefed on the intention of the study and were required to signed a consent form prior commencement of data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity was ensured by keeping all the shared information between the researcher and the participants, and also by using codes such as (P1, P2, P3) to

hide their identity. Further ethical considerations such as avoidance of harm and voluntary participation were maintained by keeping the participants safe from any harm at all times and informing them that the study is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any given time.

Below is a demographic presentation of the participants:

Total number of participants	
Gender	
Female	
Male	
Participant's marital status	
Married	
Single	
Separated	
Divorced or widower	
Age of participants	
Under 18	9
18 and above	4

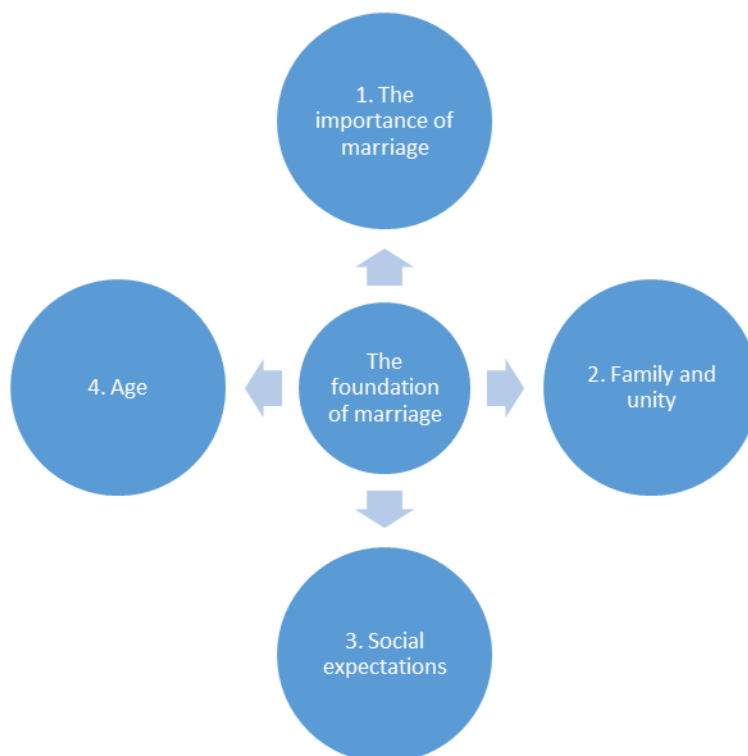
4. PRESENTATION OF DATA

This paper provides analysis of the data which resulted in the formation of four main themes namely, the importance of

marriage, family and unity, social expectations and age. These themes were generated by the responses given by the participants on their

understanding of the African belief system on marriage.

Below is a pictorial diagram of the themes:



5.1 The importance of marriage

The participants revealed how the importance of marriage is perceived as the building block of any marriage within the Vhavenda communities. The participants provided responses that provided a window for disputes on the

importance of marriage within the Vhavenda culture in relation to it being the initiator of marriage. Captured below are some of the responses from the participants:

“I understand marriage is a union that happens between two people, a man and a woman who have agreed on being together and want to start a family together (P1).”

“Marriage is when two people, a woman and a men get to know each other and agree mutually on being one and live together and have a family of their own (P2).”

“You know, when we talk about marriage we are talking about two people getting together and form one union that becomes a family (P3).”

“Marriage is universal across all African cultures, there is not definition that is strictly for Vhavenda. I understand marriage as a joint act between a man and woman who have decided to be husband and wife (P11).”

“I see marriage as something that has to do with two people who are have decided to date and fell in love and want to take their relationship to a next level of staying together in one place as one family (P5).”

“Marriage is when a woman is taken from her home to the home of the man when they are old enough going to build a home/family (P6).”

Most of the participants highlighted the significance of marriage to everyone who belongs to the Vhavenda culture to marry or get married at some point in their life. This provides an idea that within the Vhavenda culture, it is

expected that one should eventually get married or marry. Still, the same idea on the importance of marriage within the Vhavenda culture is captured by the participant below.

“In Tshivenda it is important to marry or get married because it gives out culture and families dignity, the man and woman become free and develop a sense of belonging (P5).”

Marriage within the Vhavenda people provides dignity to culture and family. The participant extends the response and mentions that one other important aspect of marriage is that it provides a sense of belonging to the man and woman who are about to get married.

