

Language use and the depiction of violence in pre-colonial Shona folk narratives

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Abstract

Drawing illustrations chiefly from oral narratives, this article seeks to interrogate and dissect the imagining of violence in pre-colonial Shona society while paying special attention to the use of language of hatred, pain and injury therein. Language faithfully mirrors and gives away a society's behavioural, spiritual, political, etc. construction. In view of the violence that has dogged Zimbabwe for several decades now, our point of departure is a polemical refutation of the traditionally held view that has one-sidedly idolised pre-colonial Shona society as peaceful and impliedly violence-free. While surely pre-colonial Shona society could never have been one marathon of violence, nevertheless, holding an analytical mirror to the past will reflect that the peaceful thesis does not constitute the whole truth either. The exaggerated image of a peaceful and innocent Shona society, we argue, was precipitated by a resurgent search for an African identity whose design was to reconnect with the past while countering the racist framing of blacks as a bloodthirsty lot to whose rescue the white man came. However folktales and romances, let alone pre-colonial history itself, betray, quite embarrassingly so for the one-sided view, as well as demonstrate that the Shona were not uniquely endowed with an incapacity for violence.

Introduction

Research leading to the writing of this article was primarily given impetus to by the wanton, politically motivated violence that characterised the inauguration of Zimbabwe's first harmonised presidential, parliamentary and municipal elections in 2008. By violence, we refer to the heartless and angry infliction of any form of injury, be it physical, psychological, emotional, etc. on another person. While other forms of violence are known and readily acknowledged, the current discussion cordons off most of the other forms to focus its exegetical apparatus on physical violence that reposes in pre-colonial society as it finds expression in folkloric Shona narratives.

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In 2008, the Shona (among other Zimbabweans) gleefully visited violence on one another with no apparent sense of remorse. Kaulemu (2011) eloquently articulates the nature of the violence and the far reaching consequences it had upon the body politics when he writes as follows:

... the life of many Zimbabweans have been characterized by individual and social anxiety, fear and trembling emanating from different forms of personal, social, physical, psychological and political violence ...The intensity of this violence rose to unprecedented levels after the elections of 29 March 2008 ... Violent tactics used in the liberation war of the 1970s were revived, and used mostly on members of what were then opposition parties ... (Kaulemu, 2011, pp. 78-79).

The record of violence that Kaulemu (2011) cites above with regard to Zimbabwe is factual. Turning to the question of language, it will be argued that the imagining of violence covering this period of the country's history – whose corpus is now in considerable accumulation - cannot avoid, in one form or another, the language of violence with which the actual violence itself was executed. In our current scheme of analysis, language is here regarded not only as a vehicle, but it is also the fuel that powers the consuming fire of violence. Our major argument in this article is that any fictive or imagining of violence as it is captured in Shona oral literature is a signpost that marks a reliable path through which to retrace the historical roots of this unpalatable phenomenon. From folktales, romances, proverbs, dynastic and/or clan praise poetry, etc. we argue that the depiction of violence will be part of a less glamorous record of the Shona past. We are motivated by the thinking that much as it may be 'inconvenient' and unsettling, we are deeply entrenched in the position that it is psychologically, politically and socially imperative for the Shona (and other Zimbabweans) to boldly confront violence than to continue blissfully reveling in a complacent denial of its historical rootedness.

Literature, whether written or oral, literate or preliterate, cannot find inspiration nor appeal to lofty enjoyment cordoned off from the true life experiences of a people. There is therefore a symbiotic interconnectedness between literature, its producers and its consumers. In this regard, oral literature becomes a legitimate artifact and/or source that can be used to infer and reconstruct the historical origins of violence in Shona society. The nature, intensity and callousness of post-colonial Zimbabwean violence demands that all its people engage in a courageous, soul searching exercise in regard to whether or not the now seemingly entrenched habit is a colonial, post-colonial or a pre-colonial habit. In its barest form, therefore, the ensuing analysis is fundamentally a nonchalant indictment of a whole people and a somber invitation for them to candidly reflect on what may be an

inconvenient truth. The oral literary genres from which we have chosen to draw parallels and deductions are apparently innocent and perhaps less treasonous as damning dumps of evidence.

The point of the present discussion becomes all the more poignant and urgent given the glamorous and glowing descriptions of pre-colonial Shona culture as it is inferred from oral literature and which has received generous acclamation from Fortune (1974, 1980a, 1980b), Mkanganwi (1973), Kumbirai (1979), Pongweni (1989), Chimhundu (1980), Kahari (1990) and Chiwome (2002) as reflective of a pervasive serenity that admitted of no violence within its abode. Pongweni (1989), who quotes from Chimhundu's (1980) study of Shona proverbs, writes as follows:

... as far as some collective purposiveness can be determined among the various Shona speaking groups, conformity, *peace, tolerance and mutual cooperation* were among the things they cherished most (Pongweni, 1989, p. 12).

