

Full Length Research Paper

Communicating co-operation or individualism? The paradox of the Shona Proverb

Rugare Mareva^{1*} and Wellington Wasosa²

¹Department of Curriculum Studies, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe.

²Department of African Languages and Literature, Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe.

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This research is an examination of whether there are contradictions in the cultural worldview of the Shona people as the proverbs they use seem to promote co-operation but at the same time they are those that apparently encourage individualism. It stems from the realisation that the Shona, just like other African cultural groups, adopt a communal approach to life shunning individualism. Since proverbs are an integral part of the people's cultural values, they should be seen to be promoting the cherished values but ironically they are proverbs which seem to contradict each other in terms of the information they disseminate. The proverbs discussed in this research have been randomly selected from some written sources as well as from the researchers' own life experiences. The research methodology employed is the content analysis approach as it is relevant in the endeavour to unravel the philosophical inclinations of using the conflicting pairs. The contradictions that have been noted do not suggest that the Shona people live a confusing life but it shows that proverbs are chosen carefully in relation to the context. This in itself is a reflection of the flexibility on part of the Shona people to treat each case differently. The contradictory pairs point out to the fact that there are always different angles of viewing certain issues and situations. It is the context which determines the proverbs that ought to be used and this ensures that the people do not live within a confusing worldview.

Key words: Shona people, Zimbabwe, Shona proverbs, Shona culture, individualism, cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

The Shona are the majority of the ethnic groupings found in Zimbabwe and according to Magwa (2007) they constitute about seventy-five percent of the population and they belong to the Bantu group. They speak the language called ChiShona and this language according to Magwa (2007) is spoken in three Southern African countries namely Zimbabwe, Botswana and Mozambique. The purpose of this paper is to analyse situations in

which the Shona people use proverbs that seem to encourage individualism and those situations that are apparently contradictory as they discourage it and therefore promote co-operation or group effort. It proceeds from the realisation that generally proverbs can be grouped into pairs which are contradictory in terms of the values which they transmit. This is what Wanjohi (1997) calls opposing proverbs, the theses and

*Corresponding author. E-mail: marevarugare@gmail.com.

antitheses, that is, when one proverb will describe something positively and the other looks at it negatively or when one posits an ideal and the other will reduce this to realism. Nyembezi (1990: xiii) proffers an explanation for these opposing proverbs thus: “because situations differ, we find that some proverbs seem to be contradictory. That is to be expected if we remember that there are always more angles than one from which to look at a problem.” The Shona people generally adopt a communal approach to life, discouraging individualism, but ironically there are proverbs which seem to prefer the latter approach. It is within the interest of this paper to investigate the significance of such paradoxes in the Shona people’s lives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research adopts the content analysis approach. The logic behind using such an approach is given by scholars such as Fraenkel and Wallen (1990) who posit the view that this technique allows researchers to study human behaviour in an indirect way through an analysis of their communications. There are several ways of analysing sources of data such as textbooks, essays, newspapers, novels, magazines and journal articles as well as political speeches among the various means of communication by human beings. Above all, Fraenkel and Wallen (1990) note that the advantage of this technique is that it is not obtrusive as the researcher can observe without being observed since the contents being analysed are not influenced by the researcher’s presence. Therefore in the end researcher then gets the opportunity to access information that might be difficult to get through direct observation or other means gained unobtrusively through the analysis of textbooks or other communications without the writer being aware that it is being analysed. The proverbs analysed were selected randomly from two sources on Shona proverbs written by Hamutyinei and Plangger (1987) and also by Bhebe and Vhiriri (2012) as well as from the researchers’ own experiences as members of the Shona ethnic group. The proverbs are used by all the people who speak ChiShona in Zimbabwe although they may have their variants as the people speak different dialects of the language.

