

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE PAST, TECHNOLOGY OF THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE: A CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF THE ORAL AESTHETIC IN *MAPENZI* (1999) AND *MASANGO MAVI* (1998)

Abstract

The paper critically analyses the contrastive use of Shona oral art forms in Chiwome's *Masango Mavi* and Mabasa's *Mapenzi*. It proceeds from realisation that the two writers identify with Shona people's oral experiences, which are referred to as oral technology in this paper. We advance the argument that Mabasa uses Shona people's oral technology in a manner that is ideologically and pedagogically empowering. This is consistent with the value thrust of Shona people's epistemological assumptions. On the other hand, Chiwome adopts a revisionist and deconstructionist conceptual scheme with regard to Shona people's oral technology. The paper comes to the conclusion that, of the two writers, therefore, Mabasa's vision maintains the line between tradition and continuity.

Introduction

The artist in the traditional African milieu spoke for and to his community. His imagery, themes, symbolisms and forms were drawn from a communally accessible pool. He was heard. He made sense (Chinweizu et al, 1985:241).

The central concern in this paper is the Shona writers' use of Shona oral art forms in two narrative constructions which are *Mapenzi* (1999) and *Masango Mavi* (1998). The oral art forms are elaborately projected in *Mapenzi* than they are in *Masango Mavi*. These art forms are part of the philosophy of life of the Shona people - their controlling consciousness which perfectly captures their "lived experiences." Both Mabasa and Chiwome establish a link with oral traditions which function as the vital nourishing supplement to their creative acts. Such a creative modality is not only sync with the creative demands of Afrocentrism, a theory that emphasises the placement of African ideals at the centre of any analysis that involves Africa, but is also ideologically and pedagogically empowering as it elevates orature to a position where, "it is the incontestable reservoir of the values, sensibilities, esthetics, and achievements of traditional African thought and imagination....[while serving] as the ultimate foundation, guidepost and point of departure for a modern liberated African literature" (Chinweizu:2).

In this paper, we acknowledge oral art forms as a form of indigenous technology that African people use to get the best out of life. This form of technology as indicated by the writers' identification with it is deathless. It reasons that, writers who identify with this form of indigenous technology simply contribute to the maintenance of an existential-continuum which is profoundly fundamental for the purposes of identity, location, space and place. While this is the conceptual frame, the writers who are Chiwome and Mabasa exhume and disseminate the oral technology in a manner that is aesthetically and pedagogically different. For instance, we argue that Chiwome's use and vision of the oral technology is revisionist, deconstructionist and interrogative. To

interrogate the meaning and profundity of oral art forms is at the same time an interrogation of the project of life itself. It is to lose faith and abandon hope which is the pinnacle of human existence. On the other hand, Mabasa identifies with the vitality and hope that is synonymous with Shona epistemological foundations. His vision is not premised on the interrogation and revision of Shona oral technology. Rather, it revolves around the conceptualisation of oral art forms as a potent, liberative and life-affirming curriculum. The manner in which he uses orature in the novel *Mapenzi* falls squarely into what Achebe calls "...“earthing” an electrical charge to ensure communal safety” (1988: 64).

In this regard, it is the writers’ identification with orature and the contrastive perspectives on the dissemination, conceptualisation and philosophical attitude towards Shona people’s oral art forms which constitutes the building brick for this paper. Orature is not past, traditional and fixated. It has its roots in the Shona past but continues to be created up to this day. It is the core of Shona people’s philosophy. Any writer who effectively deploys it makes clear his or her intentions to the readers. In the words of Achebe, it is dynamic, mobile and active, even aggressive (62). It is an arena where forces of life – visible and invisible, authentic and inauthentic, life-furthering and life-negating find expression. Therefore, to perfectly and correctly establish a connective tissue between oneself and this oral technology cannot be conceptualised as an assiduous escape into the past. To identify with the oral technology, which is an identification with Shona people’s foundations of life is what Baldwin (1963:71) persuasively presents as, “to accept one’s past – one’s history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.” We are largely concerned about this oral technology because some of the Shona literary scholars have erroneously dismissed as “naïve and sentimental” Shona novels that draw their inspiration from our oral traditions. On the other hand, they have celebrated those works that conveniently identify with western literary techniques. These are some of the people who have been miseducated in colonial and neo-colonial institutions where they have been bewitched to believe that to identify with African culture is congruous with living in the past. They fail to envisage that culture is neither an artefact, a mere cosmetic nor something frozen in the past of human development. People who have used culture to develop their societies and build their nations, our ancestors for instance, are fully conscious of its power to develop.

The Oral Aesthetic in *Mapenzi*

It is in the light of the above observations that we analyse *Mapenzi* as a novel that successfully makes use of our cultural/oral technological resources. The novel’s seemingly annihilatory disposition is transformed into a combative and aggressive intellectual mode through various oral art forms which include *bembera* (traditional satiric poetry), *Chimurenga* war songs, contemporary *sungura* songs, and folktales. These art forms are carefully weaved into the fabric of the story to satirise national leaders whose abuse of power and mismanagement of national resources has led to what the author projects as national neurosis. Mabasa is uncompromising in his stance. His novel is the first Shona novel in post-independent Zimbabwe to articulate political issues in a manner that is overt. He links the Zimbabwean fiasco as well as the pluriformity of conundrums that have transformed the nation into an agglomeration of neurotics to the

behaviour of the national leadership, which is likened to the behaviour of *Zizi* (Owl) in a folktale in this novel.

