LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IN THE KUROVA GUVA CEREMONY IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

In February 2004, the Right Reverend Alexio Churu Muchabaiwa in a gathering of over 800 Catholic men for the St Joseph's Guild National Congress at Regina Mundi School in Gweru declared that ‘The cultural practice of ‘resting the spirit of departed relatives’ (kurova guva) is destroying Christianity.’ This comment puts into perspective the efforts of previous scholars who have written on this ceremony, describing its social context. Most scholars have concentrated on what is done at the ceremony, how it is done and what happens if that which is supposed to be done is not done. In this paper, my concern is neither with the recent views expressed by the Right Reverend Alexio Churu Muchabaiwa nor what the scholars listed above have written about the ceremony, my intention is to look at the ceremony from the viewpoint of language and communication. It is through the use of appropriate language and behaviour, determined by the context, that the ceremony realises its intended success. Without that particular language and behaviour of that particular register, the register might not meet with success and the ceremony ends in a fiasco. A description of the social structure or the inclusion of some anthropological data has been deemed necessary because it is from such contexts that we get language. All other data were gathered from personal observations of some aspects of the ceremony, while researching on the dramatic aspects of the ceremony, and interviews conducted with people who took part in all the aspects of these ceremonies.

Keywords: communication, kurova guva ceremony, language, Shona culture, register, Zimbabwe

Introduction

In Shona culture, when an adult person dies, he or she has departed in flesh only but the spirit will always linger. The spirit does not interact with other ancestral spirits before a ceremony, Kurova guva (hitting the grave), to install it into the ancestral hierarchy is performed. The ceremony is also conducted to 'bring home' and 'settle' the spirit of the deceased as a guardian spirit to its (living) family. The incentive to conduct the ritual, according to Daneel (1971), is strong because of the common belief that the spiritual being, left out in the forest or jungle for too long, will turn his or her destructive powers against the kinsmen responsible for the ceremony, or against some other close relatives. In this state, the spirit is a potential and unpredictable danger to its relatives. This is why kurova guva should not go unperformed, even if it takes place two or more years after the deceased's death. But normally the ceremony takes place a year after the deceased's death. Mr. Gwese1 of Nyamapfeni village in Chihota notes that 'In our own traditional (Chihota)
beliefs a year is chosen because people believe that it gives the deceased time to 'settle down' in the new world of spirits, and also it is sufficient time for the more senior spirits to have judged his wrong doings whilst he or she was still alive.' Without this ceremony being performed the spirit remains outside both spirit and human worlds without an officially recognised status. It is considered an incomplete being whose name is not mentioned during family rituals. Relatives of the deceased nowadays often delay the ritual until a misfortune or illness befalls the family. The ceremony is performed when a n'anga (traditional healer) diagnoses the misfortune or illness as an indication of the deceased's wish to come home. The Shona strongly believe in their ancestors because they are the pillar to their survival, and that survival or good fortunes depend on the good will of the ancestors. As such, the Shona maintain close ties with their ancestors, and perpetuate the link between the community of the unborn, the living, and the dead. The ancestors are regarded as the guardians of this link, and they take action as soon as this relationship is threatened.

It is important to note that, whereas I use the term Kurova guva in this paper, there are, however, several other terms used to refer to the ceremony. Bourdillon (1989) acknowledges that in central and south Shona country, that is Zezuruland and Karangaland respectively, the terms Kurova guva (hitting the grave) and kugadzira mudzimu (settling the deceased's spirit) are used. In the north, that is Korekoreland, the ceremony is referred to as kutamba n'ombe (dancing to the sacrificial beast) or kutamba mudzimu (dancing to the sacrificial spirit).

There are also various terms used to refer to the actual event of going to 'take the spirit' from the jungle which is done early in the morning or late in the afternoon. The Zezuru people of Chihota use the terms kunorova guva (going to hit the grave) and kunotora mufi (going to take the deceased) interchangeably. Others, like the Korekore of Mt. Darwin, Shamva, Chiweshe, and other Korekores use the term kunokudubura guva (going to open the grave). Although the ceremony has a variety of names, and is held at varying times depending on local custom, Bourdillon (1989) writes that, 'In all areas it has a common pattern and function.' (p. 243) Bourdillon’s assertion is corroborated by Chieza (1995: 2):

All the Shona people as a cultural group generally have the same values and customs. There might be variations in terms of description and points of emphasis in some customs because of different geographical locations but the essence is the same.

