

The Past in them: Celebrating BaTonga artefacts and visual cultural communication in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Much has been written on BaTonga’s dislocation from the Zambezi Valley to pave way for the construction of the hydroelectric project and the aftermath effects on the BaTonga. BaTonga are characterised in these discourses as having lost their livelihoods and subsequently their culture. This article celebrates and advances that BaTonga took their culture with them especially as embodied in their cultural material objects such as the *ncelwa*. Using artefactual semiotics the article advances the argument that a view of BaTonga from a visual cultural communication perspective allows us to appreciate how BaTonga managed to carry with them key cultural values which have made them assume the cultural identity they have today.

Key Words: visual communication, *ncelwa*, artefactual semiotics, cultural communication, identity.

Introduction

Much of the literature and studies (Colson 1971, McGregor 2009, Hughes 2010, Ncube 2004, Munikwa 2011, Gambahaya and Muhwati 2010, Saidi 2013, Siamonga 2012) on BaTonga in Zimbabwe bemoan the effects of physical dislocation of BaTonga people from the Zambezi valley. In the discourses BaTonga are characterised as having lost their livelihoods and subsequently their culture; and contemporarily making efforts to regain their language, culture and identity. However, studies that celebrate BaTonga themes are lacking in these academic discourses. One reason could be that the various theories and points of departures used by most researchers have tended to be

deconstructive in nature. For example McGregor (2009) and Hughes (2010) take ethnographic approaches, and Ncube (2004) records the historical matrixes of the BaTonga. Munikwa (2011) advances evangelist from the Dutch Reformed Church perspective.

An attempt, however, has been made by Gambahaya and Muhwati (2010) who celebrate BaTonga oral literature. Saidi (2013) emphasises the importance of underlining the significance who of BaTonga participation and presence in the public spaces in Zimbabwe against the backdrop of nation building. One site amongst several from which BaTonga culture can be recuperated is through observing the role of cultural material objects such as the *ncelwa*. A critical focus on notions of visual communication accords us a new look or an incorporative study of the BaTonga where the re-writing of their past is more celebratoric than one characterised by nostalgia, loss, pain and neglect. Thus using artefactual semiotics, (Saidi 2013), the article advances that a view of BaTonga from a visual cultural communication perspective allows us to appreciate how BaTonga managed to carry with them key cultural values which have made them assume the cultural identity they have today.

The Kariba dam project

The historical development that befell the BaTonga in the late 1950s is emphasised in several studies on BaTonga. Hughes (2010) focuses much on the play out of the project as well as the discourses that emerged after the completion of the project as well as the physical, social and economic problems BaTonga faced due to the Kariba Dam hydroelectric project. His problem however is a strict view of BaTonga from the Zambian side. Macgregor (2009) makes no apology even in the reconstruction of BaTonga historical experiences from which she largely centres on the Zambian BaTonga. While there are traces of narratives from the Zimbabwean side, much of the historical reconstruction is Zambian biased. Hughes (2010) tries to cover up the gap by having a considerable focus on Zimbabwean BaTonga.

Ncube (2004) studied the history of the Zimbabwean-Tonga arguing that they are part of an ethnic group in the North-western part of the country historically forgotten. The study is a historical record and instigates BaTonga historical presence and identity in Zimbabwe. The study further incorporates the Nambya ethnic group, too, making it a two-in one historical focus of the two ethnic groups; one of which is directly affected by the Kariba dam project and the other linked to the migrations from Great Zimbabwe as well as the Ndebele reign of the pre-colonial times.

The historical experiences and the aftermath effects faced by the BaTonga on both sides of the Zambezi River do not make the Tonga two different ethnic groups. For the BaTonga, the Zambezi River was not a frontier to them (McGregor 2009). It was in fact the World Bank sponsored hydroelectric project that saw the creation of a manmade reservoir in the interior as well as colonial policies of nation-state that divided the same ethnic group into Zambian-Tonga and Zimbabwean-Tonga as they are mostly referred to in contemporary discourses of the Zambezi valley.

Gambahaya and Muhwati (2010) recreate the historical experiences of the BaTonga to reveal the cultural loss in order to identify the thematic concerns of BaTonga oral literature. While it can be argued that there is, to some degree, a celebration of BaTonga orature, the choice of thematic focus overshadows this celebration as much of it reveals the cultural, social and economic wounds the BaTonga suffered and reflected in their expressive thought systems depicted in oral literature.

