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It still makes sense!: Shona *ngano* (folktale) and the contemporary Zimbabwean socio-economic and cultural setup

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Abstract

Colonialist thinking in Zimbabwe relegates folklore, especially folktales to an art of the past, with no relevance to today's life experiences. The same thinking further condemns this art as a less serious form of literature which does not warrant serious consideration, with some renowned contemporary artists even composing songs that demean this body of literature. Contrary to such perceptions, this form of literature has never been static and trivial. Rather, it was, and remains a valuable way of exposing and interpreting reality and challenges posed by life. This paper thus argues and shows that folktales constitute a serious body of literature to which contemporary Zimbabweans must not only pay serious attention, but also tap from, for a better understanding of reality and for them to cope with challenges posed by modernity. The paper uses Afro-centrism as a theoretical grounding for the arguments.

Keywords: Folktales, colonialist, contemporary literature, Afro-centric

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1. Introduction

Colonialist thinking believes and takes *Ngano* to be an art of the past, with no relevance to today's experiences. Scholars like Bascom (1965: 4) even argue that such a genre of literature needs not be taken seriously since it is not considered history or real life experience. Bascom's view was imbibed by some contemporary Zimbabweans, with some renowned musicians like Mai Charamba singing that those who run short of songs should sing folktales instead of undermining God and his authority. The implication is that folktales are not a serious literary form, and are the ultimate option for stranded musicians. The paper argues that folktales have remained a faithful and very serious literary art which explores and illuminates life, thus warranting serious appreciation. 'Old' tales like "Tsuru naShumba" (Hare and Lion) [*Ngano Vol IV*: 89-93] and "Vasikana vakaroorwa nemadzvinyu" (Girls that got married to lizards) [*Ngano Vol II*: 57-58] continue to vividly illuminate modern Zimbabwe's experiences and life challenges. It is an undoubted fact that Zimbabwe has experienced serious socio-economic challenges in the past two decades, among them underperformance of the economy, political disagreements, emigration of skilled personnel and family decline due to loss of marriage values. As some Zimbabweans battle to come to terms with this new reality, tales told long back continue to vividly illuminate these. A closer look at some of such tales show that contemporary Zimbabweans need to tap from this form of literature to have a better understanding of the modern challenges as well as solutions thereof. Vindicating the indisputable position of folktales in explaining, criticizing and shaping life, scholars like Nandwa and Bukenya (1983), Lusweti (1984), Kabira and Mutahi (1988) and Chesaina (1991) advocate for the revitalization of this genre of literature; its collection, recording and publication to avoid the tragedy of losing such a vital source of knowledge and culture.

2. Theoretical framework

The paper is backed by Afro-centrism, a theory that calls for all African phenomena, activities and way of life to be looked at and be given meaning from the standpoint and worldview of Africans [Gray, 2001:3, Asante in Hudson-Weems (ed), 2007: 29]. The theory observes that using colonial and western perspectives to understand African realities normally results in distorted conclusions. Thus, it is prudent that folktales by the Shona and about Shona people's experiences be appreciated using this standpoint which stresses that it is only participants in a culture who can pass judgment on whether a work of art is beautiful or not (p'Bitek, 1986: 37). No doubt, these participants are the Shona people whose life experiences and philosophy of life are illuminated through the Shona folktales.

3. The tales

3.1. Folktale one: "Tsuru naShumba" (Hare and Lion)

In the tale, Hare and Lion are relatives. Confronted by serious economic challenges, Lion leaves his children under the custody of Hare as he goes away to hunt in alien forests in order to support them. After making a

big catch, Lion sends Hare a lot of meat and only hears of his children's welfare from afar (Hare has to shout and show them up). Later, feeling hungry, Hare starts preying on Lion's children, one by one. When Lion ultimately comes back, he discovers that his children are no more, and confronts Hare who shifts blame to Baboon, leading to the death of innocent souls.