His literature is a literature that engages the oppressor in the trenches of intellectual warfare while fighting running literary battles with those in positions of unearned privilege. It is a literature that shoots bullets. It is not fortuitous that the above oral art forms find expression through Hamundigone, a former freedom fighter and the author's voice of reason as well. The name Hamundigone itself bespeaks of invincibility and a never-say-die attitude towards life. It is consistent with Shona nomenclature in which the process of naming is fundamental to survival and participation. Hamundigone is cast at the centre as a mentally deranged person. The projection of a mentally deranged person as a central character is an effective literary technique by the author as it affords him the opportunity to transcend self-censorship, which has the tendency of diluting and compromising creative commitment. He is shielded by his character because a mad person is known to deconstruct all forces of rational signification and say things which are considered taboo. As a former freedom fighter, he also gives authenticity to the author's version of life in the contemporary dispensation. Again, *upenzi* (madness) can also be visualised as a technique that the author strategically uses to interrogate both the official version of national history and the concept of independence as well. As a result, Mabasa is indeed an innovative writer.

Through Hamundigone, Mabasa makes use of *bembera* to express people's despondency and disillusionment with their leaders. He also brings out the betrayal and abandonment of former freedom fighters, which is symbolic of the condition of the majority of people. *Bembera* is a type of traditional satiric Shona poetry that continues to be in vogue up to this day. It is an art that empowers the seemingly powerless and victimised with a fearless voice. For this reason, the author's choice of *bembera* is meant to empower the oppressed and disillusioned masses of Zimbabwe. In the process of reciting *bembera*, the aggrieved or wronged makes public his or her disappointment. It is a facility that is meant to address social conflicts without direct physical confrontation in a context where harmony, balance and peace are critical determinants for social order. The reciter of *bembera* uses language that reverberates with discourses of self-significance. This is meant to inject fear, trepidation and convulsion into the intended target. Chiwome (1996:13, 15) notes that:

The bombastic [language] creates assonance and alliteration which make the poet awesome....The grandiose hyperbolic discordant consonants create an impression of a formidable person. The lengthy epithets are accentuated in performance to contribute to the total intimidating rhythmic effect which can be humorous or intimidating, depending on the context.

In this novel, *bembera* becomes an effective form of social dialogue and social criticism that advertises people's anger and despondency. Hamundigone takes advantage of the presence of many people at *Musika weBindura* (Bindura Terminus) to unleash his venom against leaders of the nation. This is consistent with *bembera* because choice of space, place and time is critical. The objective is to make not only the offender aware that he/she has been discovered, but to address as many people as possible.

*Ndinzwe iwe! Ndati ndinzwe!
Ndinzwe ini inzwi rebenzi,
Tarisa zvako divi asi unondinzwa (8).*

*Listen to me you! I said listen to me!
Listen to me the voice of a mad person...
Even if you look aside you will hear me*

The introduction is meant to draw, redirect and refocus people's attention. It is meant to make sure that the offender does not miss out this verbal avalanche and invectives. It is also an introduction that is loaded with anger and emotion as well as discourses of intimidation. The poem is strategically placed at the beginning of the novel to set the stage for the novel's uncompromising stance. It is indeed a cantankerously vituperative and vitiating attack on systems that dehumanise people. The reasons that plunge the entire citizenry into an unfathomable lapse of vitality and morality as well as degeneration into ideological captivity and mass neurosis are captured in this introductory poem. At this point, it can be argued that the author makes use of oral technology as an effective literary style. This style not only enhances the aesthetic beauty of his work, but also elevates his novel into a profoundly fundamental "pedagogy of the oppressed." It is a way of pedagogical and ideological empowerment. Mobilisation of human consciousness and the national human factor element requires the adoption of discourses that are unassailably linked with a people's lived experiences and their exigencies of existence. *Bembera* is part of this. Mabasa achieves both innovation of content and form. In this paper, innovation is understood not as "a dreary dead end of meaningless experimentation, arbitrary innovation, or the lunatic's dance of esoteric, privatist aestheticism for its own sake. [It] is a tool not an end, to be applied with intelligent restraint and firmly disciplined in service to enhanced meaning and heightened communication" (Thelwell 1990:6).

