

SHUMO, TSUMO AND SOCIALIZATION*

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1. THE SHONA TERMS

The words *shumo* and *tsumo* are commonly regarded as dialectal variants of the same lexical item for 'proverb', *shumo* being Karanga and *tsumo* being Zezuru, etc. The latter has been promoted as the 'standard' form. In fact one compiler of Shona proverbs, A. Munjanja,¹ has succeeded in consistently avoiding all reference to *shumo*. The explanation for the clear preference for *tsumo* is simple. The language situation in the Shona speech community is such that, in Salisbury at least, a Zezuru-based variety has emerged as the prestige-laden, dominant spoken language. We shall call this variety General Spoken Shona (G.S.). At the lexical level certain Zezuru forms are preferred in G.S. while their dialectal variants are being discarded. For example, the Zezuru pronunciation [tʃká] for *-tya* (fear) is preferred to Karanga and Nda [tjá] to Karanga and Manyika/Ungwe [tá] and to Ungwe/Manyika [fá]. The Zezuru form [dʒgá] for *-dya* (eat) is heard most often, while at least six other variants are losing currency: [rjá] Karanga and Nda; [lá] Karanga; [bá] Karanga and Ungwe; [já] Ungwe/Manyika; [zá] Ungwe/Manyika; and [dʒá] Korekore. Other, even more 'marked' forms peculiar to individual dialects are also being discarded: e.g. Nda [tuphá] *-thupa* (worry, annoy, trouble); Manyika [ngén.] *ngenyi* (why?); Karanga [ʃuro] *shuro* (hare). This willingness of dialect speakers to discard such 'marked' forms indicates acceptance of G.S. as the *de facto* received, or more popularly 'standard', Shona.

The term *shumo* has been condemned to the same fate but it appears to be resisting. In the writer's view, *shumo* is a special case which must be

* I am grateful to Mr R. Sisimayi of Harare Secondary School, Salisbury, who collected some of the 'new' proverbs used in 3.1 from his students. I am also grateful to Mr. K. G. Mkanganwi of the Department of Linguistics, and to Professor G. Fortune of the Department of African Languages, both of the University of Zimbabwe, for helping me to gain access to reading material which I would otherwise have overlooked. I also wish to thank Professor Fortune for kindly consenting to read and to discuss an earlier draft of mine.

¹ A. Munjanja, *Tsumo neMadimikira* (Salisbury, Longman, 2 vols, 1965 - 9).
Symbols:

[] : phonetic script	ː : diacritic for voiced depressor
ˈ : high tone	ʃ : voiceless palato-alveolar fricative
ʒ : voiced palato-alveolar fricative	ʰ : aspiration
ɬ : voiceless lateral fricative	ɓ : voiced lateral fricative
ʋ : voiced velar stop	ŋ : velar nasal
ɲ : palatal nasal	< : from

treated differently. As long as reference is limited to 'proverbs'² as particular-type statements or axioms, with specified structural patterns, the practical thing to do is to discard *shumo* and to use *tsumo* in the interests of unification of the Shona language. The problem, however, is that *shumo* has a wider meaning than *tsumo*. Indeed it is interesting to note that some compilers of Shona proverbs and students of Shona proverbial lore such as Kriel³ have been confronted with the problem of choosing one or the other and sticking to their choice. The recent collection by Hamutyinei and Plangger is actually entitled *Tsumo - Shumo*,⁴ a rather unrevealing compromise creation and therefore a poor solution to the problem. Where there is one-to-one correspondence in meaning, as between *shuro* and *tsuro*, there is no problem because the prevailing attitudes in the G.S.-speaking community preclude the possibility of feature[*ʃ*] rather than[*ts*] being promoted. But a different type of solution is desirable for *shumo* and *tsumo* because *shumo* means *tsumo*, and more.

A simple and practical solution suggested here is to re-define our terms so that we have two working definitions which distinguish our two terms in a way which allows both to be used. A good starting point is to look at the meaning of *shumo*. Even in G.S. one can still say: *Zvawaita hazvina shumu* (What you have done is useless/senseless/no good), or *Vakadzi kurwira murume hazvina shumu* (For women to fight over a man is ludicrous/stupid). But the non-Karanga dialect speaker would not say, *Zvawaita hazvina tsumo*, or *Vakadzi kurwira murume hazvina tsumo*. He would actually substitute a different lexical item for *shumo* and use *tsarukano*, *maturo* or *musoro*.

