

JACKAL THE JUDGE: AN ECOCENTRIC APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION THROUGH AFRICAN NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

Far from being seemingly frivolous and insignificant modes of amusing children, African folktales, myths, legends and fables are a storehouse of the people's knowledge and wisdom preserved and transmitted over countless generations. As a product of culture, stories are an expression of what the people can see, hear, think and feel in the world around them. It is during the process of engaging with, reconciling and struggling against nature that people create stories. The people's relationship to and with the environment finds its expression through narratives inspired by their natural surroundings. This article examines how stories based on animal characters and plants can enable the 'environment' to reclaim its ecological rights rather than remain on the margins. The article argues that an ecocentric approach to environmental education poses a challenge to the anthropocentric view of treating nature as an object.

Key words: Econcetrism, education, African narrative performance, nature

Introduction

Most contemporary approaches to environmental education appear to have had little impact on the sustainability of the natural environment. There seems to be a gap between the theoretical views held by environmental activists and the practical application of those ideas. Christina Marouli (2002, p. 28) argues that one of the missing links in environmental education, which she calls, 'Education for Environmental Sustainability', is the absence of cultural value systems relating to the environment. She explains that since ecological perceptions are culturally-situated, it is important to be cognizant of the cultural context in which environmental education takes place. Therefore, to better understand environmental issues, there is need to understand the cultural factors that have an influence over such issues.

This article focuses on how African narrative performance (specifically storytelling), as a cultural art form, enables people to be aware of their natural environment. African folktales, myths, legends and fables appear to be just frivolous and insignificant modes of amusing children. But beneath the apparently mythical

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fantasies and unbelievable stories lies the storehouse of the African people's knowledge and wisdom preserved and transmitted over countless generations. Stories are a product of culture, hence an expression of a people's awareness of the world around them. Everything that they can see, hear, think and feel takes on meaning within a signifying system of images, symbols and metaphors. It is during the process of engaging with, reconciling with and struggling against nature that people create stories. Through such stories, people express the nature of their relationship to, and with, the environment.

Using the case study of CHIPAWO, an acronym for the Children's Performing Arts Organisation based in Harare, this article examines an adaptation of an African trickster tale called *Mutongi Gava* (Jackal the Judge) as an extended image of African people's consciousness of the natural environment. The animal fable was originally collected from among the Shona-speaking people of Zimbabwe. CHIPAWO then adapted it in order to create awareness of the environment among the target audience. Through animal characters as victims of mankind's vices and follies, the make-believe dimension in *Mutongi Gava* gives space for the 'environment', in this case, animal characters and plants, to give its own point of view. As a silenced voice, the 'environment' is made to reclaim its ecological rights rather than remain on the margins. Thus, the article argues that such an ecocentric approach poses a challenge to the anthropocentric view of treating nature as an object. It may sound rather farcical to imagine the 'environment' claiming its own rights. But in societies where stories are still the primary medium through which people gain an understanding of their natural surroundings, nature will be seen as a function of culture, a way of presenting human thought, behaviour and feeling. As Noverino Canonici (1996) has observed, animal stories do not necessarily look for what is 'animal' in man but rather for what is 'human' in animals. Animals may therefore be looked at as a kind of man's double.

The Children's Performing Arts Workshop (CHIPAWO)

CHIPAWO was formed in 1989 in response to a need expressed by concerned parents, who were based in Harare and wanted their children to learn the cultural performance heritage of the Zimbabwean past. While being an acronym for the name of the organisation, 'chipawo' is also a Shona word which means 'please share with others'. Thus, one of CHIPAWO's objectives is to enable children to create, contribute, participate and share with others within the framework of the African performing arts. From the time of its formation, CHIPAWO has since grown to become an active member of the International Association for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ) and the International Amateur Theatre Association (IATA). CHIPAWO is driven by the philosophy that, '*mwana anokosha*' [the child is the centre], that is, if you develop the child, you develop society. To this end, CHIPAWO has come up with a popular theatre

approach that engages children in advocacy work. From an interview with Robert McLaren, the founding director of CHIPAWO, he explained that:

Right from the beginning, there was no question that that was our *raison d'être*, to guide children and inspire them to learn and to express themselves. ...It's obvious that children will learn better and be more confident about what they have learnt and perform better if they are using the vocabulary and language of expression which is natural to them, something which they originally inhabit like the use of local performance idioms. (Interview with Robert McLaren, Harare, 22 February, 2003).

