Shangwe Music for Spiritual Rituals: A Symbolical Enactment

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ABSTRACT Anthropological scholars have discussed various myths. The Shangwe community is a ‘web’ of mythological symbols that are orally active but without documentation. It was intention of this ethnography to explore cultural and biblical symbols embedded in the Shangwe mythology in Gokwe North District in the Midlands Province in Zimbabwe. The results revealed that Nevana sanctified hut housed mythic snakes of various colours and lengths. Only five people had the traditional authorisation to enter the hut using the western door, just as there are five virgins in the Bible. Chiefs, just like the wise men who came from the east in search of the newly born Jesus, have the religious right to sit next to the eastern door which is ever closed. A certain man had the traditional role to stop the rain when it was too much to sustain plant growth. Some of the myths are comparable with certain songs of the Shangwe and other cultures. Folktales and song texts reflect cultural heritage. The objectives of this article were two-fold. First, it sought to identify, compare, and discuss traditional and biblical symbolism embedded in four Shangwe myths. Second, it intended to examine song texts connected to certain Shangwe mythology.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropological scholars have discussed various myths (Barber 2012; Engelstein 2013; Hodzic 2013). Other academics studied mythology on African rituals (Elsner 2001; Shah and Pettigrew 2009; Snook 2013). Besides, Boyce-Tillman (2013) discussed Western Music Education in the context of Greek mythology. The article aims to document and discuss biblical and ritual songs of the Shangwe mythology in Gokwe North District in the Midlands Province in Zimbabwe. The fieldwork interviews gathered among informants famed for their indigenous cultural practices showed that the community is entangled in a mythological ‘web’ that mirror biblical and cultural symbolism. Especially, the Gokwe North District is popularly known for its munyai (messenger) and the rain spirit, Nevana, and his symbolic rainmaking ritual hut called dumba, which has two doors. In the Shangwe spiritual hierarchy of rain prayers, Nevana spirit is believed to be close to their Supreme God, Mwari. Tevasiira Samson Marariromba, Nevana’s medium, discharges his rainmaking ritual process with Gaison Gasura, the munyai. In the Zimbabwean Shona language, the term munyai refers to a person who mediates marriage matters between the in-laws. Yet in the Shangwe mukwerera rainmaking ritual setting it denotes a person who facilitates rain problems between the chiefs and the rain spirits.

METHODOLOGY

The holistic approach is emphasised in studying music-cultural and total participant observation comes to the fore. Amit (2000: 2) notes that the “totality” of full participant observation necessitates holism. According to Sarantakos (2005), intensive participant observation provides favourable opportunities for identifying unanticipated outcomes. It also exists in a natural, unstructured, and flexible setting. The researcher’s personal involvement in the Shangwe cultural practices that incorporated mukwerera rainmaking rituals provided ample time to study its anthropological and ethnomusical symbols. For Titon and Reck (2009: 542),

The subject of our musical ethnography is the aspect of the music-culture that is being represented; the topic of your musical ethnography enables your analysis and interpretation of your subject.

The ethnography was based on six informants who have prominent roles in the mukwerera ceremonies. Face-to-face interviews, audio-video filming, tape recording, and the researcher’s full participant observation were the most appropriate means of collecting data from elderly culture bearers.

The results of ethnography revealed that the Nevana’s hut is unique since it is the only round hut with two doors found in the entire Midlands Province, yet an ordinary round hut has one door. As will be discussed later, biblical and cultural symbols are implanted in four myths chosen for this article. Shangwe mythologies are still active but they exist without a written record. Here, the term mythology is defined as a legend interwoven with unproven symbolic information. This particular ethnic culture is one of Zimbabwe’s fourteen minority groups whose languages do not
exist in the school curriculum system in order for them to be formally learnt.

For McNaughton (1982: 487), “Everywhere in Africa knowledge and power are integrally linked”. There is secrecy enmeshed in the Nevana hut and Middleton (1973: 300) corroborates that secrecy functions,
as part of social process and change in the structure of society; as a means to political power: as a way to attain whatever the people consider to be the absolute truth that is not known to ordinary men but only to Divinity.

According to Nooter (1993: 55), secrecy has two attributes. Secrecy has the ability to conceal and reveal meanings entrenched to the extent that the people will eventually know the truth and begin to appreciate the symbolism of secrecy. Secrecy is “rooted in the most basic experience of what it is to live as one human being among others, needing both to hide and to share, both to explore and to beware of the unknown” (Bok 1982: 281). For Piot (1993: 353), secrecy, “the intentional concealing of information”, is part of everyday life and it is the discourse among the Kabre of northern Togo (West Africa). On a similar note, Nevana, the Shangwe rain spirit also guarded his secrecy to induce rain. The only unique aspect of myths associated with this particular spirit is the concept of biblical and cultural parallelisms which are directly comparable with certain songs. Jensen and Raphael Patai also confirm the conception of biblical-African “parallels” (Isaac 1964: 87-98).

