

An analysis of the significance of myths and proverbs as African philosophies of peace and justice: a case of the Ndebele, Shona and Tonga tribes from Zimbabwe and the Igbo from Nigeria

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Abstract: *Literature, and in this case, the oral traditional narrative, has often been employed to record and express the socio-economic and political philosophies of Africans. This approach has entrenched the understanding that a nation whose history is not enshrined in its literature risks leaving nothing for posterity. This paper, however, attempts to focus on the use of African traditions of peace and justice which are enshrined in African proverbs and myths. In this endeavour, African proverbs and myths from the Ndebele, Shona and Tonga tribes in Zimbabwe and the Igbo from Nigeria, as presented in Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) have been selected for analysis. Ideas from Martin Luther King regarding peace in terms of what it is not, that is, 'peace is not the absence of tension', have been used in conceptualising the study. Danesh's Integrative Theory of Peace and the Functionalist perspective espoused by theorist such as Emile Durkheim have been adopted in thinking through the study. The emerging focus being elaborated in the study is that the existence of African proverbs and myths is a testimony to the world that Africans did not hear of civilisation or attain it at the coming of the colonisers as has been the misinformed fallacy. Proverbs and myths bear testimony to Africa's civilisation and propensity to promote peace through conflict resolution.*

Key words: *proverbs, myths, peace, justice, conflict*

I. Introduction

Africa is one continent that has often been vilified by its once colonisers as being endowed with conflicts mainly driven by 'barbarism' and 'backwardness'. All this negative publicity about Africa has been deliberately highlighted to perpetuate negative image about the continent to the point of eclipsing the continent's rich traditions of peace and justice historically enshrined in African proverbs and myth. The existence of African proverbs and myths is a testimony to the world that Africans did not hear of civilisation or attain it at the coming of the colonisers as has been the misinformed fallacy. The emerging reality is that Africa had her own form of civilisation enshrined in her proverbs and myths. The myths and proverbs were a construct of the community and not individuals; hence they formed part of the African culture and aided the community in leaving in harmony while maintaining justice. It is therefore the main thrust of this discussion to show the significance of African myths and proverbs as existing forms of community peace building. Examples to illustrate the discussion will be drawn from various societies across Africa.

II. Theoretical Framework

The concept of peace has been conceived differently by different scholars. Some people understand peace to mean simply an absence of violence. This means, an absence of overt physical harm to persons and property which emanates from wars, riots, crime and vandalism, is seen as a state of peace (UNESCO, 1999). An elaborate definition of peace that incorporates peace and justice; peace and nation building; peace and human rights; and peace and the environment as interrelated concepts was given by Martin Luther King. A former leader of the civil rights movement in the United States, Martin Luther King once said that peace is not the absence of tension, but the presence of justice. In this understanding peace and justice go hand in hand; there can be no peace without justice and no justice without peace (UNESCO, 1999:3). The latter interplay between peace and justice is explored in greater detail in the discussion as it forms the basis of the significance of African myths and proverbs and their role in community peace building.

The African world values and cherishes the absence of war, even in the presence of many tribal conflicts, but still, it is very far from limiting the meaning of peace to the absence of war, just like Martin Luther King propounded in the foregoing paragraph. Traditional African world cherishes harmony, and harmony means living in accord with various spheres or levels of reality. Thus for genuine peace, one must live in accordance with right principles in relation with the supernatural, the deities and spirits, ancestors and one's fellow human beings (Senghor, 1967 cited in Shonhiwa, 2012:45). In addition, the spirit world is seen as the guarantor of earthly existence, and human beings have a host of duties to their forebears. Infringement of any of these

obligations is believed to set off a chain- reaction of disorder in earthly affairs- personal, familial, communal, and national, among others. Such chaos is viewed as the foundation of the absence of peace. At all cost, harmony must be sought with the natural and supernatural forces which impinge on human life. It is such African traditional conceptions of peace that have filtered into African myths and proverbs.