Hamundigone makes his invincibility and fearlessness explicit through the following combative words:

*Handisi shumba iri papeji mubhuku
Yaunorega vana vachibata muromo.
.....
Kagandanga kari mandiri ingozi yerombe,
Kanotaura zvinokushaisa hope usiku (9).*

*Do not take me for a lion on a book page
That you allow children to play with.
.....
The fighter in me resembles the aggrieved spirit of a pauper
He lets out things that make you lose sleep.*

Hamundigone, who represents the voice of the oppressed and deprived reaffirms people's agency. The declaration that he is not a passive and lifeless lion is at the same time a confession of his aggressiveness, combativeness and readiness to do battle. Despite the

oppression and betrayal, people still have the ability to transcend forces that dehumanise them. This is a warning that people must not be taken for granted. Unlike other Zimbabwean writers who depict people as having reached the ceiling of their existence, and as having been totally elbowed out of the processes of existence, Mabasa depicts people as a bundle of energy. Most of these writers view society through the lenses of victimhood, vulnerability, hopelessness and helplessness. However, through the adoption and adaptation of Shona people's indigenous oral technology, the author restores and bestows upon the people their visibility and authenticity. These are crucial when it comes to participation. His discourses are premised on the philosophies that recognise participation as the sine qua non and modus operandi for liberation and development. We estimate that this kind of a combative and never-say-die vision has been made possible by the author's identification with orature. To a very large extent, Shona orature gyrates around the principles that enhance optimism. It is not founded on the

ascetic tradition, the attempted fleeing from life, from full participation in the tremendous and deepest challenges of the life-process with its risks and dangers, with its joys of success and brief sorrows of failure and loss...[but that] The African tradition, lived and lives in the thick of battle of life; here and now (P'bitek, 1986:21).

In the context of *bembera*, the overarching concern is not to exhibit fear and a profound loss of vitality. Rather, it is to show that the wronged is not afraid and is indeed prepared for any action. From the above discussion, it is discernible that one way of circumventing nihilism and a host of other philosophies related to life-negation and hope abandonment is to responsibly adopt and embrace indigenous oral technology as the brick and mortar in the construction of a resonant national literary edifice. The novel's other weaknesses are fundamentally eclipsed by the author's responsible adoption of indigenous oral technology.

In a context where power abuse and suppression of people's liberties are rampant, responsible literary creators should not compete, as if in a race, to see who will present the oppressed as hopelessly powerless and irretrievably trapped. To act in that grotesquely absurd manner is to be participant in the very systems that strangle and deny our people a life that is a great feast of existence. We unapologetically opine that the greatest gift any responsible writer can give to his or her readers is an affirmation of the fact that they are subjects and not objects to be acted upon. This gift is part of the "relocation, the repositioning of the African in a place of agency where instead of being spectator to others, African voices are heard in the full meaning of [life]" (Asante, 1999: ix). It is precisely for this reason that Thelwell dissuades African writers and critics from embracing defeatist attitudes even when conditions seem to be pathologically debilitating:

An honest novel cannot proceed out of a glib, fashionable coffee house cynicism in which everything is beyond human effort. It is rather, predicated on the assumption that there is a future for which to struggle, that conditions however grim are not beyond the reach of people's will, intelligence and decency, and that the writing and reading of such novels are not only testament to that faith, but are an integral part of that struggle (1987:231).

Towards the end of the poem, the listener is made aware of the problems that have divested the reciter of happiness. The problems revolve around the rabid betrayal of people's wishes by their political leaders. It is clear from the anguished voice that people sacrificed their lives for real change. The sacrifice was based on a specific set of practical goals which included freedom of choice, access to decent housing, health, food and many other basics of life which make life enjoyable.

Zvinofadza here?

Ndati zvinofadza here vakomana imi?

.....

Poto yakatsva ichibika sadza pamoto,

Asi kutebhuru kukaenda ndiro dzaive musherefu? (9)

Is it pleasing?

I said is it pleasing you boys?

.....

The pot was burnt while cooking sadza

But the table was graced by plates from the shelf.

Poto (cooking pot) here stands for the majority of people who sacrificed their lives and combined their vitalities in order to attain unalloyed freedom from the suppressive colonial regime. *Sadza*, which is Zimbabwe's staple food, represents the life-sustaining and life-giving programmes that people expected to get after the attainment of independence. It also symbolises expectations of a healthy life that is characterised by plenty and happiness because it is the bounden duty of any responsible government to make its people a happy people. This fact is corroborated by Shona people's sayings in recognition of the profundity of *sadza*. *Sadza muponesi, jena muponesi, chibataura* (*sadza, giver of life, securer of intestines*). *Pamoto* (on fire) stands for the pain, commitment and endurance of the people. *Ndiro dzaive musherefu* (*plates from the shelf*) is an expression of the political opportunists and other irresponsible leaders who betrayed people soon after independence. This is part of the politics without morality in this novel. It is this massive betrayal, for instance, which has engendered the mass neurosis that is the core of the novel, *Mapenzi*. In the case of Hamundigone, this pain manifests itself through the frightening scars on his back as well as the serious mental injuries caused by the war. It is also this irresponsible leadership that has driven the reciter to unleash his vitriolic venom using *bembera*.

Mabasa's use of *bembera* becomes fitting in that it increases people's awareness that their deplorable condition is attributable to the existence of a class of oppressors among them. This kind of awareness and self-knowledge "by the victim means in the first place an awareness that oppression exists, that the victim has fallen from a great height of glory or promise into the present depths...[and] the victim must know who the enemy is (Achebe, 1988:6). As a public address system, the mood in *bembera* is brazenly combative and aggressive. It does not camouflage human commitment to the goal of social and political transformation. This is the case because we strongly believe that the human condition must be viewed from the perspective of **CHANGE**, not fixity. As indicated before, it is because of the writer's careful and responsible use of oral

technology that he does not visualise humanity as an amorphous mass of lifeless, hopeless and powerless beings. While other poems in this novel reflect the vulnerability of Zimbabweans, it is largely the oral technology that is dispensed by Hamundigone, the author's voice of reason, which is empowering. It is also an effective strategy by the writer to make sure that Hamundigone, the suffering former combatant speaks on behalf of the majority.

