
'Kunemera Mufi': Exploring Performance at Korekore Funerals

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Abstract

The study reconnoitred elements of performance that are found at Korekore funerals. The purpose of the study was to revisit indigenous performance practices and elaborate elements of performance that are embodied within. Korekore funerals of Guruve district, Zimbabwe were used as a case study in this article. The paper argues that Korekore funerals demonstrate the use of theatre elements where space, actors, stagecraft and improvisation are key to a 'Kunemera Mufi' production. We argue that the 'Kunemera Mufi' at a typical Korekore funeral demonstrate the fact that theatre has always existed among the indigenous African people well before the first Whiteman came to Africa. Theatre was and remains part of the everyday activities among the Korekore, not only at funerals but also in other everyday chores such as hunting, work, child games, rites of passages, rituals and ceremonies. Thus, the paper argues against the Eurocentric definition of theatre or performance by elaborating the elements of performance at a Korekore funeral.

Key words: Performance, Korekore funeral, Improvisation, *Kunemera Mufi*, Guruve,

Introduction

The paper explores elements of performance that are exhibited at Korekore funerals in Guruve district, Zimbabwe. We argue that despite the absence of the written word and conventional stage, theatre or performances have always been embedded in the everyday life of the Zimbabwean society before recitals by the British Colonial Company which is believed to have been staged at Fort Victoria as the first ever

professional performance. Pre-colonial performances were embedded within society's everyday life activities that ranged from birth, through life, to death. As noted by Merriam (1982 p.127) and Berliner (1978 pp.20-25) performance was integrated into the process of community living, in people's personal lives, in social organisation, in work or economic life, religion, celebration, political life and history.

Performance was also produced within people's personal lives, their social organisation, politics, social control, gender and religion (Makwenda, 1990 p.97; Lloyd, 1993). Religious activities, work and celebrations were also some of the contexts of performance production and consumption. Music, dance and theatre were found in specific contexts like rites of passage. For example, birth, marriage and weddings; death, house-warming activities, beer drinking, war, coronation, homage to a ruler, politics, hunting, harvesting and general work; vulgar play, boasting, herding, lullabies, children's play, and royal praises. The principle governing traditional artistic production is that its subject matter is drawn from the actual activities of people in their living surroundings. In this case, there was no clear distinction between everyday activity and theatrical activity.

These performances still prevail in traditional societies in Zimbabwe despite globalisation and its effects. Thus, they become part of our cultural heritage which we ought to preserve and safe guard. It is also important to document the experiences for future generation and for educational purposes. The study fills the gap on the lack of documentation on indigenous cultural material and literature on indigenous original performances, which are not guided by the requirements of a conventional theatre. Researchers among them Gelfand (1959), Herman (1997) and Mwandayi (2011) reconnoitred on death among the Shona and rituals of *kurova guva*. However, there is literature deficit on the study of performance that is prompted by death and the funeral being a performance space. There also need to preserve and safeguard cultural indigenous approach to performance. Thus, the study focuses on the Korekore funerals of Guruve district in Zimbabwe.

Understanding Death

Mwandayi (2011) understood death as commonly perceived among the Shona as the separation of the body and soul in which the material body takes a new state of decomposition while the soul due to its immortality continues to survive as a spiritual entity. In looking at death with an African eye, one can hardly object except agree with Muchemwa (2002) when he notes that death is the most common reality; the most profound being of all beings. He goes on to note that it is an ineluctable contradiction which confronts every person, group and nation; that most incommensurable and incomprehensible reality of all realities.

In the Korekore culture, there is no rite or event that demands so much ceremony, numinosity and dread as does death. The obsequies are celebrated with utmost grandeur

and solemnity. With death comes several rituals: *kupeta* (folding) ritual; burial ritual; ritual of purification; ritual of bringing back the spirit; ritual of inheritance; ritual of honour and rituals of appeasement. All these rituals are supported by performance(s). Where there is death, there is bound to be performance. Performance is present in the form of rituals, music, dance, crying, speeches and *kunemera mufi*.

Kunemera Mufi

Kunemera means to joke with, *Kunemera Mufi* (to joke about the deceased) is a Shona phrase used to describe a process in which a group of mourners comically re-live the life of the deceased friend or relative through improvisational role play. The improvised performance is an open reflection of, in most cases, the secretive life of the deceased and it is mirrored through song, dance, role-play and mime. *Kunemera mufi* draws its actors from the family and close very friends to the deceased known as *masahwira* (the deceased's close friends), *varooro* (daughter-in-laws) and *vazukuru vemusha* (family grandchildren) and interested community members.

