
**MUTASA'S CONCEPTION OF *ubuntu* AND PRE-COLONIAL GENDER
IN *Nhume Yamambo* (1990)**

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ABSTRACT

This study interrogates how Mutasa conceptualises and depicts the African communitarian worldview of *ubuntu* and Shona pre-colonial gender in his novel *Nhume Yamambo*. The study relies on content analysis of the novel, critical reviews from various scholars, journals, and theses, augmented by interviews. The theoretical framework is guided by Africana Womanism which is pivotal to the explication of meaning. *Ubuntu* celebrates virtues central to mutual social responsibility, mutual respect, trust, self-reliance, caring, among other attributes. These tenets help to revitalise and rejuvenate the decaying socio-cultural fabric of Zimbabwe. The article argues that Mutasa's conception of *ubuntu* and pre-colonial gender in *Nhume Yamambo* is ambivalent. He portrays pre-colonial Shona women as people who are endowed with *ubuntu* values, very visible and active in society and contributing significantly to the rhythm of pre-colonial Shona life. Mutasa depicts pre-colonial Shona women as crucial war strategists, occupying important socio-political and religious statuses and as people whose existence is connected with that of their society. However, the research contends that Mutasa's weakness in *Nhume Yamambo* is that he fortifies pre-colonial Shona women by depicting them as people who can sacrifice their *ubuntu*. He undervalues the centrality of dignity in people's lives which must be upheld in all situations.

Keywords: *Ubuntu*, gender, Africana Womanism, qualitative, communitarian

INTRODUCTION

This article is a discourse on Mutasa's conceptualisation and depiction of the African communitarian worldview of *ubuntu* and pre-colonial Shona gender. The study seeks to ascertain the extent to which *Nhume Yamambo* is rooted in the African indigenous worldview of *ubuntu* by dissecting the strengths and weaknesses of the novel in its portrayal of *ubuntu* and pre-colonial Shona gender.

Ubuntu is an African concept which is not easy to define in foreign languages. *Ubuntu* embodies traits that celebrate mutual social responsibility, empathy, collective unity, conformity, tolerance, humanness, harmony, obedience, group solidarity, mutual assistance, togetherness, brotherhood, equality, compassion, sympathy, trust, sharing, unselfishness, self-reliance, caring and respect for others. It means patterns of behaviour acceptable to the African people. This involves an ethical stance and attitudes that influence the way people participate in various departments of their lives. Their ethos amount to their conception of what is right and wrong, beautiful and ugly. This ethos constitutes the parameters used to qualify a Shona person as *munhu*, and not just a human being (Mandova, 2013:357).

The fundamental precept of *ubuntu* is enshrined in the Shona axiom *munhu munhu navanhu* (a person is a person through other people) which persists across the diverse African languages and whose underlying ideology is similar in all African cultures. It means that one's humanity is incomplete in the absence of others. That is, the African ontology or worldview is premised on a communal lifestyle, where society is an organic entity unifying all members on the common goal of the well-being of societal members. Traditional Shona society celebrates cooperation and discourages individualism. Relationships are sustained through the maintenance of ethical values such as reciprocity, participation, harmony, and hospitality. The Shona people say *Imbwa mbiri hadzitorerwi nyama* (Meat cannot be taken away from two dogs) which suggests that when people are united, they are more likely to resist any challenge or threat to their well-being. A fragmented stance subverts the possibility of positive participation and contribution.

Traditional Shona society, thus, celebrates connectedness and cohesion. It is the spirit of communal fellowship and solidarity that African cultures celebrate. African people believe that all those that constitute their societies should join common cause in confronting challenges that threaten their existence. The individual's separate existence is viewed as subordinate to that of society. The African people believe that social fragmentation is detrimental to the realization of societal goals. However, communalism does not negate individualism. Society recognizes that each individual has his or her separate life outside the community. Individualism has to be pursued within the matrix of the welfare of society and consequently brings honour and pride to that society. The individual therefore has to strike a balance between the claims of individuality and communality, because individual welfare and communal welfare are not exclusionary entities (Mandova, 2013:360).

