

Individual Agency and Responsibility in African Proverbial Discourse

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Abstract

Akarumwa nechekuchera (He was bitten by what he dug up).

(Shona idiom reminding that trouble may be lying deep in the earth, minding its own business, as it were. Someone takes a pick and shovel and unearths it. The person bears the responsibility for the consequences of their own action.)

While proverbial lore has been the focus of much research and publication over the years, not many of those have thoroughly examined what I intend to interrogate here, namely how this lore seeks to alert us to the connection between our actions and our responsibility for them. Proverbs are as old as human existence, as can be seen in Jewish thinkers devoting a whole book of The Old Testament to them. In their introduction to that book, the editors outline the domains of life in which a knowledge and acceptance of the wisdom contained in proverbs would enable the Children of Israel to live life as God intended at the Creation. These encompass “reverence for the Lord, religious morality, good manners, self-control, humility, patience, etiquette in social relationships, loyalty to friends, respect for the poor, good manners, family relationships, business dealings, common sense”. In this paper, after analysing Shona proverbs whose messages fall into some of these categories, I conclude that, far from being conservative and authoritarian injunctions out of synch with modernity because of their alleged downplaying of, even frowning on individualism for being inimical to African communalism, as some Western thinkers have concluded, African proverbs carry wisdom which reminds us of the connection between individual and communal action, on the one hand, and individual and communal responsibility for creating the societies that we live in through such action, on the other; in fact, proverbial lore recognises both individualism and communalism.

1. Introduction.

The Latin ‘*verbum*’ means ‘word, saying, expression’. It also means ‘verb’ The former meanings of ‘*verbum*’ encompass all language forms which we call speech, and this is reflected in such English idioms as ‘A word in your ear’, ‘They exchanged words’, ‘Can I have a word with you?’ and in Hamlet’s words: “Words, words, words” (2.2.-193). Parallel to Hamlet’s response to Polonius, in Shona discourse there is an expression ‘**Shoko** rawavuya naro rinoda kuti tigare pasi’, ‘The **word** which you

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have brought requires us to sit down,' where 'word' means 'matter', 'issue' or 'topic for discussion'. Further, various forms of the word 'verb' itself are also used to mean 'word'. There are such expressions as 'She could not verbalize her feelings', 'I quoted her verbatim', and 'She was subjected to verbal abuse'. There is also the ironical 'He is intoxicated by the exuberance of his own verbosity', itself a pretentiously learned way of saying something like, 'He is rather fond of using many big words.' In fact, when these utterances are made, the speaker is referring to discourses in which forms which we now regard as belonging to various word classes, including verbs, are used in syntactic structures. In today's grammatical theory, the Latin 'verbum' has thus undergone the process of semantic shift or specialization, since it is used for only one word category, the verb. In English, we recognize two types of verb, among others, namely transitive and intransitive.

Living is eminently verbal. People perform actions on others and have actions performed on them or for them. We are born and we bear children, we breathe, we cry, we learn to speak, we learn to walk, we learn to relate to our environment, we work, we play, we love, we hate, we fight, wound, maim or kill, we wage war and make peace, and so on. In these processes and experiences, we eventually learn that there is connectivity and connectedness between our actions as agents and their results, consequences and, crucially, our responsibility for them. **Most**, if not all, the proverbs to be discussed in this paper have transitive verbs. And to indicate that their message is directed at the individual rather than to the community as a whole, the vast majority of them are addressed to 'You', with the verb in the singular form. Transitive verbs are used in sentences that have a subject, the agent, and a direct object, that which is affected by the action designated by the verb, also known as the patient. When the subject is the third person, 'he' or 'she' for singular, or 'they' for plural, there are ways of marking the verb form so that there is subject-verb agreement. This serves as a way of marking and attributing responsibility for the verb action to the subject, the agent.

Our languages have ways, beyond merely naming our actions and the objects surrounding our lives, of signaling connectivity and connectedness among the various aspects of the world we live in. Through our actions, it is we, people, who are responsible for creating the social environment that we live in, whether it be conducive to the realization of our goals or not, and whether we deserve such an environment or not. Simultaneously, the environment, both social and natural, also determines our actions and defines us. Languages have in-built mechanisms for reminding us of those connections. This means that languages are educational tools; they are a *sine qua non* of our being, a fact which once persuaded the Romans to define the human being who each one of us is as 'homo loquens', 'man, the speaking creature, the speaking being'. The expression 'homo loquens' has often

been preferred as a more apposite label for a human being than the other one from Latin, 'homo sapiens', 'man, the wise being', and that, for one good reason. While all human beings have language, they do not always act with wisdom. The word 'sapiens' is both an adjective and a noun. As a noun it is synonymous with 'sapientia', which means 'discernment, philosophy, knowledge'. We have a God-given capacity to both acquire and learn wisdom, but we do not always exploit and benefit from that capacity. We speak about a variety of subjects regarding our lives in an effort to make sense of our relationships among ourselves on the one hand, and between ourselves and both the animate and inanimate environment in which we live, on the other. Confronted by this tendency on our part to not always conduct ourselves as beings endowed with the capacity to tell right from wrong, and then act accordingly, our ancestors long ago found it necessary to articulate some of their experiential lessons in mainly pithy and memorable expressions, which we now call proverbs. These are about both our actions as agents and about our responsibility for those actions. Their defining character is their indisputable authoritativeness, not their alleged authoritarianism, an authoritativeness which derives from the fact of them having been coined from lived experience.

1.1 Literature review.

In reviewing the superabundance of literature on African proverbs, I wish to foreground Oyekan Owomoyela's (1996) thoughts on the subject. This is for the reason that his discussion is an extended and well argued response to the views of most Western and Eurocentric African thinkers on the epistemological status and social role of African proverbs in shaping and determining how our people develop from the innocence of childhood to facing the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood. Owomoyela quotes many such thinkers, particularly Hountondji (1983) and Wiredu (1980), as having concluded that, due to their so-called authoritarianism, African proverbs mould people who have no capacity to question the power wielded by those in authority, with the debilitating consequence that such people see no role for individual originality and innovation. Owomoyela (1996, p. 28) argues against this stereotyping when he writes that,

... even when one attributes ideas or beliefs to whole communities one says no more thereby than that the ideas and beliefs have undergone the necessary communal proofing to be judged consistent with the group's ethos.

He adds:

The expression 'Bantu Philosophy' no more means that all 'Bantu' people necessarily subscribe to it any more than 'Contemporary European Philosophy' suggests the adherence of all contemporary Europeans to the philosophy so described.