A puff-adder is renowned for its faithfulness to live at one chosen habitat. The Karanga in Zimbabwe attribute a faithful wife to a puff-adder. Apart from that, when a farmer finds a puff-adder in his field, the snake is a sign of good harvest. Since the snake remains loyal to one place, the Karanga belief is that the farmer will keep the wealth he obtains from the field. The puff-adder is regarded as divisi, meaning herbs used to increase the harvest (Aschwaden 1989). Amongst the Karanga, the puff-adder is an important symbol carrier. The snake symbolises rain and fertility. Its skin markings are associated with rain. The puff-adder’s alternate patterns of light and dark chevron resemble a sky covered with clouds (Aschwaden 1989). Aschwaden made great contributions on the puff-adder symbolism. The research unpacks the mythological symbolism of the snakes that abide in Nevana’s hut.

Since the Zane rain shrines in Matabeleland in Zimbabwe are vital to human life, they are considered as sacred places. These places are directly linked to Matopos where Mwari’s voice is heard. In this regard, water is the “origin and spring of life. Mwari is the creator and this is also why it comes from the rocks of Matopos. Water is seen by the Karanga as the earth’s God-given fertility. Water is truly life”, it stays elsewhere, and “God, Mwari is water” (Aschwaden 1989: 193). He is the provider of fertility and sender of rain. Aschwaden made sound contributions to the interpretation of water. He was not yet aware that the Shangwe have a rain spirit dwelling in their community. The same society is associated with certain myths and cultural elements of even other ethnic groups.

From the African perspective, all human beings are too young to speak to Mwari directly (Gombe 1952; Gelfand 1959; Chimhundu et al. 2000). The underlying African principle is to respect whoever is bestowed with traditional authority. Weber (1962) makes it known that the community acknowledges long-established power despite gender identity. By virtue of that the society owes great honour to such a person. A typical example is reflected in one the Shangwe mukwerera rainmaking song with song texts Nhái mbonga! Chii chinoriridza?” According to the informants, mbonga is a Shangwe virgin lady who does not customarily marry. A certain chief offered her daughter as a mbonga, to the Nevana priest in order to live with him. The lady prepared the food for the rain priest. One of the researcher’s informants, Evina Muriarimbo, said the last mbonga passed away in 2004. In addition, the mbonga interpreted misfortunes such as thunder and lightening for the community during the rainy season as reflected by the stated above song texts. Chiefs, who are the highest symbols of authority in the Shangwe community, owed the lady great honour. From the interviews, the status of the mbonga was envied by many girls in the Gokwe community. The informants even compared her position with that of nuns from the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe (Ngara 2012).

Chimhundu et al. (2001: 1144) affirm the concept of honouring those in authority when they say: “Kukwira gomo hoputerera”3. As a result, if a young person requests anything from any elderly person directly, the person is regarded as lacking humanity (Battle 1997). The same concept of humanity is also portrayed by the chiefs and the rain priest when they ask for rain from
God, Mwari but biblical and cultural symbolisms are characteristic of their traditional communition system. Nyambara (2001) discusses land distribution in the Shangwe community. A year later, Nyambara published another article in which he explains various connotations that are associated with the origins of the term “shangwe” (2002:288). Ngara (2013), in his article entitled, Gender and Sexuality, a Reflection on Rainmaking Songs, presents a discussion regarding roles demarcation prevalent in the Shangwe spiritual realm and the world of the living. Nyambara and Ngara made profound contributions to the study of the Shangwe. This paper comes with a symbolic dimension. It fills this gap by answering the question: How do four Shangwe mythologies and song texts mirror biblical and intangible cultural heritage, respectively?

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The qualitative data for this anthropological-ethnomusicological study will be presented and examined under four subheadings that follow immediately.

Dumba, the Rain Spirit’s Hut

There are sixteen round huts at the actual Nevana’s homestead and the rain spirit’s dumba is the seventeenth. All of them are mud plastered and have grass thatched roofs. These huts are built in a crescent shaped design. The Nevana’s rainmaking sacred hut, dumba, occupies the western side of the design. Its grass thatched roof is supported by spaced poles leaving large gaps that are covered with thatching grass. In other words, the Nevana’s hut has a grass wall. The informants told the researcher that the hut was the only one in Gokwe North and Gokwe South districts with two doors and let alone the Midlands Province. One of its doors faces the eastern side and the other one the west (See Figs. 1 and 2 in the Appendix). The western door is smaller than the eastern one. The two doors are made of thin poles. Since the rain priest passed away in 2004, four people namely, three of his seven wives, and Gaison Gasura have the traditional authorisation to enter in the hut through the western door. The eastern door is ever closed. All the chiefs sit next to the eastern door when they come to request rain, collect various grain crops and to participate in mukwerera song-dance performances. They sing specific songs such as Changu chakasara nani?