DISCUSSION

This discussion begins by attempting a definition of the proverbs and their significance as carriers of the Shona people’s existential philosophy. It then proceeds to look at the contrasting pairs of proverbs and then analyse the importance of such situations in the people’s lives. According to Hasan-Roken in Pongweni (1989:3), a proverb is a “multivalent poetical summary of a community’s experience” that has “potency of meaning.” Pongweni explains that proverbs are multivalent in their use and specific meanings are linked to the historical and immediate linguistic and situational contexts. With specific reference to the Shona proverbs, Furusa in Mutswairo (1996:83) says they are; a significant part of Shona culture which is both a product of the active and

purposeful productivity of the Shona people and a reflection of their ability to be productive and also to understand their social and natural environment. They come from practice and form the Shona people’s ways of communicating about their own life. They are utterances necessitated by their history and culture.

Because of the fact that proverbs are products of the endeavours to control the social and natural environment, they are taken seriously and treated with great importance. Although proverbs are ordinary everyday words or ordinary statements, they cease to be so when people begin to accept them as clever expressions of some “truths” (Nyembezi, 1990). Nyembezi goes on to observe that proverbs play an instructive role in society. Apart from that, they also reveal what a people adore, hate, respect and what they despise. Mkanganwi in Chiwome and Gambahaya (1998:11) agrees with Nyembezi on the “truth” element in proverbs when he states “each shumo (proverb) is an expression of some truth, covering an extensive range of content touching on a wide variety of topics from the most concrete to the most abstract, with a wide philosophical range.”

Finnegan (1998:393) defines a proverb as “a saying in more or less fixed form marked by shortness, sense, and salt and distinguished by the popular acceptance of truth tersely expressed in it.” Finnegan goes on to identify the following as the main forms of expressions of proverbs: by literal statement, by similes, by metaphors, and by hyperbole and paradox.

Another definition of the proverb is given by Wanjohi (1997) in which it is viewed as a polysymbolic metaphor or the third degree of symbolisation of human language, in that the terms or concepts that occur in a proverb are metaphorical. This is related to what Parker in Pongweni (1989:8) calls ambiguity, that is, “the point at which circumstances and /or opposing values come into conflict. One thrust is to make a decision concerning which of the values is relevant to him or to the circumstances.” Furusa in Mutswairo (1996:89) says such opposing pairs of Shona proverbs are meant to establish “the golden mean” or to discourage “extremes at excess” and explains:

it is important to add that these are realities that are unearthed in the process of living itself. The proverbs speak against parochialism and dogmatism. They leave room for personal judgement, creativity and self-initiative as demanded by the imperatives of social existence always guided by the envisioned goals of their specific culture: dualities of opposites exist in life and this does shape the thinking of a people as they try to give direction to their life principles and directions that they fashion.

Such opposing proverbs fit well into Finnegan’s (1998:424) view that “proverbs seem most typically to be used for warning, to bring another to a sense of

Table 1. The identified seventeen proverbs that communicate co-operation.

