

Children and Childhood in Shona Proverbs

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Abstract

Childhood is not a neatly definable concept as it differs among cultures. Among the Shona, a child and childhood are defined in terms of age, marital status, behaviour and also relations to other members in society. The Shona, like other ethnic groups, have a plethora of ways through which their worldview is fashioned and conveyed, and these include songs, folktales, riddles and proverbs, among others. In this article, Shona proverbs are analysed in terms of how they present Shona people's perception and conceptualisation of childhood. Afrocentricity is used to analyse the content of proverbs selected from the anthologies *Tsumo Chimbo neMadimikira* (Zvarevashe 1984) and *Tsumo-Shumo* (Hamutyinei and Planger 1987). Among its findings, the article observes that Shona childhood falls into two main categories: early childhood and mid-cum-adult childhood. Children are perceived as an integral component of any Shona marriage, and society is ambivalent regarding who is more important between the boy and girl child. Also, early childhood is perceived as a very precarious and critical stage that can either make or break a child, thus warranting responsible shepherding from parents and society. Child behaviour is also believed to be largely modelled after that of parents and so it is important that parents behave responsibly so as to positively influence their children. It also emerges that it is quite common for children to disappoint their parents, but that should not lead the parents into despair. While both stages show that childhood is considered a position laden with responsibilities, which should be carried out for the good of all, the mid-cum-adult childhood stage is viewed as one where children should start moving towards or even exercise total independence and self-reliance. Overall, it emerges that the Shona people's perception and conceptualisation of children and childhood have a lot of positives that can be drawn from for the good of today's humanity.

Keywords: children; childhood; Shona people; proverbs; Zimbabwe

Introduction

Defining a child is indeed treading on slippery ground. Hunt (1994, 5) defines a child as a person whose mind and body has not yet matured in various definable ways. The definition presents a child as a person who is in the nascent and prime stages of life. He further defines childhood as “the period of life which the immediate culture thinks of as being free of responsibility and susceptible to education” (1994, 5). In other words, childhood is a stage when one is thought of as not having assigned duties to undertake and where one should be learning. Although some of these observations cut across societies, there are some variations.

The Shona, for example, define childhood using such parameters as age, marital status, relations to other members in society and behaviour, which make the definition of a child a complex matter. Anyone who is not married, regardless of their age, is considered a child. This at one level includes and at another excludes those who are regarded as minors under modern law. Such persons are referred to using their first name(s). Anyone married or who has a child is regarded as an adult (father or mother) who now undertakes the responsibilities of parenthood to their children. This is regardless of their age. Even though they may fall under the category of a minor according to the Roman-Dutch law, they are no longer addressed using their first name(s) among the Shona. They are addressed as “Father of so and so” or “Mother of so and so.” Thus to the Shona, both age and marital status here combine in the definition of a child. Also, the term *mwana* (child) among most Shona does not only denote one’s biological child, but is used in reference to anyone whose age is such that they fall in the same category as one’s biological children.

At another level, among most Shona, relations determine whether one is a child or not. Married adults who have their own children are still referred to as *vana* (children) by their parents. Although they may no longer be addressed by their first names, but by the names of their children or the surnames of their husbands, for example “Mother of so and so” or “Mrs so and so,” they are still regarded as *vana* (children) by their parents and others with whom they share similar relations. For example, a daughter-in-law or *muroora* is not regarded as such by her husband’s parents, but as *mwana* (child), just like her husband. Inversely, a son-in-law, *mukuwasha*, is also not regarded as such by his wife’s parents, but is regarded as *mwana* (child), just like his wife. This is regardless of whether they have children of their own or not. Shona relations further add another dimension to the definition of a child. Being a child is not necessarily only an issue of age, but relations. The line of mothers and daughters and even granddaughters in relation to their brothers may be such that they are regarded as one’s mothers, regardless of their age. Similarly, the line of fathers may be such that the eldest or older ones in the line of sons can be older than the younger ones in the line of fathers. Resultantly, a 96-year-old man who is undoubtedly a grandfather can be a child to a one-month-old baby. The same applies to a 100-year-old lady who can be a child to a five-day-old boy! These “children” are expected to undertake childhood roles to these “parents.” Thus

childhood here goes beyond what is enshrined in the country's laws. It is not confined to being a minor. These definitions show that Shona childhood spans across ages, from infancy to maturity.

