

**WIDE RESEARCHES IN COMPRESSED LYRICS OF AFRICAN  
TRADITIONAL SONGS: A CASE OF MUSIC OF THE SHONA  
SPEAKING PEOPLE OF ZIMBABWE.**

<sup>1</sup>Shadreck Mataruse, <sup>1</sup>Cosmas Mukandi

<sup>1</sup>Department of Teacher Development, Great Zimbabwe University,  
P.O Box 1235, Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

**ABSTRACT**

This study examined a sample of traditional Shona music compositions. The study sought to establish how music can be used to solve life problems. This research has established that lyrics in traditional African music are more than just words arranged in stanzas. African song lyrics are so well-crafted that if well analysed, rich and informative life guidance stories can be unveiled. The researchers recorded and transcribed five traditional Shona songs that were used to gather information from the selected culture bearers within the local community. The population of this study comprised the Shona-speaking people of Zimbabwe who were seventy years and above. From this population, a sample of ten participants was selected and this became the respondents of the study. The main data collection instrument used in this research was an open-ended interview guide. Through the interview guide, the interviewees revealed lengthy life stories and lessons that can be derived from the provided songs. Data analysis revealed that African music has more value than just humanly-organised words viewed as music. The study concluded by giving recommendations that music education should not only end on performance and development of music literacy. It should help, through analysis, both educators and learners to solve real life problems. Music educators should take advantage of the wealthy music that we have inherited from the ancestors to draw life lessons.

**Keywords:** African traditional songs, compressed lyrics, culture bearers.

**INTRODUCTION**

African songs are more than just words and can be used in solving real life problems. The lyrics are so well crafted that if well analysed, rich and informative life guiding stories can be unveiled. Traditional music plays an important role in African culture. Even the ancient African cultures encompassed music into their everyday lives. The history of African music has dance, storytelling and religious practices all grounded in the music of the culture. African music is

therefore, a way of life and not just a form of entertainment. The music is used in vital aspects of life such as to communicate, pass literature and remind struggles that were won. Song lyrics, which are the main focus of this study, are not as often studied as music although they are often partners (Juslin, 2005). While there are many functions of music within African cultures, one of the primary functions of music is to communicate through song lyrics (Fell, 2014). Lyrics add something powerful to the songs we listen to and the field is rich with possibility for research on lyrics.

Within the African traditional context, song lyrics are deeply embedded in the community's culture, history and worldviews. African song lyrics are about relations between individuals and their communities. According to Dei 2013, indigenous stories, songs, proverbs and folktales are indigenous ways of knowing. Song lyrics can present a philosophy of life, wise words that can be used to teach the young about life and allowing them to grow spiritually and morally into adulthood. Through critically analysed song lyrics, the youths may be taught to become responsible members of the society. It is known overtime that song lyrics have been part of every society (Levitin, 2006). Individuals are able to connect with a larger world through listening to songs that contain pro-social lyrics and act in accordance with the interpretation of the world around them (Greitemeyer, 2009). The meaningful interpretation of lyrics suggests that lyrics can impact action. Lyrics mirror aspects of cognitive behavioural therapy and listening to song lyrics can help teach the tools of cognitive behavioural therapy.

It is however interesting that most of African traditional songs are repetitive in nature and the meanings are in form of riddles. Like proverbs, African music is brief but based on researches and observations of nature. This riddle like nature of African songs requires a listener to be critical in deducing the intended meaning. If well searched for, African song meanings can make an important contribution to children's full participation in the social, cultural and economic life of African societies. It is against this background that the researchers decided to carry out a study on how African traditional song lyrics may be used to teach members of the society, especially the young to become functional community members. The researchers have the strong belief that if African traditional song lyrics are well analysed, meaningfully peaceful and harmonised societies may be constructed.

### **1.1 Research question**

- How can song lyrics contribute to the built up expected and functional members of the society?

#### **1.1.1 Sub research questions**

- What is the function of song lyrics in African music?
- Are there any meaningful life lessons that may be derived from African traditional songs?

