

The Speech Form of Proverbs and Riddles in ChiShona under Siege

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Abstract

Proverbs and riddles are representative samples of any African language's rich tapestry. They form the distilled wisdom of a nation or ethnic group. Proverbs and riddles as parts of speech, form the curriculum of the social traditional higher education for transmission and practice of a nation's values, beliefs, knowledge system and legislative framework. This article seeks to explore the threats and consequences of language change and development befalling the continued use of proverbs and riddles in everyday human speech communication by the current generation. Technological development, migration across boundaries, social change necessitated by improved infrastructure and communication networks has become agents of language and culture change. The change has perpetuated the gradual disuse of proverbs in modern interactive speech.

Introduction

This article is post-modernistic in the exploration of the role played by proverbs and riddles in Zimbabwe. It seeks to discover the underlying factors leading to the gradual irregular play of riddling games and use of proverbs in rural areas. The traditional society in Zimbabwe is basically rural and communal in nature. Their philosophy, like in any other African society, is derived from their *ubuntu* worldview of life. The society's values, beliefs and tendencies have a history of being passed on to the next generation by oral means (Nandwa & Bukenya, 1983). This is the form of traditional/indigenous education which involves acquisition and transmission of culture, the passing on of behaviour patterns, beliefs, practices, norms, ritual practices and survival skills. Mbiti, Wandira and Ayisi in Peresuh and Nhunduh (1999) say that education was lifelong, that is from "womb to tomb". The curriculum included the use and learning of riddling games, tongue twisters, proverbs, songs, stories, chants and recitations (Irele, 2001). This article examines the challenges faced by riddles and proverbs in public domain speech form.

Doke (1947) says that the riddle describes something in a vague or obscure metaphor and requires the use of mental intellectual skills in seeking responses to it. It is an indoor game that entertained young folk in the villages after a long day of agrarian and social actions. The process was a form of a simulated mathematical session coined in a genre of traditional literature. According to Guma (1967:39), “Proverbs originate from a thorough and accurate observation of man and animals including the physical world around them”. The proverb represents some truth expressed in a concise and terse manner for a given culture (Krappe, 1930:143). Mieder (1993:24) states that a proverb is generally known as “a sentence of the folk”. It carries truth, wisdom, moral values, and traditional concepts in a metaphorical way. Proverbs can be understood as mini allegories with an abstract truism based on lived experience. While they are an indirect covert or allusive phraseology, they also pass an indirect warning and summarise on what has happened to a member of society in life situations.

Vambe (2004) describes the evening of the traditional community as marked by a setting where men and young boys would sit around a fire sharing the experiences of the day. Proverbs and riddling games would then mark the introductory part of this form of traditional education. Marivate (1973) and Mapara (2009) contend that riddles and proverbs entertained and challenged young boys ready for initiation into adulthood by provoking their minds to think fast and give an answer. This process was used by the elders as a yardstick to measure young men’s mental dexterity and social intelligence. Young men and women were taught by uncles and aunts. For women, this type of education was called education from the hearthstone (*yepapfihwa*) (Mapara 2009).

Meanwhile, old women (grandmothers) would also engage in a similar activity in the round hut which is the kitchen. This iconic structure in the Karanga group life is used as a kitchen for the preparation of food, a storeroom for grain, a bedroom for the old women and young children, and a mortuary when there is a death in the family. During the evening before retiring to bed, it was used as a classroom. Storytelling was preceded by proverbs and a riddling session. Kahari (1990) views story telling as a skilful act that required experience and expertise in capturing the interests of the children and in cases where children were falling asleep or losing concentration, they would rope in riddles and quizzes to make them think and engage their minds. The girls ready for initiation would also receive instructions through proverbs.

This rich tapestry and form of traditional education is under threat in the Zhombe community of Kwekwe due to changes in social settings, technological development and innovation which has changed the social order of the past. The language code used when people are chatting on social media such as WhatsApp, twitter among others rarely requires the use of proverbs especially where communication is across different tribes, ethnic groups, races and nations. The post-colonial mentality and cultural capital perpetuated by westernisation appears to be championing a decline in the use of proverbs and playing of riddle games.

Conceptual Framework

This research is grounded and informed by folklore theory. If *folk* is defined by Quan-Bafour (2011) as people or humanity in general, therefore folklore will include traditional values, beliefs, art and orature. There are many origin narratives associated with developing grand theories for folklore study because of the diversity and nationalistic imperatives of Africa. Quan-Baffour (2011) argues that folklore theory might be both evolutionary and devolutionary. Changes taking place in society commands folklore to adapt to new situations and the environment by natural order. This article attempts to pursue the evolutionary perspective of change driven by environment and social settings. Devolutionary theory presupposes that folklore descends from higher to lower strata of society, a sociological pattern routed in structuralism. Dundes (1969) posits that if forms of folklore of the past have value, therefore consequently it means any change to it is potentially harmful. Proverbs that were handed down by oral means may face the risk of relegation due to society's shift of focus. Folklore, especially in the case of proverbs, would survive if it was coined in a cultural rendition. They have to be fit and resist neglect or being looked down upon. If civilisation is seen as responsible for Africa's misery (Freud, 1958), then going back to primitive means of survival is not a point of discussion for now because people have adapted to technology such as cell phones, computers and the benefits of globalisation.