In some cases, among the Shona, childhood also implies behaviour and is used in reference to an elder whose behaviour does not demonstrate maturity and responsibility. One who can be regarded as an adult or even a married person can also be regarded as a child if they exude traits of immaturity and irresponsibility. These parameters vindicate Kimberly's (1994, 18) observation that being a child is as much a social construct as a physical stage, making the concept of childhood less neat and easy to define than it may seem at face value. It is the above Shona worldview as conveyed through some selected proverbs that the current article seeks to examine. This study, however, excludes the last definition of a child as it is not meaningfully covered by Shona proverbs.

Theoretical Grounding

The article analyses Shona people's perception and conceptualisation of a child and childhood using the Afrocentricity theory. Propounded by Molefi Kete Asante (1980, 1998, 2007), the theory underscores that the ordinary lives of Africans should be illuminated within the context of their own experiences using their own cultural, social, political and economic lenses. In other words, African institutions, practices and ways of life should be looked at, described and explained within the context and from the standpoint of African people themselves. The theory calls for an insider and participant interpretation of African institutions and worldviews as opposed to an outsider and touristic approach to the same. At the core of the theory is the idea that the story of Africa should be looked at as Africans see it themselves, tell or write it themselves, for themselves (Asante 2007, xii).

The theory is cognisant of the fact that foreign ways have and can still be used to understand Africa, her worldview and diverse cultural heritage, but this usually does not bring satisfactory results. Such efforts, more often than not, result in many distortions and falsifications about Africa. As such, it is prudent and imperative that the African story be told and explained as seen by Africans themselves. Afrocentricity is the ideal theory for this article in that it allows for the definition and interpretation of a child and childhood as practised and known by the Shona people themselves. The various meanings of the word "child" and the various ways through which the Shona see and look at childhood are best explained from the Shona people's perspective. This helps determine if the Shona have something positive to contribute to the global world.

Methodology

This article is qualitative in nature. It is a content analysis of selected Shona proverbs in terms of how they convey the way the people perceive and conceptualise a child and childhood. The proverbs were selected from two anthologies on Shona proverbial lore,

Tsumo Chimbo neMadimikira (Zvarevashe 1984) and *Tsumo-Shumo* (Hamutyinei and Planger 1987). *Tsumo Chimbo neMadimikira* is a collection of proverbs largely spoken in central modern-day Zimbabwe. *Tsumo-Shumo* is also a collection of proverbs from Zezuru and Karanga, the two most widely spoken dialects of Shona (Chimhundu 1980, 37). Twenty teachers of the Shona language at secondary schools in Masvingo Province were purposefully selected and assisted in the identification of such proverbs from the two anthologies and giving their explanations. This was done using focus group discussions. From these discussions, a pattern of issues and themes emerged, which were then used to analyse the data. The issue that came up is that Shona childhood spans across ages, from infancy to adulthood, while some of the themes that emerged included the importance placed on children by the Shona, the perceptions regarding boy and girl children in Shona society, childhood as a precarious time, the upbringing of children among the Shona, childhood as a socialisation period, childhood behaviour as modelled after that of parents, childhood as fraught with disappointments for parents, childhood as a bundle of duties (p'Bitek 1986), a stage towards independence and self-reliance and children as having their own wishes and aspirations.

Proverbs

The article examines Shona people's perception and conceptualisation of a child and childhood using proverbs, one of the forms of Shona oral literature. Lusweti (1984, 46) defines proverbs as sayings in fixed forms marked by their brevity and they are generally accepted by the community as expressions of truth. Truth denotes that proverbs are used to comment on what life has shown and taught people (Makaudze 2019, 3), making them a very dependable genre to unlock the philosophy of a people. Proverbs convey a people's worldview and express philosophies that are a result of careful repeated and sensitive observations of human conduct and experience of the surrounding nature (Makaudze 2019, 3). In other words, proverbs are sayings and distilled wisdom born out of preponderant happenings in life. In their expression of such truths about life and a people's worldview, proverbs make use of allusive wording, usually in figurative, picturesque, metaphorical or symbolic form (Finnegan 2012, 403). Proverbs do comment on a wide range of experiences as lived and celebrated by a people. Shona people's perception and conceptualisation of a child and childhood are also some of the many aspects conveyed and commented upon through proverbs. As shall be discussed in this article, proverbs are used by the Shona "to warn, to advise, to inform [and] clarify" about childhood (Kabira and Mutahi 1993, 37).

