

The Sacred Duty of Animals in African Traditional Religion and Culture

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For the Conference “Future Africa”: Appropriating Natures for the Future: Africa and Beyond

The study of African traditional religio-culture and contemporary ethical issues has concentrated on exploring how African traditional religio-culture can be part of the solution in relation to health and wellbeing issues, human rights, gender, sexual orientation and environmental issues. All these have been anthropocentric. This means the human beings are regarded as the beneficial of the positive resources in African traditional religio-culture. It appears much still need to be done in terms of exploring resources in African traditional religio-culture that can serve the wellbeing of the non-human world. The aim of this research is to examine African traditional religio-cultural attitudes to animals related to specific beliefs and practices in order to demonstrate the view that animals are not second class citizens in the African traditional religio-cultural worldview. A major assumption of this research is that in Traditional African religious culture animals and birds are given prominence in spiritual, sacred, health, soteriological and identity matters.

The paper considers the meaning of specific animal symbols in Shona traditional religion with reference to belief in mashura (omens). This belief revolves around specific animals being connected with bringing messages of life, death, social order customs and practices and also cases where some animals are actually believed to the deity. The fifth section will dwell

on the role of animals in traditional Shona medicine. This explores the role of some parts of animals in treating diseases. This will connect well with the last section which will focus on Shona traditional rituals and sacrifices.

The concerns raised in the various section of the research will therefore demonstrate that in African traditional religion and culture animals are first class citizens of the Shona world and worldview which recognizes relationship between animals and humans. The loss of animals therefore means also the loss of African religio-cultural identity.

This paper contributes to theme on the issue of dominant concepts of nature, in relation to wildlife and nature culture relations in colonial and postcolonial Africa and beyond. It primarily contributes to the issue of notions and narratives of human-environment relations pertaining to animals.

Methodology for Data Collection

The study adopted a qualitative research paradigm based on document analysis, focus group discussion as well as observation. Through the field work the researcher had time to analyse natural behaviour as Shona people perceived it rather than imposing value judgements. In the field the researcher extracted first hand information that was triangulated with document analysis as well as observation as an insider. The researcher had both open ended and unstructured interviews which allowed for the extraction of rich data for it allowed flexibility and freedom to explore on certain points highlighted in the focus groups. Focus group discussion allowed the diversity of thinking and detection of inconsistency and disagreements. The interviews targeted those in the Shona culture of Zimbabwe. The Shona Chiefs, heads of villages, elderly, as well as a traditional healer lady in the community who are considered the custodians of Shona culture. Interviews of approximately an hour were

held twice weekly during lunch times with the open ended and unstructured interview guides guiding the interviewer roughly. The open ended and unstructured interviews also allowed freedom to the informants to explore more on points of interest and extent on others view points. The interview guide had questions like, ‘What are some of your experiences of those animals and birds which are significant to the Shona people of Zimbabwe? What is the significance of animals and birds you know in your Shona community? Is there a possibility of reengagement of the significance of animals and birds in national environmental education curriculum? The focus group informants expand on the issues. Interview data was transcribed in the note pad with interviewee’s consent.

Data

Presentation

Animals

Baboons



When a traveller saw a baboon or baboons seated or walking it signified that there was no problem. The traveller would travel happily and safely. It meant the ancestors had blessed the journey, but if one saw one baboon seated with its palm on cheek looking sad/ unhappy it meant the journey was unsafe and the ancestors of the land would be advising the traveller to go back. If the reason of the journey was urgent so that one could not go back the traveller was advised to put snuff under a tree clapping hands pleading for guidance during the journey. If the baboon stood and walked away it meant they accepted to guide the traveller. If the baboon remained seated and instead removed the palm from the cheek and looked down it meant that the journey was unsafe and the traveller could continue only if prepared to meet the consequences which was definitely going to happen.

Their significance came upon seeing them as well as hearing their roaring or barking and never in dreams. Baboons were also significant in that they are royal creatures. The baboon in this case was said to be mostly significant among the Karanga. Its appearance in the homestead is regarded a sign of bad omen which might mean that it is *chikwambo*. Chitando (1996:60) “...vindictive spirit and should not be harmed as that could lead to more trouble.” It was revealed that this may have been sent by guardian spirits as a messenger to destroy crops as punishment for break certain taboos. Hodza (1983) noted that violating taboos could involve telling folktales (*ngano*) during the day or during summer. This attracted punishment in the form of crops being destroyed by pests or animals. Chitando (ibid) further argued that the presence of baboons in an area “can be an indicator of safety and only baboons remain in the vicinity.” So in this case baboons serve both as either bad omen or guardians for the safety of communities.

