

MAKING A CASE FOR WHY BOTSWANA PRIMARY SCHOOLS SHOULD EMBRACE VIOLENCE IN IKALANGA FOLKTALES

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Abstract

Ikalanga folktales, particularly those of *majabathu* (ogres) and human narratives have generally exhibited a fair amount of violence. This study examines forms of violence in Ikalanga folktales focusing on how physical and verbal violence are depicted using Garver's theory of violence to classify the types found in five Ikalanga folktales. The findings show that physical and verbal violence is pervasive. The article argues that the depiction of violence is necessary for the pedagogy of the text and must not be viewed in isolation and provides insight into the structural and ideological function of violence in Ikalanga folktales. Folktales have a useful purpose in the formal education of a child, particularly since Botswana schools may soon offer mother tongue instruction at Reception, Standard One and Standard Two levels.

Keywords: Folktales, Ikalanga, violence, Garver, schools, culture

1.0 Introduction

The mandate of the National Commission on Education of 1976 was to gather views from the public on the provision of education. The report of the Commission indicated that the public had recommended multiple language instruction in classrooms. The second Commission of 1993 also made a case for the introduction of marginalized languages in pre-primary schools (recommendation 12) and in primary schools (recommendation 18). However, contrary to the recommendations of the Commissions, the state rejected the recommendations of both commissions and retained Setswana only as the medium of instruction in school (Maruatona, 1994). It has taken almost six decades for the government of Botswana to approve the use of multiple language instruction albeit at Reception, Standard One, and Standard Two levels only. While the Botswana government had believed that classroom instruction through Setswana and English was the best way to forge unity among various ethnic groups, it is fair to say that children from non-Setswana speaking backgrounds have been sorely disadvantaged in early childhood education.

Despite the 1953 UNESCO report on 'The Use of Vernacular Language in Education' advocating for mother tongue instruction in schools, it has not been easy for Botswana to make the transition from a colonial-based education system to a culturally relevant one, taking into consideration African values and learners' socio-cultural and linguistic roots. Somewhat belatedly however, plans are underway to introduce 11 local languages as media of instruction until Standard Two to allow for smooth transition. These 11 languages are Sheyeyi, ThiMbukushu, Ikalanga, Shakgalagari, Chikuhane (Sesubiya), IsiNdebele, Afrikaans, Naro, Shona, Otjiherero and Sign Language (BOPA, 2023). Speakers of Ikalanga number around

118000 and make up about 10% of the population in Botswana which according to the Botswana Housing and Population Census of 2022 stood at 2,346,179 (statsbots.org.bw). It is perhaps best to give an overview of BaKalanga for the benefit of context.

Hall (2006) asserts that Kalanga history and origins can be traced to the Kingdom of Mapungubwe (1075CE-1220 CE). It was essentially a pre-colonial nation situated at the confluence of the Shashe and Limpopo rivers, specifically the southwestern parts of the Zimbabwean plateau and northeastern Botswana (Dube, 2020, p.2). Ikalanga is “a shortened form of Chikalanga (or Tjikalanga) that is used to designate Western Shona/Nyai people, their language and their culture” (Mathangwane & Chebanne, 2013, p.11). Ikalanga’s linguistic footprint covers the North-East district and northern parts of the Central District. It is a Bantu language under the Shona group of languages. This ethnic group straddles the two countries of Botswana and Zimbabwe. Interestingly, mother tongue instruction in Zimbabwe schools from primary level to Form 2 was enshrined in the Education Act of 1987 and was amended in 2006 (Maseko & Dhlamini, 2014).

It can be assumed that should the Botswana policy be implemented, learners will at some point be exposed to folktales, and this could make for interesting pedagogical tools. Folktales have long made the transition from the informal fireside space into the formal classroom setting. Traditional stories are part of the English syllabus of Botswana primary education appearing under the listening module for Standard Seven students. The general objective in that module is that “students should understand and follow a variety of oral stories” (Botswana Government English Syllabus, nd.). Thus, a structured platform that allows for an assess of the impact of storytelling on the young, as well as their relationship with certain thematic concerns in those texts, exists.

