

Re-Contextualisation of Traditional Oral Art Forms in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The article seeks to bring out some oral traditional art forms which are prevailing in some contemporary plays broadcasted on Zimbabwean television. The paper argues that in as much as people would want to follow the Western philosophy of life but as Africans there is an inborn trait within people which reminds them of where they come from. The re- contextualisation of these art forms explains the importance of the tradition to the indigenous people. The ability to use oral art forms in these modern plays shows that even playwrights in as much as they would want to reflect the burning issues of the day and move with time, they know their audience's roots. Oral traditional art forms as forms of utterances done by mouth are a product of a people's culture. This means that there are beliefs, morals and attitudes which are enshrined in these utterances such that their use will make African people feel their Africanness and be able to live as expected by the African society. Their use in some modern plays reflect that despite time which has been overtaken by events, people still value their culture as a way of Shona people' philosophy.

Key words: Oral Tradition, Modern/Contemporary Plays, Culture, Philosophy, Oral Art Forms, Re - Contextualisation

Introduction

Oral traditional art forms constitute a body of spoken forms of language which was there before literacy. It was through these linguistic forms that people could communicate, teach and pass all sorts of information in their communities. It is against such an understanding that people lived during the time of orature and these art forms have been re- contextualised in the modern society to play the same role they used to do in the past but in a different context. The environment in which people live now has seen this shift of how oral art forms are being used. The coming in of urbanisation and technology where messages, teachings are passed through the medium of television and other forms of electronic media has seen these art forms being used by different artists in their works. The roles of entertaining, teaching and informing are still the same in this present day thus the paper wants to explore the re-contextualisation of these oral art forms in Zimbabwe.

Understanding Orature or Oral Literature

According to waThiongo (1972) orature or oral literature passes from ear to mouth, generation to generation, it consists of songs, poems, drama, proverbs, riddles and sayings and it is the most ancient and richest in the African heritage. It follows that even when different components of oral art forms are performed today especially on television it will be conforming to the notion that it is heritage hence it has to be passed from one generation to the other. In African societies, oral tradition is the method in which history, stories, folktales and religious beliefs are passed on from generation to generation. Webster's dictionary defines "oral" as, "spoken rather than written," and it defines the word "tradition" as, "transmittal of elements of a culture from one generation to another especially by oral communication." Having defined these two core terms for the paper, it follows that the article analyses the transmission of these art forms through the medium of a television drama to different generations. For the African people, oral tradition is linked to their way of life. Most African societies place great worth in oral tradition because it is a primary means of conveying culture. It is also a mode of transmitting feelings, and attitudes. For centuries, African people depended upon oral tradition to teach the listener important traditional values and morals pertaining to life. Oral tradition delivers explanations to the mysteries of the universe and the meaning of life on earth. In African religion, it is the guiding principle to make sense of the world.

Bukenya et al (1997:3) asserts that oral literature refers to those forms or genres of speech formed through deliberate, distinctive and creative use of languages. Such forms may differ from one language community to another but they commonly include songs, narratives, riddles, proverbs, jokes, poems, sayings and tongue twisters among other possible forms. The most important defining character here is the orality of the forms, that is, the fact that the forms are communicated mainly or exclusively through utterances. Oracy as a social skill is an important avenue of communication in societies, which depends primarily on the spoken word for inter-personal as well as social interaction. Traditional oral art forms were concerned with everyday local happenings such as love and romantic escapades, praises of important dignitaries, moral issues among others. Also of importance to take note is that most traditional African oral forms are dynamic and liberal since they have and continue to absorb global influences which have helped transform them. This is a strong and valid point especially when one looks at the rise of different forms of speech to accommodate each other *slang* and *tsotsitaal* can also be used in these forms like proverbs for example but the idea is to make them understood by all and still maintaining the thrust.

Oral tradition is non-written history, it is spoken word only. Historically, most African societies did not have an invented alphabet. African scholar and writer, Mbiti (1975) asserts that:-

...Most African people did not invent an alphabet for the art of reading and writing. Therefore they could not keep written records of their history. Instead they passed on information from one generation to another, by word of mouth.