While *bembera* exposes the source of disenchantment and mass neurosis in this novel, songs also convey the same spirit where they blend anger and possibilities of transcendence. Mabasa makes use of popular *sungura* songs and *Chimurenga* war songs. *Sungura* is a form of Zimbabwean music that is largely expressed in indigenous languages - Shona and Ndebele. This makes it readily available and accessible to indigenous people. It is also performed during live shows and played on national radio. The author selects the music of Simon Chimbetu, himself a former freedom fighter of Zimbabwe's armed struggle against colonialism. The song is titled *Hope iyi* (This dream). It is repeatedly used throughout the novel. Consistent with our discussion of oral technology as perspectives from the past, and technology of the present and the future, the philosophy that undergirds the song is derived from Shona historiography. Coincidentally, it is also brought to the readers' attention by Hamundigone. Both Chimbetu and Hamundigone are former freedom fighters who are expressing disgust with the present government which they helped claw its way into power. It reasons, therefore, that Mabasa intends to maximise the reader's awareness of the manner in which the current government has abandoned the people in pursuit of decadent, nefarious and invidious self-aggrandising agendas. He is questioning the legitimacy of a government that manages national affairs at the expense of the people who laid down their lives for positive change.

In the song, Mabasa chooses the excerpt which reads "*kutuka kwavaniota uku kuchapera*" (*the way they scorn us will one day come to an end*). The tone is that of pain, anger and despair. However, it is not pain that leads nowhere, nor anger that is self-immolating, nor despair that is self-obliterating. It is a song that is futuristic and whose strength lies in the affirmation of hope and the impermanence of abusive or oppressive regimes. The ability to see into the future is consistent with the ability to go beyond narrow-mindedness and near-sightedness. It is one mechanism of overcoming victimhood. Since life is a long distance race, and all people graciously bequeathed with this life are long distance runners, it is a fundament not to lose focus of the race. Chimbetu's song is based on an invincible reassurance of eventual freedom. It is in line with the deathless teachings of the great African-American historian, Dubois, who at one point reassuringly said:

Courage, brothers! The battle for humanity is not lost or losing. All across the skies sit signs of promise...The morning breaks over blood-stained hills. We must not falter, we may not shrink. Above are the everlasting stars (1890-1919:172,173).

Despite the current anger and impoverishment, the song pampers the people with an unassailable and reassuring optimism. While the song might be silent on the path of action that is needed to put an end on *kutuka* (scorn), we believe that optimism is a

paramount requisite in any struggle for freedom and human redemption. A people who lose optimism and hope invariably lose the zest to live to see tomorrow. Put differently, the absence of optimism stands as an indelible marker of social death, a phenomenon that works to the advantage of the oppressor.

The excerpt *kutuka kwavaniota uku kuchapera*, is a profound political package. *Kutuka* is a Shona verb which, in a literal sense, means to scorn, to mock or to shout at. In this song, and also consonant with the theme in this novel, it is a concept that denotes oppressiveness and excessive abuse of political power, mismanagement of public funds and the betrayal of people's aspirations and wishes for a happy life. The novel is replete with examples that epitomise *kutuka*. The most consistent example is the manner in which the people have been reduced to the level of animals. Hamundigone, the former combatant is forced by hunger to ransack garbage bins in search of food. This happens despite the fact that he had earlier on met Garanowako, a member of parliament who could have assuaged his precarious situation. However, Garanowako, instead of helping Hamundigone his former colleague from the war calls for security.

Akanditarisa semunhu aona marutsi pasutu yake... "Hey Mr Driver, itai kuti security ibvise munhu uyu pano!" (19).

He glared at me like a person who has seen vomit on his suit... "Hey Mr Driver, let security remove this person here!"

The arrogance paraded by Garanowako who is a leader of the people is part of the *kutuka* concept. The manner in which Hamundigone is treated humiliates and dehumanises him as shown in the manner he gets numbed with shame. Also the abuse of national funds that were meant for former combatants shows the insensitivity and corruption in government which is said to be responsible for *upenzi* (*madness/foolish behaviour*) in this novel. The funds are looted by undeserving leaders earlier referred to as "*ndiro dzaive musherefu*" while real beneficiaries "*poto yakatsva ichibika sadza pamoto*" like Hamundigone get nothing. Hamundigone expresses this senseless abuse of public funds by leaders when he says: *Yekurwa hondo here? Handisati, ndakangomirirawo nanhasi. Vamwe vakatopiwa katatu-katatu (27) (You mean that for fighting? I am still waiting. Some have received it three times each).* Magi also brings out this nonchalant abuse when she informs us that:

"...mamwe mashefu akazoba mari achiti they were suffering form war traumas.... Vamwe vacho havana kana nekutomboenda kuhondo kwacho, kana nepfuti dzacho havadzizivi. Vaitogocha nyama zvavo munanaBotswana nanaZambia umu, hondo yapera vakazouya vachitiratidza madzvanga avakatsva nenyama yemabraai vachiti aive mavanga emabara emuvengi (106).

