



THE “LAW OF THE JUNGLE” IS NOT LAWLESSNESS AFTER ALL: AN ASSESSMENT OF GOVERNANCE AS PORTRAYED IN THE NDEBELE FOLKTALES

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ABSTRACT

Whoever came up with the adage, “the law of the jungle”, seems not to have taken time to assess the behavior of the animals in relation to social and political governance as well as their application of the rule of law. The statement is meant to suggest that there is chaos and disorder in the forest so much so that things happen haphazardly. On the contrary, it is more apparent in most African folktales that the animal world has always been, as it continues to be, characterised by an orderly system of governance as well as rule of law compared to their human counterparts. The socio-political structure which prevails in the animal community clearly reflects an orderly system of governance where the bigger and braver assume political authority and social responsibility. The small but witty also assume the role of advisors and keep checks and balances on power abuse while the rest are innocent but faithful followers. This paper seeks to interrogate Ndebele folktales with the view to demonstrate that animals have an orderly socio-political hierarchy which can be emulated by humans in order to preserve their national heritages which are under threat.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is not always the case that the law of the jungle signifies chaos, greed, disorder and disunity as the statement is usually understood by the generality of the people especially in Africa South of the Sahara. The term ‘jungle’ itself is meant to portray a picture of a set up that is characterized by lack of order as well as lack of the application of the rule of law. It is usually used with reference to a situation where a family or community does not seem to follow a certain order of doing things or even applying the rule of law. This paper interrogates the Ndebele folktales with a view to demonstrate the extent to which the behavior of the flora and fauna in the forest resembles organization, order as well as respect for the rule of law which at times does not even prevail among human societies. At this juncture, it may be necessary to mention that the folktales used for

reference purposes in this presentation are basically taken from a collection of folktales by P N Mkandla (1998) which is titled *Abaseguswini Lezothamlilo*. The presentation does not restrict itself to only those folktales that are written down but relies also on traditionally known oral folktales which have been transmitted by word of mouth through the passage of time. The oral version of folktales is the most preferred because it is not restrictive in nature, it allows dynamism and also affords the folktales a chance to adapt as per demand.

Ndlovu (2012) underscore the significance of oral folktales in comparison to their written version citing the adaptability and adjustability of the former to the later. The oral version provides room for one to maneuver the folktale in whichever way depending on the circumstances, the need and the reasons for using them. This can be observed where they say:

... 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... 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 in their shifty and adaptable nature, they invariably articulate a commentary upon relations in society and indeed create knowledge about that society. (Ndlovu, 2012).

This presentation is not about the written or the unwritten versions of the folktale but it focuses mainly on the governance system that prevails in the animal world as demonstrated by the Ndebele folktales. The presentation anchors its argument on the various folktales which go a long way in proving the fact that the animal world is not characterized by chaos, lack of democracy or even absence of the rule of law. This presentation is of the opinion that most, if not all, the above mentioned attributes are positively obtaining in the animal kingdom whereas they are very rare among their human counterparts. Animals have a certain system which governs and regulates their activities and existence in the forest community such that if one takes a close analysis of that system, they will dispute the meaning of the statement which says that there is no law in the jungle or worse still that the law of the jungle is the survival of the fittest which is characterized by an 'each man for himself' mentality as well as a 'dog eat dog' spirit. Human beings have got a lot to learn from the animal behavior especially in terms of democratic governance and equitable distribution of resources. As the folktales continue to be narrated and re-told to interested as well as non-interested members of the society, various lessons can be learnt in terms of how certain social, economic and political issues were handled in the past as reflected in the folktales. The fact that folktales are a direct creation of the people who would have made observations of the goings on in the animal kingdom is fertile ground for one to argue that what the folktales are portraying is a mirror of what happens among them as well as among human beings.

Folktales, by their very nature, use the various animals and animal behavior as characters and the characteristics by these animals exhibit the societal expectations among the human species.

Chief among the values and virtues exhibited by the animals through folktales is the aspect of power relations, politics in general as well as social responsibility. Finnegan (1970) observes that folktale narrators take advantage of the behavior of animals to represent human vices and mistakes

since folktales have got a tendency of removing the present reality by taking it into a very remote past whose existence and reality cannot be questioned.