In essence, due to regional variations, the details given in this paper may not be similar to those experienced in other areas. What is documented here is how the Chihota people perform these rituals.

In this paper the term Kurova guva will be used throughout to refer to the ceremony. The paper is concerned with kurova guva as a register. The term register generally simply describes the various styles of language available for writing or speaking. The features which interconnect to determine the register of communication, oral or written, are appropriateness, context, participants and their status, and situation. A change in any one of these will probably create a
change in the register, and Halliday (1978: 185) explains this aptly when he defines a register as ‘what you are speaking’ (at a given time) determined by ‘what you are doing’, the nature of the on going social activity. The concern of this paper, therefore, is studying *kurova guva* as what people are speaking as determined by what they are doing. The words and meanings of a particular register may not be suitably applied to any other register. People speak differently according to the dictates of the social situation they find themselves. In life there are no single-style speakers. Each of us has a different style of speaking, or idiosyncratic speech style. And as the social context and topic change, we effect a shift of some linguistic variables in our speech style. In essence, speech style is usually characterised by distinctive syntactic, lexical or phonological patterns. That is, the set of linguistic features which is accepted in one social context may seem comic or distasteful if it occurs in another. For instance, even within the context of the ceremony, what is said in *kurova guva* cannot be applied or said in *Chisahwira*. In this paper, I have followed the format laid out by Biber and Finegan (1994).

**Initial Stages of the Ceremony**

Relatives of the deceased gather to decide on the day to have the ceremony of *kurova guva*. They also choose a day when the *rapoko*, to be used for beer brewing, will be taken out of the *dura* or granary. This granary is usually sealed from the day the deceased’s property was inherited, that is during the *kugovewa kwenhumbi* and *nhaka* rites, up to the day of the ceremony’s preparations. This is done to keep the grain safe from being used for consumption by relatives. The ‘taking out’ of the *rapoko* is referred to as ‘*kuburitsa zviyo*,’ and the day thus becomes *zuva rekuburitsa zviyo*. A little amount of the grain that has been taken from the granary is put into a *tswanda* (weaving basket) and is taken into the hut of the deceased to be consecrated by the mother and father or *muzukuru* or brother of the deceased.

**Consecration of Rapoko**

The consecration of *rapoko* is referred to as ‘*kuomberera zviyo* or ‘*kureverera zviyo*’. It is known by such names because there is an act of clapping hands and or uttering of words (*kureverera*). The person who consecrates the *rapoko* takes a gourd or *mukombe* filled with water and, drop after drop, lets the water into the basket with the grain to the accompaniment of the following opening prayer:

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2 *Chisahwira* is ‘a special type of extra-kin relationship between people who usually confide in each other.’
3 This book gives detailed information on registers and its variations. It also includes examples of social dialects and children’s language. The authors give in-depth information on the various forms of register. The book ends with a survey of Empirical Register studies.
(To you Mwendamberi
And Junu
You are the ones closer to us
We inform you that we are ‘bringing
back home’ your child Nhamo from the jungle.
Inform all the elder ancestors before you
And may they also inform those before them
And all the female ancestors
That we are bringing back home your offspring,
That he may not perish in the jungle.)

This opening prayer is to inform the ancestors of the forthcoming ceremony in a kind of ascending hierarchy of the ancestors, starting with the youngest ancestor - young in the sense that he or she died last and was installed last - until they get to the great grand ancestors. There are some ancestors the living cannot ‘communicate with’ directly but can only talk to through the ‘young ancestors’ who they ask to pass on their messages as they say:

Moudzawo vari mberi kwenyu
Naivowo vagoudzawo vari mberi kwavo.

(Inform all those before you
And may these also inform those before them).

The sentence ‘moudzawo vari mberi kwenyu’ (inform those before you) shows that they cannot get to the grand ancestors except through a channel of other ancestors. This kind of behaviour is common culture among the Shona people. For example, a youngster involved in rituals or any other social gathering, does not talk directly to elders. Whatever he/she has to say or present to the elders is passed on from one person to the other in an ascending order of hierarchy/seniority. This extends to communicating with the spiritual world as the prayer above indicates.

