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African Philosophy of Development as Expressed in Shona Proverbs

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Abstract

The paper examined the African philosophy of development as it is expressed in Shona proverbs. It analysed the African people's perspectives with regards to the question of development as expressed in their arts and beliefs. The proverbs analysed in this article candidly express perspectives on development among the Shona people of Zimbabwe. There has always been an intricate relationship between art and life and this paper is mainly based on the assumption that African oral art forms are used to formulate models of development. Particular reference is given to the socio-economic aspect of development and how this is emphasised and outlined in Shona proverbial lore. The

Afrocentric theory is used in our analysis of the subject under study. The researchers argued that the aspects of Ubuntu and communalism that are emphasised in most of the proverbs to be analysed contribute a lot to development and we consequently argued that there is a lot to be drawn from Shona proverbs and that can be used to solve Africa's numerous problems, the socio-economic problem being chief among them.

Key Words: Proverbs, Shona

Introduction

Africa is made up of different and sometimes conflicting countries, regions, tribes and languages although certain traits within Africa are homogenous. Given the multi-ethnic and linguistic structure of Africa, it is impossible in a paper of this nature to examine and exhaust African philosophy of development as expressed in all African proverbs. It is for this reason that Shona proverbial lore is used as illustrative example. Shona is one of the national languages of Zimbabwe and according to Viriri & Viriri (2014, p. 2472), Shona is the home language to over 75% of the Zimbabwean population.

We argued against universalising the concept of development where the west, 'first world', the 'developed', or the North imposes its worldview on the South or 'developing' or 'third world' countries. We do not subscribe to those 'empty' notions. We follow p'Bitek's (1986, p. 48) argument that, "Africans, Asians, Arabs and other peoples, meekly accept the insulting epithet, 'Third World Countries'. Which is the 'first'? Which is the 'second'?" The main objective is the creation of the 'we'/'us' and the 'other', the centre and the periphery. The myth of a centre located in Paris, London, Berlin, and other such capitals must be repudiated and debunked at all costs where Africans and all the other peoples must advocate for the movement of this centre to a multiplicity of locations in the world (Ngugi, 1993), and strive to "find our bearings from where we are, at home (p'Bitek, 1986, p. 48). The absence of these aspects in any society is branded as underdevelopment.

The dichotomy of "developed" and "developing" nations creates an illusion that the western world has reached the pinnacle of development, hence the label 'developed'. Africa and the rest of the non-western world as developing nations are trying to mimic this thrust of development. Development in terms of technological advancement is what is mostly regarded as development in Europe and lack of these, according to Western standards, is not development at all. In other words, the western model of development poses as the benchmark, which every nation wishing to be regarded as developed has to follow, with the requirements of development dictated by the West.

In our view, development, just like any other aspect of society like philosophy, the arts, religion, among others, is culture relative. What is needed in Africa today is to come up with an indigenous philosophy of development determined and influenced by the mores of traditional values derived from its own linguistic and cultural repertoire.

Development that is holistic is what is needed in Africa, development that covers the whole person, cultural development, social development, economic development as well as political development. All these have to be drawn and linked to our own values and principles we celebrate as Africans. Kwame Gyekye (1987, p.13) noted that;

African philosophical thought is expressed both in oral literature and in the thoughts and actions of the people. Thus, a great deal of philosophical material is embedded in the proverbs, myths and folktales, folk songs, rituals, beliefs, customs, and traditions of the people, in their art symbols and in their socio-political institutions and practices.

Our understanding of development is anchored in our own culture, philosophy of development and traditional experience, therefore in this paper, we argued that Africa has its own philosophy of development which is clearly outlined and embedded in its proverbial lore, and if Africans are to go on with development, there is great need to go back to the source (our own oral art forms), to find tried and tested solutions to our problems.

Definition of Key Terms

It will help illuminate the current argument if we start by providing definitions for key words in this study.

Proverb

Our key oral art form is the proverb which in our view is a repository of the African worldview. This worldview must be the basis for an African Philosophy of Development. In proverbs, the world of the African comes alive and prevails in science, metaphysics, logic, religion, rationalism, medicine, health, economics, politics, human relations, birth, trade, child-rearing, family relations, farming, industry, living, dying, and all the other endeavours ever known to humans (Mbiti, 1970). What is this fascinating art form called a proverb? Several definitions of proverbs have been proffered by different scholars, but we found Serequebaharn's (2000, p. x) to be very succinct. According to Serequebaharn, proverbs, "... are ...condensed arguments that encapsulate and hence conserve, the seasoned truth of a heritage, ...". In this regard, proverbs are treated as an embodiment of (the cherished) values (Clement, 2011), or expressions of a philosophy of life (Ndlovu, 2013). Gyekye (1995, p. 16) corroborated this argument by making an observation that, proverbs can be utilised as a source of philosophical thought in Africa. Embedded in the various explanations of the defining characteristics of proverbs is that they are an embodiment of a people's way of life, i.e., they reflect culture. Proverbs were very functional in Africa of tradition.