What is being suggested here is that while the use of *tsumo* to refer to proverbs as a genre is perfectly acceptable, *shumo* should be allowed to retain the 'other meaning' where reference is to relative importance or praise-worthiness of an idea, object or act. Of crucial importance for our purposes here is the fact that this 'other' meaning of *shumo* implies approval by 'the generalized other'⁵ or the community at large. Since what is being approved in this case subsumes maintenance of certain standards or norms of social behaviour in the community, that approval must be something almost always sought-after as a measure of esteem within the community as a broad 'reference group'⁶ with which the individual should or wishes to identify. Although the individual member of the group may assume a certain independence, he is essentially a social product, and, because people are continually seeking the approval of others, the individual is under pressure to conform.⁷ Indeed, 'it is only through the approval of others that the self can

² The words *tsumo/shumo* and 'proverb' do not really mean the same thing but, at this stage, it is convenient to take the terms for granted and to accept the general definition of a proverb as 'a saying in more or less fixed form marked by "shortness, sense and salt" and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it', R. Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1970), 393.

³ A. Kriel, *An African Horizon* (Cape Town, Univ. of Cape Town, 1971).

⁴ M. A. Hamutyinei and A. B. Plangger, *Tsumo-Shumo: Shona Proverbial Lore and Wisdom* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1974).

⁵ E. H. J. Sprott, *Human Groups* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1958), 25.

⁶ R. T. Bell, *Sociolinguistics* (London, Batsford, 1976), 105.

⁷ Sprott, *Human Groups*, 33.

tolerate the self'.⁸ In this connection, the use of the word *shumo* in people's remarks should indicate general attitudes in relation to some shared norms. Part of these norms relate to the individual's skill to communicate effectively, and part of that 'communicative competence'⁹ is linguistic. Training in the expression of such competence is one of the most important aspects of the whole socialization process. To the Shona, appropriate use of *tsumo* is good evidence of such competence and such use is met with approval. Some teachers, for example, actually maintain that a Shona composition without a single proverb cannot be a good one.

If this distinction between *shumo* as sense or wisdom and *tsumo* as particular-type statements is accepted, one could say, *Tsumo dzine shumu* (Proverbs have sense/wisdom).

2. *TSUMO* AND SOCIALIZATION

The main function of proverbs in an African society has been stated articulately by Nyembezi, and his statement is worth quoting here in full:

In the passage of the race through many years of happiness and misery, of joys and sorrows, the people accumulate more and more experience, and this vast store of experience tends to affect their outlook, and regulate their behaviour. As a social unit the people have certain definite ways of behaviour, or conduct which are expected of the individuals comprising the social unit. *Some models of conduct are embodied in proverbs, which serve the purpose of instructing the younger and ignorant generations, or serve as reminders to the old, who have been remiss in their observance of the rules of conduct expected in the society.*¹⁰

This didactic and juridical function of proverbs is considered more important than their literary-aesthetic value, but the latter quality enhances the former function. Structurally, *tsumo* typically consist of two balancing and complementary propositions. The overt structural form is one or another of six types of verbal and substantival sentences or their combinations. These in turn allow for definite patterns of correspondence and cross-correspondence of the grammatical structures plus definite patterns of congruence and contrast of the lexical items used in the balancing propositions. Skillful exploitation of this general technique lends *tsumo* their expressive power.¹¹ The style leaves plenty of room for wit, irony and sarcasm, e.g.

- (1) *Chembere masikati/usiku imvana* (Lit: An old woman is [identified] during the day/at night she is a young mother);

⁸ Kingsley Davis (1948) quoted in Spratt, *Human Groups*, 27.

⁹ Bell, *Sociolinguistics*, 214.

¹⁰ C. L. S. Nyembezi, *Zulu Proverbs*, (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand Univ. Press, 1954), 41 (emphasis is mine).

¹¹ The relationship between structural forms and meanings of proverbs is discussed by G. Fortune, 'Form and imagery in Shona proverbs', *Zambezia* (1975 - 6), IV, ii, 25 - 55. See also S. M. Guma, *The Form, Content and Technique of Traditional Literature in Southern Sotho* (Pretoria, J. L. van Schaik, 1967), 81 - 95.

- (2) *Itsitsi dzei/tsvimborume kubvisa chana chemvana madzihwa?* (Lit: What kindness is it/for the bachelor to wipe mucus off the face of a young woman's child?);
- (3) *Manatsamukanwa/harahwa kurota ichiyamwa* (Lit: It gives the mouth a nice taste/for an old man to suck the breast in his dreams).

From the point of view of their literary-aesthetic qualities, *tsumo* have been aptly described by Fortune as 'poems in miniature'.¹² They are aphorisms with deep metaphorical meaning and are terse in expression.

From another point of view, i.e. that of the indirect manner in which the meaning is arrived at, their symbolism, as elsewhere in folklore, enables the speakers to provide 'sociological models which aid them in inculcating traditional values in their young people and in reaffirming these values and beliefs for the pleasure and remembrance of adults'.¹³ For example (4) and (5) below aim to teach the same thing, humility. The point made in both is that fortune is fickle: the mighty and the rich may be robbed of their prestigious positions by time and the same may be given to the erstwhile small and poor.¹⁴

- (4) *Aiva madziva ava mazambuko/aiva mazambuko ava madziva* (Lit: What were deep pools are now crossing places/what were crossing places are now deep pools);
- (5) *Chaitemura chava kuseva/chaiseva chava kutemura* (Lit: He who used to have his *sadza* 'dry' now has it with relish/he who used to have it with relish now has it 'dry').