McLaren concurs with Stephen Chifunyise that CHIPAWO children, most of whom are aged between six and eighteen years, have been equipped with improvisational skills that enable them to put together an original performance within a week. In fact, Chifunyise was much more blunt on this point:

CHIPAWO children are even better off in handling participatory performances than other professional performers because their training gives them a much broader base. It gives them the skill to be adaptive, to be sensitive to the needs of the community and the audience...When they do advocacy work, they are much more sincere, they are much more amicable to the demands of communicating than being simply stars on the stage. Now if our pedagogy continues the way it is, we will be producing the type of theatre artist that anyone working in Tfd (Theatre for Development) would love to work with five years from now (Interview with Stephen Chifunyise, Harare, 22 February, 2003).

From what I observed during my participation in CHIPAWO's workshops, most of their performances are adapted from the African storytelling tradition. Although the children are also exposed to other varieties of music, song, dance and drama from outside the country, the majority of their performances are rooted in their cultural traditions. It is through improvisations based on stories adapted from indigenous folktales, myths, legends and fables that CHIPAWO children have been able to come up with many environment-based performances like *Mutongi Gava* (Jackal the Judge), *DhongiraSabhuku Mangwende* (Mr Mangwende's Donkey), *Chipo and the Bird* (A girl child called Chipo and the Bird), *Chibhomutiti* (The name of a forest creature) and *Dangerous Animal*, to mention a few.

Adaptation and Variability

The play theorist, Sutton-Smith (2001) argues that the primary purpose of children's plays is to equip them with life skills for the future. By virtue of its ability to simulate

human institutions, play not only increases the adaptability of the players but also makes the human condition, not less, but more bearable. In the case of African storytelling, trickster tales appear to have provided a fertile ground for modern adaptations in most popular theatre performances. One such adaptation is CHIPAWO's play, *Mutongi Gava* (Jackal the Judge).

Mutongi Gava provides a cultural explanation of the African people's relationship with the environment. As Barbara Babcock has noted, folk narratives are a form of metacommunication with "the reflexive capacity to develop highly complex symbol systems *about* other symbol systems" (1984, p. 62). This metanarrative dimension in folktales appears to have been overlooked by Western ethnocentric critics who assumed that "primitive people have no idea of aesthetics" (Finnegan, 1970, p. 331). On the contrary, African folktales are part of an artistic experience through which people express their perceptions about the way things are. Thus, storytelling arises as a function of a people's understanding of the environment.

It is also pertinent to note that many societies across Africa make use of folk media like stories, poetry, music, song and dance to produce and celebrate their culture. The whole African life circle, from the ritual celebration of child birth, to child naming, initiation rites, labour, fertility, rain, harvest, marriage, death and beyond has been described as a "drama of life" (Kennedy, 1973, p. 73). Everything is communally performed as a way of making sense of the world. In the words of Harold Scheub (1977, p. 75), such ritualized performances mark the meeting point between two worlds - the real and the fantastic. When the fantastic enters the world of human experience, the consequent metaxic world creates an image of reality which, according to Augusto Boal (1995, p. 44), is translatable into the reality of the image. Moreover, metaxis, described by Tor Helge Allern as "the participation of one world in another," (2002, p. 81), also allows participants to undergo a heightened state of consciousness by being able to behold two worlds, the actual and the fictional, at the same time. As Boal (1995) further points out, the artist plays with an image, which he or she transubstantiates into an image of the social world that he or she inhabits. The world of images, with its own symbolic constitution, acts as a rehearsal space for real life. Thus *Mutongi Gava* may be viewed as an expression of how stories with characters drawn from the flora and fauna can be adapted to allow people to make sense of their environment. Such stories tend to influence people's actions, beliefs and attitudes towards the environment. As Robert Georges (1969, p. 324) has observed, it has become commonplace to draw inferences concerning the functional relationships between story content and other aspects of a people's social structure or behaviouristic tendencies.