The above conclusion arrived at by Pongweni (1989), resulting from a study of a huge corpus of Shona proverbs, is no doubt indicative of a society that extolled, among the other qualities already stated "*...peace and tolerance and mutual cooperation*" (p. 12). In their study of Shona folktales, which is a very popular oral narrative genre, critics were unanimous in describing Shona society as pervaded with a peaceful egalitarianism. Mkanganwi (1973) thus agrees with Chimhundu (1980) and Pongweni (1989) when he nostalgically makes the following remarks regarding Shona culture as it is represented in folktales:

Ngano shows that there was no cult of violence or worship of strength for its own sake. Shona culture must have been a superior culture of a peace-loving people (Mkanganwi, 1973, p. ii).

Without intending to neither demean nor take away any virtues that pre-colonial Shona society nurtured and jealously guarded, it is only this idyllic, homogenous description of it all that the current discussion strongly takes issue with. Kahari (1986) scaffolds this same sentimentalised and nostalgic view of pre-colonial Shona society by retracing where the rain started pummeling the Shona. His discovery is: "The Period between 1890 and 1945 witnessed a ... transformation ... from the lifestyle typified by the ideals of *peace, innocence and contentment* to that of sophistication ..." (Kahari, 1986, p. 163). While earnestly conceding the 'peace' part of the argument, we submit that the construction of a more balanced equation would lead to the realization that the quest and yearning for peace must equally have been preceded with the obvious threat of violence. And at the very least, it must have occurred in a manner very similar to what is being witnessed today, where its deployment

is a function of *to whom and for what reason it is being perpetrated*. There lurks somewhere in this reading a tacit condoning of 'approved violence' that is inflicted on people perceived as deserving of it under particular circumstances.

However, from the earlier or classical critics of pre-colonial Shona society's oral literature, Hamutyinei and Plangger (1987) arrived at a rather more sober and balanced description of Shona culture by pointing out the existence of opposing dialectics that are embedded in Shona proverbs which are a more authoritative body of Shona traditional thought which they commented upon as quoted below:

Contradictions too are obvious and just in this sense proverbs are a true reflection of life which is far from being a balanced system or coherent whole. A. Kriel rightly sounds a note of warning and tells us not to expect too much in the line of a harmonious Shona philosophy based on the proverbs (Hamutyinei & Plangger, 1987, p. xviii).

As earlier argued, our thesis resonates with the above quotation for the simple reason that it counter-balances the one-sided views of Mkanganwi (1973), Fortune (1974, 1980), Kumbirai (1980), Chimhundu (1980), Kahari (1986, 1990) who only sing praises to the pre-colonial Shona as demonstrative of "*... a superior culture of a peace-loving people*" (Mkanganwi, 1973, p. ii). This claim constitutes only one half of the equation and the other half is supplemented by Hamutyinei and Plangger's (1987) contention that "*... a true reflection of life ... sounds a note of warning and tells us not to expect too much in the line of a harmonious Shona philosophy based on the proverbs*" (p. xviii).

The post-independence violence which the Shona (and other groups) have inflicted upon each other doubtlessly testifies to the fact that the Shona are not novices in violence nor are they some hypnotic pawns taking orders from a sadistic puppet master lusting for political power. If at all they may dishonestly be perceived as 'novices', but from their readiness to use violence, there is ample evidence to suggest that they are not only very capable, but are in fact willing accomplices in a trade not entirely foreign to them.

Evidence culled from traditional oral literature, Old World narratives, let alone pre-colonial history itself demonstrate adequately that pre-colonial Africans, the Shona included, unfortunately for those in denial, were not uniquely endowed with a disposition of non-violence. Taking a multi-genre approach, we draw evidence from the corpus of traditional oral genres such folktales, romances, pro-

verbs, dynastic poetry, etc. while paying close scrutiny to the language used to record and thus communicate the past for the benefit of posterity. We are confident that the language would betray the one-sided view of a peaceful, non-violent pre-colonial Shona society.

Language as an artifact and a preservative of the past

This article has from the outset set itself the task of interrogating the imagining of violence using resources that, *inter alia*, repose in language and/or linguistic analysis. It is imperative for an illuminating understanding of the study to clarify how we intent to use this resource to bear upon data analysis.

From the body of earlier critical studies of Shona folk literature (*cf.* Fortune, 1975; Chimhundu, 1980; Kahari, 1986, 1990; Kumbirai, 1980; Pongweni, 1989), it is without doubt that a close study of language and/or linguistics as a methodology to better understand and appreciate traditional Shona literature is not something new. Paying no heed to the language and literature overlap is what Pongweni (1989) quoting from Jacobson (1960) decries thus:

... a linguist deaf to the poetic functions of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unacquainted with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms (Pongweni, 1989, p. 2).