The culture bearers informed the researcher that the above mentioned song is sung by the rain spirit, Chinamakwati when it is in control of its medium. For the Shangwe, this rain spirit is the lead singer of the song. In the mukwerera rainrite context, Chinamakwati would be sending the message that he has accomplished his duty to provide rain. In the informants’ mind frames, Chinamakwati would be wondering why the Shangwe are sending rain prayers, yet it is raining. The song texts imply that the Shangwe should now go and work on their fields.

In the researcher’s view, this song is comparable with a Karanga ngano (folktale) about a boy called Chinamakwati, who was able to call rain by singing: “Vakuru vava munu vasina mano, voti Chamatowo pfudze mombe. Ndondodzi pfudze pweku hwangu. Ndera ndera ndera hoye.” In short, African folktales and song texts are interpreted as intangible heritage which require preservation for future generations to derive benefits.

Nevana’s sacred hut and its contents are central to the mukwerera rainmaking ceremony. There are many snakes kept in the hut. The four who still enter into the hut are not allowed to wipe any snake that might wriggle past their feet when they are inside it. These snakes are just given water to drink from a wooden plate with a stirring stick placed in it. The same plate and its stick were used by Nevana medium during the rainmaking ritual process. The Nevana family members strongly believe that they are not supposed to kill any snake which they might see moving on their yard.

One of the female informants, Evina Marariromba, told the researcher that they do not look up when they get inside the hut. In response to the question why they do not kill the snakes the woman said: “It is the ancestor who will be just walking around.” It is an established belief among the Shangwe that the snakes are nyokadzimu, meaning ancestral spirit mediums. Therefore, they do not kill any snake they might see moving around the yard. When the researcher enquired more about the snakes, she simply said that they had various colours and she mentioned...
two functions, rainmaking and fertility. The researcher asked the six culture bearers to explain the rainmaking and fertility symbolism but that did not yield any result. The informants could not confide such information since it was their cultural treasure that should not be divulged to outsiders. However, Evina just said: “The snakes for the spirits are wise”, implying that the snakes are an insignia of wisdom. Similarly, Genesis 3 verses 1-7 tell us that Adam and Eve were cheated by the serpent to eat the fruits from the tree of life that was in the midst of the Garden of Eden. Soon after consuming fruits, they began to see that they were naked hence they looked for something to cover their sexual organs. Shortly, they became wise. The serpent was a symbol of wisdom.

The fact that the Shangwe do not kill snakes often seen wriggling on the Nevana yard triggered the researcher to ask the question: Do you kill snakes in your neighbourhood? The answers were: “Do you see that Nevana forest? There are snakes in it. Even our children do not kill them when herding cattle. They know that they are ancestral snakes”. The researcher concluded that the Shangwe belief in snakes as spirit mediums worked positively in conserving natural resources such as snake species.

The eastern door is epitomic to the wise men from the east. The wise men were in search of Jesus when they heard about His birth (Matthew 2 verses 1-12). The chiefs who sat on the eastern part of the Nevana hut are a symbol of wisdom since they are the ones who collect information on rainmaking and distribute among their subordinates. The five people who were allowed to enter into the hut were representative of the five wise girls (Matthew 25 verses 1-13). The biblical analogy reminds the researcher of one the church choruses with these texts: Vasikana vane guni tavaona. Vashanu vacho vakangwara.... The song commonly features during most church services in Zimbabwe. It is directly comparable with the five wise girls who were the holy ones waiting for the coming of Jesus Christ. The Nevana’s hut epitomises the Holy of Holies since only pure people entered it. Any sinner who would enter into The Holy of Holies would surely die. The eastern bigger door represented the wider path which leads the sinners to hell (Matthew 7 v 13 and Luke 13 v 24). The researcher observed that the eastern door was smaller than the western one. The smaller western door reminded the researcher of the narrow road which leads to heaven and a small number of people who follow that road (Matthew 7 v 14). The grain crops presented to the chiefs were meant to teach them the concept of sharing whatever the little they might get in life. The same concept was illustrated by Jesus when he fed five thousand hungry people on five loaves of bread and two fish (Matthew 14 verses 18-20 and Mark 6 verses 35-44).