Critical questions

1. What are the factors leading to the decline in the use of proverbs and riddles in Zhombe-Kwekwe?
2. Are riddles and proverbs going to disappear completely from the public speech domain?
3. How can the role of riddles and proverbs be re-defined to meet current society's needs?

Proverbs and Riddles in African Traditional Education

Peresuh and Nhunduh (1999) say that through stories, riddles and proverbs, the child was taught names of birds, animals, as well as helpful verbs and phrases. Fortune and Mutasa (1991) posit that children learnt language skills such as linking idiomatic phrases that make proverbs, truncation, parallelism and other moral lessons. For example, a proverb:

Kure kwegava ndokusina mutsubvu

(Vasco da Gama reached India because of spices)

Gava (jackal)

Tsubvu (Wild fruit tree)

Children would learn names of animals in relation to vegetation and their relationship in the jungle. Eventually, they would understand that there is order and interdependence in the forest. The child learnt to distinguish good from evil and was exposed to a vast knowledge of medical verbs and poetry.

Ramba kuudzwa akaonekwa nembonje pahuma.

(Those who do not listen are seen with a mark of disobedience)

The message is that those who do not listen to the advice of the adults or ‘the old’ would be seen with a mark of disobedience/transgression or some catastrophic incidents would befall them. Information imparted required the child to develop participation and observation skills, and also trained to memorization techniques. Intellectual development took place rapidly and contextually in this academic rigour and discourse of the time. Riddles, praise poetry and proverbs encouraged quick thinking, while language was developed through folktales (Quan-Baffour, 2011).

What emerged in the traditional context is a sense of the values under which all other things occurred, the main principle being functionalism. The child developed automatically the behavioural and physical skills, values, attitudes, and customs of his tribe (Ayisi in Peresuh and Nhunduh, 1999). At the stage of puberty, both boys and girls inculcated in themselves a model of the ideal man or woman. The ideal man preserved and strengthened cultural, social and moral features of the society and the ideal woman was a wife and mother who, through bearing of children, assisted by educating and preserving the customs and traditions of the group. Proverbs and riddles were a quota of the curriculum that helped in handing down the cultural tendencies and beliefs incorporated by the reality definers of the day.

The proverbs being a people's heritage, reveal the views and thinking of the past. They embody its most basic traditional values which are fruits of the experience of generations in their struggle for existence (Gombe, 1995:45).

Knowledge, wisdom and justice embraced in proverbs should not be contested because it is distilled and backed by authority from the elders. The reason rooted in its origin is that proverbs are based on frequently observed common truths of a community.

Fortune and Mutasa (1991) contend that proverbs cover the flora and fauna, small and big animals through natural phenomena to man himself. This can be seen from the diversity of the subjects from the various collections of proverbs. Kahari (1990) posits that an examination of sources reveal that proverbs are classified into those connected with dangerous animals, domestic animals, birds, fish, government and wealth, poverty, servility, travel, hospitality, family and village life. In the context of traditional education, proverbs would cover most aspects of the traditional society's education. While the school has taken over the role of the form of traditional education, it is a matter of serious concern that the erosion of the verbal use of proverbs in business enterprises, social scenes, weddings, church gatherings, social clubs and even the courts do not accommodate proverbs. Vambe (2004) says that the social and cultural change necessitated the loss of commercial value of proverbs.

Proverbs would be appreciated as legislative framework instilled in the young generation as a measure of control in society's ways of living thereby controlling levels of divorce, theft, prostitution, treacherous behaviour and drug abuse among other social ills. Nowadays, moral decadence, social disruption and disorientation, youth delinquency and social discord is the order of the day while the adults of yesteryear complain with nostalgia. Proverbs and riddles are not used simply to store knowledge but to engage others in verbal and intellectual combat.

Research Methodology

This research used a qualitative research approach. The researcher designed questions on the attitude of the current generation with regards to use of proverbs and riddles. A qualitative research method was used because it helped to develop an etic view of participants of the research. Methods used included interviews and discussions on the factors leading to the decline in the use of proverbs and riddles. Willig and Rogers (2008) contend that interviews are the chief instrument for qualitative research. Observation would complement the concurrence of speech

patterns and use of proverbs. Member checking was done to discover if interview data on use of proverbs and play of riddling games was consistent with respondents' daily language use.