CHIPAWO's adaptation of *Mutongi Gava* was first performed at the World Festival of Children's Theatre held at Hvidovre in Denmark in 2002. It has since been continuously performed at several schools in and around Harare. The performance

itself reflects more similarities with the original animal fable than differences. The usual fireplace setting of the traditional African village hut has been transformed into a conventional theatre stage. The *sarungano*'s [traditional storyteller's] multiple roles have been replaced by individual actors standing for different characters of the story. To retain the interactive 'audience' factor, the various sequences of action are punctuated by occasional interludes of music, song and dance. However, it is mostly the performers who act out on stage without the direct involvement of the audience. The use of repetition as a key structural device enables the action to move forward through a cumulative framework of confrontations towards the ending. As in the original tale, repetition becomes the core cliché responsible for advancing the various functions of plot with a particular focus on environmental awareness.

Confrontational Relationship

Typical of a make-believe play frame, *Mutongi Gava* opens with Man (a gender inclusive name referring to one of two central characters in the story) taking a narrator's role by uttering the usual folktale opening formula:

Man: (*narrating*) Once upon a time,
 When stones were so soft
 that you could eat them.
 And when trees could fly like birds.
 It was on a cool and warm afternoon,
 when Leopard went hunting.
 Suddenly he fell into a trap!

Leopard: (*grunts in pain and disbelief, then calls out when he sees Man passing by*)
 Oh, my friend!
 Can you please help me?
 I won't harm you.
 (*silence*)

Man: What?
 Since when have we become friends?

Leopard: But ... but ...
 Aren't we all animals?
 Let's take this opportunity
 to show the whole world
 that we are the best of friends!
 [*extract from video transcript*].

The folklore theorist, Vladimir Propp (1975) came up with a morphology of the folktale in which the initial situation is marked by a state of disequilibrium, lack, quest or

desire. In this case it is Leopard who desires to be rescued from the trap by Man. The folktale plot then proceeds through what Propp describes as “plot functions” (1975, p. 21). Each plot function is an act of a character that has significance for the course of the action. But more importantly is the opening formula itself which typifies Gregory Bateson’s ‘this is play’ (1972). In the Shona traditional context, the opening call, *Paivepo* ... [Once upon a time ...], will be followed by an audience response, *Dzefunde* [go ahead], to effect an interactive call-and-response relationship between narrator and audience. The significance of such a formulaic opening is to create an operative frame in which the exigencies of time, space and place are transcended. Once the limitations of social reality are suspended, and the audience are transported into the realm of the fantastic, a “ritual contract” (Chimombo, 1988, p.93) is established which sets the stage for the unfolding of the story. As Rosemary Jackson (1993) points out, fantasy dissolves the spatial and temporal ordering system, unified notions of character, language and etiquette are broken, yet through its ‘misrule’, the generally accepted or ordinary course of events are questioned.

How does such ‘fantasy’ in *Mutongi Gava* question humankind’s relationship to the environment? As Man interacts with Leopard and other characters such as Tree, Cow and Jackal, these animal and plant characters relate to him in ways that reflect how perceptions of the environment can be shaped through the narrative performance. A dominant element that characterizes the framing of trickster stories like *Mutongi Gava* is repetition, described by Harold Scheub as “an expansible image” (1977, p. 45). In the words of Mbye Cham:

Through the repetition of a structural pattern that sets a ‘protagonist’ on one pole and ‘antagonist’ on the opposite pole in a framework of confrontation that centres on a quest for a necessary item or service, not only does the action move linearly from conflict to resolution, but also the results of the confrontation keep accumulating in a direction that unequivocally defines a milieu feverishly gripped by a profound political, moral and ethical crisis (1990, p. 252).

In *Mutongi Gava*, repetition defines the different functions of plot to create a series of confrontations that define Man’s paradoxical relationship to the environment as follows:

- (i) Leopard falls into a man-made trap and cannot free himself.
- (ii) Leopard asks Man passing by to help him out.
- (iii) Man is afraid that Leopard might later turn against him.
- (iv) Leopard reassures Man that he will be ‘the best of friends’.
- (v) Man agrees to free Leopard.
- (vi) But Leopard turns against Man and wants to eat him.

