

# AFRICAN TRADITIONAL ART FORMS, DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND ECONOMIC GROWTH IN ZIMBABWE

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## ABSTRACT

The article seeks to explore the role of African oral traditional art forms and governance in Zimbabwe for economic development. African philosophies, embedded in oral literature were part and parcel of the people's life. Everybody participated in the activities that affected them in society. Thus African peoples used oral literature, which is dependent on the performer who formulates it on a specific occasion—this forms part of issues of governance. Some problems, which people, and Zimbabweans in particular are facing, emanate from colonialism, and have led them to believe that they had no culture or anything to shape their way of thinking. These problems have always been there, and people had a way of circumventing them through the philosophies that were embedded in their oral art forms. It is against this backdrop that the researcher seeks to explore the place of oral art forms; which include proverbs, riddles, folktales among others; and governance as vehicles to drive economic growth in Zimbabwe. The article is based on a conceptual method of study, where examples of oral art forms used have been taken from various speech communities in Africa. The researcher's arguments are guided by the Afrocentric approach and the discussion establishes that issues of democracy and governance were part and parcel of indigenous people's way of doing things, in a bid to achieve economic growth in their societies.

**Keywords:** African philosophies; African traditional; democratic governance; oral art forms; Zimbabwe



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## INTRODUCTION

Pre-colonial traditions and cultures have been unduly blamed for bequeathing undemocratic systems of governance without being carefully studied separately. One cannot make generalisations about pre-colonial African systems of governance, as they were not only diverse but also complex. Even post-colonial despotic rulers cannot justify their autocratic style of governance and their violation of the rights of people on the basis of pre-colonial African traditions, cultures and histories; because human rights and democracy were organically built into pre-colonial African systems of governance. Oral literature such as proverbs, folktales, and poetry suggests that societies had developed very elaborate mechanisms, which acted as checks and balances upholding a dialogical system of governance. The hierarchy of power facilitated communication between leaders and ordinary people. Even though the king or chief priest was at the apex of the power hierarchy, he was not an autocratic ruler with absolute powers, as he was under the supernatural Creator. However, this work will show how traditional oral art forms were used in governance, and how the same can be applied in the present-day dispensation in Zimbabwe to stimulate economic growth. In a bid to explore issues of governance, the article will explicate on democracy, as it is through democracy that good governance is achieved. This will be done by analysing mainly proverbs from various African societies, as they are a rich reservoirs of the philosophy of the African people.

## DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE

In trying to conceptualise the term “democracy”, the article will begin with its etymology, thus its linguistic origin. Democracy is derived from two Greek words “demos” meaning people (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/demos>) and “kratos” meaning “power” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kratos\\_\(mythology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kratos_(mythology))). Therefore, democracy means “power to the people.” It is the opposite of autocracy, which means “power to the self”, derived from two word “autos” meaning “self” and “kratos.” Attributing power to the people, hence “the people” decide on the form of leadership and laws, which will govern them and their land.

Democracy is often implemented as a form of government in which policy is decided by the preference of the real majority (as opposed to a partial or relative majority of the demos/citizens) in a decision-making process, usually elections or referenda, open to all. According to Elgstrom and Goran (2002), democracy is a system of government with the following attributes:

- (a) There are institutions and procedures through which citizens can express effective preferences about alternative policies at the national level and there are institutionalised constraints on the exercise of power by the executive (competition);

- (b) There exists inclusive suffrage and the right of participation in the selection of national leaders and policies (inclusiveness/participation).

From a Eurocentric perspective, democracy is a system of government that allows citizens to express their desires and take decisions regarding who they vote into power, through free, fair, and periodic multiparty elections. However, the practicality of democracy is subjective and contextual. As noted by Diamond (as quoted by Wiredu 2000, 182) democracy consists of four key elements of a political system of choosing and replacing government through (a) “free and fair” elections, (b) active participation of the people, (c) protection of human rights and the (d) rule of law (laws applying equally to everyone). The problem with confining democracy to these elements is that democracy looks at individuals as one person who has to solely enjoy “a right.” Instead, for one to understand democracy as exercised within the African traditional society, they have to appreciate one’s social responsibility of upholding peace with other people, as well as their environment.