As a virtue, humility encourages harmonious co-existence in African societies, promoting mutual assistance. Those members of society who are prosperous are greatly discouraged from boasting about their position in the society. They believe that fortune is mutable. Behaviour that is acceptable in African societies is generally that which promotes solidarity and harmony in

human relationships. It is also such an ethos that gives human relationships their sense of humanity. This is why the Shona have the following proverb: *Kugara hunzwana*. ((Living together calls for peaceful co-existence) which means that for peace to prevail in a community, there is need for mutual understanding. As such, common good supercedes personal aggrandisement. This brief designation of *ubuntu* is adopted in this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Good research requires a methodical and specific approach to the collection and analysis of data and the interpretation and presentation of findings. Research methodology can generally be categorized into either qualitative or quantitative. The selection between the quantitative and qualitative research methods is premised on the type of research being undertaken, the nature of the phenomena to be studied and the purpose of the research.

This study adopts the qualitative research methodology. Fossey et al. (2002:718) define qualitative research as "...a broad umbrella term for research methodologies that describe and explain persons' experiences, behaviours, interactions and social contexts without the use of statistical procedures or quantifications". A study whose focus is an exploration of Mutasa's conceptualisation and depiction of the African worldview of *ubuntu* and pre-colonial gender can therefore be best carried out by engaging the qualitative research methodology.

There are a variety of methods of data collection in qualitative research and this study will use interviews and critical works. According to Kvale (1996:1) interviews are "... conversations with structure and purpose that are defined and controlled by the researcher". In this study interviews are used to explore the views of informants on Mutasa's portrayal of *ubuntu* and pre-colonial gender.

This research engages secondary sources in the form of critical works to explain the notion of *ubuntu*. Works on *ubuntu* by various scholars will complement the data collected from respondents. These include: Samkange and Samkange (1980); Ramose (1999); Chimuka (2001); Higgs (2003); Murithi (2006); Rukuni (2007); Walt (2010); Mangena (2011); Ndofirepi and Ndofirepi (2012); Chemhuru (2012); Mbagu Muyingi (2013); Lehlohonolo (2013); Dolamo (2013); Makuvaza (2014) Mkabela (2005); Washington (2010); Shumba (2011); Kaheru (2012) and Mawere (2013). These works which do not focus on literature *per se*, like the present article, but on *ubuntu* in general are relevant to this research as they serve to corroborate some of the arguments raised with regards to how the *ubuntu* worldview is portrayed and applied in *Nhume Yamambo*.

This article engages Africana womanism, an African-centred theory propounded by Hudson-Weems, which places Africa at the centre of analysis of issues that relate to Africana women.

Considering its definition Africana womanism is an appropriate literary critical theory for this study because:

...there is no need for Africana texts to be analysed and explicated via the use of outside theory. To be sure, all of these theorists place Europe and whiteness at the centre of their analysis, which we as Africana people should find somewhat problematic for an Africana perspective (Hudson-Weems, 2007:77).

Hudson-Weems (2004) notes that Africana womanism developed from a group of women of African descent who aspired to be properly named and officially defined according to their own unique historical and cultural realities, a perspective that would mirror the co-existence of men and women in a mutual struggle for the survival of their entire family.

Hudson-Weems has identified eighteen culturally derived Africana womanist traits that explicate the nature of the Africana women and this study will utilise these descriptors in analysing *Nhume Yamambo*. The eighteen descriptors are self namer, self definer, family centred, genuine in sisterhood, strong, concert with their men in the liberation struggle, whole, authentic, flexible role player, respected, recognised, male compatible, spiritual, respectful of elders, ambitious, adaptable, mothering and nurturing.

