Journal of Folklore Research

Volume 41, Number 1 *January–April 2004*

jfr

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Beyond the Dog's Name: A Silent Dialogue among the Shona People

THE FOLLOWING is a report of an interesting phenomenon in Zimbabwe: the significance of dog names, a category of naming practice not heretofore frequently noticed. The research for this project was carried out in Zimbabwe among the Shona people, who constitute about eighty-five percent of Zimbabwe's total population. Other ethnic groups share the remaining fifteen percent of the total population of approximately 12.5 million. A greater percentage of the Zimbabwean population lives in rural areas. Of those who stay in urban areas, many people have rural ties either by having rural homes or by maintaining strong ties with parents and relatives who stay in the rural areas. Such urban dwellers frequent the rural areas, especially during public holidays. It is in Zimbabwe's rural areas that the Shona practice of dog naming plays an important social role. Before we get to the data on dog names, it is pertinent to see what other scholars have noted on the practice of naming.

A great deal of scholarly attention has been given to naming. A. Koopman, quoting Evans-Pritchard, writes that "names of all kinds are social documents, which fix a person's position in the social structure and define his relations to other members of society" (1992:1). Like Koopman, I use this quotation as the beginning point for a consideration of dogs' names. Among the Nuer, people's names are used to define people's relations with other members of society. However, among the Shona people, the dog's name is used to define such relations. Therefore the primary purpose of this article is to describe a practice and to suggest how dogs' names are used to comment on human social relations.

Journal of Folklore Research, Vol. 41, No. 1, 2004

This research on dogs' names among the Shona is fairly novel. Pongweni (1983) and Kahari (1990) have written about Shona nomenclature, but both scholars were mainly concerned with people's names, mentioning dogs' names only in passing. Other notable scholars who have also studied naming systems are Madubuike (1976), Oduyaye (1972), Ubahakwe (1981), Koopman (1992), and Majubane (1975). All of these scholars, however, are interested in systems of naming people. Only Koopman (1992) writes specifically on how animals are named. He writes on how the Zulu people name their dogs and oxen. Apart from Koopman's works, scholarship that deals with the "culture" of dog naming is scanty or unavailable. As a result, my research is based mainly on my own fieldwork. The research was conducted in three districts of Masvingo Province, namely Gutu South, Chivi North, and Bikita East. The other part of the research was conducted in Manicaland Province, specifically in Buhera North and Buhera South. I collected, compared, and analyzed the names of dogs, then conducted follow-up interviews to learn their meanings. Through such interviews and my personal experience as a Shona person, I established that dogs are given diverse names that are culturally bound. Because of this, it is difficult for any outsider to Shona society to readily understand the names.

This research revealed that some dogs' names are derived from common sources. For example, some are given names of animals, such as Shumba (lion), or names of popular events like the liberation struggle, such as Pungwe (an all night meeting of freedom fighters with the masses). Some dogs are given company names (especially the name of a father's workplace), such as Zesa, while still others are named after cars or airplanes, for example, Jeti (jet) and Jega (Jaguar). These last two examples are associated with the speed of a dog when it chases after wild animals on a hunting expedition. There is yet another category of names which seem meaningless, for example, Bhoki. In this category we have "neutral," semantically empty names that function merely to identify one dog from another.

While these categories of names are commonplace, they are outnumbered (and hence become fairly insignificant) when compared to names that are given to dogs as a means of communicating with relatives, neighbors, or the community. Such names arise as a result of severed proximity relations, as when a man's first wife names a dog Kusasvoda (No sense of shame) to communicate her feelings to her

husband as well as to his second wife. In this article, therefore, I address only names that are meant to communicate inner feelings to other members of society. The tables below summarize the categories of dog names among the Shona and the frequency with which I encountered them in each district.

