

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LAND AND CULTURE IN SELECTED TEXTS BY CHENJERAI HOVE

Josephine Muganiwa

Department of English

University of Zimbabwe

jmuganiwa1210@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article explores the significance of land in Chenjerai Hove's stories. The setting of the stories affects the choices of the protagonists, depending on their status on the land. Hove's selected novels, *Shadows* and *Ancestors*, explore this phenomenon in the context of the Native Purchase lands of the then Rhodesia. The cultural disruption of moving to commercial land as opposed to the land of ancestors has an impact on identity of the characters, both personally and as perceived by others. At times, such perceptions contradict each other, but they also have implications for the characters' economic and psychological well-being. This article therefore sets out to explore the relationship between land and culture as depicted in Hove's novels. The main argument is that, while the Native Purchase areas accorded economic status to the Africans involved, it fractured their cultural identity as they had to live by the dictates of the colonial administration. Culture refers to a way of life and includes manner of dress, food, language, social interaction and many other aspects. This in turn adds insight to how the interface of administration of land affects Zimbabwean citizens as literature here holds up a mirror to real life.

Keywords: Land; native purchase areas; Gotami; culture; identity

UNISA 
university
of south africa

Imbizo

Volume 7 | Number 1 | 2016 | pp. 64–73

<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/Imbizo/index>

Print ISSN 2078-9785

© 2016 University of South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Chenjerai Hove was a prominent Zimbabwean writer who voiced concern for the dispossessed and the underdog subject to the systems imposed by the colonial set-up in the days of Rhodesia. After independence, some of the same systems remained intact, notably the prevailing land tenure system prevailing which had been determined by the Roman-Dutch Law put in place by white people. In terms of Roman-Dutch law, the land was no longer held in custody by the chief as representative of the ancestors. Rather, ownership was determined by the holding of title deeds after the land was purchased from the government. This situation brought – and continues to bring – contradictions into the lives of Africans who were and are forced to have a double consciousness: one acknowledging the ways of their ancestors and the other acknowledging the ways of the white man as a defeated people. This article focuses on two of Hove's novels, *Shadows* and *Ancestors*, which explore the lives of characters who have moved to the Native Purchase Areas after being awarded the Master Farmer title, a title which brings with it the right to purchase land. This distinction – that the characters have this right – is important, as most critical works looking at Zimbabwe's new farmers focus on farmhands who are dispossessed and reduced to poverty. However, despite having the title deeds, they still refer to the land as belonging to Gotami, the guardian spirit of the land. In African conception land does not belong to individuals but held in trust for future generations with guidance from ancestral spirits. The new farmers are alienated culturally and live in fear of transgressing and being punished by Gotami. The tragedy of Johana's family in *Shadows* seems premised on such transgression. Meanwhile, Mucha's father in *Ancestors* has bought into the white man's view of land simply being a commercial tool to acquire money to the extent that he disregards his spiritual heritage.

The analysis of the chosen texts is informed by Afrocentricity – that is, putting the African world-view at the centre of analysis of the events. According to Asante (2007, 24 – 17), African people should be at the centre of their history and creativity: 'African people must be viewed and view themselves as agents rather than spectators to historical revolution and change.' This is important in that it takes cognisance of the fact that there are 'diverse classes, races, cultures, nationalities and religions found on the African continent' (Oduyoye as quoted in Phiri and Nadar 2003, 5). Hove's characters in both books move from Gutu rural, then known as the tribal trust lands, to the Native Purchase areas in the Gokwe area originally inhabited by the Tonga and Shangwe people. The characters have to learn new ways in order to become prosperous on their new land as the guardians of the land do not have the same expectations as the guardians of the land in Gutu had. A long quotation is expedient to prove this point:

Gotami's people do not allow you to shout at the animals, even the baboons in the hills. Do not insult them, she taught him, showing him the footsteps she had taken so many years

to walk, sometimes with pain, sometimes with itchy prickles. If you hear the honey-bird singing its song, be polite, kneel down and thank the people of Gotami first before you follow it. Watch the way it flies. If it takes long strides from tree to tree, it means there is danger where you are going. It will say things in a sad way, warning you that it is throwing you into the mouth of death.