The Rain Priest: A Symbolic Interpretation

The Shangwe rain priest, nyusa, was called Tevasiira Samson Marariromba and his first munyai (messenger) was Gaison Gasura. Despite the locally feared spirits called masengu, the rain priest and his first munyai, were the only two people who had the religious authorisation to go to Nyanhekwe Hill. Since Tevasiira Samson passed away in 2004, no one ascends the sacred hill to this day. The priest would ask his munyai to stay at the foot of the hill. He would get at the top of Nyanhekwe where he requested rain from God, Mwari through his ancestral spirit, Nevana who possessed him. Having finished communication, Tevasiira Samson would then descend the hill to fetch the munyai. According to informants, it used to rain before the two arrived at home. Consequently, they would get home dripping wet. This mythology is analogous to one of the Karanga rainmaking songs entitled Tonaiwa nemvura tichibva Zame. Zame is one of the rain shrines found in Matapos hills in Matabeleland South Province in Zimbabwe where the Karanga go to ask for rain from Mwari. According to the culture bearers, the same song is also sung by Nevana priest on his way back from Nyanhekwe Hill where he asks for rain from Mwari. In their interpretation of the song, the Shangwe, just like the Karanga, believe that the rain priest’s foot marks are not supposed to be seen when he or she returns home. Their local thinking is that the foot prints must be erased. The precipitation is a clear testimony that the community’s rain dilemma has been received by the God, Mwari.

Since Gaison Gasura was one of the two male informants from Nevana Village, the researcher had the opportunity to ask him if he had an occasion to ascend Nyanhekwe. He confessed that his uncle never gave him the chance to go up with him. On a similar note, Jesus Christ used to leave His three disciplines Peter, James, and John (Mat-
the rain spirit sees Mweziko, draws the line to remind Mweziko that he is about to destroy the earth again by floods (Genesis 9 verses 11-19). In brief, Mweziko drew the line to remind Nevana spirit to tell God that He was about to break the covenant which He [God] signed with Noah that He was not going to destroy the world by floods again. In a nutshell, the Shangwe follow their long established traditional hierarchical mode of conveying pleas to Mwari.

The Dove Symbolism

The dove myth is very important among the Shangwe. The informants told the researcher that if a man or a child comes across a dove cooing and turning around along the path, the person will immediately return home to tell the mother about the bird. The children are taught the dove symbolism from youth. Among the Shangwe and even the Karanga, there is a song entitled Inodya ichirira njiva. It is sung at various occasions. Young children normally sing it as a game song. It also features during a grain threshing ritual called jikwara. In this context, its main purpose is to energise the threshers.

From the Shangwe interpretations, the dove signifies a visitor. Consequently, if it is a woman who would have seen the dove, she would begin to prepare for the inevitable visitor. In the event that it is a man who had come across the dove, he would inform his wife to get ready for the guest.

Luke 1: verses 11-38 announce the births of John the Baptist and Jesus and the dove symbolism. In both instances, Gabriel mentions the Holy Spirit saying to Zechariah, “... and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit” (verse 15), and then to Mary who was still a virgin, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you” (verse 35). Still in Mat-
threw 3 verse 16 and Mark 1 verse 10, the Holy Spirit is identified as a dove. During Jesus’ baptism, Luke says, “And the Holy Spirit descended upon him in a bodily form, as a dove” (3 verse 22). According to Larkins (1981: 14), Gabriel reminds us that: “The dove is a bearer of good news”. The dove continues to be a sign of heavenly presence, now symbolising the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

Biblical and cultural symbols are entangled in Shangwe mythology. These symbols are evident in mythological works executed by the rain stopper and priest. The rain spirit resides in a sacred hut of its own kind. Furthermore, the same shrine is home to various snakes of symbolic functions. Since the snake symbolism is imparted in young people from youth, this belief is positively increasing the number of snakes in the Nevana neighborhood. It is a contributive impact in safeguarding nature. There are certain songs that have some relationships with myths and the rainmaking ceremonial rite. Folktales and songs form part of heritage which is passed on generationally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the whole, rain spirits are believed to reside in places such as mountains, hills, rivers, trees, and caves. The ethnography revealed that rain spirits can also dwell among family members but in hallowed symbolic ritual huts. The researcher then suggests that academics need to find out other shrines that exist among minority cultures. Shangwe belief systems have a positive impact in safeguarding nature. Given this, the researcher would like to propose that academics at tertiary institutions which offer anthropology to explain contact violence in New Zealand. Current Anthropology, 53: 799-808.


SHANGWE MUSIC FOR SPIRITUAL RITUALS


APPENDIX

Fig. 1. The western door

Fig. 2. The eastern door