Shona People and Their Worldview

The Shona are a Bantu-speaking group found in Southern Africa. The term "Shona" was first used by renowned linguist Clement Doke (1931, 78) to refer to speakers of mutually intelligible dialects that were and are spoken in more than half of present-day Zimbabwe, from the eastern (Ndau and Manyika), north-eastern (Korekore and Buja), central and north-western (Karanga) and central and northern parts (Zezuru) of the country. Prior to Doke, none of these speakers referred to themselves as "Shona"; rather

they used their totems and kings' names as labels of identity (Chimhundu 1992, 94). Not only do these speakers share a common language, but they also have a largely similar expressive culture. Among this ethnic group, marriage is considered everyone's goal. Just as among the Acholi of Uganda, among the Shona, being husbandless or wifeless is not considered a virtue (p'Bitek 1986, 15). In fact, to the Shona, celibacy is condemned as a dereliction of duty (Chiwome 1996, 23). That is why there are many marriage customs such as *kukumbira* (the process of paying lobola before wedding the bride), *kutizisa* (eloping of the bride), *kuganha* (a girl eloping with a man even without a proposal), *musengabere* (forcibly abducting a girl), *chimutsamapfihwa* (the practice of having a younger girl marry her deceased sister's husband), and *nhaka* (inheritance), which cater(ed) for the status of each person in society. Among the Shona, a successful marriage is one that culminates in the procreation of children. Childless marriages have many challenges and may even be terminated (Gombe 1998, 79). Having children is considered an investment as one is to an extent guaranteed the continuity of one's lineage and security in one's old age. In the Shona worldview, every societal member, including the dead, has responsibilities that they are expected to undertake, and which they are reprimanded for should they renege on these. Thus elders have duties they are expected to undertake and inversely, children too have responsibilities expected of them. As such, children and the concept of childhood are central to the Shona worldview and also find their way into the ethnic group's proverbs.

Early Childhood in Shona Proverbs

This stage was conceptualised to cover periods from when a couple is married up to when their children are about to be teenagers. Most proverbs on childhood were found to cover this stage.

The Importance of Children as Depicted in Proverbs

From the two anthologies, participants identified proverbs that showed children as important in Shona marriages. Among the proverbs singled out were the following:

Unaki hwemukadzi huri pamwana (The beauty of a woman lies in having children)

Mukadzi akanaka ndeane mukutu (The beauty of a woman lies in having a pregnancy)

Mukadzi akanaka ngeune mutukutswa (A beautiful woman is one with a pregnancy)

Unaki means beauty while *akanaka* means one who is beautiful. In explaining the first proverb, the participants stressed that a physically beautiful woman who fails to conceive is considered incomplete and therefore not so beautiful, while a woman who is less good-looking but who manages to bear children would be highly regarded and her marriage would be considered more stable. In the last two proverbs, it emerges that while *mukutu* and *mutukutswa* sometimes mean "a carrier bag," the implication is "pregnancy" because among the Shona a pregnancy is carried, just like a carrier bag.

The proverbs thus celebrate being able to conceive, carry a pregnancy and hence ultimately bear children. Overall, the proverbs show that among the Shona childlessness is looked down upon. As among the Acholi of Uganda that p'Bitek (1986, 30) writes about, childless Shona marriages usually do not stand the test of time. Participants stressed that the Shona do not necessarily consider beauty as ultimately based on outward looks. Instead, beauty is utilitarian; it is functional and so the beauty of a woman also lies in her being able to conceive, carry and bear children. Owing to the importance of children, in the past Shona society had practices meant to assist childless couples, though such practices are now less popular. If it was the husband who could not sire children, an aunt secretly organised with either the husband's younger brother or cousin to sire children on behalf of the brother. This, however, was supposed to be a very closely-guarded secret. If the problem was with the wife, her people either brought her younger sister or her brother's daughter as a second wife to the man so that she bears children for her elder sister. Such practices have now been legislated against and condemned as a violation of individual rights, but one thing which is clear is that they were born out of very caring institutions. They were meant to safeguard the humanity, dignity and integrity of those who could not sire children, though of course they had their own grey areas.