Have they not told you the story of how a stubborn man followed the bird without thanking Gotami? Oh, the man was led into the mouth of death. He was led to the nest of pythons, the one where all pythons live. One python swallowed him. Inside the python he found all Gotami people assembled, the old men and women, sitting at the dare to try him for the land he knew he had despised.

-Did Gotami's children not tell you about Gotami's holy days? asked an elder. The man could not answer. They had warned him about his foolish ways but he would not listen. They warned him, they sent his own friends to bring the word of the gentle anger of the people of Gotami. But the man remained deaf, deaf to any warnings which stopped him from his ways.

This is my farm, the man had said. This is the only soil that I own, bought with the money of my own sweat, he said. Go away and talk to your Gotami of all these stories, but remind him that if he bothers me any more, the white man's laws will be harsh on him . . . The people went away, their eyes full of disbelief because of the courage of the man. They knew that one day the spirits will confront the man, showing him their dark anger. They felt it was coming, but they simply said a man who refused to be warned only remembers the warning when his forehead is covered with wounds. (. . .)

-We forbade you from doing only few things. We allowed you to plough the land, to drown the soul of the land with the white man's poisons, to kill the animals of the land with the poisons the white man gave you. Those are bad things, but we said, the children are in trouble. They cannot be treated like a cigarette which burns at one end and is bitten on the other end. So we allowed you to poison the graves of our fathers with the white man's medicines of the soil. The things we said you should not do are not many. Yet you hardened the back of your head, thinking the words of the dead are nothing. (Hove 1991, 76-78)(sic)

The quotation above highlights the conflict between African traditional wisdom and the new ways brought by the white man which were, at the time, considered to be scientific and which were supposedly better. This is supported by Durning (1992) who observes that 'as indigenous cultures vanish, so do vast numbers of animals and plant species unknown to western science – as well as intimate knowledge of their use. Native peoples' homelands encompass many of the planet's last tracts of wilderness – ecosystems that shelter millions of endangered species, buffer the global climate, and regulate hydrological cycles. The novel *Ancestors* gives voice to the Tonga ancestors and their perception of what happens in their land. The land becomes a site of contestation –over ownership and maintenance of the environment – between the colonial authorities and the indigenous systems through the territorial spirit, Gotami. Schoffeleers clearly outlines the effect of colonialism on the African system in his discussion of territorial cults.

During the period of colonialism the concept of territorial cults came to be challenged in its very roots, and the breakdown of an ideational and organizational complex which sustained African societies for many centuries was initiated. More directly the challenges came from the Christian churches which throughout questioned the religious basis of cults, and from the colonial administration which became intermittently involved in sharp conflicts with the religious leadership. A more radical threat, however, came from other factors. One of these was the application of a rationalist interpretation of ecology in the form of modern forms of land conservation and animal husbandry, which affected the moral and communal basis of cults. Another was bureaucratization of the chieftainships which considerably weakened the political support of the cults. A third was the alienation of the land which in its various forms drastically changed the structure of social organization and settlement. Where such factors made their impact, the result was the disappearance or weakening of the cults or, where cults continued to exist, the introduction of functional permutations (Schoffeleers 1978, 36 – 7).

The above-mentioned conflicts are vividly dramatised in the lives of Hove's characters as we follow both Johana's father and Mucha's father receiving their Master Farmer Awards, applying for the farms in the white man's office, receiving approval, paying scouting visits to Gotami's land, experiencing the doubts and fears of abandoning the ancestral lands, going through moving their whole families, making adjustments and facing new demands from the white man. The matters of spiritual hunger and alienation are always highlighted in the lives of both adults and children and, in the context of the novel, point to land being crucial in the creation and maintenance of an identity.