Proverbs that communicate co-operation (Theses)	Proverbs that discourage co-operation (Antitheses)
1. Mazano marairanwa. (Ideas are shared.)	Zano mwene waro. (An idea belongs to the owner.)
2. Kutsva kwendeavu varume vanodzimirana. (Men extinguish each other's burning beard.)	Nhamo yemumwe hairamwirwi sadza. (Someone's grief will not stop you from feeding.)
3. Chara chimwe hachitswanyi inda. (One thumb cannot crush a louse.)	Mbeva zhinji hadzina marise. (Too many mice have no lining for their nest.)
4. Rume rimwe harikombi churu. (One man cannot surround an anthill.)	Mbeva zhinji hadzicheri mwena unoenda kure. (Too many mice do not dig a big enough hole.)
5. Kuwanda huuya museve wapotera nemuzukuru. (It is good to be many, for an arrow meant for grandfather hit the nephew instead.)	Kuwanda kwakanaka kwakaipa pakupedza muto. (It is good to be many but it is a disadvantage when it comes to sharing soup.)
6. Makudo ndimamwe musi wenjodzi anobatsirana. (Baboons are united for in times of trouble they help one another.)	Mhou haikumiri mwana asi wayo. (A cow does not moo for another's calf.)
7. Shuro yamutswa neruzhinji yave nyama. (A hare hunted by a group is easily killed.)	Gundamusaira rakatora vazhinji. (Doing things as a mob can have dire consequences)
8. Mbudzi kuzvarira pavanhu hanzi nditandirwe imbwa. (A goat gives birth in public to be defended against dogs.)	Mwana waberekerwa paruzhinji haakuri. (A baby born in public does not grow well.)
9. Kuchera mbeva kukomberana. (To dig for mice needs a concerted effort.)	Chisi chako masimba mashoma. (You cannot exert enough effort on a task that belongs to everybody.)
10. Chaitwa chisina ranga chinopfuka. (That which is done without consensus is doomed.)	Aita twake ndihombarume. (He who does his own thing is an expert.)
11. Nzira vaviri munofambidzana. (A journey is easier for two.)	Harahwa mbiri hadzibidzani rwizi. (Two old men cannot cross a river together)
12. Benzi vhunza rakanaka. (One can only learn through asking others.)	Dembo harivhiirwi pavanhu. (You cannot skin a civet cat in public.)
13. Ndambakuudzwa akaonekwa nembonje pahuma. (One who refuses advice was seen with a wound on the forehead.)	Ndomene haichemedzi. (If you do your own thing you do not regret if it goes away.)
14. Chawawana idya nehama mutorwa ane hanganwa. (Share with relatives strangers will forget.)	Asipo haapo nemuromo wake. (He who is absent is absent together with his mouth.)
15. Zano ndega akapisa jira. (The one who did not seek advice burnt his blanket.)	Gapu irindwa noumwe vaviri muto unotsva. (Too many cooks spoil the broth.)
16. Chirere chigokurerawo. (Take care of one as he will take care of you in future.)	Kurera imbwa nemukaka mangwana inofuma yokuruma. (If you feed a dog with milk tomorrow it will bite you.)
17. Kandiro kanoenda kunobva kamwe. (One good turn deserves another.)	Kakara kununa hudya kamwe. (A creature gets fat by eating or exploiting others.)

proportion....”

Table 1 shows that for each of the identified seventeen proverbs that communicate co-operation, there is an antithesis, that is, a proverb that seems to counter it by communicating individualism. It is significant to note that the proverbs were taken from Hamutyinei and Plangger (1987) and from Bhebe and Vhiriri (2012), and the researchers' own life experiences.

The categorisation of the proverbs above reveals that in life the Shona people treat each case as it comes. Therefore they are guided by the need to handle situations differently and the proverbs, thus, capture the paradoxes of life and are instrumental in guiding how people should act in each particular situation. Just like in many cultures in African societies, the Shona people adopt a collective approach to life in which the group or

society is more important than the individual. Mbiti cited in Khapagawani (2006:332) observes the corporate nature of African life as he writes, “whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group and whatever happens to the group happens to the individual. The individual can only say “I am because we are, since we are therefore I am.” However, it is important to note that this does not mean that individual efforts are not recognised as observed in some of the proverbs above.

Furusa observes that Shona proverbs like those in other African societies focus on issues of ethical and moral significances which are related to the problems of individuals and society and thus affirm definite viewpoints in life regulating and standardising the organisation of the activities of the individual. There are situations when people are taught to be kind hearted to others, taking care of them, especially the young as they would

reciprocate when they grow up. This is captured in the proverb *Chirere chigokurerawo* (Take care of one as he will take care of you in future). However, at the same time people are warned to be careful as the people whom they treat well will in the future turn against them. If one looks at the proverb *Kurera imbwa nemukaka mangwana inofuma yokuruma* (If you feed a dog with milk tomorrow it will bite you), it teaches people that such situations can happen in life. The proverbs, therefore, are able to capture such paradoxes of life, which makes them appropriate in real life as such situations are common.

