

Number Sayings, Numerology and Myths in Shona Culture in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This paper examines the number sayings, number-related myths and numerological significance of some selected numbers in the Zimbabwean Shona culture. Knowledge related to the significance of numbers is important because it is tied to the Shona people's cultural way of life, to their survival, happiness and prosperity. However, indigenous knowledge related to the significance of numbers among the Shona people is rarely taught at school, and therefore, this knowledge is likely to be lost. Hence, this paper employs a survey method coupled with personal observations and experiences to unravel the rich and traditional knowledge of the Shona people, using a functionalist theoretical framework. The recommendation of the paper is that the number sayings, number-related myths and numerological meanings of numbers in the Shona culture be further researched, to certify that knowledge gained in a manner that is suitable and proper within the circumstances so it can be verified or tested.

Keywords: number sayings, numerology, myths, Shona culture

Introduction

Culture is the way of life of every people. There is no culture without language and there is no culture without number. Therefore, it suffices to conclude that for every culture to sustain its very existence and continuity, it has to have its own unique way of counting and attaching meaning to numbers. Hence, the motivation and purpose of this study relates to the reality that during early primary school and as a child, the researcher often played with friends and sang the popular counting song "One for Sorrow" (<https://allnurseryrhymes.com/one-for-sorrow/>), albeit in a somewhat different way. The researcher later realised that the meanings attached to these numbers in the English song could be due to fun rather than to reality or superstition.

Thus, could the numbers in the Shona culture mean the same as in the popular English song? This study was triggered by the desire to learn and understand how the Shona people in Zimbabwe count numbers and if the numbers they pronounce in their riddles, proverbs and idioms are 'just numbers for numbers' sake', are superstitious or mythical or are positively related in one way or the other to their cultural ways of life. The paper therefore seeks to analyse meanings of numbers in Shona and relationships between numbers and Shona sayings, riddles, idioms and or proverbs as they relate to the daily ways of life of the people. Hence, according to Ferch (2007, p. 1), the Shona people are tied to Shona culture and thus to the language Shona, which is spoken by about 10 million people in Zimbabwe and surrounding countries. The major subsections of Shona are Karanga, Zezuru and Korekore. Manyika, Ndau, and Kalanga are considered dialects of Shona by some authors and independent languages by others. The Shona people represent over 80% of the population and thus the Shona are culturally the most dominant group in Zimbabwe. The Ndebele largely absorbed the Karanga group when they moved into western Zimbabwe in the 1830s (Shona People Traditions and Culture, n.d.)

The theoretical framework underpinning this paper is that of functionalism. The founding fathers of the functionalist perspective are Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, Herbert Spencer and Robert Merton, among others (Mooney, Knox and Schacht, 2007). According to Durkheim, for example, the functionalist theory emphasizes that a society 'functions' or is sustained if its constituent parts (norms, values, rules, customs, institutions, etc.) work together to maintain balance or 'societal equilibrium.' (<https://study.com/academy/lesson/emile-durkheims-theories-functionalism-anomie-and-division-of-labor.html>). If something happens to disrupt the 'balance' or order within the society, that society will adjust itself to maintain the equilibrium or will be forced to adjust by external forces. For any society to function and maintain its equilibrium, its people should have collective consciousness, values, norms and rules. In the Zimbabwean Shona culture, there are also number-related beliefs, rules, and values which are critical so as to maintain order, 'balance,' survival, and continuity within the society. For example, the saying '*rume rimwe harikombi churu*' ('one man cannot encircle a mound alone' - which means that one person cannot do all things alone) is intended to foster the spirit of working together and helping one another, be it in the field or elsewhere, so as to produce enough food to feed the people. Thus according to functionalist theorists, society should be analysed and described in terms of functions.

Furthermore, the problem herein is that some elders and some youth who speak the Shona language have shown ignorance of number symbolism or its uses. While knowledge related to the significance of numbers is important because it is tied to the Shona people's cultural way of life, to their survival, happiness and prosperity, the indigenous knowledge related to the significance of numbers among the Shona people is rarely taught at school and therefore this knowledge is likely to be lost.

Consequently, particular research questions arise, such as (1) what are the Shona equivalent of the English cardinal and ordinal numbers 1 to 10, (2) what are the common number sayings and number-related myths in the Zimbabwean Shona culture, (3) of what numerological significance are these common numbers and number sayings to the Shona people in Zimbabwe, and (4), how do the common number sayings and number-related myths influence beliefs and ways of life of the Zimbabwean Shona cultural people?