LAND AND IDENTITY

Magosvongwe (2013) notes that the formation of individual identities deeply embedded in people's cultural values is, in turn, based on those people's relationship with the land. She cites a number of Shona terms that reflect a person's social status and identity and then concludes:

The terms show that dignity, social status and identities that individuals and communities acquire are based on their relationship with the land. The terms also impact directly on people's sense of un/belongingness, being, self-image, self-worth, and self-confidence, including guiding principles that may affirm or negate active participation and contribution in life (Magosvongwe 2013, 4).

Owning land is the main ambition of the characters in the selected texts by Hove; to have a place they can call their own and to be in control. Johanna's father, in *Shadows*, says that he wants a place away from the headman and colonial administration. This is a reference to the role of chiefs as mouthpieces of colonial administrators in the British system of indirect rule. Johanna's father does not realise that the colonial administrators are still in control but that they are now playing on the ambitions of Africans. He therefore feels betrayed when he is asked to abandon maize and rapoko

to farm cotton for the white man's market. His worry stems from the traditional use of rapoko in brewing beer for the ancestors. In *Ancestors*, Mucha's father is clear that he wants to make money and the new lands will afford him that opportunity. The farms in both novels are referred to using the new owner's names. They reflect that they belong to people who have been awarded the Master Farmers title to award their hard work as farmers. In the new lands, people from all over the country are brought together. Where people do not know each other's real names, they simply describe the characteristics of the person concerned. In *Shadows*, an Ndebele farmer has acquired a tractor and his son uses it to work all day, clearing the virgin land and ploughing. He is therefore known as 'the boy who ploughs with a tractor'. He is also known as 'the boy with a civet cat mouth' because he speaks his mind, regardless of whom he is talking to, and is ready to pick a fight with anyone at the dip tank. This is an illustration of how something is being taken away from each person's identity. The descriptors are one dimensional, merely surface observations. They reflect that the people are strangers to each other and therefore alienated. In Shona communities, the immigrants' original environment, totems are used to address people. It is both a sign of intimacy and respect.

On the other hand, Johanna, the girl who herds cattle and works hard on the farm, is considered to be the best marriage material in the farmlands. Unfortunately this is the only identity she has as she cannot read and write. The boy who ploughs with a tractor therefore pursues other girls after he is already in a relationship with Johana. The relationship fails because Johanna fails to adopt the literate culture of writing letters despite the acceptance by the boy's mother and sisters. She also rejects the method of wooing whereby the sisters speak on behalf of their brother. She prefers that the boy talks to her so that she gets the thrill of his voice and judge his art of using words. Unfortunately when the boy writes a letter, she cannot read. The tragedy is that there is no mode to bridge their identities and they largely remain locked to how they relate to the new land: Johana, known as the girl who herds cattle, who is in love with the boy who ploughs with his father's tractor.

LAND AND ENVIRONMENT

One's environment is as important as the people within it. The flora and fauna are intricately tied to the identity of place and people. The resettled farmers miss the familiar trees, rivers and birds which work as pointers to the changes in weather and seasons. Consequently they feel lost in the new environment. According to Mbiti (1991, 44):

African people consider man to be at the centre of the universe. Being in that position he tries to use the universe or derive some use from it in physical, mystical and supernatural ways. He sees the universe in terms of himself, and endeavours to live in harmony with it. Even when there is no biological life in an object, African people attribute (mystical) life to

it, in order to establish a more direct relationship with the world around them. In this way the visible and invisible parts of the universe are at man's disposal through physical, mystical and religious means. Man is not master in the universe; he is only the centre, the friend, the beneficiary, the user. For that reason he has to live in harmony with the universe, obeying the laws of natural, moral and mystical order. If these are unduly disturbed, it is man who suffers most. African peoples have come to these conclusions through long experience, observation and reflection... The destruction or pollution of nature (including air, water, forests, land, animals, trees, plants and useful insects) brings harm to all life in general and injuries to human welfare in particular. Therefore, man has to preserve nature and use it wisely, indeed mercifully, for his own and its survival.

