

Sarcasm and Music in Shona *Jakwara* Institution.

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Abstract

The paper explores the interplay of sarcasm, threshing and music during threshing of finger millet (jakwara). In this paper the combination of work, rhythm and sarcasm (chihwerure) during jakwara is regarded as a tripartite system in which the social commentary phenomenon is enacted. Currently very few farmers are still conducting jakwara functions since maize has subsequently substituted finger millet (zviyo, mhunga and mapfunde) as a staple crop and as such very few farmers grow zviyo at a large scale. This paper will go a long way in availing the proceedings of such an extinct agricultural event as well as acting as a preservation measure. The study adopted an ethnographic paradigm in which fieldwork was carried out in Hwedza District south of Harare the capital city of Zimbabwe. Some of the information enshrined in the article is drawn from the researcher's lived experiences as he is also a Zezuru by origin. Face-to-face interviews were carried out amongst the Shona people of Rapako village in Hwedza on issues concerning their perception on rhythm as it is articulated during jakwara. The findings indicated that the Shona people express rhythm, and personal feelings through work experiences and ceremonies. Jakwara is one such work ceremony in which a number of social aspects of the Shona are displayed. The most outstanding aspects are song, rhythm and sarcasm. It was also concluded that jakwara has become extinct in the Shona society hence the need to document it.

Key Words: Rhythm, Chihwerure, Jakwara, Zviyo, Nhimbe

Introduction

Many African societies are believed to be homogenous in nature. They are characterized by the spirit of selflessness and togetherness. Whatever they do is always a result of group effort. The spirit of working together and sharing of ideas and efforts among village members is part of their philosophy of life (*unhu/ ubuntu*). Like these African societies Shona people of Zimbabwe engage in several activities in which include inculcation of the spirit co-operation and socialization. Most of the social activities are related to agricultural experiences since they are highly agrarian. Examples of co-operative work are weeding in the fields and carrying manure to the field. One of the commonest co-operative work is threshing finger millet during an institution called *jakwara*.

This paper seeks to explore the indigenous knowledge system that is enshrined in the *jakwara* practice. It presents the Shona perception of rhythm as it is articulated

by the sound of the threshers of finger millet while at the same time accompanied by poetic singing. Issues to be discussed embrace the history of the Shona people with *zviyo* as the core of their cosmology. The paper will also outline how *jakwara* practice creates room for counseling fellow members of the community in order to restore peace and harmony. The paper unpacks the events that take place when *jakwara* institution is conducted. Songs that accompany threshing as well as poetic singing meant to discourage bad behavior (*chihwerure*) are presented and discussed.

Methodology

The information in this paper was collected through an ethnographic approach in which empirical data was solicited using face to face interviews with culture bearers. Also participant observation during a staged *jakwara* performance and recording of field notes, songs and audio visual images from Chikomba District in Mashonaland East in Zimbabwe were used to collect data. A sample of ten elders was purposively selected and interviewed on issues concerning *jakwara* as a traditional practice, songs sung when people thresh finger millet and the role of sarcasm as part of social criticism.

The writer grew up in Shona society and attended several *jakwara* ceremonies. From an emic perspective, the writer incorporates lived experiences gained during these ceremonies with the outcomes of the interviews and observation. The writer was assisted by members from Jambwa village in Chikomba District to organize a staged *jakwara* ceremony since such ceremonies are no longer common in the area. The writer, as a participant observer also added value to the data presented in this paper by adding his own voice concerning what he gathered through firsthand experience during *jakwara* ceremonies in Chikomba.

Zviyo, the source of power and prosperity for the Shona

Finger millet, *zviyo*, *rukweza* or *njera* is a grain crop with very small seeds that are brownish when ready for harvest. It is classified under the grass crops family. *Zviyo* as a crop should not be taken lightly for the Shona people. It is indeed a source of power and prosperity. It is a source of power in that the Shona spirituality hinges on this crop in that whenever the Shona want to communicate with their God (Mwari) they prepare traditional brew using this crop. It is a source of prosperity in that when Shona people conduct sacred ceremonies in which traditional brew is the core their lives improve for the better. In addition the crop has several functions in the lives of the Shona. It is used to make porridge (*bota*) for the children or for someone who is about to faint. The same crop is used to prepare traditional drink called *mahewu*. It is the one that is used to make thick porridge (*sadza rezviyo*) which was once the staple diet of Zimbabweans before the introduction of maize by

