

THE ROLE OF FOLKTALES IN THE PRESERVATION OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AMONG THE SHONA: A REVIEW BASED ON AARON C. HODZA'S *NGANO DZAMATAMBIDZANWA*

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Abstract

The role of folktales in the preservation of indigenous knowledge is explored. The article is premised on the study of indigenous knowledge systems and folklore studies particularly the study of African folktales. The study sought to identify the indigenous knowledge preserved by folktales and how this indigenous knowledge is preserved by the folktales. By way of the documentary research method, five randomly selected folktales from a compilation of folktales entitled *Ngano dzamatambidzanwa* by A.C. Hodza were studied. Findings reveal that Shona folktales preserve indigenous knowledge by the use of words, idioms, proverbs, song and dance. Performing and reciting folktales help in assuring that knowledge intended for transfer from the storyteller to the audience is not lost. Collection and publishing of Shona folktales are recommended.

Keywords: *Folktales; Shona folktales; Ngano; Indigenous knowledge preservation; Folklore*

Introduction

Folktales are traditional oral narratives in which legends, proverbs, music, jokes and stories about a particular culture or social group of people are captured (Shoniwa 2013). Folktales are a good form of entertainment but they have other roles they play. For instance, they educate and validate cultural and social practices (Turner, 1992). There are two forms of folktales namely animal tales and human tales. The former have animals playing the characters of humans in a real world whilst the latter has human characters interacting with other humans and animals (Turner 1992). In both human and animal tales, the intention is to expose certain human characteristics, elevating those that are esteemed by society whilst disparaging those that are an anathema in society.

This article intends to explore how indigenous knowledge is preserved by Shona folktales. It seeks to generate discussion by stimulating new thoughts concerning the role of folktales in the preservation of indigenous knowledge. The focus is on illustrating how Shona folktales act as an instrument for knowledge preservation. Shona is the mother language for about 80% people in Zimbabwe. Folktales are known as 'ngano' in the Shona language. The objectives of the study were to answer the following research questions:

1. What indigenous knowledge is preserved by Shona folktales?
2. How do Shona folktales preserve indigenous knowledge?

Theoretical framework

This article is premised on the study of indigenous knowledge systems whose emphasis is on the need to preserve, and enhance access to local or traditional knowledge (Boven and Morohashi 2002). The paper is also entrenched in folklore studies, a broader concept in which the study of folktales belongs (Makaudze 2013; Tatira 2005). Structuralism theory by Propp (1968) underpinned this study. Propp's structuralism theory suggests that folktales can be broken down into sections beginning with a situation that is followed by 31 functions 'wedding' being the thirty-first. In summary, the theory shows that as a tale progresses through these series of sequences from the initial situation, the end of the tale results in conflict resolution, punishment of villains and rewarding of heroes (wedding).

Indigenous knowledge was defined by Owiny, Mehta and Maretzki (2014) as local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. Boven and Morohashi (2002) described indigenous knowledge as local knowledge that is unique for a particular culture or society that is useful for decision-making within that local context especially activities carried out in rural communities.

Makaudze (2013) views folktales as an important component of literature that today's society must not ridicule but should rather take seriously as they help to expose and interpret the realities and challenges posed by life. This is contrary to some people's views that folktales are an art of the past and have no part to play in today's life experiences. Makaudze is of the opinion that contemporary Zimbabweans can get a better understanding of the challenges they face and the solutions thereof from folktales. In fact, Makaudze advocates for the collection and preservation of this genre of literature to avoid loss of the vital knowledge they possess.

Ngano (folktales) were passed down generations verbally by a storyteller called a *sarungano*. The *sarunganos* were regarded with high esteem in Shona culture because they were custodians of knowledge and wisdom. As such, they were

given the task of educating future generations; ngano was a way of passing down codified religious messages to children as they prepared for adulthood. (Matsika 2009).

Folktales bring people together since they are mostly narrated to groups of children seated together outdoors in Africa (Hodza 1983). As the folktale is being told, knowledge is being shared for the greater good of the community; this approach assures that all listeners present are memory banks. The folktale itself and the knowledge imparted by use of the folktale who be preserved from loss following the demise of the story teller.

Shoniwa (2013) is of the view that most folktales actually help to transmit and preserve cultural values of a group of people as they reveal how that particular group lives. Furthermore, Canonici (1995) considered folktales to possess the power to integrate a child in his or her community physically and spiritually through the participation in the folktales. As such, folktales are regarded as a storehouse of society's knowledge, a way of recalling and transmitting wisdom of the past through generations in an entertaining manner (Canonici 1995).

