

Unhu/Ubuntu and the Shona Economy: Teaching the Traditional Economic Ethos in Zimbabwean Secondary Schools through Patrick Chakaipa's *Pfumo Reropa*

by

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Abstract

The study investigated the extent to which *Pfumo Reropa*, an old world novel by Patrick Chakaipa can be used to impart Shona economic values among secondary school learners considering that the current Zimbabwean school curricular is anchored in *Unhu*, also known as *ubuntu*, a philosophical concept that defines what is expected of a member of indigenous African society. Hence, the work sought to explore the efficacy of secondary education in inculcating the concept through Shona literature. This research involved a qualitative paradigm where sixteen teachers were interviewed and involved in textual analysis, and the collected data indicated that *Pfumo Reropa* portrays crucial Shona traditional economic values like hard work, team work, determination, persistence, trustworthiness, participation in societal development, value for humanity more than material possessions and community sharing. Thus, the study concludes that the text offers insights into the values and activities surrounding production, sharing and consumption of the Shona people's possessions, and it recommends the narrative as a novel that can be used to popularise different cultural economic values and vices in schools.

Key words: *Unhu*, *unhu* education, Shona literature, old world novel and Shona economy.

Introduction

Zimbabwe has made commendable efforts in improving both the quality and relevance of its inherited education system. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has a vision of a united and well educated society with *unhu* with concerted efforts in introducing this concept, not only in the Shona syllabi, but in the secondary school curriculum as a whole. The thrust of this study then, is finding out the extent to which the teaching of Shona literature, *Pfumo Reropa* by Patrick Chakaipa in particular, carries the *unhu* impetus, especially, in Shona economic life. *Unhu* among African people has been central and pivotal to the identity of many African cultures, and this explains why in Zimbabwe it was so intricately interwoven within the traditional education system passed from generation to generation as a perpetual marker of social history. In other words, the philosophy formed the basis of Shona culture in Zimbabwe as every member of society thrived to uphold *unhuism* in whatever he/she did (Gelfand, 1973).

It is evident that from ancient times, African literature has been at the centre of education, an education well known for its contribution to the well-being of society, socially, economically, religiously and politically. Among the first Shona societies, African literature manifested itself in the form of folk tales, songs, riddles, proverbs, taboos, poetry, among other ways to teach the subject of *unhu* which was core in their curriculum. However, the coming of the Europeans marked the beginning of written literature as yet another conduit in the transmission of *unhu* among the Shona people. The reading of fiction was introduced as compulsory component of the school curriculum and so, Shona writers of fiction saw their works “as a preservation of their traditions through which they could teach the young along the lines of *pasichigare* society” (Chiwome, 1984: 32). Hence, this study examines how *Pfumo Reropa*, a romance, can be used to impart economic *unhu* in school going Zimbabwean youth whom Makuvaza and Gatsi (2014: 375), believe are currently at cultural cross-roads where they “are experiencing serious cultural crises resulting in identity crises and mimetic philopraxis”, hence, an explanation why the Zimbabwean education system is seriously advocating the teaching of *unhu* in schools.

Pfumo Reropa

In short, Chakaipa’s *Pfumo Reropa* (1961) presents Chief Ndyire who is greedy and covetous. His kingship is characterised by grabbing of subjects’ beautiful wives and murders. For example, when he covets Munhamo, Shizha’s wife, Ndyire destroys the whole Nhindiri village, except for women and Tanganeropa. The Nhindiri women are shared among Ndyire and his counsellors. Tanganeropa, the surviving son, discovers his identity from Haripotse after Ndyire’s death. Later when Tanganeropa finds out that the Chief who replaced Ndyire wants to take his senior wife, Munjai, Tanga and his sympathisers fight the chief who is killed and Tanganeropa takes back the chieftainship. When he is old, Tanganeropa shares power with his half-brother, Rwiriko, who later turns against his brother and kills him together with his wives and father-in-law, Godobo (Kahari, 1990).

