Proverbs in Zimbabwean Advertisements

Folklore is all around us, whoever and wherever we are, and we are all folk.
—Marion Bowman, in Bennet 1996.

The substance of "folklore," understood here to include expressive genres such as riddles, proverbs, games, songs, folktales, and poems, has been approached both positively and negatively by scholars and other observers. Since William John Thoms coined the term in 1846, it has been variously defined. Thoms himself explained "folklore" as "that department of study of antiquities and archaeology which embraces everything relating to ancient observances and customs, to the notions, beliefs, traditions, superstitions and prejudices of the common" (in Grobler 1980:50). In 1973, A. C. Partridge wrote that the term "folklore" covered "the study of legends, customs, beliefs and superstition of common people whatever the stage of civilization reached." Even less complimentary attitudes were current among some of the early missionaries who worked in Africa. Lee Haring points out that one missionary, Father Victoria Malzac, dismissed the recording of haiteny (dialogic poems of the Merina) on the grounds that these poems were of little assistance in unraveling the language and, further, that they represented absurd, incoherent wordplay. According to Haring, Malzac also regarded the Merina people as evil-minded because their poems had sexual allusions (1985).

These definitions assert that "folklore" is concerned with the rudiments of the past; in addition, they suggest that folklore has nothing to offer the present generation—or at least provides nothing of interest to the lives of sophisticated people. Recent studies of vernacular expression represent a shift in conceptual framework. These studies have fully combatted the negative and archaic view about folklore; they have successfully dismissed the notion that folklore belongs
only to the past. These studies have shown that folklore is relevant to the present generation.¹

Numerous recent scholars have demonstrated exactly how folklore genres are used in today's world (Dégh 1994; Mieder 1993; Mieder and Dundes 1981; Yankah 1995; Brunvand 1988; Jarv 1999). Many conclude that the advent of both electronic and print media did not kill folklore, but rather extended its use from regional localities to national and global arenas. Linda Dégh, for example, notes that "[t]he mass media liberate folklore from its earlier confinement to the so-called lower layers of society and from the prejudice—both pro and con—that stigmatized it. Folklore belongs to everyone, not only to the underprivileged, uneducated masses" (1994:2).

This article illustrates how proverbs and other witty sayings have been "liberated" and disseminated in Zimbabwe through the mass media. Proverbs permeate virtually all economic activities in contemporary Zimbabwe: by means of radio, television, and newspapers, they are employed to promote retail businesses, industrial products, the transportation industry, preventive health practices, and many other ventures. Proverbs are used as titles of programs and infused in commercial advertisements (more commonly called "adverts") to encourage certain behaviors or to summarize the advert's primary message. In addition, proverbs are written on walls of stores as well as on buses, pushcarts, and scotchcarts.

Though many have tried to pin down a precise definition for "proverb," Ruth Finnegan's description of the genre will be applied here. She writes that a proverb is "a saying in a more or less fixed form marked by popular acceptance of truth tersely expressed in it" (1970:393). This combination of widespread acceptance and succinct form makes proverbs especially suited for exploitation in the present Zimbabwean economy as a key element of advertisements.

Why might proverbs continue to be significant in the increasingly technology-based economy of contemporary Zimbabwe? One explanation is the genre's sense of timelessness, the feeling that proverbs represent comprehensive summaries of past experiences, truths that have been tested by earlier generations. Considered the distilled knowledge of progenitors, such knowledge cannot be disputed because it is thought to represent the finest ideas in society. The comprehensive nature of this knowledge is also important: proverbs comment on hu-
man behavior, human predicaments, human conflicts and resolutions, human aspirations and frustrations. In short, proverbs embrace all aspects of human existence. Further, proverbs have a feeling of universal truth because humans everywhere are shaped by past experience; proverbs become authoritative because by explaining the past, they in turn project the future. Especially in Africa, those who do not heed the wisdom of the past generation not only disregard it, but also destroy the foundation upon which they intend to build the future.

Because proverbs are believed to apply valuable past experience to future action, they find a niche in advertising. In Zimbabwe, when an informed person advises an overzealous naïve person, one normally says, "Takabva nako kumhunga hakuna ipwa." In English, this means "We came through the sorghum [mhunga] field; there is no sweet reed [sugar cane]." In other words, life experience provides wisdom. Advertisers use proverbs to adopt an informed empirical view, implying that they have "seen it all" and are qualified to offer advice or establish a precedent for behavior. They capitalize on a sense of tradition inherent in proverbs, arguing that if the past generation used this method or that brand and succeeded, why should listeners themselves not follow suit?