As far as their content is concerned such pithy sentences perpetually enshrine 'the age-old wisdom of our Shona elders'.¹⁵ Because *tsumo* are concerned with those things that fall within the scope of common experience, the entire stock represents the distilled and collective experience of the community.¹⁶ It would be true to say that there is a Shona proverb for every situation.

Their range of contents is extensive, since some of them are mere platitudinous truisms and others are the most abstruse distillations of thought. Unlike tales, however, they are almost exclusively didactic and moral in tone and purpose, summing up the accumulated ethical and philosophical experience of generations for the benefit of posterity, in a way not found in the more amorally

¹² G. Fortune, 'Shona traditional poetry', *Zambezia* (1971 - 2), II, i, 49.

¹³ T. O. Biedelman, quoted in Kriel, *An African Horizon*, 29.

¹⁴ Giving meanings of *tsumo* is not a very fruitful exercise, however elaborate the description or exemplification. The writer feels that the best thing to do is to give only literal or near-literal translations and leave the reader to imagine possible situations, as best he can. (As R. Finnegan points out, the bare words cannot be left to speak for themselves because, in oral literature, the actual delivery is of prime importance, *Oral Literature*, 2 - 3, 15).

¹⁵ Hamutinyei and Plangger, *Tsumo-Shumo*, 7.

¹⁶ Guma, *The Form, Content and Technique of Traditional Literature in Southern Sotho*, 2, 65.

artistic myths and other narratives.¹⁷

Because the speakers view them as containing the distilled wit and wisdom of past generations, *tsumo* enjoy 'traditional popular acceptance',¹⁸ the only one criterion that what we will call 'potential *tsumo*' have not yet satisfied. And because they enjoy such acceptance, their juridical and educational function is enhanced: 'They verbalize customary law and enunciate rules of conduct in life'.¹⁹ This is why training in the use of verbal skills was an important aspect of socialization in the traditional context.

To some extent it still is but so many new factors have tended to diminish that importance. In certain situations, ability to use *tsumo* may mean approval or respect for the user while outstanding ability could mean admiration, for a person who uses proverbs so well must surely know all the rules of conduct and presumably adheres to them. A Shona man can quote an appropriate proverb to defend his action or point of view, just as a Christian would quote a verse from the Bible. This is why the juridical function has been stressed so much by writers. Hamutyinei and Plangger state:

In court and in other situations of conflict, proverbs seem to be particularly important to smooth over a disagreement with as little animosity as possible and without becoming personal. *Agreement is sought with reference to the age-old wisdom of the ancestors.*²⁰

Because they are attributed to the ancients, who could not in any way have been involved in the present dispute, it has been said that, 'These *shumo* fulfil the very useful function of court of appeal . . . They do not only serve the purpose which is served by English proverbs, but also that of English law books'.²¹ One can always say *Shamwari, vakuru vakati* . . . (My friend, the elders said . . .), and then quote an appropriate proverb.

Proverbs may be used to caution others when they would otherwise deviate from the group norms:

- (6) *Shamwari, natsa kwauno-bva/kwauneonda usiku* ²² (Lit: My friend, do good where you leave/where you go it is night).

Proverbs are often used at the beginning of stories, especially *ngano* (roughly 'folktales') so that the interest of the listener(s) is captured right at the outset:

- (7) *Veduwe, chokwadi muro-mbo/haarovi chine nguo* (Lit: Folks, it is true, a poor man/does not make a big kill).

The same proverbs may be used to conclude the story, in which position the proverbs can be introduced by:

¹⁷ G. P. Lestrade, 'Traditional literature', in I. Schapera, *The Bantu Speaking Tribes of South Africa* (London, Routledge, 1937), 293.

¹⁸ C. M. Doke, quoted in Hamutyinei and Plangger, *Tsumo-Shumo*, 15.

¹⁹ Hamutyinei and Plangger, 19.

²⁰ Ibid., 20 (the emphasis is mine).

²¹ Kriel, *An African Horizon*, 14.

²² In examples (6) to (9) the actual *tsumo* and their literal translations are printed in bold type, but they are given as part of typical-type statements.

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| <i>Regai vakuru vazoti ...</i> | (And so the ancients said . . .); |
| or <i>Saka vakuru vakati ...</i> | (That is why the elders said . . .); |
| or <i>Ndosaka zvichinzi ...</i> | (That is why it is said . . .); |

and so on. In this position the proverb summarizes the story: 'The folk-tales provide, in a longer and more interesting form, what many proverbs state in a more pithy sentence.'²³ A proverb may be used to encourage a person who is engaged in a small enterprise:

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| (8) <i>Mwanangu, Mviromviro
dzemhanza/mapfeka</i> | (Lit: My son, the beginning of
baldness/it is thinning of the
hair above the temples). |
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A proverb may be used to comfort the desperate:

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|---|---|
| (9) <i>Usaora mwoyo. Handiti
vakuru vakati kugarika/
tange nhamo?</i> | (Lit: Do not lose heart. Did the
elders not say to live comfortably/
one must start from hardships?). |
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As has already been indicated, the value of Shona proverbs lies in the fact that they cover all aspects of life. One can always find *tsumo ine shumo* ('a proverb that makes sense') for every situation. In fact, the whole moral code of the community can be drawn from this one source, *tsumo*. One or two aspects of this code are highlighted in the remaining paragraphs of this section.

