



USEFUL OR LESS SERIOUS LITERATURE? A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE ROLE OF NGANO (FOLKTALES) AMONG THE SHONA OF ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

Colonialist and Eurocentric scholarship has always refuted the existence of literature in Africa before European intrusion on the continent. In instances where such scholarship had evidence of the existence of African literature, it was treated with skepticism, and in most cases regarded as less serious or child-like. However, a re-look at African oral art forms shows that not only did the people have a large body of literature, but also that the literature was a very serious and illuminating exploration and celebration of both life and the indigenous people's cultural values. It was a literature bound on producing a real African who fitted well into the dictates of life on African soil. Using examples from the Shona ngano (folktale), and basing on the theory of Afrocentrism, the paper argues that looking at African oral art forms through Eurocentric lens robs Africans of an informed and robust exposition of the rich layers of meaning embedded therein. The paper unearths the significance of Shona folktales, including even the obvious, so as to challenge Africans, who have been colonised for nearly a century to revisit their perceptions, assumptions and attitude towards African oral art forms. This is because self-discovery and self-definition are the necessary points of departure in the decolonisation process that many African countries are engaged in.

Key Words: Useful literature, Shona culture, Folktales, Afrocentric, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to discuss the role of folktales in Southern Africa with special reference to the Shona of Zimbabwe. Bascom (1965: 33) defines folktales as, "prose narratives that are regarded as

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fiction. They are not considered as dogma or history, they may or may not have happened and they are not taken seriously ... It is often said that they were only said for amusement". To say that among the Shona people of Zimbabwe folktales were said for amusement is underplaying their role. Among the Shona, folktales are vehicles of moral lessons for life. They are serious literature and are functional; they depict the Shona people's philosophy as lived and celebrated in their society. It is the purpose of this paper to refute the earlier missionary claims that, "The Bantu had no language with which to express their philosophy" (Mbiti, 1969). It demonstrates that the Bantu, the Shona people included and the various ethnic groups of Southern Africa had both a language and a philosophy. This is evidenced by the narration of folktales, *ngano* in their communities.

Folktales play a very important role, of imparting knowledge to children. They are a medium of socialisation and, socialisation is here considered in broad terms to include basic initiation, instruction, lampooning and satirising of anti-social behaviour among members of a community. Hence, through story-telling sessions, children learn a whole range of their society's cultural beliefs and values, including the importance of not marrying strangers, respecting elders, living peacefully with others and many more. In this manner, the Shona society in Southern Africa maintains a dialogue with the past while retaining a correct pulse of the present and a perspective of the future through speculative thought and images embodied in folktales. This is so because *ngano* are one of the incontestable reservoirs of the African people's values, sensibilities, aesthetics and achievements of their thought and imagination (Chinweizu, *et al*, 1980: 2). Many moral lessons are deduced from various themes conveyed through folktale narration.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper discusses the relevance of Shona *ngano* using the Afrocentric literary theory. The theory calls for African works of art and way of life to be looked at and be given meaning from the standpoint of African people. It stresses the placing of African people's interests at the centre. As Gray observes, Afrocentrism is:

... a perspective which holds that African people can and should see, study, interpret, and interact with people, life, and all reality from the vantage point of sane African people – rather than from the vantage point of European, or Asian, or other non-African people, or from the vantage point of African people who are alienated from Africanness (2001: 3).

The theory observes that using Western or alien theories to understand African realities often results in the distortion and misrepresentation of the indigenous people's history and cultural values. Again, looking at African realities from the point of view of Westernised Africans produces wayward and awkward results. Thus it is prudent that the significance of Shona folktales be discussed using a theory that stresses the significance of African people's way of life.