Taking the entire prayer as a single point in a process, it is a context marker, as it lays the foundation for understanding the ritual as a whole. From the prayer, it is evident that the idea of having the ceremony is to ‘bring home’ the deceased's spirit. The sentence, ‘tave kudzosa mhodzi yenyu mumusha’ (we are ‘bringing back home’ your child) clarifies the aim of the ceremony, ‘kudzosa’ is to ‘bring back’. From the same sentence there is the image of ‘mhodzi’ which refers to the deceased. ‘mhodzi’ here implies ‘your offspring’ (mhodzi yenyu). In the same context, others
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would say ‘budzi renyu’ or ‘chibereko chenyu’, both meaning ‘that which you gave birth to, your child’.

After this opening prayer, the varoora (daughters-in-law) are given the consecrated rapoko to mix with the rest that has not been consecrated to soak. The rapoko germinates in about two days into chimera (that which has grown) that will be used for beer-brewing by the varoora. However, the Zezuru people of Chihota do the brewing differently. All the beer to be used for sacrificial purposes, what they call ‘Chizezuru’, is prepared by grandmothers who no longer bear children, and virgin girls. It is traditional and customary to have them prepare the beer because they are considered ‘vakachena’ (clean) in the sense that for the girls, they have not yet met or had sex with men, and for the grandmothers, they no longer have sex, an act called ‘yeutsvina’ (unclean) in the context of kurova guva and beer brewing. The other reason is that the grandmothers no longer menstruate, and the young girls are yet to start menstruation. It is held that when someone is under menstruation she is unclean.

Consecration of Musumo

A small amount of beer is also consecrated to the ancestors as musumo when beer brewing is through. The beer is called ‘doro remusumo’ from the action of kusuma, which is a way of communicating through a hierarchy of people. Those who consecrate the beer take a very small calabash of beer ‘kahari kemusumo’, and kneel in the hut of the deceased to inform the ancestors that the preparations are over. If the ancestors, together with the deceased, accept the offer, the ‘kahari kemusumo’ overflows as the beer immediately ferments.

Procession to the Grave and Kurova Guva

In the morning of the day after the musumo is consecrated, people proceed to the grave with the varoora carrying pots of beer that will be used in the event of inviting the spirit to come home. In the procession to the grave people sing and dance to pasichigare songs commonly known by the Chihota people as ngondo. The sahwira to the deceased carries a chicken, to be sacrificed and used in inviting the spirit, to the grave. On approaching the grave, the varoora crawl on their knees with beer pots resting independently on their heads. The muzukuru of the deceased unloads the pots from their heads and people sing and dance to ngondo until the sahwira invites the deceased to come home by sacrificing the chicken and sprinkling its blood all over the grave.  

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4 Among the Chihota people the sahwira carries a chicken but the animal or bird taken to the grave differs among people in different areas. In some areas some people take a cow or goat.  
5 The idea of sprinkling the chicken’s blood over the grave is to ‘cleanse’ the spirit of all evil spirits that could have come around it whilst in the jungle. Blood, in Shona society, is very significant and has several purposes including that of cleansing. Also, Ropa expresses a very strong relationship between people, a relationship bound by blood. Therefore, the sprinkling of blood from the chicken is significant as the blood communicates the existing relationship between the deceased and the living.
As the sahwira sprinkles the blood, he or she invites the co-sahwira with the following prayer, given by Charles Marimo⁶ who participated at one such ceremony as sahwira.

*Sahwira, inguva nazvino tinokukumbira
Kuti uchiuya mumusha nhasi
Uchiva ziso remhuri yako kune zvinorunzira
Mhuri yako ngatchiva paswera meso mombe
Yomuchena.*

(Sahwira, it is time now that we call you
To ‘come home’ and look after your family
and protect them from that which is harmful
Let your children be the only thing that you keep guiding and guiding)

In this prayer, the spirit is referred to as ‘ziso’ (eye), which is supposed to look after the children. It is implored to:

*uchiva ziso remhuri yako*

(Be the eye of your family)

‘Ziso’ is associated with seeing, and in the prayer it suggests seeing and looking after the family that was left behind. Being a ‘ziso’ also implies looking ahead of the family’s life in the near and far future to see what obstacles (*zinorunzira*) lie ahead of it. To be a ‘ziso remhuri’ is like being a ‘search-light’, that which shines and searches for the hidden obstacles in the life of the family – revealing all that is hidden to the family. The people say ‘uve ziso remhuri’ because they strongly believe that it is only the dead who are able to foresee what lies ahead, and even that which surrounds the people that they cannot see unless they (people) get possessed. It is believed, while possessed, the eyes cease being ‘naked’. The ‘ziso’ in this context means being able to see into the past, present and the future.