3.2. Significance of the tale

The tale succinctly captures the socio-economic situation in Zimbabwe as well as its effects on relations and families. Since 1997, a harsh economic environment with very limited employment opportunities as well as poor remuneration for workers characterized Zimbabwe. It was also a hyper inflationary environment where goods were scarce or, when available, their price sometimes doubled in a day (Moyana in Nyota et al. [eds] 2010: xii; Duri, [Unpublished]: 16), making it very difficult for a worker to buy a small item like a household stove (Kurotwi, 2004: 72). For example, the price of maize meal rose by 36% in October 1997 and by a further 24% in December the same year, and in January the following year the price of rice and cooking oil had more than doubled (Duri, 2006: 16). The same month, government made a decision to increase the cost of fuel by 67% and of basic commodities by 40% (ibid). This bred demonstrations known as food riots. Many industries and factories either scaled down or closed completely citing viability problems, giving rise to many retrenchments and acute levels of unemployment. Many people looked beyond the Zimbabwean borders for employment opportunities, what Mupondi (in Nyota et al., [eds] 2010: xii) describes as "hunting in foreign lands", in the same way Lion went into the forest to hunt. The forest becomes a symbol of alienation, of people going into alien territories in a bid to work for their families. In the Zimbabwean case, many people left for neighbouring South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Mozambique and to as far as UK, USA, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand (Kurotwi, 2003: 27), compelling Nyota to remark that Zimbabweans of both sexes and all ages are scattered all over the globe (in Nyota et al., 2010: vii). As of August 2004, the number of Zimbabweans living abroad stood at 3,4 million according to the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe HomeLink *Kumusha/Ekhaya* supplement of July 2004. Given that the total population of the country hovered around 13 million, such a figure of emigrants undoubtedly has an impact on the fabric of the nation.

In the majority of cases, the emigrants left their children under the custody of other people – in some cases, immediate family members; in others, relatives of the extended family, and sometimes friends and in the worst of cases, complete strangers. In alien land, Lion works himself lame, catching a lot of game and stocking a lot of meat to send home. Similarly, many Zimbabweans in the Diaspora work themselves flat, with some reportedly doing as many as three jobs and working as many as eighteen hours (18) a day in order to raise as much money as is possible. In most cases, they make sacrificial savings to the extent that they starve themselves so as to send home as much as they can. A number of Zimbabwean families have witnessed significant progress in life owing to the monetary benefits of having their kindred in the Diaspora, with some building big and beautiful houses (Moyana, in Nyota et al., 2010: xix). Lion is alienated from his children and only gets to know about their welfare by getting in touch with the guardian, Hare by asking from afar (he shouts and Hare shouts back) after which he leaves meat for their upkeep. Those in the Diaspora mostly get to know about their children's welfare by getting in touch with the guardians through mainly, the telephone,

email, face book, thus 'shouting from afar' as it were and then sent 'meat' [money] through money gram, and other home-link facilities hoping these would be passed on to their children. One bizarre incident is depicted by Manyarara in her short-story "OKRH" when a husband in the Diaspora cannot attend the funeral of his wife and conducts burial rites over the phone (in Nyota et al. [eds] 2010: 61 - 3), thus in a way shouting from afar.

Hare starts preying on Lion's children in many respects. Firstly, he eats the food that has been sent for them, thus denying them of a decent livelihood. Secondly, he also gives some of the food to total strangers who include Mr. Baboon and his family. Thirdly, he physically eats these children instead of looking after them. The same is true about the guardians of children whose parents are in the Diaspora. Most of the guardians feed and clothe themselves and their families using monies sent by the toiling Diasporans whilst the real beneficiaries live in abject poverty. In some cases, some of these children are sent away from school for failure to pay fees when in fact their parents would have sent enough money to cater for their needs. In other cases, these children are given very little food compared to what their parents would have sent for them. Some of the food would have been distributed to very distant relatives, including personal friends of the guardians.

Some of the guardians have gone to the extent of building very beautiful houses and buying very expensive cars for themselves whilst the children in concern sometimes stay in squalid conditions. Other guardians physically prey on these children, in some cases, sexually abusing them and in other cases, loading them with a lot of household work. In the short stories "Mother Come Back Home" and "Name Any Price", Mupondi and Magosvongwe tell stories of girl-children that are raped by elderly men who should be protecting them (2010: xx). Some of the children are also victims of severe beatings. In the tale, when Lion ultimately comes, hoping to thank Hare for a job well done, he finds no surviving child of his. As Nyota rightly puts it, just like the war of liberation has come and gone, the flight of Zimbabweans into the Diaspora in their millions will, one day, come to an end (2010: ix). It is not surprising that when some of the Diasporans ultimately come back, they may face the harsh reality that their children are 'no more'. Either the children would have escaped into the streets owing to the ill-treatment they would have suffered under the tutelage of their guardians. Some, especially the girl children, would have been married very early as a means of escaping the discomfort meted on them by the guardians. In some cases, although the children may be physically present, there may be no children to talk about culturally, spiritually, socially or even intellectually. Most guardians are only concerned about the welfare and cultural orientation of their biological children. This leaves the 'parentless' children prone to juvenile delinquency; which include drug and alcohol abuse and other street acts. They may also lack such values as love and hospitality because in their upbringing, they have been denied them. They may even fail to respect elders since they are used to doing whatever comes into their minds. Again, with no one to seriously monitor their academic performance, these children often do not do well in class. In some cases, they spend most of their time glued to television sets, watching movies or pornographic material and in other cases; they are out visiting friends and coming home very late. For those who would have been victims of rape, they would have suffered spiritual and emotional scars, which may be difficult to heal. Thus there really would be no children to talk about. So the tale warns that whilst it is

good to work for the family, such parent-child alienation usually has serious repercussions especially for the growing children who are exposed to several risks.