Even today, the importance of children still weighs heavily on newlyweds' backs. Contemporary Shona society still admires marriages and couples that beget children and looks down upon those not blessed with them. Due to the pressure to have children, childless couples leave no stone unturned in a bid to have them. They seek help from both traditional and Western-trained doctors as well as church prophets. Nowadays there are many cases of prophets who are arraigned before the courts for rape as they purportedly try to undertake some (sexual) rituals meant to enable a couple to have children. There are also quite a number of children born out of the so-called rituals performed on women by such prophets. All these happenings are a result of the importance placed on having children among the Shona.

Societal Perceptions about Boy and Girl Children

The other crucial issue that emerged from the discussions is how Shona society perceives male and female children. Participants identified and explained the following proverbs:

Ane mhuri kwayo ndeane ndume ane mhurikadzi vaeni (One with a good family has boy children; girl children are visitors)

Ane rema ndeane mukomana ane musikana anombodya (One with an idiot is one with a boy child; one with a girl child may eat of the bride price)

Wazvara ndume wazvare hadzi, wazvare hadzi wazvara ndume (One who has given birth to a male child has also given birth to a female child, and one who has given birth to a female child has also given birth to a male child)

Mhuri refers to family. The first proverb stresses that a family worth noting is one that has male children. Inversely, a family with female children is considered pathetic and hopeless. The proverb conveys the importance placed on boys as compared to girls. The boy child is admired more as he is regarded as a permanent member of the family even when married, something which was thought to guarantee parents continued physical, social and economic security in old age. Girl children were looked at as visitors because they would later marry into other people's families and even relocate and become part of their husbands' families. However, the second proverb, *Ane rema ndeane mukomana ane musikana anombodya* (One with an idiot is one with a boy child; one with a girl child may eat of the bride price) advances a contrary view. *Rema* means an unintelligent or a dull person. Although the proverb acknowledges that both the boy and girl child can be unintelligent, it underscores that a family is better off with a girl child who is unintelligent than with a boy child who is unintelligent. Participants stressed that this is because every girl child gets married and as a result her father will "eat of the bride wealth" even though she may be unintelligent, but if a boy is dull, whatever the father spends on him has gone to waste and can never be recovered. Thus, the second proverb considers the girl child as more beneficial and appropriate because her marriage guarantees the parents material benefits, benefits a boy child will never assure one of. The discussions by participants underlined the ambivalence regarding how the Shona perceive boy and girl children, as demonstrated through these two proverbs. The participants, however, pointed out that the third proverb strikes a balance by stressing that the family which gives birth to a boy child (*ndume*) has also given birth to a girl child (*hadzi*). This is because, later in life, the boy child would marry and bring home a girl child who would then do the duties that girl children would ordinarily do in their families. In this case, *hadzi* refers to the daughter-in-law who is brought home as wife by the son. Inversely, a family that does not have a boy child (*ndume*) but has given birth to a girl child (*hadzi*) has also inversely given birth to a boy child (*ndume*). This is also because, later in life, the girl child would get married and bring home a boy child (*ndume*). In this case, *ndume* refers to the son-in-law. Also, among the Shona, a girl who has married into their family is regarded as *mwana* (child) by the parents of her husband, not as *muroora* (daughter-in-law). She takes the position and responsibilities of a daughter in her mother's home. The son-in-law is also not considered *mukuwasha* (son-in-law) by the parents of his wife, but as *mwana* (child), and is treated like any other of the children and also undertakes the responsibilities of a son in the homestead. The third proverb conveys that the Shona place equal importance on both the boy and girl child, a philosophy expressed by Charamba and Charamba (2012, 186) who argue that among the Shona, just like the Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria, a human being is first of all a child (*mwana*) before he or she is either male (*-komana*) or female (*-sikana*), implying that male and female children are primarily considered equals as children.