The importance of appreciating language and linguistics even in literary works is further supported by Pongweni and Chiwome (1995) who in their discussion of the vitality of Shona riddles write as follows:

A language ensures its life through its capacity to articulate the past, the present and the future experiences of the people who use it. And it achieves this not only through the admission of new words and the semantic modification of its extant literal vocabulary, but also through the coinage of novel metaphors and other idioms, including riddles (Pongweni & Chiwome, 1995, p. 19).

It is important to indicate that the language and/or linguistics tool that we would like to deploy in the analysis is not of the brand that is rule-based and highly constrained as it occurs in strict grammatical formalisms comprising; Government Binding (GB), Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG), Lexical Mapping Theory (LMT), Cognitive Grammar (CG), etc. Such an application of the predictions of syntactic theories would not only be impracticable but also unhelpful in the fulfillment of our declared goals. We take recourse to language and/or linguistics where for instance an intertextual analysis of the paradigmatics or syntagmatics of say a name, a proverb, a metaphor, etc. will bring a better un-

derstanding of a specific literary form under examination. Thus, it is chiefly the intertextual elements of categories that constitute oral literature that may sometimes precipitate the need for an additional language and/or linguistics analysis.

Violence: A brief description

Since the principal point of this whole discussion is premised on a demonstration of the embedding of violence in the matrix of oral Shona literature, it is therefore opportune at this juncture to undertake a brief description and/or definition of this critical term. Kaulemu (2011) whose book is a plea on *Ending Violence in Zimbabwe* gives an insight into the broad meaning of violence in a manner that we are unable to improve much upon, and we shall for that reason quote him verbatim at some length:

The different forms of violence that dominate Zimbabwean society have various historical origins. They are sometimes perpetrated by individuals who may be criminals or troubled persons, but these can also be fathers, husbands, sons, mothers and daughters ... It can be regarded as violence to describe people in a certain way and to force them to live and act according to that designation ... This categorisation may be based on race, ethnicity, class, political affiliation, etc. (Kaulemu, 2011, pp. 79-80).

Indeed, Kaulemu (2011) goes on to enumerate instances of violence which the uninitiated are likely to dismiss out of hand as far-fetched contrivances of violence, giving demonstration to a case where people have approved and "... learned to accept certain kinds of violence as normal" (Parpart, 2007, p. 103). For instance, Kaulemu (2011) passionately argues: "To deny thinking people the space to think is to be violent to them. To refuse human beings the opportunity to relate normally to others is to be violent to them" (p. 81). From Kaulemu's (2011) insight, it becomes all the more apparent that violence is indeed much broader than is normally conceded to and also that it can be unleashed to inflict physical, social, political or psychological injury. In our own analysis, it is arguable therefore, that violence occurs on a continuum of increasing brutality. At its lower reaches, it is appared in rather tolerable terms while increasing in intensity to assume its most vulgar levels when victims of violence are treated with unconcealed hostility. We surmise that it is largely at such bloodthirsty and consuming levels that most people see it clearly for what it is.

Nature of the folktale

The folktale constitutes one of the major founts from which we will extract evidence in illustration of the nature and occurrence of violence in pre-colonial Shona society. *Ngano* (folktale) is a highly en-

joyable genre of children's literature. *Ngano* may be defined as simple folkloric imaginative narratives which are prominently marked by fabulous possibilities the occurrence of which entirely dispense with reality and/or verisimilitude. What is most intriguing about the genre is that human behavior is transferred wholly onto animals as they are depicted engrossed in human conversation, courting girls, drinking, commiserating, etc. - fully endowed with human thought, conscience, morality, etc. Moreover, the barrier between the visible and the invisible is blissfully shattered, subsequent to which spellbinding cinematographic scenes are enacted in which the natural and the fantastic worlds are collapsed into a seamless whole. The imaginative faculty is given a free hand and its elasticity stretches to times and places respectively "a long, long time, somewhere very, very far away" (cf. Mkanganwi, 1973; Fortune, 1973, 1980a, 1980b; Kumbirai, 1980). This is the mysterious world into which narrators of folktales happily 'drag' their willing audience. Okpewho (1992) describes what these formulaic beginnings achieve as follows:

Because the events are so back in the past, story-tellers indulge their imaginations in the most fantastic details and, when questioned, they frequently hide behind the excuse that "things are no longer what they used to be" (Okpewho, 1992, p. 183).

What is of principal importance to our study is the fact that in *ngano* we indeed get a fairly reliable glimpse of the pre-colonial Shona's normative moral values. Although they rely on the simple and the improbable for their animation, *ngano* certainly do espouse lessons for life that Shona society desired of its members. Thus, although a stock character like Baboon may be depicted milking cows from a cattle byre, which certainly does not mirror reality, but the lessons that children are supposed to learn regarding the prohibition of stealing and the consequences of stupidity are manifest to all and sundry. It is all the time abundantly plain to children that baboons do not possess speech, and never did, and also that they are unable to milk cows either. However both the Shona penal and moral codes are unmistakably delivered to the children. It is against such an understanding that folktales represent an invaluable resource from which we can glean and infer invaluable elements of the Shona cultural past.

