


# Chapter 5

## Roles and Responsibilities of Vatete (Aunt) in the Family Among the Ndaou People of Chipinge District, Zimbabwe: Challenges and Opportunities

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### ABSTRACT

*The findings of this study shed light on the essential yet often under-appreciated role of aunts within family structures, particularly in the context of Ndaou people of Chipinge District, Zimbabwe. Aunts, traditionally regarded as key figures in nurturing and guiding younger generations, face a myriad of challenges that hinder their effectiveness in fulfilling these responsibilities. Issues such as mistrust from their brothers' wives (varooro), diminishing authority, and competition from female church elders emerge as significant barriers. Additionally, geographical distance, limited resources, and educational gaps further complicate their ability to provide the mentorship and support that younger family members need. This study underscores the importance of addressing these challenges to empower aunts and enhance their contributions to familial and cultural continuity in the family.*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the *vatete* (aunt) as a cultural heritage institution within families among the Ndaou people of Chipinge District, Zimbabwe. The chapter is an outcome of a mixed methods study conducted by the author with 108 women across Chipinge District. *Vatete* is a Shona language term which means the same as aunt in English language. In this chapter, the two terms are used interchangeably with *vanatete* being the plural form of *vatete*. Vanatete are often referred to as ‘vatete cultural heritage institu-

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tion' because of the significant roles they play in preserving and transmitting family socio-cultural values, community knowledge and normative practices (Afolabi, 2005; Bwalya, 2022; Mkhize & Reddy, 2020).

While women, generally, are regarded as influential figures in their families from the perspective of the role they play and espouse as vanatete, this role is highly likely to be eroded soon if little or nothing is done to preserve it. In fact, the author was motivated to write this chapter to gain understanding of the role of vanatete and to explore any challenges they are facing in carrying out their roles and responsibilities in the family. Essentially, the chapter brings out the roles and responsibilities of vatete, challenges they are facing in the modern society and opportunities in preserving this crucial indigenous cultural institution among the Ndaу people of Zimbabwe.

## **BACKGROUND**

In the cultural context of the Ndaу and Shona people of Zimbabwe, aunts play a significant social role within the family structure (Zimunya, 2021). Their responsibilities extend beyond mere familial ties; they are integral to the social fabric and cultural continuity of both their families and communities. Vanatete are often seen as advisors, caregivers, and mediators, embodying a blend of authority and nurturing that is respected and valued in their respective families and communities (Chikanda, 2017).

One of the primary roles of vanatete is to provide guidance and support to their siblings and their children. They are expected to advise their brothers on matters related to marriage and family life, often acting as intermediaries between their brothers and sisters-in-law (varoora) (Chikanda, 2017). This advisory role is crucial, as it helps to maintain harmony within the family and ensures that traditional values normative practices are upheld. It is clear that aunts' advisory role safeguards that family members' behaviours or actions are within the socio-cultural standards that are widely accepted and expected in the community.

Vanatete are also responsible for nurturing their nieces and nephews, playing a vital role in their upbringing, including, sometimes, even their education (Moyo, 2019; Nyoni 2020). They often take an active part in teaching children about cultural practices, social norms, and life skills, which are essential for their development and integration into society (Mavhunga, 2018; Moyo, 2019). Moreover, the role of vatete is characterized by a certain level of authority, particularly in family disputes. They are often called upon to mediate conflicts and provide resolutions, leveraging their experience and wisdom to restore peace within the family (Chikanda, 2017; Chivasa, 2022). This aspect of their role underscores the respect afforded to them within the family hierarchy. In many cases, the eldest tete may take precedence in discussions, reflecting the importance of age and experience in decision-making processes within the Shona culture (Mavhunga, 2018).

Vanatete also play a significant role in the socialization of children. They are responsible for instilling values and morals, often emphasizing the importance of community and collective responsibility (Nyoni 2020; Zimunya 2021). A common saying among the Shona is, "You do not educate your child for yourself alone; education is for society, by society," which highlights the communal approach to child-rearing (Mavhunga, 2018). Vanatete are seen as vital contributors to this process, ensuring that children grow up with a strong sense of identity and belonging.

In addition to their nurturing and advisory roles, vanatete are also expected to embody certain qualities that reflect their status within the family. They are often viewed as role models, and their behaviour can significantly influence how children perceive their roles in society. A good vatete is expected to

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