Folktales and Respect for Humanity

The theme that recurs most in Shona *ngano* is, the small and the handicapped should be heroes. Orphans, widows and the poor, including the despised, are usually endowed with powers and capabilities greater than usual human strength. In the tale “Kamutari” (The thin and seemingly useless one) in *Ngano Volume II*, an orphan who has no one to look after him ends up being a chief. Also in the tale “Chinyamapezi” (The one with leprosy) (in the same Volume of *Ngano*), the despised boy who has leprosy is the one who manages to marry the chief’s most beautiful daughter when all other able-bodied men have failed the tasks that would have enabled them to marry her. Again, in the tale “Tsuru Nedzimwe Mhuka” (Hare and other animals), witty Hare fools other animals into believing that if they throw him onto ashy ground (as punishment for disobedience), he will die, when, in fact, that would create a dusty scenario that enables him to escape unnoticed. This same folktale is also found among the Chewa as “*Kalulu ndichitsime*” (Hare and the well). In the same Shona tale, big animals like elephant, hippopotamus, giraffe, and lion regard themselves as ideal to bring out water from the well disregarding pleas from tortoise that he also wants to try. To everyone’s surprise, it is poor tortoise’s efforts that avail the water. These small and seemingly handicapped characters usually succeed because they are able to use their wit, intelligence and resourcefulness. This then teaches children that in life, they are usually pitted against hostile forces of nature which often threaten them with destruction and that, in such cases; they have to fully exploit their capabilities, witticism and resourcefulness in order to survive. More so, the child audience learns to respect every human being and not to look down upon the poor people or judge others by the eye, but by perception since the disadvantaged ones can easily outdo the seemingly well-to-do members of society. Thus folktales, like proverbs, emphasise the need to respect any human being despite their status in life. Such is important in today’s society where humanity is less respected as compared to the past. In today’s Zimbabwean society, people kill each other willy-nilly due to differences in political affiliation, and others also kill even their relatives or spouses for mere want of material wealth. Human life is no longer as sacred as it had been in African society and there is an urgent need to re-orient people in this regard.

Folktales and Imagination

The imaginative capability of the children is also enhanced from listening to folktales. Children would imagine the small, witty and tricky animals such as Tsuru (Hare) and Kamba (Tortoise) that cheat and out do the larger and more powerful beasts like Shumba (Lion), Indlovu (Elephant). They may cheat them in a pretended tug of war, by deceiving them into killing themselves or their own relatives or cheat them in a race. This impresses children who are still young. They would try to outwit older persons in the grueling situations they encounter in life just like in the folktales.

Folktales and Child Discipline

Folktales also instill discipline among children. This is because the children go to storytelling sessions voluntarily and with a tacit agreement to adhere to the conventions prevailing (Miruka, 1994: 182). This discipline is also cultivated even through songs that accompany the tales. The

singing is usually a collective activity, with one leading, others chorusing, clapping hands rhythmically or shouting words of encouragement. The simple fact that there is a 'pattern' to be followed when singing implies that there is need for some discipline to be enforced in the participants. This is true especially when one considers that Shona story-telling sessions are themselves a demonstration of an interplay of various talents. The soloist, the chorus, the drum-beaters, the percussion shakers, the hand-clappers, the gifted dancers etc, all have to co-ordinate into a single rhythmical exercise. It is also interesting to note that maintaining the same tempo and applying more or less the same effort and determination is significant for a community that shares similar values. Those who fail to keep pace with the rest of the group; or to apply an equal effort may be the same people who are social misfits in everyday life. These are criticised and lampooned. Hence such a collective activity creates and fosters discipline at the same time cultivating the spirit of oneness. Again, through discipline, the child audience catalyses the narratives by various interpolations, asking questions to the narrator, making spontaneous exclamations, echoing the narrator's voice and laughing but without jeopardising the continuation of the narrative. Thus through this, discipline is instilled and enhanced among the children. This is quite fitting especially for a society that reveres any achievement by disciplined members.