Monkey



If a monkey crossed the road slowly that you are forced to reduce the speed either of the car, bus or even on foot it definitely meant the journey was unsafe. Each time a traveller met the monkey it was supposed to run and shown to be playful. This signified the assurance of a

safe journey. The sadness of the monkey was said to be a sign that the ancestors or guardians of the land were not approving the journey. In the case that the monkeys seemed sad and depressed it really meant that the traveller was supposed to return wherever they were coming from and possibly continue another day. Likewise if one was visiting a seriously ill person it then meant the ill person would not recover soon. In such cases one would ritually ask if the custodians of the land could possibly guide.

Tsimba and Chikovo

If *tsimba* and/or *chikovo* crossed the road before someone it meant a bad omen. This did not necessarily mean that the guardians of the land were warning the traveller to discontinue, but that the traveller was not likely to find what they may be going to collect or the person they would be looking for. This meant that the traveller was going to spend a little bit more time than expected waiting for the person or what they wanted to collect. A possibility might have been that the person they were visiting was cheating on someone.

Lion



The lion is another animal which is significant in the Shona traditional society and as such is preserved and well protected. Lions are also regarded as royal game. They are considered as mediums of Shona ancestors who are the guardians of the land. Seeing the lion was said to be

a sign that the guardians of the land (*vekunyikadzimu*) will be touring around the land as an assurance of the security of the land and its people. Likewise the lion was not supposed to be harmed as that would attract severe suffering for either the offender or the whole Shona community or even both.

Leopard



The leopard was also very significant to the Shona people of Zimbabwe especially the Manyika. It was a taboo to kill a leopard which also had the status of being a royal game. Their skins are very important among the Shona in that only renowned traditional healers and

traditional leaders could put on leopard skins. They were said to be killed only and only when the chief or a traditional leader wanted the skin. The hunter was supposed to be given permission to kill the leopard by traditional leaders without which it could not be killed. Thus the leopards could be preserved and protected and ensuring safety of those rare species.

Elephant



The elephant was significant for its by products which had significance in traditional medical practices and rituals. in their connection of healing different ailments So the elephant had medicinal significance. Elephant hooves were used to treat backache; its skin was used to treat fontanel epistaxes in young children and epilepsy, meat treat pneumonia, fat treat

leprosy convulsions and any other cardiac problems. So elephants were significant for healthcare hence were preserved and protected (Chitando, 1996:62).

Wild Pig



Wild pigs in some Shona communities were also very significant. The appearance of wild pigs in the vicinity was a sign of the presence of *vekunyikadzimu/ mhondoro* in an area. Similarly they do not destroy crops unless sent to punish them on violating certain taboos. The interviewees insisted that these wild pigs could not be killed no matter what. An attempt to harm or kill these animals in the royal family attracted serious misfortunes like drought, pests and human or livestock diseases.

Pangolin



The pangolin (*harakabvuka*) was also found to be very significant among the various Shona dialects. The pangolin was highly valued across all Shona communities, preserved and the most protected species. It was mainly special especially for kings for instance if one caught it and or saw it, one had to report and or hand it over to the kings. So pangolins were apart from being under the royal game a rare species which survived through protection to today. The pangolin meat was only eaten by kings or chiefs. Hunting and killing a pangolin was also a taboo and treated with utmost speciality. A pangolin also signified that a person who saw it has long life or that is going to be a great person in life. On sending the pangolin to the chief the person would be given cattle and the number depended on a particular the Shona community. It was also evidence of long life for the reigning chief.

Snakes



The interview data analysis also revealed that there is also a group of snakes which were also significant to the Shona people of Zimbabwe. These snakes include python, double headed snake and *ndara*.

The python was important especially for its medicinal purpose in healing. Its fat was used for healing the sick by the traditional healers. The killing of a python or even its appearance near the homestead signified trouble. No matter which snake a person saw it was not supposed to move and was supposed to be straight and still. If the snake tried to run away or become violent it was definitely a misfortune; probably death or serious illness of some close relative.

The appearance of such royal snake may be a sign of the ancestors complaining for lack of appeasement. Here the traditional healer in an interview had her face getting tense as evidence of the seriousness of the matter. In her words, “it is a serious misfortune and the snake is not supposed to be killed but instead invite the elderly to talk to it. If it had message from the ancestors it remained still and calm. It would accord the people time to consult a traditional healer to interpret the message for the family.” She even said that if it was manifestation of witchcraft it would be violent and may even swallow a person or a beast. It was also noted that when a **python** was crossing a road or path ahead of someone, the person would have to stop and close eyes allowing the custodian of the land to pass. This meant that the ancestors were guiding the traveller and no harm would be experienced.