2.1 If any one general ideal can be made out from *tsumo* as part of Shona folklore, it is 'the golden mean'.²⁴ They discourage extremes or excesses. Where one proverb may be quoted to emphasize or to support a particular view or stand, i.e. one extreme,

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| (10) <i>Mbeva zhinji/hadzina ma-
rise</i> | (Lit: Many mice/have no lining
in their nest; cp. English: Too
many cooks spoil the broth), |
|---|---|

this can be countered by quoting another proverb for the opposite view or stand, i.e. the other extreme, e.g.

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|---|---|
| (11) <i>Rume rimwe/harikombi chu-
ru</i> | (Lit: One man/cannot surround
an ant-hill); |
| or (12) <i>Chara chimwe/hachitswa-
nyi inda</i> | (Lit: One finger-nail/cannot
crush a louse). |

A long list of opposing pairs of proverbs, which may superficially appear to be contradictory, can be compiled. Such pairs are intended to draw us to a golden mean: 'The more proverbs are grouped into classes which form contradictory pairs, the more their users appear as people who put a premium on

²³ C. M. Doke, quoted in Kriel, *An African Horizon*, 19.

²⁴ Kriel, *An African Horizon*, 15.

moderation.²⁵ Even those proverbs that express specific sentiments but cannot be similarly paired also tend towards the golden mean.

As a guide to good behaviour Shona proverbs point out the need for moderation:

- (13) *Kana chingoma choririsa/* (Lit: When the drum beats too
choda kutsemuka loud/it is about to crack);

or the need for tolerance:

- (14) *Mugoni wepwere/ndiye* (Lit: One who can control
asina children/is one who has none).

Non-conformism or individualism in the Western sense is clearly discouraged:

- (15) *Zanondenga/akaonekwa* (Lit: He-who-listened-to-no-ad-
nembonje pahuma vice/was conspicuous with a scar
on the forehead);
(16) *Mbimbindoga/akawira* (Lit: Know-it-all/fell into the
mumasese dregs [of beer]);
(17) *Kuwanda huuya/museve* (Lit: To be many is desirable/
wakapotera pamuzukuru the arrow hit the nephew).

Although tribal warfare may have been frequent in the past at the 'secondary group' level where people were only indirectly related, bullying or aggressive behaviour has always been discouraged within the smaller, 'primary groups' where interaction is typically face-to-face:²⁶

- (18) *Gudo guru peta muswe/* (Lit: Big baboon fold your tail
kuti madiki agokutya (between your legs)/so that the
small ones can fear [respect]
you);
(19) *Imbwa nyoro/ndidzo tse-* (Lit: The humble dogs/are the
ngi dzematowo ones that can chew raw hides).

In fact, co-operation is encouraged with one's juniors:

- (20) *Svosve/wakatuma nzou* (Lit: Ant/sent elephant);

but the children must still be taught to fear and respect their elders:

- (21) *Mukuru makuru/hanga* (Lit: A big one is a big one/a
haigari pfunde guinea-fowl does not perch on
the sorghum plant).

The children's loyalties, however, must be first and foremost with their relatives:

- (22) *Chawawana idya nehama/* (Lit: What you have found eat
mutorwa ane hanganwa with relatives/the stranger is
forgetful).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ On 'primary' and 'secondary groups', see Sprott, *Human Groups*, 14 - 16.

While between families one might expect a good turn to be reciprocated by one's neighbours:

- (23) *Kandiro kanoenda/kuno-bva kamwe* (Lit: A small plate [of food] goes/where another comes from);

hospitality is a must in the home:

- (24) *Ukama igasva/hunozadzi-swa nokuyda* (Lit: Kinship is a measure half-full/eating makes it fuller);
 (25) *Mweni/haapedzi dura* (Lit: A visitor/does not finish the granary).

Strangers must be treated with respect but important people cannot expect to be regaled wherever they go:

- (26) *Mwana washe/muranda kumwe* (Lit: A chief's son/is a subject in another land).