Whilst memorisation and recall were also developed through folktales as listeners of folktales were expected at some point to be storytellers for others, the practice guaranteed immediate verification of whether the indigenous knowledge imparted by the story teller had been permanently acquired by the listeners. Apart from the names of people, places, animals and objects, folktales also have proverbs, songs and indigenous practices, all of which were supposed to be memorised by the listeners (Hodza 1987). Memorisation assures ultimate preservation and future recall of memorised concepts, in this case indigenous knowledge.

Folktales are associated with performance, thus they integrate language (words), music and dance (Hodza 1983; Canonici 1995). By way of performance, folktales make it easy for society to carry forward indigenous knowledge associated with the performance. Similarly, the songs and dances constituting part of the folktales carry with them some particular indigenous knowledge about certain practices such as rain-making, courtship, etc. This means that the songs can retain and, of course transfer the indigenous knowledge they contain without necessarily reciting the entire folktale from which the song is borrowed.

Research methodology

Research findings presented in this article are based on an analysis of a compilation of folktales entitled *Ngano dzamatambidzanwa* by A.C. Hodza. Documentary research method was therefore used. Documentary research method was described by Ahmed (2010) as the analysis of documents that

contain information about the phenomenon studied by investigating and categorising physical sources, most commonly written documents. Mogalakwe (2006) considered documentary methods as the analysis of documents that contain information about the phenomenon one wishes to study. Documents contain written text and are produced by individuals or groups in the course of their everyday practices for their own immediate practical needs (Mogalakwe 2006).

Ahmed (2010) and Mogalakwe (2006) are in support of the use of this research method because they consider it good and sometimes more cost effective than social surveys, in-depth interview or participant observation. They argue further that just like surveys and ethnography, documentary research is one of the three major types of social research that have been the most widely used such that some leading sociologists have been using it as the principal method and sometimes as the only one.

Documentary research is better suited for the study of the past rather than of the present considering that documents survived over periods of time whether recent or ancient thus documentary research has become largely the preserve of historians (McCulloch 2004). McCulloch (2004) is of the opinion that books, reports, newspapers and creative literature provide useful information as evidence on public issues, debates, and everyday life and experience. Despite being underestimated, creative literature such as folktales, can be a good source of evidence if carefully used (McCulloch 2004).

Mogalakwe (2006) suggests that carrying out research using documentary sources is not different from other areas of social research in that, in every case, data needs to be handled scientifically using some quality control criteria namely: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. The same criteria are supported by McCulloch (2004) and he refers to these criteria as rules.

The folktales compilation was considered authentic. Authenticity relates to a document being original or genuine such that it can be depended upon (Mogalakwe 2006). *Ngano dzamatambidzanwa* met this criterion since it is an original compilation that underwent an editorial process prior to publication. Similarly, the book was considered credible because it was subjected to publishing process during which errors and distortions were eliminated. Mogalakwe (2006) and McCulloch (2004) described representativeness as level of a document to stand in place of others of a similar nature. A document that is representative of other could therefore be regarded as a sample. The collection folktales selected are a true representation of other folktales in Shona and easily compare with other collections such as *Ngano Volume 1 and Ngano Volume 2* by George Fortune.

Helm (2000) pointed out that document analysis can be carried out through analytical reading, content analysis or quantitative analysis. The researchers used content analysis to gather data from the document under study. Content analysis was defined by Kondracki, Wellman and Amundson (2002) as the process of systematically analysing messages in any type of communication. They considered content analysis as a technique that overlaps between qualitative and quantitative techniques because it is a technique that allows qualitative analysis of seemingly quantitative data. Kondracki, Wellman and Amundson (2002) suggested content analysis can be used to develop inferences about a subject by coding messages according to themes. Content of five randomly selected folktales was analysed in the study.

Synopsis of the folktales used

In the first folktale entitled *Vasikana nevakomana shumba* is a story of three girls who fell in love with three young men from a far way place. The lovers decided to marry. The three girls agreed to elope with their lovers and during the process they had to take with them their young brother who had accompanied them to the well to fetch some water. The young brother later discovered that his sister's lovers would mysteriously change into lions. The young brother had to weave a basket which he, together with his sisters used to escape from the boys who had turned into lions and had decided to feast on them.

