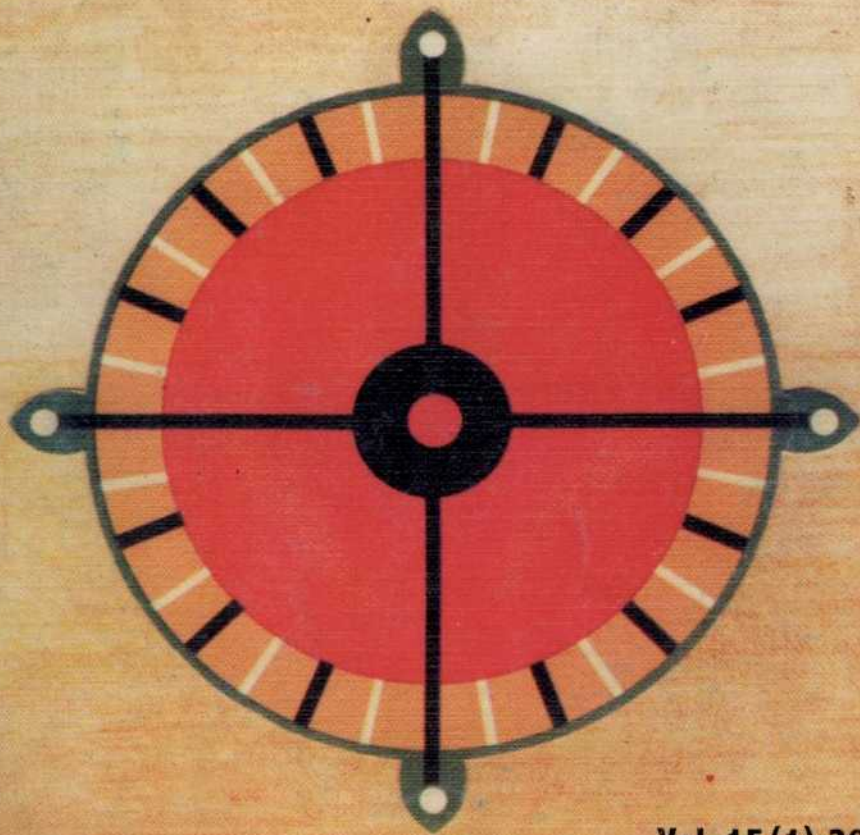


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SHONA FOLKTALES: TOWARDS A DEVELOPMENTAL INTERPRETATION

Liveson Tatira, University of Zimbabwe, HARARE. livesontatira@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

ChiShona is the language spoken by the vast majority of people in Zimbabwe. Shona folktales reflect deep human concerns experienced both in the past and at the present time, which reflect strengths and weaknesses in human nature. This paper discusses a number of folktales which demonstrate the joys and the dangers of personal, regional and national development programs. What was relevant in the past is still important today. This shows the enduring nature of oral traditions and literature.

Introduction

The term 'Shona' is used to refer to the following population groups: Karanga, Korekore, Ndau, Zezuru and Manyika. The term was first used by Doke (1931) to refer to the above tribes when he was asked by the government of the then Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, to study the language situation in that country, with the aim of unifying the dialects. Thus the five dialects were unified into one language, called ChiShona. The five tribes came to be known as the Shona people. The five dialects share 80-90% of the vocabulary.

It is estimated that the Shona people constitute 85% of the whole population of Zimbabwe (Tatira, 2004). The various groups are scattered all over the country, but are concentrated in the following original localities:

- The Ndau in Chipinge
- The Karanga in Masvingo
- The Manyika in Mutare
- The Korekore in Mt Darwin
- The Zezuru in Harare.

This article will demonstrate that Shona folktales can find their relevancy in the present economy by linking their themes to developmental issues. The term "development" will be understood not only in its limited sense of economic growth, but, to quote Bernstein (1979:92), "... it must include a more egalitarian distribution of its fruits, the guarantee of basic human and civil rights, equality of opportunity ..." The same stance is taken by Dr. Perez de Cuellar quoted by Kamba in Chiwome and Gambahaya (1998:1). He notes,

Clearly, there was a need to transcend economics, without abandoning it. The notion of development itself had broadened as people realized that economic criteria alone could not

provide a programme for human dignity and well being. The search for other criteria led UNP to elaborate the notion of human development – ‘a process of enlarging people’s choices’ – that measures development in a broad array of capabilities, ranging from political, economic and social freedom to individual opportunities for being healthy, educated, productive, creative and enjoying self – respect and human rights.