The human voice is the key element in oral tradition. Africans have been primarily vocal people throughout their history. Oral tradition in itself relies on the human voice to communicate varied messages. In support of the same view Dr. Muli Wa Kituku (1994) explains the notion that:-

Voice was the vehicle in which knowledge was passed on from one generation to another. Voice unified a family, clan, or community. Enforcement of customs depended on voice. When a person died...his or her voice was no longer to be heard, it was as if a whole library had been destroyed. Voice is important.

This therefore means that when various oral art forms are examined in the paper then it is quite transparent that they are transmitted through the voice so as to cement the above idea that the voice is of paramount importance in transmitting this heritage.

Oral tradition can be kept alive by the performances in a society because the oral elements in one culture or in a colonized community are important for both political issues and social life. It is important for political issues because there are enough to give the exact impression of oral works in their original form. The discussion on oral traditional art forms and contemporary drama is quite interesting. The most interesting part is the contrast between oral tradition and contemporary drama. When oral tradition is under discussion, it refers to the art of uttering rich ideas through the word of mouth. This was usually done in the past where the education system and way of teaching was done through the oral art forms. On the other hand by contemporary drama the article refers to the present day or modern plays which are screened on the Zimbabwean television. The argument lies on the use of old Shona oral art forms in modern plays. It is of significance to point out that there is a lot of wisdom in these oral art forms as reflected by their use in modern plays.

More so, it has to be noted that there is unbroken continuity in African verbal art forms interacting oral genres to such literacy productions as the novel and poetry. This means that because of the changing times, the art of uttering has now been continued through the production of novels as it was pointed out earlier in the paper by Mbiti (1975) that Africans had no alphabet and could not write. This

means that with the emergence of literacy, various forms of oral literature have been recorded, the likes of Ngano Volume 1 which was compiled by Fortune (1988) among others. The oral tale is not “the childhood of fiction” (Macculloch1905) but the early literacy traditions were beneficiaries of the oral genres, and there is no doubt that the epic and its hero are the predecessors of the African novel and its central characters. The African oral tradition distils the essence of human experiences, shaping them into rememberable, readily retrievable images of broad applicability with an extra ordinary potential for eliciting emotional responses. These are removed from their historical contexts so that performers may re-contextualise them in artistic forms which is what the paper will concentrate on. The oral arts, containing this sensory residue of past cultural life and the wisdom so engendered, constitute a medium for organising, examining and interpreting an audience’s experiences of the images of the present.

Methodology

In compiling the information for the paper the researcher embarked on qualitative research technique particularly the explorative research design and CHIPAWO as case study. The investigator carried out some content or textual analysis of some Zimbabwean dramas screened on Zimbabwean television and on the other hand analysed some performances done by CHIPAWO as an organisation for children performances. The researcher randomly selected the screened plays on television because the idea was to prove the rampant use of oral indigenous art forms amongst the people of Zimbabwe through drama via the medium of television. Some of the information used in the study was gathered through reviewing of related literature since the area on oral art has been researched on from different angles by other scholars.

Oral Traditional Art Forms in Contemporary Theatre

Theatre in the modern day is a combination of several aspects both from the indigenous culture of Zimbabwe and the Western culture. Indigenous oral art forms are of importance to look at as they will reflect on a people’s way of life which is their culture. Oral art forms are those utterances which are done by word of mouth. Miruka (1994) notes that oral art farms are a product of culture. Thus through a people’s oral literature, we can peep into their philosophy, beliefs, attitudes, morals and many more. Nandwa and Bukenya (1983) define oral literature as those utterances spoken, recited, sung whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and indigenous expression. In other words, they refer to the world view and the culture of the people who create it. This means that oral art forms are some things which maybe spoken or recited but definitely

they are not written. Taban Lo Liyon has a definition of oral literature which tends to embrace everything that is passed on by word of mouth. He defines oral literature as the cultural information and values transmitted mainly by the spoken word and received by the whole organism (the human body as a whole). Some of these oral art forms to include folktales, proverbs to mention a few are going to be looked at in this paper.