What Owomoyela says amounts to arguing that each human being has a unique, individual view and experience of life. This is evident in such commonly used discursal expressions as the Shona ‘Dai ndiri iwe, ndai ...’ meaning ‘If I were you, I would ...’, the equivalent of English ‘If I were in your shoes, I would ...’. Such expressions, I would suggest, serve as indicators of the speaker and recipient’s consciousness of there being existential, experiential and intellectual demarcations separating members of the community to which they both belong. Both European and African people accept individual and communal differences, but which differences are not necessarily antagonistic. In his collection of proverbs from across the world, David Crystal (2006, p. 9) observes that “It is a commonplace of linguistics that each language expresses a unique vision of the world.” I would add, further, that even within the same language community, each individual uses the shared medium of communication in a way that serves to define them uniquely, that is, in the same way that their DNA and fingerprints serve to distinguish them from the others. When people preface the quotation of a proverb with the expression, ‘Our ancestors used to say, [proverb]’, they are not suggesting that those ancestors used to sit down at a village court in order to communally coin proverbs. Rather, they mean that gifted individuals among them mined knowledge acquired in the process of their own immersion into their cultural ethos in order to fashion summative expressions which all those who heard them accepted as apposite statements of wisdom worthy of emulation.

Yet Owomoyela (1996, p. 20) quotes Hountondji (1983, p. 151) as having pronounced that there cannot be a philosophy which all Bantu, all Africans espouse as the philosophy attributed to them as this would present a “unique spectacle of a society without conflict, division or dissonance.” Hountondji’s view goes against what we ordinarily mean when, for example, we refer to the legal systems of countries using such phrases as ‘under British law’, ‘in terms of Zimbabwean law’, and so on. Every modern society has its own legal system which stipulates what is acceptable behavior and what is not and which specifies prescribed sanctions for those who deviate from the norm. So do traditional societies, whose laws and philosophies are carried partly in their proverbs and partly in their didactic folktales. The philosophy imbedded in these oral traditions strives to have members of society march towards an ideal dispensation in which all may live in peace and tranquility, but without losing sight of humanity’s capacity for committing evil. This cannot be viewed as “a unique spectacle”.

With reference to what he terms “the authoritarian odour” of African cultures, Wiredu (1980, p. 4) is quoted (Owomoyela, 1996, p. 21) as bemoaning the lack of space for individual originality in African

tradition. Wiredu's views on the matter are backed partly by reference to African peoples' reliance on the age-old wisdom contained in their proverbs when he writes:

Our social arrangements are shot through and through with the principle of unquestioning obedience to our superiors, which often meant elders. Hardly any premium was placed on curiosity in those of tender age, or independence of thought in those of more considerable years.

Wiredu's views are faulted by Owomoyela (1996, p. 31) when he points out that proverbial lore is not stagnant but dynamic and responsive to developments in the societies which rely on it. This is reflected in new proverbs being coined in order to comment on evolving, contemporary concerns. An example is the canonical Shona proverb that advises those in authority to be humble, 'Big baboon, *fold your tail* so that your juniors may respect you.' But when the people of Zimbabwe began to feel that their immediate post-independence government was failing to deliver on its election promises, they took to the streets in protest. In order to make those malcontents know who was in charge of their wellbeing, government functionaries threateningly spread an edited version of this proverb through urban folklore channels, 'Big baboon, *stretch your tail out* so that your juniors may see it' [and know their place in the scheme of things]. Further, Wiredu's reference to Africans' "unquestioning obedience to our superiors" flies in the face of Shona experience. There are occasions when our Chiefs address the ancestors in uncomplimentary terms in a ritual called 'Kupopotera vazimu': 'Shouting at the ancestral spirits.' This is done at such times as when it seems that an innocent child is about to die of some mysterious ailment, or when a drought is threatening our crops and livestock, even after we have religiously performed all the rites prescribed by tradition. This and other rites serve to insure that those in authority are accountable to those over whom they exercise power.

Another contemporary historical instance concerns the early life of Nelson Mandela. Writing on Mandela's decision to reject marriage to a woman whom his royal house had chosen for him, and running away to metropolitan Johannesburg, James Mafela (<http://press.anu.edu.au/aborig> history/indigenous bio/mobile devic) notes that it is to that one act of defiance of authority that South Africa and the world owe the achievements which Mandela later scored. Otherwise he would have settled down among his people, focusing on siring heirs to his Chieftainship. The Shona of Zimbabwe would say that in his defiance, Mandela exercised his independence of thought by shunning the 'wisdom' contained in one of their proverbs: 'Marry the offspring of parents whose abandoned homes (origins) are known.'

1.1.2 The golden mean between communalism and individualism.

The alleged unquestioning acceptance of the 'wisdom of our ancestors' as conveyed in proverbs has led some to conclude that Africans are suspicious of individualism, preferring "unanimism". Owomoyela (1996, p. 29) comments:

Students of traditional African societies are conversant with many instances of the de-emphasis of the cult of the individual. The reason is not necessarily that Africans do not believe in individualism. Any society that believes in heroism and worships it, as Africans do, evidently encourages excellence. Traditionally, nevertheless, the individual composer of a song would not think of copyrighting it or attaching his or her name to it, nor would the carver carve his name on his product. Whatever smacks of assertive possessiveness, even over one's undisputed possessions, runs counter to the traditional spirit.

The validity of this latter point is evidenced by the following Shona proverbs which both assert that, as Owomoyela puts it: "One's possessions are always available to others/neighbors to access":

a) Kandiro kanoenda kunobva kamwe: The little plate (of goodies) goes whence another comes.

This is equivalent to the English, 'One good turn deserves another'. Assisting a neighbor in times of need, or giving to others even when they can manage on their own, is a gesture of goodwill which serves as a social lubricant designed to ensure that the communal engine does not develop a knock.

b) Zano marairanwa/zanondoga akasiya gumbeze mumasese: Advice must be mutual, Mr.-Know-It-All left the blanket at a beer party.

c) Mungwaru haati chandareva ndicho/asi benzi ndichandagwinyira: The wise man is not a 'What-I-have-said-stands' person, but the fool is Mr.-Inflexible.

The character portrayed in these two is that of one who is unwisely averse to engaging in "constructive, collegial disputations over developmental modalities" for both personal and mutual communal benefit. (This quoted words come from James Clarke (1996), *The Star Newspaper* columnist's 'quotation' of what an ANC leader said at a press briefing, following a meeting of the party's National Executive Council.)

Owomoyela (1996, p. 28) alerts us to the prevalence of similar proverbial lore among his own people when he writes that, "One finds expressions of the underlying principles of cooperation, communalism, and self-effacement in such Yoruba proverbs as:

a) Going it alone brings disaster/cooperation never brings disaster.

- b) A person who does not contribute what s/he has, has no claim to what one has.
- c) No single person may say 'Here we are'.
- d) Only an idiot claims that there is no one like herself/himself; the world is full of people like her/him."