Historically and currently both Black men and women work together cooperatively toward attaining liberation and equality. This research regards Africana womanism as the best theory to engage because “We need our own Africana theorists, not scholars who duplicate or use theories created by others in analysing Africana texts” (Hudson-Weems, 2007:75). Moreover, Africana womanism is an Africa-centred theory which places Africa at the centre as it relates to Africana women:

Africana womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women ... the primary goal of Africana women, then is to create their own criteria for assessing their realities both in thought and in action (Hudson-Weems, 2007:82).

Africana womanism is a relevant literary critical theory for this research in as far as it is an African centred paradigm which locates Africa at the centre of analysis of issues that relate to Africana women.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section contends that Mutasa's conception of *ubuntu* and pre-colonial gender in *Nhume Yamambo* is ambivalent. While he depicts pre-colonial women as people who are endowed with *ubuntu* ethos and occupying influential socio-political and religious statuses, the writer demeans pre-colonial Shona women by depicting them as people who can sacrifice their dignity.

Nhume Yamambo is a novel which chronicles the history of the Rozvi people, underlining how Chirisamhuru, the *Mambo* (king) of the Rozvi state conquers Dyembeu's army in a chieftaincy dispute. The socio-political and religious realities of the Rozvi people are being recounted by Chuwe Tavada, a spirit medium. In the novel Chirisamhuru sends Tavada, his mediator, to the Mabweadziva shrine to solicit for support in a battle for chieftainship against Dyembeu. Mavhudzi, the high priest of Mabweadziva concurs and this instigates Dyembeu's conquest and the installation of Chirisamhuru as the king of the Rozvi state.

In the novel, Mutasa casts pre-colonial Shona women as people who are endowed with *ubuntu* ethos, people who are very visible and active in society, occupying influential socio-political and religious statuses and as people whose existence is interconnected with that of their society. They occupy significant religious positions at Mabweadziva shrine as *mbonga*. *Mbonga* are female religious attendants (virgins) who are at the service of the High Priest at Mabweadziva shrine. They function as intermediaries between the Shona people and the High God *Mwari*. *Mbonga* have no sex life and do not customarily marry. They are expected to remain virgins during their stay at Mabweadziva while serving the High Priest. These special qualities of the *mbonga* show a lot of sacrifice for the sake of the community, which is a tenet of *unhu*. The cornerstone of *unhu* as a core value in African ethics is the community. The individual's whole existence is relative to that of the group ensuring the survival of the group and concurrently the individual. In the novel, *mbonga* include Chisvo, Nyikite and Masikinye.

The Shona people believe in a Supreme Being, *Mwari*, who is the creator of everything. They regard all aspects of creation as sacred because they are reliant upon God's creative supremacy. In Shona traditional thought, *Mwari* is believed to regulate the fertility of the land and is regarded as the rain giver who is ultimately approached to provide rain and good crops (Mutambara, 2008:27). By projecting pre-colonial Shona women as intermediaries between the High God *Mwari* and the living people, Mutasa is making a statement that women were respected, responsible and had *ubuntu*. The sanctified status of the *mbonga* renders pre-colonial Shona women important space in the society. Mutasa describes the role of the *mbonga* and even states that it was taboo to see them, through Chuwe Tavada who says:

Sekuru Mavhudzi vakanga vati tisangane navaranda vaMwari, mbonga dzapamusorosoro chaidzo. Idzi ndidzo dzaiita ose mabasa akakoshesesa uye mabasa apamusoro pazvose. Hakuna chadzaiva dzisingazivi uye zvichitoira kuti udziona. Pakusvika taidokwairira kuona kuti vanhu vakadini vanogara pamwoyo penzvimbo yamwari. Vaiva vakadzi vashanu chete. Vaiziva kupfeka, utsanana, kudeketa, kubika, kuimba, kutamba, kupira, kutsanangura norurimi rwakasununguka uye kuzvibata.(Mutasa, 1990:140).