2.1.1 One could go on and on adding to the list of examples and comments. The above is only a small selection from a stock of many hundreds.²⁷ It is hoped that the above will suffice to indicate the general direction of Shona informal teaching through proverbial lore. This form of teaching was, and perhaps still is, only part of the general social orientation of the individual and was intended particularly for society's younger members. Although inter-tribal fighting may appear to have been an important feature in the history of the Shona people (history tends to be political and military anyway, nourishing itself on struggles for power and on intrigues in high places), one may conclude from this one source, *tsumo*, that as far as some collective purposiveness can be determined among the various Shona-speaking groups, conformity, peace, tolerance and mutual co-operation were among the things they cherished most. Most of the people probably still do.

3. THE NEW SITUATION

The remainder of this paper is written in the manner of a critique. In the discussion I will try to indicate how prevailing attitudes may be diminishing the role of *tsumo* that has already been outlined above in relation mainly to the traditional setting. The views expressed in the remaining paragraphs are necessarily impressionistic, being based on casual observation. Because I have not made any systematic study of the problem, I cannot really claim to be objective. For that reason, I may as well take the liberty of using first person pronouns 'I' and 'We'. The question raised here is: are we not discouraging creativity by jealously guarding the traditional stock of *tsumo* when the new situation may be calling for new ones to be promoted? Later I will try to show that such new proverbs are actually being 'invented' but we are dis-

²⁷ Hamutyinei and Plangger have 1595 entries in *Tsumo-Shumo*, the biggest collection published to date, but they do not claim to have exhausted the field.

couraging their use because we confuse them with slang and fail to recognize what are otherwise 'potential proverbs'.

The 'We' here refers to members of the Shona-speaking community in so far as their attitudes to language and their speech habits may be intended to conform with what they believe to be acceptable to 'the authorities' (*nyanzvi*) in education, in publishing and in broadcasting. The first two, through the Shona Language Committee,²⁸ the Schools Inspectorate and the Literature Bureau, are mainly concerned with promoting a literary language.²⁹ The third, through Harare Radio and Television Mashonaland, is trying to promote and to improve literary criteria and constraints on the spoken language.

As far as what we have already called G.S. is concerned, these three forces, perhaps quite inadvertently, appear to be setting artificial norms for public speech. For example, during radio interviews or discussion programmes and at meetings where business is conducted in Shona, the participants are often subjected to 'corrections' and must therefore make a conscious effort to avoid 'mixed language'. One result of such pressures is to make the speakers imagine that, on such occasions at least, their language is or should be 'pure' or at least 'standard'. That abstraction called the 'standard' is the joint product of the Literature Bureau, which scrutinizes and filters material intended for publication in the vernaculars;³⁰ the Language Committee and the Inspectorate, whose recommendations and guides the Shona teacher has to follow; and the radio announcer and advertiser, who are considered model speakers by many. The general point being made here is that, in certain situations, the speaker avoids any forms which he believes, quite wrongly, will deviate from the 'standard' set by all these experts.³¹

3.1 This assertion is central to the whole discussion in this section. The general attitudes arising from such a situation are negative in the sense that they tend towards the puristic. To the extent that we may share such attitudes and may attempt to 'coerce' others into observing unrealistic norms, we tend to discourage creativity.

A group such as the Shona Teachers Association, for instance, may want to assume the role of guardians of the language. Depending on how much they emphasize the need to preserve the language, they may be critical of the

²⁸ Actually the Language Committee is strictly concerned only with improving the orthography. It is only indirectly concerned with style. But many people do not know this and imagine that the Committee prescribes correct forms at various levels of the language.

²⁹ cp. L. Bloomfield, *Language* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1933), 491-4.

³⁰ The definition of 'Vernacular' used here is the legal one given by UNESCO in 1953 as 'the mother tongue of a group which is socially or politically dominated by another group speaking a different language', quoted by Bell, *Sociolinguistics*, 153.

³¹ Strictly speaking the use of the term 'standard' should be limited to refer to a system of spelling and word division, but the ordinary speaker actually believes that standardization relates to the spoken language. While working on a different project I found that some people make a conscious effort to use particular words and expressions because they believe them to be 'standard'.

member who uses *chaisvutiswa chava kusvutisa* (Lit: He who used to ask for tobacco is he who now gives it) instead of *chaitemura chava kuseva* (5). If the same member went on to use *chabhenda chabhenda mbambaira haina joini* (36), he would probably get black looks from other members present, or worse, he might even be rebuked or asked to be serious.

The value of *tsumo* lies in their power, actual or potential, to project the social values of the speakers. To that extent the more they are used the better. But the old stock of *tsumo* has largely become part of a literary language, expressed in the written rather than in the spoken medium. The teacher who has to encourage his pupils to use proverbs must cope with all kinds of figurative expressions which are simply lifted from texts and forced into the composition in inordinate doses, and/or in inappropriate situations. Both teacher and pupil are in a dilemma: while they find it desirable to preserve old sayings and to be able to appreciate their wisdom, they also know that people no longer use them much. Only the writers (today's *nyanduri*?) seem to display any skill in using them. When the pupil is drilled in *tsumo*, *madimikira* (idioms), *nyaudzosingwi* (ideophones) and other *zvirevo* (pithy sayings) from written texts, it is almost as if he were learning a second language. Outside the classroom he has little opportunity or inclination to use them.