Community peace building entails those initiatives that are adopted by the community in fostering peace, justice and harmony in the wake of conflict in human existence. Proverbs and myths have come handy in the promotion of community peace building. Following the United Nations (UN) emphasis on 'post-conflict peacebuilding', Roland Paris in his seminal study *At War's End* narrows his definition to, '...action undertaken at the end of a civil conflict to consolidate peace and prevent a recurrence of fighting' (Paris, 2004:38). However, the increasingly popular term 'peacebuilding' is also in much broader sense as a generic term or 'brand' for peace- oriented efforts. A definition that represents this general meaning in policy and applied research is given by Smith (2004:19) that peace building attempts to encourage the development of the structural conditions, attitudes and modes of political behaviour that may permit peaceful, stable and ultimately prosperous social and economic development. Peace building activities are designed to contribute to ending or avoiding armed conflict and may be carried out during armed conflict, in its wake, or as an attempt to prevent an anticipated armed conflict from starting. Smith has added that peace building activities fall under four main headings: to provide security to establish the socio-economic foundations of long-term peace; likewise to establish the political framework of long-term peace; and to generate reconciliation, a healing of the wounds of war, and justice. Fundamental traditional African conceptions of proverbs and myths relate to all these dimensions, overtly and covertly.

A conceptual understanding of the terms 'proverb' and 'myth' by way of definition comes handy in this discussion. Proverbs are a proposition or group of propositions deriving from the experiences of the wise men of the society, affirming clearly or metaphorically popular indisputable truths (Mulyumbu Wa Mamba in Shonhiwa, 2012:45). Though proverbs may refer to specific contexts or even historic persons or movements, their assertions have universal applicability. They serve as warning in human activities or relations. They criticise and praise, advice and teach. In Africa proverbs cover every department of human endeavour and human relation.

On the other hand, myth has been defined by Mercantante in Shonhiwa (2012:46) as an anonymous traditional story, orally passed on from one generation to the next, believed to be literally true by the culture that produced it, about gods and goddesses, heroines, and other real and fantastic creatures, taking place in primeval or remote times. Mythical narrations are not judged according to historical or factual exactness. What is much more important is the symbolic meaning they try to convey and which makes them trans-contextual or universal just like proverbs. Structurally, myth is timeless, peopled by extra-ordinary figures and enjoys general acceptance in the culture it originates. There are various types of myths as shall be seen in the main discussion.

The functionalist perspective championed by proponents such as Emile Durkheim generated main ideas that include structural superiority, stability, interdependence, cohesion and dysfunctions of conflict (Ritzer, 2004). Durkheim explained that all societies are divided into two categories, the sacred and the profane. Sacred things are considered superior in dignity and power to profane things and particularly to man. In relation to the sacred, man is inferior and dependent, and this relationship is exactly the relationship between men and society. Society is more important and powerful than the individual.

Danesh's theory, the Integrative Theory of Peace (ITP) has also been adopted in this study as a theory that is based on the concept that peace is, at once, a psychological, social, political, ethical, and spiritual state with experiences at intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, international, and global areas of human life (Danesh, 2006). ITP holds that all human states of being, including peace, are the outcome of the main human cognitive (knowing), emotive (loving), and conative (choosing) capacities, which together determine the nature of our worldview. ITP draws from, among other sources, the existing body of research on issues of psychological development and peace education, and developmental approach to conflict resolution.

Of importance also are the sub-theories of ITP mentioned by Danesh that: peace is a psychological and political as well as moral and spiritual condition; peace is the main expression of a unity-based worldview; a unity-based worldview is the prerequisite for creating both a culture of peace and culture of healing; and a comprehensive, integrated, and lifelong education is the most effective approach for development of a unity-based worldview. In addition, ITP posits that peace has its roots in the satisfaction of human needs for survival, safety and security; human quest for freedom, justice, and interconnectedness; and human search for meaning, purpose, and righteousness (Danesh, 2006). It is these premises that the study would also seek to explore in terms of the enactment of proverbs and myths in conflict resolution and peacebuilding by the African societies.

