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## Folklore as an instrument of education among the Chewa people of Zambia

Dennis Banda · W. John Morgan

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**Abstract** This article considers the folklore of the Chewa people of Zambia as an instrument of education. It suggests that there is only a fine distinction between Chewa culture [*mwambo wa a Chewa*] and Chewa education [*maphunziro ya Uchewa*]. The former comprises tribal “truths” to be imposed on the minds of the younger generation. The latter comprises stages in the development of the young through training and some formalised learning. However, by and large, the former dominates the latter. The strongest features of an African Indigenous Knowledge System (AIKS) such as that of the Chewa people are best expressed in terms of Jakayo Peter Ocitti’s five philosophical principles of African indigenous education, namely preparationism, functionalism, communalism, perennialism and holicism. They build on one another and are, therefore, related. The authors of this article demonstrate how Chewa culture and education use folklore to influence the minds of the young. They give examples of how various components of Chewa folklore are used to criticise, commend, dislike, admire, discard and adapt various traits in people. This paper does not present folklore as an educational panacea; there are weaknesses in Chewa traditional education which are also discussed. Rather, folklore is considered here as a valuable supplementary element in education. What the authors propose is to integrate folklore and informal learning as practised by the community in the formal curriculum to enhance the quality of the education provided for all and to maintain cultural identity.

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**Résumé** Le folklore, instrument éducatif chez le peuple chewa de Zambie – Les auteurs de cet article examinent le folklore du peuple chewa présent en Zambie en tant qu'instrument éducatif. Il ne semble exister qu'une légère distinction entre la culture chewa [*mwambo wa a Chewa*] et l'éducation chewa [*maphunziro ya Uchewa*]. La première comprend les « vérités » tribales qui doivent être inculquées aux jeunes générations. La seconde englobe les étapes de développement que les jeunes traversent par l'apprentissage et une éducation quelque peu formalisée. Mais en grande partie, la première l'emporte sur la seconde. Les principales caractéristiques d'un système africain de savoirs autochtones (AIKS), tel celui du peuple chewa, trouvent leur meilleure expression dans les cinq principes philosophiques de l'éducation autochtone africaine énoncés par Jakayo Peter Ocitti, à savoir le préparatisme, le fonctionnalisme, le communalisme, le pérennialisme et l'holisticisme. Ces principes se complètent mutuellement et sont donc associés. Les auteurs démontrent comment le folklore est utilisé dans la culture et l'éducation chewa pour influencer l'esprit des jeunes. Ils citent des exemples de l'exploitation des divers éléments du folklore chewa pour critiquer, louer, désapprouver, admirer, inhiber ou adapter les traits de caractère. Les auteurs ne présentent pas le folklore comme une panacée éducative, l'éducation traditionnelle chewa renferme des faiblesses qui sont également abordées. Le folklore est davantage considéré ici comme un élément supplémentaire précieux pour l'éducation. Les auteurs proposent d'intégrer dans le programme formel le folklore et l'apprentissage informel tels qu'ils sont pratiqués par la communauté, en vue d'accroître la qualité de l'éducation pour tous et de préserver l'identité culturelle.

**Zusammenfassung** Volkstum als Instrument der Bildung bei den Chewa in Sambia – Dieser Beitrag beleuchtet die volkstümliche Überlieferung der Chewa in Sambia in ihrer Funktion als Bildungsinstrument. Nach Ansicht der Autoren unterscheiden sich Kultur [*mwambo wa a Chewa*] und Bildung [*maphunziro ya Uchewa*] bei den Chewa nur in Nuancen voneinander. Während erstere Stammes-“Wahrheiten“ umfasst, die in die Köpfe der jüngeren Generation eingepflanzt werden müssen, beschreibt letztere eine auf Ausbildung und formalisiertem Lernen beruhende Entwicklung der Jugend. Im Großen und Ganzen dominiert dabei die Kultur die Bildung. Die Grundeigenschaften eines afrikanischen indigenen Wissenssystems, wie es bei den Chewa existiert, lassen sich am besten mit den fünf von Jakayo Peter Ocitti formulierten, aufeinander aufbauenden und daher untereinander verwobenen philosophischen Prinzipien der afrikanischen indigenen Bildung definieren: Präparationismus, Funktionalismus, Kommunalismus, Perennialismus und Holistizismus. Die Autoren dieses Beitrags zeigen, wie bei den Chewa die volkstümliche Überlieferung in Kultur und Bildung eingesetzt wird, um junge Menschen zu beeinflussen. Anhand von Beispielen erläutern sie, wie verschiedene Elemente des Volkstums dazu verwendet werden, menschliche Eigenschaften zu kritisieren, zu loben,



abzulehnen, zu bewundern, zu verwerfen oder zu übernehmen. Mit diesem Beitrag soll nicht versucht werden, die volkstümliche Überlieferung als Allheilmittel im Bereich der Bildung darzustellen – auch die Schwächen der traditionellen Bildung bei den Chewa werden erörtert. Vielmehr wird das Volkstum als ein wertvolles ergänzendes Element der Bildung angesehen. Die Autoren schlagen vor, Volkstum und informelles Lernen, wie es von der Gemeinschaft praktiziert wird, in den formellen Lehrplan zu integrieren, um so zugleich die Qualität der Bildung für alle zu erhöhen und die kulturelle Identität zu bewahren.