5.2 Family and Unity

Still, in discussing the foundation of marriage within the Vhavenda culture, the participants' responses revealed that marriage within the Vhavenda culture brings a sense of unity within the families. These responses provide insight into how unity and family are inclusive to the husband and wife and how it unites two families from being strangers to relatives. These are some of the responses from the participants:

“I understand marriage is a union that happens between two people, a man and a woman who have agreed on being together and want to start a family together (P1).”

“Marriage is when two people, a woman and a man get to know each other and agree mutually on being one and live together and have a family of their own (P2).”

“You know, when we talk about marriage we are talking about two people getting together and form one union that becomes a family (P3).”

“Marriage is universal across all African cultures, there is not definition that is strictly for Vhavenda. I understand marriage as a joint act between a man and woman who have decided to be husband and wife (P11).”

“I see marriage as something that has to do with two people who are have decided to date and fell in love and want to take their relationship to a next level of staying together in one place as one family (P5).”

“Marriage is when a woman is taken from her home to the home of the man when they are old enough going to build a home/family (P6).”

All of the participants agree that marriage is responsible for the development of unity within Vhavenda families. In addition, the participants' responses show how the aspect of family and being united has an influence on the foundation of marriage.

Based on the points provided by the participants on family and unity as a factor of marriage establishment, it is

revealed that *Mamalo* within the Vhavenda culture, which acts as a foundation of legitimizing marriage, is essential for developing marriage. Family and unity are significant when dealing with the social issue of GBV. The participants show that marriage acts as a bonding agent that develops between two people and extends to the two families. This is well captured by the participant's response below:

“You know, when we talk about marriage we are talking about two people getting together and form one union that becomes a family” this view suggests that marriage initiates with two people only and then develops into a family(P3).”

5.3 Social Expectations

The society and social expectations play a huge role of the development of family within the Vhavenda people.

People are born and raised in societies that are guided by norms and various cultural demands. Based on

engagements that were held with the participants, the data revealed that there are certain social expectations that influences individuals to be to get

married. Below are some of the responses given by the participants in this regard:

“Hmm, are you aware that there are people who got married not because of love, but because their families were pressurizing them to get married. This is the reality and when you see them together, you would think they truly loved each other and wanted to start their family whereas they were pushed towards that direction by their family (P12).”

“Would you believe if I tell you that to be honest when I married, I was not really sure about the woman I wanted. My family set me down one day and they said in our family it is a must that you must marry. I ended up rushing myself just to satisfy my family and relatives. Good thing is the woman I ended up with and got married to was the woman I wanted (P4).”

“These days there are many young women and men who are getting married because of all the flashy wedding idea they have, they get married just to show that I can afford a better a wedding than that one of who who who..., which I find very wrong (P7).”

“Did you know that there are people who spend a lot of money on attires, the decorations and so one, only to find out that they just want to please the world, I find very sad. The meaning behind marriage is being distorted, it is no longer about two individuals and two families forming a union but rather who had the best wedding in the community (P8).”

“Sometimes when I look at it, I think most of youth we marry based on the pocket, what we look for is if we will get the wedding of our dreams or not. If the person cannot provide the wedding we want, we will marry the one who will. Now this makes me wonder, is marriage based on the amazingness or the fanciness of the wedding ceremony or the love between the two? (P10). “

When looking at the above responses by the participant social expectation as one the factor of marriage foundation, the participants revealed that people are getting married for wrong reasons. There are individuals who are getting into marriage as a result of social pressures they get subjected to at home and by the society.

Another aspect revealed by this data is individuals getting into marriage because of the glamour of it. The participants provided insight into how some people get married just to have the wedding of their dreams and to be labelled as that individual who had the best wedding in town. This idea is distorting the original meaning

behind getting married. People no longer marry out of love and start a family, but rather to satisfy the expectations of the society.

5.4 Age

When engaging with the participants, there is an impression of the linkage between a person being married and

the age. The data suggests that when a person gets older, there is an expectation of that individual to get married. In addition, the data also reveals the idea of marrying at a specific age and the chances of that marriage being a success. This is what the participants said in relation to this theme.

“I do not think there is a specific age either to marry or get married but at least you need to be a person who is responsible and in the current times I would say at least be over 18 years of age (P12).”

“These days I see a lot of young men and women getting married too early and this is the reason being many divorce and violence because they are not ready for such a huge step. For a man to marry in our culture he must at least be over 30 years. That is when we know that you are a man who knows what he wants in this world (P2).”

“In our culture it is rare to find child marriage, most people who get married are either already working and responsible adults and most are over 20 years (P3).”

“There is an age to marry, when either a man or a woman is of the age of 21, is ready to marry (P13).”

