

Looking Back in Order to go Forward: Reading the Proverb on a Signpost.

Willie L Chigidi
Department of African Languages & Culture
Midlands State University
Gweru, Zimbabwe

Abstract

This paper seeks to provide a critical exposition of how African societies have largely benefitted from positively responding to the age old wisdom bequeathed to them by their forefathers as expressed in African proverbs and how in some cases they have failed to benefit when they should have. The writer of this article wishes to pursue the argument that traditional proverbs are as relevant to the situations in the life we live today as they were to situations in the life lived by our ancestors. Every proverb evolved in the past was created to suit a situation, or conversely, certain situations led to the creation of certain proverbs. Situations for which proverbs were created in the past were, most likely, fairly and reasonably light. Now many generations down the line and after more than five decades of independence from colonial rule people behave and create situations that call for the use of those age old sayings more than ever before. In fact, it is purported to show that there are today graver, greater and more serious situations that make some proverbs even more relevant today than the situations for which they were originally created in the distant past. In presenting this argument a case study of Zimbabwe will be used although in some cases reference will be made to situations in other countries. Since the attainment of independence in 1980 Zimbabwe has seen the relevance and use of proverbs in articulating development issues. In some cases government and even non-governmental agencies have made use of proverbs in articulating development issues in order to improve the quality of life of the local people. The paper also shows where, for political expediency and for other reasons, the wisdom carried in certain proverbs has been ignored to the detriment of progress. Examples to illustrate arguments raised are given in areas such as those relating to health, agriculture, gender, childhood and parenthood. The writer arrives at the conclusion that even though people are no longer in the habit of almost always using proverbs to embellish their speeches and to buttress their arguments in various situations it is increasingly becoming obvious that the need to use these proverbs is now greater than has been the case before. The reader is advised that the proverbs discussed in the paper come from the Shona language spoken in Zimbabwe.

Key words: African proverbs, folk wisdom, domestic violence, HIV and AIDS, cell-phone farmers, sign posts.

Introduction

When the subject of proverbs is brought up once again one wonders what it is that is going to be talked about that has not been said before. This question becomes

even more pertinent when, as a matter of necessity, the discussion begins with definitions of what proverbs are. Indeed, various scholars have already explained what proverbs are and we will start by looking at these definitions in order to find our own direction. Chesaina (1991:13) has defined a proverb as “a wise saying expressed in a terse, concise and metaphorical manner”. Nandwa and Bukonya (1983:100) describe proverbs as “the mark of adult wisdom and experience” and go on to elaborate saying “A proverb is a terse, pithy statement containing folk wisdom”. Mutasa (1999:274) notes that “a proverb is regarded as a summary of the experience of a given people” and that “these witty sayings are pots that may contain the age-old wisdom of the traditional people”.

The key words in all these definitions are ‘wise sayings’, ‘wisdom’ and ‘experience’. Every proverb must have been created and given life of its own by a wise and experienced individual and communities picked it up and popularised it because it expressed a fundamental truth that was recognised by all the ‘folks’ to be a true fact of life. For that reason, therefore, Russell (Mieder, 2004) defines a proverb as the wit of one and the wisdom of many. What Russell means is that what an individual has observed happening repeatedly over a long time has also been observed by other folks in the same community, and when that individual coins a proverb it simply confirms what all the others have also recognised as a truth and so the community adopts the proverb and popularise it. In other words, it is only one person with the wit and artistic creativity who comes up with the proverb and the others adopt it because they recognise the fundamental truth it expresses. People create proverbs after having seen repeatedly the way things happen in the world, in their environment, in human, animal and insect life. It is this wisdom and this experience accumulated over a very long period that gives proverbs their internal and permanent authority. Even after the authors who verbalised their wisdom and experience are long dead the proverbs which they left behind as intangible heritage remain relevant at all times, yesterday, today and tomorrow. To sum up this thinking we will quote Miruka (1994:78) who says:

Proverbs are a summary of a people’s philosophy of life, developed over generations of fluctuations. From the occurrences and recurrences, empirical conclusions are coined on the nature of life. These are expressed in proverbs as tested truths traversing the past via the present into the future. They have survived yesterday, apply today and guide the pathway of tomorrow.

As Miruka implies, these proverbs have been used to guide society’s citizens in the past; they are a summary of what people have observed and experienced and that guides them in today’s life, and will continue to do so in the future. This paper looks at how Shona proverbs in Zimbabwe have been used to guide citizens in today’s life, and two proverbs will be looked at because these have been written

on metal boards fixed onto metal poles placed on the side of major roads leading into some urban residential areas so that everyone who passes along such roads sees and reads them.

