
**RURALISATION OF URBAN LIFE AND THE LOSS OF *ubuntu* IN
MABASA'S *Mapenzi* (1999)**

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ABSTRACT

This article critically analyses how Ignatius Mabasa depicts the ruralisation of urban life and the resultant loss of *ubuntu* in his novel *Mapenzi*. The study relies on content analysis of the novel, critical reviews from various scholars, journals and theses. The theoretical framework is guided by Afrocentricity which is fundamental to the illumination of meaning. The research contends that Mabasa engages the ruralisation of urban life in Chitungwiza to highlight the degrading and dehumanising living conditions which have stripped people of their *ubuntu* as they strive to survive under a dysfunctional society of lunatics characterised by poverty, unhappiness, diseases and deaths. The economic decline which has impoverished people leading to the ruralisation of urban life is squarely a result of failed policies and lack of leadership which exudes *ubuntu* ethos of accountability, transparency, honesty and integrity. Mabasa's *Mapenzi* which demonstrates the nexus between Shona fiction, accommodation crisis and *ubuntu* is compatible with the promotion of Shona fiction which is utilitarian as it challenges leaders to embrace *ubuntu* as their guiding precept in formulating and implementing policies which are people oriented and which promote collective unity, equality, happiness, caring and group solidarity which are *ubuntu* virtues.

Keywords: *Ubuntu*, Afrocentricity, qualitative, ruralisation, communitarian, paradigm

INTRODUCTION

This article is a discourse on Mabasa's portrayal of the ruralisation of urban life and the resultant loss of *ubuntu* in his novel *Mapenzi*. The research examines whether or not the writer's depiction and understanding of *ubuntu* helps in promoting Shona fiction which is utilitarian. In that regard, the research assesses the extent to which the writer's vision of *ubuntu* and the ruralisation of urban life is progressive and liberating. The African indigenous worldview of *ubuntu* encapsulates features that celebrate mutual social responsibility, mutual assistance, trust, sharing,

self-reliance, caring and respect for others, among other ethical ethos. These axiological aspects influence the way people participate in various spheres of their lives. In this study, *ubuntu* is perceived as the school of African life that generates ethos which, in turn, proceeds to inform, govern and direct Shona people's social, religious, economic and political institutions. *Ubuntu*, which is historically intergenerational, is a product of the African people's cultural experiences and derives from their cultural heritage (Mandova, 2012:358). Through a conceptual dissection of *Mapenzi* and the ruralisation of urban life, the research locates itself within the broad context of discourses that aspire to fashion out an emancipatory and sustainable solution to Zimbabwe's contemporary nation building challenges.

It is the spirit of communal fellowship and solidarity that African people celebrate. They believe that all those that constitute their society should join common cause in confronting challenges that threaten their existence. The individual's separate existence is viewed as subordinate to that of society. African people believe that social fragmentation is detrimental to the realisation of societal goals. It produces individuals who act in ways that are not commensurate with the celebrated ethos of society. The essence is to view one's interests within the framework of societal aspirations. An individual is not analysed apart from his problems, because his challenges are also the challenges of his society. As Ramose (1999:79) observes:

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 envioning 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 ontologically, but also in regard to epistemic accessibility.

The Ndebele proverb says *Unyawo alulampumulo* (the foot has no rest), which means that one may also find oneself in a situation where he or she too, is a stranger or visitor. For this reason, one must be generous to others, just as one expects them to be when he or she is lost or when travelling. Hospitality is thus regarded as a stringent duty (Mandova, 2013:366).

This research contends that good governance is a manifestation of *ubuntu*. The Shona proverbs *ishe makurukota* (a king is his council) and *munhu kubata ushe makurukota* (kingship depends on councillors) embody governmental principles that put at the centre the active participation by society. While the first proverb implies that a ruler is sustained by his advisors, the latter further echoes the inviolable import of advisors, hence denigrating monopolistic or dictatorial tendencies. 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 is 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 (1999:144) 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 (ibid) 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 Shona history and culture assisted leaders. These were the old men who occupied the chair of Shona history. The advisors and councillors of kings were mandated by experience to take over the preservation and dissemination of Shona history and culture as the vital core of governance. These councillors and advisors had a strong grasp of governmental principles that were in tandem with the shared philosophy of life of the Shona people. They were the archives of governmental principles.