Mulyumbu Wa Mamba in Shonhiwa, (2012, p. 45) argued that proverbs are a proposition or group of propositions deriving from the experiences of the wise men of

the society, affirming clearly or metaphorically popular indisputable truths. From this assertion, the researchers therefore argued that proverbs reflect an African philosophy of development.

Development

Development is not an easy word to define because of its amorphous nature. Development means different things to different people. The absence of economic advancement and material accumulation is underdevelopment and the reverse is true for development. However, development should be holistic, advancing and satisfying the needs of the whole person. Development should encompass more than the material and financial dimensions of people's lives (Makuvaza 2014, p. 51). Each person has several departments of life which need satisfaction and attention, such as political, religious, and social among others. Development is pronounced if and only if all the facets of human life are attended to.

The notion of development that is in line with the African philosophy of development advanced in this study is that where people of African countries live under just, equitable and humane conditions. This philosophy is akin to the human factor approach to development (Chivaura & Mararike, 1998), where the African is at the centre of development. The African philosophy of development places the African at the centre of its approach. The underlying argument is that a people's development has to be centred on their culture simply because man is culture. Culture does not exist in a vacuum but is "a philosophy as lived and celebrated in a society" (p'Bitek, 1986, p. 13). In this sense, the home-grown philosophy of development; i.e. the African philosophy of development, has it that the guiding principles of the classical African era are still relevant in the present dispensation. We need to look back to our culture in order to find our bearings. This has to be done within the wider framework of the African idea of *Sankofa* (*Sankofa* is an Akan word which means, "we must go back and reclaim our past so that we can move forward; so that we understand why and how we came to be who we are today") (Prah cited in Rukuni, 2007).

Muwati *et al* (2011) were of the idea that

the concern of a theory emerges from the realisation that people either fall or rise, depending upon the nature of the ideas that inform their action. If African people are to rise, the challenge for them is to connect with evidence from their classical past which celebrates, extends and encourages immersion in, rather than withdrawal from life (p. 2).

However, we are not advocating for a wholesale return to the past and grab everything for future use. We view history, together with culture as an important tool of self-definition which makes it possible to plan for the future. Malcolm X explains how

history and culture work for African societies. He explains as follows: “Armed with the knowledge of the past, we can with confidence charter a course for our future---. We must take hold of it [culture] and forge the future with the past” (Malcolm X, 1970, p. 56). In light of this argument, an African philosophy of development must be based on African history and culture.

African philosophy of development is part of the broader African philosophical base which informs and guides action in the entire African existential space. It is justified to talk about a philosophy that applies to the whole of Africa because there are striking similarities in the culture of different groups scattered throughout Africa. Gyekye (1995) corroborated this argument in making an observation that despite an inherent aspect of cultural diversity arising from Africa’s ethnic pluralism, there are however underlying commonalities among the cultures. In his view, the word ‘African’ is used in the same way in which one might use ‘western’ or ‘European’. He wrote;

In many areas of thought we can discern features of the traditional life and thought of the African peoples sufficiently to constitute a legitimate and reasonable basis for the construction (or reconstruction) of a philosophical system that may properly be called African (Gyekye 1995, p. 191).

A philosophy of African development would imply that the philosophy is baked by someone else somewhere and then applied/ imposed on Africa, which is what we are advocating against in this article. There is a thought system that guides entirely every action in the existence of a people. Philosophy is a conceptual understanding of one’s existence, knowledge, and thought, etc. Basically, it looks at one’s world. It follows that philosophies that are outside one’s world cannot be used as paradigms on matters of great principles like development.

Philosophy of Development and Language (Proverbs)

African oral art forms were and are still used to construct and represent African way of life and perceiving reality. Bhebe in Chiwome *et al* (2002) rightly noted that: “Before the European conquest of Africa, Africans had built up a pool of knowledge and technology which they used to sustain agriculture, human and animal health, industrial production involving food processing, metallurgy...”. It is this body of knowledge that is commonly known as Indigenous Knowledge System that Africans today need to tap in order to find amicable solutions to its numerous developmental problems.