**Resumen** El folklore como instrumento de educación en el pueblo Chewa, de Zambia – Este artículo se ocupa del folklore del pueblo Chewa en Zambia como instrumento de educación. Sugiere que solamente hay una fina distinción entre la cultura Chewa [*mwambo wa a Chewa*] y la educación Chewa [*maphunziro ya Uchewa*]. La primera comprende las “verdades” tribales que deben imponerse en las conciencias de la generación más joven, mientras que la última comprende las etapas de desarrollo de los jóvenes mediante el entrenamiento y algún aprendizaje formalizado. Sin embargo, por lo general, la primera tiene predominio sobre la última. Las características más fuertes de un Sistema Africano de Conocimiento Autóctono (AIKS, African Indigenous Knowledge System), tales como los del pueblo Chewa, están perfectamente expresadas mediante los cinco principios filosóficos de la educación autóctona africana, a saber: preparacionismo, funcionalismo, comunalismo, perennialismo y holisticismo. Se basan unos en otros y, por lo tanto, se relacionan entre ellos. Los autores de este artículo muestran cómo la cultura y la educación de los Chewa usan el folklore para influenciar el intelecto de los jóvenes, y presentan ejemplos de cómo se usan diversos componentes del folklore chewa para criticar, elogiar, desaprobar, admirar, descartar y adaptar diferentes características en las personas. Este trabajo no presenta el folklore como una panacea educativa, y también aborda puntos débiles en la educación tradicional del pueblo Chewa. Aquí, el folklore es considerado más bien como un valioso elemento complementario en la educación. Lo que proponen los autores, es que el folklore y el aprendizaje informal sean incorporados en el currículo formal, tal como lo practican las comunidades, para mejorar la educación provista para todos y para preservar la identidad cultural.

**Резюме** Фольклор как средство обучения среди представителей народа Чева в Замбии – В настоящей статье рассматривается вопрос об использовании фольклора народа Чева в Замбии в качестве инструмента образовательного процесса. Предполагается, что грань, разделяющая понятия «культура народа Чева» [*мвамбо ва а Чева*] и «образование народа Чева» [*мафунзи́ро я Уч́ева*] весьма незначительна. Первое понятие охватывает так называемые «племенные истины», которые необходимо передать юным поколениям. Второе понятие касается этапов формирования юного поколения посредством образования и формального обучения. Однако, как правило, первое понятие играет доминирующую роль. Самые позитивные аспекты системы образо-



вания африканских коренных народов (СОАКН), как, например, народ Чева, наилучшим образом выражены в пяти философских принципах системы обучения коренных африканских народов, предложенных Джакайо Питером Оситти, а именно: препарационизм, функционализм, коммунизм, переннеализм и холистичность. Они проистекают один из другого и, следовательно, взаимосвязаны. Авторы статьи демонстрируют, каким образом в культуре и образовании народа Чева фольклор используется в качестве средства воздействия на юные умы. Они приводят примеры того, как различные компоненты фольклора народа Чева используются для выражения критики, похвалы, недовольства, восхищения, отрицания и принятия различных черт, присущих людям. Настоящая статья отнюдь не представляет фольклор в качестве образовательной панацеи: традиционное образование народа Чева имеет ряд недостатков, которые также здесь обсуждаются. Скорее, фольклор рассматривается в качестве ценного дополнительного элемента в системе образования. Авторы предлагают интегрировать фольклор и неформальные методы обучения, принятые местным сообществом, в систему формального образования с целью улучшения качества образования, предоставляемого всем гражданам, и сохранения культурной идентичности.

### Introduction: The origin of the Chewa people

The Chewa people are a Bantu<sup>1</sup> tribe found in sub-Saharan Africa. During the Bantu migration, they settled in the Great Lakes region, around today's Lake Victoria in Zambia (Banda 2002). It is widely believed that this is how they came to be known as *Anyanja* [the lake people]. Their language, *Chichewa*, is also known as *Chinyanja* (Tindail 1967; Langworthy 1969; Banda 2002, 2008). There are varying accounts and myths about the Bantu migration (Tindail 1967; Mwale 1973; Banda 2002, Banda 2008; Myth Encyclopedia 2007) and these are narrated to the young as part of their upbringing (Ngulube 1989; Mchombo 2006; Banda 2008). Folklore plays a vital role in this process. It should be noted that this practice is dying out and may soon be lost or remain as mere rhetoric, as parents and other members of these communities are preoccupied with modern life (Banda 2008).

### The Chewa people and education

Like many other tribal groups in Africa, the Chewa people have always had their own form of education, which is passed from one generation to another (Smith

<sup>1</sup> The collective term "Bantu people" comprises the present-day tribes with common Bantu origins before their dispersion in groups to West, East, South, North and Central Africa in a series of Bantu migrations (collectively referred to as the Bantu migration) over several millennia. The Bantu are said to have come from Asia and settled in the Great Lakes region around Lake Victoria and later trekked southwards to Congo (Kola) in the Luba kingdom. The language and folklore of these groups of people has similarities. The word "Bantu" itself derives from a noun stem "*nthu*" or "*ntu*" for the word that means "people" in all Bantu languages.



1934; Ngulube 1989; Jeffrey 2006; Myth Encyclopedia 2007). This agrees with those who hold that Chewa people perceive education as a process of preparing the young for adult life (Kelly 1991; Msango et al. 2000; Banda 2002; Banda 2008).