For Wamala (2004, 437), democracy from an Afro-centred perspective involves the “rule by consensus”; hence it foregrounds the power of dialogue. In the same vein, Wiredu (2000) concurs that communalism, non-party system and reconciliation form the backbone of good and democratic governance. This also resonates with the deliberation by Wiredu (1997, 34) on how communication is the base of a democratic society, as he rightly puts it:

Without communication, community is impossible, and without thought, communication is impossible. But without some common norms of thought, common norms of talk, communication is impossible...therefore without common norms of thought a human community is impossible.

The above submission is evident in oral art forms in which deliberations on the importance of communication were made—for example, in Ndebele there are proverbs like *itshukelwa ebandla or koniwa ngomlomo*, *kulungiswe ngomlomo* (“a meaningful answer can only be attained when a society begins to talk”). The proverbs acknowledge that conflicts are inevitable, as reflected in the Sesotho and Ndebele proverbs, *Ho loana ba lula moho* (“those who live together are bound to fight”), *akula muzi ongathunqi ntuthu* (“there is no homestead without conflicts”), which bring out African philosophies, and in folktales where animals would fight but soon reach a consensus. Hence, the state is equated to a family, whose freedom of association, speech and expression can only go as far as attaining the communal needs of society at large. Ake (1991) argues that traditional African political systems were imbued with democratic values such as patrimony and communalism, as well as a strong emphasis on participation and standards of accountability. Though not absolute, democracy in African traditional societies was centred on the dialogical flow of power and information. As will be shown later in this article, information

was communal as individuals sought advice and believed in the power of dialogue for productivity.

Davis (2006) asserts that democracy is much more than an electoral code. It is a code of behaviour, an attitude and a state of mind. A democratic society is more than just a democratically-elected government and a system of national or state institutions. The article will define good governance and democracy from an Afrocentric perspective, where the philosophies of Africans as embodied in African literature reflect on what democratic is and what it is not in the African traditional societies for purposes of continuity, in a bid to achieve economic development. In the final analysis, Bradley (2005) acknowledges that democracy is a configuration of governance moulded by general values, biases, prejudices, and nuances of a given culture. What is deemed as components of democracy by one cultural group can be deemed something else by another. Democracy is hence, a practical process reflecting and reflected by good governance.

The World Bank (1993) defines governance as a method through which power is exercised in the management of the country's political, economic and social resources for development. According to Pierre (2000) "governance refers to sustaining coordination and coherence among a wide variety of actors with different purposes and objectives." Governance relates to the frameworks that allow a democratic rule to prevail. Hirst (2000) offers a more general definition of the term. He asserts that "governance can be generally defined as the means by which an activity or ensemble of activities is controlled or directed, such that it delivers an acceptable range of outcomes according to some established standard." According to Munshi (2004, 191) good governance:

signifies a participative manner of governing that functions in a responsible, accountable and transparent manner based on the principles of efficiency, legitimacy and consensus for the purpose of promoting the rights of individual citizens and the public interest, thus indicating the exercise of political will for ensuring the material welfare of society and sustainable development with social justice.

## UNDERSTANDING ECONOMIC GROWTH

Economic development centres on people's way of living; where issues of food security, employment, and income levels come into play. In this regard, Machlup (1967) defines economic development as changes in the use of resources that result in the potential continued growth of national income per head in a society with increasing or stable population. It refers to an increase in the capacity of an economy to produce goods and services compared from one period of time to another. Economic growth can also be referred to as an increase in the amount of goods and services produced per head of the population over a period of time. Economic growth is measured by the Gross National Product (GNP), which is

an estimate of the total value of all the final products and services produced in a given period by means of production owned by a country's residents, and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which is the total value of everything produced by all people and companies in a country. In other words, it is a way of measuring the country's economic output. Economic growth in a country must manifest itself or rather is supposed to manifest itself in the upliftment of the human condition. It should be as Haque, Mheta, Rahman, and Wigneraja (1977, 15) argue, that it is an "enhancement of personality, an ability to face the world with purpose, poise and pride." It has often been pointed out that development is a loaded construct that connotes economic indices in the first instance, followed by conformity with modernisation and its scientific knowledge and technological progress (Harlech-Jones 2001). In the traditional past the economic growth of a country was measured by how productive people are in farming and trade. In the same vein the indigenous people's oral art forms would give them wisdom to necessitate such improvements, through the use of Shona proverbs such as