Malunga and Banda (2004, p.1) are of the idea that ‘rediscovering this (the IKS) underappreciated and underutilised heritage and building society based on the values derived from this richness will enable Africans to find their niche in the world. It will help them address their own challenges more accurately, while strategically positioning them to make significant contribution to addressing global challenges. Hamutyeine and

Plangger (1974, p.13) put forward that ‘surely, one of the most revealing clues to the mind of a people is found in its proverbial lore. *Tsumo* (proverbs), have a deeper metaphorical meaning than is stated literally’. Doke, cited in Hamutyinei and Plangger (1974) offered this descriptive definition; proverbs are aphorisms “characterised by terseness of expression, an economy of words with much left to implication, and by traditional popular acceptance” (p. 15). Almost anything of which people have experience can appear in proverbs. The images and comparisons are mostly drawn from observation of human behaviour, of the ways of animals, and of objects in both the natural and cultural environments.

African Philosophy of Development as It Is Embedded in Shona Proverbs

Through selected Shona proverbs, we demonstrated the existence of a vibrant philosophy which informs development in Africa from the classical era to date. Celebrated philosophical values for development in Shona proverbs are cooperation, hard work, self-sufficiency, hospitality, a good mixture of bravery and caution, the sharing of power and friendship and these are discussed below.

In Shona there is the adage, *zano pangwa uine rako*. (It is better to get advice from someone when you also have got yours.) This proverb rightly points to the importance of formulating our own models of development rather than simply borrowing ideas, information and models from foreigners because the ideas may not suit our situation. The ideas and models of development that Africa need to formulate on its own should draw from the rich repertoire of indigenous knowledge system which proverbs form part, because this heritage provides a foundation for leadership, guidance, problem solving, conflict resolution, decision making, self-reliance and hope, (Malunga & Banda 2004, p. 1).

It is highly imperative for Africa to work towards the formulation of its own development plans because past experiences have shown that models and theories we have borrowed from the North have done us more harm than good. African nations have not been formulating their own models and this has had serious implications and reparations. In Shona proverbial lore it is said, *chakachenjedza ndechakatanga*, (Forewarned is forearmed) and *Gonzo mhini gara mumhango chomudzimu chikuwaniremo* (You, rat with a cut-off tail, you better remain in the hollowed tree where you just meet with your fate (natural death). The loss of a tail implies that the rat had a narrow escape and this should serve as a warning. From now on it should be more careful and not expose itself to danger). These proverbs warn Africans to desist from the habit of just borrowing foreign ideas wholesale without careful study because that would lead to destruction and further underdevelopment.

Africans have realised that for long they have been cheated and bribed by the North through copying and borrowing foreign models wholesale, without thorough evaluation and assessment. These models have proved to be of not much use, so now it is high

time Africa needs to formulate its own models of development that suit the African ways of life and that place Africans at the centre.

Significance of Communalism in Socio-Economic Development in Africa

Most African communities place great importance on communalism. Success in African ideology thrives on communal spirit. On African philosophy, p'Bitek (1986) is of the idea that:

Man is not born free. He cannot be free. For only by being in chains can he be truly "human" Man has a bundle of duties which are expected from him by society, as well as a bundle of rights and privileges that the society owes him. In African belief, even death does not free him.

What Okot is advocating here is the spirit of oneness and not individualism which is rallied for in the North. In African terms, Ubuntu is displayed by that spirit of togetherness where one can commune and work with others amicably. It is this Ubuntu that has made ancient Africa tick. Ramose (1999) argued that;

...what is decisive is to prove oneself to be the embodiment of *ubuntu* because the fundamental ethical, social, and legal judgement of human worth and human conduct is based upon *ubuntu*. The spirit of communalism encourages hospitality and the equitable distribution of resources (p. 52).

This value is enshrined in several proverbs in the Shona language. Quite a good number of Shona proverbs support this value of togetherness/oneness and shun individualism and capitalistic tendencies. The following examples from a corpus of Shona proverbs that express this philosophical thrust are selected;

Rume rimwe harikombi churu (One man alone cannot encircle an anthill)

Kuchera mbeva kukomberana (Digging after mice involves surrounding them.)

Kuturika denga remba kubatirana (To put a roof onto the walls of a hut needs joining hands).

