



## ZIMBABWEAN POLITICS AND NDEBELE FOLKTALES: MACHIAVELLIAN PARALLELS

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper interrogates the negative parallels between Ndebele folktales and the contemporary Zimbabwean politics. There is an acceptable belief that folktales contributed positively to the conduct of politics. However, there are reflections of Machiavellianism in the folktales which are not emphasized especially in the domain of African and Zimbabwean politics. Certain villainous animal characters in Ndebele folktales incarnate themselves in Zimbabwean political spheres where some politicians survive politically by assuming Machiavellian tactics as reflected in the folktale characters. Folktales, which were in most cases the first form of schooling for Africans, bear both positive and negative influences on the people as well as how they are governed. Thus folktales, like other forms of orature, have contributed a lot to the contemporary ideas of despotism, violence, patronage and corruption which are characteristic of Zimbabwean politics. There are some folktales which openly violate democratic principles drawing parallels with the Zimbabwean political conduct since independence. This paper will use selected Ndebele folktales to draw the Machiavellian parallels between the folktales and the Zimbabwean political systems. It will draw parallels between animal characters in Zimbabwean politics, governance systems juxtaposed with undemocratic political conduct in Zimbabwe. The tendency in both (folktales and Zimbabwean politics) is that good political governance is consciously eliminated and deliberately superseded by bad political tendencies.*

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**Keywords:** Machiavellian, Folktales, Parallels, Democracy, Violence, Corruption, Mdc, Zanu-Pf, Zapu

## INTRODUCTION

It is important to state here that the folktales used here are written down in *Imvelo Lolimi LwesiNdebele* by Ndlukula (1980) Mambo Press, and ‘Sizwe Elikantulo’. *Iqoqo Lezinganekwane* by (Mhlabi, 2000). Mhlabi (2000) College Press, collections of Ndebele folktales any variations in the rendition of the selected folktales may have possibly something to do with writing and power or writing and the politics of the day. Alternatively it is plausible to theorise that the transmutation from the oral to the written is fraught with a lot of problems of omissions and possibly exaggeration for various reasons. The researchers use the folktales as they are given in this book.

It cannot be gainsaid that the formation of folktales in society was, and is, meant for the creation and maintenance of harmony and moral integrity in society. In fact, there is a wealth of literature that shows the didactic and positive aspects of folktales in the creation of a wholesome individual who strives for the collective good rather than individual, selfish and narcissistic ends. However, scant attention has been paid to the Machiavellian parallels that some folktales have with unsavory and undemocratic behaviors of political conduct in Zimbabwe today. Folktales are governed by the politics of circumstantialities. They are timeless because they are adaptable, adjustable and always in a state of flux, therefore dynamic. But, even in their shifty and adaptable nature, they invariably articulate a commentary upon relations in society and indeed create knowledge about that society; that knowledge is often mobilized and deployed in the service of society or that of particular individuals. Vambe (2000-10) has observed that the folktale, much as it is intended to inculcate positive values, can, and often do, inadvertently concretise “values that the community has wanted to discourage.” This is because in circumstances where individual convenience preponderates over the collective such as the one inaugurated by capitalism; folktales take on new contours and shades of significance. Individuals opportunistically fathom parallels between folktales and contemporary realities for their individual rise to power in politics by manipulating others or through violence. Folktales in that regard become a site of contest “for different social values contesting for supremacy” (Vambe, 2000-10).