The image of ‘ziso’ may also mean a supplication by the relatives for a shower of blessings to come upon the family. It is believed the ‘Ziso’ is able to see that a member of the family is, for instance, in dire need of help or is struggling to get a wife or husband. Finally, the ‘ziso’ is expected to lead and shine upon the righteous while performing the role of guardian of the family.

The family is portrayed as ‘mombe yomuchena.’ ‘Muchena’, in Zezuru parlance, implies a poor person. ‘Mombe yomuchena’ is, therefore, a cow/bull that is looked after and guarded very jealously by its poor owner who keeps an eye on every move it makes. Sekuru Venge⁷ says:

*Payafurira, payanwira mvura, payatsika pose,
nepayazororera, ziso rako hariisiye.*

⁶ Private interview with Mr. C. Marimo, Farm 19, Muda. 18.05.96.
⁷ Private interview. Sekuru Venge. Manyati village. Chihota. 19.06.96
(Where it grazes, where it drinks water, 
where it passes through, and where it 
comes to rest, your eye will not abandon it)

The family, in the prayer, is likened to the single beast, which should be the focus of 
the ancestral spirit’s attention, just like the poor man focuses all his attention on 
his only beast. The whole idea of seeking ancestral guidance could have been given 
in very simple language:

\[
tinokumbirawo kuchengetwa nokutariswa
\]

(We ask you to look after us and protect us)

But the image of the beast connotes the helpless and defenceless nature of the 
family. Just as the single beast has no one to look after it except the poor man, the 
family also has no one to look after it except its ancestors.

The people are familiar with these images. The advantage of using such 
images is that the messages they carry are clear. People interpret the images based 
on their knowledge of the images, and then apply such interpretations to the life or 
situation being described.

The muzukuru also pours beer over the grave and into a small hole\(^8\) dug by 
the grave side while inviting the spirit. This spilling of beer is a way of sharing 
drinks with the spirit. The muzukuru could invite the spirit as follows:

\[
Tinokukumbirai, Soko 
Kuti muchiuya mumusha 
Garaiwo muchishanda pamwe navamwe ikoko. 
Gunwe rimwe haritswanyi inda, Soko, 
Chiyai muite maonera pamwe chuma 
chomuzukuru navamwe
\]

(We ask you, Soko, 
To come back into your home 
May you, from today, work together with the others. 
One thumb cannot crush a louse, Soko. 
Be together and work as when preparing 
a niece’s beads)

The point of this prayer is to discourage non-conformism or individualism 
on the part of the installed ancestor. This is suggested by the proverbs:

\[
Gunwe rimwe haritswanyi inda
\]

(One thumb cannot crush a louse)

And

\(^8\) Private interview. Pa Chitsunge. Muda. 19.06.96
maonera pamwe chuma chomuzukuru

(Working together as when preparing a niece's beads)

After this prayer, advising the ancestor against non-conformism, an elder relative cuts a branch from a tree that the spirit, it is believed, will rest on while being ‘brought home’. The branch should be cut with one fine stroke of an axe in order not to make noise in the spirit’s habitat. It is believed that before the spirit is taken home, it stays in the jungle on tree leaves. When all invitations are over, an elder drags the branch home cheerfully and carefully. The spirit is taken to be resting on the branch and is therefore symbolically taken home. As they drag the branch home, some people run up and down in front of a singing crowd shouting:

*fambai! fambai naye! fambisai!*

(Walk! walk with him! Walk faster!)

This is a sign of their long wish to be together again with their relative. When they get home, the people proceed to the deceased’s hut, and in complimenting the ‘coming home’ of the spirit, one relative says:

*Tinofara, tino tenda kuti nhasi wava nesu*  
*Musenzekete wasara wava wako*  
*kuti uchirinda nokuchengeata mhuri yako*  
*yawkasiya panyika.*  
*Tarira nhasi vana vanokuda,*  
*Nokudaro vakutora kuti muchiva rudzi*  
*gotwe muwasara wasara.*  
*Dzirira zvinorunzira kumanyana ako.*  
*Tinokuchemera kudai kuti utirindevo,*  
*Inga ndimi makati asingacheme anofira mumbereko.*

(We are happy and thankful that today you have come to us  
The duty left is now yours  
To look after and protect your children you left on earth,  
Look! today your children have shown you love  
For they have taken you out of the jungle.  
What you agree upon, you agree with your family.  
Prevent all that can harm the family,  
We cry before thee that you look after us  
For it is thee who said yes who does not ask shall not be given)

The Chihota people believe that being in the spiritual world implies that one is grown up (*kuyaruka*), and can/should therefore be burdened with the task of looking after the family left behind.