The earlier quotation on the rules of Gotami fully illustrates this world view. In both novels, one of the worries is whether the land of Gotami has the same type of trees and animals that the characters are already familiar with. The characters are also worried about whether they will come to know the terrain intimately enough to be able to name the rivers, trees and animals with ease. Their main goal is to be in harmony with the land.

Farming rules against the use of the white man's poisons (fertilisers and pesticides) are meant to protect the lives of birds and insects. When Johana's father comes back from the city he sees his life and destiny reflected in the bird that slowly and silently dies after eating a poisoned insect. The insistence by the white man that they grow cash crops (cotton and tobacco) at the expense of rapoko and maize means they have nothing to brew beer with – and beer is essential in communicating with the ancestors. The restriction on animals has the same effect of disrupting the people's worship patterns and agricultural practices. A bull that has been named in honour of the ancestors cannot be easily slaughtered – and it also provides the draught power needed in the virgin land for meaningful farming to take place. The whole environment is therefore essential for man to succeed.

There is also an impact on social relations due to the movement from ancestral lands to African Native Purchase Areas such as Gotami's land. The relationship between Johana and the boy who ploughs his father's land with a tractor is also impeded by cultural miscommunication. His sisters get confused as they woo Johana on behalf of their brother when she asks them if their brother has no mouth to speak for himself. Johana has no *tete* (an aunt who is her father's sister) or *mbuya* (an aunt who is wife to her mother's brother) to help her in the courting game. She relies too heavily on her father and accepts the boy because she notes that her father admires the boy for working hard on his father's farm – but this is only one aspect of a good husband. Had they remained on their old land, Johana would not have been lonely and would have had more than one dimension to her character as the whole extended family would have been there to socialise her into various roles. The new lands deprives her of such experiences and hence cause the sorrow and loneliness within her.

Mucha's father can barely relate to his new wives because they are strangers who marry him for his wealth. Similarly, he marries them for their labour. If he had remained on the old land, his wives would have been *vematongo* (from the neighbourhood and therefore well-known to the family) and the relationships would have been much deeper. It is also being in the new lands that enables Mucha's father to chase away Mucha's mother and all her children with impunity because there is no one to intervene on their behalf. The ancestors therefore punish him for valuing money over being in harmony with his environment and other people as he feeds the 'belly of the purse'. He swallows the white man's teachings whole until he falls sick as a reminder from the ancestors that they need to be appeased. The environment is therefore holistic, including plants, animals, and humans (the unborn, the living and the departed).

LAND AND CONFLICT

Land is at the centre of conflicts in the two texts under discussion, as it is the world over. In colonial Rhodesia, '...the settlers, carved up and parceled the country of Zimbabwe among people of white descent. In reaction to the dispossession, the Africans put up a spirited resistance to the colonialist menace but were overwhelmed by the superior firepower of the British Maxim gun.' (Banana 1996, 152). Hove highlights how Gotami's medicine men, without firepower, defeated the Ndebele armies using steaming pots of groundnuts. The anecdote appears in both *Shadows* and *Ancestors*. In *Ancestors*, the displacement of Gotami's people is fully dramatised. The superior weapons drive the people away and the magic does not harm the white man because he does not touch the food. In *Shadows*, the elders plead with the whites not to put strangers on their land so that their ancestor's graves are not desecrated, but the white man does not listen. Some of the strangers then go on to disregard the laws, as reflected in the earlier quotation. Even though some do so inadvertently, it leads to disaster nonetheless.