colonialism. and the main one is to prepare traditional brew and also to cook *sadza*. Long ago *sadza rezviyo* could last for days and was suitable for long distance travelers. After prepared it the *sadza* is put in a container (*tswanda*) for overnight storage. The following day the *sadza* will be dry and the traveler could carry it as part of food to eat when travelling (*mbuwa*). It was believed that if the food got finished during the course of the journey, one just went under a *muhacha* tree and conducted a short prayer to respond God (*Mwari*) asking for food. If the prayer was done genuinely, God would then by providing food in form of *sadza rezviyo*. One was not allowed to carry the food that is left after eating but had to leave it behind. These practices are testimonies of how important this crop was in the Shona culture and why it was the source of their power and prosperity.

When farming finger millet one has to till the land early in winter before the rains fall as part of preparation. In other words one needs to dry plough the land. Then take the seed of *zviyo* and broadcast them all over the land. Some farmers prefer planting the seeds in lines while others broadcast them randomly. Modern methods involve the use of a harrow to cover the seeds. Whatever the method, the idea is to cover the seeds with a thin layer of soil. When the rains come the seeds then germinate in their numbers. After a month or so family members then weed the crops by removing weeds as well as thinning them to leave the healthier ones. When ready the finger millet is threshed during a traditional ceremony called *jakwara*.

Jakwara ceremony

Jakwara is a special type of cooperative work in which village members come together to thresh finger millet. Jones (2000:xvii) defines *jakwara* as “threshing song or dance done communally, involving joking among the participants.” However her definition seems to neglect the aspect of threshing which is in fact the core of the activity. In addition I take *jakwara* to refer to all what Jones 2000 says plus the threshing. The Herald of 31st July 2015 defines *jakwara* as

..a season harvest event where all boundaries of decorum were broken and hurt feelings aired out in the open without fear or reprisal. It was the day to let go, to speak of grievances in one’s and to be heard because during the ceremony nothing was sacred on the mouths of the elders. This was the platform to speak out one’s mind in the open using song, poetry, dance and oratory.

It is within the context of *jakwara* that the Shona people juxtapose rhythm (*mutinhimira*) from threshing (*kupura*) and poetic singing (*chihwerure*). In this case *jakwara* creates space for villagers to express their inner feeling as well as disapproving any mischievous behaviors by fellow villagers. Usually it is a tenet that Africans do not directly denounce fellow community members. Instead bad behavior is

indirectly denounced by making use of proverbs and metaphors. Examples are given below:

- *Haabvaruri machira* (Does not tear blankets) meaning that the person is a witch craft.
- *Ane ruoko rurefu* (Has a long hand) means that someone is a thief.
- *Ane pamuromo* (Has a mouth) which means they provoke others
- *Muromo usinga mharwe nenhunzi* (Has a mouth that a fly cannot patch) which means they talk too much
- *Ane meso meso* (Has several faces) which means that one is promiscuous.

A *jakwara* can be regarded as a Shona institution in which social commentary and music are presented during threshing of finger millet. The articulations of rhythm produced by the threshers go a long way in providing information concerning how the Shona articulate rhythm when doing work. The events that take place during the *jakwara* ceremony are really a hive of indigenous knowledge covering a number of social aspects which include cooperation, counseling, sharing, singing, dancing and assisting each other.

As the threshing unfolds the participants produce certain rhythms with the threshers while singing different songs. Most of the songs have text that discourage bad behavior in the community. The singers may actually use obscene language as part of charisma. *Jakwara* is characterized by cooperation, counseling and singing, all done with rhythm (*mutinhimira*) as the unifying factor. The rhythm articulates the value of crotchet, minim and the semi-breve as illustrated in the transcription presented later on this article. Songs that articulate the value of crotchet are performed at the beginning and end of the *jakwara*. The reason being that at the beginning the participants have a lot of energy and are able to cope with the faster beat.