2. POLITICS IN THE JUNGLE

It is very unusual to hear someone talking about politics where there is no human being involved just because humans have the wrong perception that they are the only species endowed with the gift of governing themselves. On the contrary, animals in the forest seem to also demonstrate high level politics and self governance despite having no constitution written down.

Vambe (2004) underscores the significance of the use of folktales as a mirror to society because they are versatile saying they have an “inherent elasticity, its capacity to be stretched in different directions, to be framed to capture and represent different meanings all at the same time...” When one looks at the tale of the animals digging a well, (*Uncindabangibophe*(p39)) there is evidence of a political structure among animals. In this tale, there was a severe drought in the land such that even those water sources which had never been known to dry up did so. When the crisis persisted, there arose the need for the animals to find a solution or else the whole forest would soon be wiped out. The animals were gathered by the leaders of the animal community and given a chance to make suggestions on how the impending disaster was to be avoided. The animals agreed to dig a well which would be their source of water for the remaining part of the dry season.

Immediately the process of well digging commenced but sooner than later, Hare reneged due to his laziness. This prompted other animals to take turns to guard the well so that hare would not drink. The later events may not be necessary for this presentation but as has already been seen, the animals had their own leaders who organized them in order to solve the problems that were bedeviling their stay in the forest. It would be naïve to imagine that animals just organized themselves at random or naturally but what makes sense is that, just like in the human world, there was some form of leadership which was responsible for commanding others to these meetings and making sure that there was order in those meetings. Arguably, such animals would be those that can command respect and be listened to whenever they spoke.

So far, this particular tale does not reveal exactly which animals constituted the leadership of the animal world but of importance in this case is the fact that there was or were leaders among the animals. That idea on its own dismisses the idea of each man for himself which is portrayed by the statement of the law of the jungle. Contrary to popular belief that there is no leadership in the forest, folktales reveal that there is a well orchestrated mechanism for governance there just because activities do not seem to happen on their own. According to the [United Nations Commission for Asia and Pacific \(2013\)](#), “governance” means: the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented)”. If this definition is anything to go by, there are no grounds for us to dispute that animals have a system of governance because in the above mentioned tale, the animals made decisions; they executed their decisions and even punished those who were not willing to comply with the agreed decisions.

Most Ndebele traditional folktales do not dispute the presence of a political structure in the animal world as demonstrated by their continuous reference to the lion as the king of the forest specifically calling him as *ubabamkhulu* (grandfather) in Ndebele. The position that the lion

occupies in most folktales is evidence of a superior being whose authority basically emanates from his physical power and ability to eat whichever animal he comes across. Mhlabi (2000) alludes to *Silwane*'s (lion) authority which is portrayed in his ability to gather all animals in a meeting to discuss the water crisis as he says "*usilwanewafikawazemukelangokuthabaokukhuluebonasibiliukuthizonkeizinyamazana ziyamlalelangobaeyinkosiyazo*". (The lion was very happy to welcome all the animals which had come as he felt the satisfaction that they all listened to him).

If one contrasts the Lion's ability to call all the other animals to order and his ability to organize them to solve communal problems with the politics found among human species, it becomes unquestionable that animals also have a solid political structure which regulates political activities on behalf of the other animals. In fact, from the tale of "*Izinyamazanzikhethainkosi*" (the animals elect a king); we are told that the hare was found by lion playing a harp using the bone that he had acquired after cooking *Nteletsha* another type of rabbit. When lion asked about the location from where the sound which sounded like a trumpet was coming from, Hare told him that it was coming from the mountains where the rest of the animals were gathered and were waiting for Lion.

As hare continued to blow his 'trumpet', Lion was curious to know what the meaning of the sound meant since as time went on, the sound was changing. Eventually they got to a flooded river and Lion became very unsettled because Hare was claiming that the rest of the animals were by then impatient from waiting for Lion and were deciding to choose another leader because Lion had delayed. As time went on, Lion could not swallow the idea of being replaced just because he had failed to attend the meeting on time, he eventually threw himself in the flooded water trying to cross over to the other side but drowned and died in the process.