Development should improve people’s standards of living. Therefore, for the process of development to take place, among other things, there should be freedom, justice, solidarity, mass participation and tolerance. What it means is that one cannot talk of meaningful development without taking the above issues into consideration. Some of these issues, such as mass participation, justice, solidarity to mention only a few, are addressed in Shona folktales.

Only selected developmental issues will be expounded, but it is hoped that the selection will be representative of the Shona folktales and their relevancy to development.

Shona Folktales

Shona folktales are considered a sub-genre of orature, which is often concerned with trivial social issues rather than with issues relevant to development, especially in the techno-society of today. Many students, whom I have taught, judge folktales out of step with present social problems. They might agree that values expounded in folktales may be congruent to the present, but are possibly of little or no utility. Somehow related to this perception are some of the interpretations of Shona folktales put forward by Fortune (1980) for Shona folktales, Schueb (1970) for Xhosa and Moephuli (1972) for Sotho. These scholars generally highlight trivial domestic issues, such as petty jealousy, greed, cruelty and cowardice. Fortune and Moephuli, probably because of their linguistic background, show greater interest in the structure of folktale than in its contents and socially committed undertones. Fortune, for instance, analyses the structure of folktales as having a beginning, middle and an end.

This is not to belittle Fortune’s work or his approach to the study of Shona folktales, but the present argument merely attempts to show that, apart from analysing the form of Shona folktales, content must take a pivotal role over form. Through the study of content developmental themes can be identified.

Social Issues Addressed in Folktales

Since all literature is a mirror of society and reflects social most cogent concerns, Shona folktales address issues of mass participation in development, issues of borrowing, be they overdrafts or foreign aid, issues regarding the environment, and the issue of criminality, to mention just a few.

This means that such problems have beset human society for ever. All the issues raised impact on development in one way or another. It seems anachronistic to state that folktales address such themes, which sound rather 'modern'. But folktales do so because they are timeless. This view is echoed by Bromley (1992:45), who observes, "Folktales are timeless in their appeal, reflecting human feelings and desires".

Because of this timeless aspect, folktales stand the test of time and are always adaptable to ever changing conditions. Folktale characters can be animals, birds, human beings, or a combination of them all. It is important to note that such fictional characters, though they might be animals, are metaphors of humans. Finnegan (1970:351) says:

What is often involved in the animal stories is a comment, even a satire, on human society and behaviour. In a sense when the narrators speak of actions and characters of animals they are also representing human faults and virtues, somewhat removed and detached from animals, but nevertheless with an indirect relation to human action.

Therefore, if folktales are mainly about humans and are timeless by their nature, they should have relevancy to human development, because man is the centre of development and this development is by him and for him.

First Concern: Mass Participation in Development

It is therefore not surprising to find Shona folktales that encourage development through mass participation. This type of development is highlighted in the folktale *Tsuro neMhuka dzeSango*. (The Hare and other wild animals).

In this folktale, the animals meet to discuss how to overcome the drought which is bothering them. They decide to dig a communal well where they could all drink and bath. They unanimously agreed on the idea, and enthusiastically took part in the digging of the well. But Hare refused: the digging works raised too much dust, he said, and he considered himself too aristocratic to be involved in such a dirty process. In spite of the crowded participation and hard work, it took time and vigour before they could find water. When the tortoise was about to reach the water table, the elephant, the king of the animals, removed tortoise and decided to dig himself, in order to have the honour of being the first to reach the water table. He dismally failed, however, and was forced to allow the tortoise back into the well. So the tortoise got the job done and dug until the well filled up with water. The Hare, who had refused to work, was punished by not being given access to the well. The hyena, the lion, the buffalo and the tortoise took turns to guard the well so that the Hare could not get to the water. But the first three animals allowed the Hare to fetch water because they were bribed with honey by the trickster. The tortoise, however, refused to be bribed and brought the Hare to

justice.