The *jakwara* model has four categories that are defined by the roles performed by participants. The first category comprises old women and men who will be seated drinking traditional brew and encouraging the threshers (*vapuri*) to work hard. The old men and women are the custodians of the *jakwara* institution whose overall duty is to make sure that the ethos and rules that inform *jakwara* are followed. It is important to note that *jakwara* is one of few Shona institutions in which women are also given some distinct roles which are to cook food for everyone and to winnow the threshed finger millet. They are given chance to interact with men. Men are free to use obscene language in the presence of women and no one will take offense with them. Everyone is free to say what they want including those things that are usually not allowed to be exposed.

The other category comprises sons-in-law (*vakuwasha*) whose duty is to sweep back any finger millet that happen to be thrown away from the threshing area. They are expected to work harder than anyone else in the village. After the ceremony is over

sons-in-law collect the threshed finger millet and make it ready for winnowing. They then count the bags and carry them home.

The next category comprises the young boys and men who will be threshing finger millet. This category comprises young boys, young men and elderly men who are still fit to work. They get motivation and energy from the songs they sing and the traditional brew discussed before.

The last category include girls and other young and middle aged women who will be moving up and down from the villages to the threshing area carrying food and traditional brew. They then get involved in the winnowing of the finger millet. Winnowing is greatly dependent on wind. If it so happens that the wind is still, the old women make a very big fire and the eldest son in-law will remove his clothes and run around naked with women ululating. If properly done the wind will blow harder to enable proper winnowing.

Preparing for *jakwara* ceremony begins by brewing of traditional brew (*hwahwa*) for seven days. This is done by using finger millet to produce thick porridge. The porridge is then mixed with cold water and left in a pot for about two days. In the mean time finger millet seeds are put in a thick bag and submerged in water for at least two days. This process is called (*kunyika zviyo*). The soaked seeds are then used to produce a substance called *chimera* that can be used for fermentation of traditional brew.

Chimera is then added to the mixture of thick porridge and the left to ferment for two days. On the third day the fermented mixture (*mhangwa*) is mixed with (*masvusu*) and cold water is added. The brew immediately produced is traditional brew (*hwahwa*). The day before the organizer of *jakwara* will then send a message around the village to invite members to attend. On the early hours of the *jakwara* day the son in law (*vakuwasha*) transports the finger millet to a rocky place and spread them so that they dry up. He also goes into the forest to cut tree branches, (*mhuro*)¹ to use as threshers.

Pots (*hari*) consumed during *jakwara*

Pots of traditional brew are given some names which differ regionally depending on the dialect used in the area. However the meaning may be the same. The names given in the area visited by the writer according to Amos Jambwa of Jambwa village interviewed on the 28th of February 2011 are meant to add value to *jakwara*. The names of pots are *mushumo*, *hwemasikari* and *mharadza*.

Mushumo

Mushumo can also be called *hokero*². The pot is served as an introduction before threshing commences. It is consumed in the early hours of the day as a way of opening up the event.

Some call this pot *chikurura mabhachi* which seems to be a more recent name as it indicates the presence of jackets which were not there during pre-colonial period. Note that the Shona name for a jacket is *bhachi*. This pot gives the members initial strength to start working and also for the participants to determine whether the brew is strong or not. In Shona language they say “the brew is sweet” which contextually means that the brew is highly intoxicative. Those who do not drink tradition brew will be served with non alcoholic drink called *mangisi* or *mahewu*.

Hwesadza or hwemasikati

The brew is served soon after the participants have been served with lunch. The brew is meant to wash down the food served. Usually the food is prepared by the one who organizes the ceremony. However some of the food is donated by neighbors. In other words during *jakwara* members of the village do not share effort only, but they share jokes, music, drink and food. The philosophy of cooperation transcends most of the Shona social practices.

Mharadza

Mharadza is a term that is derived from the word *kuparara* which means to dismiss. In other words the significance of this pot is to indicate to participants that *jakwara* ceremony is over. When this pot has been consumed most of the people will dismiss. However it is always the case that some members refuse to leave and continue to bother the organizer by demanding some more traditional brew. Such members are called *vana musiya dzasukwa*, which means those that only leave when the pots are empty and have been cleaned.