It cannot be in any doubt that *ngano* were told primarily both for education and entertainment purposes. Matambirofa (2013) has, however, put these two objectives of *ngano* on a simple hierarchy where education takes precedence over entertainment. In the same study, Matambirofa concurred with Chitando (2008) that children were taught to understand and appreciate both their cultural and natural environments. It is inferable from a close analysis of *ngano* that the Shona must have lived in a harsh and violent natural environment that was characterized by recurrent famines and other

kinds of threats to human survival. This partly accounts for the special emphasis in *ngano* on survival tactics and the protection of weak and vulnerable members of society, such as the disabled, orphans and widows. Arguably, this was an in-built mechanism against violence in its different guises. The underlying reading here is that a society cannot conceivably steel itself against non-existent threats of violence. The flipside of it, therefore, is that violence is both pre-historical and pre-colonial to Shona society, the residual evidence of which has, inadvertently, remained well preserved in folk or oral literature.

***Ngano* and evidence of violence**

From the broad definition and description of violence given above, it cannot be in much doubt that *ngano*, apart from their narrative pleasantries also depict violence. What can however be said in mitigation is that the kind of violence one comes across in *ngano* is often deodorized by a didactic justification for its perpetration. It is packaged and well framed to appear as legitimate violence society approves of and "... learned to accept ... as normal" (Parpart, 2007, p. 103). It is also to the credit of the story-teller (*sarungano*) that the violence in *ngano* is not only guarded and measured, but it is also generously honey-coated for children's easy mental absorption as well as to forestall revulsion to which children's tender hearts are susceptible. Below is a brief description from a tale in which violence is portrayed in stark terms.

In a folktale titled *Rungano rwaTsuru noMurimi* (Fortune, 1973), Hare habitually steals a farmer's healthy crop of finger millet. He is trapped and subsequently caught by the farmer. He however twists and reverses the instructions to the farmer's 'imbecilic' daughter who has been tasked by her father to carry him home as relish for supper and in the end, it is Hare who, instead of getting cooked for supper, in fact cunningly becomes the guest of honour as he feasts on a delicious meal. Subsequent to partaking of the food, he takes a nap, concealed under a blanket where the children are also sleeping. When the famished farmer returns home, he demands his share of food only to be told that Hare, pretending to be a long forgotten friend of his, has already had the farmer's portion. He is shown where Hare is sleeping and in a feat of rage he reaches out for a hoe handle and angrily strikes, instantly killing his own child instead of Hare. When he lifts the blanket, the *sarungano* pathetically concludes the narrative with the following anticlimax:

... akaona ropa hehwo utatsvatatsva pasi. Mwana akabva angooma akadaro ... Tsuru akabva ati vharavhazu, ndiye napamusiwo wovo kubuda, hoyo musango toro! ... Mangwana acho, murume uye akanoradza mwana wake. Pamusha apa pakambova nekusuwa kwamazuva akati ... Nenumwe musi vanhu vose vakanganwa nezvaTsuru

uyu, Tsuro akabva ati vhu nepamusha payezve ...Vakabva vabatirana mipini kuti vaitswanye ... Asi iyo yakatiza. Yakaenda nekumarara kwaive nehuku, ikasvikobvuta imwe ndokubva yatiza zvayo (Fortune, 1973, pp. 1-4).

(... he saw a large pool of blood on the floor. The child stiffened dead, instantly, just like that ... Hare stood up in a flash and dashed out through the door and then sped off into the forest! ...The following day, the man went and buried his child. There was sadness in his household for a number of days ... Then one day, after all the people had since forgotten about Hare, he suddenly arrived at the same homestead ... They picked hoe handles in order to pulverize him ... But he fled. He took a route that went via the rubbish disposal place where the chickens were feeding and he snatched one and escaped with it.)

There is no point in repeating similar occurrences of violence in *ngano*. However, when the enormous body of *ngano* narratives is examined under the theme of violence in the Shona pre-colonial period, the number of tales portraying violence could be multiplied by quite a considerable factor. Phrases/clauses and vocabulary items from the *ngano* excerpt above comprising: *ropa* 'blood', *utatsvatatsva* 'copious blood', *akabva angooma* 's/he stiffened dead instantly', *hovo* 'sudden escaping', *kusuwa kwamazuva* 'sadness for some days', *vaitswanye* 'to pulverize it', *bvuta* 'snatch' etc. cannot, in the normal order of things, be easily associated with '...a superior culture of a peace-loving people' (Mkanganwi, 1973, p. ii). Whatever suitable excuse one might crank in justification, there is an undoubted animation of generous doses of violence in a number of folk narratives.

