

# “As Slow as a Tortoise, and as Clever as a Hare.” Folktales as Lessons on Democracy, Equal Opportunities, and Human Rights among the Ndebele

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## Abstract

Indigenous African societies have, for a long time, been using their knowledge for the betterment of their lives. They have also demonstrated an ability to manipulate their immediate or remote surroundings to live sustainably. Those who claim to fight for equal and human rights in Africa do so under the misconception that they, and the developing world, have historically and inherently violated, and continue to violate, human rights in numerous ways. While this might not be completely dismissed, there is a plethora of evidence from African folktales to demonstrate that Africans have not only respected human rights, but have also encouraged equal opportunities for every member of their society. This article cross-examines Ndebele folktales with the intention of demonstrating that African indigenous knowledge exhibited through folktales was a well-organised system, which ensured respect for human rights for all members, regardless of their physical or social stature. Central to this discussion are the folktales which focus on the role played by the vulnerable members of the animal community, who replicate their human counterparts. Folktales are unarguably a creation by the indigenes and emanate from their socio-political experiences, as well as their observations of the surroundings. This suggests that indigenous people already had an idea about human rights as well as the need for equal opportunities since time immemorial.

**Keywords:** equal opportunities; equal rights; folktales; human rights; vulnerable members.



## **Introduction**

This article cross-examines Ndebele folktales in relation to the topical subject of the violation of human rights, the upholding of equal opportunities, and democracy in African societies, particularly the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe. Much finger pointing and name-calling have been directed at Africans in general, and the Ndebele in particular, regarding the above-mentioned socio-political aspects of life. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009, 69) observes that “African pre-colonial traditions are generally blamed for bequeathing authoritarian forms of governance and disorder on the continent.”

It is distressing to note that some African leaders appear to have internalised these misconceptions and used them to justify “their non-accountable styles of governance and blatant violations of human rights” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009, 69). Africa has also been portrayed as a continent where women are exposed to all forms of oppression. A traditional African woman is depicted in most literature written by western-oriented writers as docile, submissive, and inferior to the African man. Diop (as quoted by Meena 1998, 123) disagrees with such views when he claims that “compared to western Europe where women were denied their rights due to bureaucratic patriarchal structures, wars, and violence, pre-colonial Africa was peaceful and guided by principles of justice and equality.”

This article argues that actions of dictatorship, violation of human rights, trampling of the rights of vulnerable members of the society, and the lack of inclusivity are not inherent attributes of Africans as a whole, but depend on individuals in power at the particular time. Ndebele folktales point greatly to the fact that African societies have always upheld human rights, democracy, and social inclusivity for as long as they have survived; as evidenced by the folktales, which are interrogated in this article. This article considers folktales as a rich reservoir of a people’s history and culture, as well as part of their indigenous knowledge systems, which reflect their aspirations, values, norms, and social constructs and as such, serve as an exhibition of the same, especially to the modern society, which is interspersed with many socio-political controversies.

## **Methodology**

This study is premised on content analysis since it focuses on a collection of folktales that were analysed to examine their place in demonstrating how African indigenous societies shaped their literature and indigenous knowledge systems; part of which folktales are, in order to ensure there is democracy in their societies. This research is based on folktales collected by Mnkandla (1974) in the book *AbaseGuswini leZothamlilo* that presents a community characterised by an orderly system of governance.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings**

African literature, by virtue of its historical experience with former colonial masters, must be handled with caution so that it can be understood in the context of the people who formulated it, because in Africa there is not “art for art’s sake” as observed by P’ Bitek (1986). For that reason, it is imperative for this article to adopt an empowering and relevant theoretical framework, which contextualises the complete argument raised in this article, and is grounded on the theory of Afrocentricity, which calls for the analysis of African phenomena from the standpoint and worldview of Africans (Gray 2001). Afrocentricity directs that African culture form the foundation of solving or addressing problems and challenges faced in Africa, such that even issues relating to democracy and human rights should not be dealt with outside the context of the same. As a humanising philosophy Afrocentricity seeks to fight all anti-African and anti-human elements of a thought and practice, whether engendered under the guise of religion, science, or art (Asante and Mazama 2005, 73). The proponents of Afrocentrism developed this theory as a way of fighting against continued colonial dominance, especially when analysing African literature simply because in this part of the world, literature serves its people.