Some high ranking government officials looted funds meant for genuine war veterans claiming they were suffering form war traumas...Some of them never went to war and do not even know what a gun looks like. They were busy braaing meat in Botswana and Zambia. After the war, they came back showing us scars obtained from braaing meat saying they were remnants of the enemy.

This oppressiveness which is expressed as *kutuka* in the song is part of the conveyor belt of *upenzi* which leads to *mapenzi*. It leads to the destruction of life as shown through the rampant prostitution among the University of Zimbabwe's female students. They are plunged into immoral behaviour because of economic regression. Characters like Eddie end up staying with their in laws because they cannot secure jobs to sustain them. Among the Shona people and most African communities, the relationship between a son in law and a mother in law is characterised by distance. Such distance is crucial in the maintenance of a sound relationship based on dignity, respect and restraint. Mbiti (1969) elaborates on this existential necessity when he reminds us that: "In African societies, the kinship system involves among other things, relationships in which physical avoidance between given individuals is carefully observed. For example, this is the case between a man and his mother-in-law...Physical avoidance protects the individuals concerned from sexual contact" (143). Other citizens like Vincent engage in illicit drug peddling because there are no jobs while theft is rampant. Human beings compete with dogs for access of garbage bins. These behaviours are a result of the manner in which the national economy has been mismanaged. The gross mismanagement of national resources which dehumanises people is what Chimbetu refers to as *kutuka*. It is not possible to uphold morality because survival takes precedence over morality. This is the reason why Garvey says that "hungry men [and women] have no respect for law, authority, [morality and] human life" (1986:13).

What is most intriguing about this song is the manner in which it acknowledges the existence of oppression as a dehumanising system. Despite the existence of oppression, it does not drag and burden humanity with needless and mindless pessimism and hopelessness. Rather, it places emphasis on vigilance and futurism in long term strategic planning. It socialises humanity into a scheme where the ability to see beyond the blocking and limiting horizons imposed on us by our oppressors is an indispensable weapon in the ultimate realisation of dignity. This is consistent with African and Shona people's ontological and epistemological assumptions where defeatism and surrender are not at all immediate options. Mabasa's use of such oral technology is a potent weapon in human factor development. It becomes appropriate when one takes into consideration the fact that the kind of life that Mabasa is depicting is a life that has been fundamentally mutilated and battered. Orature becomes a tool that affords his novel a transcendental outlook. Transcendentalism is crucial to life as a negation of victimhood and vulnerability. Ephraim has spoken of transcendence thus:

But since self-transcendence is necessary for even the taste of freedom, then those incapable of the existential "upheaval" and new birth must somehow be shown the way [to see into the future] (2003:132).

The transcendental dimension of the song pertains to both the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressors are warned that, oppression, in whatever form is temporary because it is not man's ontological vocation. In this regard, it is a caution to see beyond the present comfort that is derived from the people's sorrows.

While the song "*Hope iyi*" emphasises the *kutuka* concept, another Chimurenga song by Thomas Mapfumo expresses the contradictions that characterise the party which led the struggle for independence and what it stands for now. These contradictions are

part of *kutuka*. The party seems to have abandoned the egalitarian principles that it represented during the war. It used to be an emblem of people's hopes and aspirations for independence and their future lives. However, now it simply stands for the Fanonian "Pitfalls of National Consciousness" where "the party has made itself into a screen between the masses and the leaders" (1967:137). Mabasa makes use of pastoral imagery to describe the behaviour of the party. This comes out through Hamundigone who says: "*Vanopenga vanoonekwa hupenzi hwavo kunge vapfanha vari kumafuro vanoti ivo vakwidzwa mumuti kuti vatemhere vari pasi shumha ivo vodyira mumuti vachingodonedza matsengwarengwa*" (134) (*Those who are mad/ foolish behave like young boys herding cattle who are hoisted up the tree by their colleagues to get fruits for all but decide to eat alone while throwing down remains*). This betrayal and pain finds expression through Hamundigone's spontaneous reaction when he listens to a Chimurenga song called "*Gwindinwgi rine Shumba.*" He involuntarily finds himself crying when the song is played on radio. The song is as follows:

*Nharo hapana, tiri kutanga isu.
Tose vatema.
Takazviudzwa naVaMugabe.
Zanu nevanhu, Vanhu chiiko.
Zanu vanhu, vanhu iZanu...
Vakabva vatanga kuchema (132).*

*No doubt, we are ruling
All black people
Zanu and the people, what are people
Zanu is the people's party and people are Zanu...
After listening to the song, he started crying.*

The pain is exacerbated by the fact that as a former combatant who once defended this party and the 'progressive' ideology it represented, he finds himself jobless, hungry and ransacking garbage bins and above all, tormented by ghosts and other dehumanising experiences from the liberation war. Since Hamundigone consistently recites Chimbetu's song "*Hope iyi,*" the party now stands for *Kutuka*. This realisation is very painful and dehumanising. It is also responsible for the various forms of *upenzi* in this novel.