- (vii) Man pleads with Leopard that they must seek the opinion of other 'creatures'.
- (viii) Man asks Tree to mediate in the dispute.
- (ix) Tree supports Leopard because Man always cuts him down.
- (x) Man then asks Cow to intervene.
- (xi) Cow supports Leopard because Man overburdens her with work.
- (xii) Jackal comes along and hears the story.
- (xiii) Jackal orders both Leopard and Man to take their original positions.
- (xiv) Leopard tries to resist but later agrees to go back into the trap.
- (xv) Jackal orders Man to go his way.
- (xvi) 'What about me?' asks Leopard from inside the trap.
- (xvii) 'Never bite the hand that feeds you,' replies Jackal the Judge.

If one were to take the global environment theme for 1994 entitled *One Earth, One Family* as a point of reference, it is possible to 'read' through the layers of ambiguity emerging from the plot functions in *Mutongi Gava*. Each function can be viewed as a metanarrative device with a double significance. In the initial situation, Leopard, signifying the environment, and Man, pose a threat to each other because Man sets the trap that snares Leopard. Thus both are implicated in the game of "chauvinistic environmental predators" (Mangeni, 2000, p. 109). But as soon as Leopard turns out to be a typical confidence trickster, the stage is set for a much deeper subtext—that of Man's unequal relationship with the environment. Each 'expansible image' as represented by Tree and Cow serves to demonstrate the nature of trickster discourse – to subvert the dominant order of reality and seek that which is experienced as absence or lack (Jackson, 1993). In the process, the trickster discourse, like fantasy or make-believe, expresses the desire to expel, or get rid of something which threatens the existing order, such as Man's unequal relationship to the environment. For instance, when Man appeals to the 'other creatures' to mediate on his behalf, Tree complains that Man cuts her down for firewood and Cows are bitter about being turned into Man's beasts of burden.

Symbiotic Relationship

Apart from the relations of confrontation between Man and the environment, *Mutongi Gava* also suggests the possibility of a close relationship between 'nature experience' and 'human experience'. Through the experience of flow, play makes it possible for the audience to share in what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls, "the solemn act of being outside oneself" (1975, p. 111). To watch something is regarded as a mode of sharing by means of a willing suspension of disbelief. This leads to an appreciation of, caring for and commitment to what is being watched. For a child audience watching *Mutongi Gava*, the animal characters in the story possess a clear and instant recognition pattern.

According to Dorothy Heathcote's 'brotherhood code' (quoted in Winston, 1998, p. 107), archetypal figures help children to make connections with unfamiliar people who might be in the same 'brotherhood' category as those in the story. The 'brotherhood code' paves the way for a re-definition of children's sympathies evoked by the performance. This helps in shaping children's perception of how they can relate to the archetypal figures in the story. In a way, the 'brotherhood code' enables children to make connections with what they regard as familiar. For instance, in *Mutongi Gava*, children may sympathize with victims of confidence tricksters like Leopard and of unwitting agents of oppression like Man. Such tricksters put on the mask of love, friendship and innocence when in reality they want to capitalize on power, privilege and opportunity.

The environmental images and metaphors in *Mutongi Gava* also stand for something beyond themselves. They constitute a kind of 'imagery bank' (Canonici, 1996, p. 89) from which performers can draw their inspiration and the means of communicating their message. According to Rosemary Jackson (1993), the fantastic manifests our desire to transcend what is purely human. As such, even the imaginary world of nature is 'humanized' to compensate for what has been lost at the level of faith in *this* world. Thus, in *Mutongi Gava*, the animal society is turned into a mirror of the human world, a model of human behaviour, thought and feeling. The use of animal metaphor, therefore, becomes a distancing device. The audience can easily recognize themselves in the culturally encoded images of Leopard, Cow, Tree and Jackal. As Robert McLaren (personal e-mail communication), the producer of the performance, pointed out, the audience can identify with Jackal when he jumps at Man, showing that life is a struggle in which nobody can trust anyone, not even Jackal the Judge. The close association between 'nature' and 'human' images has far-reaching implications for humankind's relationship with the environment. For instance, most African proponents of an animistic worldview perceive the environment as an extension of the human world. Animals as totemic symbols are an example of this relationship between humans and the environment. Some trees, rivers and mountains are regarded as sacred and endowed with anthropomorphic qualities. Thus the relationship between humans and nature is symbiotic giving protection to humans as in providing medicinal products and thus imposing an expectation on humans to guard against the reckless exploitation of nature