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 usiyiranwa* (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. (Mandova, 2013:367). This brief definition is employed in the analysis of *Mapenzi*.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts the qualitative research methodology. Farooq et al. (2011:283) contend that qualitative research deals with phenomena that are difficult or impossible to quantify mathematically such as beliefs, meanings and attitudes. Hancock (2009:06) concurs with the above definition and asserts that qualitative research focuses on reports of experience or on data which cannot be adequately expressed numerically and tends to focus on how people can have different ways of looking at reality, how attitudes and opinions are formed, how people are affected by the events that go on around them and how and why cultures have developed in the way they have.

A study whose focus is an exploration of Mabasa's portrayal of the ruralisation of urban life and the loss of *ubuntu* in *Mapenzi* can therefore be best carried out by engaging the qualitative research methodology. Furthermore, this study adopts the qualitative research method because

“it is much more fluid and flexible than quantitative research in that it emphasises discovering novel or unanticipated findings and the possibility of altering research plans in response to such serendipitous occurrences. This is contrasted sharply with the quantitative methodologist’s research design with its emphasis upon fixed measurements, hypothesis (or hunch) testing and a much less protracted form of fieldwork involvement” (Bryman, 1984:78).

This article engages Afrocentricity which is a theory of human liberation and a theory grounded in African history and culture, a theory which seeks the centrality of African ethos, interests and ideals in interrogating Mabasa’s portrayal of ruralisation of urban life in *Mapenzi*. Molefi Kete Asante, who coined the term Afrocentricity, is the principal advocate for the Afrocentric school of thought. Among other scholars who have helped to inspire, develop and popularise the Afrocentric ideas are the following: Ama Mazama; Ngugi wa Thiong’o; Marimba Ani; Kwame Nantambu; Danjuma Modupe; J.A Sofala; Maulana Karenga; Chinweizu; Runoko Rashidi; Terry Kershaw; Cheikh Anta Diop; Chinua Achebe; Kariamuwelsh Asante; John Henrik Clarke; Chancellor Williams; Jacob Carruthers; Tsehloane Keto.

Asante (1998:02) defines Afrocentricity as “...literally placing African ideals at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour”. He also avers that “Afrocentricity is an intellectual perspective deriving its name from the centrality of African people and phenomena in the interpretation of data” (Asante, in Hudson-Weems, 2007:29). The Afrocentric perspective, Okafor (2010:11) contends, “...is a simple idea that African ideals and values must be centrally situated in any analysis involving African culture and behaviour”. Asante (2003:02) also asserts that:

Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values and perspectives predominate. In regards to theory, it is the placing of African people in the centre of any analysis of African phenomena.

From all the above definitions, one can assert that Afrocentricity, as a literary-critical theory, seeks the centrality of Africans, continental and diasporic, in their own history in all circumstances where Africans are involved. Proceeding from the above definitions, Afrocentricity is an appropriate perspective for this research because:

It is clear that we need to operate from the start with Africa at the centre of all analyses concerning African life and thought, thereby eliminating futile efforts in appropriating outside constructs. To be sure an authentic paradigm must be mandatory for African theorists so that our lives and texts could be accurately construed and interpreted. (Hudson-Weems, 2007:85).

Africans have been moved off their cultural locations and now exist in borrowed platforms. Ani (1994:01) notes that culture carries rules for thinking and if people impose their culture on their victims they could limit the creativity of their vision, thus annihilating their capacity to act with tenacity and in their own interest. She notes that Europeans commit their cultural lifetime to becoming what to others is not necessarily desirable.