Often politicians and ideologues conveniently dredge them up to legitimize beliefs injurious to the good of the community. These folktales are told and retold and with each rendition they assume different social, political, economic and ideological aspects that give prominence to certain values whilst diminishing others. Thus in the contemporary Zimbabwean context, folktales can be seen to be Janus-faced in that they can be used for didactic purposes whilst being manipulated by unscrupulous, megalomaniac individuals and entities for self serving ends. They are therefore moot and problematic. It is in this context that Vambe talks about the folktales’ “inherent elasticity, its capacity to be stretched in different directions, to be framed to capture and represent different meanings all at the same time...” (Vambe, 2004-15). This abuse of folktales goes together with the abuse of the resources of language for Machiavellian purposes. The abuse of language and folktales to sanction certain malpractices in the Zimbabwean political landscape can also be juxtaposed with

the abuse of politics. As pointed out earlier on, folktales allegorically dramatize power relations and are therefore political in nature since politics refers to the capture, maintenance and loss of power. Thus the animal stories represent much more than themselves. Hence the observation by Finnegan (1970) that: When the narrators speak of the actions and characters of animals they are representing human faults and virtues, somewhat removed and detached from reality being represented in the guise of animals, but nevertheless with an indirect relation to observed human action.

Through folktales, people are sketching themselves and their political shenanigans.

### **Election Chicanery Parallels**

In the folktale “Izinyoni Zikhetha Inkosi Yazo” (Birds choose their king/leader), the birds decide to choose their king. Everyone would have wanted to be king because of the understandable narcissism of most living creatures, so they agree to set down impartial ground rules that would make everyone and anyone eligible. The rules were democratic in that they involved every bird and gave each the opportunity to prove why they would be the best for the important position. The important proviso of the agreement was that all birds would fly in the air and the one that flies the longest and comes last would be the king. Those that could not, like the hens and ostriches quickly disqualified themselves as they could not have the staying powers, followed by others until only two were left. The second last to come was the Eagle (Ingqungqulu) known for the ability and dexterity to fly long and powerfully. After some time came the least expected, small, despised bird, Ungcethe who announced upon his arrival, “I am now your king.” The other birds are incensed by this and bay for the blood of Ungcethe. To register the birds’ disdain for the winner, they use the diminutive and pejorative “kusitshonjalo” “it” (the small, despicable and hoity-toity bird) and they move threateningly to do damage to it. The bird had to flee for dear life. They end up seriously taking turns to guard the place this small bird has taken refuge in (in the hole) in order to fix it once and for all.

The story has interesting and dismaying implications for the birds’ electoral conduct. They decide on the rules and regulations of how they should elect their king. This is an inclusive constitutional provision that makes certain that the best candidate carries the day to avoid controversy and disputed elections. The tragedy with the birds in this case is that they enter into the competition with a predetermined outcome as to which birds can and should acceptably win and become king. One may rhetorically ask why they should enter into the competition at all if the candidates they want are already known or anticipated. The fact that they refuse to acknowledge the winner materialised by their own oral and agreed upon rules for kingship/leadership is an indictment on their somersault on their own brand of democracy. They could very well have simply nominated or voted by acclaim rather than engaging in a farcical process they eventually trample down upon. The competition in that regard becomes a window dresser, a smokescreen that gives the illusion of a semblance of meritocracy when the reality is that there are certain birds naturally expected to

assume the throne and not others. This is why [Furniss and Gunner \(1995\)](#) observe that “it is against this background that we can better appreciate the triumph of fraud and deception in most folktales” and in particular in the conduct of elections in Zimbabwe since 1980.

The small bird (Ungcethe) becomes metaphoric of those members of society who, however capable, are in one way or another consigned to the periphery of leadership. From the point of view of the birds there are those birds fated to be perpetual followers of the inner core, the aristocratic class of birds but who see themselves as born leaders. The paradox is that the winner becomes a convict and the losers the accusers, prosecutors and judges. The ever-present threat of violence, mob violence, upon those who use their personal resourcefulness to win erases any semblance of democracy dramatised by regulations that govern leadership ascension. It makes nonsense of any constitutional provisions or agreements if the powerful can whimsically annul the same. It is violence or its threat therefore that determines leadership positions. The parallelism with the Zimbabwean conduct of elections is ominously obvious. Constitutionally in Zimbabwe, anyone of a certain age and level of education can compete for the highest office in an election. But that constitutional provision is made nonsense of by the predetermination that only people with liberation war credentials can, and should win. Whether elections are held or not, that is the precondition enacted by those who view themselves as the originators, the definers and aristocracy of the Zimbabwean political landscape.