Much of the BaTonga historical experiences along the shoreline during and after the Kariba dam construction has been dealt with elsewhere (Saidi 2013, Siyamonga 2012, Hughes 2010, McGregor 2009, PANOS 2005 and Ncube 2004). It is, however, important to point out that since history is dynamic, its interpretation should not be left to historians or archeologists alone but to other researchers from visual communication and even semioticians too.

Artefactual-semiotics

De Saussure (1966) advanced a semiotic theory which in essence is a theory of language. His theory centralises the sign as the central aspect of linguistic systems. The other important notions of the theory are arbitrariness; the convention and social (Culler 1994) of the signs. Next is the triad relationships that exist between the sign and its components –sign, signifier and signified as shaping the theory of the linguistic sign. Pierce (1960) coming from philosophy and mathematics advances his *logic* semiotic theory whose main contribution is to expand the de Saussurean (1966) theory of sign to address contextualised communicative contexts making signs in any given conventional communicative context ‘medium for thought’ (Houser, 2010:92). He introduces the *icon*, *index*, and *symbols* as making a continuum of semiotics. Attempting a clarification of Piercean (1960) semiotic theory, Houser (2010) concludes that Piercean semiotics handles the mind as sign systems and thought as sign in action; and the product of the two is intellectual experience.

Both de Saussure (1966) and Peirce (1955) read together allows us to conclude that for de Saussure (1960) semiotics is read as a theory of language given its provenance in linguistics (Cobley 2001) while Peirce (1960) can be read as a philosophy of language. Chomsky's (1965) generative grammar is perhaps an attempt to combine the two ends mostly his view of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) concept. Chomsky's (1965) problem however was on the context of linguistic sign systems' interplay. He claims to have been addressing a homogenous society which most critics (Halliday 1984) have correctly observed did not exist.

The above view on semiotics informs artefactual semiotics especially read from modern semiotic submissions. Seboek (2001) noted that the world of semiotics is so vast and incorporates a number of key human aspects. Using Piercean theory he says symbols for example are what set humans apart from the rest of the species. Seboek (2001) suggested a system of specialisation with regards to *signs* hence encouraged modelling and institutionalisation of semiotics. Against this understanding of semiotics, van Leeuwen (2005) was quick to come up with his social semiotics from which he observes signs as existing in a specific social context as 'semiotic resources' defined as 'the actions and artefacts we use to communicate' (van Leeuwen, 2005:3).

It is here where a relook at the world of semiotics makes us see that theoretical branches of semiotics are but communication theories. Thus, artefactual semiotics centralises artefacts or material objects as sign systems viewing them as 'systems of knowledge, intersemiotic sign systems and reflective systems' (Randviir and Cobley 2010:123). Analysing cultural spaces through statues using institutionalised semiotics, Saidi (2013:47) says the semiotic branch is 'informed by a basic view of material objects... as signs which are realised in specific contexts where they assume various cultural, political and historical meanings.' The idea of modelling has a plus in that we realise that each context is complex in its own right. For example, the BaTonga historical, cultural and social experiences accord the BaTonga socio-cultural context complexities which cannot be dealt with, by any randomly-picked visual communication theory. Thus, universal theorisation is weak in interpreting specific sign systems that exist or are part of a social context especially if that social and cultural context is African. We, thus, view the BaTonga *ncelwa* as an artefact as well as a sign from which various meanings can be yielded or produced.

The character and shape of visual communication is observed as one that is given life by nonverbal coding systems synonymous to the conventional language. While conventional language has suffered 'contamination', linguistic notions of imperialism or suffered effects of language planning, nonverbal language through artefacts carry

less of these effects hence a platform of interest in celebrating BaTonga heritage and past.