Table I

Masvingo (Gutu South and Chivi North)	Number	Percentage (%)
Dogs named to communicate with other people	350	87.50
Dogs named after animals	25	6.25
Dogs named after automobiles	11	2. 70
Dogs named after company names	5	1.25
Dogs named after popular events	4	1.00
Other	10	2.50
Total	405	100

Table II

Manicaland (Buhera South)	Number	Percentage (%)
Dogs named to communicate with other people	164	82.0
Dogs named after animals	13	6.5
Dogs named after automobiles	9	4.5
Dogs named after company names	2	1.0
Dogs named after popular events	5	2.5
Other	7	3.5
Total	200	100

Table III

Masvingo & Manicaland (Buhera North & Bikita East)	Number	Percentage (%)
Dogs named to communicate with other people	433	83.0
Dogs named after animals	23	4.4
Dogs named after automobiles	29	5.6
Dogs named after company names	16	3.0
Dogs named after popular events	10	1.9
Other	7	3.5
Total	522	100

Table IV

Masvingo (Gutu North and Bikita West)	Number	Percentage (%)
Dogs named to communicate with other people	375	83.3
Dogs named after animals	35	7.8
Dogs named after automobiles	15	3.3
Dogs named after company names	9	2.1
Dogs named after popular events	6	1.3
Other	10	2.2
Total	450	100

Tables I, II, III, and IV clearly illustrate the popularity of dogs' names meant to communicate with other people among the Shona. This category is represented in Masvingo (Gutu South and Chivi North) by 87.5 percent. Of all the names in Manicaland (Buhera West) it constitutes 82 percent, in Masvingo and Manicaland (Buhera North and Bikita East) it constitutes 83 percent, and in Masvingo (Gutu North and Bikita West), 83.3 percent.

Tradition has it that many households, even the poor ones, can afford to own more than one dog. Among the Shona people, dogs are kept for various reasons. In rural areas, where I collected my data, dogs are kept for hunting, for scaring away thieves, for chasing baboons and monkeys away from the fields, and for accompanying owners when they travel on foot. The Shona people also keep dogs for other purposes. The motive behind keeping a dog might be to use its name to communicate with a neighbor or relative. Samarin notes a similar practice in the use of Gbeya dog names:

> The dogs of Gbeya . . . can be looked upon as screens upon which the Gbeya project their attitudes towards many different aspects of their life. Such projection is accomplished by giving to the dogs names that verbalize complaints, ridicule, humor, etc. They are short, even telegraphic "texts" about life in general or about one's particular place in it. (Koopman 1992:9)

Through the institution of dog-naming, members of society engage in accusation and counter-accusation with each other on sensitive issues. The practice of dog-naming is more or less like Bembera, an institution among the Shona that allows an individual to accuse another person of wrong doing, such as bewitching. In Bembera the accuser describes the suspect but avoids specific naming. Even so, the description enables identification and the suspect recognizes him/herself but cannot take the accuser to court because no one in particular has been named. Dog naming is a similar practice. Through dogs' names, the members of Shona society are able to accuse and counter-accuse indirectly.

The Shona people realize that it is difficult to articulate certain feelings directly to other members of society, and as a result they articulate such feelings through the practice of dog naming. Readers might be surprised by the length of some dog names, such as Hunodhakauroyi (Witchcraft intoxicates) and Kunyangovapahavatendi

(Even if you give them things they are not grateful). The rationale for such long names is that they function to "pour out" the owners' feelings and send messages to the targeted individuals. Once the intended person knows the full name of the dog, the message has been conveyed and the dog's owner can resort to its truncated form. It is interesting to note that sometimes the relationship between the relevant parties improves, but the dog's name remains unchanged. An owner must wait until the dog dies or get another dog and name it accordingly, but this is unlikely since dogs' names seem not to articulate positive feelings among the Shona.

This system of naming dogs in order to communicate with other people is more prevalent in most rural areas and generally cuts across all age groups and professional groups, though the scale is largely tilted towards the older generation. The naming system has little to do with one's education or social standing in rural Zimbabwe, but rather has to do with a person's relationships and how to manage those relations amicably through dog names. The dog names seem to be popular in rural areas where contact with other people is frequent and personal and where, consequently, there is an increased possibility of direct conflict.