*Mombe yekuronzera igama wakaringa nzira (Shona)*

("A borrowed cow has to be milked consciously")

*Chimwango cheumwe hachina ndima (Shona)*

("You have no guarantee when using one's plough")

These two proverb mean that if one borrows an ox for ploughing, for instance, they have to use it effectively in a short period, for they would not know when the owner would come back for it. It is through such teachings as encapsulated in proverbs, that good governance, and thus democracy would be achieved. The same idea can be applied to the present-day Zimbabwean dispensation, where the country has resorted to using foreign currency in a bid to resuscitate the economy. The currency is owned by the United States of America and its shortage now can be attributed to the fact that it is not a local currency, and that the time of its validity in Zimbabwe has now expired, as articulated by the two proverbs above—a country cannot solely depend on goods from another country, because should the latter stop supplying them the recipient country will not have control over them; and this will thus affect the former's economic growth. However, the above example places the use of oral art forms at the centre, as they instill the spirit of agency for economic growth.

## GOOD GOVERNANCE FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH AS REFLECTED IN ORAL ART FORMS

The African traditional political structures necessitated a dialogical flow of power. According to Becker (1967), most African systems of governance crystallised around the person of the king. In the same manner, Wamala (2004) confirms that prior

to the development of a monarchical social-political structure, African societies constituted independent patrilineal totemic clans divided into descending series of segments. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2004) highlights how this reality has led some scholars to misinterpret the scenario to mean that the king was dictatorial, and yet this was not the case in the African society. The king was powerful, but not to an extent of becoming an absolute monarch with all power concentrated in his hands. He would be guided by his colleagues and society would also contribute to their governance. Even oral literature reflected and necessitated the dialogical relationships that ensured the free flow of power vital for a productive society, as suggested by the Shona proverb:

*Zano moto rinogokwa (Shona)*

("Advice is like fire, you can take from others")

This proverb signifies the decentralisation of power, the backbone of good governance as well as democracy, where even the king or head chief was able to accommodate the views of other people in the community.

Oral literature is proof that the dedication to consensus seems to have been rooted in the firm epistemological belief that knowledge is ultimately dialogical or social, and in the ethical belief in the collective responsibility of all for the welfare of the community (Wamala 2004). According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008), western theorists like Jürgen Habermas, who today talk of the social or dialogical nature of knowledge are only restating an old truth long since it was discovered and lived in traditional African societies. African oral literature is full of proverbs showing the dialogical nature of knowledge and the value of consultation. The following are derived from a few speech communities:

*Magezi muliro, bwegukuggwako, ogunona wa munno (Ganda)*

("Knowledge is like firewood in the hearth, if you have none you fetch it from your neighbour")

*Indlela/Inyathi ibuzwa kwabaphambili (Ndebele)*

("If one does not know the way they have to ask")

*Itshukelwa ebandla (Ndebele)*

("Real solutions are found when people talk things through")

For the Ganda people, the analogy of firewood in a hearth contributing to the fire needed for warmth highlights the value of dialogue that is necessary for society to meaningfully live a lifestyle of triumph. Also in the Ndebele and Sotho society, individualism is not productive, instead the opposite is true. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2008) highlights that in theory, the Ndebele king was the head of state, head of government, religious chief, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and the supreme judge of all criminal cases. However, state policies were subjected to serious debate, and meetings were considered important in deciding the future of the state. A loose group

of the king's inner advisers, collectively termed *umphakathi*, played a crucial role in determining state policy. Ndlovu (1995) asserts that an Ndebele king tried to keep as much power in his hands as was possible, but the leaders at his level worked tirelessly as well to gain more and more power and increasing influence in state affairs. This assertion highlights that dialogue was at the centre of democracy in traditional societies. It also concurs with the prescriptive by Freire (1970) in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that post-colonial Africa can only overthrow the residues of colonialism by necessitating a dialogical relationship between the leadership and the people—hence this contributes to the real democracy and good governance necessary for the bottom-up or culture-centred development.