Methodology

The researcher collected the data when he had visited his grandmother in Govere village, Churumanzu district, Zimbabwe. He conveniently sampled five elderly and retired people, aged 65 years and above, comprising two women and three men residing in the same village, and separately interviewed them. The researcher chose elderly people because these were anticipated to possess rich traditional knowledge of the Shona people with regards to numbers, number sayings and number-related myths or beliefs. The participants were later requested to share, through oral presentations, their knowledge on common number sayings, number-related myths and beliefs and their numerological, cultural or religious interpretations. The participants spoke in Shona and the researcher translated the information into English and transcribed it on paper. The researcher then triangulated the collected data with information searched from the literature and from personal experiences and observations. Data were presented using a narrative description of what the participants said with some selected quotes. M1, M2 and M3 refer to the three elderly men while F1 and F2 refer to the two elderly women.

Some English Cardinal and Ordinal Numbers and Their Shona Equivalent

Some of the English cardinal and ordinal numbers and their Shona pairs or equivalent forms can perhaps be best shown as:

Table 1: English (Eng) cardinal and ordinal numbers and their Shona (Sho) equivalent

Eng Cardinal	Eng Ordinal	Eng (words)	Sho Cardinal	Sho Ordinal
1	First	One	Motsi	Chechipotsi (chekutanga)
2	Second	Two	Piri	Chechipiri
3	Third	Three	Tatu	Chechitatu
4	Fourth	Four	Ina	Chechina
5	Fifth	Five	Shanu	Chechishanu
6	Sixth	Six	Tanhatu	Chechitanhatu
7	Seventh	Seven	Nomwe	Chechinomwe
8	Eighth	Eight	Sere	Chechisere
9	Ninth	Nine	Pfumbamwe	Chechipfumbamwe
10	Tenth	Ten	Gumi	Chechigumi (Chegumi)

NB: There are no specific numerals or symbols for the numbers in the Shona language; only words. Two goats can be represented by, for example, two stones or two sticks.

And according to (<https://allnurseryrhymes.com/one-for-sorrow/>), the “One for Sorrow” song best describes what each of the numbers one to ten represents or means, at least in the English culture. There could however, be some similarities with numbers in the Shona culture or in other cultures. Hence, the song:

**“One for Sorrow” Lyrics
Modern version**

One for sorrow,
Two for joy,
Three for a girl,
Four for a boy,
Five for silver,
Six for gold,
Seven for a secret,
Never to be told,
Eight for a wish,
Nine for a kiss
Ten for a bird
You must not miss.

“One for Sorrow” Original lyrics

One for sorrow,
Two for mirth,
Three for a wedding,
And four for death

And further evidence, findings and discussion point to the meanings of some numbers in Shona culture as the pieces of information below and relating to the numbers 1, 2 and 5 were contributed by M1, those relating to numbers 3 and 4 by F1, that relating to 6 by M2, that relating to 8 by F2 and M2, those relating to 7 and 9 by F2, while those relating to 10, 11 and ‘many’ were given by M3. In most cases the participants agreed with what each of their colleagues said (e.g., for the numbers 1 to 4), but in other instances, they kept quiet or they said that they did not know. Conversely, a detailed presentation of some English cardinal and ordinal numbers and their Shona equivalent is necessary, and herein involving eleven aspects, hence:

1: (Motsi) or First (Kutanga) – According to M1 the number 1 or *motsi* represents or symbolises God because God in Shona is also called *Mutangakugara* (the First to Stay, the First to Be or the First to Exist). The researcher noted that this belief is also shared by other cultures (Lawrence, 2001). With respect to human beings, M1 also believed that the number 1 is a ‘sorrowful’ number since one who stays or lives alone has no one to share jokes or share information with.

As they say, ‘*rume rimwe harikombi churu*’ (one man cannot encircle a mound alone) which means that one person cannot do all things alone. A similar saying is ‘*chara chimwe hachitswanyi inda*’ (one thumb alone cannot kill a louse) meaning that a person cannot do anything (fruitful) if he/she is one or alone; he/she would need someone to help him/her.

2: (Piri) – M1 said that the number 2 symbolises love and/or joy. This verifies the Shona saying, ‘*mwana kuberekwa vaviri, mugota hamuna kacheche*’ (it needs two people [male and female] to live together and procreate; there will be no baby if one stays alone in his/her hut). There is usually love and joy between two people who stay together, have sex and procreate and definitely some things cannot be done by one person alone, like conceiving a child. The number two also represents joy due to the saying, ‘*vaviri vaviri wechitatu muzvinaguhwa*’ (two are a pair, the third one is gossip). Gossiping usually brings about mistrust and hatred and the people involved would not be joyful or joyous. However, in the Shona culture two is also believed to symbolise evil or bad luck. M1’s views are supported by literature. For example, Mutasa (1978) says that if a pregnant woman delivered *mapatya* or twins (i.e., two babies born at the same time), it was believed to be a bad sign that would bring bad luck to the household or the whole village. Such bad luck could result in poor rains, poor harvests, a new disease or an impending war. The headman of the village would order that the twins be killed or the mother be banished from the village.

