



RESEARCH ARTICLE

## **Rooted in Tradition, Shaped by Experience: Exploring Identity Formation in Youth Raised Within 'Gonyalelwa Lapa'**

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**ABSTRACT**

A study of being raised within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice among Bapedi has been a gap in both practice and research. The article focuses on exploring identity formation in young individuals raised within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice. This was an exploratory, descriptive, contextual and phenomenological study with a qualitative approach. The ecological system perspective guided the study. Purposive sampling was used. Data collection was done through semi-structured, face to-face interviews, and data were analysed through thematic content and verified using Lincoln and Guba's model. Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout this study. The study established that lack of identity for young individuals enthused them to join their mothers within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice. The investigations exposed that unknown identity has had an impact on young individuals who came with their mothers within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice in diverse manners.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

According to Maluleke (2012) culture refers to the beliefs, norms, behaviours, and values that a given group of people deem acceptable. Although identity is about knowing what is acceptable and true for yourself (Idang, 2015). Individuals form a cultural identity when they subconsciously interpret and incorporate signals from the world around them into their own identity so they can belong. According to Altugana (2015), cultural identity is a critical piece of personal identity (and worldview) that develops as somebody absorb, interpret, and adopt (or reject) the beliefs, values, behaviours, and norms of the communities in your life. In order for an offspring to have identity and sense of belonging they must have a family. Furthermore, most of women who are not married, their children end up being confused with regards to their identity and also not knowing where they belong, and at the end when their mothers marry for 'lapa' (family) to avoid being characterised as 'lefetwa' (spinster) their offsprings benefits in terms of identity from this cultural practice 'Gonyalelwa lapa'.

It is believed that many offspring who enter the union with their mothers may encounter challenges in terms of identity and a sense of belonging from their new families, leading them to confusion, lack of moral support and attention. In this scholarly article, the authors present a compelling argument that, apart from lack of identity and sense of belonging for young individuals who are raised within

'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice, there is positive about this 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice as children are valued when they marry their mothers for 'lapa' (family). The article thoroughly examines various facets, including the impact of surname within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice, the impact of marital surname for young individuals who are raised within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice, the impact of 'sereto' (praise/clan name) within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice, the employed research methodology, the theoretical framework, the analysis of findings, the derived conclusions, and the proposed recommendations.

### **Problem statement**

Punch (2016) explicates that a research problem ought to be a clear and unambiguous statement of the object of a study. It has also emanated from practice and observations from practice. According to Strydom (2011), before one can conduct or design a research study, one must have a clear picture of the direction of the study which can then be refined in the form of a research problem, problem statement and research question(s). In this context, the problem statement spells out the challenges faced by young individuals who came with their mothers within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice. The researchers believe that the problem statement is at the heart of every research project and that a problem statement is paramount to the success of the research effort.

This study stems from various concerns raised by young individuals who are raised within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice. Lack of identity and sense of belonging affects most individuals especially, children who do not know their origin as they grow up without knowing their biological fathers. In this study, young individuals who came with their mothers into this cultural practice 'Gonyalelwa lapa' they become confused due to the fact that they are not informed during the negotiation process of marrying their mothers for 'lapa' (family). Moreover, they confused in a manner that they are not sure whether they belong to the maternal family or marital family. In some instances, those who have associates with their biological fathers they become even more confused as they are not engaged to hear their views regarding their relocations with their mothers to the marital family.

The various studies that have been conducted focus on the challenges faced by married women within the marriage but not specifically for the children who came with their mothers into the marriage, especially to hear their feelings regarding their identity and sense of belongings. The paucity of literature regarding the lack of identity and sense of belonging on offsprings who came with their mothers into 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice. There was a need for this study to be carried out specifically in Ga-Masemola village of Sekhukhune District in Limpopo Province followed by number of cases wherein young individuals were confused with regards to their identity due to their mothers who are married for 'lapa' (family).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research approach and design**

A qualitative approach was used to investigate the identity of offspring who came with their mothers within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative approach is an umbrella term that covers the numerous interpretive techniques that explore, describe, decode, translate, and come to terms with meaning in the naturally occurring phenomena in the social world. A qualitative approach is an opportunity to study diversity in populations and also depends strongly on people who are articulate and introspective enough to provide rich descriptions of their individual experiences (Padgett, 2016). In order to understand the comprehensive significant of offspring's identity within the marriage, qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this study.