III. Myths And Proverbs From The Ndebele, Shona, Tonga And Igbo Societies

Proverbs and myths are symbolic and they impact more on the life of humans. In both proverbs and myths there are rich indices of the quest for peace, as well as events whose implications can give rise to peaceful

coexistence and harmony in the world. It is in the myths and proverbs that Africans rebuked and corrected each other in an attempt to live in harmony with each other and with the environment. All this stems on the understanding that conflict is inevitable and cannot be wished away. Where conflict arises it has to be resolved amicably by all means, while avoiding its escalation to violence leading to loss of lives.

As highlighted in the earlier stated definition, proverbs constitute part of the wisdom of a nation. This is to say that, having originated with man, proverbs have been critical in community peacebuilding initiatives. This has come in the way that proverbs have been used by different communities and cultures, to criticise and praise; advice and teach. Types of proverbs range from: vengeance proverbs; those that deal with forgiveness and reconciliation; power of negotiation and proverbs that deal with leadership and power.

Peace must be the foundation of the progress of the society. And from the African traditional perspective, conflict can be seen as inevitable but resolvable on the stronger foundation which is peace. Inherent within the Ndebele and Tonga proverbs in Zimbabwe has been an urge to conscientise the people of Zimbabwe to remain peaceful and resolute in the wake of the crisis that they could be going through. The Ndebele say, 'Akugoba lingaqondiswe', whilst the Tonga people say, 'Kunyina chipilingene chitakonzeki koololwa'. These proverbs refer to the fact that there is no problem that cannot be resolved. The very people who suffer the most, if given encouragement, can do the most to improve a situation. This is expressed in the title of African Community Publishing and Development Trust (ACPD) earlier publication: *The suffering are the cornerstone in building the nation*. The idea raised in the proverbs is that Zimbabweans have the intelligence and potential creative energy to overcome the current difficulties experienced in the country. Each person can contribute to peacebuilding in Zimbabwe, because peace begins with an individual, learning to think, behave and communicate peacefully (ACPD, 2002).

Some proverbs used in Zimbabwe emphasise the importance of using peaceful methods (in the wake of violence) as violent methods do not work. Violence, however well intentioned, is deeply destructive; and it either paralyzes society, or provokes a violent response. According to a report by ACPD (2002) there have been an estimated 14, 500 wars during the last 5,600 years of human history. Between 1945 and 1990's, 30 million people were killed in wars. In the 1990's, there has been an average of more than 30 wars a year. In speaking against such violence, the Shona proverb says, 'Moto mushoma ndiwo unonyautsa muto' (a case can't be settled by fighting, to use violence is to admit defeat). Another proverb used by the Shona people says, 'Ngoma hairidzwe nedemo' (don't beat a drum with an axe'). On the same note, the Tonga speaking people have come up with a proverb 'Mulilo muche nguyemuuna musinza' (it is a low fire that warms the soup); whilst the Ndebele have posed that, 'Uthango lwevila ngameva' (failure opts for violence rather than peace). The emerging perspective is that violence not only injures and kills many people and destroys property and sources of work; it also harms the development of children, and damages individuals, relationships, and all social organisations.

Closely related to the foregoing proverbs that speak against violence is the Ndebele proverb which states that, 'Koniwa ngomlomo kulungiswe ngomlomo' (what the mouth destroys the mouth can put right). Disagreements can be solved by discussion. It is through dialogue that people should strive to resolve the problems that befall them. Dialogue and negotiation are thus very essential. The traditional African is adept at negotiation. No dispute is so ingrained that talking and arriving at a compromise cannot settle it. This seems to be an imperative given the inevitability of conflict. The underlying message is that no matter how deep a conflict is; the natural state of existence should be a peaceful one. The Oromo of Ethiopia say that the one who does not fight is an ass; the one who fought and would not reconcile is a devilish person (Kan lilolle haree dha/kan hinaraaramne jinni oha). This proverb exposes the wickedness that lies in refusing to reconcile than in fighting (Shonhiwa, 2012:49). According to the Basotho, those who give in to negotiation gain ultimately since the house of a person who negotiates survives (Motse ho aha oa morapeli), and stubbornness does not build a village. Destructive communication, that is, communication which robs people (both oppressor and oppressed) of their value and dignity as human beings (ACPD, 2002:43), should be avoided. This communication includes: shouting, attacking people with words, threatening them with physical violence, propaganda, and asserting that 'we are always right, they are always wrong'. This kind of language is destructive because it oppresses people, and spreads hatred, fear and despair. It can lead to beating, torturing and killing people.