Marko (a herd boy employed by Johana's father) and Johana transgress a moral law when they sleep together at the river. They know they have harvested death and silently wait for it. When Johana's father finds out, he chases Marko with an axe and he runs away to commit suicide. Johana drinks the pesticide for cotton plants and they both die on the same day. Subsequent deaths in the family are linked to these deaths.

The family is unfortunate and is trapped in the second war of liberation against the settlers. Johana's father and his sons refuse to take sides and are therefore suspected by both sides to be sellouts. Johana's father runs away to the city, leaving his home defenceless. One son is killed by Rhodesian soldiers, the other by freedom fighters on the grounds of his being a sellout. Johana's father is killed after independence by a group protesting that they have not seen the gains of independence. The charge

again is that he is a sellout as he refuses to be part of the struggle. Johana's father identifies himself as an apolitical farmer but farming activities are affected by the war, regardless of one's attitude towards the war.

According to Anthony Lake:

The basic principles of discriminatory legislation are the Land Apportionment and Tenure Act of 1930 and 1969. A stated purpose of the 1930 Act was to set aside areas for the Africans which could not be grabbed by white Rhodesians. It and the 1969 Act have equally divided the land between the races. This leaves, of course, the white 5 percent of population with half of the land and 95 percent with the other half. Not surprisingly, the white lands contain the best agricultural areas (Banana 1996, 154–5).

The characters in Hove's novels leave the land of their ancestors because the soil is tired and useless, yielding very little. The fertile virgin land of Gotami is therefore attractive. However the Tsetse flies make it difficult to keep cattle and that is why the area is designated for Africans. This kind of allocation of second rate land to Africans is the reason why the war of liberation was fought. The treatment of the land by some white people was also a point of concern. Charlie Slatter, in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*, runs away from being a struggling grocer in England and becomes a rich tobacco farmer in Rhodesia by destroying the land without apology. He despises Dick for trying to be in harmony with the land, like a native. The war, however, evoked contradictory feelings in the resettled farmers. Hove writes:

Farmers listened to the young people, not questioning them, not insulting them. They were happy and proud that their young children had seen it fit to challenge the white man to a big wrestling contest. Who is not proud when his son goes hunting for the first time, challenging the leopard and the lion, alone in the bush? they said. They felt a deep sense of pride in the young people who challenged the mysterious words of the white man which were spoken in strange tongues. The young people said the white man was a pauper in his own lands, that was why he had run away so that he could steal other people's lands. Have you ever seen a chief leaving his own lands to go and become something else in other lands? the young people spoke. The elders listened, their hearts glowing with joy at the words of truth which they heard from the mouths of their own children.

But sometimes they were torn with doubts. They doubted how it was possible that the white man can be defeated since he was the one who had made the guns which the children carried, slung on their shoulders. They wondered in their hearts whether these rugged children who grew up on pumpkin leaves and sadza would sit in the white man's office the way the white man did. (Hove 1991, 87)

The older Africans approve of the war because they are aware of what they have lost, but they doubt their ability to conquer because of their history of defeat due to the superior weapons of their opponents. This doubt makes them waver in their support of the war.

The colonial system was well calculated to ensure that blacks worked for the benefit of the white man. The Master Farmer award was meant to identify hard-

working Africans and, once identified, they were given hope of owning their own land. Yet their new lands had already been earmarked for contract farming to feed the cotton and tobacco industry in the country. The inputs were supplied and the companies would buy the harvest. While the farmers gained money and the trinkets it could buy, the land was poisoned and moral degradation also took place. This is evident in *Shadows* where Gotami is not happy with the use of pesticides. Incidents of suicide also rose due to easy access to poison. These poisonous agricultural chemicals were largely used in social conflicts. There are many newspaper reports on women who drink pesticides because, after they have worked hard in the fields hoping to send their children to school, their husbands either simply marry other women or squander the money on prostitutes in the city. The increase in social conflict within families in contract farming areas, especially between spouses is therefore linked to the land tenure system. Johana drinks a pesticide because her father would not accept an employee on his land as a son-in-law. When he threatens to kill him with an axe, Marko commits suicide. Before independence, women were considered minors and hence could not own land or have bank accounts, despite the fact that they were providing the labour. Even today, many years after independence, joint farming contracts for husband and wife are rare. In the most recent season at the time of writing (2013-2014), women set up encampments outside the tobacco auction houses to ensure that their men did not squander the fruits of their labour.