## **The Ndebele People**

The Ndebele people who are the focal point in this article are part of the historic Nguni community who are now predominantly found in the west and southern region of the country of Zimbabwe, which is known as Matabeleland. Siziba and Wood (2015, 36–7) describe the Ndebele thus:

The Ndebele were originally a derivative of the Nguni people of KwaZulu-Natal. They split from King Shaka in the early 1820s under the leadership of Mzilikazi, a former general in Shaka’s army. During a turbulent period of African history known as the *Mfecane*, Mzilikazi and his followers moved west towards the area near the present day city of Pretoria where they founded a city called Mhlahlandlela.

In essence, the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe share much both physically and socially with the other Nguni tribes to the extent that even their folktales have correlation and harmony. In the present context, the Ndebeles are case-studied to examine how much of their indigenous knowledge, specifically through folktales, is an exhibit of them being conscious of the importance of human rights and democracy in their societies long before the arrival of the Europeans, who now claim a holier-than-thou position in that regard.

## **Folktales: An Overview**

Folktales are as old as man himself and have a history of being part of the lives of traditional societies since ancient times. Their use and value have been tried and tested,

yet they remain aligned to our day-to-day life experiences even in the modern world. Speaking about the historicity of folktales, Ndlukula (1990, 11) argues that *Izinganekwane ziyizindatshana ezadabuka lomuntu, zindala njengaye umuntu* (“folktales are stories which existed at the same time with man; they are as old as man himself.”) This confirms that folktales are by no means a recent development, but have been part of the lives of indigenous societies for centuries. They are a form of Africa’s indigenous knowledge system. According to Chiwome (2000, vi), research has made it clear that “Africa cannot progress or develop on the basis of borrowed intellectual, technological, and financial resources.” For some time African indigenous knowledge has been looked down upon as “primitive and unprogressive” (Mapara and Mazuru 2014). The same scholars also note the need to move such peripheral knowledge to the centre through research.

African folktales have traditionally been referred to as a school system in a traditional setup where there was no access to formal education. It could be argued that the current formal education system is just an improvement of the old system because the motive and goals are still the same. Folktales were the means to inculcate certain values and character traits in the minds of members of society, particularly children so much that as they grew up they would become responsible members of the society.

Apart from being a part of culture, folktales were also used in validating and safeguarding society’s cultural values. In other words, folktales were one of the methods that the traditional society used to make sure that its cultural practices were not only promoted, but also secured and preserved for future generations. Folktales encouraged communalism and cooperation, since they could be narrated at communal arenas. Children from different homes could gather at one homestead under a clear, starlit sky to hear their elders relate the folk talks of their ancestors. The idea of bringing children together in this manner was a way of promoting cooperation among them as they learned to appreciate the virtues of living together in harmony. Awoniyo (1982, 102) suggests that “the aim of storytelling is to educate the child in the qualities of honesty, truthfulness, hard work, humanity, etc.” Similar sentiments are reverberated by Ndlovu, Moyo, and Sibanda (2013, 195) when they assert that:

It cannot be refuted that the formation of folktales in society was, and is, meant for the creation and maintenance of harmony and moral integrity in society. In fact, there is a wealth of literature that shows the didactic and positive aspects of folktales, in the creation of a wholesome individual who strives for the collective good rather than individual, selfish, and narcissistic ends.

The role of oral art in promoting justice and fairness cannot be overemphasised. In traditional societies oral art forms such as folktales, poetry, proverbs, and songs were used to caution leaders who would have violated people’s rights. Mlama (1995, 24), in her study of oral art in Tanzania concurs with this view when she notes that oral art

“often exalts but also castigates rulers.” However, Mlama (1995, 24) is quick to observe that nowadays oral art is being manipulated by leaders for their own benefit and calls this the “disempowerment of oral art.” Critics who have studied the role of oral art in African societies agree that it is a weapon for liberation. This was probably the main reason why colonialists did not promote African oral tradition. The same view is expressed by Vambe (2004, 1), when he notes that one of the intentions of white settler ideology was to undermine African oral traditions and cultures, “as these were perceived as a site of potential rebellion against white settler values.” Chiwome (1996, 35) is of the idea that colonialists promoted written literature “in order to counter revolutionary oral art.” Actually, one can observe that the main objective of colonial missionary type of education was to produce a passive, submissive African, who did not question colonial oppression. This is in contrast with indigenous education, whose mandate was to produce a responsible individual who respected the rights of other people.