Childhood as a Precarious Time

The participants also identified and grouped proverbs that capture the period and hazards of early childhood. These proverbs include:

Kukura hubve munjodzi (Growing up is escaping from harm)

Regai dzive shiri mazai haana muto (Let them mature, do not tamper with their youth)

From the discussions, it emerged that the word *kukura* (growing up) in the first proverb can refer to physical development, emotional development, mental development and economic development, among others. In the same context, *njodzi* refers to hazards or dangers associated with being a child. The first proverb implies that at this stage, a child is usually very adventurous and experimental. Participants insinuated that a child may touch anything, including dangerous things. It may also put anything in its mouth, including snails or their shells or even chicken droppings. It eats even without washing. It also walks on and climbs very dangerous surfaces. Since in early childhood one is not yet physically, mentally, emotionally and psychologically mature, children can embark on activities or make decisions that have disastrous consequences for their lives. The second proverb conveys this vulnerability. In this proverb, *shiri* refers to mature birds while *mazai* refers to eggs. The proverb encourages people to be patient enough to wait until eggs have hatched and the birds have matured, then people can eat the mature birds and enjoy their meal. Eating eggs betrays a lack of patience and greed. Participants concurred that young children, like eggs, can be preyed upon by irresponsible members of society. Today, childhood is a stage when the girl child is sexually abused by either her guardians or strangers in society. The boy child is also victim to sugar mummies who entice him with money or goodies, in all cases jeopardising the children's futures. As such, the proverb advises that society must make all effort to shepherd the children, guiding them and nurturing them as they become responsible and mature beings. The discussions with participants underlined that the two proverbs convey the fact that childhood is a very precarious period, characterised by many dangers and happenings, some of which can harm the child and hence the need for society to be responsible and look after them.

Having Children as Intertwined with Responsibility

Participants also came up with another set of proverbs whose theme centred on parental responsibility to young children. It emerged that childhood entails social responsibilities on the part of both parents and society. The proverbs that were put under this category include:

Waita mbereko wada kusuka machira (Having children comes with responsibilities)

Nzombe huru yakabva mukurerwa (Very big and popular people were raised up)

Shumba huru yakabva mukurerwa (A big lion was raised up)

Chidokodoko chirera miviri chikuru chinouya wakora (Young ones need to be raised)

Chirere mangwana chigozokurerawo (Look after your children so that they also look after you in your old age)

The discussions showed that in the first proverb, *mbereko* means giving birth while *machira* means children's clothes and other responsibilities linked with the newly born. Thus one who has given birth is likened to one who has accepted and is prepared to execute the various responsibilities of washing and caring for the baby. The first proverb is directed at would-be parents and parents alike. These are warned and advised to have what it takes to be parents. Implicit in the proverb is that one should be mature physically, economically, psychologically and emotionally. Parenting puts people to the test in many ways and they should be ready for that. The proverb guards against irresponsible parenting or abandoning one's parental roles to children. In the second and third proverbs, *nzombe huru* and *shumba huru* refer to the physically big and even prosperous people in society and suggest that they too were once small children who were looked after or parented. The third proverb also points to the need to look after the small ones and emphasises that only through being looked after and cared for will they grow into big and independent people. These proverbs are targeted at parents and society at large and indicate that it is expected of them to look after and raise children. What p'Bitek (1986, 19) observes among the Acholi of Uganda also applies to the Shona: these children come with a bundle of responsibilities that society owes them. This is because among the Shona, as in other African societies, it takes the whole village to raise a child (Hudson-Weems 1993, 72). In the last proverb, *Chirere mangwana chigozokurerawo* (Look after your children so that they also look after you in your old age), *kurera* means to raise and to look after. This proverb, directed at parents, adds a footnote to parenting. It reminds them that a stage shall come in their life when they will be weak and vulnerable. At that stage they need to have children who would look after them. As such, for one to enjoy life at that stage, one must have properly looked after their children in their youth so that those children would also feel obliged and capacitated to look after their parents. That is why among the Shona, if a child is not properly fed or clothed in their youth, blame is placed on the parents because it is ordinarily their duty to look after and provide for the child who is still weak. However, when the parents are scantily dressed and poorly fed in their old age, blame is now placed on the children who are accused of failing to look after their parents who looked after them when they were still young. A child who was looked after in their youth cannot and is not expected to abandon their parents in their old age. Also, a parent who seemingly abandoned responsibilities to their children in their young age might not expect to be looked after by those children when they have grown up. It is a reciprocal responsibility.