(Uncle Mavhudzi had told us to meet *Mwari's* respectable maidens, the best and highly respected female attendants. These female attendants were responsible for all the sacred duties performed at the shrine. There was nothing hidden to them and it was often taboo for ordinary people to see them in person. On arrival at the shrine, we were so eager to see what kind of people stayed at the heart of *Mwari's* shrine, *Mabweadziva*. They were five women only. They knew how to dress well and were very smart. They were expert poets, chanters, cooks, singers, dancers, ritualists and well behaved women).

According to Mutasa therefore, pre-colonial Shona women, the *mbonga*, upheld the religious ethos and cultural standards expected by the Shona society hence *vaive neunhu* (they were endowed with *ubuntu*) as Sibanda (2014:26) notes:

Traditional African philosophy thrives on the vision of a perfect and virtuous individual-an individual who upholds the cultural values and norms of a true African society ... thus a person with *hunhu* is one who upholds the African cultural standards, expectations, values, and norms and keeps the African identity.

Furthermore, the role of the *mbonga* in Shona society according to Mutasa is complemented by *manyusa* (male religious attendants). Like *mbonga*, *manyusa* do not have sex life and are not allowed to marry while serving the High Priest at *Mabweadziva*. In the novel, *Manyusa* include Mukwati, Chuwe Mugura, Mwenje and Mavhudzi. The transcendence of the High God *Mwari*, as depicted by Mutasa renders the function of *mbonga* and *manyusa* very significant as it was a remarkable accolade to serve Him.

Moreover, Mutasa establishes that women and men in Shona society have analogous religious functions as religious attendants, validating the fact that historically women and men worked together mutually and their roles were complementary. Mutasa portrays women who are

politically visible in the Rozvi state. Men and women's political roles are complementary. Mutasa's portrayal of pre-colonial gender suits Chitando's (2011:34) observation that:

Essentially, *ubuntu* is an African approach to reality that places emphasis on the community and taking responsibility for each other's burdens.

At the level of the Rozvi politics, Mutasa depicts women who are recognisable and whose function complements that of men. He portrays women who believe that the burden of the Rozvi state is also their burden and they are devoted to wage a war against Dyembeu alongside men in order to conquer him and to install Chirisamhuru as the chief of the Rozvi people.

Women participate at king Chirisamhuru's court and make very vital contributions that partly lead to Dyembeu's defeat. During a court session, Ndomboya, chief Chirisamhuru's sister is requested to proclaim her views about the chieftaincy dispute and she urges the court to fight Dyembeu "*Ini ndinoti handeyi tose tichinorwa naDyembeu*". (p.174). (I say let us all go and fight Dyembeu). Harupindi, the chief's wife is also requested to avow her standpoint and she concurs with Ndomboya that they should wage a war against Dyembeu, a position that was appreciated and adopted by the court. Mutasa writes that:

Kana naiye changamire vakafara pavakaona ruzhinji ruchifarira mashoko omukadzi wake...dare rakatsokodzera nyaya iyi ndokupedzisira richiwirirana kuzotora zano ranyachide wachangamire waro.(p.175).

(Even the king was happy when he realised that the court and all attendants were pleased with his wife's words and decision to fight Dyembeu...the court ruminated over this issue and ended up in agreement with the advice of king's favourite wife to go to war).

In order to win the war against Dyembeu, Chirisamhuru mobilises support from various chiefs. He dispatches emissaries like jinda Chakamanga to chief Chireya in Gokwe, Washaya and jinda Gumunyu to chief Gutu and chief Zimuto, jinda Musaka to chief Chirumhanzu, Ndomboya, Karukai and Ticharwa to chiefs Njerere and Ndumba, Tavada and Harunandima to Mabweadziva shrine to solicit for their support. This validates the view that women were not peripheral in the politics of the Rozvi state but played central roles which were complementary.

