

THEATRE AND MORALITY – ABSTRACTIONS FROM ‘NKONDLO-A-NDZI-DYI PRESENTS’: XITSONGA DRAMA

¹Chauke OR* and ²Chauke WS

^{1,2}Department of Languages, University of Limpopo, Republic of South Africa

¹Osborn.chauke@ul.ac.za

¹ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7121-678x>

ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical appraisal of Xitsonga's theatrical performances at a selected university in Southern Africa. It examines the various ways in which issues to do with immorality, tribe and education versus pleasure bring to the fore the resultant demise and consequential life-style harvest accorded to the actions of university juvenile delinquencies within the contextual depictions of the Nkondlo-a-ndzi-dyi DVD Dramaturgical presentations. The drama is a groundbreaking artistic initiative by Xitsonga students who wished to illustrate the moral and ethnic disparities and conflicts prevailing at the campus chosen for the presentations. Evident in the paper is the idea that advocates of vice reaps according to their deeds, and so are practitioners of commendable deeds.

Keywords: Xitsonga/Xichangana, Hakelo ya swendlo, Theatre, Drama, Immorality.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In many African social settings and conversational contexts, it is easy to easily decipher that theatre is not taken seriously as an important aspect that can serve crucial posts in human life. The significance of theatre has been relegated sorely to entertainment and mainly to occupy the children and the youth. The contribution of theatre in some other important sectors of human life such as inculcation of morality, religious edification and the teaching of critical lessons about human life have taken time to be realised by many, including those who actively participated in theatrical performances. However, in some contexts, the significance of dramatic performances has been taken seriously as a tool for imparting enviable human qualities that are commendable in society. Such human traits are hinted below by Robin (2009: 128) thus:

(some scholars argue that) the arts expand participants' capacity for empathy. They suggest that the arts may serve to promote respect between individuals (Nussbaum 1997) and even tolerance between cultures.

In view of artistic performances, which may come in the form of drama, Robin considers that the various performances by different characters who may display different viewpoints, personality traits and idiosyncratic tendencies, may trigger in the audience, feelings of fear, tolerance and perhaps the desire to embrace each other by ironing out all ethnic and racial differences. Such human or social partitions as cultural or racial differences have concrete social walls that cannot be easily destroyed by mere deliberation, but may escalate profusely into more serious debates that anticipate more disparities than before. It is therefore conceded that theatrical performances offer a relaxing and non-confrontational platform where differences can be articulated, studied and left to the audience to re-think their attitudes towards one another in life. Key in it all is that theatre has a peaceful way of addressing real life challenges, and therefore stands out as the most desired option for conflict resolutions.

Action is a creation of that which is non-existent in order to assume the intended or expected imagined reality. The actors take time to study prevailing situations, socio-political anomalies and the long craved for expectations of their respective communities. This results in coming up with solutions that are too crude to be aired out verbally, in confrontation with the target group, but can be hinted solemnly through stage performances that directly hit on social misdemeanour and not the individual involved. Such performances have been, among Africans, associated with *ku ba bembela* (a phrase describing strategies used when addressing a culprit without directing confronting them) and has popularly being used to deal with

wicthes/wizards, thieves and other partakers of social ills in society. Just like *bembela*, theatre has gone a step further by not only rebuking the culprits but proceeded to inculcate morals as well.

In one sense, the participants of any theatrical performance are researchers who seriously undertake to study the behaviours and attitudes of the communities for which they intend to impart some doctrine. This means that the actors must bear a full knowledge of the audience and their socio-psychological understanding of life. Verducci (2000) explicitly relates caring to the process of acting in the following way:

An actor must shift out of her own perspective and into the character's (using her own emotional life) to secure an understanding of the inner life of the character. Essentially, an actor's goal resembles that of the caring empathizer; she ferrets out and, to varying degrees, internalizes and instantiates the mental state of, in this case, her character.

The above exempt details the role taken by the participant of any given drama. The participants are compelled by the different roles that they take to kind of temporarily undress their real personalities by camouflaging themselves with borrowed identities that identify with their respective participant roles. As such, the actor becomes what s/he is not and will probably never be, or aspire to be in order to better articulate the intended message and make it appropriately reach the target audience without them being inquisitive or annoyed.