This process seeks to open community life to all individuals and enable them to take their part in it. It passes on the culture, norms and standards by which it would have them live. Where that culture is regarded as established, it is imposed on the younger minds and where it is viewed as a stage in development, the young are trained to receive it, criticise and improve upon it (Oxford Conference 1937). However, there are limited opportunities for the young to criticise what is presented to them as knowledge by the older, wiser and more experienced generation. This is contentious as it ignores the potential of modern ideas to which the young may be exposed. In this aspect, the young are disadvantaged and considered as “blank slates” to be written on by the elders. This goes against current trends in education which hold that children just require a fertile environment in which to develop their abilities to learn (Street 2001).

Underpinning Chewa education [*maphunziro ya Uchewa*] is the acquisition of occupational and household skills and the formation of positive attitudes towards societal norms and culture (Kelly 1991, 1999). Naboth Ngulube (1989) holds that the main goals of Chewa education incorporate all processes of bringing up children to adulthood and developing their potential to fit into society. This traditional education covers all aspects of training and initiation into the life of the society into which one has been born. Children are educated in the wider society and not just at school, which is only part of that society. Education is, therefore, “bigger than schooling” (Msango et al. 2000, p. 20).

According to Gemma Burford et al. (2003), traditional education is more than rote learning or even literacy. Underpinning this kind of education is culture [*mwambo*] and there is a thin line between Chewa culture [*mwambo wa a Chewa*] and Chewa education [*maphunziro ya Uchewa*]. The two expressions are sometimes used interchangeably. However, Chewa culture is broader and includes tribal or ethnic “truths” about the social, economic, physical and spiritual well-being of a person (Castle 1966; Ngulube 1989). Functionally, Chewa culture is what identifies the Chewa as a people. On the other hand, Chewa education comprises the specific training stages that the young must complete. These include non-formal and formal learning which are not recognised by state authorities such as the Ministry of Education. This makes it very difficult for these alternative forms of formal learning to attract any grant or any form of funding from state authorities.

### Chewa educational structure

The Chewa have a well-established and organised educational structure, which has the family as its societal foundation (Banda 2008, p. 110). Chewa education also reflects Jakayo Peter Ocitti's (1973) five philosophical foundations of African indigenous education which are:

1. preparationism (aimed at enabling the young to fulfil socially defined masculine and feminine responsibilities);



2. functionalism (primarily utilitarian, where learners learn to be productive in their communities);
3. communalism (things are owned in common, children belong to the community and, therefore, adult members of the community can discipline and correct any child);
4. perennialism (a vehicle for maintaining cultural heritage and the status quo. This reinforces the notion of conservatism in African Indigenous Knowledge Systems; AIKS). Research about Indigenous Knowledge (IK), followed by sharing the findings, will however ensure that negative aspects of IK, which could hinder development or promote stereotypical practices against females, are not maintained in the name of cultural heritage.
5. The fifth foundational principle is holism (multiple learning). Learning is not limited to the four walls of a classroom as the community is a bigger “classroom” full of practical lessons for the young and for the old.

Ocitti's five philosophical principles find support from Ray Barnhardt and Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley (2005), who say that indigenous ways of knowing are based upon customs, beliefs, behaviours and world views that are different from learning systems established by Western educational institutions.

Folklore seems to embrace Ocitti's philosophy in many aspects. His foundational principles are realised in African traditional education and training through a variety of instruments. This view clashes with the Western school system which, as Catherine Odora Hoppers (2000a; online) argues,

routinely excludes African indigenous systems from its perimeters, especially in the areas of early childhood development, life-skills, value education, and other competencies, causing major lapses and further distortions in the life of those human beings that go through it.

Our thinking is that Ocitti's five philosophical principles suggest that there is an urgent need to link education to children's real life experiences, thus encouraging schools to give learners' skills to criticise, analyse and practically apply knowledge. Indeed, this is what the current *Zambian Education Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education 2012, p. 15) seems to support, as it holds that

education must involve the passing on of cultural heritage, values, traditions, language, knowledge and skills from generation to generation to enable learners function in any given environment.

A further aspect is inspiration and fun. Stith Thompson (1946, p. 461), in his well-known comparative survey, argues that

folk-tales serve to give artistic expression to the imagination and to bring amusement and excitement to monotonous lives.

As Julie Cruikshank points out, story-telling has always adapted to changing social conditions and can “re-frame both vexing issues and common sense categories by providing a larger context” (Cruikshank 1998, p. 164).

It has been shown elsewhere (Banda 2008) that through the use of folklore, many Chewa people still believe that they are able to educate, train, advise, warn, guide



and usher their young into responsible adulthood. As reported by Dennis Banda (ibid.), it is widely held by Zambian vocational trainers, such as in the police, the army, and in teacher training that those trainees who come from rural settings, where African traditional cultural formation is strong, exhibit much better behaviour and sense of personal responsibility to the community than do their counterparts from the urban areas. These beneficial effects of folklore as an instrument of education are confirmed by James Majasan (1969, pp. 41–59) concerning the Yoruba of Nigeria:

Folklore explains the common rules and the etiquette of society and helps, in various ways, to instruct and direct the young to be able to grapple effectively with various conditions of life.