From all the *kupira* that is done during the ceremony, it is evident that the spirit is always obliged to look after the children and all relatives or next of kin. The
family left behind is again seen in the image of ‘manyana’ which are the offspring of birds. They are called ‘manyana’ when they are still very small, before they have complete growth of feather and can fly. The family left behind is regarded as ‘manyana’ implying that they need protection and guidance just as the little, unfeathered, and helpless birds do.

‘Manyana’ connotes the image of helplessness in terms of defending oneself and fending for food. In the case of the family, they believe that only spiritual beings are capable of foreseeing danger when the living cannot with their 'naked' eyes. Therefore, the living relatives are like the ‘manyana’ that cannot detect danger unless the mother-hen or mother-bird crows to alert them of the imminent attack of an enemy. The use of such figurative language to refer to the people and their state is generally inspired or prompted either by imagination or by passion. This passion is a feeling of perceiving the family helpless and defenceless, and imagined as unable to protect itself.

**Extra-Linguistic Features**

Normally people rely on words to convey meaning during discourse. However, it should be noted that not all communication is verbal or linguistic. Information can also be conveyed non-verbally through facial expressions, actions, postures and numerous other gestures. Giles (1975: 18), notes that, ‘Although non-verbal communication is not really a linguistic phenomenon, it is very important. Normally it is symptomatic of inner feelings and attitudes.’ Apart from the human voice, therefore, a number of other means are used to convey messages in ritual. Most common of these in kurova guva are ngoma (drums), hand-clapping, ululation, walking on knees by the varoora, the sprinkling of blood on the grave, and many others. They are not just types of actions but are statements of fact which require interpretation and understanding. I will now discuss several non-verbal communication forms in the ceremony.

Just as there was a special type of drumming that signified or informed people of death, ngoma yerufu, the Chihota people also have a drum that informs people of the ceremony of kurova guva. The drum is known as ngoma yeguva. The drumming that informs of death is not beaten with continuous strokes on the drum as is done in ngoma yeguva. The drumming that informs the people of death would go bum! bum! with countable strokes on the drum. But that of the ceremony of kurova guva is continuously beaten with a rhythm and beat that can be danced to.

The sprinkling of blood over the grave is indicative of a relationship between the deceased and the family that has gathered to take the deceased's spirit home. ‘Ropa’ is an indirect way of expressing the kind of relationship that exists between people, that is the deceased and relatives and, therefore, the spirit must not neglect its relatives for they need its continuous guidance and protection.

The pouring of beer into the grave through a hole dug by the grave side is an expression of kudyidzana, that is, sharing between the living and the dead. Before the beer is poured, all relatives take sips first from the beer pot and the remainder is poured into the grave through the hole. Kudyidzana can also be observed at beer halls today, especially in the rural areas where people gather around a beer...
container, *chikari*, and exchange it among themselves. The society of the Shona people is a society of sharing. This sharing is believed to go beyond this world into the spiritual world. For instance, the normal practice among the Mashona would be to provide food first before talking to visitors, friends or relatives. It is their belief not to talk to, or discuss with a hungry person. This concept of *kudyidzana* has yielded some proverbs:

*Ukama igasva hunotozadziswa nokudya*

(A relationship is incomplete before people are able to share food)

And

*Nhumbu yomweni haipedzi dura*

Both proverbs connote the idea that feeding or providing food for a visitor does not empty one's food stores.

When the *varoora* walk on their knees as they approach the grave, it is a sign of their respect both to the deceased and all members of the family. It can therefore be said that this action is symptomatic of their 'inner feelings and attitudes' (of respect). This links well with what happens in everyday Shona life. When a young girl talks to an elder, she kneels down while young men crouch as a sign of respect.