Other proverbs teach people to cooperate in life so as to solve problems confronting them. The lesson comes from such proverbs as *Kuchera mbeva kukomberana* (To dig for mice needs concerted effort). This is based on the experience of hunting for mice, in which it becomes easier to catch the mice if people put collective effort. However, at the same time there are situations in which it may be wiser or more convenient for people to avoid working in groups as their dreams may not be realised. It may be better for someone in some situations to make a solo effort to achieve the desired results. This is precisely what the proverb *Mbeva zhinji hadzina marise* (Too many mice have no lining for their nest) warns people to avoid. Therefore, each proverb is carefully chosen and applied after studying or observing what the situation is like or demands.

In some circumstances, people are encouraged to take advice from others so as to avoid entering into problems. That is what the proverbs *Zano ndoga akapisa jira* (One who refuses advice burnt his blanket) and *Ndambakuudzwa akaonekwa nembonje pahuma* (One who refuses to listen was left with a wound on the forehead) advise people to. However, this is contradicted in such proverbs as *Zano mwene waro* (An idea belongs to the owner) which encourage people not to share ideas but to use them for their own benefit. Some proverbs assure people that there is security or comfort in numbers not individuals. These include *Kuwanda huuya museve wakapoterwa nemuzukuru* (It is good to be many as an arrow was shielded by a cousin) whilst in other circumstances it is a disadvantage to be many as espoused in, *Kuwanda kwakanaka kwakaipa pakupedza muto* (It is good to be many but it disadvantage when it come to sharing soup). People are also taught that in life it is good to be secretive as reflected in such proverbs as *Chidembo hachivhiiwi paruzhinji* (A civet cat cannot be skinned in public). If one lets his/her plans public one's goals may fail to materialise at the end of the day.

Chimhundu in Pongweni (1989:12) states that among the various Shona speaking groups, conformity, peace, tolerance and mutual cooperation were among the things they cherished most. Chimhundu's main concern in his research is to discover the role of *tsumo* in the socialisation of the individual- the didactic and juridical functions of the Shona *tsumo* being more important than

the literary. There are instances where the proverbs discourage extremes or excesses in behaviour. There are proverbs which emphasise a particular view or stand i.e one extreme such as *Mbeva zhinji hadzina marise* (Too many mice have no lining for their nest) and inevitably those which try to counterbalance this view such as, *Chara chimwe hachitswanyinda* (One thumb does not crash a mouse). Doke in Pongweni (1989:12) argues that the more proverbs are grouped into classes which form contradictory pairs, the more their users appear as people who put a premium on moderation. As argued by Parker in Pongweni (1989:5), proverbs have a binary character as they either positively or negatively evaluate the situations which elicit them, sometimes both, but they are never neutral. The non-neutrality of proverbs leads to Parkers' conclusion that proverbs occur in response to situations where plans for behaviour are ambiguous. In a proverb using community, situations arise which present real or potential challenges to the smooth flow of social interaction. Nyembezi (1990:6) notes that the bulk of proverbs are a result of the observation of the people, of human behaviour, animal behaviour and the observation of things in general in their environment. The study of proverbs throws some light on the thinking of the people, and enables one to understand them better and gives one a peep into that otherwise closed field which we may perhaps call the soul of the people (Nyembezi, 1990).

Conclusion

This discussion has revealed that proverbs are an integral part of the Shona people's existential philosophy as they are carriers of their cultural values. The Shona people generally adopt a communal approach to life discouraging individualism and one way of reflecting this is through proverbs. However, the use of proverbs has been noted to be situational as each proverb apparently has its antithesis. It has been observed that the contradiction does not suffice to mean that the Shona people live a confusing life but the reality is that each proverb is cautiously chosen and applied according to the context. The contradictory pairs of proverbs reflect the flexibility among the Shona people to deal with each situation as it comes and also point out to the fact that there are always different angles of viewing certain issues and situations. It is the context which determines the proverbs that ought to be used and this ensures that the people do not live within a confusing worldview.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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