Animal Rights

In trickster discourse, the polarities between victimizer and victimized can be reversed. This results in the alteration of existing relations of power. Mbye Cham (1990) has argued that the pattern of relationships between victimizer/victimized, exploiter/exploited or oppressor/oppressed may either be upheld as models or overturned in the interest of society's well-being. For instance, in *Mutongi Gava*, Tree

and Cow no longer perceive themselves as mere objects but as subjects. They confront Man, the source of their suffering, with a view to changing the structures of oppression. This view agrees with Paulo Freire's (1972) dialogic pedagogy where the oppressed must critically assess their situation and begin to question the values, practices and beliefs of their oppressors. This enables them to transform themselves from a condition of false consciousness to one of critical consciousness. In the story, Cow challenges Man by asking, 'Why do you treat us as if we don't have animal rights?' As McLaren commented, 'Man is the great exploiter and abuser of nature'.

The ecocentric perspective allows the 'environment' to voice its own point of view. As a silenced voice, the 'environment' is made to reclaim its ecological rights. Contrary to Man's expectations, Cow and Tree, as representatives of animals and plants, seize the opportunity to clamour for equality with Man rather than remain on the margins. This ecocentric view poses a challenge to the anthropocentric view of treating 'nature as object' (Hansen, 1991). Perhaps by enabling the audience to listen to the silent voices of the 'oppressed', the trickster discourse offers an alternative medium for raising people's awareness of the environment. It might sound rather trivial to imagine the environment expressing its personal experiences, but this is not uncommon in societies where stories remain the primary medium of understanding people's surroundings and where nature is seen as a means of presenting human thought, behaviour and feeling through animal fables.

Moral Justice

Mutongi Gava also explores the moral dilemmas that still confront Man's relationship with nature through the subtle use of ambiguity. As James Leary (1982) has asserted, the manipulation of appearance through trickster discourse is a potent weapon for social change. The messages contained within what has been called 'playful acts of liminality' (Guilmette, 1982) such as irony, inversion, paradox, pretence, disguise and humour do not only provide thresholds of understanding but also suggest new ways of thinking and behaving for both performers and audience.

An overview of the plot structure in *Mutongi Gava* reveals how the sequence of events is governed by problematic moral strands emerging from the story. These strands bring out an environmental crisis that is framed according to different layers of ambiguity as follows:

- (i) Leopard falls into a man-made trap and yet seeks help from Man.
- (ii) Man frees Leopard who turns against him.
- (iii) Man appeals to Tree and Cow who happen to be his 'beasts of prey'.
- (iv) Tree and Cow are Man's 'beasts of burden' yet claim equality with him.
- (v) Man finally appeals to Jackal the Judge who cannot be trusted either.
- (vi) Jackal frees Man and leaves Leopard in the trap!

Beneath the surface of this ascending scale of contradictions, an ambiguous sense of moral justice can be discerned. Can Man and the environment ever become 'the best of friends'? Which of these 'creatures' can really trust the other? Will there ever be harmonious co-existence between Man and nature? Whenever promises are made such as Leopard's, and hopes are raised such as Jackal's, they are likely to be contradicted, negated or reversed.

In the end, the playful manipulation of ambiguities in *Mutongi Gava* animates a series of moral interpretations concerning Man's relationship to the environment. The moral questions which emerge mainly from Jackal's judgement have far-reaching implications for environmental awareness:

- (i) Animals are their own enemies, not Man. (Jackal takes Leopard back into the trap).
- (ii) Nobody can be trusted, not even the Judge. (Jackal the Judge scares Man away).
- (iii) Do not take your benefactors for granted. (Cows and Trees ask Man if it is fair to exploit them).

If the animal and plant characters are taken to be metaphors of human behaviour, Jackal's judgement is an ironic statement on what could be the prevailing situation with regards to Man's relationship with the environment. Man is exploiting and destroying the environment while pretending to save it. Hence things may not be what they seem on the surface. The world remains an ambiguous place, an arena of continuous struggle between Man and the environment. Perhaps this explains the compromised position of Man throughout the story. It may be indicative of an uneasy relationship between Man and the environment, with the latter continuing to be on the receiving end of Man's exploitation.