The second folktale entitled *Mwanasikana nevbereki vake* is about a couple who over-protected their daughter to an extent of barring young men from proposing marriage to her. A certain young man tricked the family by pretending to get bark-string from a baobab tree for the purpose of 'ferrying' his parents' fields and well closer to the home. The 'idea' looked so interesting such that the girl's family thought of engaging the young man. In the process, the young man and woman fell in love and got married. The 'plan' of bringing the wells and fields closer home was later realised to be a mere scheme to win the girl's heart.

In the third folktale, *Mudzimai akadyiswa muko*, a couple had girl children only. The husband then decided to get a second wife who could possibly give birth to boy children. Indeed, the second wife gave birth to baby boys. The husband got so pleased with the second wife and the first wife felt rejected. To reclaim her 'lost' husband, the first wife mixed gravy extracted from cooked baboon meat with the second wife's relish. The second wife's totem was Baboon and having eaten relish mixed with such gravy, there was a curse on her which turned her into a baboon and she disappeared into the bush. The second wife's parents had

to find a sangoma to transform their daughter back into a human being. Thereafter, the parents withheld their daughter from going back to her husband.

The forth tale entitled *Gudo naTsuro* is about Baboon and Hare who were friends. One of the days Baboon asks Hare to accompany him to his in-laws. Along the way, Hare uses various tricks to eat the food they had taken for the journey alone. At Baboon's in-laws, the two are tasked to sleep in the goats' kraal to guard the in-laws' goats against hyenas. Baboon and Hare hatch a plan and slaughter one of the goats at night and Hare once again tricks Baboon such that the latter never had a piece of the meat they had cooked. In the morning the in-laws discover that one of the goats had been slaughtered and Hare treacherously convince Baboon's in-laws to believe that their in-law was responsible. Baboon is killed and Hare takes over Baboon's wife.

The fifth folktale, *Vakomana vakapfudzana pamusikana*, recounts the story of a young man called Chiwareware who visited his uncle and aunt and during his visit he fell in love with a girl who lived nearby. After paying the bride price, the young man had to pay a courtesy visit to his in-laws. As part of the visit, Chiwareware was tasked by his in-laws to weed a field. Another young man in the neighbourhood who had been vying for the same girl's love killed some lizards and put them on the fire that had been left by the field-side by Chiwareware when he was warming himself. When Chiwareware's lover brought him food to eat, she was shocked to find some lizards being roasted on the fire; she thought that her husband-to-be ate lizards. When Chiwareware came for his food, he thought his wife-to-be ate lizards. An argument started and the two broke up. The young man who had put the lizards on the fire took advantage of 'what had happened' and married the girl.

Findings

The findings are split into two sections; the first section presents the elements of indigenous knowledge preserved by Shona folktales whilst the second section outlines ways used to preserve the indigenous knowledge found in Shona folktales.

Indigenous knowledge preserved

Words (names of places, objects, animals, time, etc)

The language itself was preserved in ngano. Folktales are ideally shared orally. As the folk story teller shared his or her story new words would be introduced; meaning and interpretation could be derived by the listeners but most importantly, the story tellers had to explain to the listeners.

From the folktales in *Ngano dzamatambidzanwa*, the following examples were picked:

| Sub-theme | Example | Meaning | Page(s) | Folktale(s) |
|--------------------|--------------------|---|---------|-----------------------------|
| New words | | | | |
| | Mariga | God | 12 | Vasikana nevakomana shumba |
| | Kukuhwa [moto] | Kindle [fire] | 13 | Vasikana nevakomana shumba |
| | Guruguda | Remove meat from bone with teeth | 13 | Vasikana nevakomana shumba |
| | Musumbu / mushunje | Bundle of grass | 15 | Vasikana nevakomana shumba |
| | Gandanga | Wild person | 15 | Vasikana nevakomana shumba |
| | Guchu | Calabash used to carry food or drink on a journey | 24 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |
| Place names | | | | |
| | Chiro | Baboon's sleeping place | 25 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |
| | Nhanga | Bedroom for unmarried girls | 26,28 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |
| Time | | | | |
| | Mukanganyama | Early morning/break of day | 24 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |
| | Runyanhiriri | Break of day | 25 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |
| | Rufuramhembwe | Dusk/nightfall | 26 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |
| | Marambakuedza | Very early in the morning | 27 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |

Idioms and proverbs

Ngano also use idioms and proverbs to convey some messages. Here are some examples extracted from *Ngano dzamatambidzanwa*:

| Example | English translation | Page(s) | Folktale |
|---|--|---------|-----------------------------|
| Mariga akombora | God has blessed us | 12 | Vasikana nevakomana shumba |
| Kakova kaMusinzwi kadira muna Taisireva | The stream of Musinzwi (disobedience) has drained itself into the stream of Taisireva (we said so) | 22 | Vasikana nevakomana shumba |
| Kuzivana nemusikana | Fall in love / get intimate | 28 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |
| Tsika mwedzi | Miss a monthly menstrual (possibly pregnant) | 28 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |

Song and dance

Song and dance are also found in Shona folktales. Below are examples of songs that were found in the collection of folktales under study:

| Example | English translation | Page(s) | Folktale |
|--|--|---------|----------------------------|
| Mushauri: Vana vedu marema Vadaviri: Tevera zvine muswe wazvo | Soloist: Our children are mentally retarded Chorus: Follow those that have tails | 17 | Vasikana nevakomana shumba |
| Muimbi: Ihe ihe vakafa havana chavakaona; Zvino ndozviudza ani baba akafa, ... | Singer: <i>Ihe ihe</i> those who have died have nothing they've seen; Whom shall I tell my father is dead, ... | 57 | Mudzimai akadyiswa muko |

5.1.4 Cultural and religious norms and practices

Concepts relating to culture, religion and the social issues of a community are portrayed in folktales. In fact, it is the religious and socio-cultural setting of the

community that shape the issues captured in the folktales. Below are some excerpts from the *Ngano dzamatambidzanwa*.

| Example | English translation | Page(s) | Folktale |
|--|--|---------|----------------------------------|
| Rooranai vematongo | Marry someone whose family / background you're familiar with | 12 | Vasikana nevakomana shumba |
| Kugamuchira / kubata zvakana vaeni | Hospitality to visitors | 24-28 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |
| Kutumira roora kuburikidza nasadombo/munyai | Sending lobola to the in-laws by a mediator / middle man | 29 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |
| Kutsvaira dota / kuonekera | Son-in-law's first customary visit | 29 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |
| Kutizisa mukumbo | Elope | 30 | Mwanasikana nevakoreki vake |
| Kutukana utukwa (Chizukuru) | Jokes, pleasantries / humour between uncles and nephews / nieces | 75 | Vakomana vakapfudzana pamusikana |
| Kutsvetsva musikana kuburikidza nasekuru nambuya | Courting a girl through the help of uncles and aunties | 75 | Vakomana vakapfudzana pamusikana |

How indigenous knowledge was preserved in ngano

In the first instance, it must be realised that after the sarungano had recited a folktale to listeners, he or she would at some other time tell the same folktale again. Besides, there were instances when the listeners would request the sarungano to recite a folktale they had listened to earlier on. In that way, a folktale would be easily recalled. In some cases, the sarungano would randomly pick any one of his or her listeners to recite a folktale. The sarungano would assist the young ones whenever they failed to remember folktale correctly.

Coupled with the fascinating use of animals instead of human beings, a story teller would unfold a folktale to an audience. Besides getting to know the name of wild animals and insects, the children listening to the folktales would easily remember the folktale because of the entertaining manner in which they were delivered. For instance, in *Ngano dzamatambidzanwa*, the folktale *Gudo naTsuru*, the story is about friendship in which one of the friends (Tsuru) was cunning. Besides learning about Baboon (Gudo) and Hare (Tsuru) and their

nature as animals, the listeners would also relate that to humans and their behaviour and relationships.

Most folktales involved the story teller and the listener from the introduction to the conclusion. In the folktales the listeners actively participated in the folktales through two main ways. In some folktales, the listeners were expected to say some words in agreement with the story teller after each phrase said by the story teller, for example in the tale of *Gudo naTsuro*, the listeners were saying “Dzefunde” after every phrase said by the sarungano. Dzefunde simply meant “Go on”. In some folktales the listeners participated through singing. The sarungano would introduce a song and the audience was expected to join and sing along; in most cases, singing was accompanied by dancing. A typical example is found in the tale entitled *Vasikana nevakomana shumba* in which the following song was sung:

Bhaa, tunduu

Toita musere musere toenda kwedu

Tundu,

Toita musere musere toenda kwedu (Hodza 1983:19).

Discussion

Language preservation

Shona folktales as shown by the selected cases from *Ngano dzamatambidzanwa*, are an ideal way of teaching the language to children. By so-doing the young ones are not just entertained but are also taught new words. Similar views were expressed by Canonici (1995, 21) and Hodza (1983, 7 and 1987, 7). The new words are also preserved together with the folktale as it remains in the memory of the story teller and the listener. The evolution of an indigenous language may, therefore, not threaten the loss of some words, names, etc and their meanings since they are preserved in the ngano. As examples, in today’s Shona the young generation may not use the words and phrase: Mariga (Mwari), nhanga (girls’ bedroom), kukuhwa moto (lighting a fire). The use of such words and phrases in folktales, therefore, preserves them.