The tales also have a role of censuring would be social deviants among the children. When children hear about the misfortunes of social deviants, they learn to always conform to what their society accepts. Tales like "Turo nedzimwe mhuka" (Hare and other animals) vindicate this. In the tale, Hare refuses to dig a well but drinks water by playing tricks on other animals but is ultimately caught and imprisoned. The tale shows that being a social misfit in society always has negative implications. One would rather live in accordance with societal dictates. Miruka (1994: 136) has also made a similar observation on folktales' role of censuring social deviants:

Folktales operate within a society to ensure conformity to the accepted cultural norms and continuity from generation to generation through its role in education and the extent to which folktales contrast with accepted and socially accepted forms of behaviour through amusement or humour and creative imagination or fantasy (Miruka, 1994:136).

This is also in line with the Shona people's philosophy of life that believes in peaceful co-existence.

Folktales and Talent Identification

Apart from being didactic in nature, folktale narrations also equip children with various talents that can be later explored in life. These include singing, dancing, oratory or drum - beating. When the story-teller starts a song, the children who are the audience, respond. On songs, usually, if the child audience does not know how to respond (which may be the case owing to their age and limited experience), the story-teller teaches them, indicating how the various parts have to co-ordinate. The teller may also ask one or more among the audience to be soloists. These may then lead, each according to his / her talent, varying their voices but coming together at certain points. In other

words, each of the soloists is granted the platform to be creative and individualistic in voice modulation and selection of words but what is important is that they have to come together at certain points so as to maintain the rhythm.

Through folktale narrations, children also acquire the skill and art of story-telling itself. This is because, among the Shona, story-telling is not a monopoly of a group of people or certain individuals. Everyone, including children, is exposed to this art at a tender age. After completing a tale, the narrator can ask one of the children to tell any other story. The nominated child usually does that, initially with hesitation, and it is the duty of the audience, including the elderly story-tellers, to encourage and cheer him / her up. In such a case then, everyone is an artist (p'Bitek, 1986: 35), the only difference lying in the talent and skill. Therefore, folktales offer one of the best platforms for speech training for the young such that when they grow up, they easily become good story-tellers and public speakers. They would not be passive in national debates, but would take part by confidently airing their views. The young boys, for example, would be prepared for the various sessions at the *dare*, village court where several issues affecting society would be deliberated.

Folktales, the Individual and the Community

The importance of individual creativity is also noticeable even in the act of narration itself because, usually, the Shona and even many other ethnic groups in Southern Africa have a single plot to a folktale but with as many versions of it as there are tellers, or as many versions as the number of times the story is told by the same teller (for no one tells the same story in the same way on different occasions). Also, other people distinguish themselves through dancing, drum-beating or yodeling.

The individualism (in singing, dancing etc) is only permissible if it does not disturb the rhythm and tempo of the song, that is, if it is in line with social harmony. Also, the individual creativity in narration is only permissible if it does not destroy the plot of the tale. If such individual creativity negatively affects the storyline, the audience would reprimand the teller and guide him or her. For example, a narrator who mixes information from various folktales to the detriment of the plot of that particular tale is normally corrected by the actively involved audience. These various individual talents (of singers, dancers, narrators etc) make up one good tale. Hence, the singing as well as story-telling sessions in general mould children who are both creative and / or individualistic but within the expected values. This makes them fit easily in a society that accepts individualism within communalism. The child audience is thus prepared for life where various talents such as those of blacksmiths, singers, poets, dancers, orators are explored to the fullest for the good of the whole society. Thus the child audience learns that individual creativity and / or input are encouraged only if they are for the well-being of the group. The predominance of choral music and dance also reflects that among the Shona group spirit and group activities dominate the thinking and daily life of the people's lives (Dhlamini, 1995: 4 cited in Makaudze and Gudhlanga,

2011). Children, through song and dance, will know that whilst the group is important, it does not completely obliterate the individual. Through participating in storytelling sessions, these children again learn to sing their traditional rhythmic songs. This prepares them for the African way of life where songs punctuate activities like child-birth, funerals, initiation, weddings and work parties.