He points out that the philosophical drift of such proverbs is that "To attach one's name to an object or an idea is to assert exclusive claim and proprietorship to it, whereas traditional society frowns on the implied possessiveness and ostentatious self-importance. The Yoruba user of proverbs resorts to them in order, among other reasons, to disclaim proprietorship of the wisdom they carry, and to attribute it to the elders" In line with this interpretation of these Yoruba proverbs, the Shona often preface the quotation of a proverb with the words 'Our ancestors used to say' (proverb), thereby presenting such wisdom as articulating a neutral, established, commonsensical position in an argument. That is why quoting an apposite proverb to support one's views in a traditional court puts the issue beyond doubt. Individual originality comes from one being so fluent in one's knowledge of the community's collective wisdom lore as to be able to quote the appropriate proverb in the appropriate context so that the meaning of such a quotation resonates with what others engaged in the same discourse know about their communal ethos. Owomoyela's (1996, p. 29) conclusion on this matter is that, "... the ethno-philosophers are in this regard closer in their expression to the African spirit than are the professional philosophers".

But Africans also know that, in order to have anything, in the form of material possessions as well as wisdom, one must work and think, as an individual. In this way they see value in the ideal citizen seeking to achieve what Chimhundu (1980) has called "the golden mean" between individualism and communalism. This is what the following Shona proverbs are designed to articulate:

- e) Zano pangwa uine rako: Accept advice (only) when you have your own.

That is to say, seeking other people's opinions on an issue when you yourself are completely in the dark about it is the way to perdition.

- f) Shindi yakashaya muswe nokutumira: The squirrel failed to get a tail through sending others (to get one for it from the Creator).

This one also urges self-reliance and time-consciousness. The Creator does not accept late applications.

- g) Kugara maoko hakuna mukoho: Sitting on one's hands does not bring any harvest.

This one is hyperbolic. If, while other people subsist on the sweat of their brow, using their hands to make a living, you sit on yours, you are condemning yourself to perpetual beggary.

h) Chawawana batisisa/mudzimu haupi kaviri: Hold fast to whatever you have acquired, the ancestral spirits do not give twice.

Routinely, in the course of our lives, each person is striving to attain something that can improve their well-being. Such an acquisition should therefore be valued and guarded jealously.

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that, whether they are stressing the value of communalism or individualism, African proverbs overall recognise the place of the individual in the scheme of things. This comes from the fact of the community being constituted by individuals, each one of them expected to contribute to the maintenance of its eternal values, and to developing them in response to the changing socio-political milieu, through their individual actions. The citizen who is conversant with African proverbial lore, the ideal citizen, knows when to act as an individual and when to cooperate with others, all for both the individual and the common good. This is the essence of the golden mean, knowing when and how to do what the Shona call 'kuzvibata', literally 'to hold oneself', in other words, when and how to project oneself. The individual's conduct must ideally be informed by their answer to the question, "How do I behave so that society can view me as truly one of their own?"

In the following sections I analyse and comment on proverbs that carry advice on how the citizen as agent can or is expected to conduct themselves in order to achieve both individual success and communal cohesion and coherence. Cohesion comes from consistency in an individual's adherence to proverbial wisdom, while coherence is a product of such individual action resonating with that of others who subscribe to the same ethos.

2.0 Common sense.

2.1 Perseverance and patience.

The proverbs in this section serve to underscore the values of perseverance and patience in the pursuit of happiness. They have this in common, that they all point to the necessity of the agent, whether it be an individual, a team or the community as a whole, conducting a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis before they embark on an enterprise, however big, however small.

i) Kubata mwana wengwe/senga pfuti.	To catch the child of a leopard/carry a gun.
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This proverb exploits the well-known predatory propensities of the leopard, on to whose terrain one dares not trespass unless one is properly armed. It advises the agent to have adequate resources essential for the task at hand. The danger posed by the leopard is parallel to the challenges which

one has to reckon with in investing one's resources in a project. For example, successful farming requires that one has the land, the inputs, and equipment essential for a good harvest. Without these, one is exposing oneself to failure and starvation.

ii) Kunzi mukadzi ari apa/kunatsa munyu.	For a woman to be called a proper house wife, she must know how to season her relish.
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This proverb literally refers to a woman's culinary expertise, and that for a good reason. A bride is valued for making a positive impact on the lives of her in-laws. Among the plaudits that she earns, apart from those for her beauty, industriousness, and respectfulness towards the in-laws, is that for her ability to prepare mouth-watering meals. Indeed, the future of her marriage may depend on the latter. But this proverb, as Hamutyinei and Plangger (1987, p. 249) state, applies to domains wider than the domestic. They say, "To achieve your desired status in life, you must aspire to it, then train and work towards it."

iii) Kupfuma ishungu/unorara musoro uri panze.	Getting rich comes from having ambition/you sleep with your head outside (the blanket).
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Proverb (iii) resonates so much with what the Shona regard as common sense that it has been used by many emerging entrepreneurs, particularly bus operators, as a trade name. The ambition necessary for success in business, or for achieving any goal that one sets for oneself, is the direct opposite of 'sitting on one's hands'.

iv) Kukurukura/hunge wapotswa. 641.	To be able to discuss (an accident) means you have escaped.
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While number (iii) correctly says that, in order to succeed, one has to have ambition, the Shona also know that such success is not guaranteed for all who dare. That is why proverb (iv) advises the wisdom of not expecting that all will be smooth sailing. In the event of failure, there is a need for self-introspection. This enables the unfortunate to view their misfortunes in perspective.

2.1.1 The common sense of taking care of the self.

Although the family and the community provide an environment in which the individual can thrive, the ultimate responsibility for one's welfare rests on one's shoulders. While the vast majority of proverbs are metaphorical, proverb (v) below communicates literally, perhaps because of the commonsensical message which it conveys, and because its message is vital for both the young and the old.

v) Kude chinhu kureva/kunyarara hauchiwani.	v) Wanting something entails asking for it, keep quiet and you won't get it.
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Proverb (vi) below metaphorically addresses the needs of the 'child'. Literally, the child in question is one so young that it is carried on the mother's back, out of the mother's sight. She gets to know that her child needs attention only when it cries, otherwise such a child could die on her back. Proverb (vi) extrapolates the child's invisibility and 'unarticulated' discomfort to the unarticulated and therefore unknowable problems of an adult who does not communicate them to others. This proverb,

more than most, pointedly underscores the need for an individual assuming responsibility for their own welfare. Further, the assertion in the proverb that such individual problems are ameliorated, or, indeed, solved by the agent appealing to his fellows underscores the importance that Shona and even African society places on communalism. Individualism represents the freedom which society provides for one to develop one's own personality, while communalism represents society's interest in the welfare of all who constitute it, since their welfare is its own welfare.