Apart from songs, Mabasa also embraces Shona people's oral narratives in the form of a folktale called *Zizi nedzimwe shiri* (Owl and other birds). The folktale "expresses man's mission, namely, to participate in and thereby to transfigure his world; to make this world conform to his vision of a habitat fit for man as such, a home for himself and his putatively homeless and abject kin..." (Ephraim: 138). In this folktale, *Zizi* (Owl) is king of all birds. He derives his power from the fact that he feigns to be the only bird with "horns." He therefore abuses this assumed privilege and makes the bird kingdom a virtual penitentiary. All birds have to bring him food while he sleeps. One day during a meeting, *Nhengure* sat closely to *Zizi* and carefully analysed his physiology. He realised that *Zizi* did not have any horns but had feathers which he used to intimidate other birds with. From then onwards, *Nhengure* challenged *Zizi* and engaged him for a fight. *Zizi* cried and ran away. In the end, there was happiness for all birds. "*Zizi*

akachema achitiza, shiri dzese dzikafara” (132) (*Zizi cried and ran away while the other birds partied and celebrated*).

Folktales are part of the oral technology that was/ is used to mould and direct perception and consciousness. They also directed human participation. Obviously, those who have been mis-schooled misinterpret these folktales as rudiments of childish and fetishist psychology and “underdeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature” (Hegel, 1952:199). “We do not argue with them, the fools,” (Armah, 1973:3) as we interpret with salivating and ecstatic admiration those works that are rooted in Shona/African creative traditions. The above folktale is a typical “revolutionary pedagogy of the oppressed” where there is only one destiny for mankind – **FREEDOM**. It is a straightforward existential instruction to any people to desist “from allowing, through carelessness and moral cowardice, any social evil to grow” (Dubois: 1969:199). By blending this folktale into his narrative, Mabasa makes clear his vision and commitment as a ‘writer in politics’ whose volition is to reassure society that, no matter how debilitating, oppression can be overcome. He is part of what Achebe calls “most African writers write out of an African experience and a commitment to an African destiny” (74). In the folktale, the birds stand for the oppressed while *Zizi* represents the abusive and arrogant oppressors.

The overarching pedagogy in this folktale, which as stated above, is a “pedagogy of the oppressed” lies squarely in the reaffirmation of the age-old realisation that the oppressed are their own liberators. They must negate and indeed transcend defeatism and surrender. This is exactly what the birds do because they do not abandon the search for freedom and liberty despite the threat posed by the domineering *Zizi*. When the oppressed embrace vulnerability, victimhood, helplessness, hopelessness and meaninglessness as new social ideals they become their own oppressors. In fact, they make the oppressors’ burden of oppressing and dehumanising them less demanding. It is for this reason that we put forth the proposition that, the folktale of *Zizi nedzimwe Shiri* is resonant with vibrations of the creation of a new people, with a new humanity. The folktale proffers a reverberating and refreshing alternative to the morbid and moribund consciousness that has become symptomatic with Zimbabwean literature whose thrust is modernist existential nihilism. The triumph over the oppressive *Zizi*, which is a pedagogy of the oppressed, represents an extricating philosophy from the depths of nothingness. It is a lesson for the oppressed to inexhaustibly strive towards the creation of men and women who are not overwhelmed by tautological deficiencies of nothingness. It is a marker of man’s triumph over invisibility, inauthenticity, and non-beingness while rediscovering authenticity, visibility and beingness.

The birds’ freedom is born out of physical confrontation. This necessarily entails that the oppressed people can never experience freedom unless they use physical force to overwhelm their oppressors. This is a fact all oppressed peoples have to contend with because oppression stands for unyielding violence which Fanon (1967) has referred to as an unthinking machine which can only yield when confronted with greater violence. Many revolutionary scholars have emphasised violence as the sine qua non for freedom. One such scholar is Freire (1970:29) who puts it in an instantly recognisable manner that:

Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an idea located outside of man; nor is it an idea which

becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest of human completion.

Freire lays emphasis on the need for constant and responsible pursuit of freedom. The birds took their time studying *Zizi*, the oppressor, until such a time when it was convenient to strike. Therefore, it is mischievous to label the oppressed people cowards when conditions are not yet rife for them to institute a revolution. The great African-American historian Frederick Douglass had also long realised in 1857 that:

The whole history of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will (Gordon, 1997:1).

The folktale is strategically placed towards the end of the novel when all the problems bedevilling society as well as their sources have been highlighted. It suggests the possible solution to issues raised in the satiric poem (*bembera*) as well as *kutuka kwavaniota*. In this regard, the various oral art forms in this novel intricately concatenate to provide a moving picture of the problems and solutions to the existential nightmare that characterises contemporary Zimbabwe.

Mapenzi becomes a novel that does not only confine itself to the portrayal of the human object position but more importantly, it shows human beings as subjects of life. This is articulated through various oral art forms whose thrust is triumphalism and transcendence. The folktale, in particular, shows that the right to defend life, which is a right to self-defence, is a moral obligation that must be pursued at all costs. This is necessary because “self-defence is a natural, perhaps even an instinctive reaction of all living organisms confronted with imminent injury” (Ramose, 1999: ii). Such an act is indispensable because oppressive systems tend to monopolise the right to self-defence. The gesture shown by *Nhengure*, who is representative of all birds, is a celebration of the human project over forces inimical to human existence and the realisation of life as a great party. It is also a celebration of approach-behaviour as opposed to avoidance-behaviour. Avoidance-behaviour, which is consistent with withdrawal and resignation functions subversively and defectively for the oppressed but effectively for those who thrive on oppression. It is for this reason that we have consistently argued that the conceptual thrust in *Mapenzi* is futuristic, reassuring and empowering. The author makes use of Shona oral technology to parade human possibilities and unlimited potentialities.