BaTonga *ncelwa*

Smoking as a social activity is not a new phenomenon among the African people. Scholars like Clark (1998) claim that smoking in Africa was introduced by the Portuguese. Vder Merwe (2005:147) disputes such claims by saying ‘Khoisan peoples smoked a variety of aromatic materials before European contact...’ Phillipson (1983:308) concurs with van der Merwe (2005) while presenting Shaw’s 1938 archaeological findings noting that ‘tobacco was ordinarily snuffed or chewed among southern Africans.’ (2010) says among the Tswana smoking tobacco was associated with powerfulness or sharpness, and ‘the head rush of inhalation, and the mini-orgasm of the sneeze, and so with “life force” or “breath” (*moya*)’ (2010:82). He also observes that ethnic groups at times defined themselves or were defined by others through the practice of smoking. Today BaTonga women are also identified along these lines based on their *ncelwa*. The other declaration made by Landau (2010) is that smoking was associated with fertility. He says,

In the 1950s, pouches of tobacco (*segwana*) were carried back and forth from the Tswapong Hills to the Blauwberg on the Mogalakwena River to bring rain and better the crops, marking chiefs’ alliances that might prove critical during droughts. Old women even today pinch the scrotums of little boys – called *segwana*, tobacco pouch – and pantomime a huge *gogasnort* of their fingers, and exclaim “Strong!” or “He’s going to be a man!” Rain and inhaling tobacco were linked in chains of signification because they entailed related activities. Tobacco was therefore one node around which power was “harmonize[d] with experience”...in the rain-making activities of the chief. It was not the only one, of course. The idea of pula or rain attached among highveld people not only to smoking and snorting (Landau, 2010:82).

The above is a Tswana social and cultural smoking social set up. BaTonga elders confirm that smoking has always been part of their socio-cultural being. The *ncelwa* is thus visual evidence of a long cultural and historical practice which continues even to this day. Mapfumo (2013) comments that;

Smoking is essential in the life of BaTonga women. Most women enjoy the *ndombondo* or *nchelwa* smoke as they believe that the smoking boosts the immune system. They also see it as a unique way to relax and recharge themselves. Some of the BaTonga women say it helps them to have an open mind and see things differently and innovatively. Some cultural experts say the *nchelwa* smoking tradition has helped them to restore their pride and dignity in the wake of powerful Western cultural onslaught (Mapfumo, *The Herald* Saturday 25 May 2013).

Smoking is part of BaTonga culture and the *nchelwa* is but a smoking instrument and a material object occupying an important domestic space within the BaTonga cultural sphere. *nchelwa* is a smoking pipe handled or a semiotic artefactual piece for the BaTonga. It is called the *ndombondo* or *mfukoin* in other BaTonga dialects. It is used by BaTonga women for smoking tobacco. Men have their own smoking pipe which is smaller than the *nchelwa* called the *chete*.

The BaTonga *nchelwa* is a long handled squash and it has a hole on one end where a male clay stem is fixed to hold embers and *polya*. The calabash-gourd to which the clay male stem is attached acts as a water chamber while the long second squash-stem is then used to inhale the smoke from the gradually burning *polya* placed inside the clay male stem but not directly on top of the embers. The *polya* is burnt slowly (catalysed by sorghum) by conduction; and the smoke bubbles through water to give the women who smoke it an extended filtered smoking pleasure. Given that it is a women's smoking pipe, it is also decorated with colourful beads and largely colour coded based on the choices of the owner. The BaTonga had a long trading relations with the Portuguese (McGregor 2009) from which beads became an important commodity for the women.

Who authors the *nchelwa*?

BaTonga women are the authors of the *nchelwa* and they use readily available material. The material includes squashes, reeds, clay and scrap metal. The squash is a plant, dried and has seeds removed from a small hole drilled on the bulb-squash area. Clay from the Zambezi flood-prone areas is used to make the 'cup' or bowl which makes the 'head' of the male stem. Beads of various colours are thus sewn together or coloured cloth is knitted together and hung around the neck of the *nchelwa*.

There is what seems to be a huge irony where the material used to make the pipe is cheap and simple yet the created material piece is far from being simple. It is a sophisticated artefactual semiotic piece that reflects a great degree of ingenuity. The reflected ingenuity and sophistication on a piece is created by Africans, women in particular, who are considered ‘backward’ and ‘unschooled’. It is this sophistication and ingenuity that attracts, in part, tourists to areas like Binga. This same sophistication gives the *ncelwa* its unique place within the BaTonga cultural artefactual semiosphere.