Recent years have seen the emergence on the political landscape of Morgan Tsvangirai, who, for one reason or another has proved popular with most Zimbabweans. The two main political parties, ZANU PF and MDC T insist on elections as a democratic marker of the will of the people, but ZANU PF maintains that only a person with war credentials can be president of the republic, They argue that the country was won through the barrel of the gun and cannot be given away to neocolonialists through treachery, the barrel of the pen. This explains why the leaders of the security forces have said that even if Tsvangirai wins, they will never salute him. This is a short step to saying they will never recognise, or allow him to be king like the bird Ungcethe. The question then is, why enter into an election at all if the expected leader is known? Why bamboozle everyone into believing they are engaged in a free exercise of choosing the best from laid-down rules when it is democracy that is being nailed?

The paradox in Zimbabwe, like the case of the birds, is that those that wins but is not supposed to, face the sword of Damocles over their heads as shown by the violence, harassment and imprisonment of Tsvangirai since 2000. Witness the treason charges, the battering of Tsvangirai and the many deaths that occur each time there is an election. Could it be that there is a certain aristocratic class in Zimbabwe that determines the origin story of the nation? Relating to this, [Furniss and Gunner \(1995\)](#) talk about a conflict that is “between the complacent and powerful aristocracy which presumes absolute ownership of all for nothing and the weak who are frustrated by the naked power and arrogance of the aristocracy.” The arrogance finds expression in the boast

by the leaders of ZANU PF that they have many “degrees” in violence to annul the result of any competition or election because they know who should and should not be leader. Using the folktale of the birds choosing their king, it can be argued that folktales need to be interrogated for the Machiavellian ways in which they can be utilised by self-serving individuals.

The parallelism does not end there. One may argue that birds like hens, ostriches, owls etc, which are not naturally high fliers know from the start they cannot be leaders. They can be viewed therefore as followers. If this reasoning is followed to its conclusion, it shows the negative side to followership in subverting democracy. It means that the followers become implicated in the whole process of subverting the principles of democracy which should be beneficial to them. This implies that the followers can easily be used as cannon fodder in creating conditions for violence in the country. All the animals take turns to hover around Ungcethe’s place of refuge to make sure he is killed for having won the important position of being king. In Zimbabwe it is the followers, at the instigation of political party leaders, who tend to be violent. There is a sense in which this folktale seems to be inveighing against normalising the abnormal, where elections are merely a façade in a country supposed to be a constitutional democracy.

### **‘Iron Fist’ Power Parallels**

In the folktale, “izinyamazana zimba umgodi wamanzi” (Animals dig for water) in the anthology ‘Sizwe Elikantulo’. Iqoqo Lezinganekwane by Mhlabi (2000), we are presented with the lion as king of the animal world calling for a meeting to confront the exigencies that impinge on their lives. In his royal demeanor, the lion summons his subjects and they (the animals) respond well to the call to such an extent that he is happy that the animals respect him and his position. The narrator says:

Usilwane wafika wazemukela ngokuthaba okukhulu ebona ukuthi isibili zonke izinyamazana ziyamlalela ngoba eyinkosi yazo.

(The lion happily welcomed the animals since he realised that all obeyed him as their king, p129).

So he goes about seeking a solution to the water crisis facing the animals in the bush. In another folktale by the same author titled “uMvundla lo Silwane”, (Hare and the Lion) we are also presented with the lion as the king by virtue of his preying strength. He survives and provides for the hare by hunting and killing other animals. Implicitly in this folktale is the lion’s citizenship in the animal world by virtue of his power, viciousness and the fear he inspires in other animals. The narrator says:

USilwane wayevuka ekuseni ayezingela, athi angabamba abuyeke ekhaya afike anike uMvundla inyamazana ayibambileyo. pp

(The Lion would wake up very early to go hunting and having killed his prey, He would return home and give the hare the prey.)