vi) Mwana asingachemi/anofira mumbereko.	vi) A child who does not cry dies in baby strap.
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2.1.2 Placing value on and conserving one's blessings

vii) Kunyanya kusevesa sadza/unozopedzisira wotemura.	vii) Eat your relish too soon and you will end up eating sadza without it.
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Sadza is Zimbabwe's staple food, made from ground maize grain. Ideally, it is eaten after soaking a morsel of it into a relish of meat immersed in a soup. Without the relish it is unpalatable and difficult to swallow. This becomes the fare for one who has gone prematurely for the appetizing relish, which alone does not fill the stomach. This proverb is quoted to warn against squandering the good things that one has as if there is no tomorrow.

viii) Kushaya mano kwendiro/kupakurirwa isingadyi.	viii) It is the brainlessness of the plate, that it has food dished into it but does not eat.
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On the other hand, Shona society knows that there are people to whom the Creator has been generous, they who seem to have the legendary Midas touch, and yet who live their lives like paupers, the Scrooges who accumulate and hoard possessions without ever putting them to use. Apart from these, there are others who are innocently unaware that opportunity knocks only once, and thus allow chances for self-improvement to pass them by. According to the above proverb, they are like or are the plate, into which food is regularly dished, but which does not eat, allowing others to snatch it.

3.0 The discrepancy between appearance and reality

3.1 Too much haste, less speed

Apart from providing wisdom in the pursuit of material wealth, Shona proverbial lore also sought to educate citizens on philosophical matters. The proverbs in this section serve to draw people's attention to the fact that reality does not always appear on the surface of things, that there may be a crucial discrepancy between appearance and substance.

ix) Kuona mukombe kunaka kunze/izvo mukati mune marovhu.	ix) The ladle may appear clean on the outside, yet there is decaying pith inside.
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x) Kuona onde kutsvuka kunze/imo mukati mune honye.	x) The fig may appear red on the outside. [= ready to eat] yet be full of maggots inside.
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Proverbs (ix) and (x) literally warn against conduct that may result in the agent placing their health in danger. We drink from the ladle, and we eat figs. But if we drink from an apparently clean ladle without first inspecting its inside to ensure that it is not infested with decaying pith, or if we eat a fig merely because it looks red on the surface and thus ready to be consumed, we expose ourselves to food poisoning. Understanding the proverbial metaphors in both examples enables us to extrapolate their meaning to a wider domain of lived experience. Such a domain encompasses the choosing of a future wife, friend, clothes to wear, which political party to support and, indeed, which food to eat. The importance of appreciating and being guided by an awareness of the discrepancy between appearance and reality in all spheres of our lives is underscored by both proverbs being based on food and drink, without which we die.

xi) Kuziva benzi/hunge waswera naro.	xi) Knowing a fool comes after you have spent the whole day with him.
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The metaphor in example (xi) above differs from those in the other two only because of its vehicle: the former refer to the ladle and the fig, whereas this one refers to a human being, 'a fool'. Otherwise its message is the same: do not be hasty in judging the character of people you meet. The 'village idiot' may be an idiot only superficially, which is the reason why a wise ruler, anxious to feel the heart-beat of his pliant realm, creates time to listen to the 'fulminations' of this particular character. His irreverent commentary on the way the ruler conducts himself may have more value than those of the sycophants seeking to ingratiate themselves to power.

Sometimes, failure to thoroughly assess appearances leads people to making decisions which negatively affect the rest of their lives. The hasty choice of who to associate with, and who not to, such association ranging from who to marry to who to regard and treat as a confidante, may lead to embarrassment, if not misery. This applies on many plains, ranging from the personal to the social to the international. Failure to heed the wisdom of proverb (xii) below leads to all concerned behaving like a headless chicken.

xii) Kwamairidigikira ndiko kwomoringbenya/kwamairinga benya ndiko kwomoridigikira.	xii) You now spurn where you used to visit regularly; and where you used to spurn, you now visit regularly.
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This proverb is about the fickleness of fortune, which humans exacerbate by taking decisions without considering their ramifications. Further, Shona wisdom lore also cautions against trusting others without considering what their real motives are for being unexpectedly kind towards us. The fact that the Roman poet Virgil (*Aeneid* 11, 49) cautioned against uncritical acceptance of generosity from strangers goes to buttress both the universality and historicity of the wisdom carried by proverb (xiii) below. Virgil put these words in the mouth of his fictional Trojan priest Laocoon, "Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes." ("I fear the Greeks, even as they bring gifts").

xiii) Kutumikai kwomukwambo/kutaurira mbuya kuti gapu renyama ratsva?	xiii) Why does a son-in-law readily accept an errand to go tell the mother-in-law that the relish pot has burned?
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Picture this: the son-in-law is sitting around a fire at the men-only court in the company of his father-in-law and of his wife's brothers. Because this fire is bigger than that which she can make in her kitchen, the mother-in-law has decided that her relish will cook faster if she uses the men's fire to cook her relish. Then, at some point, her relish pot has consumed all the water she had put in it and her meat begins to burn. Then the son-in-law, who is traditionally not allowed to enter such a kitchen, readily 'volunteers' to go and alert his mother-in-law of the impending disaster. This proverb warns the in-laws to be wary of this 'hero's' readiness to assist. This is simply because the mother-in-law normally cooks with the assistance of her grown up, marriageable daughter. Thus the 'hero', given the fact that mothers-in-law are usually more accommodating of their daughters' romantic dreams, may in fact have the hidden agenda of seizing this opportunity to go and court his sister-in-law to become his second wife.

People's professed generosity sometimes serves to hide their real motives, so accepting their gesture could or is intended to have fatal consequences for the 'beneficiary', as is illustrated by the cat's come-let's-play invitation to the rat in the proverb below.

xiv) Moyo chena wei/kiti kunyengetedza gonzo kuti huya titambe?	xiv) Is it because of the kindness of its heart that a cat pleads with the rat to come and play with it?
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3.2 Be grateful for God's little mercies

The following three proverbs advise us that only those whom fortune has generously favored, the well-off, can choose. Whereas the rest may be doing their best to improve their circumstances, they must, in the meantime, do with what they have, patiently.

xv) Kuramba nyama yechidembo/hunge uine yetsuro.	xv) When you spurn civet cat meat, it means you have rabbit meat.
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Such patience may entail humiliation, such as when your poverty forces you to eat what others frown on, to turn the other cheek when dealing with bullies, and to work long hours in order to change your fortunes. This humiliation can be worsened when it is one of the well-to-do who spurns the food which you offer them when they visit. On this theme, there is another Shona proverb which says 'Being related is a half-measure/it is filled up by sharing food.'

xvi) Kuramba mvana/hunge uine mhandara.	xvi) When you reject a woman (with a child out of wedlock), it means you have a girlfriend.
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In traditional Shona society, a woman who has a child out of wedlock is normally not a bachelor's first choice for a bride, just as tattered clothes are not the first choice for a man who is fashion-

conscious. This proverb says, 'If the choice is between going naked and having *something* covering your body, one has to accept rugs.' It urges realism, in the context of a cultural milieu which places a premium on the need for perseverance and patience.

xvii) Kubaya dura/hunge wakazvimbirwa.	xvii) (If you) destroy a granary/it shows you have eaten too much.
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Having a full granary after the annual harvest is the crowning glory of the peasant farmer. It is the same as an urbanite having a healthy bank balance, from which he can make withdrawals as and when the need arises. On a wider domain, this represents the agent having a steady job with limitless prospects, a family which lacks for nothing, social connectedness and connectivity. Any conduct on the part of the agent which threatens this healthy social fabric with disintegration is equivalent to the peasant farmer reducing his granary to rubble, this proverb says.