The tale thus shows the problems of a weak economy, which usually forces people to vacate their homes and go to alien places in order to work and provide for the family. Whilst it is good to work for the family, such parent-child alienation usually has serious repercussions especially for the growing children who are exposed to a plethora of risks. The folktale thus aptly captures the experiences in modern Zimbabwe's trying economic environment and the impact it has had on the family and welfare of the child. It is both a warning and advice to those parents who almost lose touch with their children to revise their ways of ascertaining their children's welfare.

3.3. Folktale two: "Vasikana vakaroorwa nemadzvinyu" (Girls who were married to lizards)

Four girls are courted, and fall in love with lizards. They immediately elope to their 'husbands' homes without knowing that they had got married to lizards. When they arrive at their husbands' 'homesteads' the girls make shocking discoveries; that the boys changed into lizards, ate strange food (*shana mudamba*) and did not have decent houses. They stayed in cracks. The girls had been attracted to the boys' outward appearances. One suitor was light in complexion (*mutsvuku*) while the other was smartly dressed, putting on a tie (*akasunga tai*). Their marriages being unsuccessful, they troop back home.

3.4. Significance of the tale

The tale, in traditional Shona society stressed the need for young girls to be married to boys whose cultural orientation and background they were aware of. "Vakomana vaisanduka kuita Shumba" (Boys who changed into lions) [Ngano Vol II: 46-52] and "Vakomana Shumba" (Lion Boys) [Ngano Volume IV: 22] also convey the same theme.

The Shona have always considered marriage as the ultimate goal in life, and hence prepared their citizens for this important achievement (Weinrich, 1982: 34-5; Gombe, 1998: 81). They strove for happy marriages which were preceded by proper courtship and which also gave birth to stable families and a healthy society (Majaya in Haasbroek and Majaya, 1978: 11). As such, they had to warn, advise and teach the young on how to achieve this cherished goal in life. In the tale, the girls did not know anything about the suitors' history, their personality, and type of food or shelter. That the boys would at one point change into human beings and at other instances into lizards or lions was advice to warn the young that there were suitors who pretended to be human when in fact they were inhuman. Their behaviour or practices were far from being human. Rather, they were animalistic in their approach to life, hence were either lizards or lions.

The girls had met their suitors at a well, fell in love with them and eloped, without any of their elders who could have advised them knowing it. In modernity, there are many 'wells' where girls meet their suitors away from their elders, and in most cases immediately fall in love. In some cases they proceed to sleep or even stay as husband and wife without consulting their elders. Among some of such environments are schools, colleges, universities and work places. In some cases, Zimbabweans enroll with colleges and universities in the region

or overseas, where there is hardly contact with one's relatives. In the latest, and yet most bizarre of all, they meet lovers from unknown backgrounds on the "facebook of dating" and fall in love. Again, due to economic challenges, many Zimbabweans stay in the Diaspora, where they are not just in touch with people of alien races, but of unfamiliar religious, social, economic and political backgrounds. Such are places where the girl children are by themselves, away from any elders like aunts and grandmothers who would have helped them assess and value their suitors. Yet, Hatendi rightly observes that a marriage which is not backed by the bridegroom's family-group in particular is unstable as they will refuse to accept the bride in their midst (in Dachs [ed] 1973: 137). He adds that Shona marriage is not a one man show; kin-referees play an important part in marriage, making confidential reports on the behaviour of either family-groups (ibid).

The girls had been swayed by the boys' looks - complexion and dressing. The tale warns against merely assessing physical or outward beauty, which the Shona know to wither away with time. Since different people have different ways of approaching life, it was therefore imperative to get married to someone with the same culture as one's own. That is why traditional courtship involved many people - aunts, grandmothers and grandfathers who usually helped ascertain the suitor or girl's background before a proposal was either tendered or considered (Majaya in Haasbroek and Majaya, 1978: 10-11). The suitor always needed to be from a traceable background, known parentage, of an upright and admirable character, be hardworking and responsible. As Hatendi rightly puts it "Shona boys and girls are advised to marry a person whose family-group's history is known, complete strangers are not generally candidates for marriage. They are regarded as a great risk" (in Dachs [ed] 1973: 136). That is partially why traditional marriages were strong and divorce cases very rare (Gelfand, 1968: 43). It emanated from getting married to people whose culture and values were well-known and acceptable.