Mabasa deploys orature in order to interrogate and illuminate the present, while showing that conditions of life today, however grim are not untransformable. This creative gesture becomes a responsible act of mobilising society and constructing a sociological foundation based on hope in a context where the temptation to embrace hopelessness is highly palpable. Mabasa’s exuberant vision in this novel, as epitomised through oral art forms, is incandescent with the kind of intellectual might that “trains the intellectual eye to see the broad canvas of fundamental human concerns. This is the kind of [vision] that Paulo Freire, in majestic simplicity, has described as a pedagogy of the oppressed, the kind that invests an individual with a profound sense of commitment to

human betterment, and hence to the humanization of man. This kind of [vision] leads to enlightenment, which brings with it always a sense of urgency to do the right, to bring about change. This kind of [vision] is what has always been feared by those...who crucified Christ, and those who assassinated Martin Luther King and Malcom X, [those who hanged Mbuya Nehanda, trapped Tongogara and brought down Samora Machel]" (Ephraim:258). As pointed out in the preceding argument, *Mapenzi*, despite its glaring weaknesses becomes a typical pedagogy of the oppressed which calls for critical analysis and action. This is made possible by the author's conscientious use of Shona people's oral technological systems.

The oral aesthetic in *Masango Mavi*

The conceptual perspective in *Masango Mavi* stands in direct contraposition to *Mapenzi*. The author's position and use of orature is expressed mainly through idiomatic expressions which constitute the titles of some of the short stories and a proverb that is expressive of the author's entire vision. In a story called *Masango Mavi*, Chiwome refers to one Shona proverb in its inverted or corrupted version: *Mwana washe wakanga wave muranda kumusha (7) (The king's son was now a commoner in his home/territory)*. Under normal circumstances, the proverb reads: *Mwana washe muranda kumwe (A king's son is a commoner elsewhere or in other lands)*. This proverb, in its original form, is pedagogically and ideologically empowering. It reaffirms people's agency especially in their existential spaces. It decries any form of enslavement and abandonment of participation in a place that is one's own. It encourages resistance, resourcefulness and creativity when confronted with any danger that threatens to overwhelm and obliterate the self. Again, it expresses commitment to the naturalisation of a sense of somebodiness as well as a developed and liberating self-consciousness that must be affirmed and defended at any cost.

However, Chiwome seems to be writing in a context where traditional life with its idyllic and egalitarian experiences has been blighted by the tragic misalliance with Europe and the West. In the words of Asante (1998), the Shona people, who are the intended benefactors of such proverbial pedagogy, have been moved off their existential spaces and cultural platforms. The world in which they now live resembles a borrowed world where they cannot be creative enough to live life meaningfully. In such a context, they find it very difficult to survive to the effect that they disintegrate in pessimism and vulnerability. This is shown through the character of Jeshuwa who has failed to lead a normal life both in the urban areas and rural areas. Through Jeshuwa, the image that emerges is that of an embattled African who belongs neither here nor there. *Chirungu chakanga charamba, kurima kwaramba (4) (Western lifestyle had failed and farming as well)*. It is against this background that Chiwome interrogates the applicability of Shona oral technology in the contemporary dispensation. His vision becomes deconstructionist, interrogative and revisionist. Characters like Jeshuwa have become victims in their own land. They have been relegated to the periphery where they are no longer acting subjects, but objects to be acted upon. In this regard, by inverting the Shona proverb to give it a meaning that acknowledges and legitimises Shona people's object position in the world, Chiwome is promulgating a philosophy of object withdrawal from, rather than immersion in existence. His newly found proverb is a prototype of life-weariness-pessimism vis-à-

vis a grotesquely absurd world. It lacks the spirit conscious of real possibilities for authentic existence and the ability to say no to the scorn of man. A number of Shona people's oral art forms were deliberately constructed in such a manner that they would function in the direction of empowering and sustaining the human principle through thick and thin. For instance, *Sango rinopa waneta* (the forest rewards those who are tired or those who persevere), *usarase mbereko nekufirwa* (do not throw away the baby towel because you have lost the baby) and even the proverb under review, *mwana washe muranda kumwe*.

For that reason, it becomes problematic when our writers deconstruct and mutilate such philosophical packages to derail a whole panorama of sociological optimism. It is tantamount to domesticating human potential, creativity and resilience. While we agree that the use of the proverb is consistent with the kind of life that the author presents, questions must still be asked as to the authenticity of such a creative disposition. To deconstruct Shona proverbial sayings, which constitute Shona people's lived experiences and philosophy of life, is at the same time to render the Shona invisible and inauthentic. It is to question their life and the entire project of existence. It is also to confirm dislocation and dis-memberment when the creative challenge requires us to carefully work out mechanisms for relocation and re-memberment. Others, for instance, the avante garde, might argue that the avante garde of the past cannot be used to express modern experiences since these require an avante garde of the present. Such people fail to realise that every people have a body of values that are crucial determinants for resilience. For most African people, proverbs represent such a body of values. We are not afraid to be labelled rigid, traditional, and unprogressive or fixed in the past. To use proverbs in such a disenchanting manner is to be participant in the disarming game which we call the subtle cultural politics of disempowerment.

