

The Relationship between Tshivenda Linguistic Vocabulary and Musical Trajectories as Encapsulated in *mirero*, *maambele* and *dzithai*

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Abstract

African societies have always had well-established oral traditions. Vhavenḁa have a great wealth of folklore, such as *mirero* (proverbs), *maambele* (idioms) and *dzithai* (riddles) which help portray myriad aspects of their cultural heritage. As part of indigenous knowledge system, folkloric elements such as *mirero*, *maambele* and *dzithai* are used as vehicles for advising, correcting, reprimanding or rebuking. They are also used in providing direction, support and guidance. Through these folkloric elements, Vhavenḁa have always had their way of expressing how they perceive the significance of their different musical practices and styles. In their general day-to-day language, they have their own musical terminology to explain a particular perception. There is always a close connection between indigenous music and the day-to-day lives of people in traditional African societies.

Introduction

This article explores the relationship between Tshivenda linguistic vocabulary and musical trajectories as encapsulated in *mirero* (proverbs), *maambele* (idioms) and *dzithai* (riddles). The primary objective is to highlight the significance of these folkloric concepts in portraying indigenous African philosophies in the way Africans saw the world. It also elucidates how African people used various styles and elements of their musical practices as one of the vehicles through which this objective was applicable or achieved in the daily lives of African people (in this case Vhavenḁa).

A number of scholars have written on the proverbs, idioms and riddles, contextualising particularly on their characteristics and functions. According to Mbiti (1997), the language of proverbs and idioms is a whole way of seeing the world and a way of speaking with other people.

Meanwhile, Mangoale (2004:113) in Mafokane and Sepota (2006:23) postulates that “proverbs are the most important expressions of human wisdom and knowledge of nature, psychology and reality for the people of Africa”. Proverbs reveal people’s values and norms and assist to instill morals and cultural beliefs and practices in the societies in which they are used (Mafokane & Sepota, 2006:24). According to Okharedia (2006:43), proverbs and idioms are a body of short statements built up over years, and reflect the thoughts and insights of Africans into life. It is a rare technique of verbal expression. Nketia (1958:21) in Okharedia (2006:43) describes proverbs and idioms as an expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology. Magwaza (2004:32) posits that proverbs and idioms “are oral expressions of culture, life, attitudes, ideals and hopes of its people”. Talking about riddles, Mafela (2012: 90–92) asserts that they represent “an important asset for children’s fuller participation in the social and cultural life of African communities”, particularly as they assist them to exercise their intellectual skills, develop their critical thinking abilities, stimulate their minds and fortify their memory prowess.

This application of our indigenous philosophies which has been in practice since time immemorial was unfortunately eroded by the advent of colonialism in our African societies, and resulted in foreign forms of thought and social organisations. The latter replaced African value systems that Africans themselves had idealised and conceptualised which yielded remarkable strides towards good moral practices amongst the youth, *Ubuntu* and social cohesion.

This article is aimed at exploring and elucidating this phenomenal relationship between indigenous Venda music and proverbs, idioms and riddles. There is a deliberate effort in this article to scrutinise the proverbs, idioms and riddles that have musical trajectories. The primary aim is to portray how this was mirrored in indigenous African musical practices through the years. As mentioned earlier, indeed proverbs, idioms and riddles have been researched by many scholars such as Mphasha (2010), Quan-Baffour (2011), Possa (2010 and 2012), Madadzhe and Cloete (2012 and Masubelele (2012). However, very few writers, if any, have looked at the relationship between these folkloric aspects and musical trajectories. As Madadzhe and Cloete (2012:94) put it, “most of these studies [only] highlight the morphological, syntactic and semantic features” thereof. This study aims to demonstrate the existence of the relationship between Tshivenda linguistic vocabulary and music and to posit that “African music is functional to almost all aspects of life” (Merriam, 1962:123). The study therefore extends the existing body of knowledge by demonstrating how music has equally played an indelible role in the life of

Africans from childbirth to adulthood by employing these trajectories. This has remained one of the gaps in previous scholarly writings about these folkloric elements that are interwoven in African cultural heritage.