The folktale's message, apart from other meanings, is that people, though they might be of different ethnic groups (like different animals), should be united when it comes to community developmental projects, as the animals did. One often finds in any community or organization people who refuse to participate, like the Hare. Such divisive elements should be censured, rather than being listened to; otherwise projects will never take off. The folktale therefore encourages all members of society to own community developmental projects.

For development to take place, we do not need the services of corrupt law enforcement agents. This is another sub-theme, which is integral to development. The hyena, the buffalo and the lion are corrupt law enforcement agents who succumb to bribes and let criminal elements like the Hare unjustly benefit from other people's hard work. It is only through the honest and dedicated services of people such as the tortoise that development can be fostered. If law enforcement agents shoulder criminal elements, development is delayed because the right to property would be compromised.

In the folktale, it is only after the arrest of the Hare by the tortoise that we are told that the Hare never came back. It meant that all other animals concentrated, therefore, on their day to day activities, thus being productive rather than wasting time, guarding the well. What we learn from this is that criminality should be reduced to a reasonable level thereby enabling members of the society to engage in their day to day activities without too much anxiety. Within the same folktale, there is another sub-theme of political hijacking of ordinary people's initiatives and efforts. When the tortoise was about to reach the water table after all the other animals, including the king (elephant) had failed, the elephant pushed the tortoise aside so as to get credit for reaching the water table first. The elephant failed and the tortoise had to get back in the well and dig until water was available. Had the elephant insisted with his hijacking spirit, no animals would have found water.

The sub-theme warns politicians and other people in authority not to hijack initiatives of ordinary citizens. This is because such people might hijack projects but lack the expertise required for such projects to take off. Development would be thus retarded. Politicians, the least they can do is to bless the occasion and leave the professionals to carry on without undue interference. If politicians interfere, they might derail projects as the elephant nearly succeeded in doing. Politicians are in a way warned not to sacrifice development for personal fame.

Related to this sub-theme are the recent accusations by some people in Matebeleland that some politicians have hijacked the Zambezi-Matebeleland Water Project. These people argue that the project has taken longer because of political interference and as a result there is no significant progress. Butsilo Dabudabu, a consultant electrical engineer, commenting on the same project notes, In fact, the start of the project has been oscillating like a pendulum for the last 15 years, and no one has come with a plausible explanation ... the committee handling the project has

more politicians than civil engineers in it. (*Zimbabwe Daily News*, May 20, 2002).

Borrowing for Development

Apart from themes concerning mass participation in development, folktales address also the issue of borrowing and how this may impact negatively on development. There are many folktales that warn people against unwise borrowing, such as *Huku neGondo* (The Hen and the Eagle) in Mahlaule (1999), *Tsuro naGudo* (The Hare and the Baboon) and *Ingwe nemukadzi aiva nemimba* (The leopard and the Pregnant Woman).

For the purpose of this discussion, I will use the folktale *Ingwe nemukadzi aiva nemimba* (The Leopard and the Pregnant Woman). In this folktale the woman asked the leopard to kill a buck for her and in return she promised to give her child to the leopard at birth. But when she gave birth, she no longer agreed to surrender the baby to the leopard, which then started pestering her, intent now on devouring both the woman and the child.

The tale contains the element of borrowing, or rather, of a negotiation for delayed payment, which is similar to borrowing. The mother did not have the resources to pay the leopard for its labour, and therefore had to 'borrow' or negotiate for a deferred payment. The woman had nothing except her future baby.

The folktale teaches not to borrow beyond one's repaying capacities. People should not bond their only means of survival whenever they borrow either from banks or elsewhere. Banks would repossess everything if one fails to repay. In such a case an individual would end up in a worse situation. In this folktale, the leopard now demands to eat both mother and child. Such unwise borrowing, instead of leading to development leads to underdevelopment and possible catastrophe.

Partly related to the borrowing theme is that about the danger of being over-dependent on others. This theme is brought out in the folktale *Kondo naDimba* (The Hammer kop and a small bird, *Dimba*). The Hammer kop lived in a big beautiful nest, built with the feathers of many birds. At the same time there was a poor *Dimba* who lived far away, in another country. This *Dimba* depended completely on the Hammer kop for food and water. *Dimba* was not always given clean water and enough food, but he always appreciated whatever he was given.