Furthermore, Mutasa portrays women as crucial war strategists engaging critical military stratagems which lead to the conquest of Dyembeu's army. Chirisamhuru's war commanders acknowledge that Dyembeu has a robust army which enjoys superiority of numbers over them. Moreover, Tumbare, Dyembeu's chief army commander employs various tactics against Chirisamhuru's army including intimidation which leads to desertion by some of Chirisamhuru's

soldiers. Ndomboya, Karukai and the other women counter Tumbare's strategies by climbing up a hill and singing before Dyembeu's army while naked. The general effect was to destabilise Dyembeu's army as the writer states:

Zvainzi wose murwi waDyembeu waona vakadzi vasina kupfeka ava uchaita munyama wokufira muhondo. Kushanda kwazvo kuzere kwaizoitisa kuti njere dzomuvengi pakurwa dzivhiringike sedzeduruturu. Zvaizoitazve kuti maoko ake ashaye simba uye anange padivi achingopotsa parufiro. Zvombo zvake muvengi zvaizotedza zvichidonha pasi nokuvhunika.(p.190).

(It was claimed that all those of Dyembeu's warriors who saw the bodies of these naked women would suffer the misfortune of dying in this war. The sight of women's naked bodies would have a deadly effect on the soldier's 'minds' who would immediately be confused like fools. Such a sight could make their muscles weak and their hands powerless. They would then miss their target but meet their death. The enemy's weapons would turn slippery, fall down and break into pieces).

Moreover, Harupindi and Harunandima stage manage a scene where Tavada masquerades as Mavhudzi while the two are disguised as *mbongas*. Tavada delivers an eloquent harangue to the two camps proclaiming that *Mwari* and *Mabweadziva* are supporting Chirisamhuru's army hence he will emerge victorious. He also warns of Dyembeu's imminent defeat. After the performance, Mutasa writes that:

Varwi vaChirisamhuru vakadengenyesa makomo namatondo noruzha rwokufara. Vaipembera, kuimba nokutambira vadzimu neZame. Varwi vaDyembeu navatungamiriri vavo vakarukutika ura hukange huchadambuka nokutya. (p.194).

(The warriors of Chirisamhuru's jubilant songs and dances reverberated among the mountains and forests expressing their triumphal joy. They celebrated, sang and danced in praise of *Mwari*, their God. Dyembeu's warriors and commanders were weak and demoralised and in their stomachs, it seemed the intestines would break in fear).

The overall impact of Harunandima and Harupindi's war tactic is to boost the confidence of Chirisamhuru's army while further weakening Dyembeu's because it was the general belief among the Rozvi people that a camp with *Mabweadziva's* blessings triumphs.

When asked to comment on whether there is a nexus between *unhu* worldview and Mutasa's *Nhume Yamambo*, interviewee D, a lecturer at Great Zimbabwe University responded thus:

Yes, there is a connection between *unhu* worldview and *Nhume Yamambo*. Mutasa seeks to restore the pre-colonial Shona people's dignity in the novel. He departs from previous Shona novelists like Chakaipa who have helped to advance Eurocentric views about Shona past.

Asked the same question, respondent E, a fourth year Honours Shona student at Great Zimbabwe University remarked that:

There is a link between *ubuntu* worldview and *Nhume Yamambo*. Reading the novel is quite refreshing. The writer is very Afrocentric in his portrayal of pre-colonial Shona people and *ubuntu*.

The researcher asked the same question to respondent F who teaches Shona at Masvingo Teachers College and she responded thus:

Mutasa's *Nhume Yamambo* corrects the distortions made by European historians such as Trevor Roper about our culture. The Shona people are portrayed as people with dignity and history.

The three respondents concur about Mutasa's endeavour to rewrite the pre-colonial Shona history through literature and correcting the distortions made by early writers like Chakaipa. Chakaipa's negative depiction and conceptualisation of the African communitarian worldview of *ubuntu* is shown in his portrayal of pre-colonial Shona political system in *Pfumo Reropa* (1961). In the novel, Chakaipa presents the pre-colonial Shona governmental system as anarchical. Chakaipa writes that:

Munyika muno makanga mune madzishe akasiyana. Mambo oga oga aitonga nematongerero aimufadza. Hapana aimuti nhai iwe haugoni kutonga. (p.1).