Childhood as a Socialisation Period

The discussions also showed that early childhood is a period during which the cultural values as well as the dos and don'ts of the society are inculcated in the young. The proverb, *Kuraira kunoda pwere mukuru ndimambo* (It is only the young who can take

instructions, elders cannot) was singled out from the anthologies. The participants explained *kuraira* as teaching and socialisation, *pwere* as children and *mambo* as king. They stressed that among the Shona and other monarchies, a king was a very respected and deified leader of a society. He gave instructions to his subjects, all which were obeyed. No subject dared give instructions to the king. The proverb therefore points out that socialisation can easily and readily be done to children but not elders, because elders are like kings who cannot be easily moved. Elders feel belittled if they are lectured to. Thus, the proverb conveys that childhood is a stage for shaping children into whomever society wants them to become in adult life. This is supported by linguists such as Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2011, 365) and O'Grady et al. (2010, 384) who regard the age between zero and 15 years as a "critical age." Using the Critical Age Hypothesis, they argue that this childhood period is one during which a child can effortlessly acquire any language and other formative habits that they are exposed to. After this age, it becomes very difficult for the child to acquire a language and such desirable habits. They even present cases of children who at this critical age were made to stay among gorillas and were ultimately found to be unable to speak because of the lack of exposure to a human language, showing childhood as a vital socialisation period.

Childhood Behaviour as Modelled on That of Parents

Another set of proverbs identified by participants shows that under the socialisation process hinted at above, children adopt the behaviour, attitudes and mannerisms of their elders. The following proverbs were picked:

Mbudzi kudya mufenje hufanan'ina (A person gives birth to a child whose behaviour resembles theirs)

Mhembwe rudzi inozvara mwana ane kazhumwi (It runs through the family; a buck gives birth to a kid that resembles it)

Hufananyina gunguo rakatodza tateguru (It runs through the family; a crow emulates its forefathers)

Mbudzi kukwira mufuta kufana rudzi (That a goat climbs a *mufuta* tree is behaviour copied from its kind)

Kahukwana kupinda mudzani huona amai (When a chick walks into a run it will be doing so emulating its mother)

Mwana wenyoka inyoka (An offspring of a snake is a snake)

The first proverb talks about feeding, that a young one of a goat eats that which it has seen its mother eating. The young one sees and learns from its mother. The second proverb talks of looks, that a buck which has a white spot on its forehead gives birth to a young one which also has a white spot on its forehead. In other words, the appearance

of a young one is something passed on from the parent or elders. The third proverb talks of appearance and behaviour by mentioning that the crow's characteristics were merely inherited from its forefathers. Thus, the crow's looks and behaviour are passed on from the parents to the younger ones. The fourth proverb also talks about behaviour and states that the behaviour of young goats of climbing *mufuta* trees (as they eat) was learnt from their parents and others of its kind who also did the same. This proverb conveys the idea of learning by seeing. The same idea is expressed by the fifth proverb, which points out that the behaviour of a young chick of going under some surfaces or into the fowl run is acquired from observing its mother doing the same. Thus there is nothing unusual about it. Similarly, the last proverb expresses that the young one of a snake is also a snake because its appearance and behaviour are the same as those of bigger snakes. There is no difference between what the young snake does and what its elders do. Participants highlighted that though these proverbs are different in wording, they are similar in meaning. They all convey that parents and grandparents are the first and immediate role models for their children and it is not surprising that children exude more of their parents' and elders' behaviour than teachings received from outside the home. Overall, the proverbs were seen as warnings, especially to parents, that they must demonstrate good behaviour because it is likely that their children's behaviour will be modelled after theirs. In addition, they are a reminder to the same parents that any bad behaviour exhibited during the childhood stage is most likely to have been learnt from them. Thus, the proverbs depict parents as both overt and covert teachers and role models to their children.

Children as Having Their Own Wishes and Aspirations

From the discussions, it also emerged that being young does not mean that children are blank slates on which elders can write their own wants. Rather, young children too have their own wishes and aspirations, which, however, are more often than not disregarded by the elders. The proverb *Mwana mudiki kubvuma rwendo rwake rurimberi* (If a child agrees to embark on any activity, it also accords them the chance to do their own things) conveys this. It shows children as people who also have their own plans; these, however, play second fiddle to those of their elders. It is a reminder to parents to be aware of the feelings, wishes and desires of children and where possible to accommodate them.