4.0 Cover all bases when you invest for your future

In modern times people take both or either of two types of insurance, a life cover and/or a retirement annuity. In the early days of Black Zimbabweans' immersion into the cash-nexus economy, many of them were happy to become members of a pension fund, but they gave life insurance salesmen a hard time. This was due to many of them beginning their sales pitch with an utterance such as, "When you die, your children can continue to enjoy that standard of living which they have become used to." This amounted to the potential customer being invited to contemplate his own eventual demise. But it was unacceptable to the Shona macho-man who had been acculturated to become the sole and ever-present provider for his family. In retrospect, such a customer's reaction seems ironical. It points to the disconnect between traditional, rural society, where the age-mates of the customer would have imbibed the wisdom in the proverbs to be discussed in this section, on the one hand, and the Western, urban one into which the customer was becoming immersed, on the other.

xviii) Kurera imbwa rera inoruma/igokudzivirira mupfumvu.	xviii) If you must rear a dog, choose one which bites, so that it will defend you in times of danger.
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Proverbs (xviii) and (xix) both urge the agent to prepare and be ready for all eventualities in life. The literal meaning of the first one comes from the need for one to ensure the security of one's household and premises. One must have a dog that will keep intruders at bay. The second one, below, is worded tongue-in-cheek. The revulsion with which witches are regarded is ameliorated only by our knowledge that the vicious dog of proverb (xviii) above may be so unpredictable as to bite its master and/or his visitors. Otherwise both proverbs serve to underscore the wisdom of leaving nothing to chance when it comes to securing one's welfare.

xix) Kuroora mukadzi roora muroyi/unofuma wowana chinokurwisira daka.	xix) When you marry, choose a witch; then you will have someone fighting on your behalf against your enemies.
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In their literal meaning, the first two proverbs below have to do with the need for a man to exercise caution in how he relates to his in-laws. Proverb (xx) advises him to first pay the bride price and then, if he must, expose his father-in-law's shortcomings, otherwise the latter could reject him as unsuitable for his daughter, or he could ask for an exorbitant bride price as punishment. Proverb (xxi) advises a would-be son-in-law to take the socio-economic status of his future bride's family into consideration before he commits himself to the marriage bond. Marrying a girl from a destitute family will attract extra, lifelong costs.

xx) Kuseka tezvara/kuseka wabvisa pfuma.	xx) If you must ridicule the in-laws, do so after you have paid the bride price.
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xxi) Kuroorera mukarabwe muchena/waisa udyi mumba.	xxi) To marry the daughter of a pauper means inviting (those with) insatiable hunger into your home.
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Together, these proverbs serve to caution against people taking precipitate action while committing themselves to long-term enterprises. Their literal reference to the family is meant to alert the agent to the fact that some decisions we make in life are vital and irreversible, the family being the anchor, the main thread in the social fabric.

xxii) Kuvaka zvitumba vaka zviviri/chimwe kutsva unodzamba nechimwe.	xxii) When it comes to building huts, build two; if one burns, the other shelters you.
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Proverb (xxii) is about not putting all of one's eggs in one basket, about always having a fall-back position, given the fickleness of fortune. But, unfortunately or fortunately, depending on one's view of marriage, it also gives cultural sanction for those who are in or aspire to polygamous marriage and, in the case of some, even for engaging in so-called 'small house' liaisons.

5.0 Blabber-mouths get what's coming to them

All the proverbs discussed in this paper carry wisdom that, if the individual accepts and practices, helps to build character. The two below advise on the importance of confidentiality in social interaction. Those who prematurely publicize matters discussed in the Chief's council, who divulge their friend's secret plans in matters of courtship and, indeed, those who pass information to a community's rivals, the squealers, are ostracized for causing embarrassment and for exposing the community and their friends to danger.

xxiii) Kurebesa muromo unodya chedemo/chebanga hauchiwani.	xxiii) If you are a loud mouth, you will eat only something cut with an axe but not with a knife.
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The above proverb is anchored on sharing food, especially meat. An axe makes so much noise when it is used to cut up a beast's carcass that all in hearing distance can hear it and know what is happening. There can be no secret that the carcass is being prepared for sharing, cooking and/or roasting. This is equivalent to some matters being discussed in public and thus being made accessible to all. But if the

beast or some other animal carcass is being carved using a knife, there is virtually no noise, and only those present get to know what is happening. This is equivalent to some matters being discussed in the presence of only those who need to know. Blabber-mouths are excluded from the latter.

xxiv) Kurebesa muromo unodya chomwendzi/cherima hauchiwani.	xxiv) If you are a loud mouth, you will eat only something done under the moonlight and not in the darkness of night
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Proverb (xxiv) replaces the public space, accessible-to-all context of proverb (xxiii) above with the clear moonlit night, while the knife is replaced by the darkness of the night. It conveys the same message as (xxiii) but, given the wickedness associated with the darkness of night, adds an overlay of conspiracy. The latter succeeds when all involved keep their intended victims in the dark.