Having defined what is meant by oral art forms, it follows that these are also part of traditional performances but the only difference with these is that they are done through the word of mouth. Some of these indigenous art forms are also seen permeating contemporary plays and that is of paramount importance to have a closer analysis of these. These art forms are part of the philosophy of the Shona people's life, their controlling consciousness which perfectly captures their lived experiences. Orature has functioned as a mighty supporter of people's struggles against the vagrancies of life, that is, internal and external. A number of Shona people's oral art forms serve to empower and embolden the human principle. The simple reason for such an outlook towards survival is that life is a challenge that demands courage. In other words, to live is to be courageous. The Acholi people of Uganda have no kind words for cowards when they tell 'O coward, return into your mother's womb' (p'Bitek 1986:26). In other words, the idea here is that orature is not past, traditional and fixated. It has its roots in the Shona past but continues to be created up to this day. It is the case of Shona people's philosophy thus some oral art forms which were used in the past society are going to be discussed to show how they have been incorporated in contemporary plays on Zimbabwean television.

Children's games

In Zimbabwe there were performances which were done for different reasons like children's games which were done when they were celebrating the full moon (*Jenaguru*). Girls and boys would play games such as '*Sarura wako*' in Shona in which girls and boys will be in a circle singing whilst a boy or girl goes around to choose a partner of their choice. This was done to teach children to make choices and or decisions about their life partners. These children's games would also include *mahumbwe* games. These plays bear a necessary developmental function. They pass on attitudes and knowledge of self, imitations of adult life and values, and distinct criticisms of adult life and societal norms.

Also of importance to take note of under children's games in Shona are *zvindori* and *zvidobi* where children will be taught how to count and memorise names of places. These are sometimes called children's folklore. Children's folklore is a play as well as a comment on the names of the mountains in African context or in

their immediate areas. Some attitudes are imposed by race and sex, and family, ethnic and economic situations. The oral songs and rhymes of these games are a special part of children's folk life. Black youth typically learn sidewalk songs from other children. But they also learn them from their parents often before they can talk. Once in the children's repertoire, sidewalk songs take the place of nursery rhymes and reflect pre-adult concerns. Children then learn them from each other in the street, on the front porch, on the sidewalk, or in the park. Looking at our own Zimbabwean television plays these games are also seen permeating contemporary plays especially in the drama **Studio 263** where Angie Jari and her friends are seen playing these especially the 'names of America' game where at the end they will task each other on names be it of countries, capital cities, trees and so forth. This resembles the *zvindori* and *zvidobi* which were done orally during the pre colonial period. But because this tradition has to be passed on from generation to generation though in a different set up but it is still there.

Children's folklore in general fulfils certain functions, it reflects and criticizes society and transmits values. For most kids, their lore entertains them, teaches them how to manipulate words, helps to develop their group identity, and creates a bond. It also provides the opportunity to practice "handling" authority and informs them of their sexual roles. The existence of children's sidewalk culture depends on adults who believe that children should socialize separately. Even though they consider their children to be blessings from God, they believe that children should not be a part of adult talk and that children should play with children. As a result, children talk about "grown things" with their siblings and friends in a way they can get away with, in a song.

Folktale narrative in modern plays

The art of storytelling was a very important concept in the African culture. It is the conveying of events in *words*, *images* and *sounds*, often by *improvisation* or embellishment. They were never done for the sake of doing thus Mkanganwi (1988) in the introduction remarks of Ngano Volume 1 avers that, "Being a body of verbal art, 'ngano' did not occur in a social vacuum, divorced from ordinary life. They were told for entertainment and instruction. They were an important part of the evening recreation and education of the children..." This clearly shows that because events have been overtaken by time this concept can no longer be seen in its original state that is why they are seen used elsewhere to allow the transmission of this heritage to different generations.

Folktales are an important medium for socialising children in that they incorporate various other folklore forms such as songs, jokes and riddles. They are part of the oral forms that were and are used to mould the direct perception and consciousness. They also directed human participation in the way the audience respond to the storyteller saying 'dzepfunde' (we are listening). Hegel 1952:199 postulates that "For those people who would have been mis-schooled misinterpret these folktales as rudiments and fetishist psychological and underdeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature". As Africans who are rooted in the oral storytelling traditions, we refute this as we interpret with salivating and ecstatic admiration those works that are rooted in Shona/African creative traditions. Thus tradition of storytelling is prevalent in modern performances as seen in the film **Neria**. Usually in the traditional past the concept of storytelling was done by grandmothers in the evening with the children gathered around the fire place. It is also the same with the film **Neria**, in the play mbuya Chitsike mother - in - law to Neria is seen with children narrating a folktale 'Jari Mukaranga' to them. The folktale is about a domestic issue where a man has two wives in a polygamous marriage. The elder wife is not well taken care of but the husband loves the younger wife who is called "*mukaranga*" in Shona. This folktale is being recited to the grandchildren by mbuya in the evening. It is accompanied by a song and as they were singing the song, his son, Neria's husband arrived with his friends and found the song being sung yet they were also singing it on their way home. The transcription of the song is presented below,