The idea of a chief or king having an open door policy in terms of gathering information and having dialogue with ordinary people resonates with the proverb, *Ushe madzoro hunoravanwa*, (“Kingship is turn-taking, and people take turns”). This means that if one would want to be accorded the same kind of respect when in power, then they also have to take cognisance of others, as they will need their support as well. The set up necessitated the free flow of information for economic growth. There were no hide-and-seek games to play, as people knew that they were doing things that would benefit them. It is in the same vein that this researcher is advocating a home-grown and indigenous way of leadership, where the use of these oral art forms benefit the people and the nation at large.

The philosophy of collective social responsibility expressed in existing literature equally echoes how African traditional societies contributed to good governance and democracy. Ake (1993) contends that the relation between the individual and the collective reflects the communal character of the African society. This compounded effort is the key to building a productive society, thus economic development. As highlighted by Marx and Engels in Fischer (1963), oral art forms are fashioning tools with a pre-existing purpose to the development of human consciousness, which is in line with the needs of the society. It is through poetry where rulership would be differentiated from leadership. An orator would condone or applaud the king's way... in a subtle and creative way. Mpofu (1973), in the poem *Izibongo zika Nkulumane* cements the value of a people-centred approach to governance that enhances social responsibility and democracy as the poet depicts the dishonest unstable and individualistic character of Nkulumane. He says:

Isigodlo sasisithi wen'uyinhlanzi  
 Kanti wena uyinyeluka  
 Aphiko akho angeke ange umuntu  
 Mafitshane bo, uzulu mnengi

(“The state thought you were the fish. Instead you were the slippery one, your wings are too short, and they cannot embrace the people”)

The above poem emphasises the need for a leadership that reaches out to the people, not an individualistic kind of leadership. Also, the value of communalism is evidenced in these proverbs:

*Rume rimwe harikombi churu (Shona)*

("One man cannot surround a mountain")

*Chara chimwe hachitswanyi inda (Shona)*

("One finger cannot kill a mouse")

*Isongo linye alihencezi, akhenceza emabili (Ndebele)*

("One musical instrument does not make a melody, two or more do")

The point driven by the proverbs above is the centrality of political participation and social capital. Owing to the complexity of society, everybody is supposed to contribute and work alongside others. Putnam (1996, 1) confirms how social capital, which can be defined as "features of social networks, norms and trust...that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" is all-inclusive. In the same manner, Wamala (2004) asserts that at the heart of social capital is the nature of traditional kinship relationships, where everybody in the tribe is a relative. Therefore, the value of collectivism over that of individualism exercised by both the leadership and the citizens contributes to a democratic society and a more productive one economically.

Looking closely at the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (Zim Asset) programme, the application of the oral indigenous art forms plays a very significant role as it enables people to come together and realise their potential in building a better economy. A good example to support this assertion is a folktale about the Hare and other animals. The Hare proved to be lazy and when other animals came together to dig a well, he did not take part. When the water had sprung out he wanted to benefit from the same source, and yet he refused to work together with others. At the end of the day the Hare and his family were not allowed to drink from the well, thus highlighting the importance of communalism as embedded in oral art forms. Even in leadership, for the purposes of good governance, working together is vital for a common course as it accelerates economic development. In this regard, the economic blueprint itself calls for people with different potentials to come together for the purposes of developing the economy. This means that good governance, as encapsulated in the use of some traditional art forms, results in a vibrant economy.