The Concept *Unhu/Hunhu*

Unhu, which is also known as *ubuntu* in Africa can be described as a “broad philosophical concept that defines what is expected of a member of an indigenous African culture” (Sibanda, 2014: 28). Nziramasanga (1999) describes the expectations (values) as responsibility, honesty, justice, trustworthiness, hard work, integrity, a cooperative spirit, solidarity, hospitality, devotion to family and the welfare of the community. Thus, *unhu* can be explained as “a bundle of cherished values in African societies” that encompasses social, economic, religious and political life. (Ndondo and Mhlanga, 2014: 3). This concept describes what makes up a ‘perfect’ African person (*munhu*). Therefore, for one to be identified as *munhu*; one should “uphold the African cultural standards, expectations, values and norms and [keep] the African identity” (Sibanda, 2014: 26), and failure to do so means that “one is not a real human person but just a human being among other forms of being in the universe” (Mukusha, 2013: 34).

One with *unhu* is referred to as *munhu* (person) meaning he/she carries the social-cultural values of Shona society. However, as noted by Tatira (2013), it is really impossible for one to possess all the qualities of *unhu*, although members are expected to do their best in order to become *vanhu* (the plural for *munhu*). What disturbs and draws attention among the Shona is falling short of the majority of the expectations. Such an individual who lacks *unhu* is usually regarded as a deviant with an animal instinct, because it is the possession of *unhu* that the Shona use to differentiate between a human being and an animal (Gelfand, 1973). Hence, this worldview which is generally a binding cultural heritage passed through generations of African people (Mapara, 2013). This study therefore explores how Shona literature via *Pfumo Reropa* in particular can be used to impart the different economic values of *unhu* in the classroom.

Methodology

This study took the qualitative approach to allow for an in-depth study of the promotion of *unhu* in the economic sphere through the teaching of *Pfumo Reropa* in secondary schools. The case study method was employed where the Masvingo Urban District formed the population for the study. The method allowed for a full understanding of phenomenon within its real-life context and thorough an analysis of the subject; and the setting was selected because it was easily accessible to the researcher. Four Masvingo Urban Schools were randomly selected, representing the school types in the district, namely council day schools, mission schools, government schools and private schools. All Shona teachers from the four selected secondary schools formed the sample, selected because they are the key participants in the teaching of Shona literature.

The research employed here is textual analysis of the novel chosen on the basis that it is often selected for study in the secondary school syllabi. The text was analysed by the key participants (teachers), guided by the core values of *Unhuism*. The research also used interviews which are “good in accessing people’s perceptions, meanings, and definitions of situations and constructions of reality” (Marshall and Rossman, 2006: 168). The researcher used the common type of individual, face-to-face verbal interchange with teachers since they are mature participants with thematic frames in the both presentation and data analysis. The themes were drawn directly from the research questions. Hence, the results indicated that *Pfumo Reropa* portrays crucial Shona traditional economic values which include: hard work, team work, determination, persistence, trustworthiness, participation in societal development, value for humanity more than material possessions, and community sharing.

***Unhu* and Community Development**

Unhu cherishes hard work. To show that it is foolish to think that one can get something without working hard for it, the Shona people used the proverb *Ishavi kurova munda neshamhu* [it means one is possessed (by an evil spirit) if he is beating the field with a stick]. Individuals were taught hard work as the only way to achieve their goals. According to Female Teacher I:

Teaching hard work can help our students who do not want to work but employ corrupt ways to get whatever they want in life.

Hard work is exhibited in *Pfumo Reropa* among the Nhindiri family. The men are described as great hunters, and together with their women, they work hard in the fields. As a result, the family remains self-sufficient. They have enough to live on, and this gives them fame in the society. The family accumulates wealth; grain, goats, and chickens from their hard work and the subsistence economy bind the family together, as the women peacefully live together. Gelfand (1992: 11) agrees with the idea when he observes that “subsistence economy helps to foster a sense of brotherhood among the members of a lineage group, for all know that the available food will be shared by the group.” Thus, readers learn to work hard in order to earn a decent living that is also full of respect. Male Teacher B indicated that Chakaipa teaches this aspect through Munhamo, whose hard work is rewarded by Ndyire’s senior wife who reveals the secrets of luring her new husband Ndyire to her, and, as a result, Munhamo becomes the most loved wife after the first wife’s death.

Female Teacher A highlighted that Chakaipa emphasises the need for hard work among the Shona by portraying the negative effects of laziness in *Pfumo Reropa*. Ndyire’s younger wives are disliked by their husband because they are sluggish. He does not stay at their homes, and he always scolds them.