On one occasion, however, he expressed displeasure about the dirty water he was given by the Hammer kop and told his benefactor in no uncertain terms. The Hammer kop did not counteract the insults, but simply withdrew his help. Not a long time had passed and *Dimba* was back begging for assistance. This time he was denied help. He sang, begging, at Hammer kop's nest until he sang himself to death. On discovering that *Dimba* had died, the Hammer kop smiled and threw *Dimba*

away.

Among the many themes of this folktale I will pick on the one that relates to development. The tale teaches that individuals or countries must not depend too heavily on others. Developing countries tend to depend too much on the developed/industrialized ones. The Hammer kop represents the developed countries while *Dimba* represents developing countries. Developed countries often donate material things to countries in need. Such donations are extended if the relations between donor and recipient countries remain those of master and servant, or those of small brother - big brother. The moment the recipient offends or is perceived to have offended the donor, or goes against certain policies of the donor, the donations are withheld or withdrawn, as was done by Hammer kop to *Dimba*. The same tactic is employed by the developed countries to the developing countries through the I.M.F. and the World Bank.

Developed countries dictate policies to developing countries and they withhold the money if these policies are not followed. Stoneman (1992:32) notes, "...I.M.F. has quite a lot of leverage against poor countries and overwhelming leverage on countries in a weakened situation who really have almost no option but to go along with it". These developed countries are not happy if developing countries do not borrow, this is because they will fail to have control over them. Again, on this note, Stoneman (1992:32) comments on the relationship between Zimbabwe and I.M.F. He notes, "Now Zimbabwe at independence was described by the I.M.F. as being 'under borrowed by Third World Standards', which meant that the I.M.F. was unhappy that it hadn't got any leverage on Zimbabwe. So Zimbabwe rather foolishly borrowed very heavily for a few years and ended up with an I.M.F. programme. They were forced to devalue and cut subsidies".

The other sub-theme is that developed countries donate only a few things in order to keep the recipient country a perpetual beggar, as Hammer kop did with *Dimba*. The developed countries normally do not help the recipient country with the skills necessary for that country to develop. This is done in order to keep the developing country dependent on the donor. In a way, as long as these developing countries rely on these handouts, they will not develop because they would be lacking skills to initiate their own development. Therefore, developing countries are warned not to depend too much on these handouts because the tendency is counter- development.

Sometimes, developed countries donate money for community projects but because the donors have their own agenda, recipients are not consulted and development fails to be achieved. Makumbe (1996:13) observes, "... Zimbabwe cases confirm the fact that when people are expected only to be passive recipients to government and donor initiated handouts and programmes, they tend to shun participation and basically lose interest in the programmes. This leads to programme failure and continued underdevelopment of rural communities."

The picture that is cast is that developing countries should never over depend on developed countries. They should develop their own skills to sustain their economy lest the moment the master-servant relationship is severed, they will starve like Dimba. On a more serious political theme, the Hammer kop built his empire (nest) with other birds' feathers. His comfort is a result of exploitation of other birds. The same is true with some developed countries. Their comfort is a result of exploitation of the developing countries.

It is a historical fact that most developed countries exploited both the natural and human resources of developing countries to develop themselves. Africa is a case in point. It was robbed of its human resources during the inhuman episode of slave trade. Minerals, timber and other natural resources were siphoned during the colonial subjugation of Africa by Europe. Bernstein (1979:83) is right when he observes, "The original centre of capitalism established their wealth and power through incorporating and exploiting other parts of the world". Through slavery, Africa lost its human resources necessary for development. The compulsory emigration of Africans, "if the Trans-Saharan shipment of Africans to the Mediterranean is taken care of, then we are dealing with a migration which spanned 1000years" (Walvin, 1983:40).

From what Walvin notes it could be seen that the developed countries drained Africa of its inhabitants for a long period. Walvin (1983:40) emphasises this enormous loss of human resources to the developed countries when he observes, "It was, however, in the years of European ascendancy, from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth, that this African Diaspora reached staggering high levels; draining certain African societies of their healthy and largely young labour force and in the process transforming the economic and demographic face of the New World settlements". Estimates of the Africans who landed in America give a staggering figure of between ten to twenty five million. These black people were forced to work in plantations and other parts of European economy. No doubt these Africans were exploited to develop Europe. Walter (1972) summarises this by unequivocally stating: 'Europe underdeveloped Africa.'