Thus, even in their deceptive simplicity, modern adaptations of animal stories like *Mutongi Gava* can provide insights into people's underlying beliefs, values and assumptions about the environment. As Zabe MacEachren (2000) has argued, without the means to engage and interact with the environment, our relationship with it becomes artificial, distant and theoretical. An eco-centred relationship with the environment means having a deeper sense of appreciation for the animal the plant, the water, the air and other natural resources. It also means adopting a more sustainable and interdependent attitude, towards the environment, that is characterized by an understanding and feelings of ascendancy over personal prerogative.

Implications for Environmental Education

How effective is CHIPAWO's adaptation of indigenous narrative performance as an approach to environmental education? Following the anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski, Barbara Babcock (1984) argues that education and development need to

be defined and organized from the 'native's point of view'. African narrative performances like *Mutongi Gava* make up "the aesthetic principles by which the people (define) themselves and shape (their) artistic structures" (Bauman & Sherzer, 1974, p. 314). From an aesthetic point of view, CHIPAWO's approach is rooted in the language of the people. In my interview with McLaren, he explained the value of using African cultural idioms as follows:

Kennedy (Me) : What do you find as the value of indigenous forms like storytelling, dance and song in communicating development, like I saw recently in the play, *Dangerous Animal*, performed by CHIPAWO children at USAID (United States Agency for International Development)?

McLaren: As an artist throughout my own personal work in theatre, I have felt that if ...we are going to make meaningful art for our audience, we have got to ground it in the culture of our audience. So in terms of my own personal involvement in art, it was a choice. In terms of CHIPAWO, the reason that we founded CHIPAWO was that our children were not exploring, or not well versed, or not having a rich experience of that 'majority culture' which was their culture. ... So as children, as growing human beings, also as performers, the whole idea of CHIPAWO is to re-integrate the children's cultural roots, their cultural history and also the dominant cultural forms (Interview with Robert McLaren, Harare, 22 February, 2003).

From an African popular theatre perspective, McLaren's view has far-reaching implications for the incorporation of a people's culture in environmental education. CHIPAWO's adaptation of cultural elements of signification such as folktales enables both performers and target audience to be immersed into the imagined world of the narrative performance. Through a willing suspension of disbelief, they begin to envision possibilities for environmental sustainability that can be translated into action.

In one of its training manuals entitled *Pedagogy and Aesthetics* (2002), CHIPAWO outlines its primary aim as that of making children and young people the central focus in creating, informing, commenting and educating through a popular medium the issues that they themselves experience. The performing arts are regarded as 'the hidden curriculum' (2002, p.3) which can empower children to be creative and free to communicate their thoughts, needs and desires. CHIPAWO believes that what the children perform should be something they can relate to, something they can experience themselves or something that is within their world. As Vygotsky (1976, p. 554) pointed out, in play a new relationship is created between the imaginary situation and the real situation. There is a sense of 'playing at reality' which makes play an indispensable learning medium for young people. In short, performances like *Mutongi*

Gava provide children with the time and space to ‘play at reality’ while simultaneously learning to be responsible towards their natural environment.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how the make-believe dimension in African narrative performance creates space for environmental education. In the process, the often silenced voice of the ‘environment’ is allowed to reclaim its ecological rights and place rather than remain on the margins. Such an ecocentric approach to environmental education poses a challenge to the usual anthropocentric view of treating nature as an object. If narrative performances like *Mutongi Gava* are viewed as attempts to transcend human limitations, the imaginary worlds they create through symbol, metaphor and allusion act as distancing devices for a deeper understanding of human behaviour, thought and feeling.

Through the adaptation of African narrative performance, in particular trickster folktales, it was possible to subvert the dominant order of reality and seek that which is experienced as absence or lack. Thus by engaging and interacting with the ‘environment’ through embodied learning, a more eco-centred relationship emerged between humankind (or Man) and nature that may produce a deeper sense of appreciation for the natural environment. As Gavin Bolton (1979) has concluded, such interpersonal and subjective knowledge provides, perhaps, ‘the most important kind of learning’.

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