There is an implied shrill shout of encore towards the very end of the tale above to which the *sarungano* concedes as evidenced by the fact that Hare is permitted to add insult to injury. He snatches a fowl from the bereaved family and once again, escapes into the forest. To his already staggering litany of misery which he has gleefully committed against the same family, it sadly turns out that Hare is determined to inflict one last act of violence. Just to refresh the memory, he begins by stealing grain from the family plot, which is followed by tricking the farmer's daughter and wife into preparing and serving him a delicious meal by impersonation, following which an innocent child violently dies at the hands of his or her own father and now for a 'dissert', he rubs it in by making a sudden appearance during which he steals. For all these travesties of natural justice, Hare gets away scot free. For committing all manner of violence, the impression left is that Hare completely remains unscathed socially, psychologically, physically or otherwise. Poetic license that is embedded in the

trickster mode, in which Hare is the undisputed super villain allows such miscarriage of justice to recur.

If granted that folktales were primarily meant to educate children, what lessons then were children meant to draw from an unpunished and unpolished successive perpetration of violence? Barring the trickster mode of the tale, the tenor of the folktale's lesson(s) is that "... certain kinds of violence [are] normal" (Parpart, 2007, p. 103) and approved of especially if they are inflicted on *others*. In the excerpt of *ngano* above, the *others* include the farmer whose crop is being stolen by Hare, his imbecilic daughter who imbibes counter-instructions by Hare, the gullible mother who prepares and serves a sumptuous meal to a thief (a stranger 'impersonating' a long forgotten friend of her husband) and lastly, the community that is caught off guard when Hare makes his last and daring stealing escapade. It is as if 'stupid people' – the *others*, deserve socially-sanctioned violence while the perpetrators get fêted for their misadventures. This accounts for why Hare is 'feted' for bringing misery to an innocent and hardworking family.

Violence in the romances

Pre-colonial Shona literature is also vividly painted in novels, which, although they were written well after colonization, portray, in their temporal setting, life during the pre-colonial period. Authors who have ascribed to this form of cultural nationalism are quite a handsome handful. Chiwome (2002) indicates that 'By 1985 Shona had 17 romances and 98 novels' (p. 85). This gives testimony to the Shona people's nostalgic and desire to reconnect with their pre-colonial past after a long and forced hiatus with it. Refer to Table 1 provided below for some of them.

Author	Title	Year Published
Mutswairo S.	<i>Feso</i>	1956
Chakaipa P.	<i>Karikoga Gumiremiseve</i>	1958
	<i>Pfumo Reropa</i>	1961
Chiguvare D.	<i>Kutonhodzwa kwaChauruka</i>	1976
Kuimba G.	<i>Tambaoga Mwanangu</i>	1963
Simango J.	<i>Zviuya Zviri Mberi</i>	1974
Mutasa N.	<i>Mapatya</i>	1978
	<i>Runako Munjodzi</i>	1982
	<i>Hondo Huru</i>	1983

Zvarevashe I.	<i>Kurauone</i>	1976
	<i>Gonawapotera</i>	1978
Ribeiro E.	<i>Muchadura</i>	1967

Table 1: Romance Literature

The modest number of authors who make their subject matter what has been referred to as the ‘Matter of Zimbabwe’ by Kahari (1990) give testimony to the yearning which the Shona people, perhaps like any other, have for their pre-colonial traditions. Kahari (1990) avers that the basis of romance narratives include “traditional folktales, myths, chronicles and legends” (p. 78). He also narrates at length the critical, defining characteristics of romances indicating *inter alia* the baggage of violence which they are bound together with. Quoted below is a description of the salient characteristics of romance narratives from Kahari (1990):

...The heroes of the wondertale stray along and among ... rivers, forests and mountains to encounter hostile people and animals ... symbolizing ... long and drawn out struggle against the forces of tyranny and injustice meted out to the ordinary people by the cruel and ruthless chief[s] ... *But ... victory is only achieved in and through the blood of ... enemies, and ... admirers rejoice to see it flow* (Kahari, 1990, p. 78).

Romances exhibit a narrative paradigm shift towards verisimilitude, although the authors often find themselves trapped and unable to completely shrug off the lure of the fantastic and the fabulous that their predecessors – the *sarungano* (folk story-teller) freely indulged in. Romances however draw their subject matter from legends, myths and some highly embellished but true life or neo-historical accounts. Characters of folktales comprising animals and other non-humans are completely weaned off in romances excepting only in instances where some spiritual experience is required through the mediation of an animal which would be ‘acting’ in its natural capacity as an animal.