In both folktales, the lion is depicted as all-powerful and regal. Paradoxically the lion is also shown as the leader who preys on his subjects and who typifies the social Darwinism of the law of the Jungle where the powerful ride roughshod over the weak. He is therefore, a metaphor of “naked power and arrogance of the powerful” [Furniss and Gunner \(1995\)](#). Thus, in this case, the folktales become metonymic of certain leadership qualities that Zimbabwe finds herself saddled with. The lion comes to embody a certain ethos in Zimbabwe in which the shedding of blood is a measure of good, normal political rulership. In 1977, well before he became president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe and leader of ZANU in Mozambique said, rather tellingly:

(T)he ZANU axe must continue to fall upon the necks of the rebels.

When we find it no longer possible to persuade them into the harmony

That binds us all (Mugabe 7:13 quoted in [Southall and Melber \(2006\)](#)).

The axe symbolises violence, bloodletting and the will to kill. This should also be understood in the context of the president who blustered that he has many degrees in violence when he was confronted by the political menace of Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change.

It is one of the ironies of the Zimbabwean political landscape that those, like the lion, who are feared most, become the owners of power. In most pre-colonial societies in Africa kings ruled until they died and even then one who takes over invariably came from the royal family. Even if the lion dies, other lions still retain the kingly status. Robert Mugabe has ruled Zimbabwe like a king, and, indications are that he will die on the throne. Most tragically is the realisation that he is preparing a successor from his ZANU PF dynasty. Like the lion that goes hunting after its subjects, Mugabe has presided over a macabre 32 years of rule characterized by violence and deaths. One has to remember the infamous Gukurahundi period in Matabeleland and parts of Midlands in which an estimated over 20 000 civilians were killed ostensibly in search of a few dissidents ([Alexander et al., 2000](#); [Makumbe and Campagon, 2000](#)). This also brings to mind the violence and killings that have characterised Zimbabwe since 2000, starting with farm invasions and reaching a crescendo in the inconclusive 2008 presidential elections. In the animal world represented by the folktales, huge, powerful and herbivorous animals like the Elephant who should ordinarily and naturally be leaders because they are not feared, are consigned to the margins of leadership.

The elephant has the rare ability of using common sense like human beings and has a strong memory which helps it remember incidents that happened a long time back. It is also relatively humble and friendly, which is why it can be found in the animal world being used for riding games and tourist attractions. This aspect, however, is not useful when it comes to matters of leadership in the forest as the elephant always plays second fiddle to the Lion. This can be analogised, in Zimbabwe, to people like Joshua Nkomo, leader of ZAPU and Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of Movement for Democratic Change, natural leaders who were, (Nkomo) and are (Tsvangirai) peripherised because of the Lion (Mugabe's) propensity for violence. Mugabe himself, king style,

once observed that he could not quite envisage anyone who could have run the country better than him. This was a dangerously narcissistic and misdirectedly regal statement. Apropos of this, Furniss and Gunner (1995) opine that “the achievement-oriented ethos of (our society) allows for a great deal of Machiavellianism: thus immoral conduct may be condoned in a candidate.” It should be remembered that, unlike the elephant which has a strong memory, the lion only uses the politics of the stomach for its day-to-day life.

In Zimbabwe the Lion (Mugabe) described the savaging of the people of Matabeleland and the Midlands region as a moment of madness. But because of convenient or circumstantial amnesia or because of the propensity for the macabre (of the lion), that moment of madness resurfaced in the 2008 Presidential elections where a lot of people were killed for having presumed too much in trying to vote Mugabe out of power. Typical lion style, and like the Bourbons, President Robert Mugabe seemed to have learnt nothing and forgotten nothing from the Gukurahundi debacle. Thus to the extent that the lion is violent, predatory and yet leader of the other animals, this provides an ominous parallelism with the bloody Zimbabwean political ruling leadership. Fear of a leader breeds sycophancy and this tends to create a sense of entitlement in a leader which leads to tyranny.