Violence in Ikalanga folktales is prevalent though not much has been done to understand its impact on the social and mental development of the child. Gender violence is also of note since “a child’s first exposure to gender is often through a fairy tale” (Kuykendal & Sturm, 2007, p.38). There is need to investigate how folktales present violence and to determine the extent to which children are affected by violent texts in their formative years. This article aims to study the depiction of violence in five Ikalanga tales. Violence is examined from the premise of Jungian interpretation that folktales capacitate children with requisite skills to address conflict and needs in a healthy manner. Visikoknox-Johnson (2016) states that “acquiring these skills can ultimately impact a child’s health, quality of life or even influence its values and beliefs in the future” (p.77). The study seeks to reduce the dearth of literature on the impact of violence in children’s folktales in Botswana in particular and contributes towards bridging the gap in knowledge in this area generally. It starts by classifying the type of violence found in Ikalanga folktales to determine whether it could bad or whether it could be useful. A relationship between violence, folktales, and children is also investigated.

Nikolajeva (2015) maintains that “folktales, myths and legends were never created for an audience of children...because they often contain violence and child abuse. Moreover, they are sometimes obscene and amoral” (p.10). A more recent study by Saxby (2022) asserts that

folktales were “cautionary tales for adults, often with dark events smattered with violence” (p.220). It needs to be questioned whether violence in children’s literature serves any meaningful purpose in this present time or whether society is being too protective. Studies on children and violence have mostly been on illustrative texts such as comics (Sunarto, 2000; Sendjaja et. al. 2003, Supriyadi, 2009). In sub-Saharan Africa, the genre of oral literature has largely focused on abuse towards children and women (Ashliman, 2006; Molepo et al, 2007; Ngapo, 2015). Scholars like Nikolajeva (2015) and Saxby (2022) view violence in folktales as unsuitable for children as they were not originally the intended audience; their views, however, are Eurocentric and fail to appreciate the African pre-colonial context where the spoken word was the primary mode of communication. Among the BaKalanga, folktales which contained all manner of themes from abduction to cannibalism, infanticide to dismemberment were narrated to children. There were ogre tales and human narratives that contained violent episodes. The tales were not only for entertainment but provided moral messages to promote, among other things, acceptable behaviour. Orenstein (2002) views folktales as “the first models of society we encounter before we ever leave home. [T]hey teach us Right from Wrong. Under the guise of make believe, they prepare us to join the real world and provide us with lessons that last a lifetime (p.10-11). Saxby (2022) states further that “multiple studies have shown that fairytales can effectively be employed in the classroom to help children develop emotional intelligence and emotional regulation” (p. 227). It is hoped that these observations will become more pronounced with time in various primary schools in Botswana once multi language instruction commences.

Boudinot (2005) asserts that “there is some supporting evidence from educators and sociologists which shows fear and violence in folktales contributing to a safer and more educated society” (p.1). In other words, depictions of violence should not be seen as unravelling the moral fabric of society but as a means towards reinforcing expected behaviour. Tartar (1992) posits a reason why violence has survived folktales by stating that violence provides comic relief and is cathartic. Tartar (1992) further opines that violence is used in folktales to discipline wayward behaviour in children and that this pedagogical nature of folktales has ensured the survival of violence in oral tales. Teaching folktales in the classroom environment can provide a more structured approach towards promoting desirable behaviour among children. As Saxby (2022) states, “teachers in the contemporary classroom often select fairy tales for their therapeutic and didactic effects. Lessons include the teaching of ethics and morality, by challenging, for example the way a nefarious creature behaved” (p.227).

In *The uses of Enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales*, Bettelheim (1977) provides a strong argument as to why violent narratives are beneficial for a child’s psycho-social development. He used Freudian psychoanalysis to investigate why children were fond of folktales. Bettelheim (1977) argues that “fairy tales give children the opportunity to understand inner conflicts which they experience in the phases of their spiritual and intellectual development, and to act them out and resolve them in their imagination” (p.17). In other words, folktales provide children with avenues through which to cope with everyday challenges by overlapping the fictional world of the oral text upon the real world of everyday life. There is

that form of cathartic effect that a folktale brings to a child which in turn helps him or her to deal with or contextualise daily aspects of communal life.

Veschi (2020) states that the word violence can be traced back to Latin as *violentia*, related to the adjective *violentus*, “distinguishing the violent behaviour of an individual, from vis, force, or vigor” (<https://etymology.net/violence>). This paper will attempt to explain what violence is and then apply Benjamin Garver’s theory of violence to five Ikalanga folktales to determine whether exposure to such is necessary for the development of the child.