“Mamalo was paid for me and I was old enough, I was married when I was already working and got married by a person who is working and we told ourselves that we are going to build a family and even today here I am (P7).”

“This issue of being expected to marry at a specific age is real, this is mostly found in our families, you will hear them makings jokes saying ‘when are you getting married?’ some you will hear them saying ‘if you are having any difficulties out there will the ladies let us know’ in other words, they are saying I am taking too long to marry because my age permits marriage. This makes people marry when they are not ready (P11).”

Participant 10 “The issue of being expected to get married at a specific age is very serious, I have been told that women my age are married and they have children now, I don’t really understand while it is perceived as mandatory that because I am a 24-year-old female I should be already married. Yes, some of our parents got married while in their 20s but times have changed now (P10).”

Participant 2 “Sometimes I think us as parents and grandparents we do pressure of children into marriage. I remember telling my eldest son that I want grandchildren in this house because you are old enough. Now when I look at it I think I might be reason behind him marrying (P2).”

The majority of the participants agree on the fact that age can be a contributing factor to a person getting married. According to the responses by the participants, it is being revealed that there are individuals who are mostly likely to get married based on their age. Some of these individuals are given comments by family members that they are of the age to marry and get married, and that they are delaying parents to opportunity of having grandchildren.

Based on the data, some of the participants linked the age at which a person gets married to the success of married. This provides insight into how delay in getting married can be done deliberately to ensure a high chance of marriage success. Some of the responses above reveal that the current generation, both male and female, are getting into marriage when they are too young. According to most participants, it is expected for a male to be over the age of 20 and this captured by the response given by the participant below:

“These days are I see a lot of young men and women getting married too early and this is the reason being many divorces and violence because they are not ready for such a huge step. For a man to marry in our culture he must at least be over 30 years. That is when we know that you are a man who knows what he wants in this world (P2).”

This response reveals that according to the Vhavenda culture, a man is expected to get married when he is 30 years old and above. Therefore, when a man reaches that age, he will feel the need to get married regardless of the level of capability and mental readiness in fear of being stigmatized by the family and the community.

5. DISCUSSION

Based on the data, it is possible to address the study's four research questions. Namely:

- 1. What are the core belief systems that underpin the Mamalo practice within the Vhavenda culture?**
- 2. How do these belief systems positively influence perceptions of marriage and the roles of women within the community?**
- 3. In what ways can Mamalo be recontextualized to promote gender equality and restore dignity to women?**
- 4. What are the potential implications of these findings for broader discussions on cultural practices and gender equity in Africa?**

Core belief systems underpinning Mamalo within Vhavenda culture: Mamalo is embedded within a broader Vhavenda belief system concerning marriage, family, social responsibility,

and cultural continuity. The importance attached to marriage constitutes one of the central beliefs underpinning the practice. Marriage is understood not merely as a private relationship between a man and a woman, but as a culturally and spiritually significant institution that establishes belonging, family continuity, and social recognition. Participants clearly associated marriage with cultural and spiritual meaning, including reference to the biblical account of Adam and Eve. This finding is consistent with Chisango, Mafa and Maunganidze (2022), who observe that marriage in many African societies is associated with social significance and success, while unmarried individuals may experience social stigma. Baloyi (2022) similarly argues that marriage extends beyond childbearing and family formation to include the continuation of culture and tradition from one generation to another.

Another core belief underpinning *Mamalo* concerns social responsibility, related to expectations, age and the establishment of a family. In some cases, these expectations can appear as pressure from family and the wider community, including comparisons with people of a similar age who are already married. Age is consequently constructed as an important social marker of marital readiness. Yet, chronological age does not necessarily determine marital preparedness. Similar to Hariri and Purba (2022) study, being eighteen

may be the legal age of marriage in South Africa, but this alone does not determine whether a marriage will be successfully maintained. Economic circumstances, understanding of the purpose of marriage, emotional readiness, mental readiness and understanding of social responsibility are most important considerations. The findings therefore reveal a tension between culturally learned expectations concerning the appropriate age for marriage and the broader conditions necessary for a healthy and sustainable marital relationship.

The process through which *Mamalo* is negotiated further reveals the importance of family unity, genealogy, descent, compatibility, and communal participation. Within the Vhavenda cultural context presented by the participants, the man is traditionally expected to initiate the marriage proposal and to undertake the payment of *Mamalo*. Before the payment and negotiation take place, both families become involved, including through background investigations concerning family history and descent. The practice therefore positions marriage as a relationship between families rather than exclusively between two individuals. Similar processes have been documented among the Ameru of Kenya, where families investigate one another before *Mamalo* is initiated (Karicha, Akaranga & Musili, 2021),

and among the Abagussi, where family visitation, introductions, and investigation form part of the process of establishing marital suitability (Orera, Kakai & Gimode, 2023). These similarities suggest that family involvement and communal verification constitute significant elements within several African marriage traditions.