Folktales and Language Training

Folktales also play a major role of teaching new vocabulary of a people's language. It broadens the children's lexicon of their particular language. If a story mentions a new word that the children have never heard of, they interrupt the storyteller and ask for the meaning of that particular word. A good story-teller leaves the text, suspends the action of the narrative and explains some points to the audience (Chimombo, 1988). The chances of learning new vocabulary are quite high, given the nature of oral art forms. Shona art forms like proverbs, riddles, euphemisms, folktales complement each other and inter-relate in everyday situations. So, in telling stories, new words from these other oral art forms surface and are explained by the narrator thereby boosting the vocabulary of the young audience. In this way the children learn new words. So, they are introduced to the verbs, tenses, proverbs, idioms and a whole range of figurative language. Again, some of the words reflect a people's history, origin and identity. For example, among the Nda (a Shona dialect), Zulu words like *kugqoka* (to put on / dress) *gqonda* (go straight) used in a *ngano* can be explained upon request by the audience. In explaining such words, the narrator may consciously relate them to the Nda people's contact with the Zulu and in doing so, the young know of their history. Such words also give the Nda an identity different from any other Shona dialect speaker. Once children learn about their past they can then be able to speculate their future direction in life. This amply demonstrates that folktales are serious literature that guide the younger generation. Once they are guided in their youth they grow into mature and responsible citizens.

Folktales and Responsibility

In Africa, no one is born free, but with a bundle of duties expected from him or her (p'Bitek, 1986: 19). Shona folktales cultivate this sense of responsibility amongst the young and this is important especially in a society that does not place emphasis on rights of individuals but on roles expected from, and privileges entitled to each individual. Firstly, by being asked to narrate a story, the child narrator is endowed with a kind of responsibility and has to make sure the story is told in such a way as to satisfy many that the job has been done well. Even those who respond by clapping, drumming or chorusing have a sense of duty attached to them. Interestingly, for a successful narration, each should carry out his or her roles with all effort. In addition, some folktales overtly teach that people should carry out the duties endowed to them by society. The tale "Murume nemukadzi" (Husband and Wife) in *Ngano Volume II*, in which a husband ignores his family duties and feeds himself in the forest whilst the family is in hunger is an example. The husband is ultimately caught and punished so as to show how important the aspect of responsibility is among the Shona people. Since African society thrives on various talents of various individuals, there is

need to instill this sense of duty in the young and as well challenge them to maximise their efforts for the good of the whole community.

Folktales and Other Social Values

The young are also trained and 'taught' the aspects of tolerance and patience, especially given the fact that some of the child narrators can be hesitant or have floppy narrations and have to be corrected and cheered up. In this regard, the audience would be made to understand that in life, people are not equally gifted and have to be accepted as they are. Since some of these seemingly hesitant narrators later develop into polished tellers, Shona children get to understand that patience pays, and that any skill that one desires in life can be successfully acquired if patiently learnt.

Folktales and Environmental Education

The best way to survive is to have mastery over one's environment. It is through folktales that the African child also understands his or her environment better. Although some folktales have animal characters and others human characters only, many have both animal and human characters interacting and living together. For example, tales like "Turo naGudo" (Hare and Baboon), "Turo waiba vana" (Hare that stole babies), "Rungano rwebere" (A tale of a hyena), "Shirikadzi nekashiri" (A widow and a small bird), "Murume nenyoka" (A man and a snake) all in *Ngano Volume 3*, "Turo naGudo" (Hare and Baboon), "Bofu naShumba" (A blind man and Lion), "Turo naBveni" (Hare and Baboon) in *Ngano Volume 4* have both human and animal characters living together, talking together and sharing experiences. In some of the tales, Hare and Baboon propose love to, and get married to real human beings. Such tales, at one level teach the child audience that the human and animal world are one, people and animals live together in harmony. As such, the Shona child learns not to ill-treat or unnecessarily kill animals. The child learns and appreciates that animals make the human world complete and so have to be cared for. Kurotwi observes the interdependence between the human and animal kingdom and writes that:

Due to the black man's harmony with nature, we were aware that wild animals, forests, fauna and flora, are as much part of our survival in the same way we were part of theirs. For that reason, we kept a very scientifically calculated check on our wild animals, only killing enough for our consumption and leaving enough for the balance of nature (Kurotwi, 2003: 12).