Violence is actually problematic to define because the taxonomy surrounding it is broad and can be context dependant. The most common definitions of violence limit themselves to physical acts that range from inflicting pain to killing (Anderson & Bushman, 2001, p.28). This definition is quite limited in that it leaves out many actions that can be construed as violent behaviour. The definition by Audi (1971, p.51) is somewhat comprehensive in that he views violence as the physical attack upon, or the vigorous physical abuse of, or vigorous struggle against, a person or animal, or the highly vigorous psychological abuse of, or the sharp caustic psychological attack upon a person or animal, or the highly vigorous, or incendiary, or malicious and vigorous, destruction of property or potential property. Audi raises awareness that force is not the primary way that one should view violence. Violence infringes on a person beyond the physical and sets roots on the psyche as well.

Stanko (2001) defines violence as “any form of behaviour by an individual that intentionally threatens to or does cause physical or psychological harm to others or themselves” (p.316). This definition is problematic because violence can be done by groups and not just an individual. Furthermore, the use of the word ‘intentionally’ seems to omit violent acts that are due to negligence or neglect.

Later definitions of violence sought to divide the concept into two parts. Bufacchi (2005) talks about a ‘minimalist conception’ and a broader ‘comprehensive’ conception of violence. The general difference is that minimalists frame violence to physical force upon the body (Glasser, 1998). This definition rules out the psychological effects of violence such as body shaming, emotional abuse, and sexual harassment. Advocates of the ‘comprehensive conception’ of violence such as Ray (2011) broaden the definition “to include anything avoidable that impedes human realization, violates the rights or integrity of the person and is often judged in terms of outcomes rather than intentions” (p.9). Aspects of what sort of violence this is, vary. For instance, Jackman (2002) on the one hand broadly includes corporal punishment as well as verbal admonishment. Felson (2009) on the other hand includes physical aggression as well as other social and psychological ramifications. For instance, bullying would not be a form of violence under Glasser’s definition. In Ikalanga folktales, violence takes on a wide range of scenarios that speak to both minimalist and comprehensive conceptions.

It can be argued further that violence in whatever form is an exercise in power relations. One harms another because they are in a privileged position, financial, economic, social, etc.,

to do so. Specific examples could be violence within a patriarchal setting where a husband beats a wife simply because he is physically stronger than her and knows that she will not defeat him. However, studies show that even the physically weak can be violent towards those who are physically stronger. Foucault (2003, p.188) calls this “the underside of power.” He essentially refers to situations where the aggressor is in a situation which should typically put them at a disadvantage to the victim in terms of age, physical strength, racial profiling, or privilege. Such situations would include violence of a child upon a parent, a slave upon a slaver, or in the context of Africa the violence of the colonized upon the colonizer. My working definition is that violence is the use of physical and emotional harm upon (an) individual(s) regardless of whether such violence is driven by self-interest or sanctioned by the community. As such this definition includes torture, bullying, body shaming, sexual exploitation, cannibalism and so on.

2.0 Garver’s Theory of Violence

This paper expands the discussion on violence by applying Garver’s theory of violence to five Ikalanga folktales. The theory is quite expansive as it focuses on two aspects: “whether the violence is personal or institutionalised and whether the violence is overt or a kind of covert or quiet violence” (Garver 1971, p.249). The first kind of violence is direct/personal and in Ikalanga narratives this would include a character slapping, kicking, or punching another. The definition would also include kidnapping, abduction, and torture. Violence that is institutionalised would encompass the type which is sanctioned by schools and the courts. Corporal punishment is a good example of this. In folktales institutionalised violence would include sentences made by the *she* (chief or king) at a *kgotla* (community meeting place) upon offenders. Garver then speaks of covert personal violence. The violence is ‘covert’ or psychological in nature because you cannot physically see it in action the way one sees a person striking out at another with a fist, for instance. Thus, covert violence entails action that leads to mental upheaval. In folktales this could include verbal bullying, cursing, and body shaming. Garver’s last type is institutional covert violence, and it touches on ideologies that are enforced upon a population by patriarchy, for instance. In such a scenario a character can enact overt physical violence upon another with the approval or backing of the state or *she* (chief).

3.0 Findings and Discussion

In this qualitative study five Ikalanga folktales from an unpublished collection by Prof Kezilahabi were selected for analysis. These folktales were collected in the northern part of Botswana in 2004 and form part of a larger corpus of around two hundred folktales. The folktales are *Banana ne Shumba* (the maidens and the lion), *Mabuyu* (Baobab fruits), *Nkadzi wakabe edana ne nyoka* (A woman who was in love with a snake), *Shulo ne Phowu* (Hare and Ostrich) and *Lingano gwe Nkadzikulu* (A tale of an old woman). Garver’s overt physical violence dominates these tales. This is where the perpetrator uses his/her own limbs to injure and or kill the victim. These tales were deliberately chosen because they all depict violence in unique ways and would make for interesting analysis in a classroom setup. The five folktales are all human narratives except for *Shulo ne Phowu*, and the types of violence they display, using Garver’s theory, are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of Violence in the selected five Ikalanga Folktales