Characteristics and Use of Proverbs and Idioms

As mentioned earlier, every society has a plethora of proverbs, idioms and riddles with varied characteristics and used in various ways. These include those that promote hospitality, solidarity, collective action, interdependence, and reciprocity. There are also those that are employed to admonish wrongdoers or censure inappropriate behaviour; as a moralising story; to advise or shame someone into compliance; show wit, ridicule, mockery, irony or satire; indicate warning; invoke encouragement and motivation for when things are not going well; and those of ambiguous or hidden, oblique language as a form of speech. Proverbs and idioms give proper guidance to the young and old on various issues in life. These folkloric elements also appear in songs and poetry. This article focuses on the images taken from musical instruments (or parts thereof) and performance practices.

***Mirero* (Proverbs)**

A proverb is a short familiar sentence expressing a supposed truth. Proverbs are figurative in one way or another. The following are relevant to this study.

1. Proverbs that promote collectivism, interdependence and solidarity

Example: *A dzimana u ɔa Malombe, mukosi wa lila a a phalalana*

Translation: professional dancers begrudge one another the victuals, but in trouble they rally to aid one another

Example: *Nanga nthihi a i lidzi tshikona*

Translation: one reed flute does not perform tshikona¹

¹ *Tshikona* is an indigenous Venda royal music and dance practice considered as one of the most unique African national cultural practices. Traditionally performed by males only, it comprises *nanga* (pipe) instrument playing, drumming and dancing. It used to be a national dance associated with ancestors and performed at traditional events and very important ceremonies and rituals such as the celebration of victory after war, the installation of a new ruler, the commemoration of a ruler's death (*dzumo*) and the sacrificial rites at the graves of a ruler's ancestors.

Example: *Mulenzhe muthihi a u tshini tshimbo*

Translation: One leg cannot dance

Meaning and commentary:

These proverbs serve to remind people, members of a family or clan who ought to live together as a social unit particularly in trying times, of solutions to problems or tackling momentous tasks together. This is particularly true of African societies; even if certain people are not particularly fond of one another, they usually tend come to each other's rescue in time of distress. Africans have generally been a caring society that discourages selfishness and individualism. In modern day Africa, we witness this in trade union solidarity. Team work usually yields desirable solutions or a better performance. It is important for all members of a community to work as a collective. Peaceful coexistence was fostered. African societies have always been communal, hence people believed in working together as a collective entity; they would always prefer taking collective decisions on important matters that affect their lives. African traditional wisdom advocated for collective socialisation or collective consciousness of society and family stability (Masubelele, 2012: 73–74). According to Biko (1998:27), quoted in Masubelele (2012), African people have always been a “community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life”. A proverb can get to the root of a complex problem and offer solutions.

2. Proverbs that are used to rebuke or shame someone into compliance

Example: *Wa da dza lila; wa dzula dza lila; a dzi lili nga u vhona iwe*

Translation: You participate and the flutes resound; you abstain and they still resound; they do not resound because of you.

Meaning and commentary:

No man is indispensable; whether you are present or not, things will still go on. This proverb has been used to correct a person's behaviour towards others, particularly a conceited and pompous person who is full of self-importance. African people despised an egotistical person or a person of high self-esteem. In such scenarios, people would ensure that they would accomplish a task or solve an issue at hand to shame the individual who regards him/herself indispensable

3. Proverbs that are employed to advise or warn the young and old about gossip

Example: *Mulomo wa muthu u fhira ngoma u lila*

Translation: the mouth of a human being surpasses a drum in loudness

Meaning and commentary:

Elders in African societies have always been weary of information that is spread by word of mouth. News from the mouth of a human being, whether true or simply false rumours or gossip usually travels at a higher velocity and can cause more trouble than through any other medium. Every society or community has individuals with various characteristics; one of these is individuals with a knack for spreading false information or lying, which could have far-reaching and dire consequences. The advice or warning that this proverb offers is that the recipient of news should be careful not to accept any information as it is. The recipient is advised to investigate or interrogate the authenticity or truth of the information before formulating an opinion, passing judgement, or deciding on any path of action.