This may explain why Ngulube (1989) and Banda (2008) believe that folklore, as a reservoir of indigenous knowledge and norms, might still be drawn upon to help solve problems of social cohesion in schools and in society in general. This might be the reason why the newly-launched *Zambia Education Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education 2012, p. 15) has made the following appeal to schools:

In making the curriculum flexible and responsive to learner and societal needs, schools, teachers and educators are encouraged at all levels of our education systems to localize some aspects of the school curriculum to match local needs and circumstances to compensate for indigenous knowledge, values, attitudes and practical skills that learners would have acquired in their home environment.

In the following sections we consider Chewa folklore in terms of its specific categories.

### **Chewa folklore**

Chewa folklore comprises proverbs, riddles, taboos, beliefs, myths, legends, folktales; tongue-twisters, folksongs and ballads, and folkdance (such as *Nyau gule wamkulu* [*Nyau* the great dance], *Chimtali*, *Chitelele*, and others). Folkdances are accompanied by songs with messages designed to teach, advise, ridicule, belittle, warn, praise etc. In some of these songs, proverbs and ballads are used to drive home the lessons behind them.

Although such instruments are identified as being distinct from one another by many authors (Kumakanga 1996; Ngulube 1989; Carmody 2004), they also seem to borrow from and complement one another (Mchombo 2007). However, despite complementing each other (Majasan 1967, 1969), they do function as individual devices with specific purposes. The designated time and occasion when each is used could be proof that they may be considered as separate entities in Chewa folklore (Obiechina 2002; Odora 1994; Odora Hoppers 2002). This could be why some authors (Herskovits 1948; Majasan 1969; Thrift 1985; Mumba et al. 2000) suggest



that the components of folklore should be analysed separately to identify their educational values, a suggestion which this article takes up.

The Chewa indigenous knowledge system seems to have specific socialisation agencies and venues where folklore could be used as an instrument of education (Phillipson 1976; Kalusa 2000). These include places such as *kumtondo* and *kumphala* [female and male gatherings respectively], *dambwe la Nyau* [a Nyau camp], *mnyumba* or *mvigubu* [a secluded house for training girls who have come of age (*anamwali*) concerning matrimonial life]. The *mphala* [male gathering] acts as a “village parliament” (Mwale 1973; Ngulube 1989; Kumakanga 1996). Other venues include ceremonies, peer group get-togethers, the environment, cattle-rearing places, boys’ and girls’ school dormitories [*gowero*], water-drawing places, funeral gatherings and round-the-fire gatherings in the evenings.

Our argument is that these venues serve as prototypes of “classrooms”, “workshops”, “laboratories” or “tutorial rooms” in formalised institutions. Modernity increasingly restricts such settings for the transmission of folklore to the rural parts of the country and it could soon become mere rhetoric, and be referred to only when people are nostalgic about their past glories. However, it has been argued by several authors (Ngulube 1989; Nooter 1993; Banda 2008) that those people who went through this form of education manifest traits of it no matter how much secular education they may have acquired.

Chewa folklore still plays a significant role in socialisation and its various components either add or reinforce the following:

- knowledge of the physical environment and skills for living within it;
- how to live and work with others;
- roles in networks of kinships, relationships and understanding of rights and obligations; and
- laws, customs, moral principles, obligation to the Chewa people’s ancestral spirits, to relatives and to others in the group or tribe (Herskovits 1948; Hulstaert 1955; Ngulube 1989; Odora Hoppers 2000a, 2000b).

Elders are cardinal depositories of such knowledge, meaning that they save the knowledge for the benefit of the younger generation. This may explain why they are often referred to as “living libraries and encyclopaedias” (Franck 1960; Ocitti 1973; Clarke 1978, 1979). This notion is supported by Joseph Ki-Zerbo (1990, p. 27), who says that “when an elder dies in Africa, it is a library that burns.”<sup>2</sup> However, the current thinking (Banda 2008) is that knowledge and wisdom may not be determined by age alone. Many young people today may be wiser than the older ones who might deny them the opportunity to excel with their gifted wisdom because of their age.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed a recent collection of essays on indigenous philosophies and critical education carries the dedication: “... to our departed ancestors who continue to guide and watch over us and strengthen us mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and materially as we navigate the treacherous waters of the academy” (Sefa Dei 2011).



## Specific aspects of Chewa folklore as instruments of education

### *Proverbs [miyambi]*

Chewa proverbs have been described as “capsules” full of wisdom (Banda 2008). They serve as “libraries” of Chewa wisdom, norms and beliefs (Kumakanga 1996). They are used to inculcate into young minds what the elders perceive as “truths”. They are also used to warn, offer advice, praise, teach a moral or rebuke the other person (Jones-Jackson 1987; Mchombo 2007).

First, there are those based on people’s experiences and observations in life. The explanation of such proverbs fits the two Yoruba definitions: “A proverb is the horse that can carry one swiftly to the discovery of ideas” and “Proverbs are daughters of experience” (Kuusi 1969). An example of a Chewa proverb which could be said to be based on people’s experiences and observations is: *Mchikuta mulibe namwali* [There is no virgin in a labour or maternity ward].

Second, there are those with cultural connotations. *Wakhungu akati nikutema waponda mwala* [When a blind person threatens to stone you, he/she has stepped on a stone] and *Mukaona khoswe aseka chona, pali dzenje pafupi* [When a rat laughs at a cat, there is a hole nearby] (Mwale 1973).