The researcher targeted families in Zhombe East in the Kwekwe District. The selected areas are beneficiaries of the Zimbabwe Rural Electrification Programme and therefore are exposed to electronic media. Zhombe has a good reception of the three cellular networks in Zimbabwe. Villages covered include Mahlaba, Ngulube and Tagwireyi. A total of twenty five (25) families were selected for the research. The respondents were between 15 and 65 years for both men and women. Interview guides were set with questions regarding the use of proverbs and riddles in ordinary discussions and even at the chief's court. Respondents included the chief, headman, women groups and secondary school graduates in middle age and young families. Church congregants/parishes were interviewed. The researcher spent several sessions of evening time with respondents in the villages and observed their regular speech patterns.

Findings

Researcher asked the respondents to give the factors leading to the decline in the use of proverbs. The tables show the categories of respondents and their responses. Below are the tabulated responses from the respondents:

Table 1.1 Responses from Mahlaba village

Broad view	Respondents category	Participants' response
Factors leading to the decline in use of riddles and proverbs.	Twelve families (12) interviewed and observed	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time for riddling is replaced with Television entertainment and computer games 2. Children have to do homework and little time is left for story telling that would accommodate riddling sessions. 3. Young parents do not have much information on proverbs and riddles and therefore are not good mentors for the exercise 4. Most parents in this village drink beer at the bottle store nearby and usually have little time with their children to talk about riddles and proverbs
	Church groups	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Most of the time is spent on night prayers, choir competitions watching movies and therefore no time for riddles 2. Proverbs and riddles are part of an old and deserted culture
	Head and councillors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Community gatherings are dominated by Christian values and traditional aspects such as proverbs are given little attention 2. People are concerned about the message and not the whether one uses proverbs or not 3. Most of the villagers who are active in the current affairs are young and have limited knowledge on

		<p>proverbs and riddles</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">4. Community members spend most of their time on tweet, WhatsApp, and on Facebook.5. College students visit libraries and study groups therefore no time for riddles.6. Children enjoy watching television and not discussing proverbs and riddles7. New computer games attract the attention of children more than riddles
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Table 1.2: Responses from Ngulube village

Broad view	Respondents category	Participants' responses
Major causes of the decline in use of proverbs and riddles	Eight families (8) interviewed and observed	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ordinary discussions do not need the use of proverbs 2. Proverbs and riddles use complicated language and residents are not interested in quizzing themselves for no benefit 3. Riddles and proverbs are for school children who are still in school 4. Women selling at the market do not need proverbs to complete a transaction 5. Riddles and proverbs have limited commercial value
	Head and Councillors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Traditional courts no longer rely on proverbs because the young generation do not understand them well 2. Some of the cases resolved in the village require police input and statements have to be written in English as an official language for court proceedings 3. Young people think that the use of proverbs does not give them a social status in the community

Table 1.3 Responses from Tagwireyi village

Broad view	Respondents category	Participants' responses
Reasons why proverbs and riddles are not frequently used in the village	Five families (5) interviewed and observed	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Our village is multi-ethnic and using proverbs and riddles is not ideal because of linguistic differences 2. People's attitude towards proverbs and riddles is generally negative 3. Villagers are interested in business matters for their life and riddles and proverbs do not help them much for business purposes 4. Grouping people together for riddles has been discouraged by individualism, beliefs and values
	Elders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Proverbs are used when doing traditional functions such as <i>kurova guva</i> 2. Proverbs are used when consulting a <i>Sangoma/Nánga</i> or a witch doctor

Discussion

An analysis of the findings shows that most respondents in the community are not motivated to use riddles and proverbs when speaking to their family members or community members. The three villages confirm that the social setting has changed because their families watch television during the evening time. This was the time in the traditional society setting that was used for storytelling, riddling and use of proverbs (Nyota & Mapara, 2008). While school has taken over the role of traditional education, it is a matter of serious concern that public places, business

enterprises, social scenes, weddings, church gatherings, social clubs and even the courts do not accommodate the verbal use of proverbs.

The observed community members reveal that they have their language code which suits their needs and expectations. The availability of technological devices and network in the community distances people from having time for traditional issues because they are concerned with latest global news. The ambiguity of proverbial phrases and conceptual relations characterised by this genre discourages the young generation from partaking in the verbal rendition . Messages on WhatsApp and Twitter do not need proverbs and riddles in the view of the young generation. However, new forms of proverbs developed from social network communication are not accepted. This reduces the value of the new proverbs to mere phrases and statements which are not value laden.

Conclusion

Riddles and proverbs will remain in the school curriculum as part of traditional education but society has lost the motivation to use proverbs and riddles in the speech form. While the death of the form of folklore is a premature debate, the use and relevance in current patterns of communication in communities such as Zhombe remains limited. The prevalence of electronic media, cell phone network availability and globalisation shifts people's attention and attitude away from tradition and folklore. Church gatherings, modernisation and improved communication networks removes the attention of society from traditional games such as riddling. The article recommends the use of proverbs as mission statements for black economic empowerment directly incorporating folklore into the business domain.

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