Mid and Late Childhood as Conveyed in Shona Proverbs

This stage was generally conceived to cover teenagers, young and mature adults. Proverbs identified here focused on the disappointments from children, the duties of children as well as society's expectations of them.

Childhood as Fraught with Possible Disappointments

The participants also identified the theme of children causing disappointments, which they said was quite common with teenagers, though also experienced during the early childhood stage. They picked the following set of proverbs as justification:

Mugoni wepwere ndeasinayo (One who says they can manage children is one who does not have one)

Wakazvara sekera muchitende (If you have children, laugh at other people's children secretly)

Wabereka sekera mudende (If you have children, do not laugh at the behaviour of other people's children in public)

Wabereka sekera munyasi medengu (If you have children, laugh away from the public)

Abereka otochena moyo (Once you have children, you must be gentle-hearted)

Kuzvara hakuna hombarume (With children, you cannot beat your chest and say yours are well-mannered)

In the first proverb, *mugoni* means one who fixes. In this case, it is one who claims to be able to deal with children. The proverb warns that a person who claims to be able to deal with children is one who does not have children. Inversely, the proverb acknowledges that childhood is a stage that is quite difficult to deal with and no one can claim that they know how to. The participants, most of whom have had or have children, admitted that one can never be totally sure that one is managing problems posed by children and childhood quite well. They concurred that it is only those who do not have children who can claim mastery of childhood because they do not quite understand the complexity and volatility of handling and dealing with them. In the second, third and fourth proverbs, *wazvara* and *wabereka* mean one who has children; *sekera* means laugh at or ridicule while *muchitende* and *mudende* mean “in a gourd” and *mudengu* means “under a bushel.” The proverbs advise anyone who has children to make sure when they laugh at, ridicule or scorn other people's children that they do so secretly (*muchitende*, *mudende*, or *pasi pedengu*), and not in public. This is because it is likely that their own children, who may seem worthy now, may sooner or later also do similar if not worse things that may court terrible laughter from those whose children they are laughing at. In the proverb *Abereka otochena moyo*, *abereka* means one who has children while *kuchena moyo* means to be lenient, tolerant and understanding. In other words, one who has children should exercise leniency, tolerance and understanding. This is because handling children involves dealing with fragile, less understanding, immature and even less tolerant beings. This therefore calls for one to go an extra mile since the frustrations of dealing with such characteristics are numerous. Similarly, in the last proverb, *kuzvara* means having children while *hombarume* means a hunter who always catches game. Participants acknowledged the proverb as meaning that no one always gets it right or always gives birth to children of remarkable behaviour. While a great hunter would ordinarily catch game each time they go on a hunting expedition, giving birth to children is different in that at one point one may give birth to a child of good character but at

another one may give birth to a child of less remarkable character. Also, one who has children can never claim to be good at dealing with them.

Overall, this set of proverbs conveys that children do not always behave in ways that please their parents and as such anyone who is a parent should leave room for disappointment. The discussions showed that while dealing with children is not easy even at the early childhood stage, such challenges become worse at the mid childhood or adolescence stage. In agreement, psychologists note that at this stage children undergo visible physical, cognitive, emotional and social transition (Hashmi 2013, 21–23). Children at this stage are “so much alarmed that they are quite alarming. All Giggle Blush, half Pertness and half Pout” (Byron cited in Hashmi 2013, 20). They are normally swayed by peer pressure and exude behavioural problems such as conflicts with parents, mood disruptions, and risky behaviour like experimenting with their bodies, which poses a high likelihood of creating disappointment. The list of proverbs above discourages laughing at someone’s circumstances or laughing at someone’s child without being cognisant of the fact that one is also equally likely to fall into the same, if not worse circumstances, though the times may be different. Hence, parents are advised to be level-headed when dealing with or looking at children.