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

The experiences of the characters in both *Shadows* and *Ancestors* illustrate that land is central to human survival. However, there is also a need for the just distribution of land so as to avoid conflict and, in addition, there is a need to revisit the African cultural values of land tenure and conservation so as to restore harmony with the environment. The land tenure system in Zimbabwe must be revisited also so that a spirit of community can be fostered. As long as the system is individualistic and favours those with capital, a lot of people will remain disadvantaged. Class taxonomies tend to reduce the value of people as human beings and integral spiritual players. In *Shadows*, Mako is considered inferior because he is employed – and yet, spiritually, he is the only one who understands Johanna, despite her lack of education.

Fraud on title deeds is possible because most people are not conversant with the land tenure system and it is far removed from their cultural sensibilities. Women must be able to have access to and control of the land in order to avoid unnecessary loss of lives due to irresponsible male guardians.

Conservation systems must also be fostered in tandem with the African cultural sensibilities of promoting organic farming and respecting flora and fauna. Currently, organic food is more expensive, but if it became the norm then it would be cheaper and

producing it would also lead to the rehabilitation of forests and farmlands. According to an environmental report, Zimbabwe currently suffers from the following:

Environment – current issues: deforestation; soil erosion; land degradation; air and water pollution; the black rhinoceros herd - once the largest concentration of the species in the world - having been significantly reduced by poaching; poor mining practices having led to toxic waste and heavy metal pollution (www.indexmundi.com).

Poaching and dumping of toxic waste in rivers is a reflection of a lack of respect for other living organisms. The adoption of Gotami's laws will help restore respect for the land and living organisms which would rehabilitate the environment and ensures prudent conservation for the future. That means there will be no poaching, use of poisonous chemicals and pollution of rivers. In narrating the story of Johana and her family in *Shadows*, Hove highlights the sickness that has hit the land and how matters require to be addressed in a holistic manner so as to reconcile the animate and inanimate universe. The dark shadows of land and ecological injustice cast over Zimbabwe must be removed for a brighter future.

REFERENCES

- Asante, M.K. 2007. *The Afrocentric manifesto*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Banana, C.S. 1996. *Politics of repression and resistance: Face to face with combat theology*. Gweru: Mambo Press.
- Banana, C.S. 1996. *The church and the struggle for Zimbabwe: From the programme to combat racism to combat theology*. Gweru: Mambo Press.
- Bujo, B. 1997. *The ethical dimension of community: The African model and the dialogue between North and South*. Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa.
- Durning, A.T. 1992. Worldwatch Paper #112: Guardians of the land: Indigenous people and the health of the Earth. <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/878> (accessed August 8, 2014).
- Hove, C. 1991. *Shadows*. Harare: Baobab Books.
- Hove, C. 1996. *Ancestors*. Harare: College Press.
- Lessing, D. 1950. *The grass is singing*. United Kingdom: Michael Joseph
- Magosvongwe, R. 2013. Land and identity in Zimbabwean Fiction writings in English from 2000-2010: A Critical Analysis. PhD Thesis, University of Cape Town.
- Mbiti, J.S. 1991. *Introduction to African religion*. Second edition. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- Phiri, I.A. and Nadar, S., ed. 2003. *African women, religion and health: Essays in honor of Mercy Aruba Ewudwiza Oduyoye*. Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications.
- Schoffeleers, J.M., ed. Guardians of the land: A Kachere text. Gweru: Mambo Press.
- www.indexmundi.com/zimbabwe/environment_current_issues.html (accessed July 25, 2014).