

# The SHONA Proverb as an Expression of *UNHU/UBUNTU*

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## Abstract

This paper is a discourse on the Shona proverb as a conduit for the transmission and expression of fundamental attributes of ubuntu. The research argues that traditional Zimbabwean institutions drew sustenance from the country's value systems and experiences embodied in the Shona proverb. The Shona proverb, as a product of the historical and cultural experiences of the Shona people, unravels the worldview of the Shona people. It is the submission of this paper that ethos which constitute ubuntu are embodied in the Shona proverb. Unhu/ubuntu is vital in creating the necessary general framework within which people can pursue their life's existential projects necessary for development. Zimbabwe therefore needs recourse to the wisdom encapsulated in the Shona proverb in order for her to experience equipoise, harmony, serenity, balance and peace, which are the basis for Africa's progress.

**Keywords:** Expression, Proverb, *UBUNTU*

## Introduction

*Unhu* is a Shona word which is *ubuntu* in Nguni. The concept of *unhu* in Zimbabwe is similar to that of other African cultures. *Unhu* is a social philosophy which embodies virtues that celebrate the mutual social responsibility, mutual assistance, trust, sharing, unselfishness, self-reliance, caring and respect for others among other ethical values. It means behavior patterns acceptable to Shona people. This means ethos and attitudes which influence the way people participate in various departments of their lives. Their ethos refers to their conception of what is right and wrong; beautiful and ugly. The ethos is the parameter used to qualify a Shona person as *munhu* and not just a human being.

Proceeding from the above apprehension, not all Shona people are vanhu {human beings}. In Shona culture, a person has to meet certain obligations regarded as good, according to the Shona worldview, in order to be referred to as munhu.

*Unhu* is perceived as the school of Shona life that generates ethos that proceeds to inform, govern and direct Shona people's institutions namely, social, economic, political and religious. It, therefore, regulates, informs and directs the action and approaches to life and its challenges. *Unhu* sets a premium on human behavior and relations. This paper contends that *unhu* is a product of the Shona cultural experiences and derive from their cultural heritage.

Proverbs are condensed assertions about the shared experiences of a people in history over a period of time. Shona proverbs are necessitated by Shona history and culture. They are composed by members of the Shona community as a conduit, through which the collective experiences of the Shona people are transmitted. Referring to the Shona people, Furusa in Mutswairo<sup>1</sup> correctly points out that:

Their proverbs are a common medium of expressing their collective wisdom which comments on the happenings that reveal a system of values under which the Shona culture functions and develops.

The research has, therefore, selected proverbs as the indispensable Shona cultural source from which to derive the major attributes of *unhu*.

### Major Attributes of UNHU

The traditional Shona society celebrates co-operation and discourages individualism. Social relationships in Africa are not only found among the people, but they also exist between the people and their natural environment and are also extended to the spiritual forces. Relationships at all these levels are sustained through the maintenance of ethos such as reciprocity, participation, harmony and hospitality. The African social philosophy is, therefore, basically communal. The Shona people say:

*Imbwa mbiri hadzitorerwi nyama*

Meat cannot be taken away from two dogs

*Gumwe rimwe haritswanyi inda*

A single thump does not kill a louse

*Rume rimwe harikombi churu*

A single male person no matter how big does not surround an anti-hill alone

The above proverbs are profoundly reflective of the binding philosophy of the Shona people. An individual views his position in relation to the aspirations of the community. A fragmented stance subverts the possibility of positive participation and contribution. Every member is connected to his society. This is why Mbiti cited in Kaphagawani says:

---whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say 'I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am'---

The traditional Shona society celebrates connectedness and cohesion. The society does not elevate the individual and does not see him as solitary and unbound. Okot P' Bitek (1981) contends that a man is incapable of being free because his thoughts and actions are guided by the philosophy of life which is instilled in him from childhood. The traditional Shona society is against the individuals who seek fulfillment outside the context of the group, without realizing that fulfillment itself is not uncluttered space or an absence of controls. It is a powerful and demanding presence. The Shona say:

*Varume ndivamwe kutsva kwendebvva vanodzimurana*

Men are all the same, when their beards burn, they help each other to extinguish the fire

It is the spirit of communal fellowship and solidarity that the Shona culture celebrates. The Shona people believe that all members, who constitute their society, should form a common front in confronting challenges that threaten their existence. The individual's separate existence is viewed as subordinate to that of the society. Marimba Ani posits that the idea of thriving on competition and individual achievement belongs to European culture:

European culture creates a being who thrives on competition and, therefore, on individual and distinct achievement---because a person's existence as a member of the group does not in itself mean much---the individual strives to be "better than" to stand apart from others in his craving for recognition.