Jakwara songs

The most interesting part of *jakwara* is the music that accompanies threshing. The songs have a dual purpose, to accompany work and to discourage bad behavior through sarcasm (*chihwerure*). These songs are inherited from the fore fathers. However not all song are for discouraging bad behavior. Some have text that cover issues concerning the ceremony or any social life experiences. Apart from the text of the songs, the rhythm that resonates with the sound of the threshers is very fundamental in this paper. Below are some of the songs sung to accompany threshing. The rhythm and text of each song is discussed after each song.

Song one: *Tangorova*

| | | |
|-----------|---|--|
| Lead: | <i>Ndiye Rukondo warinde shiri mʼvoura ichinaya</i> | Rukondo scared away birds during rains |
| Response: | <i>Warinde shiri</i> | Scares away birds |

Lead: *Tango tango tangorova baba*
 Response: *Tangorova*

The musical score is written in 4/4 time. The lead part consists of two lines of music. The first line has lyrics: "Ndiye ru ko to wa ri nde shiri mvu ichi na ya Ta ngo ta ngo ta ngo ro va". The second line starts with a measure rest, then "ba ba", followed by "Ta ngo ta ngo ta ngo ro va", and ends with "ba ba". The response part consists of two lines of music. The first line has lyrics: "Ta ngo ro van". The second line has lyrics: "Ta ngo ro va.".

Figure 1

In this song threshers articulate the rhythm of semi-breves with singing starting on the on beat as indicated by the circled quavers. The text of the song has very little to do with context of threshing. The words talk about someone by the name *Rukondo* who was asked to go and scare away birds in the field when it was raining. This implies that some of the songs may have text that talk about farming experiences.

Song Two: *Tsanga yawira mukanwa*
 Lead: *Tsanga yawira mukanwa* A seed has fallen in the mouth
 Response: *Hutetena* Chew it

The musical score is written in 4/4 time. The lead part consists of two lines of music. The first line has lyrics: "Tsa nga ya wi ra mu ka nwa". The second line has lyrics: "Tsa nga ya wi ra mu ka nwa". The response part consists of two lines of music. The first line has lyrics: "Hu te te na". The second line has lyrics: "Hu te te na". Below the response part is a rhythmic notation consisting of a series of vertical stems on a horizontal line, representing the rhythm of the response.

Figure 2

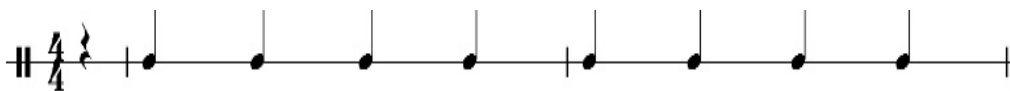
The meter that is below the transcription of the song which has crotchets is the rhythm produced by the threshers. The resultant sound of the singing and rhythmic sound of threshers produce a polyrhythmic structure that is very interesting to listen to. The dance and gestures by some of the participants show how they express their aesthetics and freedom of expression while at the same time doing productive work.

The lead talks about a seed of finger millet which has accidentally fallen in one's mouth. The response replies by saying that you can chew it. The song has a fast tempo which is accompanied by rhythmic pattern of minims. The lead is sung by one person and the rest will then respond. This song is sung in the early stages of *jakwara* because the participants will still be full of energy. Because of the fast rhythmic movement of the threshers, it is apparent that some of the finger millet will be purposely or accidentally thrown away. It is the duty of old men especially those who are in-laws (*vakuwasha*) to collect them.

Song Three: *Vana kuhondo*

| | | |
|-----------|---|--|
| Lead: | <i>Vana kuhondo vana kuhondo vana baba, vana kuhondo muchapera</i> | Children to war Children to war you shall perish |
| Response: | <i>Garo tumira vana kuhondo, hondo yauya ha heha ha nhaka muchadura</i> | You send children to war There is war you will suffer |

Threshers



This song has a background which dates back to the Second World War. During the Second World War many blacks from the then Rhodesia were recruited as soldiers. Many died in the battle fields. A song that warns parents from allowing their children to join war as soldiers was composed and this song is *Kugaro tumira Vana Kuhondo*. The song was inherited and sung during *jakwara*.