4. Proverbs that are used for warning or censure inappropriate behaviour

Example: *Tshi do fhalala tshi songo tangwa*

Translation: *Tshikona* will disperse before reaching its climax

Meaning and commentary:

Literarily translated, this proverb says “it (*tshikona*) will not finish its course”. Indigenous Venda music was closely integrated with Venda cultural norms and values (Vhuvenda). Music was one of the components that shaped the foundation of a Muvenda child. Through music, the child learns how to behave in various situations. Particular musical practices reinforce rules of proper behaviour (Mugovhani, 2007). These practices were vital mechanisms of their credence and social identity. African music is functional to almost all aspects of life (Merriam, 1962:123). Such musical practices included *tshikona*.

This proverb is a figurative way to say the business will come to naught. Traditionally, *tshikona* performance reaches the finale and conclusion only after the old folks have stepped in to extemporise joyfully with dance (*u tanga*). So, if the old ones do not step and dance joyfully

during the performance, it is a signal that they are not happy, satisfied or impressed with the performance, and therefore it will flop. The use of this proverb serves as a warning to someone doing something not condoned by the community that the act will yield dire consequences. The youth or adults are reminded of the moral standards that are to be followed in the family, clan or community.

5. Proverbs that are invoked to encourage and motivate

Example: *A si na nanga u lidza gunwe*

Translation: Even if one does not have a pipe or flute, one blows on one's thumb

Meaning and commentary:

As the saying goes: “one makes the best of a bad job or makes do with whatever there is”. *Tshikona* is a communal musical practice. It is a cooperative and collective practice. The same goes for a number of jobs in a given community. People used to come together and assist each other in the completion of a given task. It is expected that everyone would use whatever means to be part of the workforce. In *tshikona*, the participants use various instruments: *nanga* (blowing reedflute or panpipes, drum-beating, clapping hands, dancing, etc). No one is expected to be idle. Even spectators are expected to join in by way of imitating the dances or the blowing and even ululating. Even *Vhamusanda* or *khosi* (a ruler) is expected to take part in one way or another in the performance. Similarly, this is expected in any job situation. The proverb is usually employed to motivate or encourage a person to make a plan to contribute in whatever way possible.

6. Proverbs that are figurative or of ambiguous or oblique language

Example: *Mulomoni wa phalaphala u pfiwa nga mulidzi*

Translation: the mouthpiece of a trumpet is felt by the player

Meaning and commentary:

The truth of a matter is best learned from the person concerned, “from the horse's mouth” as they say. Vhavanḁa have other proverbs that have the same meanings, such as “*tshilonda tshi vhavha mukweti*” (the sore is best felt by the owner) or “*ndi a vhavhiwa li na mulwadze*” (the sick is the one who best feels the extent of the sickness). The song “who feels it knows it”, by the international reggae singer Bob Marley, also falls into this category. This proverb can lend itself

to a number of interpretations. It could be invoked to tell someone to shut up because s/he does not know the extent or magnanimity of the problem or pain the other person is facing or feeling. It could be used by a doctor to persuade the patient to describe exactly what s/he feels because s/he is the owner of the pain or sickness. According to Vilakazi in Mafela (2012:91), “an elder is judged to be a clever man by his command of proverbs in oratory”.

Maambele (Idioms)

An idiom is an expression characteristic of a particular language not logically or grammatically explicable. The following are the idioms that are relevant to this study.

1. An idiom to describe an incredible performance

Example: *O fhufha vhavhili vha sera*

Translation: Two people crawled underneath his jump

Meaning and commentary:

A figurative description of a *malende* dancer’s performance. *Malende* is a Venda traditional musical practice which comprises call-and-response singing, drumming, dancing and hand clapping. The soloist is usually the leading singer (caller) and dancer, while the majority of the musicians offer a response by singing and clapping, with a few on the drums (Mugovhani, 2007:184). It involves dance-jumping and stomping rhythmically. The description of a dancer’s jump being so high that two people could crawl underneath is rather an exaggeration similar to “breaking a leg” (performing very well) in professional singing or playing an instrument. The dancer jumped to the highest (A great *malende* dancer).