The power of proverbs in peace building is also shown in the way they foster a spirit of tolerance among human beings. The Shona tribe say, 'Chura kugara mumvura sandi mwana wegarwe' while the Tonga people say, 'Chulwa kukala mumenda tachambi kuti mwana wasitale'. The English equivalence for the proverb (given in Shona and Tonga) is that a frog may live in the same pool as the crocodile, even though it is not a child to the crocodile. The Tonga people have also added that, 'Bucheda aamwi', meaning that it dawns at the same time. Even if people differ, they are all people and enjoy similar favours from God. This forebodes the equality of all humanity before the creator, that none is supposed to take advantage of the other. Tolerance brings about coexistence, and hence peace that is necessary for meaningful development. The Tonga people have also spoken against revenge, 'Mubi, mubi alike', meaning that a bad person is bad alone. The proverb speaks against taking revenge on someone who has wronged you. Leave a bad person alone.

The good society can only be achieved through peaceful means. In shading light on this essence, the Ndebele proverb says, 'Induku kayakhi muzi', that is to say, war does not build a nation. As a community peace building form, this proverb draws the community to a sense of alternative resolution of conflicts that are non-destructive to life and property. Violence, for example, war, destroys, it cannot build. The proverb also directs the community to focus attention on peace instead of violence, as major problems facing a nation can only be addressed when people are united. As the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops wrote in their Pastoral Letter in May 2000, 'let our common enemy be poverty, disease and ignorance, not our fellow citizens.

African proverbs have also been instrumental in pointing at how conflict in a community should be resolved. Africa's greatest, yet least used wealth is the intelligence and creativity of citizens (ACPD). Traditionally, many conflicts were resolved through discussion. For example, a Ndebele proverb says, 'Itshukelwa ebandla', meaning that problems are discussed at an indaba. Conflicts involving individuals would be tackled in a discussion with the extended family. If the family was unable to resolve the conflict, it would be discussed with the kraalhead. If the conflict was too difficult for the kraalhead to solve, it would be taken to the chief's court (indaba or dare). The spirit medium would also give advice (ACPD, 2002). A lot of conflicts are still resolved this way, in the communal areas. In modern times, community workers have resolved conflicts peacefully, as part of their work in the development process. As a Zimbabwean peace-worker from NOVASC said, 'conflicts tackled constructively are essential in the work of improving society'.

Positive human relationships are essential for community peacebuilding. This is closely linked to the conception of the inevitability of conflict wherever human beings are involved. The Shona say, in order to get settled at any place one should be on good terms with the neighbours (Kugara hunzwana nevamwe). This means harmony with neighbours brings peace. People hate associating with aggressive characters. The Shona proverb also says that hatred brings no reward; meat is eaten when it has spent a day on fire (Kuvengana hakuna chimuko/ nyama inodyiwa yaswera pachoto). This proverb implies that antagonism and hatred block understanding and progress in a community. To bring peace and harmony people must stop having differences. Instead they should take time for frank discussion. Peaceful coexistence is encouraged as enshrined in the Shona proverb that, 'Harahwa mbiri hadziurayane', two old men will not kill each other. People who share the same fate should not be fighting, because they depend on each other for survival.