Most of the stories in the romances in Table 1 are wrought in an environment pervaded with gruesome violence which created a pervasive sense of insecurity. The mere celebration of romance heroes such as Tanganeropa in Chakaipa’s *Pfumo Reropa*, Mutumwapavi in Mutasa’s *Mapatya*, Tambaoga in Kuimba’s *Tambaoga Mwanangu*, just to mention but a few, gives ample testimony to this observation. The eponymous names already foreshadow these heroes’ undisputed fighting valour. Historically, there is little doubt that most of these stories are set during a time of internecine, intra-Shona wars of territoriality and supremacy. There is equally not much doubt that there seems to be a joyful regard for brutality when inflicted on those considered enemies. In Chakaipa’s *Pfumo Reropa*

(1961) the hero, Tanganeropa, has been captured following a fierce fight in a foreign territory that he is traversing and he is brought before the king for interrogation. When asked about his homeland and other personal details, the king has the impression that he is not cooperating and he chillingly issues a dire warning as follows:

Tarisa uone, ukanyatsondiundza nezvoupennyu hwako handikukurayi asi ukaita zvokutamba neni zvinoipa. Iwe ndiwe munhu andiri kuda nokuti ndine muti wandiri kuda kusanganisa nomwoyo wako ... ndinoda kuti vana vangu vagozova varwi chaivo...

(Chakaipa, 1961, p. 89)

(Look here, if you honestly tell me all about your life, I will spare you, but if you want to joke with me, things will become sour for you. You are the very person that I wish to make a special magical preparation mixed together with your heart ... I want my sons to be real fighters ...)

Romances are soaked with enemy blood, the spilling of which is greeted with cheerful rejoicing. This illustrates what Kahari (1990) earlier declared about romances; "... victory is only achieved in and through the blood of ... enemies, and ... admirers rejoice to see it flow..." (p. 78). The '*flowing of blood*', whether that of a foe or friend, the '*rejoicing of its flow*', joyful celebration of '*victory*', the craving for '*real fighters*', the making of charms '*mixed with a human heart*', brandishing of a '*blooded spear*', the celebration of '*bravery*' etc., which is the hallmark of romance narratives, is reflective of wanton killing which is delivered through the vehicle of brutal violence. From romance narratives, peace could perhaps only have been guaranteed if one lived in a strong, centralized polity which enemies hesitated to attack. It is as if the best form of defense at the time was a preemptive, offensive strike on one's enemies, real or potential.

In his study of heroes and villains in Shona literature, Matambirofa (1992) arrived at the following conclusion regarding the portrayal of these stock characters in pre-colonial romances:

The images presented of heroes and villains in romances are affected by the type of society writers try to reincarnate ... People lived in a hostile physical environment which demanded from the individual both alertness of the mind and physical strength as vital components for survival. Besides, the mainly subsistence mode of existence also required skills in hunting, making implements, farming and fighting. It is largely on account of this that heroes are given as brave fighters (Matambirofa, 1992, p. 40).

Romances also betray the fact that fueling the violence of wars and fighting, was always an underlying justification for its enactment. The fighting could be offensive or defensive, but bringing unity to this bifurcation was its justification, which was legitimated by *othering*. In other words, groups, individuals and polities other than the ones the chivalric warriors at arms belonged were legitimate targets for offensive and merciless strikes. And their annihilation brought vociferous jubilation from the conquerors' polities. This is the kind of violence that was approved of and considered normal in pre-colonial Shona society. However, and quite unfortunately so, it seems to strike a chord with a crop of some denizens in the current society. In elaboration, violence is considered as violence largely if it is inflicted on the ego and those dear to it. Violence is only *violence* if pain is inflicted 'without cause' as subjectively judged by the ego or those belonging to its protective and/or immediate circles.

Violence in pre-colonial times

Although the major sources that we have used thus far to illustrate the prevalence of violence are located in traditional Shona oral literature, in this section we would like to migrate to an examination of true historical accounts that buttress our founding hypothesis. In Mazarire's (2003) exploration of the role of women in the founding of the Chivi chieftainship, he describes the shenanigans, the wars and fighting that took place then. Writes Mazarire (2003):

Tavengwegweyi, the founder of the Chivi chiefdom only got access to this area through marrying the Ngowa ruler's daughter vaChifedza. He gained control over the most fertile parts of this district when his sons, led by Matsveru, embarked on a war of aggression that ousted their maternal uncles. In the process, they hired Dumbuseya mercenaries of Wedza to assist them in the war and they rewarded them with a woman, the daughter of Musvuvugwa by the name Ndada (Mazarire, 2003, p. 43).

Ganging up with one's sons, which Tavengwegweyi did, let alone make commerce of war by hiring hordes of mercenaries – the Dumbuseya, from hundreds of kilometers to oust his in-laws, also his own sons' 'maternal uncles', is a clear demonstration of lust for power which became achievable via the route of military action. This was a perpetration of political, social, psychological and physical brutality on those for whom the ousting project was inaugurated. The mere mention of mercenaries – dogs of war who fight under terms of a commercial transaction to kill human beings must give enough indication of the ferocity of killing that erupted when such a lot set their eyes on their victims. The reward of a woman to the Dumbuseya further exacerbates the severity of the psycho-social violence that must have been felt by Ndada and her relatives.