The act of *'kuchenesa nzira'* (cleaning a path) to the grave is also an action that communicates something. Since the ceremony is meant for 'taking the spirit home' when it has been cleansed by blood (*kucheneswa neropa*), everything that will be associated with the spirit should also be clean. This is also why beer brewed for sacrificial purposes, especially at the grave, is prepared by grandmothers and virgin girls who no longer bear children or menstruate, and have not had sex with men, respectively. These acts (child-bearing, menstruation and sex) are presumed unclean in *kurova guva*. Therefore, where the spirit also passes through should be clean. One can also observe that ancestral spirits come among people through their abodes or *homwe dzemidzimu* early in the morning, that is, *'kunze kwava kuchena'*. This image of *'kunze kwava kuchena'* could therefore mean that the ancestors or ancestral spirits need cleanliness. There is always an element of *'kuchena'* (cleanliness) in everything done for them.

Ululation is an expression of excitement, an encouragement or a way of expressing gratitude depending on the situation at hand. For example, people ululate to encourage dancers to dance even more, or singers to sing even more.

*'Kahari kemusumo'*(small beer calabash) is very significant because it communicates to both the ancestral spirits and the living elders that preparations for the 'taking home' of the deceased's spirit are through. Those who consecrate the beer may complement the message sent by the *kahari* with their own words:
(To all our ancestors
We kneel down again before you
To inform you that our preparations
for the ‘child’s’ coming are over
May you therefore guide his coming back home)

Without the complement of words, the kahari speaks for itself. When it is placed in front of the hut of the deceased it signifies that the ‘bringing home’ process is complete.

The water that is poured into the basket of rapoko as consecration of the rapoko process also communicates a message. Although the water is poured to the accompaniment of a prayer, the action (alone) infers that they are soaking the rapoko together with their ancestors because the soaking is done during the invitations or when the ancestors have been invited. It is essential that the ancestors be present to bless the grain as it is soaked.

Finally, although it is a ceremony to ‘bring back home’ the deceased’s spirit, and people are usually happy for the ‘coming home’ of the spirit, however, some people still weep, especially at the grave. This weeping is an externalization of the emotions of pain and grief, a realization, of the initial parting with the deceased.

Sub-Registers within the Register

A number of sub-registers emerge within the broad register of kurova guva. These include kupira mudzimu (ancestral worship) which has already been looked at in the previous sections on Kurova Guva, chisahwira (a special kind of extra-kin relationship), chitukwu (a jocular type of relationship established through ‘insulting’ between participants), chinyririkani (a relationship between people with whom one is shy), and many others. Only two sub-registers chitukwu and chisahwira will be discussed here because they are the ones that are readily recognisable at the ceremony. It needs to be noted that for effectiveness, the participants in all of these sub-registers must suspend their individuality.

Chitukwu

Chitukwu is a relationship established through the exchange of ‘insults’ between participants. It is clearly and readily recognized between the varoora and family relatives. The varoora do the most work in the ceremony. They brew beer, cook sadza, and ferry beer pots to the grave. They are required to be cheerful from the start to the end of the ceremony. Because it is also part of their duties to cheer up people whenever they discover that their spirits or morale are low, they can
either sing or dance to the cheering of the crowd. They can also imitate any character present or even the deceased just to amuse people.

The varoora virtually say anything to those involved in the chitukwa relationship. They are unrestrained or uninhibited. Though they can use vulgar words, they, however, have to use euphemisms in place of more obscene or offensive words. For example, one muroora says to a suspected sorcerer of the deceased:

\[
\text{ndiwe wakava muvhimi wemwana uye nhai?}
\]

(You were the hunter of that child?)

‘Muvhimi’ here implies the murderer or the killer. Instead of saying that ‘ndiwe wakauraya’ or ‘wakaponda’, ‘muvhimi’, a lighter word, is used. One of the varoora could also say:

\[
\text{Iyeyu ndiye anoziva chakadya ura Hwenyu}
\]

(he knows what ate your bowels)

This means that the accused knows what killed the deceased. This is another instance when a euphemism is used to lighten the emotional burden of an accusation.

Chisahwira

At the ceremony of kurova guva the sahwira voices his complaints to all gathered for the ceremony. For example, how much the corpse stank, what evidences of witchcraft were found coming out of the body, for example, horns, wizards’ torches (nyanga, chikono). The sahwira could say:

\[
\text{Vanhuwe! mwana wenyu anga asingabvaruri machira hezvo nhasi zvazomuwana.}
\]

(People! your child had no time to sleep in his blankets and today he has got the reward)

‘Kusabvarura machira’, in Shona, means ‘that one is a witch. He does not sleep in his blankets and that is why they are not torn.’ The belief is that blankets get torn when they are used. Instead of the sahwira simply saying that their child is a witch, a better and lighter term, ‘kusabvarura machira’, is used. This may be true or may not be true of the deceased. It could be said to lighten the mood of the gathering. The sahwira may also call on the spirit of the deceased to kill his heir who has already lived too long. The dunzvi (deceased’s sister’s son or daughter) may counter this with a plea, ‘chengetai rudzi’, meaning ‘look after the lineage’. The sahwira can reply in kind:
There are times that the *sahwira* suspends this jocular type of relationship and moves on to more serious issues pertaining to *kurova guva* and the ‘bringing home’ of the spirit by, for instance, inviting the *co-sahwira* to come and look after the children and all relatives.