Folktales were, in as much as they still are, a way to advance child socialisation and development, a crucial part of their social and physical upbringing. Thus, this article interrogates Ndebele folktales with a view to demonstrate how they show the indigenous people’s respect for human rights, as well as equal opportunities for all members of their societies, including the vulnerable.

### **Hare: Voice of the Voiceless**

Democracy itself is a difficult concept to define, because it means different things in different contexts. African political governments have been deficient as far as democracy is concerned; and the general assumption or even conclusion, mainly by those in developed countries, has been to say that this state of affairs is inherent in the blood of the African. It is assumed that because there many African leaders who exhibit dictatorial tendencies, Africans have always been undemocratic from the beginning.

This may be far from the truth, especially when one considers the revelations from the folktales, because they provide evidence to the fact that democracy was always a virtue even in the traditional African society. Apart from encouraging democracy by word of mouth, the traditional African society put in place structures to monitor and check on leaders to ensure they do not oppress the general public. In most cases, undemocratic leaders in society frequently faced prosecution, and were dealt with fairly on behalf of the oppressed.

Undemocratic tendencies in themselves are a result of the abuse of authority, physical strength, or financial advantage over others. If one is not careful, they can fall prey to these characteristics and develop undemocratic tendencies, especially over the poor and vulnerable members of society such as women, orphaned children, widows, and the physically challenged. The traditional society ensured leaders who did not rule fairly were dealt with accordingly.

The folktale of the Lion and the human being's wife (*USilwane Lomfazi Wesothamlilo*) serves as an illustration that democracy was valued in the traditional African society. In this folktale, Lion comes across a woman gathering firewood alone in the forest. Since Lion has gone for several days without food, he tells the woman that he is thankful to his ancestors for providing him with a meal at a time when he was about to collapse due to hunger, but the woman starts to plead for her life to be spared.

The two engage in a lengthy argument until their noise attracts Hare, who is also walking about in the vicinity, running errands. When Hare arrives at the scene, he discovers that his grandfather Lion is the one he had an encounter with a few days before. Subsequently, Hare is still nursing a grudge, which emanates from a previous hunting expedition with Lion, where the latter had decided to take the rest of the meat for himself, leaving rather a small piece for Hare to take to his family. Hare decides to teach Lion a good lesson by making him pay for his previous crime.

When Hare has listened to both sides of the story, he jumps up in amazement and holds on to a big rock boulder that is nearby, in the pretext that the boulder is about to fall and if it is left to fall, it would destroy all of them. He then shouts to both the woman and Lion to help him support the boulder so that it does not kill them as it rolls over.

As they are still holding the boulder, Hare instructs the woman to go and look for a tree, known as *umhamba ungabuyi futhi* ("go and never come back"), which he says, is strong enough to support the boulder. Soon after the woman has left, Hare pretends that the woman is too foolish, she may not be able to find the requisite tree and as such, he would rather follow her and help her but meanwhile, Lion should remain supporting the boulder in case it falls. Hare later on meets the woman who out of foolishness, is already walking back to the scene to come and report that she has failed to find the type of tree which she has been told to look for. Out of shock and anger, Hare tells her to run back home as fast as possible for safety, while he goes the other way to continue running errands. Lion remains there, balancing the boulder, and only releases the boulder when hunger has taken the better part of his strength.

While this is a very comic folktale, which, when listened to, is likely to provoke more laughter than anything else, it goes without saying that the writers of this folktale were calculative and absolute in their bid to ensure that no one should take advantage of weaker members of society. The traditional society acknowledged a woman's physical weakness and would do everything possible to make sure that they were protected from any form of abuse. The woman in this tale is representative of the weaker members of the community, whose quality of life is dependent on those who are deemed powerful in society.

It is obvious that under normal circumstances, Hare and the woman cannot assist each other because they are sworn enemies by nature. What makes the folktale more exciting

and significant is the way two common enemies, who are both disadvantaged by their physical stature, decide to unite for the purposes of overcoming their more powerful enemy. This folktale, therefore, serves as a lesson to all members of society to ensure that they do their best to protect each other from those who would want to take advantage of them because of their physical stature. Lion, on the other hand, is frequently portrayed as the king of the jungle in most African folktales to the extent that even his actions of wanting to eat the woman still falls within the parameters of his operations as a leader of both animals and humans in the folklore world. At the same time, those powerful members of the society, in leadership or not, are being warned against abusing power because that is a vice in the society.