The third category of Chewa proverbs consists of those which put restraint on the young. These are aimed at developing the young into responsible adults. One example is: *Mwana sakula kwa makolo* [A child will always remain a child to parents]. However, some proverbs are gender-biased. These are aimed at reinforcing the stereotype belief among the Chewa that women should keep a low profile in the presence of men. Example: *Aja amene mkodzo wao sulumpha mzera asamakamba pagulu* [Those whose urine cannot jump a ridge (women) should not talk in public]. The passing on of folklore through this kind of proverb, if perceived as a “truth”, could in fact potentially construct and reinforce negative attitudes.

Generally, Chewa proverbs draw upon the collective wisdom of oral peoples as suggested by Emmanuel Obiechina (2002). Kumakanga (1996, p. 1) identifies three categories of such Chewa proverbs: (a) *miyambi yoweluzira milandu* [proverbs used in judicial cases]; (b) *miyambi ya mikhalidwe* [proverbs for character formation and for inculcating good morals]; and (c) *miyambi yosiyana-siyana* [proverbs for miscellaneous purposes]. More often, the educational point of these proverbs is given in the accompanying story. This may explain why Majasan (1969, pp. 41–59) describes proverbs as “suppressed stories”.

Currently, proverbs are taught in indigenous Zambian language lessons only; and often only for pupils to pass a rote examination and not necessarily with the purpose that they should understand the proverbs’ moral purpose and be able to apply them in daily life. Yet, proverbs could be used as mottos for the week (proverb for the week) in a given class to motivate its members to work hard or warn them about possible dangers if they do not follow its principles. A proverb such as *Uzatuta zomwe unafesa* [You will harvest what you planted], if displayed in front of the class, could work as a very effective motto of the week to encourage pupils to work hard if they want to pass.



### Riddles [zirapi]

*Zirapi* [riddles] are brainteasers used during family or community gatherings on moonlit nights. Their main purpose is to test children's intelligence. They test knowledge of shapes, sizes, logical sequences or cause and effect relationships of what happens. Riddles are not necessarily set by adults; children may test one another and those who know more riddles than the others shine and gain popular esteem. While there may be no clear distinction between riddles and proverbs in the oral traditions of European peoples, in the Bantu oral tradition the two are distinct from each other. Chewa riddles follow a question and answer pattern. When listeners fail to guess the correct answer, they are asked, as a group, to pay something. The payments symbolise the value of these activities. Like the Yoruba riddles discussed by Burford et al. (2003), Chewa riddles also have a number of functions. They

1. keep children awake and alert so that they pay attention to the folktales to come;
2. extend children's knowledge of various subjects such as cause and effect, shapes, sizes, lengths, e.g.: *Nyumba yanga ilibe khomo* [My house has no door], to which the answer is *dzira* [an egg];
3. test children's memory and their general understanding as they observe things, e.g. *Sinyama sifupa* [It is neither meat nor bone]; to which the answer is *mzipe* [ligament or tendon]; and
4. are used for entertainment in the evenings, e.g. *Munda waukulu koma ukolola ni kumanja* [very big field yet the harvest is just a handful], to which the answer is hair. The head could be big, but a haircut produces little hair (Quarcoopome 1993; Banda 2011).

Again, we can see how Ocitti's (1973) five philosophical principles seem to be implemented through riddles.

Ngulube (1989) claims that the educational value of these riddles is to improve children's vocabulary, train their memory, and provide instruction in local traditions and culture. Our thinking is that a teacher teaching shapes in mathematics could easily use riddles to introduce a lesson on shapes. A teacher of language and literature could devise a project for pupils to identify proverbs that describe characters in a story they are reading. This could be one way of implementing what the *Zambian Education Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education 2012, p. 12) intends to promote when it says:

The school curriculum should respect and retain elements of the past and also be able to develop and assess competences needed for tomorrow's Zambia. That way formal education would be functioning as a starting point for continued life-long learning.

Indeed, lifelong learning seems to be entrenched in Ocitti's (1973) five philosophical principles and the full implementation of this new curriculum may benefit from the use of folklore as an instrument of education as suggested by this article.



### *Taboos* [malaulo]

Chewa taboos are used to reinforce the knowledge or the perceived “truths” acquired. Breaking a taboo has well-defined consequences, including potential death. Taboos are feared and respected by many (Banda 2008). Fear is widely used as a motivator for learning and maintaining the preferred behaviour indicated by a taboo (Clarke 1978, 1979; Ngulube 1989; Kelly 1999; Kalusa 2000). Most taboos deal with food, morals, prevention of diseases and accidents. They also cover carefulness, healthy mannerisms and habits and generally the acquisition of knowledge deemed necessary to the growth of a Chewa person (Ngulube 1989, Banda 2008). For example, infidelity by a husband when the wife is pregnant or a baby is still young is believed among the Chewa to result in the wife having prolonged labour, or the baby to be “cut” [*mdulo*], i.e. to die of a cough-like illness. A similar taboo exists for a wife’s infidelity during pregnancy which may lead to a breech birth, or the mother might turn yellow when she looks at her baby after delivery. In the modern medical world, this could be jaundice. When a wife is experiencing prolonged labour, to avoid her death, the husband will be summoned to the maternity room and questioned by the traditional birth attendants concerning his moral conduct during the wife’s pregnancy.