### **METHODOLOGY: DESIGN, PROCEDURE AND PARTICIPANTS**

This research is a qualitative case study which sought to ascertain that lyrics in traditional African music are more than just words arranged in stanzas. The lyrics are well-crafted that if well analysed rich and informative life guidance stories can be unveiled. The researchers chose a qualitative research design because of its usefulness when the subject under study is too complex to be answered by a yes or no hypothesis. Chua, High, and Lau (2008) note the importance of this design by highlighting its major purpose in describing the state of affairs as they exist. Yates, Starnes, and Moore (2008) also indicate that a qualitative research design helps in capturing the complexity of everyday behaviour. Furthermore, Nketia (2005) postulates that qualitative research is field oriented. The researchers should be part of the respondents. This would help the researchers provide a rich description of cultural scenes, practices and beliefs. The broader scope covered by qualitative research design ensures that some useful data is always generated (Martyn, 2008). In this situation, the researchers sought to establish the meaning of song lyrics from the views of the participants. The researchers therefore identified the Shona speaking people of Zimbabwe as a population for this study. This population is a culture sharing group and researchers studied how it developed shared patterns of behaviour over time (Phillips and Burbules, 2000). In this study, the researchers visited the respondents to record musical lyrics and to carry out interviews that were used as data for this study.

Participants of this research were chosen using non probability sampling. This sampling technique was chosen as the researchers decided to rely on available subjects selected based on the knowledge of a population's culture as well as knowledge on the purpose of the study. Within the non probability sampling, snowball sampling was also used. This was when the researchers faced difficulties in locating the targeted members of a population. In this case, a sample of ten participants who were seventy years and above and Shona speaking people of Zimbabwe were selected to become the respondents of the study. Since the participants were difficult to locate, the researchers collected data from the six identified members and later got information from these to locate other members to make a total of ten participants.

The main instrument used in the study was the interview. The aim of the interviews conducted was to find out the views of the respondents on how African traditional music lyrics represented wide researches with life guiding stories that are compressed into a few words.

The researchers used audio visual recordings and a journal to record information for later analysis. More than ten African traditional songs were recorded from the respondents but only

five songs were used in this research. The lyrics were later used to explain how African traditional music was a product of lengthy researches carried out and compressed into a few lyrics. The researchers also used selected respondents to interpret the recorded song lyrics.

Data collected in this study was analyzed using qualitative methods. The researchers used the descriptive narrative technique to analyze data from conducted interviews and audio visual recordings.

## **FINDINGS**

### Song 1

Jari Mukaranga

*Kumutengera jari mukaranga ko inini?*

*Jari mukaranga.*

*Ndini ndakakubvisa mugota,*

*Jari mukaranga ko inini?*

*Jari mukaranga.*

In this song *jari* is a special blanket bought for the recently married wife *mukaranga* in a polygamous family.

This song tells a story about the first wife, ‘vahosi’ in Shona culture. The wife is complaining about the favours now being given to the recently married wife, ‘mukaranga’ while she (first wife) is being neglected. In this song the first wife is reminding the husband that she also needs to be valued and treated fairly. The song also reminds the husband that it is the first wife who earned him adulthood status leading him to attain community respect as according to the Shona culture. The first wife is therefore requesting the husband to retrace his behaviour and review the importance of the first wife.

While the song meaning may be taken literally, it may also be argued that this song is not about the husband and his wives at all. The song could have been used as an encouragement for members of the society to note the value in their original culture before they are snatched by the so called modern cultures. This song is requesting members of the society to start over and return to nature and identify themselves with their original culture. The song seeks to cleanse those who are being swept away by cyclones of the modern cultures.

The song is however at the same time realising the fluid nature of culture. Song lyrics are not suggesting that the young wife should be divorced. The young wife has a part to play in the family but should not send away the first wife. Both should take part in the built up of a peaceful and harmonious family, and not compromising the status of the first wife. Likewise, the waves of modern cultures that are fast sweeping Africa should not swallow the African traditional culture. It is therefore the duty of Africans to carefully select the gist from modern cultures and fuse it with theirs in a manner that maintains African cultural identity.

Song 2

Chigwindiri

*Chigwindiri wauya zinhu risina hama tamba tione,*

*Ndauya mukoma hiya tamba tione*

*Kanyama kemusango hiya tamba tione*

*Irombe remusango hiya tamba tione*

*Haa ini zinhu risina hama tamba tione*

*Nditambireiwo ini zinhu risina hama tamba tione*

This song is about someone who has no relatives and suffering lack of support from the society in which he lives. The person has realised the importance of socialising with other members of the society so as to be able to carry on with life. Chigwindiri is therefore in this song requesting to be accepted in the social activities of the community in which he lives. In response Chigwindiri is encouraged to join others in singing and dancing. He is at the same time being requested to showcase his dancing talent hence the lyrics *tamba tione*.