**Ngondo Songs**

The study of *kurova guva* would be incomplete without discussing and highlighting the central role played by *kurova guva* songs, commonly known by the Chihota people as *ngondo* (war songs), or more precisely, in the words of Pa Chitsunge⁹ of Muda, *nziyo dzeguva, mbavarira or dzepasichigare*’ (traditional songs). However, *Ngondo* being the most commonly used term among the Chihota people, will be used throughout in this discussion.

The songs provide the necessary anchor for the successful ‘bringing home’ of the deceased’s spirit. The songs serve quite a number of purposes in the ceremony: they could be sung to keep up the morale and spirit of the participants; they facilitate the communication between the people and the spiritual world; they reunite the dead and the living. The reunion occurs at the spiritual level; they are sung to invite all spirits of possession - *vemashavi* and *vemidzimu*; they are sung to the accompaniment of *ngoma* (drum), *hosho* (rattles), and *mbira* which are essential and indispensable property of *kurova guva*. These instruments help in providing the harmony, melody and beat of the songs that create a conducive atmosphere for the coming of ancestral spirits.

There are several songs, each with its purpose, sung at varying stages of the ceremony. The messages in these songs shall become clear with the analysis of the meaning of the language used in the songs. *Ngondo* is especially sung the night before the event of ‘taking the spirit home’, on the way to the grave to take the spirit, on the way back home, and all night after the ‘coming of the spirit home’. They are also sung when people gather in the deceased’s hut, having ‘brought home’ the spirit.

There are songs that express the loneliness of the ‘ancestral spirit’ to be brought home. It is considered lonely before the ceremony to ‘bring it home’ is performed, and because, since it has not been installed into the ancestral hierarchy, it cannot communicate or associate with other ancestors. The song that expresses

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⁹ During the burial, a long stick, the height of the grave is rested again the body of the deceased. Its top end will be visible on the edge of the grave after burial. After the soil around the grave has settled, the stick is removed leaving a thin hole down into the grave. The stick is normally removed after several months. It is believed that the spirit will come out through the hole and manifest itself as a worm or caterpillar which will turn into the deceased’s spirit and wander about. As soon as the stick is removed, one of the surviving relatives periodically visits the grave to see if they can find the caterpillar or *gonye*. As soon as the caterpillar is found, word is passed among family members that the spirit has come out and is, therefore, wandering about without a home.
the loneliness of the spirit is called ‘Musango Ndodziungaira’ (In the Jungle I wander). It is sung as follows:

Musango ndodziungaira/ndodziwaira!
Ah! nedondo musango ndodziungaira nedondo
Musango ndodziungaira!
Ah! nedondo musango ndodziungaira nedondo
Dziva dziva ndodziungaira!
Ah! nedondo musango ndodziungaira
Nedondo!

‘In the jungle, I wander
Ah! in the jungle
I wander, In the jungle
I wander! I wander!
In the jungle I wander!)

The key words from the song that expresses ‘loneliness’ are ‘kudzungaira’ or ‘kudzivaira’. When somebody is said to be ‘ari kudzungaira’ (he or she is wandering) he/she is alone, with absolutely no one to advise him/her or talk to. He/she is believed to be confused and very lonely. That is, until the relatives come to take it home.

The song also contains the image, ‘dondo’, into which the spirit wanders. A ‘dondo’ is a very thick forest. The image, ‘dondo’, and the action of ‘kudzungaira’ are related because in a typical ‘dondo’, it is not easy to find one’s way about or out because of the darkness and thickness of the forest. So the spirit wanders lonely and aimlessly in the jungle. Believing that when someone is wandering (achidzungaira), it is an indirect call for help or assistance, the relatives go to the grave to ‘bring it home’ to be reunited with them through the ceremony of kurova guva.