The European representation of the 'non European' is the phenomenon that they disdain. In their opinion, people of other cultures are in essence irrational (ibid:240). An African-centred reading of European cultural history expounds the centrality of racialist perceptions in European ideology (ibid:241). This is why Zanden, cited in Ani (ibid:292) writes that:

The social, moral, and political, as well as the physical history of the Negro race, bears strong testimony against them; it furnishes the most undeniable truth of their mental inferiority. In no age or condition has the real negro shown a capacity to throw off the chains of barbarism and brutality that have long bound down the nations of that race: or to rise above the common cloud of darkness that still broods over them.

Thus, European self-definition and self-fulfilment depend on 'negative' representations of others and the role of European image of others is to buttress the European self-image. Afrocentricity thus, seeks to reposition Africans and reality from the fringes of European thinking, attitude and doctrines to a centred, positively located place within the domain of science and culture (Asante in Hudson-Weems, 2007:30). Thus, it contests the furtherance of white racial supremacist notions in the imagination of the African and the entire world (Asante, 2003:02). Afrocentricity interrogates the perpetuation of white racial domination over all images. Thus Asante in Hudson-Weems (2007:31) writes:

No one constructs or writes about re-positioning and re-centering merely for the sake of self-indulgence, none could afford to do so because the African dispossession appears so great and the displacing myths so pervasive that simply to watch the procession of African peripheralisation is to acquiesce in African de-centering.

Thus, to be centred is to be situated in the framework of African interests and culture. Afrocentricity as a liberating perspective contends that Africans possess the cultural aptitude to see, explicate and interpret from the vantage point of their existential location. Afrocentrists contend that one's analysis is more often than not related to where a person's mind is located, for instance, one can tell if an African is located in a culturally centred position vis-a vis the African world by how that person relates to African information (Asante, 2007:42).

The Afrocentric paradigm as a theory of human liberation is therefore the best guiding framework in this study which examines Mabasa's depiction and understanding of *ubuntu* and the ruralisation of urban life in his novel *Mapenzi*. It puts the researcher at an advantage in ascertaining whether or not the writer is in a centred or marginal place with regards to his portrayal of the African communitarian worldview of *ubuntu* and the ruralisation of urban life because there could be no social or economic struggle that would be significant if African people remained entangled with the philosophical and intellectual locations of white hegemonic nationalism as it relates to Africa and African people. Moreover:

Afrocentricity is the most complete philosophical totalisation of the African being at the centre of his or her existence. It is not merely an artistic or literary movement, or an individual or collective quest for authenticity, it is above all the total use of method to effect psychological, political, social, cultural and economic change (Asante, 1998:137).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Mabasa highlights accommodation crisis in the urban areas and portrays characters who are living under degrading and dehumanising conditions. He depicts how ruralisation of urban life has stripped people of their *ubuntu* as they strive to survive under a dysfunctional society characterised by poverty, unhappiness, diseases and deaths. Magumbate, Maushe and Nyoni (2013:16) define ruralisation as:

The wholesale decay in the quality of life of people in urban areas to a level that their quality of life will be more akin to rural areas and sometimes inferior than that of their rural counterparts. Ruralisation is evidenced by very poor urban social services, inadequate infrastructure and unsustainable livelihoods.

Mabasa describes squatter camps in unit D Chitungwiza where *mai* Tanya lives as unsuitable for human habitation:

Chitangwena chacho chainzi vanodzingwa chaive chakatoora zvacho. Yaingovewo imba nekuti vanhu vanoshaya, asi kune vaye vane mari yekuchengeta imbwa, havaimbobvuma kuti imbwa dzavo dzirare munhu makadaro. Zvaive zvimidhadhadha zvichingoenda kunge matiroko echitima. (p.111-112).

(The shack from which they were to be removed was unlivable and dirty. It was in a squalid and dilapidated state, not even fit for a dog to stay. It was a line of collapsing shacks like abandoned train compartments).

The author's statement shows that accommodation in the urban areas has reduced people to the level of subhumans. In the Shona society, when one says *uri imbwa yemunhu* (you are a dog) it shows that the person lacks *ubuntu* and is not fully human. This shows the extent to which Mai Tanya and her family have been dehumanised as the author suggests that their habitat is even unsuitable for dogs.