In addition to establishing a sense of authority, use of proverbs also promotes intimacy, drawing the speaker closer to the hearer. Risto Jarv notes that by using a proverb, a speaker "acquires an aura of being one of the people" and "attempts to leave an impression that he is voicing the people's opinion" (1999:79). Creating a bond of familiarity with potential consumers may be an attempt to gain trust and consumer confidence. Thus, although capitalists in Zimbabwe (both native and foreign) are often characterized as having ultramodern sensibilities and an insatiable desire for the English language, it should not be surprising that the advertisements of many companies rely upon indigenous proverbs in indigenous language—expressive forms cherished by most of the Zimbabwean population that sustains the capitalists' profits.

For instance, the Cotton Company of Zimbabwe (hereafter COTTCO), uses a particular proverb as a technique to ensure a cycle of business dealings with farmers. Both the content of the proverb and the fact that it is phrased as a proverb convey the idea of a secure, time-honored relationship between the company and individuals. The
proverb, *Kandiro kanoenda kunobva kamwe* (One good turn deserves another), is used in a traditional context between neighbors or friends and encourages reciprocal exchange of good things. By using the proverb in its advertisements, the company in a way attempts to prove that it has a communalistic outlook—the basis of Shona proverbs and people—rather than a capitalistic one. More explicitly, the advert suggests that if farmers are to expect a good deal from COTTCO, they should also start by selling their produce to the company. In turn, the company pays higher prices and bonuses and provides loans to such farmers. Only those farmers who sell their cotton to COTTCO can benefit from loans; thus, *Kandiro kanoenda kunobva kamwe* (One good turn deserves another). In this advert, the proverb summarizes all the transactions and benefits that accrue from dealing with COTTCO. These promised benefits include material advantages, but also the potential satisfaction of engaging in familiar social exchanges.

The form of proverbs is also important. Radio and television programs are often interrupted by adverts spiced with proverbs that are expressed in condensed or rather forceful language. A single proverb summarizes a long story with graphic precision. Brevity and clarity are important to media presentations: the longer the advertisement, the greater the cost to the advertiser. In addition, many Zimbabwean proverbs can be paired antagonistically: for almost every proverb, another proverb exists that conveys an opposite meaning. This is an ideal resource for advertisers, since a rival advertiser can counter the advert of another by picking an opposite proverb. Consider the following proverb pair:

*Kumhanya handiko kusviku* (Running too fast does not guarantee that you reach your destination)

*Chinono chinengwe bere rakadya richifamba* (The leopard is cautiously slow, the hyena eats while walking)

The first proverb can be used to discourage people from making hasty decisions, while the second can encourage timely and efficient action.

Furthermore, proverbs may be effective as commercial advertisements because they fulfill traditional functions. In his work on Kalenjiri proverbs, Chessaina notes that most proverbs are as relevant to contemporary cultures as they were when used by previous generations (1991:26), both because they speak to timeless problems and because
they are used in situations that recur among all peoples. Traditionally, proverbs in Zimbabwe have been used to help people in decision-making. Advertisers extend this function by means of the mass-media; through adverts, companies seek to attract potential clients and counsel them on the best decision to make when faced with a choice among commodities in the market.

For example, Brilliant Soap commercials use the proverb “Kuziva mbuya huudzwa” (You recognize a grandmother after being told; i.e., you learn about something good after you have been told about it). This proverb suggests that consumers perhaps have not purchased a product because they had not been told about its benefits, but now they have no excuse not to. Chibataura Roller Meal uses the proverb “Kuudza mwana hupedzisira” (Give full details when instructing a child) to tell the story of a child sent to buy Chibataura, but who returns with a similar but different brand of meal. The advertisement proceeds to give all the details about the packet label so that no one will confuse it with other brands. Parents, as it were, are exhorted to give detailed descriptions to their children when they send them to buy Chibataura so that they buy the correct brand. Both proverbs emphasize the idea that when one is enlightened, one can make a meaningful decision—in this case, consumers can use their money in the “best” way.