Today's society has a variety of backgrounds and cultural beliefs that African people need to consider seriously before entering into relationships and marriages. Some have remained traditional and cherish marriage, and conduct courtship and marriage through the grand traditional way. Others have adopted the Christian religion, which despises traditional marriage customs like polygamy, daughter pledging, inheritance, among others. For example, among traditional Shona people, it is taboo for primary kin and persons of the same totem to mate (Hatendi in Dachs [ed], 1973: 136) but to some Christians, totemism has no serious place in marriage; adhering to it is tantamount to worshipping animals or other gods. Some people practice Islam and have a different approach to both courtship and marriage. A believer in the ecumenical church can hardly have a successful marriage with someone from a Pentecostal church because their ways of worship are not only different, but also antagonistic of each other. Similarly, one from Watch Tower can hardly have a happy union with one from an Ecumenical or Pentecostal church because the former are criticized for not using the Bible in their preaching (Interview with Rev Madhumbu of an Ecumenical Church). The Seventh Day Adventists are also critical of other churches that worship and keep Sunday as the Sabbath instead of Saturday.

Similarly, believers in the Apostolic Church (Marange and Mwazha) hardly have happy unions with those from other churches because the former cherish polygamy and early-child marriages whilst the others advocate monogamy and late marriage. Also, the Roman Catholics, Zionists (ZCC) and Apostolic Church (Mwazha) find themselves attacked by other churches who claim these churches have Mary, Samuel Mutendi

and Paul Mwazha as their intermediaries instead of Jesus Christ. These churches also have different approaches and attitudes to food and drink. The Seventh Day Adventists for example, do not cook on the Sabbath and so; all food is prepared on Friday eve. The Apostolic Faith Church Mission and Zion Christian Church (ZCC) and Seventh Day Adventists are against consuming bacon whilst other churches see nothing wrong with such food. The Roman Catholics see nothing wrong in beer drinking and ancestral veneration whilst other churches like the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, Church of Christ, Living Waters and Baptist view and label beer drinking as un and anti-Christian. Also, these other churches view ancestral veneration as worshipping other gods. Daneel gives several examples, one of which involves the Chibarirwe (African Congregational Church) people and those of the Dutch Reformed Church (now Reformed Church in Zimbabwe). He says the Chibarirwe who are heavy drinkers make licentious use of beer, compelling the Dutch Reformed Church members to follow their own church rules closely, for fear of being accused by the Chibarirwe of hypocrisy (in Dachs [ed] 1973: 166). Inter-marriage between these divergent churches would see one being asked or compelled to undertake a practice s/he was brought up to condemn. This results in friction and instability in marriages.

Other backgrounds include, emanating from a well-to-do or poor family. A boy/girl from a not-so-good background who marries from a well-to-do family usually finds his/her affair or marriage very taxing. S/he may fail up to live to the expectations and standards of the rich family and may ultimately earn themselves derogatory names for their inadequacies, or may be forced to spend and live a life beyond their capacity and in some cases, indulge in inhuman acts like stealing or corruption in a bid to bring happiness and abundance to their family. Some come from families with businesses which are run under cults. Hatendi writes that "The belief is rife that certain physical and psychological traits run in families, and it is therefore, unwise to marry a complete stranger" (in Dachs [ed] 1973: 136). This poses problems especially to those who might have come from a morally upright family background. As a result of such marriages of convenience, divorce cases and court cases are on the rise since both parties normally make shocking discoveries about the personality, background and socio-religious orientation of their partners.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

What is clear is that modern experiences are far from being unfamiliar or mystical to the Shona, they have always been talked about in one way or the other. Thus, the folktale as a literary art is, has always been and will continue to be a very meaningful and quite serious way of exposing, explaining and shaping reality. As such, serious attention should be devoted to this body of literature as it also vindicates the diverse ways through which Africans comprehend reality. In light of this, it is important to safeguard against losing this treasure. Since most children who should benefit from the rich layers of knowledge and wisdom embedded in these folktales spend most of their time glued to television sets or discussing issues on Facebook, Google chat, What'sApp and other forms of internet-based communication, it is mandatory to modernize African folklore. For kids, it is helpful to have many of these tales in the form of cartoons, so that as they enjoy watching them they also benefit from the lessons conveyed therein. Folklore can also be one of the

compulsory subjects or courses to be studied in lower, higher and post-secondary studies. Also, since most of these learners spend much time watching movies from television stations and discs, it is advisable for producers of television programmes to call for and play dramas and movies based on themes conveyed through folklore. In addition, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture in collaboration with other stakeholders can also strive to have as many of these important tales in the form of discs that can be played and watched on televisions sets at home or schools. Also, folktales and the crucial themes and lessons derived need to be issues and topics for discussion on Facebook so that children who spend much of their time discussing useless issues benefit from these. These, and many other ways can be pursued in order keep important forms of literature and themes alive and vibrant in this ever-changing society.

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