The *ncelwa* traditionally is first used by women from a tender adolescence age. The Binga Museum houses two unique photographs taken in the 1940s where two young girls were photographed happily clinging to their *ncelwas*. The way the *ncelwa* is held by the two young female adults reflect how they seem to have just been initiated into the ‘new fashion’ (of smoking *ncelwa*). The two also show a similar attachment and association with other aspects (dress, the piercing of the nose) around them as they appear very happy as shown by their natural smiles with front teeth knocked out as per the BaTonga identity requirements of the time. A young adult BaTonga woman who was found unable or not using the *ncelwa* (not smoking), was considered as one who was not moving with times. Hence, with the use of *ncelwa* one can become a mark of graduating young BaTonga girls into adulthood. Women would then smoke the *ncelwa* from that time (or age) until their time of death. Sadly, however, the young BaTonga women today seem to be shunning away from the tradition and only elderly BaTonga women mostly continue the practice.

***Ncelwa* and *mbanje* (marijuana/cannabis) connection**

Phillipson (1983) reflects that early western scholars studying smoking pipes in Africa concluded that water smoking pipes were linked to the smoking of *marijuana* (cannabis). der Merwe (2005:147) thinks the water pipe has Arab origins and he says ‘The Arab water pipe (*hookah*), of possible Persian origin, is equally widespread in East, Central and South Africa.’ This Arab link also coincides with the introduction of cannabis which according to van der Merwe (2005) became what he calls the widespread smoking material, later mixed with tobacco when it was ‘introduced’ to Africa by Portuguese.

Furthering his argument van der Merwe (2005) uses Sebanzi findings in Sebanzi area – Zambia, saying archaeologists found a tradition of pottery where clay was used as a raw material for making material objects. This then demonstrated that clay pipes of non-Arab design were used in Zambia as early as *ca.* A.D. 1200, apparently by ancestral Tonga people (van der Merwe, 2005:148). Phillipson (1983) advances the argument

that given that tobacco could not have made its way to Zambia at this time the earlier pipes were used for smoking cannabis. Interestingly for Phillipson's (1983) claim there was 'no technology to test evidence of cannabis residues at the time of the archaeological excavations and the pipes have not in recent years received analysis' (van der Merwe 2005:148) meaning that there still remains no direct evidence for cannabis smoking at Sebanzi (in Zambia) although van der Merwe (2005) maintains that it still remains the 'most reasonable explanation' (van der Merwe (2005:148).

The BaTonga popular smoking pipe has also been at the centre of controversy in terms of its functional use and interpretation by scholars. The stereotyping of cannabis smoking as argued above is traced back to the early western scholar-popularised-literature on smoking and smoking pipes. Phillipson (1983:302) observed that African smoking pipes are of two general types:

...those with an angle between the bowl and the stem (or stem socket), also called elbow-bend pipes; and those with no such angle, also called barrel-pipes or tube pipes. The former type is found all over the continent and is ethnographically associated with tobacco smoking. The latter type is found in the eastern, southern and central areas of the continent where it is ordinarily attached to a chamber to form a water pipe. These water pipes are commonly associated with the smoking of cannabis in Africa.

From the taxonomic view Phillips brings in one observes that the *ncelwa* fits within the second category of barrel-pipes or tube pipes where an extra water chamber makes it a water smoking-pipe. The water chamber is perhaps what makes scholars like Phillipson conclude that *ncelwa* is closely associated with 'the smoking of cannabis in Africa' (Phillipson, 1983:302). While this might be true in other unspecified parts of Africa, with regard to the BaTonga *ncelwa*, this cannabis claim is disputed by the BaTonga *ncelwa* smokers. The smoking is openly done, (given legal issues and state positions on cannabis in the country). During social gatherings or festivals BaTonga *ncelwa* women smokers gather in groups sharing matters of life while openly smoking *ncelwa*. A manipulation olfactory in and around areas of where the *ncelwa* is smoked one finds no traces of cannabis smell. However one gets the aroma of burning embers which perfume the atmosphere and not even the smell of *polya* (tobacco) can be picked up. The *ncelwa-mbanje* is thus but a myth advanced by scholars and contemporary Zimbabwean citizens to misrepresent and denigrate the BaTonga by associating them with cannabis smoking in a manner that makes them appear as weed smokers.