6.0 Family relationships

6.1 The responsibilities of parenthood

As pointed out above, the family is the central organizing block for the edifice that is society. The individual character of those who make up society is molded first and foremost by the parents and, secondarily but also crucially, by adult members of the community. The latter agents have a role in molding character because parents do not and cannot always observe their children's behavior. In African society, neighbors have an unwritten duty to discipline an errant child in the absence of the latter's parents as well as an obligation to subsequently alert the parents concerned to the transgression committed by their child.

xxv) Kubereka mwanasikana/kuchengeta mangava.	xxv) To bear a daughter is to store up troubles.
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While Shona society values and celebrates the blessing that children represent, as others do, it is nevertheless cognizant of them being potential causes of misery, when they deviate from the community's trodden path in their conduct. Proverbs (xxv) and (xxvi) together state that whether the child concerned is a boy or a girl is immaterial, that either or both have the potential to digress and become an unbearable, even life-threatening, burden to its parents.

xxvi) Kuyarutsa mwanakomana/kuzvikohwera mapfumo mumba.	xxvi) Raising a son means harvesting countless spears for your granary.
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The young and healthy son can grow up to become the pride of his parents through his good, culturally sanctioned deeds. But, be not complacent, for he can equally easily become the neighborhood bully, engaging in fights, in thieving and, even in murder. Proverb (xxvi) advises parents to be constantly aware of these unpredictable eventualities. It literally draws a relation of equivalence between having a son, on the one hand, and building an arsenal of weaponry with which to defend oneself against potential enemies created by such a son's depredations, on the other. However, in Shona patriarchal society, an ironical permissiveness is sometimes tolerated when it comes to how

the wayward son, as opposed to the wayward daughter, is viewed. When he impregnates a girl whom he does not intend to marry, the son is often seen by his people as having proved his manliness, while his victim is condemned by all and sundry for being of loose morals. The saving grace for Shona culture is that it incorporates other proverbs that expose such hypocrisy. These remind the shortsighted that they should “Laugh at someone else’s deformity only after their own death”, and that, “If you must laugh at someone’s misfortune, do so with your mouth (hidden) in your armpit.” Just as the dead tell no tales, so those who hide their laughing mouths will never be known to have laughed. In other words, ‘If you boast about your son’s potency, ignoring the misery that he has caused another family, what will you do when the victim is your own daughter?’ All this boils down to advising parents that they should lead by example. While it is in the nature of all of us, including children, to transgress, the antidote to this post-lapsarian tendency is good nurturing through the exemplary conduct of our parents living what they preach.

xxvii) Kuona imbwa yodya matehwe/inenge ya-shaya wokuvhima nayo.
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xxvii) When you see a dog eating hides it means there is no one to take it for hunting.

The potential miseries immanent in parenthood can be ameliorated, if not altogether avoided, if parents bring up their children to become upstanding citizens. Proverb (xxvii) says that if parents neglect advising their children, they will develop bad habits. Ideally, dogs eat meat. However, when, long after the meat is finished, they begin to subsist on the dry and stiff cow-hide, it is a sure sign that their master has been negligent of them. The dog’s behavior is a deviation from the norm, but through no fault of its own. Such a dog, like a child who misbehaves, is a victim of neglect.

xxviii) Kubereka/misodzi yawanda.

xxviii) To bear many children (means) to shed plenty of tears.
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Despite the fact that they have the same parents, siblings are individuals with individual needs. It follows that, the more children one has, the more demands one has to meet. Although this proverb can be adopted as a slogan by family planning campaigners, its primary meaning is that bearing children places a heavy responsibility on the parents’ shoulders. Children are by nature curious and will experiment with this and that. Even when they have been told that fire burns, they will nevertheless touch it, just to find out how painful it is to be burnt.

6.2 Parents must hit the ground running

The proverbs in this sub-section are about the timing of the parents’ inculcation of good manners into their children. This is necessitated by the tendency of parents to become so overwhelmed by the joy that comes with the arrival of a new baby that they tolerate their child’s minor transgressions. These proverbs say that these transgressions can surreptitiously develop to become the beast that will consume the parents’ original celebrations.

xxix) Kurayira ndokurayira wachea/kwaa-kabva hakuna vanhu?	xxix) Why bother giving advice to a grey-head, are there no people where he came from?
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Proverb (xxix) above asks a rhetorical question, one which, in the context in which it is used, is dismissive. Literally, a person who has lived so long that their hair has become grey is expected to have also become wise enough to be the exemplar of traditional wisdom. Yet the agent here behaves in a manner that brings shame to both themselves and to the community. The agent has either forgotten what their parents taught them, or they were born to parents who failed in their duty to teach them the community's values, or they have deliberately decided to trash parental education. Whatever the case may be, the community is saying, through this proverb, that the agent is beyond the pail and must deal with what's coming to them.

It should be noted that the wording of the question in this proverb indicates further that the molding of good character is the responsibility of both the parents of the individual concerned and of the community in which they grew up.

xxx) Kurayira kunoda pwere/mukuru ndimambo.	xxx) Advice is best directed at the young, an elder is king.
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Concerning matters of behavior, proverb (xxx) says that in an ideal world, an adult person is the repository of traditional wisdom, a king. If he needs to, the king consults only his counselors, who bear a constitutional responsibility to advise him, and not commoners. Such a person should conduct themselves in an unimpeachable manner. The underlying assumption is that if they do not behave in the manner expected of them, then they too are beyond salvation.

xxxii) Kukaka ngoma/kunoda dehwe nyoro.	xxxii) When fixing a new drum (for drumming) you need a softened ox-hide.
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While its subject is also about disciplining children when they are still young, proverb (xxxii) uses the musical drum, and not, as the others above do, a human being, as the tenor. This instrument has an animal hide stretched and fixed over a wooden drum. The proverb reminds the addressee that stretching the hide so tautly is achievable only when the hide is still soft or has been softened. Otherwise the hide will resist being stretched and even get torn in the process. The vehicle of this metaphor is the person who has acquired antisocial habits before being counseled by their parents and the community. They will reject and resist advice.

7.0 Etiquette and empathy in social relationships

7.1 Visitors bring goodies for the family

xxxiii) Kubayira mweni mbudzi/kuziva novoho.	xxxiii) Killing a goat for a guest constitutes generosity towards one's family.
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Normally, when people pay a visit to a family, they are by that act expressing social solidarity with their hosts. In welcoming them, the latter are reciprocating that gesture and, in order to express

their appreciation, they will prepare a feast in which both parties will participate. This is an opportunity for the woman and man of the house to feed their own children on other than the daily, oftentimes predictable fare. This often entails slaughtering one of the few chickens or goats that the ordinary peasant family owns. Both the hosts' and the visitors' children begin to associate visitors with good food, and they grow up to know the wisdom of proverb (xxxiii) below.

xxxiii) Kune wako/hakudi unongedzwa negumbo.	xxxiii) The place where your relative lives is not to be pointed at with the foot.
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It says that if you are genuinely concerned about your relatives' welfare, use your feet to go visit them instead of using those feet as you do your index finger. For such a visit is not merely an opportunity to share food since, in fact, the relatives may be so poor that they cannot afford a feast. The visit may be prompted by the visitors experiencing some problems on which they need advice, such as one of their children contemplating marriage to a girl from an unknown family, a matter on which they have come to seek their relatives' advice.