Every proverb has a situation

Proverbs were crafted to depict or to suit certain situations or experiences in human existence; hence every proverb has a situation. For example, elders must have noted that every time someone did not heed warning he/she ended up in trouble. Someone then enunciated the rule of conduct when he/she coined the Shona proverb 'Dambakuudzwa akaonekwa nembonje pahuma' (The one who does not listen to warning/advice ends up in trouble (with a wound on the forehead)). Having observed that being hospitable to visitors will not make you poor the elders coined the Shona proverb 'Muenzi haapedzi dura' (A passerby will not eat up everything in your granary and leave you poor). A repeated observation of human nature in courtship led to the rise of the proverb 'Rinonyenga rinohwarara, rinosimudza musoro rawana' (A man who is proposing love to a woman does not reveal his true nature. He will only do so when he has won her love) or, put more bluntly, 'Risinganyepi hariwani' (Any man who will not tell a lie will not marry). These few examples of proverbs have been given to show that, as a Fante elder puts it, 'there is no proverb without a situation' (Finnegan, 1972:407).

However, although proverbs are no longer in popular use in people's daily lives, indications are that we are observing and experiencing situations today that call for the use of those same proverbs more than ever before. In other words, yesterday's proverbs are even more relevant today than they were in the past at the time they were created. Fewer people in Zimbabwe are using these proverbs nowadays and others even say 'Zvetsumo ndezvakare izvo' (Proverbs are old-fashioned), yet the situations we see and experience in our present life call for their use more than has ever been the case in the past. People may no longer use the proverbs now but the situations that call for their use are there. In fact, it is possible to argue that the situations that led to the crafting of some of these proverbs in the past were probably quite light and far less serious than the situations today for which they could be used. In other words, more serious and graver situations exist now which call for the use of those proverbs and make the situations in which they were used in the past look like child's play. We should take note of Nandwa and Bukenya's words that:

Folk wisdom is [also] characterized by practical application in that proverbs normally make sense only when they are directly applied to specific situations or problems...The value of a proverb lies in its applicability to a concrete situation, how it asserts it and possibly suggests a solution to it (1983:102).

To illustrate the applicability of certain proverbs to concrete situations, and graver situations than those for which they were created in the past, we will work with two examples here. The two examples of proverbs we will work with have been chosen because while it is generally agreed that proverbs are no longer in popular use in people's daily lives these chosen two are in use twenty four hours a day. They speak to people every day. Each of these two proverbs will be defined in this article as "Three Little Words" and we shall explain later why they have been given this description.

Three little words (1)

The first of the two Shona proverbs that form the focus of our attention here is 'Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi' (Carpenter bee stick to one flower because the flowers of this world are too many). The proverb means "stick to one place, stick to one female or one male partner". Whoever used his genius to come up with this proverb must have observed the behaviour of a carpenter bee and noted that it has the habit of moving from one flower to another enjoying whatever it enjoys there. However, he /she must have also noted that the carpenter bee cannot visit every flower there is in the world in its life time. The proverb is actually a comment on human behaviour because its author must have also noted that some men behave like a carpenter bee in that they want to have every other 'beautiful' woman that they come across. But there are too many beautiful women in this world and you cannot have them all. Moreover, as the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah (1968) says "The beautiful ones are not yet born". While Ayi Kwei Armah was concerned about the endless cases of corruption, moral decay and spiritual death in post-colonial Ghana, he is quoted here in a literal sense where reference is made that every generation seems to bring more physically 'good' people than the previous generation. The creator of this proverb must have likened a covetous man who wants to possess every woman he sees to a carpenter bee that tries to reach every flower that it sees blossoming, not realising that it will not finish them all in its life time. It is an exercise in futility. As we can see, the "content and imagery contained [in the proverb] is derived from the environment from which the speaker of the language comes" (Mutasa, 1997:276).

Going back to our earlier argument that the situations for which some of these proverbs were created and used (or situations that led to the rise of some of these proverbs) were probably fairly light, it is possible to speculate that the proverb 'Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi' (Carpenter bee stick to one flower because the flowers in this world are too many) was created in the context of a society that permitted a man to marry more than one wife. We deliberately talk of men's sexual greed because the proverb was created in a culture that allowed men to marry many wives without allowing women to 'marry' many men. In