A sense of communal approach to life is celebrated in the above philosophical proverbs. This philosophy is the basis for development in Africa. In classical Africa whose economy was largely agrarian, communalism sustained lives and ensured the survival of the communities. Development in Africa today can still be based on collective approach which discourages individualism (the celebrated value in western philosophy). An African can only say, "I am because we are, since we are therefore, I am" (Mbiti 1969). An African's existence depends heavily on others. This philosophy

is evident in proverbs and wise sayings from other African societies, for example, among the Xhosa there is a proverb which says;

Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (A human being is human because of others).

The Yoruba say that, one tree does not make a forest, which underscores the African philosophy of communal approach. It should be noted that this philosophy does not discourage individual efforts in achieving developmental goals, but it emphasises that collective efforts are fruitful and legitimate. In real terms, the goals of the individual must not contradict with group efforts in Africa, and in reality, a community is a product of the collective efforts of its members not individuals as separate entities. On a similar note, Mandova and Chingombe (2013, p. 103) argued that individualism has to be pursued within the matrix of the welfare of the society which resultantly brings honor and pride to the society. Therefore, selfishness is castigated amongst the Shona people in particular and in Africa in general.

Individualism, which is the norm in the North, has been borrowed in Africa and it has led to a plethora of problems and further underdevelopment of Africa. If individuals work together and feel for each other, there would not be such high crime rates in Africa, take for example abortion, thefts, robberies and murders that are found in most African countries today. It is because Africans are copying foreign ideals of individualism and self-centeredness and they now lack the *unhu/ubuntu* philosophy. The climax of *Ubuntu* is a selfless spirit of living for the betterment of a person's environment using all talents at his/her disposal and not resting easy knowing that another is in need (Malunga & Banda 2004, p. 2). On this particular aspect, Furusa (1998) commented:

We no longer visualise our condition as a group condition. We view ourselves as separate individuals and fragmented communities... We have been persuaded to think that we will fill our stomachs faster if we do not have other African people to fill.

The researchers' interpretation of development is access to and equitable distribution of resources and not individualism and capitalism. We have started from the communal level because charity begins at home. Development begins at the grassroot level and transcends upwards although resources that benefit the whole nation comes from the top and trickle down until they reach those at the lowest level. That is why we advocate for the communal spirit of togetherness and the philosophy of *unhu* because individualism and capitalism give one the opportunity to escape from responsibility. The concept of *unhu* does not only apply to those at the lowest level of the economy strata but it also applies to the political leaders themselves. In Africa before colonialism, a chief or king ruled with the support and consent of his subjects and ancestors. There is the adage *ishe vanhu* (for one to reign, there has to be a good

relationship with the subjects, because if the subjects are not happy that ruler is bound to lose his position).

If we take the kind of leaders we have in Africa today, the majority is selfish and they may even choose to rule for as long as they survive, regardless of their subjects' wishes. In Zimbabwe, in the presidential, ministerial or senatorial elections, a lot of chaos and violence is witnessed amongst supporters of opposing factions. The leaders also fail to peacefully coexist with those who hold different views. These are real acts of selfishness which can be attributed to the spirit of individualism which was alien in African philosophy. A good political leader should have the will and the interests of the people at heart and if he has failed, he should be prudent and humble enough to step down and give others a chance. In Shona we have got the proverbs, *Ushe madzoro hunoravanwa* (Ruling, like a duty to herd cattle, has to rotate) and *Ishe vanhu* (A leader is because of the subjects/ the ruled). The leaders we have today lack this humane aspect because they can choose to rule for life and continue to make blunders at the expense of the majority. Mandova and Chingombe (2013, p. 106) argued that rotational leadership promotes accountability and reduces corruption and checks despotism. Shona proverbs therefore promotes democracy, freedom and justice, and this is what Africa needs to embrace today.

Sibanda (2015, p. 4) stated that traditional proverbs emphasise the responsibility of leaders and how they should use power wisely to benefit their people. This, therefore means that a good leader should engage his people and help each other in developing the entire community as is expressed by the proverb, *Gudo guru peta muswe vadiki vakutye* (Lit. A big baboon should humble itself so that the younger ones would respect it) which means a leader should be humble enough to consider advice from everyone, including the lowly ones. These proverbs emphasize the importance of consultation in governance in order to guard against authoritarianism.

African Renaissance involves regenerating African ideas to create sustainable development and the ideas we need to regenerate and revive are the very ideas that are embedded in our African oral art forms.

Wiredu (1980) opined that;

This quality of our culture (that of communalism), is obviously one in which we must not only preserve but positively develop and deepen. It would profit us little to gain all the technology in the world and lose the humanist essence of our culture (p. 17).