### *Beliefs* [zokhulupilila]

Beliefs, like taboos, reinforce the knowledge that has been acquired. These are taken as “truths” and imposed on the younger minds. Often these are not questioned, as doing so would be undermining the Chewa culture. Notable among many Chewa beliefs are those describing or explaining productivity, reproduction, woman or manhood, predicting weather or famine and others.

A boy’s penis not floating in water when swimming could be an indication of impotency and must be reported to the elders. There is also a strong belief that casual sex cannot result in pregnancy, which is believed to occur only when there have been several acts. Some of the early pregnancies among school-going girls could be a result of such beliefs. Another belief is that a child can have a number of “fathers”, each of whom is responsible for one part or parts such as the feet, shape of the nose or eyes. In such situations, it is not safe for one’s child to have eyes, for example, that look like those of the man in the neighbourhood. Discussing such beliefs in Biology classes could help in averting possible early pregnancies. Another belief is that an open spider’s nest on the ground or a lot of dew that morning could be a sign that it will not rain. The opposite means it will rain and this may be supported by the singing of one particular bird. This could form a good introduction to weather forecasting in conventional geography lessons at school.

The examples presented here suggest that Chewa taboos and beliefs cover a wide range of scientific, social, moral and hygienic principles which feature in formal school curricula. Our argument here is that the taboos and beliefs in Chewa folklore are by no means a dead subject but actually form a large body of emergent literacies which children take to school. Teachers could make good use of this potential in the introduction of modern conventional subjects, or even set projects which send pupils to do research in their communities to identify those taboos and beliefs relevant to



the particular subject being covered. This is what Islam and Banda (2011, p. 78) suggest when they claim that

Folklore as a form of indigenous knowledge could provide alternative forms of knowledge that may be integrated with the formal knowledge to enhance the provision of quality education and the achievement of the millennium goals.<sup>3</sup>

Even if certain taboos may not be scientifically correct, our argument is that teaching about them could benefit the learners and help them change the false perception they may have developed based on their uncritical adoption of a taboo.

### *Myths*

Many educationists hold that myths from across Africa cover some universal themes that tell how life, the earth, death and specific groups of people came into being (Little 2006; Semali 1999; Omolewa 2001). Myths are like lessons readily illustrated in simple personal life stories, recollections and memories (Wyndham 1921; Wendland 2004; Mchombo 2007; Banda 2008), yet taught without a script. Chewa myths seem to explain a number of things that baffle the young, and a number of these myths seem to have parallels in other Bantu groups (Biobaku 1955).

One myth the Chewa share with other Africans is on the origin of death (Jeffrey 2006). The Chewa myth is that *Mulungu* [God] sent a chameleon with a weighty message to tell humans that *Mukafa musamafelelela koma muziuka* [When you die, you must not die forever, but come back to life]. The lizard overheard the message and wanted to be the one to announce it. He ran faster than the chameleon. On the way, he forgot the message and, in an effort to recall, he changed the story to *Mukafa muzifelelela osaukans* [When you die, you never come back to life]. The Chewa people mock the chameleon for its slowness and when they find a dead one in their path, they cover it with soil or twigs [*nthyonthyo*] to avert misfortune, while children stone the lizard whenever they see one, because they believe it brought death. Chewa myths share a great deal with myths from other African tribes, but differ on the animal characters involved. The Bushmen's myth says it was an insect that was sent with the message of life, but that the inquisitive hare overtook it and delivered a message of dying forever.<sup>4</sup> The Hottentots' myth involves the chameleon and the hare, while the Mende of Sierra Leone say that it was the dog which was sent to deliver the weighty message, stopping many times on the way to eat or to urinate. As a result, the dog was overtaken by a toad, who changed the message from "Life has come" to "Death has come" (Vuolab 2000).

The educational value of such a myth to the young is substantial. First, it tells them that God is kind and loving and wanted mankind to live forever. Second, it explains the characteristics of certain animals and highlights acts that should not be

<sup>3</sup> This refers to the eight millennium development goals (MDGs) formulated by the United Nations in 2000.

<sup>4</sup> The hare is a ubiquitous figure in world folklore. See for instance *The Leaping Hare* (Evans and Thomson 1972).



emulated by people, e.g. dawdling when you are sent to deliver a message and distorting the message itself.

### *Legends*

Legends are traditional stories narrated to both the young and the old regardless of gender. Chewa legends cover many historical issues of the Chewa people during the time of migration (Mwale 1973). Chewa tribal traditions are also passed down through legends, which may explain why those appointed to preside in local or customary courts are well-versed in such legends, so that they may refer to them during court sessions (Ngulube 1989; Banda 2008). For instance, they are able to follow the family trees of chiefs. This helps in solving disputes involving inheritances of chiefdoms and kingships. The educational value of legends is that they are sources of tribal reminiscence and social relationships useful to clan solidarity (Castle 1966). This is why certain clans cannot intermarry because they are deemed to be one [*mkoka umodzi*].