Overt physical violence	Folktale	Covert physical violence	Folktale
Dismemberment	<i>Mabuyu</i>	Verbal threats	<i>Lingano gwe Nkadzikulu</i>
Cannibalism	<i>Shulo ne Phowu; Banana ne Shumba</i>	scolding	<i>Lingano gwe Nkadzikulu</i>
Mob justice	<i>Banana ne Shumba</i>		
Burning a person alive	<i>Nkadzi wakabe edana ne nyoka</i>		
Infanticide	<i>Shulo ne Phowu</i>		
Hacking to death with an axe	<i>Lingano gwe Nkadzikulu</i>		

As Table 1 illustrates, overt physical violence dominates overwhelmingly, suggesting that the violence in Ikalanga tales is more explicit than implicit. The type of violence further moves away from the usual beatings to incorporate disturbing images that range from maiming to cannibalism. At a glance, Table 1 presents an exaggerated image of overt forms of punishment. It is extremely unlikely that learners in a primary school environment would have experienced or been exposed to such levels of violence. It is thus important to remember that if Western thought is that folktales were initially intended for an adult audience (Nikolajeya, 1997; Zipes, 2012, Saxby, 2022) then by extension it can be surmised that African folktales were for adult consumption before being ultimately dominated by children. This argument can also be extended thematically in that Ikalanga folktales touch on barrenness, infidelity, witchcraft, and other content which can be regarded as unsuitable for the six to nine primary school age group. However, when one studies the oral text in context, in its own temporal space of transmogrification and anthropomorphism, these depictions of visceral violence become watered down. The learner knows that in this world of make believe the moral of the story is of greater importance than episodes of violence contained therein. In short, to paraphrase Aristotle, it is a situation of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. It might even be that young learners will experience covert physical violence in exponential amounts to overt violence and thus can better relate to the former more. The analysed texts also show that covert and overt physical violence can occur within the same narrative. More research is needed into the relationship between violence in folktales and the student's physical world. However, studies show that, "instruction in the mother tongue contribute far more to the cultural, affective, cognitive and socio-psychological development of the child than instruction in a foreign language" (Dhlamini & Maseko, 2014, p.61). The five folktales are summarised below with some analysis.

Banana ne Shumba (the maidens and the lion) is a tale in which several females are courted by a lion disguised as a man. This is the only example of transmogrification in the five stories. A boy who is part of a group of females travels with them to the suitor's home and realizes that the man is not what he seems to be. The boy then aids the escape of the maidens

by transporting them on a paper plane made from a piece of bone. Upon realizing that their plans of eating the maidens have been thwarted, the other lions turn on the suitor and eat him. This cannibalism is tempered by the knowledge that they are animals eating one of their own. It is a tale which carries lessons on abduction and the importance of working together. It is interesting how the maidens do not seem to have a voice. When they are taken away by the man they do not protest and can be seen as naïve vessels who rely on masculine ingenuity to overcome what would have been an inevitable death. Gender representation is important in folktales as “we tend to accept the gendered discourse embedded in them as natural, essential and conclusive” (Saxby, 2022, p.225).

In the story of *Mabuyu* (Baobab fruits) a pregnant woman has a craving for Baobab fruits. She sends her daughter to the bush to forage for some. A troop of baboons hold sway over a Baobab tree and though they give her some fruit they keep insisting that the mother comes in person so that they can judge the extent of her pregnancy. However, when the mother finally comes, the baboons go into a rage at the sight of her, tear her apart and eat the foetus: *Wate eswika koga, makudo kalamba bona. Ebata Nkadzikulu epalula eja n'gwana* (when she arrived, the baboons were outraged. They caught the old woman, tore her apart and ate the foetus). The word *epalula* (tear apart) provides the image of dismemberment. The eating of the foetus is shocking, and one wonders on the significance of this action on an unborn child. Similar to the previous tale, *Banana ne Shumba*, this one has underlying warnings of the implications of women who venture outside the domestic sphere.