Giving justification of whatever tincture in retrospect, whether or not it consists of blaming it on times past or the purpose for which it was perpetrated, it remains extremely difficult outside the realm of lies and disbelief not to see the hand of brutal violence at work in such a scheme of things. To just this extent alone, the Shona pre-colonial past is only homogenously glamorous for those who are now privileged to scan it only as a historical record whilst they are comfortably shielded by the passage of time, as it were, far from the actual experience of violence that was being perpetrated then.

The one account cited above of Tavengegweyi of Chivi is factually true to Shona pre-colonial history and similar accounts can be proliferated, *ad nauseam*, regarding some of the dirty methods that were employed to establish different dynasties and chiefdoms on what Beach (1980) referred to as the Zimbabwean Plateau. The rise and fall of states such as Mutapa, Rozvi, Changamire, Torwa and many others are a function of the consuming wars that were calibrated with military violence. The rise and fall of states is what Mazarire (2009) refers to when he observes thus “The pre-colonial history of Zimbabwe is usually explained in terms of the rise and fall of empires – the Great Zimbabwe, the Mutapa, the Torwa, the Rozvi and Ndebele states.” (p. 1). Beach (1984) regards “...Torwa and Mutapa ... as out-growths of the Great Zimbabwe state...” (p. 24). It cannot be in doubt that war represents the zenith of human brutality and savagery which is given vent to by the most ferocious forms of violence, the terminal point of which is the capitulation or outright annihilation of enemy forces. Shona pre-history demonstrates this quite unequivocally and rivers of blood must have sogged the fighting warriors, whether on the attack or on the defense modes.

Dynastic celebration of violence

Most Shona dynastic and/or clan praise poems are a festive adulation of the exploits of war and violence. So entrenched are these adulations as they stand engraved in Shona clan praises (*zvidawo*), boast names as well as nicknames that one is tempted to forgive some from among the Shona who only see the celebrations and hardly the purposes for which they were composed. Celebrated violence is always both socially and politically sanctioned when directed towards *others*. In demonstrating what we have referred to as dynastic violence, we shall quote an excerpt from Mutswairo’s (1983) epic poem titled *Madetembedzo edzinza rovokwaChiweshe* (Poetry of the dynasty of the Chiweshe people):

Changamire! Iwe uri pfumo guru,
Rakati rabatana nerokwaRusanga,
Mambo Chinembiri wenyika yeShawasha,

Rusanga akanzwa seawirwa
 Nomutoro mukuru wepfumo guru.
 Ndiweka wakadya mombe dzaRusanga
 Ukamusiya arova gasho achiti rashu,
 Ropa rake raparadzwa newe, Mutenhesanwa,
 Nemhuri yake yose yazangazika,
 Yangove sembudzi dzerimuka dzisina mufudzi.
 (Mutswairo, 1983, p. 19)
 (Lord! You are such a terrifying fighting force,
 Who, when you engaged Rusanga,
 Chief Chinembiri of the Shawasha country,
 Rusanga felt as if an unbearable burden
 Of a huge army had fallen upon him.
 You are the one who ate Rusanga's herds
 And left him utterly dead and sprawled,
 After his blood had been spilled by you, Mutenhesanwa,
 With all his family scattered all over,
 Like wild goats without a shepherd...)

Barring the brutal streak of this excerpt and momentarily focusing only on the poetic element of it, there is little doubt that it is a lofty, polished piece of poetic rendition that conjures supreme literary enjoyment. It was composed by an intense and deep thinker endowed with an elevated skill in Shona verse. Indeed, this comes hardly as a surprise given that Solomon Mutswairo wrote the lyrics of the national anthem/poem of Zimbabwe. It is perhaps the unguarded enjoyment of similar kinds of praise and/or boast poetry by the Shona people that possibly render them numb to the stinging violence that gave inspiration to their poetic evocation.

Turning to the violence part of the poem, we witness the Chiweshe people of the Shava 'Eland' totem blissfully celebrating the military exploits of their founding patriarch – Mutenhesanwa, who undoubtedly must have been 'lustfully' belligerent. In the epic, the poet idolizes and eulogizes the warrior patriarch for prevailing over a litany of prominent enemies whose chiefdoms he utterly laid to waste, such as Rusanga, Matema, Seke, Nyamweda, Mbari and others. Mutenhesanwa must surely have brought blood and terror not to a few people once he had embarked upon his infamous military expeditions of conquest. The vocabulary and/or expressions used in the poem leave no illusion as to the quantum of

violence that he brought to the very doorstep of his enemies; *'spilling blood'*, making an enemy feel like *'an unbearable burden has fallen upon him'*, leaving Rusanga *'dead and sprawled'* with his family *'scattered all over'* and *'like wild goats without a shepherd'*, in addition to plundering Rusanga of his cattle herds. For its poetic edification, the poem lavishly feasts and rests its emphasis on the intense political and mental pain and anguish that was inflicted on Mtenhesanwa's hapless adversaries in an inadvertently near-sadistic manner.