Democracy in traditional African societies resided in the non-party system. According to Wamala (2004), the multiparty system, as also the one-party system itself, and does not have a place for the consensual values of traditional African societies:



The party system destroys consensus by deemphasizing the role of the individual in political action. With the rise of the party system, the party replaces the “people.” Thus the candidates proposed by a party no longer appear as individual men and women of flesh and blood. What you have are party members resplendent with party cards. With the massive help of the party machine, party members will try to win the people’s votes by appealing to their basest instincts and sentiments. (2004, 350)

In a multiparty system the loyalty of members of the party is not really with the people whom they are supposed to represent, as dictated by the principles of political delegation. Rather, their loyalty is to the party that ensured their success in the elections. However, traditional societies were characterised by “monarchical democracy” (Wamala 2004)—as captured by the Sotho proverb *Bana ba mosali ba kobelana hloho ya tsie* (“people of the same descent, share the little that they have”). The idea of having representatives was that they should represent the interest of “the people”, not the party. The sole purpose of having structures was to promote democratic principles. Even though the system encouraged democracy, there were instances where people in leadership positions would compromise their leadership efforts as manifested in kinship relationships that exist among the people. These are some of the complications of administering a society where both the negative and positive principles are found. But, above everything else, the African society would strive to do things in the best interest of their people.

Moreover, the philosophy embedded in African traditional art forms entails that a good leader should respect the other leader when they are in their land. This helps facilitate dialogue where these leaders would share ideas on how to lead their land. This ideal is captured in the proverb:

*Mwana washe muranda kumwe (Shona)*

(“A king’s child is a slave in another land”)

*Gudo guru peta muswe vadiki vagokutya (Shona)*

(“Elderly and respected people should humble themselves so that they can be respected by the young ones”)

These proverbs show that a good leader does not go about bragging about their position. When they are among other nations as visitors they wait for the indigenous people of the land to lead and give directions while they listen and follow. On the other hand, African oral art forms, through the use of the above proverbs, encourage good governance by drawing on qualities of a leader who would be humble so that they earn respect from the young ones. This is quite important in achieving economic growth, as people will come together and work for a common goal.

However, traditional African societies have been accused of centralising power (as opposed to democracy and good governance), as it resides within a particular patrilineal totemic queue. This form of governance violates the democratic principle of “individual autonomy,” and highlights that no-one should be subjected to rules

that have been imposed by others and the importance of promoting the principles of “equality”, which requires that everyone have the same opportunity to influence the decisions that affect the people in society. This notion is captured in the Ndebele and Shona proverbs below respectively:

*Akula langa eliphuma elinye lingakatshoni* (**Ndebele**)

(“No sun can rise before the setting of another”)

*Mambo havatongwi* (**Shona**)

(“One cannot judge the king”)

The song *Pachigaro chamambo* (“At the king’s throne” by the late musician Andy Brown also reiterates the notion that power is held by a certain person or social class, who take decisions on behalf of the rest of the population. A good example is the recent development in Zimbabwe, where the succession issue of President Mugabe’s presidency was at centre stage in Zimbabwean politics. Anyone who seemed to be questioning the position of the president (Mugabe) was fired from the party and government, as it is regarded a taboo to do so. The formation of factions within the revolutionary party itself was evident of the taboo mentioned above; hence it boils down to negative democracy and governance. Therefore, respecting these traditional art forms is key amongst African people; even in the modern society.

## CONCLUSION

I illustrated in this article that traditional oral art forms serve as an important tool for facilitating economic growth, through home-grown ideas in Zimbabwe and other African societies as evidenced by languages from various proverbs analysed. It can be noted that every system has its own advantages and disadvantages. Despite the liberal nature of the oral art forms to facilitate good governance for economic growth, there are some circumstances where people would not cooperate for a common course. As the custodian of African cultures, the examples of African oral art forms above has shown how the socio-political structure of traditional societies commanded good governance that contributed to democracy. As noted above, the definition of democracy is subjective. The preceding argument postulates that oral literature as heritage is used by African people to restore and maintain their identity even in situations where negative issues to do with governance would be raised. However, without eulogising the past as a haven of peace, the article further highlights how the allocation of leadership by clan and the political structure also acted as a barrier for attaining good governance and democracy.

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