Shona tradition a man could have two or more wives, even up to ten or even more in some cases, and it is possible to assume that there was no real danger of fatal infection arising from having multiple partners in the form of several wives like that. Any health problems were probably not so fatal and could be dealt with by using medicinal herbs prescribed by local traditional healers. At any rate each of the plus or minus ten women was expected to be faithful to her husband who also happened to be the husband of all the others in the polygamous situation. While it cannot be denied that this proverb is applicable to many other situations, it is posited in this paper that it was created in a culture in which manhood was measured by the number of wives and children one had. The more wives, and consequently the more children a man had, the more prestige he had in the community. In such circumstances, how serious then was the situation that called for the application of this proverb 'Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi?' (Stick to one partner). It was not serious at all. This is what has been described in this article as 'light situations'. Actually, in traditional society elders encouraged men to have big families with many wives and many children who would in turn provide a pool of labour to produce wealth. Those with only one wife each were often laughed at. The proverb 'Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi' (Stick to one partner) was created at a time when a man was allowed by custom to marry many women and so it can be concluded that the proverb was not meant to discourage the practice. It was applied in response to the practical situation of greed. It was used when an element of greed was detected in the manner in which a man was acquiring wives. It was bad enough for a man to marry two wives, but to go on and marry up to ten or more indicated a serious social problem which society tried to curb by applying the proverb 'Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi' (Stick to one partner). Having multiple partners in the shape of a man marrying several wives was a light matter in an HIV and AIDS free society and that frequently became a laughing matter and a subject of jokes in separate men's and women's circles.

What shows that having multiple partners in the form of marrying many wives was not taken as a matter of serious and grave concern in the past is that parents gave their daughters to men who already had several other wives, and wives gave their young sisters to their husbands as extra wives, and some wives found their husbands other girls to marry from elsewhere, again as extra wives. The proverb which exhorts people to stick to the ones you have was created at a time when people practised polygamous marriages and it was never meant to discourage the practice. It was only in situations where a man showed insatiable desire to marry more and more that elders advised and warned others to control or reduce their appetite for more because as the proverb shows there will always be more "flowers" and better "flowers" for that matter. One cannot go on and on acquiring women.

If the proverb 'Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi' (Stick to one partner) was applied in 'light situations' like the one described above that proverb is now more relevant than ever before. Many African countries have been independent for fifty plus years now and Zimbabwe has been independent for thirty-five years. In these years of independence African countries have experienced all sorts of challenges in varying degrees. One of the biggest challenges that Africa has encountered is the problem of HIV and AIDS. One of the major factors responsible for the spread of HIV and AIDS is irresponsible sexual behaviour. Zimbabwe is one of the African states which had the highest rates of HIV and AIDS infections from the 1980s to the early 2000s. There is not even one single individual regardless of social status who can claim that he/she knows no one close to him/her who has died of HIV and AIDS. The HIV and AIDS pandemic has caused untold suffering and havoc in all communities and nations worldwide, although developing nations' situation has been aggravated by other factors like poverty and economic mismanagement.

The HIV and AIDS problem in Zimbabwe, like in many other countries in the world, has been so serious, so dire and so grave, especially in the period from early years of independence to the early 2000s. It is one of the more serious situations that have made the nation to 'look back to the past in order to go forward'. Although proverbs are 'not as commonly used nowadays as in the past' (Mutasa, 1997:274) and although some people want to casually dismiss them as 'tsumo ndedzakare' (proverbs are old fashioned) the proverb 'Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi' (Stick to one partner) should be seen as more useful and more relevant today than when it was originally created in the remote past. Certain Shona/Ndebele marriage practices such as the custom of marrying several wives are no longer sustainable in this age of HIV and AIDS. A proverb that was used as a joking matter when advising men, not necessarily to stop marrying two or more wives, but to observe the 'golden mean' and do things in moderation, is now being used to warn people to desist from the practice altogether and save lives. Whole families have been wiped out because people have often been promiscuous. The HIV and AIDS pandemic is a graver situation than the HIV and AIDS free society of the past in which this proverb was applied. If a man in the past could marry as many wives as ten and could afford to jump from one matrimonial bed to another without fear of contracting sexually transmitted infection from them, that practice today can wipe out whole communities, and so the proverb 'Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi' (Stick to one partner) now looks more useful and relevant than it ever was in the past. And even one irresponsible act of unprotected sex can kill dozens, scores, and hundreds of people down the line.