In rural communities, group solidarity is often maintained at any cost; conflict is not permitted to leave people totally divided. We have, therefore, a situation in which conflict is inevitable but cannot be allowed to get out of hand. The system of dog naming becomes a favorable solution for many rural Shona people. This system is not prevalent in towns, probably because town dwellers are at liberty to confront their neighbors directly. This is so probably because most urban dwellers seem not to put primary value on good neighborliness, as rural people do. Urban dwellers are also known for "cash talk," and therefore seem not to hide their feelings in dogs' names. The issues disguised in dog names usually involve problems of witchcraft, problems of marriage, problems of proximity relations (i.e., neighbors), and also problems regarding family relations.

Witchcraft

The problem of witchcraft among the Shona people cannot be understated. Most Shona people strongly believe that society abounds with witches in the same way scientists believe the environment to be

infested by air-borne diseases. However, though belief in witchcraft is strong among the Shona people, one cannot accuse another of witchcraft without certain repercussions. Traditionally, if someone accused a person of being a witch, the accuser was supposed to be prepared to take the accused person to a *gumbwa*, a sniffing exercise to determine if someone is a witch. The accused would be given a concoction to drink. If he vomited, it meant that he was not a witch. In such a case, it would mean that the accusation was false and the accuser would have to pay a heavy fine (*kuchenura zita*) to cleanse the accused's name. In his research on witchcraft among the Shona people, Gelfand (1977) observes what happens when a person is falsely accused of witchcraft. If the accused person vomited after drinking the concoction, his group jumped into the air rejoicing that his accusation was false. They then handed him over to the group that had accused him, with the words *muroyi wenyu uyu* (here is your witch, you will know what to do with him/her). They had to pay a heavy fine for accusing him falsely. It should be noted that this process of accusation, though still prevalent to some extent, was suppressed by the 1890 Witchcraft Suppression Act. If a person accuses another of witchcraft, she is normally taken to court and, if found guilty of making a false accusation, sentenced to jail. In order to avoid imprisonment, or direct animosity, the Shona people often make accusations of witchcraft through the practice of dog naming.

Four examples from the fieldwork data will suffice to illustrate dog names that deal with witchcraft problems:

1. Sousinauroyi (Sousina) (As if you do not have witchcraft)
2. Hunodhakauroyi (Hunodhaka) (It [witchcraft] intoxicates)
3. Muroyindishe (Muroyi) (A witch is a chief)
4. Idyavakowo (You should eat your own [children])

Each of these names addresses some aspect of witchcraft. Some are accusatory and counter-accusatory, especially Sousina and Hunodhaka. It was during my fieldwork that I learned of a situation in which these two names had been used by two neighbors in a village in Masvingo Province. One woman accused another of witchcraft and named her dog Hunodhakauroyi (Witchcraft intoxicates). This name implies that the neighbor was heavily involved in bewitching others. She was overdoing things, therefore her behavior became equivalent to that of a drunkard, hence Hunodhakauroyi (Witchcraft intoxicates). When the

neighbor discovered that the dog's name referred to her, she retorted by naming her own dog Sousinauroyi (As if you do not have witchcraft). We can, therefore, note that there is effective, though indirect, communication between the neighbors through the names of their dogs. Both neighbors understand the communication, but neither can openly say one is accusing the other of witchcraft. If both were to be confronted, they would deny having accused anyone. They would pretend that Hunodhakauroyi and Sousinauroyi are merely dogs' names.

Another subtle aspect of dogs' names is that the names are usually used in a truncated form, like Sousina and Hunodhaka. For this reason it is difficult for an outsider to understand fully the meaning of such truncated names. But for the Shona, dogs' names serve their purpose well: each time a person calls her dog, she is gratified to know that she has revealed her innermost feelings to her family and neighbors while avoiding the nasty repercussions associated with open confrontation.