Ku mu tenge ra ja ri mka ra nga ko i ni wo

Ja ri mka ra nga

More so, the same issue is prevalent in **Studio 263**. In the soap, Muwengwa has a wife Sipilisiwe and a 'small house' Eve whom he dates. In this scenario, there is an element from the folktale Jari Mukaranga which is brought out. In this respect, Muwengwa is so much in love with his second wife Eve and not caring about and neglecting his wife. He is so much devoted to his second wife and everything she does to him is alright. This concept is borrowed from the traditional folktale Jari Mukaranga where there is a domestic intrigue that ensures that in a polygamous marriage, the younger wife usually becomes favourable of them all. This shows that folktales are really part of a people's tradition that they are found permeating modern day performances.

Besides the above mentioned plays, regarding storytelling, CHIPAWO has tried to reclaim and preserve Shona folktales in an age where such traditional performance practices have been viewed as anachronistic especially by the young generation. Shona storytelling especially the trickster narrative has been much adopted and adapted in that area of children theatre. Chipawo undertakes most of these activities with their theatre groups of children and young people whose ages range from three to eighteen years. They have performed several folktale stories which include Mutongi Gava, Jari Mukaranga among others. It exposes children to the cultural performances heritage of their people thus folktales keep on being part and parcel of contemporary performances in Zimbabwe. To this idea, Chinweizu et al (1985:241) contend that the artist in the traditional African milieu spoke for and to his community. His imagery, themes, symbolism and forms were drawn from a communally accessible pool. He was head. He made sense. This means that the artist should be able to lead the community, Achebe (1975) says the artist should march right in front of the society in which he leads especially with this tradition of folktale he should make sure that the upcoming generations should have knowledge about these things.

Proverbs

Proverbs (*tsumo*) have been defined by Pongweni (1996) as phenomenon of language of literature of society and culture. They can not be disassociated from the society hence they are culture bound. It can be defined as a short familiar sentence expressing a supposed truth or moral lesson. Mieder (2004:1) defines it as a short generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truths, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation. To cement the same idea, Bhebhe and Viriri (2012: 10) refer to them as, "the palm oil with which African words are eaten". This brings out the same idea that these proverbs were and are still part and parcel of a people's life. In essence, this means that proverbs are a useful means of studying a people as they show or reveal what it is that the people adore and what it is they hate, what they respect and what they despise. African countries are rich in these sayings for they create them in their own imagery to suit whatever they want to teach or express. This means that in practise these proverbs can be positively used or negatively used depending with the situation and content in which it is applied. As they are created by society for their use, contemporary plays also incorporated these in their performances to express different circumstances for example in the drama **Togara Sei?** where there is an issue of lodgers and landlords. Nzuda and his young brother in the play could not relate well with their tenants and they always raise their rentals whenever they feel like doing so. They do not buy themselves food in their home relying on the lodgers. This does not go down well with the majority of tenants who lived there. such that whoever is doing it will know and change the

attitude. In the process of reciting '*bembera*', the aggrieved or wronged makes public his/her disappointments. It is a facility that is meant to address social conflict without direct physical confrontation in a context where harmony, balance and peace are critical determinants of social order. Usually when this '*bembera*' was done in the past, the person would have been drunk and considered to be doing that under the control of beer. In the play **Simuka Upenye (*Arise and Shine*)** screened on ZTV, sekuru Tau will always move around with his bicycle and whenever he met school children he shouts, "*Imi vana moda kutijairira imi*" (Children you are now becoming too much). He does this because sometimes he finds them in wrong places and in a bid to let other adults hear so that they caution them together. Also in the play **Pfuma yenhaka** there is the character Paraffin who is also perceived as greedy. He always eats whenever he finds food. Paraffin talks about Ngoromani's family which has taken the property of his deceased brother and leave his wife and family suffering. He talks about it openly to people and to him but when they hear about it they assume he is sane and sweep everything under the carpet. This has been adopted from the traditional past hence it can be concluded that these have since permeated modern performances.