2. An idiom to describe an act of immorality or scandal

Example: *O pwasha dzimbila*

Translation: S/he broke (dismantled) the mbila

Meaning and commentary:

Someone has been embroiled in a scandal or accidentally committed a serious crime. Mbila musical instruments, particularly *mbilamutondo* (the indigenous xylophones) are not easy to construct. Moreover, the instrument has been held in high esteem and treated with reverence through the years. Mbila music has featured prominently in various indigenous cultural practices, ceremonial occasions and rituals involving royalty, such as *dzumo* (commemoration of a ruler’s

death), *u vhea vuhosi* (the installation ceremony of a new ruler), and *thevhula* (the sacrificial rites at the grave of a ruler's ancestors), and the prayer for rain (Mugovhani, 2008: 18). This cultural practice is not only confined to royalty, but it is also for members of a particular clan or families in any African society also indulge therein. Vhavaṅḁa have held the belief that some problems or illnesses could be overcome or healed by evoking the spirits of their ancestors and the belief was that these ancestral spirits could be evoked fully through Mbila music performance (Mugovhani, 2009:50).

Breaking or dismantling such an instrument was therefore regarded as a serious offence. Indigenous African societies have always believed that it is the responsibility of parents and all other adult members within that community to ensure that all their youth are taught, guided and encouraged to observe the given rules and respect authority. If a Muvenda child commits a scandalous offence or a serious crime, the proverb “*o pwasha dzimbila*’ gives an apt depiction of how the community views the act.

3. An idiom to report unbecoming behaviour

Example: *O hwala ngoma nga tshiombo*

Translation: He is carrying the drum by the drumstick

Meaning and commentary:

This idiom is used to depict someone who is trying to perform an impossible act or applying an incorrect method to performing a task such as “putting the cart before the horse”. Mieder (1993:11) in Mafokane and Sepota (2006:22) asserts that “by employing proverbs in our speech we wish to strengthen our arguments, express certain generalisations, influence or manipulate other people, rationalise our shortcomings and question certain behavioural patterns”. The act of trying to carry a drum (a large traditional instrument) by using a drumstick (a very small item) is tantamount to attempting to do the impossible.

4. An idiom symbolising an act of mockery/sarcasm/irony

Example: *O lidza mufhululu nga ningo.*

Translation: She ululated through the nostrils

Meaning and Commentary:

The act of ululating is one of the common cultural practices amongst African societies. This act of applause is most commonly performed by Venda women. The most prevalent settings occur during traditional musical performances such as *malende* and *tshikona*, and on occasions of royal leadership is giving public address. Vhamusanda's (the royal leader or ruler) speech delivery is quite often interspersed or extemporised with ululation as an act or sign of approval or appreciation. Similarly, a great musical performance by either an individual or a group is also applauded through ululation. In corroborating this cultural practice from a Basotho ba Leboa perspective, Mapaya (2013:102) has this to say:

The meaningfulness of a performance resides in performer-audience rapport and understanding (Agawu, 2001; Nzewi & Nzewi, 2009). An approving *mphuludi* (*mufhululu*=ululation) and occasional break into *go reta* (praise poetry) of women during performances by Bahananwa groups is spontaneous and is understood to be a mark of excitement or a sign of approval during a performance. All these interjections are part of a *mmino wa setšo* (indigenous music) performance. This means, therefore, that African audiences provide yet another layer of rhythm to the music.

Undoubtedly, one of the most effective means of communication using proverbs and idioms, according to Magwaza (2004:32), is the enterprising and illuminating ways in which indigenous musical concepts reflect these oral expressions. Ululating "through the nostrils" is one of those verbal or oral expressions. The nostrils could elicit one of most musical ululations of approval or appreciation. Conversely, these nostrils could be manipulated to manifest sarcastic or mocking applause. In such a scenario this idiom could literally be saying; "she pretended to be congratulatory (happy for me)".

5. An idiom used to depict a joyous occasion

Example: Murumba u tambela zwanda.