Among the Shona people, a *muroyi* (witch/sorcerer) is a dreaded person. The dog's name Muroyindishe (A witch is a chief) implies that no one dares to cross the witch's path. A witch, like a chief, can literally do anything without rebuke or challenge because people fear provoking an angry response. Once angered, a witch finds a legitimate reason to bewitch someone. As Mr. H. Chifeke, an old man, told me in an interview in 1997, "*Muroyi haavhunzwi, ukamuvhunza zvaaresva anotowana mamutsiro eshavi rake*" (A witch is not challenged even if he/she wrongs you, if you challenge him/her, he/she will have fertile ground to awaken his/her bewitching spirit). By using a dog's name, however, a suspected witch can be taken to task. For example, Idyavakowo (You should eat your own children) is directed at a witch who kills and eats other people's children while letting his/her own live: Idyavakowo (You should eat your own children). Dogs' names help to alleviate the fear associated with confronting witches directly by offering a non-threatening way for people to vent feelings associated with witchcraft beliefs.

Polygamous Marriage

In addition to being widely used to level accusations of witchcraft, dogs' names are also employed abundantly to communicate within the institution of marriage, be it polygamous or monogamous. Shona

people have been known for polygamous marriages, and even today the practice continues, though to a lesser extent. In the past having many wives and children earned an individual social prestige, so many Shona men married many wives to get many children. Traditionally, a big family enhanced one's chances of getting rich. The bigger the family, the better the chances were of getting many cattle through marrying off daughters. Bigger families also meant greater crop production and the possibility for a father to become a *hurudza* (prominent farmer). However, polygamous marriages, though they could bring economic success and social prestige, were and are still characterized by suspicion, jealousy, and contempt among wives and children. Wives usually compete for love and attention, while children identify with their mothers in competing for the father's love and attention. Sometimes direct confrontation degenerates into fighting.

Apart from direct confrontation, dog names play an important role in communicating grievances either to the husband or the other wives in a polygamous marriage. The following names were all collected from homes which had polygamous marriages. However, this does not mean that such names are the preserve of polygamous marriages only; they may also be found in monogamous marriages:

1. Kusasvoda (No sense of shame)
2. Mushandewangu (The home is mine)
3. Zvavashe (The chief's affairs)
4. Muchatizoto (You will give up)

The dog's name Kusasvoda (No sense of shame) was given to a dog by a female owner in a polygamous marriage. When I asked the owner why she gave her dog such a name, she retorted that the dog's name was a communication both to her husband and her husband's second wife. Through the dog's name, she castigated the husband for not being ashamed to have taken a second wife at his advanced age. She derided the second wife, who was young, for not being ashamed to marry an old man who already had a stable marriage. In this case, the dog's name was a form of communication directed to two individuals. In retaliation, the second wife named her dog Muchatizoto (You will give up). In effect, the junior wife thus not only asserted that she was there to stay but also warned the senior wife that she should give up her jealous attack. In response to both of his wives' nomenclature exchanges, the husband named his dog

Mushandewangu (The home is mine) to remind his wives not to bother themselves with his style of marriage since he was the boss of the home. Through such dogs' names, the trio managed to communicate effectively: each grasped the others' perspectives and life continued as usual. Their practice echoes what Hunt noted in his 1952 article: "When any person conceives that he or she has a grievance against another, it is apparently the practice to bestow a name on a dog, which will act as a perpetual reminder to the guilty party of his fault" (Koopman 1992:8).

Monogamous Marriage

A wife in a monogamous marriage can also communicate her feelings to her husband through a dog's name. A wife can buy a puppy and name it, but ideally the puppy remains the husband's dog, or rather the family dog, not the wife's. Normally wives can communicate their feelings to their husbands through the following names:

1. Tamwa (We are drunk)
2. Vachirikudoro (He is still at a beer drinking place)
3. Rovahakohandibvi (Beat to your satisfaction, I will not leave)

All three are complaint names. Tamwa and Vachirikudoro have to do with the deviant drinking behavior of a husband. Tamwa (We are drunk) suggests that the husband becomes a problem when drunk. The wife reminds him that whenever he is drunk, he becomes a bothersome character. Through Vachirikudoro (He is still at a beer drinking place), the wife admonishes her husband to come home early. Each time the wife calls the dog, she is venting her complaints and—if the husband is within hearing distance—can hope to correct his behavior. The last example, Rovahakohandibvi (Beat to your satisfaction, I will not leave), can be given to a dog by a wife who is constantly abused by her husband. The message to the husband is that if he thinks beating her will make her go away, he had better change his strategy.