In many Ndebele folktales, the lion is given the status of being the king mainly because of its dictatorial and vicious disposition with emphasis placed on the quality of laziness where it will wait for other predatory animals to do the running and hunting only for it to appear when they are feasting. The lion only has to roar and the animals retreat to a safe distance whilst Mr. Lion voraciously feasts and, if it pleases him, he will invariably leave his saliva on what will be left on the carcass. These are the qualities and characteristics that obtain in the Zimbabwean politics of the day where some politicians are so feared that even the mere mention of their names in public places invites goose pimples on the people.

When it comes to election time the lions of the nation only have to remind the voters how indispensable they are and how they have dealt with those who have dared to oppose them in the past so much so that any dissenting voices are automatically annihilated. The lions of Zimbabwe quickly remind the voters of the way they voraciously ripped the recalcitrant people of Matabeleland and the Midlands when they tried to recognize Joshua Nkomo as their king (leader) in the early 1980s. Those that continue on the path of dissent face unsavory consequences. This state of affairs has led to voter apathy especially in the Presidential elections. The ‘Lion’ will move around in armored vehicles declaring himself the King of the liberation struggle and of the country now and forever more. This is the context in which voting wrongly is often given prominence in this country. The idea of voting wrongly in the Zimbabwean political iconography means that no one should be voted to occupy the seat reserved for the mighty Lion, Mugabe.

It is also important to note that the danger in trying to undo the lion does not pose peril to the followers only but even the elephants of this country. On some occasions the elephant, big,

powerful and ponderous, can be skillfully attacked by the lion maybe to better assert the unchallenged status of the King. Joshua Nkomo, at one time the most popular politician in the country from Zambezi to Limpopo and cutting cross tribal divides, a distinction that earned him the accolade “Father Zimbabwe”, had to crisscross the world in search of political asylum. He was fleeing the charging Lion and never became “Father Zimbabwe” in the true sense of the word. Even after the Unity Accord of 1987, he had to make do with the junior position of Vice-President and in this arrangement he only played an advisory role to the king of the Zimbabwean political jungle where the bloodier one is, the more secure one’s kingly throne is. The same goes for Tsvangirai who was not only battered but had also to seek refuge in Botswana because the Lions of Zimbabwe felt that he was an upstart, a Lilliputian trying to imperil the throne of the king. Such folktales touch on the serious and modern issues of good governance, democracy and despotism which have seized the African continent ever since most of the countries attained their independence.

One of the commonest characters in the Zimbabwean folktale is the hare, the trickster, whose foxy tactics enable it to survive in the harsh environment of the jungle where the rule is that only the fittest stay alive. The jungle life can be very unbearable, especially for the animals that are physically challenged and are powerless. That means they have to look for other means of survival or else risk being made a meal of. In the imaginaries of folktales, the hare is very clever and can trick even the biggest and most dangerous of animals. He does not do the donkey work but bamboozles other animals like the baboon, the elephant and even the lion himself to do the hard work for him and at times makes himself available as a seeming good advisor on serious matters to those that are stronger than him. In some instances he can even cause serious schisms between the animals and gleefully and sadistically watch at a distance. In the Ndebele folklore the hare was not congenitally nocturnal but was forced by circumstances of chicanery which saw several animals angrily look for it during the day. There is also the belief that hares do not close their eyes when they sleep so that they are able to detect any danger lurking. This bespeaks the untrustworthiness of the hare and the consequences of the same.