### *Folktales* [nthano]

One particularly notable component of the Chewa folklore is the folktale. Many Chewa folktales feature a trickster hero. One well-known trickster, also found in other cultures worldwide, is the hare, locally known as *Kalulu*. The hare is the most popular trickster, referred to in some English story books, as “*Kalulu the hare*”. The only animal which outwits the hare [*kalulu*] is the tortoise [*fulu*] in a classic folktale also found in many other cultures throughout the world, for example in Aesop’s ancient Greek *Fables* (Avoseh 2001; Morgan 2005). Although the tortoise walks slowly, he is considered traditionally to be a quick-witted creature. When the two appear in the same tale, *Fulu* the tortoise emerges as the winner and is rewarded and *Kalulu* the hare gets punished. The hyena also features prominently in Chewa folktales and is almost always the loser who gets punished. Even when he appears elsewhere in Chewa folklore, such as in proverbs, he is the antagonist. Generally, the hyena is considered to be a clown figure and is ridiculed in Chewa tales. Chewa folklore shows that the relationship between humans, the environment and the animal world is very strong, as is the case with other indigenous groups of people of Africa (Vuolab 2000).

The tales are preceded by the salutation “*Panangotele*” [Once upon a time], uttered by the story-teller and followed by a chorus “*Tilitonse*” [We are together], which is a response from the listeners given after each sentence of the story. This is meant to ensure that nobody is sleeping or dozing. These folktales take a circular form. Two characters, a bad one and a good one, are juxtaposed. At the end of the tale, the bad one is punished and the good one rewarded. The tales are graded. Short ones usually have lessons on discipline and manners. The others answer why-questions, and are called why-stories. The educational value of such tales is that patience and humility are vital in one’s life.



### *Tongue-twisters*

Chewa folklore also has some tongue-twisters, but not many, and they are particularly popular with children. We can put the Chewa tongue-twisters into two categories:

The first category includes those that involve repeating a clause or a phrase very quickly. The underlying principle here is to say the words or syllables being repeated correctly. There is laughter when words are missed or mixed. Example: *Ubu bowa bonse ubu mbwanga bwanga mbwanga* [All these mushrooms are mine and belong to me and to nobody else]. The fun here is to miss one of the *bwa*-syllables. Some tongue-twisters are nonsensical as they are not always meant to communicate meaning, for example in *Abanda abandawe abandiwo* [Mr Banda of the Banda group has stolen some soup], the syllable /ba/ is repeated just for the fun of it.

The second category of tongue-twisters includes those that repeat a word but with a different pronunciation. Failure to notice this difference creates change of meaning and attracts laughter, e.g. *Mtengo wakwera mtengo* [The tree has become expensive]. The *Mtengo* for tree has a stress on the syllable /te/ while the *mtengo* for price is not stressed. So: *Mtengo wa mtengo wakwera* [The tree of the price has gone up] – is a nonsensical statement, while *Mtengo wa mtengo wakwera* means The price for the tree has gone up.

The educational value of these tongue-twisters is to allow flexibility of pronunciation and to reinforce language learning and development. This is done through play instead of rigorous grammar lessons as is the case in formal schooling.

### *Folksongs and ballads*

Majasan (1969, p. 59) defines folksongs and ballads thus:

two forms of music are dominant in the folklore of simple societies. They preserve over-all literature and through them the general attitude to life is communicated from one generation to another.

Majasan (ibid., pp. 184–186) holds that there is a difference between ballads and folksongs. He claims that with the former, the performer “sings and speaks” in his or her song. The latter are songs in verses and do not involve speaking. For instance, the Tonga people of Zambia have ballads [*kuyabila*] which are accompanied by some drumming. The drumming is sounded after the ballad has been recited, as if to acknowledge the message in the ballad.

The Chewa people do not have ballads fitting Majasan’s (ibid.) definition (speaking like singing), but they do have “funeral ballads”. These are recited in public places and could be learning opportunities for Chewa people. Women are the chief mourners and sometimes cry even before they find out who has died. Some women do not really cry but sing ballads where they narrate who has died, describe the role she or he had in the family, and discuss possible causes of their death. Funeral ballads often centre on the good deeds of the deceased. It is taboo among the Chewa to speak ill of the dead.



Both ballads and folksongs could be very effective instruments for formal education. They are used to teach, praise, rebuke, ridicule, advise, warn or mourn. Sometimes they are used to condemn a cultural practice without attracting opposition or criticism from other quarters within the society.

### *Folkdance*

Among the Chewa, folksongs and folkdance go side by side because all the folkdances are accompanied by songs (Smith 1984; Mchombo 2006; Banda 2008). The most popular folkdances are *Nyau* or *gule wamkulu* [*Nyau*, the great dance], *Chimtali*, *Chitelele* and others.

*Nyau* folkdance has many functions in the development of the young among Chewa people. This folkdance is not just an instrument of education, but serves as a “school” – hence the Christian missionaries<sup>5</sup> in the late 19th century called it a “secret school” (Moumouni 1968; Smith 1984; Mchombo 2006).