Environmental Messages in Folktales

Apart from borrowing themes and over dependence on others, environmental issues are handled in Shona folktales. Environment is a component factor of development. The wanton cutting down of trees means counter-development because this can lead to erosion. This destruction of land through soil erosion negatively impacts on farming. There are folktales which warn people against indiscriminate felling of trees, but common folktale themes are those which encourage harmony between men and his environment (animals, birds and insects).

Themes, where man is rescued from danger by birds, abound in Shona folktales. The main emphasis in these folktales is that man should preserve the environment in order for him to survive and

develop. One such folktale which encourages man to live in harmony with his environment is *Mukoma nomuni'na vaive nherera* (Two young orphan brothers).

In this folktale, the younger brother saved *masvosve* (ants), *hove* (fish) and *makonye* (millipedes) from imminent death. Both orphans met the ants, fish and millipedes at different stages on their journey and were asked for food by them. After saving the ants, fish and millipedes, the orphans continued with their journey. They arrived at a far away place where they decided to look for brides. Their in-laws tested them before giving them wives.

The first to be tested was the younger brother. He was ordered to cut down a tree with a single blow. The millipedes assisted him by eating the tree from inside. Because of this help, the younger brother made a single cut and the tree fell down. On the second occasion, the younger brother was ordered to collect all grain scattered in the sand. The ants helped him to collect all the grain and put it into sacks. The last test required the younger brother to recover a plate, which was thrown into a deep river infested with crocodiles. The fish helped him by bringing the plate to the riverbank. The younger brother was then given a wife.

The elder brother, who had refused to help the ants, fish and millipedes, was also tested. First he was ordered to recover a ring thrown into the river. He almost drowned and failed the test. The fish recognised him and did not want to assist him. The second test for him was to take a hat, which, was placed on top of a thorny tree. He tried but failed; in fact, he fell and crushed to death. The millipedes, which could have assisted him by eating the tree from inside, did not want to assist him.

In the folktale, man is reminded that he depends on his environment and that in order to survive and develop (through marriage and procreation, as the younger brother) he should take care of his environment. If man is careless with his environment he will certainly perish. If he cares for his environment, like the younger brother, then there will be development. This is because one would use such resources for one's material benefit, as did the younger brother who used the ants, fish and millipedes for his benefit. It is common knowledge that Africa is suffering, *inter alia*, because it has depleted its environment.

Criminality and Social Development

Criminality is another issue addressed in Shona folktales. We come across this theme partly as a sub-theme in the folktale *Tsuro nemhuka Dzesango* (The Hare and other wild animals), but there are folktales with criminality as their main theme. Common knowledge dictates that when criminals bedevil society, such a society's development is likely to be negatively affected. In many folktales of this nature, people are warned to guard against criminals, especially conmen or tricksters. *Tsuro* (Hare), *Anansi* (Spider) and the *Ajapa* (Tortoise) depending on culture, thrive on criminality.

Owomoyela (1989:168) commenting on the criminality traits of these tricksters says, "Hare is too lazy to fend for himself by honest means. He directs his genius at the procurement of food by devious, tactics as Ajapa in Yoruba tales". The way these tricksters survive is representative of other individuals in society.

Individuals who behave in such a manner are reminded of their negative attributes and how they affect the economy. Conmanship impacts negatively on development because people lose their property and investments to such criminals. The Hare in many Shona folktales is involved in a series of tricks in which other animals are duped. They lose their treasures to the Hare. Through these folktales people are warned not to put too much trust on other members of the society, especially when dealing with strangers.

Conclusion

This discussion was an attempt to link Shona folktale themes to development. The term 'development' being understood to entail more than merely economic growth. Issues of environment, criminality and mass participation were taken cognisance of and how these impact on development.

Shona folktales, though they might seem anachronistic to the present technologically advanced society, convey relevant messages for the present techno-society. Through Shona folktale themes, issues of foreign aid, I.M.F./ World Bank monetary policies and leverages, and the impact of slavery on Africa are addressed. Countries and individuals are warned about the dangers of unwise borrowing as well as the dangers of community developmental projects. They are also urged to conserve their environment in order for them to enhance over dependent on others. People, through folktale themes, are urged to co-operate and participate in development.

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