Definitely no attempts should be made to harm the python because it was the royal snake which should be protected and preserved. If the royal creatures were harmed they attracted harm to the offender or the entire community. Similarly when person intended to travel the following day or in the near future and happen to have a dream that features a python then it meant the journey was safe. It means the guardians of the land will guide the traveller in the journey.

The double headed snake (*shukuviri*) again signify trouble if seen around the homestead. Definitely no attempts would be made to harm or kill it as it is a messenger from ancestors (*vekunyikadzimu*) that perhaps something wrong and certain rituals like brewing beer and beast slaughter was needed to appease the ancestors. A taboo may have been breached and that would be a messenger that they consulted on what should be done.

Sometimes a newly married woman had a dream of any of the above snakes it means the person is pregnant. Any of the a snakes given under data presentation may signify that a person has *mudzimu* or a manifestation of the ancestral spirit on a person, the snake will coil

on that person when looking for fire wood in the bush or even when at home and can only uncoil after the elderly have seen it put snuff besides the shelf clapping hands and telling ancestors (*vekunyikadzimu*) that they acknowledged their presence and will definitely take the necessary steps to commission the person. The snake will remain calm uncoil and lie straight for people to kill it. The person no matter how young will kill it and take its bones for healing purposes. From then on, the person will be a traditional healer.

Birds



The birds have also significance to the Shona people of Zimbabwe though with slight variations in the different Shona communities. The following birds emanated from the focus

groups discussions *mashuranyama*, eagle, secretary birds, owl and others. Chitando (1996:61) says “Birds are closer and nearer to the sky and are regarded as part of sacred manifestations.” Among the Shona people and Karanga in particular the *mashuranyama* birds signify or predict joy like a party or a wedding where people will have lots of meat. In that same Karanga dialect that is where a dove is also significant in that it predicts good luck or even signalling the coming of visitors. Thus the birds were held with high esteem hence preserved and protected.

Nationwide in Zimbabwe among the Shona, the data revealed the significance of an eagle (*chapungu*) as the royal bird and a messenger from the ancestors. The eagle was widely followed during Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle when it led the comrades and gave them security against the Smith soldiers. The eagle also led the comrades on safe routes on their long and uncomfortable journeys in the jungle.

As also revealed from the focus group interviews, the secretary birds (*matendrerera*) are widely believed to be subject to the local myth. The stork birds (*shuramurove*) and swallow bird (*nyenganyenga*) are all associated with the onset of rain season. Likewise these birds even today are treated with high esteem as part of communication with the sacred realm.

The owl is also significant in connection with witch craft activities. Its presence in or near the homestead is bad omen and considered as the presence of witches especially at night. Likewise an attempt to harm or kill it attracts more trouble to the people. The focus group member disagreed some saying the owl does not see during the day while others say it does. Those saying it only see during night said it only see during night when it is used as messenger by witches.

Insects

The insects are also very significant to the Shona people of Zimbabwean and the Karanga people of Bikita in particular. The insects foretell and predict coming of rains, commencing of rain season and whether the season is going to be good or bad. Mrs Zuka noted that, *harurwa* are very important insects as they are a signal weather the farming season is going to be good or bad. If they appeared in huge quantities definitely they foretell drought, then Chief Mazungunye would commission for people to catch them and store to cushion people in drought. *Harurwa* could be caught without the consent of chief Nerumedzo as it will become misty and poachers will not see or catch them. From the writer's experience ancestors send *harurwa* to rescue the Shona from starvation hence *harurwa* is only found in Bikita District in Masvingo for chief Ziki to serve his people.

It was also revealed that *majuru* termites when seen for more than two days collecting grass in large quantities it is a sign that rain is about to come. Mr Muchokore said by the time the *majuru* would stop collecting grass and disappear then the rains will come shortly. In this he continued and said people would be encouraged to work also as hard as *majuru* during the coming of the rain season.

Zvipembenene (beetles) and *nyenze* (cicadas) when seen flying around and singing restlessly day and night especially when it is hot day it meant the rain season was approaching. The *nyenze* were be heard when it was almost three weeks away from the commencement of the rain season. These insects served to inform the Shona especially to start land and seed preparation.

Data Analysis

Data revealed that, the significance of the animals and birds varied from communication with the dead and ancestors, foretelling future events like fortunes and misfortunes, foretelling long life and death to daily weather conditions and seasons. This was mainly because the Shona communities are agro- based. That is in line with Chisaka (1999) who said philosophy reflects the environment in which it was born and developed. This was why most of the significance of the animals and birds are linked to the land cultivation, growing of crops and destruction of fields when taboos are violated. The prediction is guided by what Tasara and Maposa (2012) say; “the quantity and behaviour of creatures is the basis of prediction and also imminence and intensity of rainfall in particular.”