The dynastic praise poem is a carnivalesque, jubilant celebration of Mtenhesanwa's military, political, social and psychological violence for which no apologies, let alone reparations, can be claimed by Rusanga, Nyamweda, Seke, Mbari, etc. who he attacked, overpowered, killed and divested them of their wealth and territories. This is just one example of this traditional poetic genre, but given the countless numbers of Shona dynasties, this picture pretty much replicates in stupendous volumes, all going to give an unsettling suggestion of the baggage of violence that the Shona pre-colonial past is weighed down with, which, much as the present generation of the Eland totem in oblivion enjoys and blissfully celebrates the killing and plundering of its forebears' enemies or quarries.

Conclusion

Although we have not delved into any analysis of the manifestations of post-independence violence in Zimbabwe as such, it is precisely the viciousness of violence in the post-colony that has triggered in us the necessity for embarking on the current analytical enterprise. We are certainly not alone in genuinely worrying about the alarming levels of violence that Zimbabwe has continued to witness. Several concerned scholars have been curious to go back in time in order to locate the roots of this dangerous proclivity and most are in agreement that violence predates independence. Our principal source has been traditional literature as it occurs in the Shona language and culture. This has been occasioned in part by the need to examine relatively 'unadulterated' sources and resources where an oral record of the Shona is narrated by the Shona to the Shona – presumably sealed off from colonial influence and subterfuge. In our search, we have concluded that the white man indeed compounded violence. However, for all his well known crimes, he must be acquitted of the 'charge' of *introducing* it as such. Below Muchemwa (2007) traces the roots of totalitarianism which fuels the current violence from the pre-colonial eras as follows:

Totalitarian tendencies in current Zimbabwean political culture, though predating the war in the form of indigenous patriarchy and traditional chieftaincy, found invigoration and re-inscription during the struggle when the accent fell on the military in the formation of national consciousness and the nation state (Muchemwa, 2007, p. 11).

In an apparent compensation of the wholesale colonial denigration of blacks, there certainly has been a tendency by Shona writers when they reconnect with their pre-colonial past to selectively pick values and norms that paint them in inordinately good stead while sweeping below the rag, the not-so-rosy side of the past. This may be an understandable expression of cultural nationalism and/or renaissance, given the wanton disparaging of Africans by the racist colonialists. This reaction to colonization comes out in the view which is expressed by Chiwome (2002):

African nationalism was expressed through the yearning for ideals, a groping for a pristine grandeur in the face of subordination. There was a deliberate attempt to select and resuscitate some myths, values and institutions (Chiwome, 2002, p. 86).

It is against such a background that the tendency by cultural nationalist activists and/or critics has been to conveniently flash only the virtuous side of the Shona, according them a generous one-sided “...superior culture of a peace-loving people.” (Mkanganwi, 1973, P. ii) It seems that the underlying text then was a sarcastic accusation of violence perpetrated by ‘civilized’ white colonialists, who, in stark contrast to the ‘peace-loving’, ‘savage’ Shona, ignited the catastrophic wars of black resistance which they quelled with violent brutality. If white-on-black violence had stopped at conquest alone, perhaps that would have settled the matter, but the whites were not finished yet as they proceeded to rub it in - taunting and slighting ‘black savages and kaffirs’ “through a wide range of small but hurtful and harmful actions ... such as having to step off the pavement when a European passed by, ... ridiculing and undermining traditional cultural practices ...” (Parpart, 2007, p. 105). There might have been need back then to produce the ‘peace-loving’ card in order to prick the conscience of ‘civilized’ yet violent white colonialists. However, given the unapologetic and unabated levels of violence the Zimbabwean polity seems to have developed an increasing appetite for, decades after independence, it is in the best interests of all denizens not to excuse it on circumstances, whether past or present, because doing so effectively means getting resigned to a pathological lack of agency that is rendered numb by a deluded image of self-righteousness.

Be that as it may, the Shona, just like other human beings, are certainly not endowed with an incapacity for perpetrating violence upon those whom they are angry with for whatever reason. Oral and/or traditional literature clearly demonstrates that while the Shona definitely yearned for and extolled peace, the vicissitudes of life, just like they are experienced by all other people, unfortunately were unable to guarantee perpetual, paradisiacal peace. Thus, without divesting them of the high premium they placed on nobility of character and the quest for peace, it would be a false and

dangerous oversimplification of reality to seek to psyche the Shona into the false view that they are historically without the blemish of violence. Doing so would imply that their hands would otherwise be clean for all time were it not for the mischievous politicians, the ripple effects of *Mfecane* and the white colonialists who schooled them in violence - a nihilistic habit which they apparently seem to lack the desire nor the motivation to wean themselves of.

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