The problem seems to arise from a general failure to recognize the fact that different social situations require or encourage the use of different speech styles. No speech style is therefore necessarily better than another. Teachers and parents are traditionally distressed over teenage language because (a) they have forgotten about their own adolescent speech, and (b) they do not relate the specific utterances to their keys in language variation. These keys are a system of speech types each of which is used in a specifiable set of social situations. Gleason has suggested five keys which may be arranged as follows: Intimate ← Casual ← Consultative → Deliberative → Oratorical.³² Today *tsumo* from the traditional stock would probably feature mainly in the oratorical key because they have become more or less frozen by literacy. They would also feature in the deliberative key. What I prefer to call 'potential *tsumo*' (see (27) - (38)) seem to jump from the casual straight to the deliberative key because, while they may originate in informal situations where relationships are well-established, they are repeated in situations which require formal verbal planning. The older established of these potential proverbs would therefore be properly subsumed in the deliberative key but are unlikely to feature in the oratorical key unless their potential as new proverbs is recognized.

One aim of this article is to point out the need to recognize potential *tsumo* and to distinguish between potential *tsumo* and slang-like vocabulary of the casual and consultative keys which is typically ephemeral. But as things are at the moment, there is little or no encouragement to use these potential

³² H. A. Gleason Jr, *Linguistics and English Grammar* (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), ch. 15, esp. 357 - 61.

tsumo because of the conservative attitudes of those who want to pretend that they are just slang. Some of them, e.g. *Saga reshuga rakapera netisipunu* (27), have been current for years and do not seem to be inherently transient, which is an essential characteristic of slang.³³ In terms of the requirements of *tsumo* as a genre the only criterion which potential proverbs fail to satisfy is that traditional popular acceptance which follows recognition. This is something that should come with time, provided usage is not actively discouraged by official agencies and influential individuals. Some may object strongly to the use of adoptives in these potential proverbs, but if these adoptives reflect the way in which Shona has adapted to changed sociocultural conditions, insistence on purity would be counter-productive.

The diminishing social role of *tsumo* generally can be explained in terms of misplaced emphasis rather than lack of it. Traditional *tsumo*, *madimikira*, etc. are being extolled as ends in themselves without reference to context or style. Depending on how the teacher treats them, his efforts may lead him to frustration when he finds that all he is doing is to make life difficult for the students without tapping their potential for effective expression. The literary-aesthetic aspect is over-emphasized and only those proverbs that have actually been recorded are considered 'the very juice of language itself' without which 'the language would be but a skeleton without flesh, a body without soul'.³⁴ We are too preoccupied with preservation of the old stock to realize our potential as creators and users continuing an established tradition. Man is by nature a creator. That is why he prefers information given in such a way that something is left for him to construe.³⁵ In oral literature a large proportion of the community are potential creators, and dissemination of the literature is not highly specialized: everybody is a potential adapter and declaimer of it and it soon becomes the common possession of the people as a whole.³⁶ But if a genre must be disseminated only in the written form, it ceases to be communal property and its importance as an instrument of socialization must decline.

A related problem is that the imagery in some of the older proverbs is now out of date. (This is not a problem peculiar to Shona and does not necessarily mean old proverbs do not survive.) For example, *riva* (mouse trap) is used as the key-image in certain proverbs, but trapping mice is no longer a favourite pastime for boys, even in the rural areas. In the towns some may not even know what *riva* means, and so will fail to see the symbolism and fail to appreciate the proverbs. To that extent, some of the older proverbs may have lost appeal, and with that some of their value as aids for socialization. As the entire sociocultural environment changes, the language

³³ Ibid., 359 - 60.

³⁴ Nyembezi, *Zulu Proverbs*, 44.

³⁵ Kriel, *An African Horizon*, 6.

³⁶ Lestrade, 'Traditional literature', 297.

changes accordingly, adapting and adopting from various sources,³⁷ expanding in certain domains and contracting in others. That such change is inevitable was acknowledged half a century ago by Jespersen: 'A language or word is no longer taken as something given once for all, but as a result of previous development and at the same time as the starting-point for subsequent development.'³⁸ *Tsumo* could also be allowed to adopt and adapt.

People assume, quite wrongly, that *pasichigare* (long ago) everything was static. *Tsumo* may be fairly rigid structurally but they were not all created at the same time. Further, their source was obscure, and because of the oral mode of dissemination, the originals were liable to be adapted or even transformed as they travelled greater distances in time and space: 'Even proverbs, those change-resisting elements in Bantu literature, may acquire fresh interpretations, and, with new interpretations, new forms.'³⁹ The best evidence for this is the number of variants and variations of individual *tsumo* recorded by Hamutyinei and Plangger. One would expect this process to have increased in pace with social change generally, but literacy must have checked the tendency, and current attitudes are simply not favourable. 'New' proverbs or adaptations of old ones fail to gain popular acceptance and most are soon forgotten. They are regarded as merely part of slang, and their creators and declaimers are not admired for their efforts.