Translation: The hands are washing the drum

Meaning and commentary:

This idiom is an apt verbal expression of describing a joyous musical performance. The drummers are playing the drums in perfect rapport with the singers, instrumentalists and dancers in a very moving performance. All the performers are in a happy or celebratory mood. The drummers here are offering a very beautiful and smooth accompaniment to the entire

performance. Sometimes the idiom is expressed as *murumba u tambela tshanda* (*tshanda* meaning one hand, instead of *zwanda* which stands for many hands). It is significant to mention that the types of drums of varying shapes and sizes (*murumba* and *thungwa*) are mostly used in performances of *malende* when people are very happy or celebrating, hence *zwanda* (more than one hand) would be more appropriate.

Dzithai (Riddles)

Riddles are used to embellish, conceal or hint (Okharedia, 2006:44). The hint or hidden meaning is expected to induce an interpretation, explanation or answer from the respondent who is usually a young person.

Example: *Thai ngindi!, ha tshini hu tshina vhadinda.*

Translation: He only thunders but does not dance; only servants dance

Meaning and commentary:

Riddles are used to build and develop the youth's capacity for memorisation. Riddling is a game for the youth to develop or test their memory skills. It comes in the form of a puzzling question, which is invariably an obscure description of something to which the hearer is asked to name and thereafter explain its meaning.

The literal translation of this riddle is: It thunders and then rain comes, and the meaning of this riddle is the falling rain. The dancing servants symbolise the rain. According to Mafela (2012: 90-92), "riddles represent an important asset for children's fuller participation in the social and cultural life of African communities", particularly as they assist them to exercise their intellectual skills, develop their critical thinking and stimulate their minds and fortify their memory prowess.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Vhavanḁa used to sustain their lives through indigenous knowledge systems, which mirrored their history, customs, norms, values, cultural practices and indigenous music traditions. As part of indigenous knowledge system, folkloric elements such as *mirero*, *maambele* and *dzithai* serve as a mirror to people's social, political and economic life. This article portrayed how these were mirrored in indigenous musical practices down the years. These folklores are still relevant in the

modern world. A more apt communication strategy is yet to be found which could be as enterprising and persuasive to the listener as the use of proverbs to describe a situation, an action or an episode. *Mirero*, *dzithai* and *maambele* are brief but remarkably more persuasive to the listener than most other figures of speech. Through these folkloric elements, Vhavenda have always had their way of expressing how they perceive different elements of music.

Mirero, *dzithai* and *maambele* have been utilised by various African societies to depict how they perceive the world around them, including the day-to-day behaviours of different people within their communities. Africans have, for instance, always held the belief that in a typical African community every adult is every child's parent and every child is every adult's child hence the saying "it takes a whole village to raise a child". Africans believe in communal life, that is doing things together. African leaders often take a consensus or collective decision on important matters that affect their lives or the lives of others; hence there are proverbs (*mirero*) and idioms (*maambele*) to portray such beliefs, norms and values. There is a saying that; "no single person's mind can arrive at a good decision".

There are also proverbs and idioms that postulate that the youth will always seek for or need support, mentorship and guidance from experienced elders. There will always be need for the inexperienced youth to learn, seek support and guidance from their elders. *Mirero*, *dzithai* and *maambele* have always provided the necessary vehicle for people of all ages.

This article posits that today's African societies are experiencing shifting identities; there is now scant regard for indigenous African philosophies and value systems, and some cultural, musical or folkloric practices are on the brink of extinction. This is corroborated by Magwaza (2004) who contends that proverbs and idioms are a vanishing cultural heritage. This is further corroborated by Mafenya (1994: 1) who asserts; "children and adults rarely hear or use idiomatic expressions." The erosion of the indigenous African value systems has resulted in the moral degeneration amongst the youth and loss of social cohesion that is prevalent today.

These folkloric elements could still be a useful tool for contemporary African families to inform and educate members on the norms, mores and ethics of the African social culture. This should not be allowed to be classified as a vanishing cultural heritage or to be viewed as one of indigenous cultural heritages on the brink of extinction. It is incumbent upon schools and tertiary institutions to continually encourage the use of such rich linguistic tools as proverbs, idioms,

riddles and others by learners, students and academics in their everyday written and/or verbal discourse. The integration of indigenous African folklore in all levels of education should be sustained for the preservation and promotion of one of the richest intangible heritage.

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