7.2 Even the lowly deserve respect

The interaction described above, between equals, is not the only platform on which people associate with each other. Sometimes it is one defined by inequality between participants, between the well-off and the destitute, or between consanguines on the one hand, and outsiders, on the other, and between an employer and an employee. The proverb below cautions the privileged not to suppress the underdog. While enjoying your fortune, do not forget that it came through the sweat of the laborer. Pay the workers their dues. In general, proverb (xxxiv) advises us to not discriminate against people on the basis of their low status, otherwise they will develop a grudge against us.

xxxiv) Kunokanganwa mudyi wenyemba/muworeri wamateko haakanganwi.	xxxiv) The one who eats the beans will forget, but not the one who gathers the shells.
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7.3 There are many ways of showing hospitality

Extending hospitality to a visitor includes welcoming those who come with him, as pointed out in 7.1 above. In fact, there is another Shona proverb that says, "When you drag a tree trunk, you also drag the whole of it, the root, branches, and leaves", which is quoted to advise a man who is about to marry a woman who already has children from a previous relationship. He must accept her with all her baggage. The two proverbs below are literally about how you, as a host, should treat your guest's or friend's dog. The dog concerned is close to his heart, maybe because he is a dog lover or, more likely in traditional Shona society, he uses it for hunting.

xxxv) Kuchengeta imbwa yomweni/kuda muridzi wayo.	xxxv) Baby-sitting a visitor's dog comes from liking its owner.
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xxxvi) Kudzinga imbwa yomuna/kudzinga tenzi wayo.	xxxvi) Chasing a friend's dog is the same as chasing him.
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In either or both cases, it is not enough to extend your generosity to him while you treat his dog as vermin. The message is that people are not perfect exemplars of virtue, each one of us is a complex admixture of positives and negatives. Only when the negatives outweigh and eclipse the positives in a person's character must you keep a safe distance.

7.3.1 There may be consequences

Entering into a relationship of whatever kind or becoming friends with someone requires that one first studies them carefully. This is because, as pointed out in 3.0 above, there is often a discrepancy between appearance and underlying reality. Proverb (xxxvii) below comes partly from the Shona people's sense of revulsion at some of the village dog's unsavory habits, such as its tendency to feed on human excrement. Because of this, for them the worst kind of abuse is to call someone "a dog". Traditionally, a dog is fed on leftovers, at the best of times on bones, bare bones. Certainly not on milk, as this is tending towards spoiling it. It must have only the health and strength necessary for it to guard the home and hunt. Being the lowly creature that it is, it has no sense of gratitude and has no qualms about "biting the hand that feeds them."

xxxvii) Kurera imbwa nomukaka/mangwana inofuma yokuruma.	xxxvii) If you raise a dog on milk, it will bite you come the morrow.
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The so-called friend, to whom you have entrusted all your secrets and unstintingly extended your generosity, being a consummate dissembler at heart, will one day stab you in the back.

8.0 Social cohesion through cooperation

8.1 Generosity and gratitude

xxxviii) Kupa kunotanga/kunyima kwozotevera.	xxxviii) Generosity comes before stinginess.
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The Shona, as other peoples do, place a premium on good neighborliness. This is demonstrated by, among other gestures, giving, by sharing the good things that one has with others. Not that the beneficiaries of the giving are necessarily destitute. After a bounteous harvest, it is not unusual to overhear the following exchange between good neighbors:

A: The pumpkins from my field this year are especially delicious.

B: Mine are simply unbelievably so.

A: Here, go and cook this one and tell me what you think.

B: So you don't believe me? Take this one.

In reciprocating A's gesture, B ensures that A will in future continue to be generous towards her, similarly B. Otherwise one of them will conclude that there is no point in sharing her goodies with

the other. This says that one is responsible for how others treat one. Stinginess breeds stinginess, just as generosity breeds generosity.

Each in its own words, the following four proverbs expand on the themes of generosity and stinginess. Together, they point to our individual responsibility for how others treat us.

xxxix) Kupa huvigisa.	xxxix) Giving amounts to banking.
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xl) Kupa kuturika.	xl) Giving amounts to hanging up (meat, vegetables, etc.) for future use.
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Proverbs (xxxix) and (xl) are about giving as an investment for one's future wellbeing. The first one says when you give to others, you are in fact building a treasure trove for yourself, on which you can call as and when the need arises. The second one comes from the rare experience of the family having slaughtered one of their few, treasured cows or from that when the head of the house has returned from the forest after a successful hunt. Only some of the meat will be eaten fresh, while the rest must be dried and salted on slim poles hanging over the hearth fire, for future use. This means that, when you give to others, you are creating a fund of goodwill which will ensure that you continue to enjoy that standard of living to which you have become used. They in turn will, and must reciprocate your good-heartedness.

xli) Kupa mweni/kuchengetera mbuva mberi.	xli) To give to a stranger means to store provisions for the future.
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In pre-colonial Africa, going on a long journey entailed traversing long stretches of untamed and uninhabited territory, which required that one should carry provisions for self-sustenance. When these ran out, one depended on the generosity of strangers to survive. Proverb (xli) says that those who assisted such a traveler were doing the equivalent of ensuring that they too would be assisted when they found themselves in similar circumstances. This turns the geographical journey into the metaphorical one through life, on which each one of us is.

8.2 Cooperation assures success

Parallel to the English proverb 'Many hands make light work' are several Shona ones whose wording derives from our people's experiences in the various contexts in which they live(d) their lives. Their messages are for the benefit of both the individual and the community at large. Proverbs (xlii) to (xliv) are about the advantages of cooperation among people sharing a common goal. But the first one warns that there may be a fly in the ointment. Unless all concerned are unselfishly committed to the task at hand, there is a danger that the outcome may be compromised.

xlii) Kuwanda huuya/chakaipa kupedzerana usavi.	xlii) To be many is good, but bad when it involves some finishing the relish (meant for sharing with others).
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It comes from the joy we experience when we share food with family and friends. On such occasions, the staple food, sadza accompanied by meat or just vegetables, is dished into several plates to be served to small groups of diners, three or even four to a plate. The senior member of each group carves a morsel, dips it into the relish and then eats it first before the others join in. (Sometimes what appears to be the best cut turns out to be a chunk of bone with very little meat. This once happened when our senior suddenly discovered that he had retrieved the wrong piece of meat from the dark pool of soup, and was about to abandon it in order to try his luck a second time. We protested against the blatant injustice of it all by, without any one of us uttering a single conspiratorial word, diving for the remaining pieces and running away from the 'dining table' to enjoy our meat at a safe distance from the bully who, with his recently acquired Primary School English, was breathlessly shouting, "As you were! As you were!" But we could understand neither his English nor his selfishness). A person as described here can make or break everyone else's day, depending on how much of the meat he claims for himself. Granted, given his seniority, he is the one who picks a piece of meat first, usually the one that seems to be the biggest and juiciest. But if he does that and quickly repeats it before the others have had their turn, he spoils the feast for them.

xliii) Kuwanda huuya/uno tumburwa mota rokumusana.	xliii) To be many is good, you can have the abscess on your back cut open.
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Proverb (xliii) is based on our people's understanding of human physiology, particularly the fact that one cannot reach one's back to scratch it when it itches. One asks someone else to do that for one. Alone, one is left to endure the pain and discomfort. This proverb points to the value of cooperation and good neighborliness between people. Going it alone can have undesirable outcomes.

xliv) Kuwanda huuya/kwakatorambwa nomuroyi. 1380.	xliv) To be many is good, only the witch rejected it.
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So important is cooperation that proverb (xlv) above says that one who spurns it is a witch. And the witch's ambition is nothing but to unleash misery on unsuspecting innocents.

xlv) Kutamba ngoma/ihumwe.	xlv) Playing the drum is a beer-for-work process.
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Proverb (xlv) draws a relationship of equivalence between beating the musical drum and inviting neighbors to come and assist in accomplishing an important task, such as plowing one's expansive lands, or harvesting one's crops in a bounteous year. To make the work light, the host provides not only food but also copious amounts of the traditional brew.