The Shona people believe that fragmentation of society is detrimental to the realization of societal goals. It produces individuals who act in ways that are not commensurate with the celebrated ethos of the society. The essence is to view one's interests within the framework of societal aspirations. An individual is not analyzed outside his problems because his challenges are also the challenges of his society. Ramose<sup>5</sup> posits that:

The African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focusing on this or that physical or psychological characteristics of the lone individual. Rather man is defined by reference to the enviroing community as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories, whatever these may be. And this primacy is meant to apply not only ontologically, but also in regard to epistemic accessibility.

The human individual is, thus, inextricably linked to the all-encompassing universe.

However, communalism does not negate individualism. Communalism does not necessarily make the individual a mere victim of inflexible demands of the society i.e. neither individual freedom of action nor of personal responsibility. The society recognizes that each individual has his/her separate life outside the community, hence the Gikuyu proverb says:

*Ciethananga ikigwa ikuumbuka itiri ndugu*

Birds look for one another to land together, but fly individually

The proverb shows that communalism is not pursued to the detriment of individuality. Individualism has to be pursued within the matrix of the welfare of the society which

resultantly brings honor and pride to the society. Individualism is accepted when it correlates with societal aspirations. Everybody has a role to play in communal obligations but they also have private lives. The individual, therefore, has to strike a balance between the claims of individuality and communality because the individual welfare and communal welfare are not exclusionary entities.

The African spirit of communality is maintained through the extension of hospitality to others. In traditional African communities, hospitality had no limit of function. Strangers and visitors were generously received and fed. The Shona say:

*Mombe inopfuura haipedzi uswa*  
A passing ox does not finish the grazing

*Mweni haagendi nedura*  
A guest does not carry away the granary

The underlying factor is that just as one gives, one should also expect to be given in return. This implies reciprocity between the people involved. Therefore, it is as if giving was preserving for future usage. The Shona say:

*Kupa kuturika*  
To give is to bank

The Ndebele proverb says *Unyawo alulampumulo*{the foot has no rest} which means that one may also find oneself in a situation where they are also strangers or visitors. For this reason, one must be generous to others as much as one expects them to be when he/she is lost or when traveling. Hospitality is, thus, regarded as a stringent duty.

Coming from a capitalist society, the whites misconstrued hospitality as a sign of weakness. According to the Rudd concession, the whites first asked for permission to hunt and the permission was granted on the pretext *mweni haapedzi dura*{ the visitor does not finish the granary}. The whites later asked for permission to dig gold from a single hole. According to D.N Beach (1994), they were allowed to dig the gold because a single hole had insignificant effects on this Eldorado. Whites manipulated this hospitality extended to them and later colonized Zimbabwe.

As a virtue, humility encourages harmonious co-existence in the Shona society. It encourages mutual assistance among the Shona people. Those members of the Shona society who are prosperous are greatly discouraged from boasting about their position in the society. The Shona are aware that nobody praises himself but the lowest among people. They believe that fortune changes. This is why they say:

*Aiva madziva ava mazambuko*  
What used to be pools are now fords

*Chaitemura chava kuseva*  
One who used to eat morsels without relish is now dipping morsels into gravy

This means that those who are prosperous today may be less privileged tomorrow. In the same vein, they also believe that those who are less prosperous today may be successful tomorrow; hence, exhibiting the importance of upholding the primacy of the value of mutual respect regardless of one's position in society. These proverbs manifest one of the fundamental aspects of the Shona culture which is the importance it attaches to the person. The Shona people place humanity at the centre of the universe and construct everything around the person. The behavior which is acceptable in the Shona society is generally that which promotes solidarity and harmony in human relationships. It is also such ethos which gives human relationships its sense of humanism. This is why we have the following proverbs:

*Kugara hunzwana*

Living together calls for peaceful co-existence

*Murombo munhu*

A poor person is also human

These proverbs show that the Shona people call for the harmonious totality of existence among them.

Industriousness is another tenet of *unhu* whose ultimate goal is self-reliance. The key aspect of self reliance is the ownership of natural resources by indigenous people of a nation, the most important being the land. The land is the basis of the people's material life. It is the backbone of the national economy and is, as a result, a very important natural resource. In short, life comes from the land and its exploitation is essential for human social advancement. With the Shona people in pre-colonial Zimbabwe in control of their natural resources, the emphasis, then, was on industriousness. The Shona believe that the power used in working does not finish, so the spirit and will of hard working does not end.