(In this land, there were many types of chiefs. Each chief ruled in a manner that pleased him. There was nobody to question their competence).

The above excerpt is at variance with the pre-colonial Shona system of governance and ignores the significance of *ubuntu* in fostering good governance. The statement suggests that pre-colonial Shona chiefs governed their subjects according to their aspirations and understanding. This is a distortion of pre-colonial Shona constitutional thought premised on *ubuntu* worldview as the pre-

colonial Shona people were aware of the view that chieftainship is realised through subjects. This view stresses the fact that the king owes his status and the powers that go with that status to the will of his subjects. The chief's mandate to rule rests upon the consent of his subjects and a leader who is without the consent of his subjects lacks *ubuntu* and is not a semblance of power. In a telephone interview, respondent G, a lecturer at California State University argued that:

The caricature of African people in literature and the falsification of African history serves to appreciate Europeans as the only originators, architects and makers of history.

The above discussion on Chakaipa serves to corroborate respondents' view that Mutasa sets out to correct early writers' negative depiction and conceptualisation of the African communitarian worldview of *ubuntu*. However, the respondents seem to observe Mutasa's strengths while ignoring his weaknesses as a writer. This study contends that acknowledging writers' weaknesses helps shape literature in a very positive way as there is a sense in which writers and readers are influenced by critical works on fiction.

This study therefore argues that Mutasa's weakness is dehumanising pre-colonial Shona women by portraying them as people who can sacrifice their humanity in order to advance society's projected goals. Ndomboya, Karukai and the other women who sing before Dyembeu's army while naked in order to weaken the warriors lack the basic determinant of humanity, which is dignity. To portray mothers appearing naked before warriors is to degrade and demean women. Gwakwa (2014:144) states that:

Ubuntu underscores the importance of consensus and respect of one's body. *Ubuntuism* prescribes a culture of shared meaning, community-oriented approaches to life, respect for others and insist on descent dressing.

The writer seems to undervalue the centrality of dignity in the life of every human being. There is a deep sense of decency in the Zimbabwe *ubuntu* worldview that the 2015 Miss World Zimbabwe, Thabiso Phiri, was stripped of her crown when images of her posturing in nude were posted on social media. She was forced to renounce her crown in order to safeguard the image of the pageantry. Mutasa seems to overlook the view that human dignity must be upheld in all situations.

CONCLUSION

This article has defined *ubuntu* as patterns of behaviour acceptable to African people which embodies virtues that celebrate mutual social responsibility, empathy, collective unity, conformity, tolerance, humanness, harmony, obedience, group solidarity, mutual assistance,

togetherness, brotherhood, equality, compassion, sympathy, trust, sharing, unselfishness, self-reliance, caring and respect for others. The research discussed and analysed how the concept of *ubuntu* is portrayed and applied in *Nhume Yamambo* engaging the Africana Womanist theory. The study has argued that Mutasa's conception of *ubuntu* and pre-colonial gender in *Nhume Yamambo* is ambivalent. He portrays pre-colonial Shona women as people who are endowed with *ubuntu* values, very visible and active in society and contributing significantly to the rhythm of pre-colonial Shona life. Mutasa depicts pre-colonial Shona women as crucial war strategists, occupying important socio-political and religious statuses and as people whose existence is connected with that of their society. Such a conceptualisation of *ubuntu* and precolonial Shona women is rooted in the Africana Womanist theory and it promotes Shona fiction which is utilitarian. However, the research argues that Mutasa's weakness in *Nhume Yamambo* is that he demeans pre-colonial Shona women by depicting them as people who can sacrifice their *ubuntu*. He undervalues the centrality of dignity in people's lives which must be upheld in all situations. To that extent the negative portrayal of *uuntu* and pre-colonial Shona women does not promote the moral fabric of the Zimbabwean society through fiction.

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