Consider, for example, the following pairs of 'new' and 'old'. The 'new' were all heard in informal situations and in all cases the speaker's intention seemed to have been to divert. One must assume, therefore, that they would not be considered suitable in other situations, e.g.

- | | |
|---|---|
| (27) <i>Saga reshuga/rakapera netisipunu</i>
cp. <i>Mviromviro dzemhanza/mapfeka</i> (See e.g. (8)). | (Lit: The bag of sugar/was finished teaspoon by teaspoon); |
| (28) <i>Charovedzera charovedzera/tsotsi rakajamba waya kwasviba</i>
cp. <i>Charovedzera charovedzera/gudo rakakwira mawere kwasviba</i> | (Lit: He who is experienced is experienced/the criminal jumped a fence after dark);
(Lit: What is experienced is experienced/the baboon climbed a precipice after dark); |
| (29) <i>Muchena kubata paindi/hanzi ndava mbozhawo</i>
cp. <i>Nondo kugara mun'ombe/hanzi ndava n'ombewo</i> | (Lit: A poor man holding a pint [of beer]/thinks he is rich too);
(Lit: The tsessebe living among cattle/thinks he is cattle too); |
| (30) <i>Kumisa hure/hunge une mari</i> | (Lit: To stop a prostitute/it means you have money); |

³⁷ For an outline of the language situation, see a recent article by the present writer, which is a review of the *Standard Shona Dictionary*, 'Some problems relating to the incorporation of loanwords in the lexicon', *Zambezia* (1979), VII, 75 - 91.

³⁸ O. Jespersen, *Language, Its Nature, Development and Origin* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1922), 7.

³⁹ Lestrade, 'Traditional literature', 299.

- cp. *Kubata mwana wengwe/senga pfuti* (Lit: To hold a leopard's cub/carry a gun);
- (31) *Chabhenda chabhenda/njanji haiswatudzwi* (Lit: What is crooked is crooked/a railway line cannot be straightened);
- cp. *Yadeuka/mvura yeguchu haijorerwe* (Lit: Water spilt from a calabash cannot be recovered);
- (32) *Kudedera mupurisa/hunge une mbanje muhomwe* (Lit: To tremble before a policeman/it is because you have dagga in your pocket);
- cp. *Kubvunza chati kwatara/hunge une katurikwa* (Lit: To inquire about the sound of a falling object/it is because you had something hung up).

I am not trying to suggest that new proverbs should be created as a matter of policy because conscious coinages, even of single lexical items, seldom enjoy popular acceptance. Neither do I imply that the older proverbs should be discarded. My argument is that, as far as form and imagery are concerned, proverbs (27) - (32) are as good as any. Their 'modern' imagery actually makes them topically more relevant because they depict real life situations of the generation using them. If, instead of actively discouraging their use, we at least recognized their potential as *tsumo* of the future, we should be better able to revive interest in *tsumo* generally. We would thereby enhance the value of the old stock of *tsumo* because they would be better appreciated, especially where comparisons could be drawn with the new.

That new *tsumo* are being created and then discarded because they are not well received was confirmed by a very simple exercise carried out recently. Mr R. Sisimayi was able to collect a dozen proverbs in this category, at very short notice, from one of his classes at Harare Secondary School; (33) - (38) are a selection from his list.⁴⁰ In each case the imagery is quite striking and the message clear enough. It is also interesting to note that the structure of *tsumo* is more enduring than the content.

- (33) *Ane wigi ane bvudzi/hazvi-enzani neane muparavara* (Lit: One with a wig has hair/it is not like one who is bald);
- (34) *Chiripo chiripo/nhanza haina opareseni* (Lit: What is there is there/baldness is not cured by an operation);
- (35) *Chabhenda chabhenda/nyoka haina ruvhesi* (Lit: What is crooked is crooked/a snake has no reverse [gear]);
- (36) *Chabhenda chabhenda/mbambaura haina joini* (Lit: What is crooked is crooked/a potato has no joint);
- (37) *Chinokura chinokotama/longslivs⁴¹ yave gwanda* (Lit: What grows stoops/the long-sleeved shirt is now sleeveless);

⁴⁰ From the point of view of structure, other examples included in his original list, are not, strictly speaking, *tsumo*: e.g. *Tamba nezvimwe gaka harikwesheswi*; and *Vhairira chingwa tii inopisa*.

⁴¹ The spelling *longslivs* (English: 'long sleeves') is preferred because Shona spelling is generally more phonetic than English.

- (38) *Chinokura chinokotama/* (Lit: What grows stoops/the old
bhurugwa chawe chikorobho pants are now used to scrub the
 floor).