For example, Handidiwe is not self-reliant; she does not own even a hen and is a thief who steals other wives' eggs. This lazy wife cannot compete with the other wives for Ndyire's love. As a result, she resorts to love potions which lead to Ndyire's death. In yet another family, a lazy couple, Murwarazhizha and her husband, Dzinesu, attract poverty and hunger every year. They depend on begging for food. As a result, she lures her husband into looking for "*divisi*" (charms for good harvests). The charm involves human body parts and so the couple plots to kill Munhamo and her children. Unfortunately, Murwarazhizha gives Handidiwe the poison and the witchdoctor was killed by Dzinesu for deceiving him and later, he kills himself. Hence, according to Female Teacher L, Chakaipa is teaching his readership that hard work is the way to prosper, and laziness is a societal vice that may attract unfortunate situations.

Laziness as a vice is despised not only in Shona novels, but also in literature from other African societies. This implies that Zimbabwean literature falls within the larger body of African fiction. In the Nigerian novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Unoka, Okonkwo's father, is very lazy. Achebe presents the effects of his laziness, and this includes borrowing without returning, hunger in his family and not being respected by people. With this evidence, laziness becomes one of the most despised ills not only among the Shona people, but among African societies in general as it can also generate vices such as gossip, jealousy, witchcraft, theft, hatred and murder, which destabilises society. Thus, readers are taught that as members of the Shona society, they should do all they can in the different spheres of life to contribute to universal harmony (Gelfand, 1992).

Teamwork is also encouraged in the selected text. Female Teacher E explained that working as a team in a common effort has always been appreciated among the Shona by quoting the proverb *Kuturika denga remba kubatirana* [to put a roof onto the walls of a hut needs joining hands]. This emphasises that among the Shona, *unhu* is "based strongly on the collective" (Munyaka and Motlhabi, 2009: 70). The social interconnectedness expected is demonstrated in the selected novels. The Nhindiri family, in *Pfumo Reropa*, is used to teach the benefits of collaborative work. Chakaipa further reinforces the need for cooperation through the use of the proverb *chara chimwe hachitswanyi inda* [one thumb does not kill a louse] describing VaMunhamo's need for a second hand in the fields in order to produce sufficient food for her new husband's three wives. As was noted by Gelfand (1992), the group concept is also displayed by the norm of eating from common plates at the *dare* (men's meeting place), in *Pfumo Reropa*. Boys eat in a separate group and share a common plate, while married men share food brought by their wives. Sharing food in these groups instils the spirit of teamwork among the Shona.

All the teachers agreed that determination is an important economic virtue among the Shona, as depicted by Chakaipa through Tanganeropa who makes difficult decisions to accomplish his goals. Regardless of the challenges he faces along the way, he succeeds. Due to his self-determination, Tanganeropa excels in everything he does, including fighting against both people and dangerous animals, retaining their stolen chieftainship and becoming the only man to successfully bring the spear rod; *rwiriko* from the Chomudzimu or Chendamba anthill which is very thick and thorny. The writer describes:

Chakakonzera kuti mwana uyu azive kana kuti ave nyanzvi mutunhu tuzhinji, kushinga. Akanga asingadi kurega chinhu kutosvikira achigona kana kuti achikunda. Aiti akatadza chinhu kunyangwe zvaakanga ari chikomana chididikidiki, aichema nepamusana peshungu (p.25)

[What made this child knowledgeable or to be an expert in many things is bravery. He wouldn't want to surrender until he was able to do things or conquer. He used to cry because of passion if he failed to do something since his boyhood]

This implies that determination coupled with practice, leads to development. Through perseverance, one gets to learn new things.

Male Teacher A highlighted that *Pfumo Reropa* teaches persistence, a crucial value of *unhu*. He says:

Because of his persistence, apart from practical skills, Tanganeropa also gets knowledge and wisdom from Haripotse during training in the forests.

This explains why the Shona say: *Hapana munwe unoiswa mukanwa ukabuda usina mate* [no finger put into the mouth will come out without saliva]. The proverb praises courage and perseverance in difficult work. Through persistence, Tanganeropa gains economic values such as trustworthiness, self-sufficiency, generosity/kind heartedness, hospitality and sharing. In his teaching Haripotse says:

Unofanira kuva munhu anovimbika, munhu asingabi, munhu anoda hama dzake, munhu anogarisana zvakana navatorwa. Mutorwa anonzi gara tidye haanzi afe. Ukaita zvandataura, zita rako rinokura kwazvo (p.67).