The Vatsonga (Machangana) and their Wisdom

The term Vatsonga is employed to designate an otherwise socially, politically and linguistically misrepresented people who are found in Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa and/or some percentages in Botswana, Malawi and Zambia. Vatsonga is their formal name and Xitsonga is their language. In other countries, save South Africa, the people are wholly and misrepresentedly known by the name Machangana (a collective term for the subjects (all languages included) of Soshangana Manukosi, a Nguni by origin, who because of the Tsongas' acquiescent acceptance of even unhospitable strangers, have made them succumb to his malice, political manipulation and subjugation). Since most of the defeated people where the Vatsongas, every speaker of Xitsonga, wherever they are, is labeled a Muchangana after his (Manukosi's) nickname Soshangana, which originally and literally meant "we are coming together". This linguistic and social misrepresentation is made explicit by Mathebula (2013:7-8) in the following astringent citation:

Most existing literature refers to all Tsonga people as Shanganes, which clearly reduces the history of the Tsonga people to the 1800s with the founding of the Shangane tribe written by earlier authors and contemporary conservatives as Shangaans.

Even some of the Tsonga people who do not fall under the Shangane tribe have accepted being called Shangaan, apparently because they have being indoctrinated so or they are suffering from utter ignorance (Mathebula, 2013). In the country in which this study has been carried out, just like in other countries where this language is spoken, the Vatsonga have been, for political motives (Hachipola 2009) combined with ignorance, universally labeled Machangana, Vahlengwe and scarcely are they referred to by their real name Vatsonga. Just like Hlengwe which is a dialect of the Tsonga and specifically for the Chaukes, Shangaan is a dialect of Tsonga with politically tainted roots, and should specifically be attached to those who either once fell under the political exploits of Soshangana or his/their descendants.

Sarcasm

In this paper, the ethnonym Shangaan is employed to designate Tsonga ethnic groups merely to tally with the derogatory articulations aired by the dramatists. However, its use is pejorative since it connotes negated politicisations and muffled identities of the people in question. The dramatists are identified, through use of their 'Shangaan' language, as tribally detached fellow students who are also unfit to fall in love with students from other ethnic groups. This makes Tsonga students shy to speak their language openly and in public. It is clear that the population at the university in question is composed of students from varied ethnic backgrounds where other ethnic groups consider themselves superior to others. This superiority mentality

is the one that bear differences, divisions and misunderstandings between students as evidenced in the drama under consideration.

Conceptual Framework

The paper aligns itself along its anchor, ‘*Hakelo ya Swiendlo*’ (the recompense of sin). In practice, it equates to a fair type of recompense doctrine of retribution, which in this film’s case becomes key as those who indulge in various practices are paid accordingly. Costello (2015 : 2)

(a) simple rule that if one does evil, then he should reap punishment, while if one does good, she should reap reward.

The good are rewarded as per their deeds by seeing themselves through the entire duration of their course, and those who choose to undertake evil deeds also get their fare share by getting infected with sexually transmitted diseases and other passing on.

2. METHODOLOGY

The researcher employed the qualitative approach in coming up with this paper. This paradigm involves studying the behaviour and life styles of people within real life setting (Yin, 2021), and involves the use of qualitative analysis, as opposed to quantitative analysis of data. The writer resorted largely on listening, analysing and transcribing the contents of the Nkondo-a-ndzi-dyi DVD. The writer also interviewed some of the actors in a bid to get down to the realities behind their formulation of the analysed theatre and their actual views. In this case, a marriage of both the writer’s views and the actors underlying worldviews depicted in the Drama concretised into a genuine whole characterising the students’ views, aspired life style versus decorum aligned life styles, views on tribalism and the general and ‘abstract’ theme of morality. The researcher being not only a former student of the institution in question but also a lecturer teaching the very actors in the drama, made use of his understanding of the situation around the institution.

Ethical Consideration

This is purely a dramatic show of the circumstances that be at tertiary institutions around the globe. Dramatists who pose as students have here fictionalised their existence and even though they have used their real names, it should not be taken to mean that their theatrical performances are or were genuine reflections of their life styles. Special emphasis is made on behalf of the late protagonist (the author’s beloved former student) Tiyani Zamba. It ought to be understood that his passing on following the production of the film was just a matter of “nature’s” coincidence, and not a consequence of the dramatic act which then tallied mystically; a marriage of fiction and historicity. His role was to warn, advise and teach the fast sliding generations of this era and not to encourage and be involved in his fictitiously performed indignities.