In Zimbabwe, the 1990s showed that a nation of sick and dying citizens cannot develop meaningfully. Concerned people realized that they had to summon all the resources at their disposal and use them to save the situation. It was absolutely necessary to be innovative and come up with new approaches to deal with the crisis. It was for this reason that some organisations felt that in order for the nation to go forward they had to look back for inspiration and guidance. They therefore went back to traditional society and retrieved some wise sayings from the treasure-house of adult wisdom. They did this knowing pretty well that 'proverbs seem most typically to be used for warning, to bring another [others] to a sense of proportion, and to comment on or ridicule another's action' (Finnegan, 1976:424). To that end, these organisations retrieved from oral tradition the proverb 'Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi' (Stick to one partner). Using the Shona language spoken by about 78% of the Zimbabwean population they wrote the proverb in bold on a metal board nailed on a steel pole and placed it where every citizen can read it. This is what is implied in the title of this paper by the words 'the proverb on a sign post'. Unusual problems require unusual solutions. With the famed high literacy rate in Zimbabwe estimated to be one of the highest in Africa a huge number of people can read the proverb for themselves.

To achieve 'terseness', which implies saying directly and precisely what you set out to say without 'beating about the bush', the proverb can be reduced to what we called earlier on in this article 'Three little words' by dividing it into two clauses. The first clause is made up of three little words 'ZINGIZI GONYERA PAMWE' and the second clause is also made up of another three little words 'MARUVA ENYIKA HAAPERI'. Which ever clause catches your eye as you drive past will have the same impact on your conscience. The phrase 'three little words' is derived from the title of a famous song from the album 'World Anthem' by Harry Ruby and the Lyrics by Bert Kalmar published in 1930 (Wikipedia, 30/03/12). A song with these words was very popular in the 1970s and the 'Three little words' are 'I love you'. Those three little magic words 'I love you', if well meant, have built relationships, homes, families and friendships. The proverb 'Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi' (Stick to one partner) is placed on the sign post in such a way that the subject of the first clause 'Zingizi' is placed alone in its own line on top of all the other words and written boldly in red ink. The other words that complete the proverb 'Gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi' are written below it and in a different colour, black. If one is driving fast past the sign post, which ever set of three little words catches the eye will produce the same effect because Shona proverbs, even in their oral form are, after all, frequently abbreviated.

In some places in Zimbabwe one sees these two sets of three little words that form the proverb 'Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruva enyika haaperi' (Stick to one partner),

stone cold and lifeless, but staring him/her in the face. Next to the words of this proverb on the sign post is the well-known HIV and AIDS emblem, a piece of ribbon tied into a loop to represent the idea or message that “let us all strive to stop the scourge”. Here we have a case of an oral art form sharing the same space with a modern symbol and conveying the same one message-“think safety!”, “stop AIDS!”. The sign posts carrying the proverb have been placed strategically at various points along Zimbabwe’s roads approaching residential areas in some urban centres and at growth points and business centres in rural areas, and outside the national and provincial offices of the National Aids Council of Zimbabwe (NACZ). A typical example is found in the Midlands City of Gweru where one sign post with the proverb is placed along the main road from town entering the townships of Mutapa, Ascot and Mambo, and another one placed on the road from the Light Industrial Sites leading into the same townships; another sign post with the same proverb is placed on the road as you approach the huge and sprouting Mkoba Township which has 21 Villages. Also, to get to Senga and Nehosho Townships on the other side of Gweru town and beyond to the fast growing Midlands State University, you pass by another sign post with the same proverb that reminds you to stick to one partner. Nearly 17000 students registered at the university at any one given time and their teaching and non-teaching staff pass by this sign post carrying the two sets of ‘three little words’ that save lives. This has been one of the major effective ways of HIV and AIDS education and awareness which has helped to reduce the prevalence of HIV and AIDS infections and deaths in Zimbabwe. As reported by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA-Zimbabwe) in an article titled ‘Promoting evidence based HIV Prevention Services’, Zimbabwe became the second country in Africa to register a decline in the HIV and AIDS epidemic after Uganda. HIV prevalence in Zimbabwe declined from 23.2% in 2003 to 14.3% in 2009. The decline is a combined effect of behaviour change interventions including sexual partner reduction and increased condom use... (30/03/11). The report also shows that the 2009 National Survey of HIV and Syphilis Prevention Among Women Attending Antenatal Clinics also showed a decline. It is very difficult to quantify and specify the actual percentage of people saved as a result of reading the proverb on a sign post, but it cannot be denied that the proverb has contributed to the collective effort of educating the people. Zimbabwe has seen significant changes in sexual behaviour and sensible people no longer see having multiple partners as a sign of manhood but a sign of foolishness. Of course, with time, people who have seen the sign post several times become oblivious of its existence. They see it every day yet they no longer “see” it in their consciousness. But they “see” it in their sub-conscious and their sensibilities are affected and that is what matters. They have already internalised the words and the idea and message in them and that is why, perhaps, they are still alive. It is like people who see but without “seeing” the street number of their urban homes. They go in and out of their gates every day no longer thinking about their house

number at the gate. But it is there in their sub-conscious. That is why they never get lost.