Idioms and proverbs

As observed in earlier literature (Hodza 1983; Canonici 1995), the richness of a language is easier revealed by use of proverbs, idioms and riddles. All these are used to convey some particular message and in most cases it relates to a specific locality. The aspect of *specificity* must be emphasised as it points back to the definition and descriptions of indigenous knowledge provided by Owiny, Mehta and Maretzki (2014) and Boven and Morohashi (2002) where they put emphasis of the fact the indigenous knowledge is unique to a given culture or society. Ngano also use idioms and proverbs to convey messages. Reading from *Ngano dzamatambidzanwa*, there are expressions such as:

1. “Mariga akombora” (God has blessed us);
2. “Kakova kaMusinzwi kadira muna Taisireva” (meaning disobedience has led to regretting for something earlier warned against).

The first statement is full of wisdom. Even though in the tale the boys who turned into lions were the ones thanking God for being blessed with beautiful girls, the point being driven home by the story teller is that, it is God who blesses and not men so human kind ought to seek blessings from Him. Similarly, the second phrase is a reminder to the listener that when advice is being given, the listener should take heed to avoid regret. The phrase also reminds the listener of the essence of the story: people ought to get married to those whose background they are aware of to avoid the dilemma that led the girls in the story to regret afterwards.

Song and dance

Singing and dancing are very important in the Shona society. This is why song and dance are part of the Shona folktales. Shoniwa (2013) made similar sentiments in his study. By including songs in the folktales, the story teller wisely taught the audience how to sing and dance; in most cases the tunes and dances would fuse the local culture’s genres and dance styles. In some cases, there would be inclusion of musical instruments as well. In that regard, story-telling was not just a simple task but a multi-faceted one. The songs also carried within them some messages for both the singer and the listener.

Culture, religion norms and practices

The fact that concepts about religious and socio-cultural practices are found in Shona folktales adds their value. The findings of this study concur with assertions made by Shoniwa (2013), Turner (1992) and Canonici (1995) that folktales reveal more about people’s culture, religion and social practices. Shona folktales, as revealed in *Ngano dzamatambidzanwa*, actively emphasise, while at the same time acting as storehouses of indigenous knowledge, that people should be hospitable (kugamuchira vaeni), that a mediator (sadombo/munyai) is required when paying lobola, a newly married young man should pay a courtesy call to the in-laws for customary introductions (kutsvaira dota), and that jokes and pleasantry (kutukana utukwa/chizukuru) is reserved for uncles and aunties with their nephews and nieces.

Ngano and indigenous knowledge preservation

It is important to note that folktales were an outdoor activity involving groups of children (Canonici 1995). Knowledge was easily cascaded to many people instantaneously. Since the sarungano would recite a folktale to listeners as many times as he or she could and as many times as the listeners requested, memorisation became quite easy. Memories of the listeners became the storehouses of indigenous knowledge embedded in the folktales as suggested by Matsika (2013) and Canonici (1995). The instances when the listeners were

asked by the sarungano to recite a folktale they had listened to earlier was an excellent way of preserving the folktales and consequently the indigenous knowledge they possessed. This recitation was, however, flexible allowing the reciter to bring in their own personality into the story through the words used, tone or emotion of voice creating a close variation of the original. This taught other skills such as communication skills and creativity among others. Thinking skills were taught in that the children would usually be expected to deduce the moral of the story and this was tested by some discussions which would usually conclude the story.

As observed by Turner (1992), Canonici (1995) and Hodza (1983) that folktales were an entertaining way of giving advice to young ones, the same is realised in Shona folktales in which the fascinating use of animals instead of human beings entertained but also provided advice to the audience. Children listening to the folktale got to know the name of places, objects, wild animals and insects and would easily remember the folktale because of the entertaining manner in which they were delivered. Most importantly, there was a lesson derived out of all that.

Conclusion

It is imperative to stress that Shona folktales are a good vehicle for the preservation of indigenous knowledge relating to the Shona language; words, among them, names of places, objects, animals, time together with idioms and proverbs are preserved in a manner that is entertaining but also portrays their meanings. Socio-cultural norms and practices, coupled with song and dance are also embedded in the indigenous knowledge preserved by Shona folktales. It is therefore imperative to ensure that all known Shona folktales are collected and published.

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