In Ndebele folktales, animals such as the elephant, lion, and hippopotamus represent leadership. These animals are portrayed in folktales as having the tendency to oppress and subjugate other animals in various ways. The lion is often presented as powerful and cruel, one who uses his power in an unreasonable way to devour other animals, and who has an insatiable appetite for meat. In another folktale, the lion craves for meat to an extent that he eats his wife and kids. Such a reign of terror is against the Ndebele people's political ideologies as reflected in folktales. The folktales, therefore, become the Ndebele people's unwritten constitution. Without such a constitution there would be lawlessness, chaos and, confusion. Folktales, therefore, represent the philosophy of the people. Mbiti (1966, 31) in his study of Akamba folktales, comments that "stories... are the mirror of life; they reflect what the people do, what they think, how they live and have lived, their values, their joys and sorrows."

In the Ndebele folktales on democracy and human rights, animals like the hyena and the leopard are punished by the hare. Although these animals are not presented as leaders, they are portrayed as greedy, selfish, and destructive, often humiliated and chastised in front of other animals. The lesson in the majority of these tales is that there is a need for one to respect other beings, and they teach the values of *ubuntu*, which include respect, altruism, tolerance, and co-existence.

### **Tortoise: Advocate of Equal Opportunities**

The folktale of the animals digging a well after experiencing a severe drought is loaded with meaning. It is said that the animals were affected by such a long season of drought that all known water points had run dry. This catastrophic situation resulted in Lion, king of the forest, convening a meeting, which was attended by all animals, who sat to deliberate until a solution was found. At the end of the meeting, all the animals unanimously agreed to dig a well, which would provide a solution to their problem.

As the time for digging arrived, the big and powerful animals dug with energy and determination, but got tired as the days went by, and since it became obvious they were not getting the desired results, and water was not to be found. It was at that time that

tortoise was heard asking if he could try. As expected, the larger animals not only chided him, but some suggested that he be sent away for thinking that he could do anything where even the most powerful elephant had failed. As time went on tortoise made his call louder and louder, until some of the animals grudgingly agreed to give him a chance, telling themselves that he was bound to fail anyway. The tale concludes with the tortoise being the one whose efforts resulted in the well-producing water so that the rest of the animals could drink.

In the tale above, it is important to note that while the story is meant to entertain the listener, it has an underlying message to highlight the fact that indigenous societies had respect for equal opportunities for all members of the community. Folktales are fictitious stories, and it is not necessary to analyse the logic behind certain events. For instance, we may not question the feasibility of a tiny tortoise managing to do what an enormous elephant has failed to do. It is in that very deed that the moral motive of the folktale becomes more emphatic.

In this case, the attitude of looking down on or despising other members, especially the vulnerable, is discouraged, as demonstrated by the way the animals delayed themselves by shutting out tortoise. The tortoise can be taken to represent certain people in today's society, the so-called underdogs—like those of Malawian origin, whom until recently, were not allowed to vote in Zimbabwe and classified as aliens. The tortoise can also represent the illiterate or less educated, rural folk, and vulnerable groups such as the old, street people, the poor, widows, and orphans.

The folktale goes a step further in highlighting the advantages of giving others equal opportunities, regardless of how small in stature they may be. Usually, in practical life experiences, vulnerable members such as widows and orphans are not considered first, they are mistreated simply because they have no one to speak on their behalf. The folktale not only encourages good behaviour, but goes on to exonerate traditional Ndebele societies from the allegations of failure to protect the vulnerable.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion above has revealed that African societies, and in particular the Ndebele societies, have always encouraged and observed equal and human rights as a virtue. Those who point fingers at them for violation of these are doing so because they are at a vantage socio-political platform, and have a voice that can be listened to hastily by the rest of the world—and yet there is evidence that they themselves have a log in their eyes—which they must remove before attempting to remove that which is in their brothers' eyes. Contemporary society has much to learn from Africa's indigenous knowledge systems in terms of human rights and democracy. We therefore recommend that societies should move forward by looking back at their past for sustainable knowledge.



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