The song *chigwindiri* therefore is encouraging the spirit of socialising with other community members. According to the Shona culture, all members of the society function as relatives. No one should be left suffering lack of basic life needs when other members can provide. At the same time, those in need should be open so that the community may play their part in assistance.

Song 3

Dzinomwa muna Save

*Dzinomwa muna Save*

*Mhondoro dzinomwa muna Nyazvidzi*

*Mhondoro dzinomwa*

Mhondoro is a Shona name referring to a young lion with a spirit of respected person of the society who is dead (Ngoro, 2004). Such persons include important ancestors such as chiefs and respected political rulers. These lions become harmless to community members since the spirits are believed to have returned to heal and protect people from misfortunes.

According to the lyrics of this song, the *mhondoro* do not drink water from every other source but from big rivers. Such rivers, Save and Nyazvidzi in this case, are perennial rivers cutting across the Shona speaking communities of Zimbabwe with uncontaminated water. The song is therefore encouraging the young to associate themselves with pure activities that are socially accepted within the society they live. Doing so would earn them respect and in turn the society would benefit from them as they would in future assume the role of protecting their people through the *mhondoro*.

Song 4

Nhemamusasa

*Iwe nhemamusasa, nhemamusasa*

*Karinge zuva nhamo ichauya*

*Nhemamusasa iyawoye woyewo*

Nhemamusasa means cutting tree branches to make a temporary shelter. According to the information gathered during this research, Nhemamusasa was a war song by the Shona speaking people of Zimbabwe. When the Shona marched to stop the enemy from attacking them, they would make a tent shelter, "*musasa*" using tree branches.

The song is however currently being sung to educate the young the need for preparedness for unexpected mishaps. Like any other societies, the Shona people of Zimbabwe sometimes face natural disasters like drought and diseases. The song is therefore discouraging being over relaxed during good times of welfare. When food is in abundance, reserves should be made in case of drought in future years. Herbs for curing various diseases should also be researched for to maintain a healthy society. Nhemamusasa serves as a reminder that life is not always smooth and therefore measures should be put in advance in preparation for life turbulences.

Song 5

Nyamutamba nemombe

*Vakomana regai nditaure, woyewoye woye,*

*Vasikana regai nditaure, nyamutamba nemombe wabaiwa,*

*Nyamutamba nemombe wabaiwa, woye woye woye,*

*Ini regai nditaure, nyamutamba nemobe wabaiwa*

When literally translated this song means someone who used to show off fighting bulls. People used to warn him to stop engaging in such dangerous games but the advice fell in deaf ears. One day the bull fighter was killed by the bull and the community is mourning him.

The main lesson that can be derived from this song is the need for taking advice and warnings from others. There are a number of activities that may seem interesting and refreshing but may lead to serious problems in future even to the extent of costing life. It is therefore the duty of every member of the society to critically analyse the safety of whatever activity before disaster strikes. If one is lucky to be warned against participating in such activities it is crucial to take heed of such advice in order to serve life.

## **DISCUSSION**

Findings from the recorded song lyrics revealed that what seems to be short and repetitive lyrics of the Shona traditional music embed in them a number of life lessons that may help in the built up of meaningful and peaceful society. This study revealed that song lyrics in traditional songs may be used to instil in the young the awareness of having values and their corresponding relationship to the world in which they live. Analysis of song lyrics may give as many children as possible the best general education which will enable them to deal with a complex society and to form their own definite opinions about political, economic, legal and scientific facts of life. The use of traditional song lyrics may therefore be used to transmit cultural identity in the young generations and thereby moulding the desirable characters of the society.

This study has also revealed that song lyrics can be studied from an academic perspective. Song lyrics may be considered as a form of social commentary and so can communicate culturally significant messages. Such messages may be explicit or implied through metaphor or symbolism. If well analysed, song lyrics may help the young learn their cultural and practical life. African traditional song lyrics may be used in the maintenance of law and order through reprimanding the wrongdoer without branding him the criminal. African traditional song lyrics have their emphasis on community experience and involvement. The song lyrics have also remained essential to institutional life (Asante, 2000).