African proverbs have also been handy in showing how power is a tool which can be used positively or negatively. Power is good when it is practised in its total fairness, but it can be destructive if it is used as a form of oppression or for the purposes of corruption (ACPD, 1997:3). Traditional proverbs emphasise the responsibility of leaders and how they should use power wisely to benefit their people. Some wise Zimbabwean proverbs which express the traditional positive approach to power say, 'Gudo guru peta muswe vadiki vakutye' (Shona), meaning that, even leaders should be humble. In Ndebele they say, 'Inkosi yinkosi ngabantu' meaning that, a leader is only a leader because of the people. Galbraith (1983) in ACPDT (1997:40) emphasises that negative forms of power always provoke resistance. Negative power creates its own resistance and acts to limit its own effectiveness. The usual and most effective response to an unwelcome exercise of power is to build a countering position of power. This is expressed in the well-known Ndebele proverb, 'Obusa ngomkhonto uzakufa ngomkhonto', that is, he who lives by the sword dies by the sword. Therefore one has to be careful how he or she leads the people during their reign. In Zulu they have come up with the proverb, 'Isitha somuntu nguye uqobo lwakhe' meaning that one's enemy is one's own self. The insight raised in this proverb is that instead of controlling others, people who use power positively recognise their own weaknesses and control themselves.

The concept of justice has been encapsulated in the African proverbs as a form of peace building. The maxim has pointed towards the observance of justice and the rights of others in community. As Achebe (1958: 14) has illustrated, the Igbo encapsulate the fundamental role of justice in a widely known proverb, 'Egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebela nku kwaa ya' that is translated to say let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too, if one says no to the other, let his wing break. The justice emphasised in this proverb has a universal effect to humanity, while also stressing the essence of coexistence and tolerance.

African proverbs direct people towards an understanding of the significance of good governance through a constitution. A constitution is defined by ACPDT (2009:2) as a set of laws and principles which direct how an organisation or country is governed, in other words, the structure or foundation of an organised society. It contains a social contract (agreement) between people and their leaders, determining their relations. Some proverbs have been enacted in showing the relevance of the constitution in society. For example, in Ndebele they say, 'Umuzi ngumuzi ngomthetho', translated thus, a home is a home because of its laws. In addition, people have to work together for the constitution to be a success as seen through the phrase, 'Rume rimwe harikombi churu' (Shona) or 'collective efforts are legitimate and fruitful' (English). This has been one of the initiatives towards peacebuilding in a nation whereby collective effort by all is revered. Those who lead are mandated to lead according to the dictates of the constitution as the guiding document, be it at community or national level. In the same vein, no individual is seen as above the constitution and the powers exercised therein, which move is essential in harmonising society.

Like the proverbs previously discussed, Africa is also endowed with myths. The nature of myth does not readily give an abundance of common sayings directly relative to peace, but the myth operates at highly symbolic levels. The symbolic meaning derived from the myths has landed them some characteristics of universality. There are various types of myths as cited by Shonhiwa (2012:51) cosmogonic myths (that seek to provide a theoretical base for the origin, the current situation and the destiny of man and the world); myths of invention and first knowledge (whose aim is to explain why things are how they are and how human beings came to be privy to useful knowledge on earth); and myths about suffering and death (that affirm a primordial order that was chattered by acts of commission either by man himself or by animals).

In the traditional Ndebele, Shona and many other communities in Zimbabwe, for example, a myth is told of a man and woman from an unknown distant past, who were living during a period when the relationship between the spirit world and the physical world was already seen as sacred. Any sacrilegious act was punishable by means determined by the supernatural forces, presided over by the gods of the land. This relationship shows how peace was observed in the communities through harmonious relations between man, nature and the supernatural. It is said that the man and the woman had been instructed never to engage in any physical work during the sacred days committed to the gods, the guardians of the land. Contrary to the instruction, the man and the woman took to their chores, with the men getting his axe to go and chop firewood and the woman having to carry the firewood. The resultant effect was that the man and the woman were mysteriously taken and confined to the moon, where they are serving their punishment for defying the gods. As is observable, within the full shining moon there are images of woman carrying firewood and a man carrying an axe as a testimony to their punishment. From the narrated myth some lessons that are capital for community peace building in human existence can be drawn. One such lesson is that human beings are subject to the supernatural control to which they have to show loyalty. For example, within the Ndebele and the Shona tribes of Zimbabwe there are days that have been set aside as sacred days where one should not do such work as is defined by the community. Such works include fetching firewood or doing any form of field related work. Any offenders are reprimanded by the community as they will cause sporadic rainfall or anger the gods who are seen as very much behind the good yields.