The story of *Nkadzi wakabe edana ne nyoka* (A woman who was in love with a snake) is a short narrative of a new bride who is in a relationship with a snake, a relationship we assume to be heterosexual as the reptile should be understood to be male. Despite the fact that the woman is being taken to the groom's home, the snake insists on following her and the bridal party. Upon arrival the snake causes a commotion, and the shocked in-laws burn the snake and the bride in a hut. The folktale cautions against multiple relationships in general and infidelity in particular. The burning of the lover and the bride symbolises how despicable such a union is. Yet again, the violence viewed in isolation is shocking though the general message of respecting cultural norms on marriage stands out. Whatever conclusions arise, a classroom environment that has children from different (or similar) cultural backgrounds enriches debate (Zhang & Lauer, 2015).

Shulo ne Phowu (Hare and Ostrich) is a trickster tale that is macabre. The hare often plays the role of a protagonist in trickster tales and is presented as a sly character that dupes unsuspecting animals that are often quite larger than itself. This is a gruesome tale of child murder and cannibalism. The ostrich is tricked by hare to eat her children as relish with some mealie meal, *Phowu inogala ipiwa shadza ne nyama ye bana ngono isingananzelele* (The ostrich, unawares, is daily fed its children with the mealie meal). A total of ten children are

killed, cooked, and fed to the mother.¹ When the mother ostrich discovers the truth, she collapses and dies. It is a harrowing tale, subtle in its horror but disturbing in its total number of deaths. The only death that comes across as humane is that of the mother who dies probably from shock. This is the only tale of the five that features anthropomorphism exclusively. As such the folktale is fully within the realm of animal entertainment without human characters adding some form of realism. It is evident though that these animals display human qualities: cooking, ploughing, and so on. As this is a trickster tale, the notion of entertainment seems to overshadow whatever moral lessons are promoted.

Lingano gwe Nkadzikulu (A tale of an old woman) explores a chilling relationship between a grandmother and her grandchild. The old woman keeps a snake in her hut and her intentions are to feed her granddaughter to it. Therefore, whenever they go out to the ploughing fields, the old woman tells the young girl that she should return home for some seeds that are in the hut. The snake is unsuccessful in its attempts to kill the child. Finally, the child narrates her ordeal to her father who kills it with an axe. The old woman dies from grief when she realizes that her snake has been killed.

With an appreciation of the content of these stories, it is safe to say that an understanding of what approach to use in the local curriculum is what is needed for effective classroom teaching and learning in one's mother tongue.

Scholars such as Nkosana (2013) have asserted that the technicist approach that Botswana uses for its curriculum could be a hindrance towards pedagogical change. Toraman and Korkmaz (2022, p.489) state that "technicism is an approach which is reinforced by competition and funding mechanisms where inputs and outputs are counted and rewarded (or penalized), and a system which treats teachers as technicians to be controlled." It is thus important that policy makers go beyond implementing mother language instruction to include teaching that allows for pedagogy which is sensitive to cultural background. Simply put, the one size fits all pedagogical approach used during the era of Setswana as the main source of instruction may need to be changed to cater for the nuances that each culture demands upon its people in the reception of education. Studies on Botswana classrooms have indicated that the teacher centred style can frustrate reforms especially if those reforms are at odds with the dominant technicist approach (Prophet & Rowell, 1990; Fuller, Snyder, Chapman & Hau, 1994; Tabulawa 1997; Yandila, Komane, & Moganane, 2003). Hopefully teaching students in their mother tongue, albeit for a short period, can bring with it unique teaching pedagogies to offset the status quo. In this environment, topics taught in Ikalanga which use folktales as part of instruction will not construe the violence therein as something to be shunned or at worst censored.

¹ It should be noted that *nanzelele* is not Ikalanga but Isindebele. The storyteller used this term and it has been transcribed as such in order to respect the storyteller's poetic licence of mixing languages as long as the communicative aspect of the story is not compromised.

4.0 Conclusion

Using Garver's perspective on violence, one can deduce that Ikalanga folktales predominantly display overt physical violence, and this can cause consternation among educators who seek to interrogate their presence in the syllabus. Violence, though, is not a straightforward concept because to define it one goes beyond the physical to touch on psycho-social aspects that young learners may not be conscious of. Studies show that violence is best understood within the context of the narrative as part of the process of understanding and appreciating the benefits of traditional storytelling. Violence in folktales is necessary for character evaluation as well as the mental and emotional growth of the learner. Until further research is done on the impact of folktale violence on the student in Botswana schools, it could be premature and counterproductive to censor violent literature in the primary school syllabus. Moreover, there needs to be clear legislation on how this multiple language instruction will be implemented and monitored. A policy falls short of expressing the desire for real change in the Botswana education system. The fact that the instruction only goes up to Standard Two is ultimately self-defeating.

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