Three little words (2)

The other 'Three little words' on a sign post are the abbreviated form of the Shona proverb which says '*Regai dzive shiri, mazai haana muto*' (Let them be birds, eggs have no gravy). What this proverb is simply saying is that people should be patient, and that they should not eat, consume, or use anything prematurely. It implores people to allow things to develop to their maximum before they are exploited. If you allow things to reach their fullest stage of maturity you can then also derive maximum joy, enjoyment or benefit. The proverb was created long back in the past where people saw the need to advise people not to use things prematurely. For example, it could be used to dissuade people from eating unripe sugar cane/sweet cane, fruits, young chicks and animals -anything that was not ready for consumption. Sugar cane and fruits are sweeter when they are fully ripe, and birds and animals provide more mature meat when they are fully grown. Also, Shona marriage customs allowed parents to pledge their little daughters in marriage to old people. A girl child could be pledged to a man in her infancy and even as an unborn baby in her mother's womb. Sometimes, the man to whom she was pledged could desire to take the poor young girl as a wife for fear of losing her to younger and more attractive men. These are all situations where the elders would apply the proverb '*Regai dzive shiri, mazai haana muto*' (Let them be birds, eggs have no gravy). In other words, let things mature.

No one knows exactly the circumstances that led one genius of a man/woman to come up with this proverb that enunciates the rule of conduct. Whatever it is, it must have been a situation similar to the scenarios given above. But all the scenarios given above, other than the pledging of young girls to old men, are fairly light situations. Even the pledging of young girls, horribly bad as it was because it deprived the girl child of her freedom of choice, was never done clandestinely. It was an accepted 'bad' practice done in the open by a people who were schooled in strong patriarchal traditions and did not realise that they were abusing children, that is, if we judge them by today's standards. The proverb '*Regai dzive shiri, mazai haana muto*' (Let them be birds, eggs have no gravy) can be used to illustrate the argument we are pursuing in this paper that some proverbs seem to be more useful and more relevant today than they were when they were originally created. Arguably, the situations which call for their use today are more serious, graver and sometimes horribly frightening than the situations for which they were created in the remote past. It is horrible to read in the Sunday Mail Metro (April 2-8, 2006, p.2) that a father sexually assaulted his 13 year old daughter and argued in a Chitungwiza Court that 'he had to be the first to be intimate with her, adding that he was not embarrassed to see her naked...'.

In many cultures children are highly valued and therefore their wellbeing and protection are a priority. In the past thirty-five years that Zimbabwe has been independent the nation has witnessed increasing incidents of child abuse: sexual, physical and social. Many of the abused youngsters are children who have been dumped on the streets, who have been orphaned and those who are HIV positive. All such children have suffered abuses in varying proportions. These children in the streets have been sexually abused by adult strangers; orphans have often been sexually abused by adult relatives in whose care they have been placed or in whose care they have placed themselves. Many of those who have been raped have probably become HIV positive.

Outside the offices of a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that looks after the welfare and interests of orphans and other disadvantaged and vulnerable children and situated in the Belvedere suburb of Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, a sign post stands strategically for everyone who approaches the place to see and read the three little words '*Regai dzive shiri*' (Let them be birds). These three little words are actually the abbreviated or shortened form of the proverb '*Regai dzive shiri, mazai haana muto*' (Let them be birds, eggs have no gravy) and they are actually the local name of the organisation that provides extensive HIV and AIDS education. Although only three little words '*Regai dzive shiri*' (Let them be birds) are written on the sign post the majority of the people who read it can complete the proverb by providing the other clause "*mazai haana muto*" (eggs have no gravy) because they know it since they share the same cultural background with the ancestor who crafted that proverb in the distant past. These three little words are an eloquent statement to all adults that they should give these little children of Zimbabwe a chance to grow and realize their full potential. In other words, allow them to develop fully into whatever it is they want to be. Allow them to grow into fully mature men and women who can also become husbands/wives and mothers and fathers of the nation.

However, whoever came up with the idea of putting up that proverb on that sign post must have recognised that one useful strategic intervention is to go back to the past and retrieve a wise saying from the treasure-house of adult wisdom which is generally recognised as an internal truth and use it to advise, correct, to admonish, and to guide behaviour. Employees of this non-governmental organisation read that statement everyday as they go in and out of their offices; visitors who come to give or seek information read it; Universities and Technical Colleges and other educational institutions send their students on industrial attachment there, and those students and their lecturers who come to supervise and assess them, come face to face with these three little words '*Regai dzive shiri*' (let them be birds). Those who see it will help to popularise the proverb and spread the message in the communities where they come from and one hopes that people will change

their ways once they have been 'taught' in this way. As Miruka (1994:80) points out:

Proverbs are largely didactic. They are used to point out facts of life where there is an anomaly so as to restructure things and prompt the deviant back to normality.