This proverb says that in order for there to be music, in order for people to achieve social cohesion and coherence, there must be cooperation between and among members of the same community, each one and all of them playing a part which tradition has assigned them. This is reminiscent of what Edward Sapir (in Mandelbaum, 1963, p. 8) has said about how the speech sounds of a language

work in order to convey meaning. A single drum beat does not make music, just as, according to Sapir, one step does not constitute a dance, nor does one speech sound a language. He wrote:

Even the most resplendent and dynamic symphony is built up of tangibly distinct entities or notes which, in the physical world, flow into each other in an indefinite continuum but which, in the world of aesthetic composition and appreciation, are definitely bounded off against each other, so that they may enter into an intricate mathematics of significant relationships.

9.0 Individual human rights.

That the space, role, and therefore the value of the individual are undermined and overshadowed by a concern for an all-embracing communalism in the African scheme of things is nowhere more eloquently repudiated than in the following two proverbs.

9.1 The right to individual freedom

Proverb (xlvi) says enslavement is for domesticated animals. For example, the shortsighted and inconsiderate farmer may yoke his oxen to pull the plow from day-break to sunset, or he may have his donkey carry a heavy burden from one village to another, distant village and, in both instances, get away with it. (This author comes from the traditional Shumba-Chibga royal house of South-eastern Zimbabwe and recalls no occasion on which a case of cruelty to animals was ever tried at the Chief's court). On the other hand, spousal and child abuse is not tolerated, so are theft and murder. The proverb says, when subjected to injustice, a human being fights back, has a right to fight back.

xlvi) Uranda ndohwepfuma (zvipfuwo) /hwomunhu hunozvirwira.	xlvi) Domestic animals can be enslaved; a human being will free himself.
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9.2 A woman has a right to choose.

Whereas the above proverb is about human beings in general, (xlvii) below is about a woman who has become a widow. In both Shona and other African communities, a widow could be inherited by, become the wife of her deceased husband's consanguine, such as his surviving brother or her husband's sister's son, for example. Such a person was required to step into his late relative's shoes in terms of bringing up the orphaned children and having others with the widow, if she was still of child-bearing age. In this context, proverb (xlvii) says the individual woman must have a say in these arrangements. She could 'choose for herself' whether to accept the proposed husband or reject him, or whether to go it alone and bring up her children through the sweat of her brow. Her reasons for opting for the latter course of action could range from her wish to preserve her late husband's memory and legacy to her perception and knowledge of the proposed replacement's unsuitability

for the purpose. It may be her view that consanguinity alone is not a sufficient criterion for an individual who is otherwise a profligate drunkard, a notorious wife-beater, or an incurable womanizer or all of the above and more.

xlvi) Nhaka ndeyemombe/yomunhu inozvisa-rudzira yoga.	xlvi) Cattle can be inherited; a human being (woman) will choose for herself.
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10. Conclusion

Shona proverbs, like those of most African communities, have attracted the attention of researchers for many years, including that of both Western and Eurocentric African scholars. The philosophy of life, the worldview which these aphorisms express has led many of these people to conclude that Africa values and promotes communalism over individualism, and that such a dispensation discourages and frowns on original thinking and action. The overarching concern of this paper was to provide a reading of African, particularly Shona, proverbial lore that enables us to see the African of yore as having had both the capacity and foresight to encourage, accommodate, and reward constructive individualism, just as it had the institutional and administrative wherewithal for disciplining its deviants. That these adages focus on the individual and on that individual's responsibility for their actions is made apparent by their grammatical structure. The addressee in the vast majority of them comes in the form of a noun or pronoun in the singular. Further, it cannot be argued that African cultures frown on or that they undervalue individuals who strike out on their own to add to communal wellbeing since their languages have native vocabulary that names both individual achievers and social misfits. In other words, we can tell that a term, such as 'basikoro', came into Shona from English 'bicycle' after colonialism and its technology, but not where those that our ancestors used in discourses about morality are concerned, such as the following:

Shona	English	Comment
gamba	hero	One who has distinguished himself by his military exploits, as a hunter, or in any other endeavor requiring the display of outstanding courage and physical strength.
hurudza	master farmer	One who always works assiduously and knowledgeably on his lands and regularly brings in a bounteous harvest.
shoroma	the business magnate	One who, through investing in many business ventures, has accumulated vast wealth and generously assists the less fortunate.
gwara	coward	One who lacks the courage of his conviction. He hides in a tree's thick foliage when his comrades are engaged in a do or die battle with the enemy, or runs for dear life at the distant roar of the lion during a hunting expedition.
mhondi	murderer	This is a person who gratuitously takes the lives of innocents or, metaphorically, one who betrays his friends for a pittance or at the drop of a hat and thereby causes them life-changing trauma.
nyope	Mr. Lazy bones	This is one who would rather be found dead than working to make a living. He usually has a voracious appetite for the good

		things in life.
muroyi	witch	Usually a woman, one who uses herbs and magic to cause illnesses and death because of jealousy or just for the sake of it, also extended to people who gratuitously and habitually break the social code of conduct.

In conclusion therefore, one has to see the irony in Pliny the Elder's dismissive observation that "Ex Africa semper aliquid novi", "There is always something new out of Africa", by which he meant that Africa has a genius for always inventing new forms of anomy which, given the foregoing, turns out to be an apposite summation of not only the African, as he supposed, but of the human experience, namely that the only constant in all our cultures is change, which factor has seen to each of them having a body of proverbial lore that pragmatically seeks to accommodate change by advising us to always strive towards reaching a golden mean in how we both respond to and how we fashion the environment in which we live. For we are all preprogrammed to achieve, both as individuals and as communities and nations, the greatest forms of heroism, on the one hand, and to sink to the nadir of barbarism, on the other. Barring the cases of those born in already hostile environments, we each carry the responsibility of opting to go one way or the other, and of accepting our roles as agents.

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