The public transportation industry also uses proverbs to influence potential customers. In a time of increased competition in terms of speed and comfort, some bus owners struggle for passengers. Old buses, for instance, are losing passengers to the Volvo buses that have been introduced recently on Zimbabwean roads. In response to this competition, some older buses are inscribed with proverbs that justify their slow speeds. Kumhanya handiko kusvika means “Going fast does not ensure safe arrival.” Accidents on Zimbabwean roads—especially those involving buses—tend to be fatal, so this kind of proverbial caution might entice people to board the slower moving bus. Elderly passengers especially may be more likely to board an older bus when faced with the alternative: a Volvo bus bearing the words Wagarira nhanzva (You will be going fast). Though “Wagarira nhanzva” is not a proverb, this popular urban saying—used in reference to a perfectly fast vehicle—has its origin in a rural game. Sitting on a nhanzva (a slick log), children slide downhill for twenty meters or so until they reach level ground. The log travels at a terrific speed. This
exciting but dangerous game is also depicted on the Volvo buses: beside the slogan "Wagarira nhanzva" is an illustration of a person seated uneasily on a slippery sliding log. Thus, through the use of familiar word images, proverbial advertisements prompt passengers to choose between the speed, fun, and comfort of potentially dangerous travel and the slow, dull, relatively uncomfortable, but safer experience of the older buses.

Though advertisers use proverbs to provide overt advice, they also boost sales by placing proverbs in other contexts. In Zimbabwe, several radio programs have proverbs as their titles. One, for instance, is called "Charova sei chando?" This is a truncated form of the proverb "Charova sei chando chakwida hamba mumuti?" (How intense is the cold, that it has forced a tortoise to climb up a tree?) The program, essentially an extended advertisement, takes place during the winter months and is sponsored by a chain store called Power Sales. The store issues raffle tickets to customers who have purchased a certain amount of goods, and winners are awarded blankets. The radio program's title thus links it to Power Sales and reminds potential customers that the winter can be cold, that they need to prepare for it, and that they could win a warm blanket by shopping at Power Sales. By using a proverb that alludes to the impending biting winter, the advertisement creates a need among consumers and boosts the sales of the chain store as customers buy more products to increase their chances of winning.

Another chain store called Metro Peach advertises its commodities on a radio program called "Kare, Nhasi" (Yesterday, Today). Though the program's title is not a proverb per se, it resembles the structure of and has the same effect as a proverb. It calls to mind the saying "Mangwana ndinhasi" (Tomorrow is embedded in today). Both "Kare, Nhasi" (Yesterday, Today) and "Mangwana ndinhasi" (Tomorrow is embedded in today) suggest that things stay the same despite the passage of time. As an advertisement, it becomes a witty saying assuring customers that though times have changed, prices are as low as they were in the past; in addition, it reassures customers that the business has maintained its reputation over time. At the end of every commercial, Metro Peach leaves a proverb for listeners to interpret, usually one that is little-used and seemingly unrelated to the chain store's products. Those who submit a correct interpretation of the proverb are awarded prizes from Metro Peach. The rationale for clos-
ing the program with an obscure proverb may be to make listeners
deliberate with family and friends about its possible meaning. In the
ensuing conversations, persons might bring up the name of Metro
Peach, and the store, in effect, has used proverbs to extend its adver-
tising reach in time and space. People continue to think and consult
others about the meaning of the proverb well after the program has
ended. As they put their query in context for others, they too be-
come advertisers for Metro Peach.

Another radio program, called “Chakafukidza dzimba matenga”
(What covers houses are roofs), has been on the air for eighteen years.
It has been sponsored by Negondo Industries, which specializes in
cosmetic products. The title for the program is meant to suggest that
many ugly things happen in society that are not divulged to the pub-
lic. If one removes the metaphorical roof, everything in the house is
exposed, good or bad. This proverb operates on two levels. On the
one hand, it reminds listeners that Negondo Industries’ cosmetic
products can help customers hide “ugliness” or physical problems:
perfume covers up body odors, creams smooth rough skin, and hair
products make hair shiny. Just as passers-by cannot know what goes
on under someone’s roof, neither will strangers know what a person
covers with cosmetics. On the other hand, the proverb suggests that
opening up to others increases chances for better assistance: Reveal
your cosmetic difficulties to Negondo Industries to receive their help.