So whoever reads the three little words on the sign post will, presumably, be prompted back to normality. At least that is the hope of the Non-Governmental Organisation and those who took the proverb from orature and put it up on a sign post. This shows that non-governmental organisations that pour funds into Zimbabwe must have learnt their lesson that unless they understood the way of thinking of the people they served the projects they fund will not succeed and all the money they pour into the projects will be exhausted without much having been achieved (Mutasa,1997:281). So they found it prudent to use a proverb that is part of the people's culture.

Incidentally, a group of researchers at the Centre for Sexual Health and HIV Research, at the University College of London, UK, have carried out some research project which they titled 'The *Regai Dzive Shiri* project: A cluster randomized controlled trial to determine the effectiveness of a multi-component community-based HIV prevention intervention for rural youth in Zimbabwe', by Cowan, F.M. et al and published in *AIDS: Official Journal of the International AIDS Society, Volume 24, Issue 16*. It has not been established in this paper why the researchers gave the name '*Regai Dzive Shiri* Project' but it is possible to speculate that since it is a project for rural youth in Zimbabwe the choice of title was influenced by the desire to give the advice that allow the children to grow and realise their full potential. And in Zimbabwe's Masvingo Province in the district of Mwenezi there is another Non-Governmental Organisation called Child Aid Mwenezi which works with 3000 families and collaborates with 10 organisations and stakeholders and among these is listed one called "*Regai Dzive Shiri*". Never before have 'three little words' of a proverb attracted so much attention that the proverb has been adopted by so many organisations as a message on a sign post, a title of a research project and as a name of an organisation.

Perhaps non-governmental organisations have copied the idea of putting proverbs on sign posts from seeing the strategy adopted in black business enterprises where people use proverbs 'to name shops and buses' (Mutasa, 1997:279). Some black business people use proverbs to name their businesses as a way of expressing their fears, hopes, history, dreams, achievements and even their philosophy of life. Such names include '*Kugarahunzwana*' (Let peace prevail), '*Murombomunhu*' (A poor man is also a human being), '*Rugare Tange Nhamo*' or '*Chaitemura Chava Kuseva*' (Suffering comes before prosperity). At the Birchenough Bridge Business Centre

in Chipinge District of Manicaland on the Masvingo-Mutare Highway there is a relatively new business complex that has been named '*Maths DzaMuseyamwa*' (*Museyamwa's Mathematics*). One wonders whether this is a shortened form of an emerging proverbial saying expressing something using the proverbial style. '*Museyamwa*' is a sub-totem of the *Mhofuyomukono* (Eland) clan in Zimbabwe and it has come to be used to stereotypically describe black business enterprises, especially rural shops that are often run on unprofessional lines and are sometimes not profitable.

The Shona proverb that feeds the nation

Having discussed the use of proverbs placed on sign posts and their effectiveness in conscientising people it is tempting to want to venture into the area of land redistribution and land use. After almost a whole century of land deprivation during which the black majority in Zimbabwe were settled in dry and unproductive areas while the very few white farmers had all the prime land to themselves, the government of Zimbabwe embarked on a process of land redistribution with the intention of benefitting the previously disadvantaged blacks. Part of this process is the fast-track land reform programme also known as the Third Chimurenga that started around 2000. Unfortunately, not every person who got land under this land reform programme is a good and committed farmer. Even audits by the ruling ZANU(PF) party 'confirm that the large and highly productive spreads of white farms have been taken over largely by politicians, judges, top policemen, generals and editors of state owned newspapers loyal to Mugabe-widely dubbed "weekend farmers" (Jan Raath, 2012). The result is that what was once 'the bread basket of Africa' has suffered and there has been food shortages and hunger. Agricultural inputs like cheap fertilizers and seed given to resettled farmers, especially those politically connected, were often abused and some were sold at double the price at bus ranks and the money raised used for other purposes. If these inputs had been put to good use then there would have been good returns as well. In a story titled "Made hit out at 'lazy' war vet farmers" *Nhamo Murefu* reported that the Agricultural Mechanisation Minister Joseph Made addressed the Buy Zimbabwe Market Company and shocked delegates by his admission that 'focus should be shifted from the debate about genetically modified crops to the central question of underutilization of land'. The Minister is quoted as saying:

The GMO debate is a closed chapter. Rather we should ask why the land distributed is being underutilized. The country should come up with an answer to the deadly laziness (<http://www.the Zimbabwean.co.uk>).