Kriel rightly points out that 'oral literature is not all traditional and static but living and changing', but his further suggestion that writers actually feel free 'to adjust and even to change the wording of proverbs in order to use them more effectively in a particular context',⁴² is not supported by the evidence from published Shona novels. On the contrary, literacy has, in the well-meant attempt to preserve *tsumo* from the past, made them more static than they would probably have been otherwise. As a result many of them have dated and have become divorced from the spoken language. (In more general terms, it can be argued that written and spoken Shona have become two separate things.)

3.2 Some blame for this must be borne by the intellectuals. Perhaps the most eloquent expression of their sentiments respecting authenticity has been made by Guma. Writing on Southern Sotho, he bewails the 'dangerous tendency' that gives rise to pairings similar to the more traditional-type variants and variations given by Hamutyeine and Plangger. He does not even consider the possibility of pairings like (27) - (32). He warns teachers, school inspectors and readers of manuscripts that this tendency should be checked. His statements are very subjective:

The existence of such pairs is unfortunate and has opened the way for a dangerous tendency which, if not nipped in the bud, may have disastrous consequences for Southern Sotho proverbs. As it is, nobody can speak with authority as to the correctness or otherwise of such alternative forms ...⁴³

His approach to the problem is clearly prescriptive: 'This tendency must be nipped in the bud; otherwise Southern Sotho proverbs may be so watered down as to lose all their salt.'⁴⁴ He admits that change is inevitable, but maintains that, 'This, however, is no excuse for a deliberate watering down of even those aspects of language, that are normally resistant to change.'⁴⁵

The intellectual loves his language and may regard it as a symbol of ethnic identity, or even of survival. His language loyalty is expressed by working for its preservation and he encourages its use and study. This is fair enough. But he may also try to protect it from change, alleging that innovations and external pressures corrupt a language rather than enrich or elaborate it. This type of intellectual must be advised that purist efforts to resist 'interference', particularly lexical and semantic, cannot succeed: 'The

⁴² Kriel, *An African Horizon*, 18.

⁴³ Guma, *The Form, Content and Technique of Traditional Literature in Southern Sotho*, 97.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

only effective attitudes are those of the mass of the people. The efforts of scholars to resist the "corruption" of their language by foreign structural elements have been very unsuccessful.⁴⁶ The contact situation in the Shona speech community makes resistance to change particularly low, even in the written literature,⁴⁷ because literacy is attained after or at the same time as interaction. Where literacy is acquired in the first language before interaction with the second language(s), writing in the mother tongue can resist shift longer than speaking.⁴⁸

But *tsumo* belong to a spoken and not written literary tradition. As an oral art form, they attain their true fulfilment only when actually performed. This is why efforts to promote them through written works have only helped to secure them a place as mere super-added embellishments to already existent works.⁴⁹ In the spoken language (G.S.) one seldom hears them except on those occasions where those who can may wish to speak elegantly. Writing has diminished their social value by freezing them. It is no longer necessary to use them repeatedly in order to remember them because one can always look them up somewhere. But many of those that can be looked up have dated and have ceased to be relevant topically. The urban youngster finds it difficult to conceptualize *urimbo*, *musungu*, or *guchu* when these occur in proverbs and they may only become meaningful by way of indirect association with *guruu*, *chirimbani*, or *chigubhu*. But if he felt free to use more recent and topically more relevant expressions, his interest in the older expressions would be that much greater because he would see some continuity and appreciate better the age-old wisdom of the traditional stock.

3.3 As a solution to the problem, I would suggest a shift in emphasis from preservation of the old stock to continuation of an established oral literary tradition. Preservation is desirable but it cannot revive interest in, or guarantee survival of, the tradition. Some adaptation would revive that interest but it must not be done consciously, e.g. by a team. What is needed is a balance of emphasis between preservation and adaptation, between recording, use and creation. We need to adjust our attitudes so that speech forms can be appreciated as they occur in specifiable contexts. If new sayings that are typically *tsumo* in form and content do occur, they should be noted and recognized as potential proverbs. Time will give some of them age-old wisdom status. Officials in education, publishing and broadcasting could take the lead by rationalizing their guidelines with the living language of the people. A living language is dynamic not static. The ordinary Shona speaker has not ceased to be creative. He must not be discouraged.

⁴⁶ J. R. Rayfield, *The Languages of a Bilingual Community* (The Hague, Mouton, 1970), 105.

⁴⁷ D. du T. van der Merwe, has actually suggested that so many Anglicisms have penetrated the language that some Shona written today, e.g. in news bulletins, only becomes comprehensible when back-translated into English. See his 'The influence of English on written Shona', *LIMI* (1975), III, ii, 4 - 12.

⁴⁸ J. Fishman, 'Language maintenance and language shift as a field of inquiry: Revisited' (1968), in his *Language in Sociocultural Change* (Stanford, Stanford Univ. Press, 1972), 76 - 134.

⁴⁹ cp. Songs in *ngano*, for which see Finnegan, *Oral Literature*, 385 - 6.