The proverb also relates to the main content of the radio pro-
gram, which centers on especially sensitive social and domestic is-
ues, such as infidelity, infertility within marriage, and impotence. In
this program we find communal efforts to solve social problems that
bedevil Zimbabweans but are rarely spoken about. In the radio dis-
cussions, many proverbs are invoked both by moderators and by those
with problems to be solved. Each participant tries to use a proverb to
convince another, more or less in the same way proverbs were used in
traditional courts to settle disputes. As in traditional courts, where
issues were solved by a panel of judges listening to people as they
contributed to the issue at hand, the panelists on the program also
listen to the views of different callers. Those who argue convincingly
carry the day. Letters are read from former program participants who
successfully resolved conflicts. The program includes a series of com-
mercial breaks during which Negondo advertises its products. In short,
by means of a program that is named after a proverb and encourages
abundant use of proverbs, Negondo Industries exploits an expressive form for commercial ends. Just as those callers who seek out help by opening up their hearts to strangers find solutions to their difficulties, so customers who voice their physical flaws will resolve their problems—bad odor, rough skin, pimples, unruly hair—with Negondo products.

In the field of public health, proverbs are also employed extensively. Along with other sectors of the economy, the health industry has discovered the power of indigenous proverbs to disseminate information. Health officials wield proverbs in campaigns against unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, especially AIDS. The most commonly used proverbs warn individuals against particular behaviors and allude to the potential dangers of being impervious to advice.

While attending several rural health seminars, for instance, I collected the following proverbs used by health officials when educating people about the dangers of AIDS:

*Usayeka bako waniwa nemunira* (Don’t remember about a cave only after you’ve been drenched by rain). This proverb addresses itself to promiscuous people who might regret their behavior after contracting HIV. It warns people to take preventive measures rather than disregarding health warnings and later lamenting their actions.

*Zanondega akapisa jira* (Mr. Know-It-All burned his blankets). Those who presume not to need advice may incur misfortune.

*Ndakambakwudzwa akanonekwa nembonje pahuma* (One who refused another’s advice was seen with a wound on the forehead). If individuals go their own way without heeding the health officials’ advice, they may find themselves in trouble.

*Wakuruma zheve ndewako* (One who has given you advice is your friend). This proverb is used by health officials to persuade people that advice about AIDS prevention is not intended to rob them of pleasure, but is rather offered in order to save their lives.

Though the situation to which these proverbs are applied is novel, the social context is not. Traditionally, such proverbs were used when serious issues were discussed, and they were proffered as advice from elders to youth. In the context of public health, these proverbs also represent a “top-down” power structure, in which better informed
health officials advise the less informed general population about the threat of AIDS. The proverbs warn about the consequences of not listening to those who are wiser or more experienced. The proverbs were well received by the audience, but I am not aware of any studies that ask whether or not this educational method affects actual behavior.

Similar proverbs are used by another player in the Zimbabwean economy: insurance companies. Barbara and Wolfgang Mieder have noted that insurance advertisements in the United States may quote proverbs without any alteration, taking “direct advantage of the didactic aspects of the proverb to sell their policies” (1981:314). Likewise, Zimbabwean adverts encourage uninsured radio listeners to purchase policies, as illustrated by the following proverbs:

_Wakubaira zani ndewaho_ (One who has given you advice is your kin/friend.) This proverb proposes that those who provide advice have the individual’s best interests in mind.

_Zvamungwana zvinosivikanwa nebenzi_ (What happens tomorrow is known to a fool). Here, it is suggested that fools predict the future at their own peril; this proverb encourages listeners not to delay the purchase of an insurance policy.

In Zimbabwe, those who sell life insurance are especially prominent users of proverbs in advertising. For instance, the Southampton Life Assurance Company sponsors a radio program that has been broadcast for years. It thrives on brief life stories spiced with proverbs—especially those proverbs that highlight the dangers of short-sighted planning. These proverbs come across almost as thinly-veiled threats. Typically, an insurance agent chronicles the lives of people who die without insurance policies and whose families consequently are plunged into financial and social crises. Or, conversely, they dwell upon the untimely deaths of insured people and describe how family survivors continue to enjoy the good life well after the unfortunate death of the breadwinner. These advertisers draw directly from the traditional style of first narrating a story and then summarizing it by quoting a proverb with a moralistic tone.

Finally, proverbs function in the Zimbabwean economy in a more indirect way: they can be applied to reinforce the pride, confidence, and enthusiasm of economically marginal merchants and vendors.
For instance, on some stores—especially in rural areas—proverbs are inscribed on walls not so much to boost sales as to sum up the storeowner’s life history and celebrate a change of fortune from poverty to riches. A proverb of this sort is *Chaitemura chava kuseva* (Those who used to eat food [without relish] are now dipping morsels [into gravy]). The same proverb may also suggest to others in the community that hard work pays off, and in some cases may shame anyone who laughed at the early struggles of the now successful entrepreneur. Proverbs that dot the walls of retail shops in rural areas include:

*Aiva mazambuko ava madziva* (What used to be fords are now pools). Fords are places in a river where everyone can cross to the other side, but pools do not permit the same access. This proverb means that one who used to be an insignificant figure in society has now become respectable because of business success.