Another myth associated with the number two, said M1, is that when one sees a two-headed snake (*svikuviri* or *sikukuviri*) on the road while one is travelling, the journey will not be a pleasant one.

3: (Tatu) – F1 believed that three in the Shona culture symbolises unity and firmness. For example, when preparing a meal mothers usually balance their clay pots on the three stones (*mapfihwa*) arranged in a triangular form. They rarely use two *mapfihwa* or four *mapfihwa* etc. Three also stands for the degree to which one will endure pain, humiliation or suffering inflicted upon by another person without revenging; thus the saying, “*potsi haarwirwi, piri haarwirwi asi tatu torwa*” which means that the first mistake is not punishable, the second same mistake is also not punishable and one is given another chance while the third same mistake is punitive (Chirume, 2017).

4: (Ina) – In Shona the days of the week are *Muvhuro*, *Chipiri*, *Chitatu*, *China*, *Chishanu*, *Mugovera*, and *Svondo*, corresponding respectively to Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. According to the international standard ISO 8601 (ISO 8601, 1988), Monday (or *Muvhuro*) is the first day of the week. Also *Muvhuro* in Shona language means the ‘opener’ and *kuvhura* means to open hence Monday is the day that ‘opens’ the week, implying that it is the first day. Hence Thursday (*China*) is the fourth day.

Thus in some Shona societies and according to F1, this fourth day, *China*, is the day of resting and people are not supposed to do any work. Some call this day of resting *chisi*. It is taboo to work on this day because it is believed that the spirits of the land will also be resting. Working on such a day will make the spirits of the land angry, and this may cause physical pain, bad luck, crop failure or sometimes even death to the perpetrators. The spirits of the land may be appeased by giving a hen, goat or cow to the village headman or elders who will make sacrifices on the perpetrator's behalf. The researcher then conjectured that perhaps this is one reason why the number four in Shona culture is believed to symbolize death or bad luck, just like the number two.

5. (Shanu or Chishanu) – M1 highlighted that the number five is associated with greeting each other by shaking hands. Thus “*ndipewo chishanu*” (give me a five) means let us shake hands since there are normally five fingers on one hand.

This seems to agree to the English version, “... give me five: an exclamation prompting someone to slap another's hand as greeting or acknowledgment.” (Nichol, n.d.).

6. (Tanhatu or Chitathatu) – Oduma-Aboh (2015) says that the number six is sacred to the Shona but does not elaborate. M2 seemed to agree to Oduma-Aboh (2015)'s point by concurring that there are some numerological significances of numbers and number sayings to the Shona people in Zimbabwe. In particular, M2 had this to say:

Mwanangu, muchivanhu chedu zvinhu zvese zvinoitwa nemunhu kana zvaanotaura achidzokorora kana kuita nehuwandu hwazvo haazviitiri nhando. Zvine zvazvinoreva. Semuenzaniso kana tichipira vadzimu sei tichivaombera katatu kana katanhatu? Madzimai vanopururudza kangani- katanhatu? Ndiko kuti vadzimu vadavire tigove nehupenyu nerugare mwanagu. [My son, in our culture everything that a person does or says by repeating a number of times is not done in vain. Those things mean something. For example, when we do the ritual of appeasing our ancestors, why do we clap for them three times or six times? The women ululate how many times – six times? It is done so that the ancestors will hear us and we will have life and peace my son]. (bold stress mine).

The researcher could not however establish the truthfulness or authenticity of M2's contribution concerning the numbers three and six because the other participants did not know about it.

7. (Nomwe) – When asked about seven, F2 believed that bad luck or something evil could befall someone if he/she was pointed at by the seventh finger which is the pointing finger. [There are five fingers on one hand and on the other hand the second finger, after the thumb, is the one normally used for pointing at something]. F2 said, “*Kazhinji amai kana vatsamwa vakakunomwa kana kukunongedza nechigunwe chemunongedzo, wotokumbira ruregerero. Unogona kuzoguma wave rombe.*” [Most often if mother is angry and names you or points at you with the pointing finger, you should ask for forgiveness. You can end up being a beggar].

F2’s contribution above concurred with the researcher’s experiences and observations on the role of mothers in the Shona culture. Peace, happiness and survival of the family depend to a greater extent on mothers. People should avoid wronging their mothers because if the mother is wronged, there won’t be peace in the family. Therefore, adhering to family norms is necessary for order and continuity of the family. Nevertheless, the researcher still inferred that the other informants did not know the meaning of the number seven because they just kept quiet.