While the moral lesson behind the story was meant to inculcate a spirit of honesty and humility among the children, it however, still goes on to demonstrate that there was a political structure which was responsible for governing the rest of the animals in the forest. The fact that Lion was unable to stomach the idea of another king being elected while he was alive is synonymous with the way the Ndebele in general never replaced a king while the other one was still alive. This is evident in the way Mzilikazi went on to execute his son Nkulumani after he found him having been elected as the king of KwaBulawayo back in the 1800s. Ndlovu (2012) present the lion as the king of the other animals "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."

Apparently one needs to note that the animals do not just have any jack and jill of an animal as their leader but there are criteria and certain traits that the animal should possess. In this case, any leader has to be strong physically, mentally and otherwise hence the strength that lion possesses enables him to be the leader. Emphasizing on the same point, Ndlovu (2012) et al, posit that:

In many Ndebele folktales, the lion is given the status of being the king mainly because of his 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 lion voraciously feasts and, if it pleases him, he will invariably leave his saliva on what will be left on the carcass.

There are instances where the elephant also assumes the role of a leader among other animals just because of the size of his body which gives him advantage over others. However, such folktales are not very common among the Ndebele since the generally accepted king of the jungle is the lion. Usually, the elephant appears only as a technical advisor and moderator or even gets abused for his powerful physical abilities. In the tale of the water crises, elephant was one of the animals that was fooled by hare and was found tied by hare onto a pole but when the time came for the execution of the hare, he is the one who gave the final word of how hare should be punished.

Other animals seem to listen to him for the sake of his body size as well as the wisdom he is believed to possess. One characteristic that is emulatable about the elephant is that he is humble and accepts other animals. In any case, elephant does not eat other animals and as such acts as a source of security among them. In most tales where he is found, he is there just to exemplify on various human expectations as confirmed by Awoniyo (1982) who states that the “aims of storytelling are to educate the child in the qualities of honesty, truthfulness, handwork, humility” and other things.

The political structure of the animal world is also reflected in the folktale of the mysterious fruit tree known as *Umdlwadlewaneowatshelainkosiphezulu* (p25). In this tale, the writer starts by saying:

KwathinxabedlayoabangakoMvundlangalobobusukukwafikauMpunziisithun ywasakoMkhulu. Wafikaemanzitengobaumangoayesewugijimilewawumudek akhulu. “InkosiithiifunaamadodawonkeesigodlwenikusasaMvundla,” watshoedlulauMpunzingobayayiseminengiimiziayengakafikikuyo.

(When it was time for supper, Mpunzi the messenger of the king arrived. He was very wet from sweat because he had been running for a long distance. “The king is calling for all the males in his palace tomorrow Mvundla,” He said this as he departed since he still had some more households to cover).

Without necessarily proceeding with the rest of the folktale, just this part has a lot of information about the political structure of the animal kingdom. First and foremost, regardless of being mentioned by name, the king who is being referred to in this case is undoubtedly the lion as can be observed from the urgency and authoritative nature of the message that is being presented to the rest of the animals by *Mpunzi*. Even the way *Mvundla* accepts the message without any complaint or query is a very essential aspect in terms of the rulers and the ruled. *Mvundla* does not seem to spend time concerning himself about the relevance of the message, the state of the messenger, or even the time that the message comes, which under normal circumstances would mean a disturbance of the plans that the rest of the animals might have already laid down for the next day. The animals portray a lot of subordination and respect for the role played by their leaders.

The second very crucial point to note emanates from the very fact that the king seems to be having some very well-known communication structure which connects him with his subjects. In our own political setup today, we have various structures which link the people (or are meant to) with the political leadership in form of Members of Parliament, councilors and others. *Mpunzi*

therefore, is synonymous with these present day government representatives and serves as evidence that there is some kind of orderly connection between the leadership and subjects in the jungle. In light of this, the belief that the law of the jungle says “each man for himself” falls away because the king is calling all males to his palace so that he can consult with them for the sake of progress in the community.

As if that is not enough, the tale unfolds and says that the king had so many announcements to make that day such that the animals were dismissed very late as the sun was about to set. On their way home, they decided to use a short cut which cut through the forest and the mountains. It was while the animals were on their way that they came across a very appetizing fruit tree.