*Rugare tange nhano* (Poverty precedes riches). Wealthy people from humble backgrounds may display this straightforward saying to encourage poor people to believe that they can also be rich one day.

*Kufuma ishungu* (To be rich one needs to be determined). Here, the entrepreneur reminds others that riches come about through effort and perseverance.

This orientation toward patient endurance is echoed in the proverbs often displayed on scotchcarts and pushcarts. These proverbs emphasize the general theme of perseverance and encourage the cart's owner to persist in efforts to succeed. The acquisition of property, they seem to suggest, is not an end in itself, but rather part of the process of striving for success. The property owner should press forward despite encountering pitfalls and making seemingly insignificant progress. These proverbs seek to inculcate a spirit of determination and to equip the owner with the necessary energy to move forward:

*Wenhamo ndwenhamo* (A poor person should not tire). This proverb encourages the person to press onward, thereby increasing his productivity. A proverb with a similar function is *Wenhamo haavori moyo* (A poor person does not lose hope).

*Seka urema wafa* (Laugh at a cripple only when you are dead). This proverb addresses itself to members of society who might ridicule the pushcart operator's material wealth. While it may serve as a reminder that the winds of fortune can change suddenly, this proverb could also serve
as a warning; it may make its viewers afraid of ending up in the same or worse situation as the pushcart driver if they dare to laugh. It reinforces the idea that fate is on the side of the poor and against their deriders.

*Padoko padoko hapadzoki* (That small bit is quite some progress). The proverb energizes the pushcart owner by suggesting that although income from carrying baggage is meager, that small amount is better than nothing and is in fact a step forward.

*Apanyaira hashayi misodzi* (Those who are emotionally upset do not lack tears; i.e., the one entails the other). Once again, this proverb can mean that though business seems gloomy, rewards will follow effort. This proverb can also “prick” people into action, especially those who remain seated but nevertheless wonder why they have no wealth of their own. Finally, it can be meant to praise the owner of the cart for having acquired it through economic initiative; in this case, the proverb is a metaphorical pat on the back that invites other people to share the owner’s pride.

Thus, unlike the proverbs discussed earlier, the proverbs inscribed on scotchcarts, pushcarts, and rural stores are not meant to advertise particular commodities. Nevertheless, they play a role in contemporary Zimbabwean economic life by motivating small business owners to persist and by encouraging others to become engaged in a cash economy. These proverbs also celebrate the achievements of those in business and attempt to prevent small or capital-poor ventures from being stigmatized. Their use encourages a brisk economy.

This brief overview of proverbs in today’s Zimbabwe supports the sentiments of Barbara and Wolfgang Mieder, who wrote in 1981, “There are certain folklore genres which are losing ground in the age of modern technology, yet one must hasten to state that other genres are actually increasing in popularity” (309). According to Dwight Edwards Marvin, the proverb is one of the folklore genres that is most alive today (in Mieder and Mieder 1981:310). In Zimbabwe, proverbs play an important role in the contemporary economy; the powerful images and succinct nature of indigenous proverbs make them especially suited for advertising. In addition, the fact that proverbs often comment on widespread human experiences enables them to remain relevant; they fit any place, time, and function in spite of the technological advancement of a particular community. Proverbs can be used to establish a familiar and authoritative context for giving advice and
establishing business relationships; they can be employed to respond to similar claims set forth by others, to invite new or continued interest in products and companies, to underscore symbolically the practical function of a particular commodity. Further research into this phenomenon in Zimbabwe could provide more details about the extent of this practice, as well as more information about how expressive forms are chosen by advertisers and received by their audiences.

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Note

1. Speaking specifically of oral literature, Taylor agrees that it "actually transcends the boundaries of time and still exists as a living and creative force today" (1981:21). Nevertheless, Taylor associates oral literature with miners and urban ghetto dwellers, implying that it is only important to the economically underprivileged. Though I believe this is too narrowly conceived, it can be observed that capitalists may use proverbs specifically to capture the attention of the underprivileged in Zimbabwean society. Many images used in proverb-based advertising—trees, tortoises, mountains, plains, and wild animals—are pastoral images that may appeal to rural populations, or, as is the case among most Zimbabweans, urban populations with a rural background.

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