It is the intention at this point therefore to turn to a proverb that can be applied to situations of underutilisation of the land that the Minister of Agriculture, Mechanisation and Irrigation Development and the nation of Zimbabwe are deeply

concerned about. In a situation like this the Shona people have often looked back to African oral traditions in recognition of the wisdom in the folk proverbial expression that says '*Badza guru ipa murimi. Ukapa tsimbe inovata naro*'. The literal sense in which this proverb is used is that you should give a big hoe to someone who is hard-working because if you give it to a lazy person he/she will sleep on it and will produce nothing. In the context of the agrarian reform that took place in Zimbabwe this proverb meant that critical resources should be given to people who can utilise them fully for the benefit of the nation. If you give them to people who cannot utilise them the nation would suffer. This proverb, '*Badza guru ipa murimi, ukapa tsimbe inovata naro*' (Give resources to those who can use them) is the kind of proverb that, in the manner of the proverbs '*Zingizi gonyera pamwe, maruwa enyika haaperi*' (Carpenter bee stick to one flower because flowers of this world are too many) and '*Regai dzive shiri, mazai haana muto*' (Let them be birds, eggs have no gravy), one would love to see put on a sign post and placed at various strategic points in the newly acquired farms and resettled areas. While this proverb could be applied to any situation anywhere where effort is required it can be aptly applied to the critical situation of land reform in Zimbabwe. When this proverb '*Badza guru ipa murimi*' (Give a big hoe to a hard worker) was created in the remote past it was used to give warning or advice in much less adverse and much less serious circumstances. Now that proverb is much more relevant and useful today than it ever was before in our ancestors' time. Today it is used to depict a situation where a nation that was once the 'bread basket of Africa' has become the 'Begging Bowl of Africa', importing maize from countries like Zambia and Malawi where the country used to export in the past. On 6 May 2012 it was reported in the Zimbabwean Mail that the Food Reserve Agency of Zambia [was] sending 300 000 metric tones of maize worth \$42, 5 million United States dollars to Zimbabwe. Now to show the relevance of this proverb Ngoni Chanakira had reported in the *Newzimbabwe.com* that the then Agriculture Minister Herbert Murerwa had confirmed that at least one white commercial farmer had been allowed back on his land after the government kicked out the black beneficiary for not using the property. The Minister said in an interview:

Yes. I can confirm that we gave back the farm to the white commercial farmer last year. However this was mainly because the black farmer was not farming at all.

There have been cases too where black beneficiaries themselves have voluntarily and illegally leased their farms to the ejected former white commercial farmers. The writer of this article witnessed the putting up of infrastructure on a farm owned by a certain black school headmaster who was living in town. This headmaster was actually leasing his acquired farm to a white commercial farmer. The state President too was angry about this trend that he threatened to dispossess any resettled farmer who leased his farm to former white farmers. Others lease

their farms to those who want to use them. One resettled farmer in Mapinga revealed that:

The owner of this farm is not around, he lives in Harare and we pay rentals to him. He is not into farming and he comes here occasionally to collect his rentals. We don't use the whole farm (Africanews reporter, 7/5/12).

What this means is that part of this farm lies idle while the owner enjoys the status of a farm owner in Harare. It is in cases like this that the proverb '*Badza guru ipa murimi, ukapa tsimbe inovata naro*' (Give a big hoe to a committed and productive farmer) is used. Despite all these setbacks there are other resettled farmers who have prospered. According to the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) study:

Impressive investments have been made in clearing the land, in transport and in housing, the scale of investment carried out by people themselves, and without significant support from government or aid agencies, is substantial and provides firm foundation for the future (Africanews, 7/5/12).

There is no doubt that herd sizes in the resettled areas have grown, while households without cattle have declined. It is to such people who have made good progress that we should say '*badza guru ipa murimi*' (Give the big hoe to a hard worker) and say to the armchair cell-phone farmers based in Harare, away from their land, '*ukapa tsimbe inovata naro*' (If you give it to a lazy man he will sleep on it).