The Dramaturgical Setting

The drama is set in a rural campus in one of the multi-ethnic university systems in Southern Africa (the university concerned resists mentioning for ethical reasons). the actions of the drama are performed around areas spanning the university premises, and especially students’ residence and the surrounding busy and grassy rendezvous. The setting is itself fit for a naughty audience who are just at the university to spend money and lure a luxurious life. The multi-ethnic environment peopled by mainly adolescents who are eager to explore the mystery story of life makes campus life a bizzare and enticing haven for many uninitiated budding scholars.

Imparting Social Values Through Role

Khazamula, being a proficient and enhancing role player, both key and the protagonist is epitomic of a social addict of philanderer, an all – round womaniser and animalistic figure who stops at nothing until he has quenched his hots in multi-figured pools of cash-draining whores. He characterises a university youthful, frivolous, hornbill charactered fellow, being tossed about by circumstances beyond his control. Heavily obsessed, unrepentant and irrevocably bound to the grip, he presents a staunch womaniser whose

insatiate appetite for females problematises his meagre resources meant for his sustenance as a student still dependent upon his parents.

Tribalism: An Attempt at Genocide

This paper is a product of reactionary response, and it draws from a long period of linguistic rights deprivation, despise and segregation on the side of Xitsonga ethnicities in general, and Xitsonga students at the university chosen for the study. Xitsonga students are mostly looked at contemptuously as marginally located language groups, and therefore are sub-jects to other prominent ethnic groups who enjoy national fame with regard to linguistic acceptance and popular usage. Xitsonga, being one of the languages that carry the national label ‘minority language’, has not witnessed much development in terms of literature, theatre, its use in academic institutions and its inclusion in the linguistic social arena in which other languages enjoy wider use of public communication.

There is a fierce war between learners from other ethnic groups and those speaking Xitsonga. Speaking Xitsonga is dismally viewed as contemptuous and less privileged, if not less human. Those who speak other languages view themselves through exalted lenses, as of high status and important human beings among other ethnic groups. In some contexts, the Tsonga are called names like Shanganes, changana, jangana, or having the ethnonym used to rebuke notorious children “don’t act like a Shangaan being”, as if to underline how unreasonable a Shangaan being is.

This painstaking issue of inferiority and superiority complexes marks the university’s tribal ambience and define its ethnocentric biases. It unravels the plight of ‘Shangaan’ boys midst girls from other ethnic groups at the university, as they are rejected off their proposals and mere interactions on account of being Shangaan. *U vula leswaku ni fanela ni apulaya ku va wa ririmi rimbe na* (do you mean I should apply to be Mukalanga?). In this light, ethnic differences are ingrained social marks that at times serve to create divisions and hatred between members of different ethnic groups.

Theatre and Morality: Drawing Lessons from Nkondlo-a-ndzi-dyi Presents: Xitsonga Drama

The drama under scrutiny is not art for the sake of it but has been designed with the intention to impart morals to the youth of the day who happened to find themselves at a university. It is true that university life is different from home life, and therefore the shift from a home setting to a university setting comes with callings for social and moral adjustments and influences. Many leave home as morally upright school goers but peer pressure pulls them out of their morals to adopt queer and questionable propensities that even their parents had never conceived of. Such social indulgences, more often than not, result in extra-scholastic engagements that affect not only their future projected endeavours but their physical and spiritual life as well.

In this drama, there is a clear lesson portraying the ugly side of having multiple sexual liaisons. Because the atmosphere of the play promoted uncontrolled affairs, and being the major theme under discussion at various levels and scenes, the consequences of having affairs with many partners point to a doomed future for all that are engaged in it. Khazamula in the drama, as a key figure wooing, advising on courtship and accumulating many girl friends on account of his sweetness of tongue eventually gets ill and ultimately dies. This character’s life trajectory at campus represents the few If not many unfortunate high life divers who are influenced by others to the fatal snares of youthful inclinations. Hence the youth are advised that multi-sexual engagements is risk (vubihi bya vugangu, vumbhisa), especially in multi-ethnic environments where people meet and fuse without the knowledge of each other’s backgrounds. In the words of Maregele (2013) such ideas are echoed thus:

Hi ntlangu lowu a hi ringeta ku kombisa vanwana va hina leswaku loko munhu a ta exikolweni u fanela ku yimela timhaka ta xikolo ntsena. Loko munhu a nghenelela eka timhaka ta vugangu na swin’wana wa kota ku kavanyeteka a ta tsandzeka ku fikelela swikongomelo swa yena swa xikolo na swa vutmi hi ku angarihela.