Praise Poems and Names

Praise names are basically clan praises. Shona people are divided into clans and these clans have got some poems which they are thanked after a good service is done. It includes poetry uttered by husband and wife during the act of conjugal intercourse, *madanha* by women and *zvirevereve* for men (bedroom praises). The main intention of this genre is to thank the member of the clan for the service rendered. The praises of the clan are phrased in terms of its totem. The clans and sub-clans are penetrated with the imagery directly suggested by the totem animals of the clan being praised. The whole essence of using praise names in Shona is that people should thank somebody for whatever good he/she has done so that he/she will continue doing it thus the saying, '*tenda kuti chakata dzidonhe*' (you should be thankful so that the fruit may fall again). These clan praises are recited in praise of the whole clan for the Shona people believe that if someone has done good it is because of his ancestors who have made him done that. When looking into the soap **Studio 263**, one can note that there is the use of this clan praises when mai Huni is addressing her husband. Mai Huni is seen addressing her husband with his totem 'Jena'. Whenever she is thanking him she says "*Maita Jena*" (Thank you Jena) despite the fact that she is a modern woman. This really shows that there is the influence of the traditional past and the soap has just managed to keep that tradition going.

Besides the clan praises under these praise names, there are boasts names (*mazita ekuzvirumbidza*) which also fall under praise names. These maybe personal and self praised designed to impress or intimidate. In the traditional past, these were usually

done by n'angas before divination to inspire confidence in the people who will be in need of help. These are also prevalent in the soap **Studio 263**. One would find that when Muwengwa is with his small house, Eve, he would be calling himself names like, *'Isu vanaMukanya, Makwiramiti'*, (We the Mukanyas, Climber of trees) to appear as if they are better than anybody else and that is typical of boasting and these praise names are used to impress the lady. Even when he met with Wakanaka, the lawyer uses Muwengwa's praise name and call him *'Ah Mukanya'*. Also Welly in the soap is full of using boast names to himself. He calls himself Dread Welly wemaPlan (DWP). If one looks at this closely these two, Muwengwa and Welly always use these boast names because they are all after one lady, Eve. They fight over this girl so each of them tries by all means to impress her.

Lullabies (Children's Poetry)

Lullabies are children's poetry which is composed with the understanding and appreciation of the child's needs. They are among the earliest oral forms to which infants are exposed. They do not have a fixed performance location. Chiwome (1996) contends that the primary goal of lullabies is to teach children that crying is not the best way of communicating. Although they are usually performed to entertain or soothe a crying baby, lullabies also serve as media for socialising children. Mothers or any other adult performs them. A lullaby can either be slow, rhythmic, or sleep-inducing depending on its intention. As a socialisation tool, lullabies are used to introduce infants and babies primarily to the language of the society. They also expose infant to the language and tradition of singing. For example in the soap **Studio 263**, Tendai is a pre-school teacher and it is at these pre-schools nowadays that these lullabies are done. Infants are socialised into different aspects of life like to wash hands after using the toilet, to sing and listen to them when someone is singing to them. Again in the drama **Manje So?**, Phidza had to ask Tendai to baby sit his son who was left by his mother. Tendai had to look for other twins from the hood to keep the baby company and sing to them whilst they play. This was usually done in the past when parents are busy in the fields so this concept has also seen itself permeating contemporary plays.

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, this paper explored on the re-contextualisation of traditional oral art forms into the contemporary plays and it has managed to keep the tradition of oral art abreast with the modern day. It has highlighted on the general tradition of oral literature in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular and has given the importance of this heritage thus the transmission of it to different generations has been noted through contemporary plays on Zimbabwean

television. Largely the paper has been devoted to look at the oral traditional art forms which have found way into modern drama and are prevalent on Zimbabwean television. The paper was informed by the concept of orature and the idea of re-contextualisation which sees the art of passing information by word of mouth from one generation to another still obtaining value in the modern plays. This is a deliberate move to prove that as long as the community live, their tradition also has to be evident and the assurance of passing on of that heritage to other generations will be assured hence proving the notion that culture is dynamic.

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