It can be argued that the dog stands as a symbol of perseverance to the wife. Through its name she externalizes her feelings, and each time she calls the dog, apart from communicating with her husband, she is communicating as well with her inner soul. Psychologists encourage the verbalization of problems as a remedy for avoiding suicide and depression. Dog naming in a situation of perpetual abuse

can be a "clinical" remedy. Even in healthy marriages dog names can help relieve the psychological strains of occasional conflict.

Proximity Relations: Neighbors

Good neighborliness is a golden rule among the Shona people, but at times this rule is difficult to uphold. Some neighbors have poor relations, and these bad relationship are manifested in the names given to dogs. Most such names emanate from ingratitude, insensitivity to other people's feelings, and problems resulting from borrowing and lending. A few names will suffice as representative of dog names that are meant to communicate with neighbors:

1. Kunyangovapahavatendi) (Even if you give them things) [implied: they are not grateful]
2. Dhan'i (Thank you)
3. Tembanechako (Rely on what is yours)
4. Muneivo (You have absolutely nothing)

The above names are social comments on the behavior of neighbors. The first name is normally meant to communicate with neighbors who are ungrateful for services rendered to them. Neighbors are reminded to be thankful each time they are given something. However, at times being thankful is not enough; one should also learn to give back to those who typically give, hence the Shona proverb *Chindiro chinopfumba kunobva chimwe* (One good turn deserves another). This means that neighbors should not always be on the receiving end. If a neighbor continues to receive only, he becomes bothersome. In response to this situation, others name their dogs Dhan'i (Thank you). This is a complaint that a neighbor is only accustomed to thanking others rather than being thanked. Tembanechako (Rely on what is yours) and Muneivo (You have absolutely nothing) are names I came across in a village where two neighbors had severed all other communication. A poor young couple used to borrow things regularly from a very successful farmer, perhaps excessively. The poor couple discovered that the farmer was no longer interested in lending his property when the aggrieved couple named their dog Tembanechako (Rely on what is yours). The farmer then retaliated by naming his dog Muneivo (You have absolutely nothing). Even though these two neigh-

bors are no longer speaking, communication is clearly taking place between them through their dogs' names. Neighbors in such a situation find it difficult to communicate directly so they use dog names instead. In any case, it is considered rude to openly tell poor neighbors that they rely entirely on you because they do not have anything worthwhile on which to survive.

Relatives

Sometimes dog naming is directed at relatives and not at neighbors. Dogs' names are used to admonish relatives and to shame them into carrying out whatever responsibilities they have been neglecting. Through dog names, Shona people can also deride relatives for doing something that is not congruent with their responsibilities as relatives. Ideally, relatives should live in harmony and should not be jealous of each other. The value of such familial cooperation is expressed in the Shona proverb *Kuwanda kwakanaka museve wakapotera pamuzukuru* (To be many is desirable, the arrow saved the uncle and hit the cousin). The proverb means that if you are many you have an advantage, since you can share the burden in times of trouble. The Shona people, as Gelfand notes, "have a deep-seated loyalty of their kin. They condemn any kind of violence among relatives: they place great stress on harmony and tranquility" (1973:9).

In practice, however, relatives often fail to live up to this ideal. It is when relatives fail to live up to other people's expectations that we find people giving their dogs some of the following names:

1. Muroyiwehamasiyananaye (A witch who is a relative should be ostracized)
2. Vengahama (One who hates his/her relatives)

Muroyiwehamasiyananaye (A witch who is a relative should be ostracized) could have been included in the discussion on witchcraft. In this particular case, however, communication is directed to a witch who also happens to be a relative. In the Shona worldview, this witch-relative is of a worse kind than a non-relative witch in two senses. First a witch-relative is a destroyer rather than a protector of the progeny. Second, the witch-relative can easily harm relatives by manipulating ancestral spirits. This is so because the witch knows the lineage of the

family well, and this knowledge is believed to be an advantage when it comes to the nocturnal and bewitching visits that witches normally undertake. The lack of such knowledge sometimes renders a witch's nocturnal visits relatively ineffective. Therefore the witch-relative, through the dog's name, is warned of the potential dissolution of relations should the bewitching continue.