The Igbo of Nigeria also have various myths that have been enacted to show, for example, how murder is abhorred. Chinua Achebe in his narrative text *Things Fall Apart* (1958) has attempted a fictional narrative of the Nri myth of origin among the Igbo of Nigeria. The Nri myth is retraced to the father of all Nri who was Eri. No one knows where he came from. Tradition (odinaani) says he came from God (Chukwu). He was a great man sent by God to rule all the people of the Anambra. Before he came to Anambra the people were living in scattered huts. They had no king. It is said that the earth was not firm, as it is today, when he was on earth. He got Awka smiths to use bellows to dry the flooded land. The Anambra at times floods its banks. When Eri came there was no food for the people. He prayed to God to send food to his people. From Chukwu's provision, a covenant was established between earth and man. The earth becomes the greatest supernatural force (alusi). No one person should defile the earth by spilling human blood in violence on it. Life is sacred among the traditional Igbo and murder is about the most serious offence. Even when it occurs in the context of inter-village wars, it does not go without expiatory sacrifice. One who takes a human life was bound to make adequate compensation, even when it is not deliberate.

Achebe (1958) tells a story about the killing of a daughter of Umuofia by a villager of Mbaino. We read that Umuofia immediately dispatched an ultimatum to Mbaino asking them to choose between war on the one hand, and on the other the offer of a young man and a virgin as compensation (p.8). It is through such acts that the traditional community peace building initiatives were mediated. Although fearsome, we are told that Umuofia never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle- the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. Umuofia was guided in her wars by the medicine called agadi-nwayi, or old woman who was said to be as old as the clan itself and had one leg. A peace settlement was reached in which Mbaino offered a young man Ikemefuna and a virgin as compensation, all in the interest of serving further loss of lives through an imminent war with the neighbour.

Achebe also narrates the myth of the Week of Peace. Anyone who broke the peace was punished, as was the custom by Ezeani, the priest of the earth Ani goddess (p.21). The week was viewed as sacred. During this Week one was forbidden from beating a kinsman or his wife. This was also a Week during which people lived in peace with their fellows to honour the great goddess of the earth without whose blessing their crops will not grow. On committing an offence one had to bring to the shrine of Ani one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries. This is symbolic of how reparation was made for the sacrilegious act. The oldest man in the village explains that in the past a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. But after a while this custom was stopped because it spoilt the peace which it was meant to preserve. This is an exposition to the dynamic nature of the community that is able to revise its peace initiatives towards a more harmonious and satisfying relationship for all.

IV. Conclusion

The centrality of African proverbs and myths in community peace building cannot be overemphasised. As observed through the foregoing discussion, there is a very close link between the two traditional approaches to peace. One such link is at the symbolic level at which the two operate. This means that the historical or factual exactness should not be used in judging the myths and proverbs but their symbolic meaning as an attempt by man to adapt to his environment. Conflict has been described as imminent hence the communities enactment of the peace building initiatives to ensure peace and harmony with the natural and supernatural forces which impinge on human life.

The traditional proverbs and myths discussed emphasised the fallible nature of all humanity and its subject nature to the supernatural. Various facets of human life have been addressed by proverbs, for example, the exercise of power in terms of the responsibility of the leaders and how they should use power wisely to benefit their people. As much as the proverbs show the wisdom of a nation, they also carry a great deal of entertainment value that keeps the traditional oral narrative of a community intact. Both the myths and the proverbs discussed have pointed at the essence of human life that has to be respected as sacred. The spilling of blood is abhorred as being evil and retrogressive to community development, hence should be shunned by all. A collective spirit has been portrayed as best illustrated by way of proverbs and myths. It is therefore no mistake to say that African myths and proverbs are such a valuable treasure as forms of community peace building.

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