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to find out the role of song lyrics in African traditional song lyrics. The main concern of the study was to find out how best these lyrics may be used to educate members of the society especially the young so as to build a meaningfully peaceful and harmonious society. In an attempt to address the above concern the study examined five traditional song lyrics from the Shona speaking people of Zimbabwe. Ten members aged seventy years and above from this society were selected as participants of the research. Data was collected and analysed using the descriptive narrative technique. Research findings revealed that a meaningful and productive life guiding lessons may be derived from what may seem to be repetitive and short lyrics in African traditional songs. The study has revealed that from these lyrics wide researches have been done and the findings compressed into very few lyrics. Through compressed African traditional song lyrics, members of the society especially the young are taught how to become positively functional within the societies in which they live.

This research has also suggested that African traditional songs be effectively taught in African schools in order to mould desired and functional members of the society out of young generations. While it is important to copy good things from other cultures, it remains important to maintain our culture. Good things from other cultures should be there to reinforce and not to swipe away ours. Teachers should therefore be discouraged to rely solely on sources of content that are not African. The study revealed that the use of local traditional songs lyrics in music education has a positive impact in constructing a meaningfully desired and peaceful society. Through traditional songs lyrics, the young generations become aware of having values and their corresponding relationship to the world in which they live.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Basing on the findings of this research, the study recommends that African traditional song lyrics should be effectively used to teach the young what they are expected of in the societies they live. African school authorities should also encourage the use of traditional songs in music education. This would go along with Blacking (2000) who views music as accepted patterns of sound intended to construct a meaningful society. What is taught in schools should be culturally relevant to and affirming of the students' lived realities (Mataruse, 2017). Schools should help in moulding its population into one society with a shared cultural identity and prepare future generations for their citizenship roles.

The study also recommends that schools should be miniatures of societies through teaching relevant music for cultural preservation and society building. The total activities and programmes of a school should be organised according to the cultural ideas and values of the



society which establishes and organises the school. If African traditional song lyrics are well analysed and taught in schools, the above role of educational institutions would be achieved with ease in African societies.

## **REFERENCES**

- Asante, K.W. (2000) *Zimbabwe Dance: Rhythm Forces, Ancestral Voices-An Aesthetic Analysis*. Trenton: African World Press, Inc.
- Blacking, J. (2000) *How Musical Is Man?* Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
- Chua, L., High, C. and Lau, T. (Eds) (2008) *How Do we know? Evidence, Ethnography and The Making of Anthropological Knowledge*. New Castle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Dei, G.J.S. and Kempf, A. (2013) *New Perspectives on African-Centred Education in Canada*. Toronto, Ontario: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Fell, M. (2014) *Lyrics Classification*. Master's Thesis: Saarland University.
- Greitemeyer, T. (2009) Effects of Songs With Prosocial Lyrics on Prosocial Behavior: Further Evidence and a Mediating Mechanism. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Vol. 35 No. 11. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0146167209341648>
- Juslin, P. (2005) A Dimension Approach to Vocal Expression of Emotion. *Journal of Cognition and Emotion*. Vol. 19 No. 5. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02699930441000445>
- Levitin, D. (2006). *This is your brain on music: The science of a human obsession*. New York, N.Y.: Dutton
- Martyn, D. (2008). Communities of Practice: A Research Paradigm for the Mixed Methods Approach. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*. Vol. 2 No. 3. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1558689808316807>
- Mataruse, S. (2017) Transmitting Cultural Identity in Schools Through Traditional Music: A Case Study of Three Districts in Zimbabwe. *Global Journal of Educational Studies*. Vol 3 No. 1. <https://doi.org/105296/gjes.v3i1.10638>.
- Ngoro, R.B. (2004) Jestice Phillis, G., ed. *Holy People of the World. A Cross Cultural Encyclopedia*. California: Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data.
- Nketia, J.H.K. (2005) *Ethnomusicology and African Music: Mode of Inquiry and Interpretation*. Afram Publications.

Yates, D. Starnes, S. and Moore, D. (2010) *The Practice of Statistics*. U.S.A: W.H Freeman.

Phillips, D.C. and Burbules, N.C. (2000) *Positivism and Educational Research*. New York: Rawman and Littlefield Publishers.