*Kutema ugariri*{bride service}, a traditional Shona marriage type is the evidence of emphasis the Shona people put on industriousness. *Kutema Ugariri* is a marriage type for the poor or underprivileged people who cannot raise bridewealth which authenticates Shona marriages. The basic characteristic of bridewealth service is that the husband, instead of providing bridewealth, marries his wife through a long term service agreement with his father-in-law. This marriage type encouraged industriousness and ultimately self-reliance and discouraged the dependency syndrome. It also shows the Shona philosophy and attitude towards poor and underprivileged people which forms the basis of the custom.

### **UNHU and Governance**

The Shona proverb proffer discourses on governance and governmental principles which amounts to good governance. Good governance is the systematic organization of government to respond effectively to people's collective hopes and aspirations. This research argues that good governance is a manifestation of *unhu* and the Shona proverb is a necessary instrument in the provision of fundamental principles of governance.

The Shona proverbs *ishe makurukota* (a king is his council), *munhu kubata ushe makurukota*{kingship depends on councilors}embody governmental principles, that put at the centre the active participation by society. The proverbs remind the leaders that decision-

making is not a one-man process. The emphasis that the proverbs, establish on the virtue of consultation in governance, are a weapon against authoritarianism.

It reasons, therefore, that the issue of *dare* as a properly constituted platform for dialogue is fundamental to national progress. Ramose (1999) attests that the concept of a king with absolute power is odd to traditional African constitutional thought because the king's orders to the nation derived their validity from the fact that they had previously been discussed and agreed to between the king and his councilors. Different voices should be heard. Gyekye cited in Ramose (1999) makes it profusely clear that:

It appears that the most important injunction was that the chief should never ever act without the advice and full concurrence of his councilors, the representatives of the people. Acting without the concurrence and advice of his council was a legitimate cause for his deportation. The central issue of principle is that elders, who are themselves repositories of Zimbabwe's culture and history, assisted leaders. These were the old men who occupied the chair of Zimbabwean history. The advisors and councilors of kings were mandated by experience to take over the preservation and dissemination of Zimbabwean history and culture as the vital core of Zimbabwean governance. These councilors and advisors had a strong grasp of governmental principles that were in tandem with the shared philosophy of life of the Zimbabwean people. They were the archives of governmental principles.

Leaders, therefore, ruled with the assistance of councilors and advisors. The advisors were the main anchors in assuring that sanity prevailed in state politics. They provided the checks and balances and in the process, monitored leaders whenever their actions were at variance with the Zimbabwean people's collective aspirations and hopes. *Unhu* underscores the importance of consensus and gives priority to the well-being of the community as a whole.

History and culture were, thus, at the centre of governmental principles. Culture is the compass that informs people about the direction their projects should obtain. This is why it is important for African leaders today to work with advisors who are granaries of African cultural and historical wisdom. People that do not supplicate energy to run or manage the institution of governance from their history and culture are like a headless chicken. It is, for this reason, that this paper contends that governance and governmental principles in Zimbabwe should be predicated on *unhu* which is expressed through the Shona proverb.

In the Shona proverb, *ishe itsime* (a chief is like a well); a chief is likened to a well where everyone has the right to draw water and in *ishe ihumbarota* (a chief is like a rubbish pit); a chief is likened to a rubbish pit where everyone has the right to throw litter. A chief is, thus, reminded to attend all the disputes brought before him. Every subject is entitled to get a fair hearing. The proverbs emphasize the patient negotiation during the hearing.

In the administration of justice, leaders were not expected to use violence or to intimidate disputants. This is why they say *Mhosva haitongwi nepfumo* (A case is not settled by a spear). Related to these proverbs is *Dare harivengi munhu rinovenga mhosva* (The court does not hate a person but the crime) which further emphasizes the fairness and impartiality when settling the disputes. The elders were to have no regard of persons; they were simply to be guided by the matter of the case presented before them.

Discrimination among the suspected offenders was greatly discouraged. Emphasis was on the intensity of the crime and not to harbor grudges against suspects. Nepotism was greatly discouraged when settling disputes. This is why the Shona say *Kumuzinda hakuna woko* (At the chiefs court, there is no relative of yours). The Gikuyu say *Gutiri ciira wa kimwemwe* {Judgment knows no discrimination}.

The democratic nature of traditional Shona governmental system is expressed in the Shona proverbs *ushe madzoro hunoravanwa* {chieftainship is like a cattle-herding roster you take it in turns} and *ushe usiiranwa* (chieftainship is legacy). The traditional Shona were wary of a Government by a single individual because it ran the danger of becoming dictatorial and absolutist, which would have been detrimental to freedom and the administration of justice.