## Population and sampling

The study was conducted on a population comprises of young individuals (both males and females) who were found in various areas, as long as they had been raised or came with their mothers within the cultural tradition of 'Gonyalelwa lapa' within the BaPedi ethnic group in the Limpopo Province. These individuals resided within the context of the 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice for a minimum of one year or more, with the expectation that they possessed a substantial amount of knowledge regarding the phenomenon. It is important to note that the participants communicated in Sepedi, the language that the researcher was proficient in, in order to prevent any potential confusion for the participants and to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the information shared.

## Data collection methods

Semi-structured in-person interviews were applied, and open-ended subjects included in an interview guide for the purpose of data collection. The goal of semi-structured interview is to collect information and facts (Rosetto, 2014). In accordance with Williams (2015), through semi-structured interviews, the researcher is permitted flexibility while maintaining focus. Nevertheless, it becomes hard for the researcher to maintain consistency, especially if the interviews are conducted by more than one interviewer. The interviews were conducted in a private setting preferred by the participants due to the delicate nature of the subject matter. This permitted the authors to establish a harmonious relationship with these individuals in order to foster a mutual connection to their genuine experiences.

## Data analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is a way in which the researcher is piecing together and editing parts into a whole with its own meaning and significance for (in Reybold et al., 2012). In the same way, Chambliss and Schutt (2013) postulate that qualitative data analysis is an reiterative and reflexive process that commences as data are being collected rather than after data collection has ceased. Thus, data collection and analysis classically go together as the researcher builds a coherent interpretation (Marshall & Rossman 2016). Thematic data analysis was employed in order to attain significant and valuable results from the participants. According to Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016), the recorded interviews were transcribed word for word and subjected to analysis Thematic data analysis was utilised to extract overarching themes and subthemes from the original data, following the prescribed steps outlined in the table below.

**Table 1: Braun's and Clarke's (2013:79) six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis**

Step 1: Become familiar with the data	Step 4: Review themes
Step 2: Generate initial codes	Step 5: Define themes
Step 3: Search for themes	Step 6: Write-up

## Theoretical framework

The study was guided by the strengths-based perspective. Strengths-based perspective is as a social work practice theory that emphasises people's self-determination and strengths (Pulla 2017). The main purpose of the strengths-based perspective is to allow persons to see themselves at their best, and their value as human beings. This approach helps individuals to identify, secure, and sustain the range of internal and external resources that are required to live in the community normally and independently (Romeo & Hunter, 2017). Furthermore, this approach helps individuals to identify, secure, and sustain the range of internal and external resources that are required to live in the community normally and independently (Hammond & Zimmerman, 2012). The strengths-based perspective helped the researcher to discover the inner strengths of the (participants) young individuals who are raised within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice in coping with their challenges.

The strengths-based perspective also helped the researcher to discover the strengths and weaknesses in young individuals who are raised within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethics are commonly associated with morality and within the field of social research. Moreover, it refers to established standards for prescribed conduct for researchers involved in a particular study (McLaughlin, 2012). According to Haahr, Norlyk and Hall (2014), the research ethics protect the participants and other interested parties in the research, as well as to maintain professional research standards, promote public confidence in the research, and minimise legal risks. When conducting a study respect of the rights of participants must take precedence over any other subjective interests (Harris & Atkinson, 2016).

The study adhered to ethical considerations such as informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality, avoidance of harm, debriefing of participants, and data management. Regrettably, due to the limited length of this manuscript, a detailed discussion of these ethical considerations is unattainable. The initial step was followed in obtaining ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the College of Human Sciences at the University of South Africa (UNISA). This committee encompassed a panel of independent experts entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding the rights and well-being of research participants and ensuring that the study was ethically conducted.

## **DISCUSSIONS OF THE FINDINGS**

### **Identity and a sense of belonging for young individuals**

#### **The impact of maternal surname for young individuals who are raised within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice**

Identity and a sense of belonging are some of the aspects which define a human being. There is a lot of confusion for young individuals who are raised within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice as most of them do not know where they belong with regards to the surname they need to utilise. The study shows that young individuals who came with their mothers into 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice identify themselves as the children who belong to their mother's maternal family due to the surname they are using. The account of one research participant serves as evidence for this claim:

"I identify myself as a child who belongs to my maternal family as I'm still using my mother's maternal surname. I did not change my surname, as I'm still called by my mother's surname."