The *Nyau* folkdance is an educational aid in solving social, moral, and spiritual problems facing the Chewa people such as respect for elders, marital problems, family planning, practical, survival and occupational skills and strategies of avoiding sexual promiscuity. Various *Nyau* folkdancers play various roles in educating the people generally, such as in the importance of spacing children, demonstrated through a *Nyau* folkdancer called *Katumbiza* [the name refers to a family that does not space its childbearing]. This *Nyau* folkdancer performs his dances with many puppet babies around him accompanied with a song explaining the problems that come with uncontrolled childbearing. Clinics and hospitals that sensitise families to observe family planning could easily use *Katumbiza* to sensitise the communities on dangers of not spacing the births of their children. The *Nyau* folkdancer known as *Tsempho* [diseases] is used to warn people about the dangers of contracting diseases.<sup>6</sup> If *Nyau* folkdance is so flexible that it can be used to warn about diseases, sensitise people on which politicians to support and to educate the community about morals, norms, values and acceptable attitudes towards work and society in general, why should it not be used in formal schooling? Maybe the reason is that formal schooling is too rigid a system to accommodate any alternative form of knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

We agree with those writers who claim that many African folkdances have a lot of formalism and are characterised by the teaching and learning of pre-arranged materials in particular and well-established settings (Tiberondwa 1978; Adeyemi and Adeyinke 2002). Such aspects of the folkdance could be used in class to teach and warn pupils about, for example, the dangers of HIV/AIDS in a more practical and realistic way.

<sup>5</sup> Christian missionaries came to Zambia in the late 19th century around the time when the Welsh American journalist and explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley published reports of his travels in the area (Carey 2003).

<sup>6</sup> See Banda (2008) for *Nyau* masks and their significance as tools of education among the Chewa people.

<sup>7</sup> See *Indigenous Philosophies and Critical Education: A Reader* (Sefa Dei 2011), for a comprehensive and recent set of essays relating to this question.



### *Chimitali folkdance*

*Chimitali* is a Chewa folkdance performed by the women. The dancing involves wriggling and twisting of the waist, belly, shoulders or sometimes the whole body. The most appreciated part of the body is the waist [*mchiuno*]. Again, the educational value is in the folksongs that accompany it. The songs cover all sorts of themes, but most *Chimitali* folkdance songs are lamentations over the evils in society. Some praise individuals in a community or country.

### *Chitelele folkdance*

*Chitelele* folkdance is also for females, primarily girls. Much of the dance involves singing and clapping hands in unison to match the steps as the girls jump up and down in a particular choreography. No drums are involved. Again, the educational value is not so much in the dance but in the accompanying songs. Like *Chimitali* folkdance, this folkdance also offers girls some enjoyable regular exercises for physical fitness for other duties (Schoffeleers 1973; Mtonga 2006). Some *Chitelele* songs ridicule, warn, advise, teach and counsel people in society in general, especially the young who should learn to guard against falling prey to the vices mentioned in the songs. Such dances could be integrated into the school curriculum and research could aim to understand more about the significance of the various steps and moves included in these dances. Pupils who are gifted in such dances might take them up professionally. Knowledgeable men and women in the community could be pass their knowledge on as “volunteer teachers” in the schools; being something akin to Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “organic intellectuals” (Gramsci 1971; Morgan 1987). Such practice would open up the possibilities for a complementary cultural curriculum, using oral and local history, language and the creative arts such as dance and drama, broadcast and film, literature, creative writing and critical thinking. It would also integrate the informal education practised by the community generally in the formal curriculum, reducing generational gaps and contributing to social cohesion.

### Conclusion

This article demonstrates that Chewa folklore has always had and continues to have a significant role to play in the upbringing of the young. It argues that Chewa folklore, like that of other indigenous people, remains morally and intellectually relevant to a society which strives to retain its cultural identity. However, we have also shown that while folklore is a useful instrument of education, some aspects, such as belittlement or ridicule, work against certain members of the Chewa society on account of their gender, age or disability. The integration of Chewa folklore into the formal school curriculum would need to consider how this problem could be resolved.

We also suggest that Chewa folklore, transmitted traditionally as informal and non-formal education, could be a rich complementary support for formal schooling,



especially during early childhood education. Integrating it could open a way to including education in morals, attitudes and values currently lacking in the formal school curriculum. It could form the common ground between the formal school and Chewa indigenous knowledge systems as suggested by Paul Sillitoe et al. (2005). This might enhance the achievement of education for all (EFA)<sup>8</sup> and reduce malpractices such as examination leakages.

This article suggests that, if integrated into the school curriculum, Chewa folklore could improve and enrich lessons in a variety of subjects as teachers learn to use folksongs, folktales, proverbs, taboos and even folkdances in delivery. Further research into Chewa folklore would also help in identifying aspects within it which ridicule or belittle a group of people based on gender, age or disability. Another future role that Chewa folklore could play if integrated into the school curriculum is the promotion of practical and occupational skills embedded in it, acquired through apprenticeship as suggested by various authors (Barrow 1978; Odora Hoppers 2002; Marah 2006). Above all, many aspects of Chewa folklore could form a foundation to many contemporary school subjects, such as science, geography or Agricultural science so that pupils move from the known to the unknown (Cruikshank 1998, p. 165).

This is a perspective that is attracting both scholarly and public policy interest given the implications of post-colonialism and of the cultural and environmental dimensions of globalisation and development (Sefa Dei 2011; Morgan 2005).

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<sup>8</sup> Education for all (EFA) is an international initiative to bring the benefits of education to every citizen in every society by 2015. *The World Declaration on Education for All* emerged from the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990. Its participants also recognised that “traditional knowledge and indigenous cultural heritage have a value and validity in their own right and a capacity to both define and promote development” (UNESCO 1990).



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