The traditional Shona system of governance celebrates rotational leadership and this has pedagogical insinuation in a continent bedeviled by political instability today. Rotational leadership promotes accountability and reduces corruption and checks despotism. According to Mutyasira (2002), politicians who normally overstay their welcome have a tendency of practicing dictatorship, which results in many unethical practices. He posits that some African leaders, notably of revolutionary parties, believe that they have a right to rule their countries for as long as they want because they liberated their countries from colonial hegemony. Liberating one's country from colonial subjugation is an incontrovertible semblance of national patriotic culture. However, the cult of long incumbency which breeds dictatorship goes against *unhu* which celebrates the principle of democracy. Muamar Gadaffi cited in Mutyasira (2002) remarks that:

"Revolutionary leaders should not have expiry dates. They are not like tinned drinks which have expiry dates. It is a big mistake to deny such leaders a chance through elections. My brother Museveni was born a revolutionary. He is not made to go to the people to demand votes because he is a revolutionary".

Such a statement by an African leader is anathema to the central tenets of good governance and democracy articulated by the Shona proverb *ushe usiiranwa* cited above. The Shona understanding is that no one man is mother of all wisdom and so the Shona political institutions celebrate rotational leadership. The proverb challenges African leaders that accumulation and personalization of power in the hands of one man does not fall within the realm of African celebrated political ethos and *unhu*.

Kambudzi<sup>11</sup> argues that rotational leadership is health for African political institutions. He correctly observes that the cult of long incumbency breeds an aversion to voluntary retirement in the African leaders. He further contends that corruption and failures haunt some African leaders so much so that they imagined that if they left power, their subjects would immediately call for their arrest. Kambudzi (1998) states that:

Nationalist leaders on assuming office at the end of colonial rule took it for granted that the nationalist movement had endorsed their unlimited incumbency in the independence era. The problem of this cult of long stay in power by a single man is the brutal stifling of political development in the African states.



The Shona proverbs *ushe varanda* (chieftainship depends on the subjects), *ushe ukokwa kuna vamwe* {chieftainship is by invitation from others}, *ishe vanhu* {a king is his subjects}, and *ushe hauzvitorongo* {chieftainship cannot rule itself} articulate a fundamental motif of traditional African constitutional thought. It stresses the view that the king owes his status and the powers that go with that status to the will of his subjects. His mandate to rule rests upon and remains dependent on the consent of his subjects. They are the ultimate source of the king's authority to rule. Proceeding from that realization, it stands to reason, therefore, that it is the subjects who wield ultimate power. A leader, who is without the consent of his subjects, is not a semblance of power. He is not even the reality of that leadership.

The proverb invokes in African leaders the urgent need to prioritize their subjects and to serve them with justice. The traditional African society was characterized by the freedom of subjects to express themselves in all matters concerning their very existence as a people. There should, therefore, be a thick dividing line between colonial administration and post-independence African governmental systems. Okumu (2002) notes that:

During the demoralizing period of colonial rule, Europeans saw Africans as objects rather than as subjects of governance. Now, after independence, it is tragic that African leaders have also developed a system in which they continue to demonstrate their insincerity, their lack of affection, and even hostility towards those they govern and see them more as objects to be manipulated.

The above proverb *ishe vanhu* is, therefore, very relevant in reminding African leaders today that the leaders' power has meaning only within the collective and when used to improve the lives of the subjects. It records the mutual reciprocity that is expected between the ruler and the governed. The Igbo people say *nweze oza oha, oha nweze eze* {the king owns the people and the people own the king} which means that the king is as responsible for his subjects as the subjects are for him. He is the axis of the people's socio-cultural, economic and political relations. Emphasis is on the primacy of the society and its collective over the king and his private interests.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to explore *unhu* through the Shona proverb. *Unhu* has been described as a social philosophy which embraces the ethical values of generosity, consideration of humaneness towards others in the community, mutual assistance, humility, industriousness, co-operation, hospitality, solidarity and social cohesion. The Shona social philosophy is, therefore, basically communal.

Good governance has been described as the systematic organization of government to respond effectively to people's collective hopes and aspirations. The paper has argued that the concept of *unhu* is essential to governance. It has been contended that a leader who has *unhu* is selfless, consults widely and listens to his subjects. The paper has exhorted readers to make a reorientation and recourse to the political wisdom sourced from our history and cultural heritage through the Shona proverb. The point of departure is the realization that the Shona proverb is an embodiment of the Shona people's worldview, their philosophy of life, a conduit of the ethos, ideals and human factor principles celebrated and cherished in the Shona community.



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