The insects are very important as they are one of those groups that survived taming. Most animals and snakes are now tamed in game parks and snake parks that they can no longer properly serve as significant in predicting and predicting and facilitate communication between the living and the dead as well as ancestors.

Human interference in taming animals and birds has stifled that symbiotic relationship that existed between the Shona and their environment. It is in the light of this argument that, the writer is advocating for bio-centric approach. In this the preservation of animals is no longer based on Euro-centric concept of intrinsic value but on Afro-centric concept of wanting to restore the of relationality. The relationship with nature should be symbiotic when people and animals and birds in this case is of more or less equals. The writer agree with Ranger (1988) who notes that, “...Traditional African ecology, like everything else in Shona society, is inseparably linked with traditional religion. Environmental protection is sanctioned by the

creator and the ancestors of the land.” This is in resonant with what Mr Muchekayaora a headman notes in an interview that, “Hunting was regulated and commissioned by the custodians of the land *mhondoro*. They had a policy that no hunting could be undertaken in *Mbudzi* or November. Chitando (1996) noted that the month was associate with breeding. In that she noted that even if in exceptional circumstances hunting could be permitted, female species were prohibited to promote breeding. So *vadzimu vaisumwa* meaning ancestors could be informed and snuff could be sprinkled under a tree to allow trespassing the prohibition which was meant for sustainability.

Animals and birds are also significant to the Shona people of Zimbabwe as they are considered as totems for instance lion, elephant and others. These and other animals could not be eaten or killed by the people belong to the respective totems lest will risk illness of loosing teeth (Tatira, 2000, Chigidi, 2009 and Chitando 1996). The animals were in the process preserved and protected. Even today people still address each other through names of these animals which serve as their identity a sign of its resilience. It is a taboo for same totem people to marry this means our decisions as Shona people are still informed by the significance of animals and birds

Various animals on being seen, heard crying or dreamt about, meant something which was either good or bad. Machimbira’s focus group of chief’s dare council number one noted that when travelling either by car, by bus or on foot the ancestors will be with us all the way. They are companions on journeys.

The Significance of Animals and Implications to the Environmental Education

Curriculum

Given choice, definitely as an educationist from data gathered and analysed, the writer advocate for inclusion of the significance of various animals and birds in the educational curricula at various levels. However the product cannot have a free way into the curriculum without some modifications vetting for aspects which still hold the day and prune those that are no longer necessary. The Shona attitude to nature is a virtue which undoubtedly is important to curb the environmental degradation and climatic deterioration. Though scholars like Taringa (2006) take the Shona's attitude to nature as ambivalent and even fear of curse form custodians of land than real knowledge of environmental conservation the outcome is good, animals were conserved and the good attitude should continue.

A cultural sensitive in curriculum planning as curriculum planners could not help but to unpack and take stock of what is good from its culture for inclusion into modern education. Lawton (1980) described curriculum as "a selection from culture", but the crucial question still stands, whose culture is represented in the Zimbabwean Shona curriculum when our significance of animals and birds is still out and jostling for position in the curriculum. Can we afford to go without this unique and valuable skill of predicting and foreseeing into the future for timorous planning? The answer is definitely no we cannot.

The population of Zimbabwe the Shona in particular are languishing in poverty while vital knowledge that can possibly empower them through good health, safe environment is abandoned under the carpet. The curriculum is the only vehicle to export this to the succeeding generations or else the custodians will die and go with it. The environmental education should be seen maintaining the attitude where, people are not masters over nature to exploit it without feeling or treat it without respect.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The oneness of the Shona human and animal community seems to be disturbed by westernisation. This is where some animals are now tamed in game parks thus separating them from human world. Animals are in national parks. The snakes are also tamed in snake parks where their contact with human world is now limited and artificial. The paper has therefore attempted to reclaim the ‘importance of significance of animals. It has demonstrated that animals and birds are significant in relation to communication, to prediction, foreseeing the future in relation to long life, death, fortunes and misfortunes, weather and seasons through communication with the ancestors. The paper was guided by the need to explore how indigenous knowledge systems (the significance of animals and birds) can possibly be used to predict and foresee into the future. The ability to predict and foresee is vital and unique skill as it is linked to the Shona’s socio-eco- politico and religious organisations given that the Shona communities are agro-based. They need to predict diseases for livestock, drought, life and illnesses of its people. The paper has argued for the possibility of an environmental education curriculum based on indigenous knowledge related to the relationship between the Shona and animals and birds. Finally based on the findings the researcher recommend that the research be replicated in other Shona dialects to establish the possibility of similarities and variations.

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