At the same time, these belief systems contain gendered assumptions that require critical consideration. The expectation that the man should initiate marriage and pay *Mamalo*, together with the expectation that the woman relocates from her natal home to her husband's household, reflects a traditional organisation of marital roles in which authority may be associated more strongly with the husband's household. The relocation of the woman consequently raises questions concerning power and authority within marriage. But because these gendered expectations are learned and reproduced through family and community interaction, they can always be re framed in a way that aligns with the couples views.

Positive influence of these belief systems on perceptions of marriage and women's roles: The identified belief systems surrounding *Mamalo* can contribute positively to perceptions of marriage through their association with values such as

belonging, responsibility, family unity, social recognition, and cultural continuity. As Chisango, Mafa and Maunganidze (2022) study shows, these values restores marriage as a significant marker of social status and responsibility within many African communities. Maintaining these helps uphold cultural continuity and community (Baloyi, 2022). Within the present findings, these meanings can also help explain why *Mamalo* continues to be understood as an important component of marriage. Rather than being viewed simply as a financial transaction, *Mamalo* is better situated within a wider cultural framework in which marriage establishes relationships between families and creates obligations to sustain the family and the wider community.

A particularly important positive dimension also concerns the communal support provided to the bride and groom. After the *Mamalo* process is completed, the bride may be accompanied by other young women from her community to her new home, where she receives advice and counselling concerning her new marital responsibilities. The findings indicate that the man also receives guidance from his family. This practice demonstrates that marriage preparation is not necessarily directed exclusively at women but can involve both partners. Similar practices of

advice, counselling and family involvement have been documented among the Kikuyu, Ameru and Abagussi of Kenya and the Masubiya people of East Caprivi in Namibia (Murage, 2023; Karicha, Akaranga & Musili, 2021; Kapesiso, 2022; Orera, Kakai & Gimode, 2023). Such practices can provide social support to couples and create a communal mechanism for transmitting knowledge about marital responsibilities.

The communal support provided to the bride and groom also particularly further suggest that *Mamalo* can contribute to the social recognition and dignity of women when interpreted within the broader cultural system. Mbewe (2021), in research among the Ngoni people of Mzimba District in northern Malawi, found that perceptions of *Mamalo* differ between those who practise it and those who do not: while some non-practitioners perceive it as a burden, practitioners understand it as a cultural practice that strengthens and preserves marriage. The present findings similarly suggest that *Mamalo* can be understood as a practice that assigns value and dignity to women within the cultural context in which it is practised. This is important because it challenges interpretations that reduce *Mamalo* exclusively to an economic transaction and instead draws attention to its symbolic and relational dimensions.

Recontextualising Mamalo to promote gender equality and restore women's dignity: The findings also provide a basis for recontextualising *Mamalo* rather than simply rejecting the practice. This recontextualisation would require distinguishing between the cultural values that promote family unity, social support, counselling, responsibility and dignity, and interpretations that may reinforce women's subordination. The family participation embedded in *Mamalo*, for example, can be retained as a mechanism for strengthening marital support and accountability while ensuring that both the man and woman participate equally in decisions concerning their marriage. Likewise, the counselling traditionally provided to couples can be strengthened to address mutual respect, shared responsibility, communication, non-violence, and the equal dignity of both partners. This approach would build upon existing cultural resources rather than treating gender equality as necessarily incompatible with cultural tradition.

The issue of the woman's relocation following *Mamalo* is particularly important for this recontextualisation. As the data indicate, traditionally moving from her family home into that of the man should be celebrated. Even though this arrangement may create an understanding that the husband's household possesses greater authority within the marriage for those who do not understand the tradition, in reality the interpretation is different. Instead, it can be reconstructed as a symbolic

and relational practice through which two families establish a socially recognised marital relationship. Such a reinterpretation would enable the cultural significance of *Mamalo* to be maintained while rejecting any understanding of the practice that could legitimise women's subordination, control, or violence.