The hare mentality finds expression or incarnation in Zimbabwe in the character of Jonathan Moyo, the former information minister, who was expelled and, later, re-admitted into ZANU-PF, for his sly, scheming, maneuvering and backstabbing antics. Whilst posing as an inveterate supporter of the king (Mugabe), he arranged, secretly, the Tsholotsho Declaration which sought to remove Mugabe from power in what the President himself described as an attempt at a ‘palace coup.’ Like the hare’s wishy-washy and ambivalent relationship to other animals, Jonathan Moyo has at one point been a caustic critic of ZANU-PF and Mugabe in particular, but later somersaulted to become an incurable admirer. He later formed his own political party and, once again, became a strong critic, recanted and went back to ZANU-PF under the same Robert Mugabe, the King and Lion. The hare’s association with other animals is characterized by the politics of expedience and circumstantialities. The same goes for the now Politburo member, Jonathan Moyo, whose membership of ZANU-PF is characterised by a love-hate basis depending on what he thinks he

stands to mine through such an association. It is essential to note that the hare survives the jungle life through the sheer power of his intellectuality: using the brain to deceive and outwit. In the social and political Darwinist landscape of Zimbabwe, Jonathan Moyo, a Professor of Political Science, always has a seemingly cogent, eloquent and convincing explanation for his political flip-flops that allows the powers-that-be to take him into their trust and confidence despite various past inconsistencies and crass betrayals. These hare-like qualities find dramatisation in the weekly columns that he uses in the state media to defend not only himself but also the king, now that he is under his shadow. In doing this he always makes a point of projecting the blame on other people like the way in which the hare shifts the blame for drinking and muddying the water that he did not participate in digging on Umpala. This leads to Mpala's death. In his weekly columns Moyo always stigmatises Tsvangirai as evil and a threat to national security which raises the specter of treason charges. The irony is that he has nicodemusly met the Americans, the avowed enemies of his party, to plot against Mugabe in what became known as the Weakleaks. Thus it can be argued that the foxiness of the hare in Ndebele folktales is best personified by the equally chameleonic and brazenly manipulative Jonathan Moyo in Zimbabwe's rugged political terrain.

Folktales also dramatise bribery and corruption. In the folktales "izinyamazana zimba umgodi wamanzi" the hare decides not to participate in the serious and productive project of finding solution to the animals' water problems. Because of his laziness and parasitism, the hare finds it appropriate to live off the sweat of other animals in the animal kingdom. But he needs the water to drink, and to quench his gnawing thirst, he brings honey with which he bribes the guarding animals in order to drink the water. Strategically he decides to strike fear into the hearts of the various guarding animals by making mention of the claim that the honey is for the feared king of the jungle, the Lion. The parallelism is egregiously glaring. In Zimbabwe corruption has been elevated to a national ethos. Witness the ways in which both blacks and whites, in order to either maintain or be given farms, have had to sponsor ZANU-PF conferences, congresses and galas. In order to successfully invade farms or any business premises or mines, one simply has to mention the name of the President of ZANU-PF, the 'Lion of Zimbabwe' and one gains legitimacy and unmolested enjoyment of the irregularly acquired property. One has to also chant a few slogans and make a few punches into the air (this is a ZANU-PF slogan) and that automatically waves a magic wand.

## CONCLUSION

In light of the foregoing discussion, the researchers contend that Ndebele folktales can be analysed to unpack their Machiavellian parallels with contemporary political realities in Zimbabwe. The reflected behaviors of animals like the hare, the lion, elephant, impala and the behavior of birds are used to interrogate modern problematic issues like corruption, democracy, despotism, good governance and political chicanery. These are issues that have seized the Zimbabwean polity ever since Zimbabwe attained her independence. The conduct of animals and birds find dramatisation in the political department of eminent politicians who have shaped the course of Zimbabwean history

for good or for worse. It is for this reason that the researchers decided to zero in on the negative and Machiavellian parallels of folktales with the Zimbabwean political situation. This is because the positive aspects have received long and incisive critical subjection.

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