In addition to the abovementioned findings, the other participants were already made the decisions in terms of their identity based on the treatment they received from the marital family. Initial glance influenced their decisions as they were not treated well, and they ended up classifying themselves as the children of their mother's maternal family. The participants shared the following:

"I describe myself as a child of my maternal family according to my identity book. The reason I'm calling myself the child of my maternal family is because my mother's marital family did not treat us kindly from the beginning. And I'm still using my mother's maternal surname."

Interestingly, even though the research participants were describing themselves as the children of their maternal families. There were some who were confused and were not sure about where they belong as they are staying with the "marital family" but still using their mother's maternal surname. The confusion in terms of belongings was confirmed by one participant's statement:

"I do not know whose child am I, as I do not know where I belong. I will say I belong to my maternal family because I did not change the surname, I'm still called by my mother's maternal surname."

Responses show that most of the participants pronounced themselves as belonging to their maternal family because they are still using their mothers' maternal surnames, and the marital families did not treat them well on their arrival at the marital family. The data further portray that the surname plays a significant role in as far as the identity of young individual is concerned, as it helps them in terms of belonging. The research findings are in line with what is stated by Pilcher (2017) who posits that the impact of surname is to provide people with clues about their origin and assists them with identification. In agreement, Nduna (2014) and Sibani (2018) maintain that the surname is also imperative for identity in the situation whereby the children do not know whether they belong to maternal family or paternal family. A surname helps the children to identify themselves in terms of where they belong (Aksholakova, 2013).

### **The impact of marital surname for young individuals who are raised within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice**

It was interesting to establish from this study that there are some participants who described themselves as the children of their mother's "marital family" because they live with them and have adopted their surname. The study findings illustrate that young individuals who came with their mothers into the "marital practice" as well as those who were born within the "marital practice" described themselves as the children of their mothers' "marital family" because they were given a home and surname by their "marital family". The research participants had these comments to make:

"I identify myself, as a child of my mother's marital family because I live with them full time and also use the surname of this family."

"I identify myself as a child of my mother's marital family because they gave me a home and surname... you see..."

The findings of this investigation further reveal that young individuals whom their marital family did not finalise the payment of 'magadi' (bride-price) for their mothers who are married for 'lapa' (family) they still pronounce themselves as the children of the maternal family. One of the participants said the following:

"Because the marital family is yet to finalise the payment of the bride price, I am still identifying myself as a child of my maternal family, I have two years since I came with my mother in this "marital family."

In light of these findings, it is evident that young individuals whose mothers are married under the cultural practice of 'Gonyalelwa' consider the duration and the family name in which their mother are married to when they describe themselves in terms of their identity and belonging.

### **The impact of 'sereto' (praise/clan name) within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice**

'Sereto' (a praise/ clan name) is a ceremonial name or title which is given to a person by the family, as a way of showing respect and reviving their deceased son's or ancestor's name (Thwala, 2021). 'Sereto' (praise name/clan name) helps people to know their identity and where they belong. The study findings revealed that 'sereto' (the praise/clan's name) given to young individuals whose mothers are married for 'lapa' (family) by the "marital family" helped them to identify where they belong. The following were revealed by the research participants:

"I identify myself as a child of my mother's marital family as I was also given a praise/clan name by this family, I am 'Mamorokolo, this makes me feel extremely happy and proud to be the child of this family and I also feel a sense of belonging"

Furthermore, the findings indicate that young individuals who came with their mothers within 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice texture welcomed and accepted within the household after being

given a 'sereto' (clan name) by their mother's marital families. The narratives of the following participants shed light on this point:

"I was given a praise/clan name by my mother's marital family and my praise/clan's name is Phaahle, this makes me feel welcomed as the child of this family"

The findings of this investigation reveal that young individuals who also not given a 'sereto' (clan name/ praise name) by the marital family they still consider or identify themselves as the children of their mother's marital family as they follow what is required by their mother's marital family as they follow their custom. The narrative of one of the research participants serves as supporting evidence for this claim:

"I identify myself, as a child of my mother's marital family because my mother is married, which means that I should do what my mother's marital family do"

The findings of this study confirm that 'Sereto' (praise name/clan name) is important for young individuals whose mothers are married for 'lapa' (family), as some of them based their identity on the name given by the "marital family". Sereto' (praise name/clan name) helped them to describe themselves and know where they belong. Although, some of the research participants were not sure about their identity but 'sereto' (the praise/clan's name) helped them to clear their misperception. There were young individuals who did not hesitate when it came to their identity, as they already regarded themselves as the members of the household, they live in. These findings are in line with the view of Thwala (2021) who posits that the impact of praise names persists to provide individuals a strong sense of identity and belonging to family and social hierarchies. In support, Habib and Ward (2019) praise name provides individuals with a sense of who they are, the community in which they belong and their places in the universe.