The process of recontextualisation can also be understood through African feminist theory, where the roles associated with *Mamalo* are learned through critical evaluation of the context. The expectation that men initiate marriage, that women relocate to the husband's family, and that women learn the responsibilities of wifehood through advice from older women are examples of good and noble behaviours transmitted across generations and through critical acts of maintaining the society. If these practices continue to be modelled without critical reflection, gendered expectations may also continue to be reproduced. Conversely, communities can deliberately model alternative forms of *Mamalo* in which women participate actively in marital negotiations, both partners receive counselling, decision-making is shared, and respect for women's autonomy is emphasised. In this way, cultural transformation can occur through the same social processes through which cultural traditions are originally transmitted.

Implications for cultural practices and gender equity in Africa: The findings have implications beyond the Vhavenda context because they demonstrate the complexity of African cultural practices associated with marriage and gender. The practice of *mamalo* as the data shows simultaneously embody family unity, cultural continuity, social belonging, counselling, and recognition of women while also reproducing gendered expectations concerning who initiates marriage, who makes the payment, and where the woman resides after marriage. This complexity is consistent with evidence from other African contexts. For example, Karicha, Akaranga and Musili (2021), Murage (2023), Kapesiso (2022), and Orera, Kakai and Gimode (2023) demonstrate the importance of family involvement, investigation, counselling, and communal participation in marriage-related practices among other African communities.

The findings therefore suggest that efforts towards gender equity in Africa can benefit from engaging critically with existing cultural resources rather than treating culture only as an obstacle to social change. The communal and relational dimensions of *Mamalo* provide potential foundations for strengthening family accountability, supporting couples, and promoting

respectful marital relationships. At the same time, practices that create unequal authority or imply that women become subject to male ownership or control require critical reinterpretation. This approach is consistent with the finding by Mbewe (2021) that the meaning attributed to Mamalo differs according to whether individuals understand and participate in the cultural practice. Cultural practices therefore acquire meaning through social interpretation and practice rather than possessing a single, unchanging meaning.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the intricate relationship between the traditional practice of Mamalo and the belief systems guiding marriage within the Vhavenda culture. Through in-depth engagement with participants, it becomes evident that the cultural significance of marriage transcends mere social obligation; it embodies a framework through which individuals experience belonging, unity, and continuity of cultural traditions. The findings illustrate that marriage is not only a personal commitment but a vital societal institution that carries profound spiritual and cultural weight, as reflected in participants' references to historical narratives, such as that of Adam and Eve.

The belief systems surrounding marriage and Mamalo reveal dual narratives. On one hand, they affirm the importance of marriage as a source of personal and communal identity, offering individuals a sense of freedom and stability. On the other hand, they expose the social pressures and expectations that can compel individuals into marriage, sometimes before they feel ready. This tension reflects the complexities inherent in cultural practices, where the same traditions that provide a foundation for social cohesion can also perpetuate gender inequalities and GBV.

The study also underscores the role of African feminist theory in shaping attitudes and behaviors related to marriage. The ability to critically reflect on traditional practices support the argument that the solution of African problem, including the restoration of women's dignity does not necessarily require the abandonment of African traditions. Instead, it requires a critical reconstruction of the meanings, expectations, and gender relations associated with these practices. The values of family unity, social responsibility, communal support, counselling, and cultural continuity can be retained while interpretations that undermine women's autonomy and dignity are challenged. Such transformation is particularly significant because cultural beliefs are

learned and reproduced across generations.

By modelling Mamalo as a practice based on mutual respect, shared responsibility, women's agency, and non-violence, communities can use an existing cultural institution as a resource for social change. The broader implication is that African cultural practices can become important sites for advancing gender equity when communities critically reinterpret traditions in ways that preserve cultural identity while affirming the equal dignity and agency of women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, this study makes the following quick recommendations:

1. Recontextualisation of Mamalo to promote gender equality. Mamalo should be critically reinterpreted in ways that preserve its cultural and relational significance while rejecting interpretations that position women as subordinate to men. Contemporary understandings of mamalo within the Venda communities should emphasise mutual

respect, partnership, consent, shared decision-making, and equal responsibility within marriage.

2. Use traditional and community structures to prevent Social vices emanating from misconceptions of Mamalo. Traditional leaders, elders, religious leaders, men's groups, women's organisations, and community institutions should collaborate in developing culturally grounded prevention programmes. These initiatives should challenge harmful constructions of masculinity, male entitlement, and the perception that may emanate from misconceptions of mamalo and ideas of ownership over women.

3. Strengthen culturally informed marriage and gender education. Premarital and community education should incorporate discussions of Mamalo, gender equality, communication, conflict resolution, women's rights, and non-violent relationships. Further research should also examine how contemporary Vhavenda men and women interpret and experience Mamalo across different generations and social contexts.

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