The name Vengahama (One who hates his/her relatives) admonishes relatives not to hate or despise their kin. Normally, poor relatives give such names to their dogs to communicate with their rich relations, who might look upon them as a bother because they seem to be constantly seeking assistance.

In the category of relatives, there are some relatives who are most often at loggerheads—namely, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Such relationships are often characterized by suspicion and hatred, and this sour relationship is possibly a result of jealousy. Both the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law might be competing for the love and attention of the man they share. These individuals often claim central positions in the man's life. The mother-in-law might claim her experience and offer social and domestic guidance to the daughter-in-law, which can be rejected and be branded as interference. Hence, friction becomes unavoidable. The irony is that the two are supposed to be *vanyarikani* (relationship characterized by avoidance of open confrontation). Open confrontation between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is taboo. If a wife scolds her husband's mother, this can lead to divorce or a heavy fine. In a situation of potential conflict where open confrontation is not socially acceptable, dog names are normally used to communicate issues of contention. Here are a few examples of names given to dogs in such contexts:

1. Kunyanatsahavazvitendwi (Even if I do good things no one appreciates)
2. Vaneni (They are after me)
3. Tundu (Ideophone which expresses a highly temperamental person)
4. Kunyanyisa (This is too much/overdone)

The first three names are typically employed by daughters-in-law. In this case, Kunyanatsa was a result of a complaint by a daughter-in-law that even if she did the good things expected of a daughter-in-law, her mother-in-law was never grateful. The same applies to Vaneni,

through which the daughter-in-law complained that despite doing good things, the mother-in-law was always after her. Kunyanyisa was meant to communicate with a mother-in-law who was said to be too involved in her son's life. The name Tundu, on the other hand, was given to a dog by a mother-in-law to communicate with her daughter-in-law, who was said to be moody for no apparent reason.

Conclusion

Dog naming is a vital communicative resource among the Shona, particularly in the rural areas of Zimbabwe, where open confrontation is often avoided. The legitimate institution of dog naming further discourages confrontation while offering a viable alternative. Neighbors, relatives, and community members know what they will be communicating to each other through dog names. Generally speaking, however, the use of such names will not result in open confrontation. Each neighbor, instead of openly challenging another about the reason for naming a dog in order to comment on a particular behavior, retaliates by naming his/her dog in response. This silent dialogue, characterized by accusation and counter-accusation, lives on among the Shona people. Old people among the Shona could not date the origins of the practice, but they say that it is as old as the practice of dog-keeping among the Shona.

Dog names are used indirectly to challenge the ideal way of life of the Shona people, summarized here by Gelfand: "In all contact between individuals, old and young, male or female, the impression must never be created that one looks down to another" (1973:12). The ideal may not be openly challenged or undermined as such, but it can be indirectly undermined through a system of dog names as illustrated above. At the same time, dog naming also permits individuals to vent their feelings, feelings that could become dangerous to their health if allowed to fester. In this manner, dog names are exploited in a system of communication that enables the Shona to breach the taboo of open conflict and to maintain their psychological health, without adversely affecting the normal rhythm of the community.

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People interviewed for this project objected to their names being written down, citing cultural sensitivity to the issue discussed.

LIVESON TATIRA, Beyond the Dog's Name: A Silent Dialogue among the Shona People

In this article Tatira demonstrates how dogs' names are used extensively by the Shona people to communicate with relatives, neighbors, and household members in situations where direct communication would be difficult or impossible. As a result, most dogs' names express grievances that cannot be discussed; they offer an indirect way of communicating in order to rebuke, insult, or correct bad behavior. In examining the dog-naming practices he encountered during fieldwork in Zimbabwe, Tatira also demonstrates how they relate to witchcraft, marital problems, and other social issues.