Generally, urban areas rely on modern forms of livelihoods and modern social amenities, are distinctive by using chlorinated tapped water while water in rural areas comes from wells, boreholes and rivers; urban areas have tarmac roads and pavements, rely on cleaner energy sources, people are employed in a money economy, people live in beautiful houses and they use fastest modes of transport. (ibid). Mabasa's portrayal of life in Chitungwiza does not indicate the characteristics of urban life but shows an area which is ruralising:

Zvimatenga zvedzimba dzekuzvivakira pasina mvumo yekanzuru dzemuUnit D kuChitungwiza, zviya zvekungonamanama chimbi chimbi kupinde maroja, musi uyu zvakadonha pamwe nekumwauka. Ko dzimba idzi dzaimbove namaplan here? Kwaingove kungoti rumwe rutivi kune zvidhinha zvisina kutsva pamwe mapuranga akabiwa kumaindasitiri, nezvimapurisitiki zvefetiraiza nezvimwewo zvitema zvaibviwa nazvo kuSiya so kuMbare. Kana zviri nani waitozomboonawo hwindo repuranga rekutsigira nechimuti asi zhinji dzaive dzisina mahwindo. Chikuru kuvanhu ava kwaive kuwana pekuisa musoro. (p.110).

(On that day, the roofs of these unplanned, unapproved buildings collapsed and fell down. These shacks in Chitungwiza's Unit D had not been approved by council and had no plans. They were hurriedly erected to house lodgers. The structures were poor and dangerous. On one site they were built with unbaked clay bricks supported with planks and plastic paper picked from the industries on the other sides. In rare cases would these rooms have wooden windows, otherwise they were just hovels. The inhabitants were only interested in having somewhere secret to rest their bodies).

One might contend that the author engages the ruralisation of urban life in Chitungwiza to expose the deteriorating livelihoods, inadequate service delivery, poor sewer services, unhygienic toileting, poor roads, use of unsustainable energy sources, inadequate and poor housing which have disconnected people from life of human dignity, happiness and kinship. Jonga and Munzwa (2010:139) corroborate the author's portrayal of life in Chitungwiza:

Urban centres in Zimbabwe can best be described now as marked by sickening misery due to increased urban poverty. These hardships explain the increased rate in crime, the resort by urbanites to the ventures of the informal sector and in the case of housing, the manifestations of alternatives like multi-habitation, squatter camps and informal land subdivisions. Many urban dwellers still live under conditions that are offensive, demeaning, demoralising and debilitating.

The loss of *ubuntu* in urban centres due to accommodation crisis is aptly captured by Mabasa's observation that "Ah, handiti vazhinji vaiwana baba, mai, vana, muzukuru, hanzvadzi, navamwene mumba mumwe chete?" (p.110). (In most cases, father, mother, children, brothers and sisters, nephews slept in same room). This statement shows that urban life and poverty are eroding *ubuntu* which used to act as the ethical and cultural compass that direct and guide the Shona people's conduct. It seems the author blames lack of ethical leadership for the ruralisation of urban life which is stripping people of their humanity. Achebe (1983:01) points out that:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land, or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership.

CONCLUSION

This article contends that Mabasa engages the ruralisation of urban life in Chitungwiza to expose the deteriorating livelihoods, inadequate service delivery, poor sewer services, unhygienic toileting, poor roads, use of unsustainable energy sources, inadequate and poor housing which have disconnected people from life of human dignity, happiness and kinship. The economic decline which has impoverished people leading to the ruralisation of urban life is squarely a result of failed policies and lack of leadership which exude *ubuntu* values of accountability, transparency, honesty and integrity. Mabasa's *Mapenzi* which demonstrates the nexus between Shona fiction, accommodation crisis and *ubuntu* is compatible with the promotion of Shona fiction which is utilitarian as it challenges leaders to embrace *ubuntu* as their guiding precept in formulating and implementing policies which are people oriented and which promote collective unity, happiness, equality, caring and group solidarity which are *ubuntu* virtues.

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