Song Four: *Uri rombe*

| | | |
|-----------|--|--|
| Lead: | <i>Hure rangu rakafa ndibateyi maoko ndione kusasana</i> | My prostitute died console me so that I feel better |
| Response: | <i>Hee uri rombe</i> | Hee you are a destitute |

Hu re ra ngu ra ka fa Ndi ba te i ma o ko

Ndi o ne ku sa sa na

He - e u ri ro mbe

Rhythm of threshers

Song Five: *Chihwerure*

Lead: *Chihwerure*

Response: *Ha ha hoha-hoha*

Lead: *Chihwerure*

Response: *Ha ha hoha*

Lead: *Ndiani akaita seni muraini chihwerure*

Who is like me in this
community

Response: *Ha ha hoha-hoha*

Lead: *Kutenga gejo nemombe chihwerure*

I bought a plough
and an ox

Response: *Ha hahoha*

The *jakwara* experiences assist in developing linear rhythmic structure similar to Western. It is important to note that their perception of rhythm has not been always complex and polyrhythmic. The implication is that school teachers who are introducing rhythm to beginners can benefit a lot if they make use of *jakwara* songs to develop rhythm. This will be in line with the philosophy that folk songs can be useful in teaching certain concepts in schools. For the ethnomusicologists it can be noted that as the Shona people execute their daily household chores, whether for men or women, rhythm permeates throughout all these activities.

Constructive criticism and sarcasm (*Chihwerure*).

The Shona tradition has always been crafted in such a way that rituals and ceremonies are treated in a serious manner. Respect, honor and tolerance have always informed their life. Under normal circumstances no one is allowed to openly expose someone's bad deeds even if it is well known in the society that the person is having an unethical behavior. For example if one member is a thief, a witch or a prostitute it is rather unethical to expose them in public. To address this anomaly the Shona employ a number of strategies meant to discourage those with anti-social behavior in such a way that they do not feel offended. One way is by the use of proverbs (*tsumo*) or riddles (*madimikira*)

Another strategy is enshrined in the relationships between members of the village. For example daughter-in-laws *varoora* singular *muroora* or *malukazana* always perform the duty of relaxing tense atmosphere in the society by making some jokes. They perform the same role as the *vazukuru* (singular *muzukuru*) or *abazukulu*. Both *varoora* and *vazukuru* have the honors to expose any bad behavior in the society but performed in a humorous manner. Even if they tell exactly what one does, the accused is not allowed to take offence. In other words the two are the judges of the village. They help maintain the norms and values of a society by discouraging bad behavior.

Chihwerure is yet another form of social criticism which is done in a jovial manner. It is a counseling system which is only instituted during *jakwara*. It involves figurative expressions that are presented in juxtaposition with threshing. Any utterance of this nature done outside *jakwara* institution becomes an insult and is regarded as unethical. The Shona have a saying which says, *chihwerure haichiende kumba*, which literary means that one should not take offence on what transpired during *jakwara*. *Chihwerure* is enshrined in the text of the songs sung during *jakwara* and is performed together with the rhythm of the threshers (*mutinhimira wemhuro*). It is done in a poetic and sarcastic manner. Very talented member are able to do it in such a manner that it makes people laugh but at the same time discouraging bad behavior.

Conclusion

The Shona's traditional music place a lot of value on rhythm articulated by the traditional drum (*ngoma*). However, they engage in other activities in which rhythm is articulated. These include cutting wood, crashing grain and clapping. One of the most effective one is *jakwara*. What makes *jakwara* unique is the nexus of activities that embrace a number of social and musical aspects. The major one are rhythm articulation by threshers (*mhuro*), social commentary and sarcasm and also work

and singing. What is sad about *jakwara* is that the institution has declined in most part of the Shona society where the staple crop is maize.

In this paper it is recommended that scholars should revive and preserve the songs that were sung during *jakwara* for future reference by the young. Many young people born in the post colonial period have not attended a *jakwara* ceremony yet it plays a very important role in the society. Because of the decline in frequency of this institution the Shona no longer have an opportunity to denounce those that have bad behavior in the society. To some extent the decline of *jakwara* has led to the loosening of the social ties that use to exist among the Shona.

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Footnotes

¹*Mhuro* is the plural of *mupuro* . This is branch of *musasa* tree which is used to thresh rapoko

²*Hokero* is a noun derived from the verb *kukokera* meaning to invite.