The performance is therapeutic in nature as it confirms the reality of death. It is captured in a comic nature so as to bring relief and comfort to the bereaved and the mourners gathered. The performance themes are derived from the life of the deceased. The performers dwell much on the interesting aspects of the deceased's life for example, stinginess, anger issues, womanising, drunkenness, love, hate, pride, pride among others. Costumes and props are borrowed from the deceased wardrobe in a bit to build belief. The stage is normally the front yard of the deceased homestead, in the round. *Kunemera mufi* has also been evident in urban areas at armed robbers, prostitutes and free-spirited youngsters' funerals a space meant to showcase the deceased's lifestyle of extravaganza, fast cars or skimpy dressing. However, not all Korekore funerals do the *Kunemera Mufi*. Sometimes the funeral is too painful especially when the death is sudden and/or when a young person full of promising life dies.

The Actors

There is spontaneity when it comes to choosing actors. There are no auditions that take place. The cast members are comprised of *sahwira*, *varooro*, *vazukuru* and some community members. Ndlovu and Hove (2015) define a *sahwira* as a close friend of a family or someone with whom they share their problems. *Sahwira* plays a pivotal role at the funeral by providing social support to the bereaved and they also reaffirm social order, reminding people of the reality of death and continuance. Thus, in most cases the *sahwira* is the one who initiates the formation of the cast. *Sahwira* in most cases takes the role of the deceased as they are well knowledgeable about the life of the deceased.

Varooro (daughter-in-laws) of the family also take a leading role apart from usual their duties of preparing food for the mourners, performing rituals during the burial such as

kutsvaira makuva (sweeping the grave) and *kutsiga gate* (carrying water to the grave yard). They are paid a token in the form of money or goods. *Varoora* are free to join the cast as long as the deceased is not their husband. *Vazukuru* (the grand children in the family) are also free to join *sahwira* and *varoora* as part of the cast members. Actors are as well drawn from community members especially those who worked or drank beer with the deceased or went to church with the deceased. *Varoora*, *vazukuru* and the community assume the roles of supporting cast in order for them to assist *Sahwira* to properly portray the true life of the deceased.

***Kunemera* through Improvisation**

Kunemera Mufi is a creative drama, an improvisational, non exhibitional, process-centered form of performance in which participants are guided by a lead actor to imagine, enact and reflect upon human experience. The *Kunemera* cast thrives on dramatic scenes without written dialogue and with minimal or no predetermined dramatic activity and through repeated performances, characters develop stock speeches and stage business and its scenarios gain fairly standard form. Sometimes the cast performs impromptu scenes based on ideas from the audience who are free to assist with the improvisational process. *Kunemera mufi* performance is not rehearsed. The actors quickly improvise drawing from the life of the deceased. If for example, the deceased was a farm worker who wore overalls to work, the lead actor will also dress in overalls for believability. And sometimes even if the lead actor is not a smoker and the deceased was a smoker, he will ‘smoke’ in the act or performance as he plays the role of the deceased. The same happens when a well-known prostitute passes on. The actors will have heavy make-up and wear skimpy dresses in celebrating the life of the deceased. On this occasion, no one can hold grudges against these actors as it is an accepted norm. It is as entertaining as it is therapeutic to the survivors, close relatives and the community.

The Stage

The indigenous *Kunemera mufi* performance uses open air space, theatre in the round as the performance space. At *Korekore* funerals, male mourners sit separately from female mourners and typically, the audience is placed on many sides of the action or in and amongst the action. They normally create and circle around the kitchen hut and the round completed by the hut. The actors then take the centre stage so as to allow all spectators a clear view of the performance. The space does not present a barrier to the participants as the audience is allowed to take the role of spect-actors. According to Auslander (1994) the involvement of the audience as the spect-actor is not only participatory but also therapeutic. Each director and designer responds to space differently: famously, Peter Brook calls for an ‘Empty Space’, Josef Svoboda calls for a gigantic space, and Jerzy Grotowski calls for an intimate space.

Yet for *Kunemera* actors, they prefer theatre in the round as the use of space has a profound effect on the audience. Theatre in the round allows a close relationship between the actors and audience. The stage is bare. Sometimes the coffin will be present on stage and the actors concentrate on depicting the life of the deceased which is a key aspect of poor theatre in which objects are often symbolic and/or of great significance lighting typically flooded the acting area with no use of spotlights or focus areas if used at all, 'costumes' would be anonymous, not identifying character (as with realism).

Conclusion

To sum up, *Kunemera Mufi* as an indigenous presentation exhibits strong elements of performance. It is exclusively based on improvisation and the actors are drawn from friends (*sahwira* and neighbours) and relatives (*varoora* and *vazukuru*). The performance is executed with the help of minimum props mainly those borrowed from the deceased. Dance and song are incorporated into the performance to encourage community participation. The performances act as therapeutic to those bereaved. However, there is greater need for researchers to look more into indigenous performances and explore on how they are contributing to contemporary performances.

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