Childhood as Duty-Oriented

While early childhood has largely been conceived as a stage when parents look after and fend for their children, at a later stage in their childhood participants pointed out that children are expected to play key roles or undertake certain responsibilities. The proverb, *Chirere kuti mangwana chigozokurerawo* (Look after children who will also look after you in old age) was given as an example. *Kurera* means “to look after,” “to provide for,” and “guarantee one of well-being.” While the proverb urges parents to look after their children, it equally places the same responsibility on children, who are then expected to look after and provide for their parents in their old age. As such, if parents lack in their old age, it is the children who are blamed for negligence since they are supposed to reciprocate the love they were accorded in their young age. This goes against other cultures where childhood is largely conceived as a stage when one is not expected to have responsibilities. p’Bitek (1986, 19) avers that in the African milieu, no one is born free; rather, everyone has a bundle of duties expected of them. In a worldview where even the dead are invoked to undertake their duties and rebuked if they fail to, the living too cannot be exempted. Parents undertake duties expected of them while children too undertake childhood duties. Anyone who is a child either by age, marital status or relation has responsibilities of childhood they are expected to undertake. More so, the conception of childhood among the Shona has been seen to be quite wide as to include son-in-laws, daughter-in-laws and even elderly people who have the capacity to cater for other people’s well-being.

Childhood as a Step towards Independence and Self-Sustenance

Another theme that emerged from the discussions is that of childhood as a step towards independence and self-sustenance. The following proverbs were picked from the anthologies:

Chava chigondora chave chimombe kutadza kufura urema hwacho (Once it is slightly grown, a young bull should now learn to feed itself or fight its battles)

Kabva muzai kava kashiri (Once hatched, it is already a little bird)

Chasosodzwa chave chitiyo (Once hatched, it is already a chick)

Chakura chinotamba urema (Once grown, it should start working)

Chakura chinotamba chichiringa kwacho (Once grown, it must start working towards self-reliance)

In the first proverb, *chigondora* means a weaned calf while *kufura* means being able to graze and fend for itself. The proverb conveys that a weaned calf must learn to graze and fend for itself because the period of depending on the mother's milk is over. In the second proverb *zai* means egg while *kashiri* refers to a young bird. The proverb conveys that once a young bird has been hatched, it must start looking for food on its own. In the third proverb, *chasosodzwa* means "the hatched" while *chitiyo* means a chick. The proverb underscores that once it has been hatched, the chick can and should start practising pecking and looking for food. In the fourth and last proverbs, *chakura* means "once grown" while *chinotamba urema* means "it works for its own survival" and *chinotamba chichiringira kwacho* means "it starts making movements that are for its benefit." The implication is that once it has slightly matured, a child should start working and move towards independence and self-reliance. Participants emphasised that although childhood is largely perceived as a period when one expects to be looked after and helped, it is not always one where children are pampered in every way. Rather, children are challenged and expected to take initiative, be creative and start working towards self-reliance and self-sufficiency. In other words, childhood at the stage of adults-in-miniature is a stage when children are expected to demonstrate the potential to be able to stand on their own. Thus, children are urged to start the practice of contributing towards their own growth, prosperity and even that of the family. Here, the Shona family is equated to a forest which when seen from afar appears as a unity yet when approached from near turns out to be composed of trees that stand individually (Gyekye 1988, 12). In other words, the warmth of the family should not and cannot obliterate individual achievements and contributions. Therefore, one should not be over-dependent on the family but should, from childhood, learn to carve their own niche in life. Consequently, young adults should not always wait upon and look up to their ageing parents and grandparents for guidance and lessons about married life. They should learn to stand on their own, in case they fail to get the much-needed help.

Conclusion

The article focused on the Shona conception of children and childhood as conveyed through their proverbs. It emerged that defining a child is not an easy task. Also, among the Shona, children are considered an integral component of a successful marriage, while society has an ambivalent perception regarding who is more important, the boy or girl child. Early childhood was shown as a precarious and critical stage, and one with the potential to disappoint parents. It was also noted that children's behaviour is seen as largely modelled after their parents'. Also, contrary to perceptions in some cultures, among the Shona, childhood, especially from mid childhood onwards, was also seen to be intertwined with responsibilities and as a stage towards independence and self-reliance. In light of this, the study considers Shona proverbs a very crucial genre of art that should be emphasised for the good of contemporary society. The teachings conveyed through proverbs if emphasised may go a long way in minimising challenges faced in modern life, such as skewed gender (boy-girl) relations, the abandonment of children, indolence among the youth and abandonment of vulnerable elders in society. Society also needs to consider children as people with their own rights and interests that warrant to be observed. Overall, it emerges that Shona people's perception and conceptualisation of children and childhood have a lot of positives that can be drawn from for the good of today's humanity.

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