Also related to the above proverb is the Shona idiomatic expression *mwana wevhu* (*son of the soil*). *Mwana Wevhu* expresses nationalist sentiments that commit the Shona to their ecological spaces. It is an expression that was widely used during the struggle against colonialism. The cultural and political significance of this idiomatic expression was also expressed in Zimbabwean novels like *Son of the Soil* (1976) by Wilson Katiyo. Katiyo's vision in his novel was based on optimism, a mood that is in accordance with the expression. However, Chiwome interrogates and at the same deconstructs the kind of nationalist and optimist disposition that is synonymous with the expression *mwana wevhu*. His vision is pessimistic as he questions whether such a concept still exists. It can be estimated that he is writing against the Shona sentiment expressed in that expression and also Katiyo's novel, *Son of the Soil*.

In the story *Mwana Wevhu*, the people have lost the land. They have been condemned to unproductive and rocky areas where agriculture is completely impossible. Colonialism seems to have subverted the cultural, ideological and political value of the concept *mwana wevhu*. The legislation of racist policies like the Land Apportionment Act, Land Husbandry Act and Land Tenure Act deprived the Shona people of their most important resource – land. This is probably the reason why Chiwome argues that the Shona people have been converted into commoners in their own backyard.

Vanofirei vanhu vacho murukangarahwe? Kutyokera musana masaga mashomanana echibage chete chete? Kwanzi navanamudhumeni, "shandai

nesimba mugopfuma savarimi vomumapurazi.” Muvhu rakaita seredu iri munzvimbo isinganayi mvura ungabudirira sei? (5)

Why do they hurt themselves in such rocky terrain? Breaking their backs for a few bags of maize only? The agricultural demonstrators say, “Work hard for you to be rich like commercial farmers.” How can you develop in these soils where is no rain?

The manner in which Chiwome deconstructs and interrogates the meaning of *mwana wevhu* is in a profound sense, an expression of the current government’s failure to timeously give people the land that they had fought for. The people went to war so that they would get back their land in order to be real sons of the soil. However, they were betrayed by the government which adopted the policy of reconciliation and the provisions of the Lancaster document, which sought to give the government land after ten years on a willing-buyer – willing-seller basis.

At the same time, the Zimbabwean economy is in a nadir such that one can hazard to approximate that some Shona people are likely to prefer to be called *mwana we-Britain* (Son of Britain), *mwana we-USA* (son of USA), *mwana we-Australia* (son of Australia) and *mwana we-South Africa* (son of South Africa) because these are places that some Zimbabweans have escaped to. They would abhor being labelled *mwana wevhu*. The contrasting versions and visions on the conceptualisation of *mwana wevhu* between Chiwome and Katiyo can be explained in the context they write. Katiyo wrote during the colonial period when it was necessary to use land as a mobilising force for the struggle. Again, people were optimistic that they would get their land as soon as independence was declared. Chiwome writes several years when people have become impatient with the government’s failure to give them the land they sacrificed for. The people have become disillusioned and impoverished because they do not have access to fertile land. This is what prompts Chiwome to revise, interrogate, re-present and deconstruct *mwana wevhu* as a concept that is part and parcel of Shona epistemological foundations.

The only problem with Chiwome’s revisionist perspective is that it is frighteningly pursued through the lenses of victimhood and this does not afford possibilities of transcendence. This coupled with other titles like *Masango Mavi (Hostile Jungle)*, which are also idiomatic expressions mark a predictable trend of pessimism in the author’s novelistic creation. While the author uses oral technology to depict the experiences of a people who find themselves confronted by novel experiences, his vision borders on Afropessimism. Afropessimism is a life-negating and non futuristic perspective that seems to be gaining ground in the contemporary dispensation.

Conclusion

Fro many communities among African people, orature has functioned as a redoubtable bastion of people’s struggles against the vagaries of life – internal and external. It has provided them with a potent technology that has made it possible for them to be subjects in the arena of active participation and contribution, giving and receiving. This is precisely the reason why our ancestors were astute enough to create art forms that largely

revolve around the celebration and concretisation of hope and resilience. A number of Shona people's oral art forms serve to empower and embolden the human principle. The simple reason for such an outlook towards survival is that life is a challenge that demands courage. In other words, to live is to be courageous. The Acholi of Uganda have no kind words for cowards whom they tell, "O, coward, return into your mother's womb!" (P'bitek:26). Of the two writers discussed in this paper, Mabasa employs Shona oral art forms in a manner that underscores Shona people's position as agency. He reaffirms their ability to overcome the current existential nightmares that traumatise them day and night. On the other hand, Chiwome has lost faith in the entire social fabric such that he finds it logical to interrogate and deconstruct oral art forms.

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