*Bathibedlulaewathenilenyeyalezintababaficaishlahlaabangasazanga.Isihla
hlalesisasilezitheloezibukekayo,
ezigobhozisaamatheendoda.Pho.Ngomthethowaseguswiniesingaziwayosasi
ngathintwangitsho. (p24-25)*

(As they passed through the mountain planes they came across the tree that they did not recognize. This tree had very attractive and seemingly delicious fruits which made a man to salivate. Unfortunately, the law of the forest did not permit anyone to even touch a fruit tree whose name is unknown).

The late dismissal of the animals at the meeting is not anything to write home about, neither is their choice of using a short cut on their way back. However, the discovery of this unknown tree has a lot of revelation concerning the animal world. The tree is said to have been appetizing and attractive to the eye such that common sense would have pardoned the animals if they all ran towards the tree and had a feast for themselves, after all, who would stop them. On the contrary, the animals do not behave as expected, they pause to ask each other what the name of the tree is. Most importantly, the writer makes an emphasis on the fact that it was not permissible to eat the fruits of any tree that was not known by name. If this was the case, one would not be misdirected to suggest that the animals were guided by a democratic constitution. Whether it was written or not written, accepted or not accepted in a national referendum is not of consequence here but the issue is that there was a law which all the animals knew and were willing to respect without any complaints.

The writer actually says “*pho ngomthethowaseguswini*” (according to the law of the forest) which means there are laws in the forest which are not only there on paper or wood but are there to be followed. The fact that all the animals do not proceed to eat the fruits of this unknown tree up until the tortoise has managed to go up the mountain to ask the human being who knows the tree is evidence of not only the application but also the execution of the rule of law in the jungle. One wonders where the guts to say the law of the jungle is characterized by despondency comes from. It should be remembered that folktales are used as a mirror of the human societies and as such their message is embedded in the observation of the animal behavior so that it can be transmitted to human beings. If this is the case, one then wonders how it is possible for people to observe the animals, express their observations using folktales but come up with a conclusion that says that animals have no law. Cook (1978) states that “fairytale, folktales and fables are about human behavior in a world of magic, and often become incorporated in legends” which cements the fact that human beings would have made relevant observations before coming up with the folktales.

3. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE JUNGLE

It would not be fair for one to major on the political aspects of folktales as evidence of order and the rule of law in the forest alone just because it focuses mostly on the very powerful animals leaving out the tender and feeble ones. This part of the presentation concentrates on those animals that demonstrate the prevalence of social responsibilities in the forest as sign that there society there is not despotic or disorganised. Some writers have argued that in the forest you either kill or be killed, they describe the situation as a “*dog eat dog*” scenario which is characterized by survival of the strongest. While it might be true that animals in the forest eat each other and survive through their tactics and skills, the situation may not be as worse as the terminology used to describe it suggests. If things were happening as fast and as brutal as they are made to appear in most cases, one wonders how the animals we have up to today have made it. It becomes apparent therefore, to adopt the view expressed by the folktales which suggests that the animal world has order and application of the rule of law.

There are a number of Ndebele traditional folktales which portray a positive picture about the survival of animals in the forest especially when it comes to social responsibility. Ndlukula (1998) presents to us “*Umfundisiwaseguswini*” (the chaplain of the jungle) whom we meet when *Juba* (dove) has been tricked by *Khanka* (the jackal) to throw him dove’s children for food. We find the chaplain who is *Wabayi* coming to console the *Juba* (the dove) family for their loss.

Wabayi himself is called the chaplain because of the only white line which is on his neck yet the rest of the body is black. *Wabayi* seems to be performing the role which is also performed by the pastors and preachers of today.

“*izinkonzizonkeeguswinilaphaziphathwanguyekanyelezokulahlaabafileyo*”. (All the church services including funeral services were conducted by him). If the animals recognize the need to comfort each other during times of distress, as reflected in this folktale, then it may be a lie that the law of the jungle is each man for himself but God for us all. If anything, this could be applicable more to selfish human beings than the animals. As this folktale unfolds, Hare comes along and feels pity for the way *Juba*’s wife is weeping for her children. When he is told that Jackal is the cause of this sorrow, he chides *Juba* for being foolish by yielding to Jackal’s threats since jackals cannot climb trees. Despite the foolishness displayed by *Juba*, Hare vows that he will punish Jackal for the crime he has committed. There is no social responsibility which can surpass comforting one another during hard times but better still punishing those who cause pain on the weaker members of the society. Writing about the situation in the forest, Ndlovu (2012) have this to say:

The jungle life can be unbearable, especially for the animals that are physically challenged and powerless. That means they have to look for other means of survival or else risk being made meal of.