(through this performance, we were trying to advise our fellows by telling them that when they come to school, they must stick to matters that are relevant to schooling only. Indulgence into multi-sexual practices may disrupt both one’s educational and life’s plans in general.

Malegele speaks from a mature reflection. He depicts some who has studied life and its meanders and pitfalls that usually derail the life of many a youth in modern universities. Since its not easy for the youth to control and advise each other, the play takes a centre stage to knock some sense in those that indulge in risky behaviours whilst they are students striving to shape their futures.

Another lesson extracted from the drama is that *vanghana a va yingisiwi va karhi va ku khuzela naswona a hi faneri ku khuzela munhu a karhi a lahleka* (we should not praise our fellows when they are indulging in bad behaviour and we should be critical enough to perceive on whether what our friends are encouraging us to do is good). In the drama, Those who indulge in multifarious affairs are regarded with high esteem as heroes. It is very sad that their end is pathetic and eventually cut from their fellowship with friends. The gloomy consequences of such behaviours (sicknesses and death) indicates how fatal it is to associate with wrong people and uncritically involve oneself in their deeds.

The drama is also keen on addressing juvenile delinquency involving the youth who lie to their parents by requesting to money which they allegedly say its for mealie-meal when in actual fact its for girlfriends. Such has been a common factor bedeviling many students who strive to fight themselves out of ridicules and being stratified lowly in the social ladder among other competing youth. It is true that those who win many girls are those with fatty pockets and many desperate girls often run for such thingamabobs in the hope that they will be relieved of their plight. This theatrical performance makes it clear how it is ethically wrong to lie to parents who, normally struggle to raise school fees, for the sake of pleasure, and risky pleasures for that matter.

Identity Concealment: A Case of Concern with Many Xitsonga Students

The stratification of ethnic groups, and worse still, that involving languages has created tensions around the world. Many language speakers have developed for themselves, frontier mentalities that keep other so labeled ‘less privileged people’ apart. Such notions are the chief sources of both superiority complex in one group and inferiority complex in the other. At the university under study, Xitsonga students are among the despised fellows. Those who speak other ‘repute languages’ look down upon them and even girls from those languages choose not to be wooed by Xitsonga boys simply because ‘they are not their type’. Xitsonga people and their language is considered of low status and therefore not comparable to other ethnic groups and languages with high social statuses.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The dramatisers are encouraged to use pseudonyms when carrying out their theatrical performances. This will help send the right message to the audience as opposed to using their real names which may become hard to fictionalize their performances. This means their performances may be regarded as authentic externalisations of their inward aspirations, behaviour and propensities.
- Actors are commended for their language reviving step they have taken despite their surrounding scathing negations from external critics and they are greatly commended their unprecedented initiative.
- Further recommendations are made to Xitsonga students at different academic institutions across the globe, not to be ashamed of themselves and their identities but have the courage and pride to show case their language in every way possible.
- A final recommendation is directed towards non speakers of Xitsonga who may feel their languages are superior to Xitsonga. Whilst this may not be contested, depending on the angle from which they measure linguistic superiority, they are encouraged not to unnecessarily offer negative criticisms upon other people’s languages, moreso if such psychologically and spiritually mutilating criticisms are directed

towards speakers of sidelined and unpromoted languages – the so-despised minority or marginalized varieties.

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4. CONCLUSION

The paper addresses issues to do with students’ interactions at a given University as dramatized by a group of Xitsonga students residing at the university’s Mashava Campus. A group of five students, composed of four boys and a girl sets out the dramatic performance with a revealing vigour towards reviving their language (Xitsonga) through theatrical showcasing. In their presentations, they immediately bring out the reality that multi-sexual involvement in general, and a compromising propensity of marrying pleasure with education eventually brings out a fall in many a students. In this paper it is also highlighted that a student should be assertive, well advised and properly informed so as not to be influenced by either the morally loose environment or being corrupted by their peers and the rest of the institution’s general populace.

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