Self-sufficiency

The African philosophy of development discourages over-dependence and over-reliance on others. Every effort must be made for one to have enough for survival.

While collective effort is important, African philosophy of development discourages (over)dependence on borrowing as is demonstrated in the following proverbs;

Chimwango chekukumbira hachina ndima (A borrowed hoe does not work a big portion in the field.)

Mombe yekuronzerwa igama wakaringa nzira (When milking a cow entrusted to you, keep on watching the path).

The proverbs above point to the fact that one cannot safely rely for long on what has been entrusted to them by someone else. The owner can return and claim the borrowed item at any time and such things can also be a source of unending disputes.

If Africa can listen to the wise voice in these proverbs, she will not entirely depend on foreign aid. She would strive to work for herself and produce enough for her children. The problem with foreign aid is that more often than not, there are stringent conditions that are part of the package. In Zimbabwe, in the early 1990's there was the Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) which saw the removal of subsidies on higher education and other parastatals and the objective was to reduce government expenditure through downsizing the workforce - retrenchment. Gambahaya (1998, p. 29) pointed that the major weakness of ESAP was that the programme had no formula for the rural people and small farmers who survive on subsistence economy. Zimbabwe blindly adopted the Structural Adjustment Programme (from the IMF and World Bank), which perhaps had failed in other African countries. The programme had serious consequences like high rate of unemployment, the growth of informal trade, high crime rates, high rates of school dropouts as well as high mortality rates. Expression of frustration and displeasure from the programme led to some linguistic innovations of the term ESAP as Edzai Sithole Apa Paramba (Let us try Sithole (the leader of an opposition party in Zimbabwe) because this party (ZANU PF), has failed.)

Because of the advances in technology, the world is fast developing into a global village and interdependence is inevitable but development that is mediated by means of global quality should be rooted in local customs, indigenous knowledge, abilities and traditional communication habits, which used to be the case before colonialism (Viriri 2009). The drastic consequences of ESAP on Zimbabweans and the country's economy show the danger of embracing foreign ideologies blindly, without careful scrutiny. There are proverbs in Shona that discourage the mere acceptance of foreign things and these are:

Chiri mumushunje hachichingurwi (The contents of a grass bundle should never be received) and

Chabva kumwe chinobatwa nemishonga (Something from afar has to be handled with medicine).

The proverbs have been explained thus: something under cover or disguise should not be accepted before you have satisfied yourself that there is no trick or danger involved. Likewise, something peculiar, phoney or unfamiliar should first be scrutinised before it is used (Hamutyinei 1974, p. 116).

Makuvaza (2014, p.52) was of the idea that,

Since the needs of societies are not identical, no country is justified in either imposing its conception on another or despising another's development model. In the same vein, no country should unnecessarily copy, imitate or even adopt wholesale development patterns from other countries.

This is in line with the African philosophy as expressed in Shona proverbs as is exemplified by proverbs discussed above. Therefore, all, and in fact each nation should formulate their own models of development that suit their needs, expectations and aspirations. Ncube (2010, p. 200) averred that donor-driven development projects are problematic as they are not only often short-term in focus (thus perpetuating an unhealthy donor dependency cycle) but they can often fail to meet the real needs of the communities they aim to help as they often lack grassroots participation and insights and are often based on the interests of the donors at a particular time and not so much what is actually taking place on the ground. From the proverbs analysed in this section, it is clear that Africans had wisdom to guard against dependency on foreign aid or advice.

Conclusion

The essence of the paper was to discuss the African philosophy of development as expressed in Shona proverbs. It can be seen that development is culture relative and the idea is for each culture to formulate its own models of development basing on its own indigenous knowledge systems because experience has shown that borrowing foreign concepts is deadly and it does more harm than good. An economy that is not self-sufficient whose people lack *Unhu/Ubuntu/Botho* cannot ensure sustainable development. Although we have tried to show that Africa needs to be self-sufficient, to have the spirit of oneness (communalism) and not to (over)rely on borrowing, we have also shown that globalisation is inevitable. The paper has shown the need for Africa to draw from its rich indigenous knowledge systems, lessons of sustainable development and desist from the idea of merely borrowing foreign theories which have proved to be detrimental to the development of Africa. For a people to have control over its present existence and its destiny, it has to know its past and especially establish some continuity with the best values of its history (Hadebe 1998). African proverbs, among other oral art forms are indispensable in the formulation of sustainable models of development.

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