The identity of women in any society is crucial and for the BaTonga through the *ncelwa* the women have mapped women's social space within the BaTonga community and within the larger space of Zimbabwean realm of women's social space. The BaTonga culturally follow matrilineal patterns and to identify them is by looking at those aspects that map their space. Interestingly, the *ncelwa* is an individual tool; women do not physically share the *ncelwa* as when they die her close sister inherits the smoking tool. Communicatively, we find the *ncelwa* continuing to send visual cultural messages that have a bearing on the BaTonga women.

The *ncelwa* is a key visual symbol and following de Saussure (1966) we can say that the *ncelwa* signifies BaTonga women's ingenuity, and identity. The *ncelwa* also represents BaTonga women's presence in the country where cultural mapping is quite visible. This created artefact has found its way among the pieces of Zimbabwe. The BaTonga have contributed to the economy of the country through tourism where the *ncelwa* is a tourist attraction. Through the *ncelwa* we appreciate BaTonga culture as operative and utilising visual communication processes means that the culture can be described as made up of systems of knowledge, inter-semiotic sign systems and reflective systems. Goodenough (1981) said that cultures are in fact sets of decision standards, intellectual forms, perception models, models of relating and organizational patterns (Ranviir and Copley 2010 in Copley ed. 2010:123). Thus such codified systems of cultural communication have drawn tourist business along the shores and some aspects of the Zimbabwean character are reflected.

A mere look at the *ncelwa* and its simplicity communicates an array of messages about BaTonga women's ingenuity and their cognitive development as well as cosmology. Scholarship has shown how BaTonga are regarded as 'backward' and lacking schooling. Most BaTonga, especially elderly women who smoke the *ncelwa* have not had opportunities to acquire formal education and given the period of the *ncelwa* making, formal education had even not advanced to Zimbabwe the way it has done today.

Against this background, the question that needs to be answered is; how was it possible that women would create a simple but very sophisticated smoking pipe which has been deemed by Siamonga (2012) and Nyathi (2005) as the healthiest way of smoking? Toth and Schick (1994) traced technological tools from evolution to prove the level of intellect as well as cultural development of an ethnic group. We celebrate BaTonga cultural technologies that helped produce pieces such as the *ncelwa* as visual material pieces. We also can observe that BaTonga were literate in visual semiotic language and communication making production of semiotic pieces a form of literacy to which a section of the population in the country and the world are, even today, illiterate to.

Conclusion

The role of semiotic artefacts in cultural communication is not merely for archaeological, historical or anthropological significance. Artefacts are important communicative signals in visual communication and this explains why archaeologists, historians and anthropologists alike have drawn conclusions from them in some cases misrepresenting the society they studied. As visual signals, the *ncelwa* has to first be viewed in its primary state as symbolic media from which their materiality impinge BaTonga's 'sensuality' as well as appealing to them and outsiders 'physically at a fundamental level' (Jones, 2007:19). As BaTonga women use them, remembrance about their past, identity and being is aided and physically they embody their memory as a people with a rightful claim to their surroundings. Thus, perception and appearance become indices of human agency and intentions given how they are positioned in time and space making. Jones' (2007) conviction becomes relevant when he observed that the world of material objects is a significant sign system analogous to language. The *ncelwa* was constructed to codify information as such there is an interplay of communication of meanings of cultural significance showing that material culture visually characterise the matrix of human existence given that 'people *and* objects are engaged in the process of remembering' (Jones, 2007:22) and information exchange.

In conclusion, this article has celebrated BaTonga women's *ncelwa* an artefact that breathes life to the visual communication discourses in Zimbabwe. While much has been said regarding BaTonga's dislocation from the Zambezi Valley to pave way for the construction of the hydroelectric project and the aftermath effects they experienced socially, culturally and economically it was pertinent to celebrate and advance that BaTonga took their culture with them especially as embodied in their cultural material objects such as the *ncelwa*. Using artefactual semiotics the article was able to re-look BaTonga from a visual cultural communication perspective appreciating how BaTonga managed to carry with them key cultural values which have made them assume the cultural identity they have today and the economic value they contribute to the country via the *ncelwa* in tourism and related fields. One way of confronting de-marginalisation is not to merely continue bemoaning or fossilising remaining pieces from the losses but also to celebrate that which still exists. It is the existing that will visually communicate to future generations as has been in the past in intergenerational relations.

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