What these writers are saying cannot be disputed by anyone because that is exactly what happens. However, what is important is to note that, harsh as the situation might be, the animals have a way of regulating themselves as well as controlling those that have an insatiable appetite.

While all the animals are aware that they may be turned into food any time by anyone, they seem not to condone selfish behavior among themselves as can be seen from the way Hare goes on to punish Jackal by making him run to fetch the sun which Hare refers to as a piece of charcoal.

Jackal runs until he passes out only to be resurrected by the morning breeze and in that case he has served his sentence for greed.

It is very common in any normal society to have the physically powerful abusing their powers in order to take advantage of the poor. This is prevalent in most human societies where the rich get richer at the expense of the poor. The same scenario obtains in the animal world as can be seen from the behavior of certain powerful animals. In the tale of *Umhambaungabuyifuthi*, (p28) (Go and never return), Lion has been assisted by the woman after she later found the former starving to death. The lion wants to eat the woman and they argue until Hare finds them and tricks Lion into holding a rock under the pretext that it is falling so as to make the woman escape. Eventually she escapes but not before lion remains balancing the rock until he almost collapses due to hunger. In this case, Hare shoots two birds with one stone because he punishes the lion for his greed in giving him a small piece of meat in a previous hunting session as well as teaching him a lesson for him not to abuse his powers.

A similar incident occurs when *UnananeKaselesele*(p56) (Nanane of Selesele) goes to look for food leaving her children locked up in the house. The children decide to be mischievous and go to play outside yet their house is by the roadside. When the animals are passing by, they all marvel at the beauty of the children who have opened the door and are now playing outside because the other animals are afraid that when the powerful ones finally come along, these children will be history.

As time goes on, Elephant arrives and swallows them up. The writer is clear to express that all the other animals have not eaten the children not because they do not have the appetite but because they understand that their mother will not take kindly to such when she arrives and will definitely revenge. Eventually, *Nanane Kaselesele* severely punishes the elephant by cutting his intestines from inside and cooking them until the elephant dies so that she and her children can escape from his stomach. In this particular story, the tale shows that the weaker and vulnerable members of the society are all at the mercy of the stronger ones but no one justified for taking advantage of others.

Nanane kaselesele in this case serves to show that the animal world does not take kindly to power abuse and greed. This characteristic of folktale finds meaning in [Vambe \(2000\)](#) who observes that the folktale, much as it is intended to inculcate and educate children, it concretises the “values that the community has wanted to discourage.” Speaking of the hare as a clever promoter of social justice and cleverness, [Hodza \(1997\)](#) says:

The hare and baboon story shows how the intelligent can exploit the stupid.

Children who hear these folktales are encouraged to realize that they too could be tricked if they act in a stupid way like baboon.

One needs not over emphasise the fact that regardless of it being a very small and fragile animal, the hare serves to regulate the activities of the other animals and because of its wits, there seems to be reasonable peace and harmony among all the animals in the forest. Hare is there to keep checks and balances on the other animals whether big or small and in a way retains sanity in the animal world. Given the incidences cited above, it becomes very clear that the folktales demonstrate to a greater extent that the animal world is characterized by genuine order, prevalence of social responsibility as well as observance of the rule of law thereby disputing the relevance of any argument which says that there is no law in the jungle.

4. CONCLUSION

This presentation has looked at the characteristics of the Ndebele folktales from the not-so-common angle of analyzing oral literature. This angle however, though uncommon has revealed that the animal community is not as despotic as suggested by the various adjectives that are used in describing it. The fact that there has been a general consensus on the acceptance of folktales as a mirror of the human societies simply means that the same are the ones who have observed certain traits among animals and come to the conclusions which they express through the various folktales that there are. These observations are made after a lot of research has been carried out on the behavior of the animals and as such, it becomes contradictory for the humans to observe that animals have an orderly system of governance, yet go on to say the law of the jungle is the survival of the fittest. In light of the submissions made in the foregoing presentation, the animal world is characterized by order, respect for the rule of law, respect for social justice, punishment of vice and other very positive attributes which can serve as lessons for the human societies today and the day to come.

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