Thus Shona tales teach children to conserve the natural environment. The tales produce children who have a sense of duty in environmental conservation. This is unlike in modern times where Zimbabweans no longer have a sense of duty in conservation of the environment. Today, people feel and regard it as the duty of the Environmental Management Agency (EMA) to conserve the natural environment. As such there are always running battles between people and EMA, as people play hide and seek, destroying both the plant and animal kingdom.

Also, folktales teach Shona children how to exploit their environment. The children already know for example, which animals can be hunted, which ones are dangerous, which ones should not be

killed and why, how to behave in a foreign land, and the importance of religion, among others. Therefore, the children simply live the life and values they learn from the folktales. The other aspect brought out in folktales is that there is no distinct line between the sacred and the secular among the African people. Supernatural forces come in to rescue characters from certain situations. In Shona folktales, birds of the air usually play the role of the spiritual world that makes life more manageable for the African people. In the tale “Zviuya zviru mberi” (Good things lie ahead), a bird informs the orphan boy that he should not worry about the troubles he is facing because his future looks bright. In the end, the orphan becomes a chief and leads a very admirable life. This is what happens in Shona social life, where the people usually consult the spiritual world and are foretold about certain fortunes or misfortunes to which they act accordingly. Such knowledge of the environment therefore makes the Shona children exploit it fully for the benefit of the society or safeguard it for the same reason.

Shona tales also help the child audience understand how the plant, animal or natural environment has the shape it has. Etiological tales explain the existence of various phenomena such as forests, mountains, rivers, among others. The tale “Mijaho Yematombo” (A Race of Stones) for example, attempts to explain how mountains and hills were formed. The tale explains that stones decided to run a race and give medals to winners. The race was so tightly contested that many stones crossed the line at one go and others came and heaped up on top of the other, forming mountains and hills. Some tales also explain the shape, behaviour and status of various objects in the environment, such as animals, human beings or the natural phenomena. The tale “Rungano rwaNguruve, Dahwa naMutswiri” (The tale of Pig, Night bird and Squirrel), for example, explains why the pig has a flat mouth, the night bird a wide mouth and the squirrel a long mouth. It explains that the three were close friends. One day they saw honey up a huge tree and decided to bring it down. Night bird could climb up the tree, but could not extract the honey from a beehive, and so was the case with Squirrel. However, Pig said he was unable to climb up the tree but could get the honey. Pig was thus assisted by his friends to climb up the tree. As he tried to extract the honey, he was beaten severely by the bees and he fell down, his mouth hitting the ground first, and becoming flat. Night bird could not control his laughter and so laughed uncontrollably and his mouth widened. Meanwhile, Squirrel was so angry with Night bird, and he never opened his mouth and it grew longer. To this day, these animals have these shapes; pig with a flat mouse, night bird with a wide mouth and squirrel with a long mouth. These tales provide the young with a kind of control over their environment and when they act on it, they do not act as strangers.

More knowledge of this environment is acquired through tales that depict the people’s social relations, political organisations, social and religious institutions and practices. The world in *ngano* is also very similar to the world that the children live in. In many tales, animals have their own kingdom, ruled by kings and made up of families as in real life. In most tales, the Lion is regarded as the King who rules his empire through the help of other big leaders such as the elephant in the same way the king or chief presides over his subjects with the help of councilors or headmen. Thus

ngano expose Shona children to a kind of world they actually live in, and to the kind of relations that exist in life. They are about life as lived in Shona society.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion demonstrates that when looked at from an African perspective, Shona folktales are not useless literature as was claimed by early missionaries and explorers. Rather they are a serious and illuminating exploration of life and history. The tales are about life as lived and celebrated in society. Telling them is narrating life, is celebrating African cultural values. They again play a crucial role, of nurturing young children into responsible citizens of society. Thus it is prudent that scholars of African literature, culture and history focus on oral literature as a way of having a sound understanding of indigenous people and their rich cultural heritage.

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