We find an idiophone ‘dziva-dziva’ in the song. The reduplication of the idiophone, ‘dziva-dziva’, implies that the action is repetitive. It implies that the spirit moves from place to place endlessly in the forest without rest.

As people prepare to go to the grave to take the spirit, they sing a song to enact their preparation. One of such songs is ‘Tora uta hwangu Ndoda kuenda’ (Give me my Quiver - I want to go). It is sung as follows:

Tora uta hwangu ndoda kuenda dzinoruma
Vashe vashe woye!
Dzinoruma
Vashe vashe woye!
Tora Uta hwangu ndoda kuenda
Dzinoruma.

(Give my quiver I want to go, they bite
Aha! Chief! Chief!
They bite
Aha! Chief! Chief!
Give me my quiver I want to go (hunting).
This song is normally sung before a hunt when the hunter asks for a quiver (uta) to use in hunting fierce animals (dzinoruma). In the context of kurova guva it is sung while gathering the necessary items needed in inviting the spirit and all kupira processes performed for the ancestors, and the deceased, whose spirit is to be ‘brought home’. These items could include the chicken to be sacrificed during invitations at the grave, beer taken to the grave, or even the musical instruments that are played to the accompaniment of ngondo.

There are also songs sung to celebrate the successful ‘bringing home’ of the spirit. For instance, the song ‘yave nyama yekugocha’ (It has become meat to roast). Figuratively, the song means more than just the expression, becoming meat to roast. ‘Yave nyama yekugocha’ is sung after a victory or after achieving something unexpectedly. It is in this context of ‘achieving’ or ‘succeeding’ that the song becomes meaningful in the kurova guva. In kurova guva it is sung for the successful ‘bringing home’ of the spirit. The song is sung as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Yave nyama yekugocha!} \\
\text{yowerere yava nyama yekugocha!} \\
\text{Baya wabaya!} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(It has become meat to roast
Oh! It has become meat to roast
You stab it!)

The song implies that something that seemed indomitable has been conquered, or something that people were not sure of achieving has become achievable, that is, ‘yave nyama yekugocha’. It indicates the people’s successful bringing home, reunion, and restoration of the wandering spirit among its relatives.

Some songs are sung to emphasise the necessity of the living, suffering and struggling together of the spirit and its living family. One such song is ‘mudzimu womusha uno uya titambe ngoma yababa’, (Come all ye ancestors of this family and dance to the tune drums of the fathers). This song also does not mean what it says, or as it reads. It means something more than ‘dancing to the tune drums of the fathers’.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Mudzimu womusha uno} \\
\text{Uya titambe ngoma yababa} \\
\text{Ha! Ha! uya titambe ngoma yababa} \\
\text{Uya titambe!} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Come Yee all ancestors of this family
Come and dance to the tune drums of the fathers
Oh ye come to dance).

The song is as an appeal to the ancestor that has been installed to work together with the living and help them in the exerting and tough moments of life. ‘uya titambe ngoma yababa’ means that the ancestor has to come and do what other ancestors (the fore-fathers) did and left the young to do and they also (fore-fathers)
still do. That is, looking after, suffering together, and struggling together with its relatives.

Contrary to the uninitiated thinking of Gelfand (1959) on these songs, that ‘it is not easy to understand why these almost meaningless and redundant thoughts are sung’, it is obvious that these songs have relevance in this ceremony. I agree with Okot P’Bitek that, because they cannot ‘speak in foreign tongues’ but in the language of the Shona people, they have nothing to communicate to strangers outside who do not, and cannot participate in the philosophy of life that the songs celebrate.

Conclusion

Much of the information that has been used in this paper was gathered from oral sources and supplemented by my own knowledge of kurova guva, gathered while researching on the design and dramatic elements in the ceremony.

In my discussion, I have attempted describing the linguistic and extra-linguistic features found in the kurova guva ceremony as a register. In the course of my study, I found out that the language of this register employs in its structure, graceful and imagistic words. I have tried, with the help of my interviewees, to explain the images of the language, and all figurative expressions used in the ceremony. I also have given an interpretation of the extra-linguistic features, and explained them in the context of kurova guva. Within the register of kurova guva, I discovered that there are some sub-registers which I have also explained together with analyses of the songs sung at the ceremony. To get the meaning of the songs in the kurova guva context, I have had to analyze and explain the language employed in these songs. And finally, having looked at these songs, the meaning in their language, I can conclude that they are relevant in the context of the kurova guva.

Works Cited