[You should be somebody who is trustworthy, someone who does not steal, who loves his relatives, and someone who stays peacefully with his neighbours. A stranger should be given food not wishing him death. If you practice what I have told you, your name will become very famous]

Haripotse tells Tanganeropa that he should be trustworthy, should not steal, and should love his neighbours and foreigners. Tanganeropa is promised that these virtues would mould him into a great person in life. He exercises them and becomes a famous king in his land. The author implies that persistence has benefits and for one to be recognised among the Shona, one should also possess those economic values.

Participation in societal development is one important economic value of *unhu* that was identified by teachers. The Shona understood that when members participate in economic activities, a society is economically stable and peaceful, and above all, one attains a full status of being human. According to Munyaka and Motlhabi (2009: 73), carrying out duties that contribute to the well being of others transforms and confers on an individual the full status of being human, thus ubuntu is a call to participation. It demands service to humanity in a practical way.

This means that *unhu* expects individuals to carry out duties that enable them to participate in different societal activities for the good of society. Failure to do so would mean lack of *unhu*. The young were therefore encouraged to be helpful and charitable to the community through the saying *Chirumbwana chitumiki* [a young boy is easy to send]. Chakaipa's *Pfumo Reropa* highlights activities which include working in the fields, rearing of domestic animals, trade, hunting, carving, building, iron and gold smelting as participation in societal economic growth. Such activities were meant to provide for families and the society at large. According to Male Teacher C, the portrayal of such productive activities in novels can lead learners to full participation in economic activities that can develop their families and the society at large; an element which Western education has failed to perpetuate.

Female E concurred adding that:

Even if some of the portrayed activities are not popular among the young generation, what is important is that the learners will be taught to involve themselves in productive activities of the day.

Thus, Chakaipa expects all Shona learners to know and participate in various duties for economic development.

Unhu and Material Wealth

Unhu discourages love for wealth more than people, and relations. This means that the Shona value humanity more than material possessions or wealth. This is taught by Chakaipa when he presents Ndyire, a greedy king who violently grabs people's wealth and wives leaving them dead or in tears. He is not moved by the agony of his people who are left in after his actions.

According to Female Teacher H,

By portraying such a leader, Chakaipa in *Pfumo Reropa* is condemning citizens who attach more value to material things than people, relationships and human life. The author uses Haripotse who upon realising that their chief is lost, publicly denounces Ndyire and supports Tanganeropa in fighting for the kingship such that they can help restore *unhu* in the land. Tanganeropa demonstrates love for people when he is king by protecting them from foreign powers.

Teachers therefore agreed that Chakaipa's novel reminds Shona learners that people should be valued more than possessions regardless of their status in society. One should never value wealth more than other humans but respect, love, and have compassion for others.

***Unhu* and Community Sharing**

Teachers stressed that Chakaipa portrays community sharing, one value that is cherished by *unhu*. This is supported by Nussbaum (2003: 2) who says, "ubuntu acknowledges among other things that my wealth is your wealth". Munyaka and Motlhabi (2009: 73) concur saying that in the *unhu* worldview,

people are expected to share the resources with which they are blessed. Furthermore, because such actions contribute positively to those in need, they maintain and preserve community cohesion.

This means that African people share material possessions especially with members in need so that societal solidarity is maintained and safely guarded. Most teachers agreed to this, with Male Teacher B saying:

Sharing is one important economic value that our students need to be taught through these novels. It is a quality that values human life instead of personal wealth as we see today. People have become individualistic to an extent of throwing away food while others are dying of hunger.

In *Pfumo Reropa*, the Nhindiriris are praised for sharing with the community, while Ndyire is ridiculed for greed. This indicates the Shona belief that wealth should be shared with others. Meanness is therefore, undesirable as it hinders development, and by despising individual accumulation of wealth, the author is teaching readers that wealth should be communalised.

Conclusion

Most teachers realised and applauded the teaching of the economic values of *unhu* through the novel *Pfumo Reropa*. Only a few expressed concern over the teaching of *unhu* through the novel as they felt that there were a number of challenges that needed to be addressed for the teaching of literature to effectively impart *unhu*. Although, the novel is set in the pre-colonial era portraying traditional aspects, it was established that Chakaipa's novel *Pfumo Reropa* presents key economic values that can be effectively taught among Shona learners as future participants in the economic sector. This research also revealed that curriculum planners are justified in including the text in the Shona syllabus, as it can help curb the problem of cultural loss in the economic sphere.

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