Proverbs against domestic violence

The final example of a proverb to be discussed is one that is used in the context of the scourge of domestic violence, especially gender based violence. In Zimbabwe today, spousal violence is the leading form of gender based violence and is grounded in cultural practices which have dimensions of gender inequality (www.safaid.net, p.2). This has also resulted in a high rate of divorce and the subsequent suffering of the separated parents and children. Admittedly, marriage has not always been so blissful right from the beginning of this institution. Married couples did quarrel even in traditional Shona society and elders or members of the extended families always intervened to restore some kind of order, arguing that '*Kurwa hakuvaki musha*' (Fighting does not make a home). The Ndebele also say '*Induku kayaki muzi*' (A knobkerrie does not build a home). But these situations to which the proverb was applied were relatively light. There are graver and more deadly situations today that call for the use of this proverb than ever before. This proverb is more useful and relevant now because domestic violence has reached

alarming proportions with official figures released by the Harare Civil Court showing that child maintenance cases stood at around 4000 in 2011, and this is just the tip of an iceberg (The Sunday Mail, May 6-12, 2012, p.D4). Also according to a report released by a non-governmental organisation working in Zimbabwe, Musasa Project, domestic violence is linked to more than 60% of murder cases that go through the High Court in Harare (www.abc.co.zw, 30 May 2011). These statistics are an indication of how numerous marriages have broken down very often after acrimonious accusations against each other. 'Stressful pleasures and life styles are wrecking havoc' in a manner not known in traditional society and 'marriage councilors now have a torrid time' as they try to deal with domestic violence. While in the past domestic violence rarely resulted in fatalities, today it is common to hear of people whose bellies have been ripped open, of people whose heads have been crushed with logs, or whose throats have been slit with kitchen knives. It is common to read about men who have shot dead their wives and children before turning the guns on themselves in cases of accusations and counter accusations of infidelity. It is as if people think fighting is the only way to solve disputes. In grave situations like these surely one can argue that the proverb '*Kurwa hakuvaki musha*' is more relevant in our violent culture of today than it ever was in our ancestors' culture. This is a proverb that appeals to anyone with a conscience.

In response to the high levels of domestic violence the Zimbabwe government put in place the Domestic Violence Act of 2006, a law that criminalises different forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, psychological and economic abuse. In a further attempt to stop the prevalence of domestic violence, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development launched the Anti-domestic Violence Council which was set up in terms of Section 16 of the Domestic Violence Act 5:16. In addition the Ministry transformed the annual 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence to cover the whole year (www.abc.co.zw, 30 May 2011). The measures against domestic violence are an eloquent statement that shows that '*kurwa hakuvaki musha*'. Because people no longer use these proverbs in their daily lives government has chipped in with pieces of legislation to do what proverbs used to do fairly well in the past.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that traditional wise sayings created by our ancestors are more useful and relevant today in the sense that society's ways and behaviour today call for the application of these proverbs more than was the case in the past. The paper has given examples of the practical use of Shona proverbial sayings in Zimbabwean communities where they are there to admonish, advise, ridicule and prompt deviants to conform to acceptable standards in order to improve the quality of life of society's members, young and old. In particular, the

paper focuses on Shona proverbs that have been retrieved from a dying oral tradition and put up on sign posts in a desperate attempt to save the nation, and goes on to discuss the relevance and applicability of two other crucial proverbs that, if also put up on sign posts, would improve the performance of the people and enhance the quality of life of citizens.

References

- Chesaina, C. (1991). *Oral literature of the Kalenjin*. Nairobi: Heinemann.
- Finnegan, R. (1976). *Oral literature in Africa*. Nairobi: OUP.
- Gender-based violence and spousal abuse amongst couples in Zimbabwe.
<http://www.safaid.net>.
- Mieder, W. (2004). *Proverbs: a handbook*. Greenwood: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Miruka, O. (1994). *Encounter with oral literature*. Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishers.
- Mutasa, D.E. (1997). *The Shona proverb over the ages: The sociolinguistic approach*. In P. Makgamatha (ed.), *Potent words: Studies in Southern African folklore* (pp. 273-287). Pietersburg: University of the North Press.
- Nandwa, J., & Bukenya, A. (1983) *Oral literature for schools*. Nairobi: Longman Kenya Ltd.
- Divorce rate alarming. (2012, May 6-12). *The Sunday Mail Metro*, p. D4.
- Father sexually assaults daughter. (2006, April 2-8). *The Sunday Mail Metro*, p. 2.
- Masau, P. (2012). Resettled farmers fail to utilize land. Retrieved May 13, 2012, from <http://www.africaNews.com>
- Raath, J. (2012) Zim crops failing after Mugabe's land 'reform'. www.zimsituation.com, January 31, 2012.
- UNFPA Zimbabwe (2010, December 2). Promoting evidence based HIV prevention services. Retrieved March 11, 2011, from <http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/zimbabwe>