8. (Sere) – The researcher’s informants were unable to give the Shona cultural or numerological meaning of this number. However, when pressed further about how the common number sayings and number-related myths influence beliefs and ways of life of the Zimbabwean Shona cultural people, F2 contributed by saying:

Hupenyu hwedu, hutano, hupfumi kana kushaikwa kwazvo zvinokonzerwa naMusikavanhu. Vadzimu vedu ndivo vanyai vedu. Saka kana tikafadza vadzimu vedu, tatofadza Mwari. Hupenyu hwedu hune chekuita nemabasa edu akanaka kana akaipa kana zvakanaka kana zvakaipa zvatinotaura. Saka ngatizvingwaririrei. Imi vana vemazuva ano mukasatevedzera dzidziso idzi zvave zvenyu. [Our lives, health, wealth or lack of them are controlled by God the Creator. Our ancestors are our intermediaries or ‘go betweens’. Therefore, when we appease our ancestors, we have appeased God. Our lives are affected by the good or bad things we do or the good or bad sayings we utter. We should thus be very careful of them. You children of today may ignore what we teach you at your peril].

M2 corroborated F2’s explanation by saying *ndizvozvo* (that’s it) and by nodding his head.

9. (Pfumbamwe) – F2’s other contribution was that *pfumbamwe* (9) comes from the two words *pfumba* (to hold in the hand or hands by folding 5 or 10 fingers respectively) and then unfolding one (*mwe* or *imwe*) finger. Thus *pfumbamwe* or nine could have been derived from ‘ten less one.’

10. (Gumi) – M3 believed that the number ten is associated with ‘manyness’ since *gumi nefararira* or *kuwandisa* means ‘being too many.’

11. (Gumi neimwe or Gumi nerimwe) – M3 further went on to say that the number 11 is associated with bad luck. For example, he narrated that in the eleventh month, November, things like marriages, weddings, or other ceremonies like *kurova guva* (to bring forth the spirit of the dead person so that it will look after its surviving family) are forbidden. This is so because the ancestral spirits or *vadzimu* will be resting during this month. Anyone who carries out these forbidden rituals or ceremonies will invoke the wrath of the spirits and bad luck will befall him/her or his/her family.

Many. (Kuwanda) – There are several beliefs associated with ‘being many’ or *kuwanda*. Being ‘many’ is sometimes considered to be good or bad or advantageous and disadvantageous. For example, M3 pointed out that in Shona they say, “*kuwanda kwakanaka, kwakaipira kupedza muto.*” (it is good to have numbers but they also demand more resources), “*kuwanda huuya*” (the more people, the merrier), or “*mbeva zhinji hadzina mashe*” (too many mice do not have ‘mice food’ in their hole meaning that where there are many people no one takes responsibility and therefore many things can remain undone).

Now it is interesting to note that, when probed further, all the five participants agreed on the numerological meanings of the numbers 1 to 4 but seemed to have limited and varied information on the other numbers. Perhaps this was so because “... according to psychologists, humans can count in flashes only up to quantities of four” (Tammet, 2013).

According to Merzbach and Boyer (2011, p. 50), Philolaus, one of the Pythagoreans, is reported to have opined that, “All things which can be known have number; for it is not possible that without number anything can be either conceived or known.” Thus the Pythagoreans believed that numbers ‘ruled’ or dominated all things. Plato also called the study of number symbolism “the highest level of knowledge” (Meaning of Numbers – Number Symbolism). Thus the study of numerology helps to understand the influence of numbers on people’s lives but whether one truly believes in such influence depends on one’s level of ‘superstition’ or on how one was brought up to verify things in one’s culture. What may be indisputable is that each cultural group of people possesses rich indigenous knowledge about numbers, number myths and number sayings which may influence, positively or negatively their ways of live. Teachers and learners may not access such knowledge at school level because it may still be untapped from the ‘knowledgeable’ elders in the communities.

Conclusion

Based on the above this work concludes that the Shona people of Zimbabwe have their own way of counting numbers, just as in English or as any other people via language have, and of course, some of these numbers have numerological interpretations, and thus, number sayings and number related myths influence beliefs, actions, practices and ways of life of the people.

And in unity, this paper also concludes that in Zimbabwean Shona culture, the common number sayings and number-related myths have major functions which help to maintain order, balance, survival and the continuity of society. Hence, the number sayings, number-related myths and numerological meanings of numbers in the Shona culture need to be further researched wherein new knowledge can be verified or tested. And within this paradigm, teachers and learners should access such knowledge at school level from the ‘knowledgeable’ elders in the communities, based on the idea that this knowledge might help people in other societies so they can also improve their communication and way of life.

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