## THE IMPLICATION FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

**Cultural Competence:** Social workers need to develop a deep understanding of the 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice. This includes recognizing the familial and societal expectations placed on individuals who grow up within this tradition and how these expectations shape their worldview, behavior, and identity. By acknowledging the importance of "originality," or cultural roots, social workers can approach their clients with greater cultural empathy and awareness.

**Identity Formation and Psychological Support:** Given the study's findings that individuals raised in the 'Gonyalelwa lapa' context often experience confusion in identifying themselves, social workers must tailor interventions to address issues of identity conflict. This may involve facilitating discussions around personal identity, cultural identity, and the possible tensions between the two. Social workers can provide psychological support to help clients navigate these challenges, promoting a more cohesive sense of self.

**Holistic Assessments:** The cultural background of clients raised within the 'Gonyalelwa lapa' tradition should be integrated into holistic assessments of their needs. Social workers must consider the influence of cultural dynamics not only on the individual but also on their family and community relationships. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the client's situation, leading to more effective interventions.

**Family-Centered Interventions:** Since the 'Gonyalelwa lapa' practice is family-oriented, social workers should adopt family-centered approaches when intervening. This involves working not only with the individual but also with the family as a unit, helping to address the broader cultural and relational factors that may be affecting the client's well-being. Family therapy or mediation may be beneficial in supporting both the client and their family in understanding and resolving identity-related challenges.

**Community Engagement:** Social workers should also engage with the wider community to foster cultural understanding and support for individuals navigating identity issues related to 'Gonyalelwa lapa.' Community-based interventions that promote dialogue and cultural sensitivity could help reduce stigma and confusion among young people raised within this practice, contributing to their overall psychosocial development.

**Engage Both Maternal and Marital Families in Family Group Conferences:** To address the complexities arising from the 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice, it is crucial to involve both maternal and marital families in family group conferences prior to the payment of 'magadi' (bride-price). These conferences should educate and empower families about the significance of origins for the children involved in such arrangements. This engagement can facilitate a mutual understanding of the cultural implications and foster a supportive environment for the child's identity development.

**Emphasize Family Support and Cultural Sensitivity:** Practitioners in the helping professions must be aware of and sensitive to cultural diversity when working with families affected by 'Gonyalelwa lapa'. Recognizing the importance of support from both maternal and marital families is essential in addressing issues related to identity and belonging for young individuals. Social workers should integrate cultural competence into their practice to effectively support these individuals and their families in navigating the complexities of their cultural context.

**Empower Young Individuals to Advocate for Themselves:** Social workers should assist young individuals raised within the 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice in advocating for themselves and their peers by lobbying policymakers on issues pertinent to their experiences. Empowering these young people to engage in policy discussions can help address systemic issues affecting their sense of identity and belonging, leading to more informed and supportive policies.

**Conduct Further Research on Women's Identity and Belonging:** Additional research is needed to explore the identity and sense of belonging of women married into 'lapa' (family) arrangements. Understanding the experiences and challenges faced by these women can provide valuable insights that inform social work interventions. This research should focus on how these women navigate their roles within the family and their impact on their children's identity formation, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of social work practices in the community.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights that young individual raised within the 'Gonyalelwa lapa' cultural practice often experiences confusion and misperceptions regarding their origins, leading to challenges in their sense of belonging and identity. The frustration stemming from this confusion can affect their self-perception and their relationships with both maternal and marital families. It is crucial to address these concerns by listening to the voices of these young individuals and taking proactive steps to support their identity development within their cultural context. Engaging families, promoting cultural sensitivity, empowering youth advocacy, and conducting further research are essential strategies for enhancing social work interventions and supporting individuals in navigating the complexities of their cultural practices.

## GLOSSARY

**Lapa-** family

**Sereto-** clan/ praise name

**Magadi-** bride-price

**Lefetwa-** spinster

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