1984

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Recommended Citation
Johnson, Joyce, Culturally Derived Motifs and Symbols as Structural Features in Es'kia Mphahlele's Chirundu, Kunapipi, 6(2), 1984.
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol6/iss2/24

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Abstract
The story of Chirundu is set in an independent Central African territory. Various geographical and historical references in the novel identify this territory as Zambia. In Chirundu Mphahlele is primarily concerned with the nature of political power in ex-colonial Africa and the problem of adapting traditional cultures to modern social structures. The personal relationships of the main characters represent situations and relationships which exist between various groups in the society. Mphahlele examines the choices for the individual and the society as a whole, operating as they do between African and Western institutions. Social relationships, in this context, Mphahlele shows, become 'largely incoherent, pulling against and contradicting each other'. The situation which Mphahlele describes for a particular Central African territory may be regarded as a paradigm for all ex-colonial African societies which show social structures which are inconsistent in themselves because of social and political pressures which operate in contrary directions.
Culturally Derived Motifs and Symbols as Structural Features in Es’kia Mphahlele’s *Chirundu*

The story of *Chirundu* is set in an independent Central African territory. Various geographical and historical references in the novel identify this territory as Zambia. In *Chirundu* Mphahlele is primarily concerned with the nature of political power in ex-colonial Africa and the problem of adapting traditional cultures to modern social structures. The personal relationships of the main characters represent situations and relationships which exist between various groups in the society. Mphahlele examines the choices for the individual and the society as a whole, operating as they do between African and Western institutions. Social relationships, in this context, Mphahlele shows, become ‘largely incoherent, pulling against and contradicting each other’.¹ The situation which Mphahlele describes for a particular Central African territory may be regarded as a paradigm for all ex-colonial African societies which show social structures which are inconsistent in themselves because of social and political pressures which operate in contrary directions.

In the following discussion, I am especially concerned with Mphahlele’s method of relating *Chirundu* to the cultural environment in which his characters live. I shall show how he has used motifs and symbols from Bantu culture and African oral tradition to evoke an African social environment and to create structural unity in the novel. In particular, I shall examine Mphahlele’s use of the motif of marriage to advance the story line and his treatment of the python as a symbol to develop the theme of the novel and to further characterization. Both motif and symbol are given special meaning because of the ways in which Mphahlele has related them to thought-patterns existing in Bantu society and to its folklore.

The main characters in the novel, Chimba Chirundu, his wife, Tirenje, and his nephew, Moyo, belong to the Bemba ethnic group. The
two important relationships depicted are Chimba's relationship with Tirenje, whom he marries both under Bemba customary law and British ordinance, and his relationship with Moyo, his sister's son. In *Chirundu*, the circumstances of the breakdown of the marriage between Chimba and Tirenje symbolize the breakdown of relationships between previously allied groups in the society. It also indicates the loss of certain guidelines of conduct in the society, for in the context of which Mphahlele writes, the marriage relationship or kinship affiliation, as represented in that of Chimba and Moyo, provides stable guidelines of conduct for the individual. The metaphor of marriage or kinship to describe other types of alliances is thus, in this instance, culturally derived.  

The conflict in the novel arises from the circumstances under which Chimba takes a second wife. By marrying his second wife, Monde, under British ordinance, Chimba becomes guilty of bigamy which does not exist under Bemba customary law. The conflict of interests arising from Chimba's bigamous contract supplies the background for dealing with the theme of power and the conflict between the politicians and their grass-roots supporters, who, like Tirenje, are abandoned by the politician who is busy consolidating his power.

Chimba's action in committing bigamy is deliberate. He is defying Tirenje who has made it a condition of their marriage that she must be his only wife. He denies that there is any necessity to choose: 'I love Tirenje as much as I love Monde. I resent the idea that I should have to make a choice: If you love both women, make up your mind which you're going to live with! Inanity — why should I have to put up with it?' While it is clear that Tirenje is unwilling to divorce Chimba to allow him to marry again, it is also clear that Chimba does not contemplate divorce either. 'Divorce,' he admits, 'would have been the easiest thing, but [he] did not want to lose Tirenje and children. Not Monde either' (p.64).

Chimba also intends his marriage to Monde as a protest against colonial institutions. He tells his English lawyer Mr Clare: '...your people colonized this country and imposed their own laws on us. Now the Ordinance supplants native customary law. And yet the British kept the tribal system alive so as to be able to govern through chiefs and kings. Isn't that contradictory? I'm out to fight a system' (p.9).

Chimba sees himself then in the role of a committed nationalist attempting to fight the British Ordinance by disregarding it. Mphahlele makes it clear, however, that Chimba is testing his own power by placing himself above the law.
Chimba's act of defiance is also aimed at people like his former English headmaster, Noah Hackett. He observes, for example, after the start of his affair with Monde: ‘...I felt rich, increased to be loved by two women... I remembered how the Hackett incident had rankled in me. So that I felt happier still that I could virtually say to the angels that were spying on me on his behalf. «Tell him, go tell him that I’m free of his institutions»’ (p.44). Similarly, Chimba is reacting against his father who had become an overzealous convert of Christianity, and had consequently divorced one wife and had driven the other, Chimba’s mother, away by his obstinate fanaticism. Chimba’s ‘fervent’ nationalism is at one level self-serving, but he also means it to contrast with his father’s total acceptance of colonial domination as symbolized by his conversion to Christianity.

Finally, Chimba’s decision to have two wives is directly related to his position as a government Cabinet Minister operating between traditional African and Western institutions. In this intermediate role which he performs in a period of social change, Chimba finds that Tirenje and Monde satisfy different needs in his political life associating each wife with two different social environments and with two different stages in his political career. This association of Tirenje and Monde with different aspects of Chimba’s life and with different stages in his political career is maintained throughout the novel. To the extent that Chimba’s situation is symptomatic of that of his society as a whole, Tirenje and Monde come to represent different areas of society to which Chimba as a politician has pledged equal loyalty.

Throughout the novel, Monde is associated with city life and with Western European values, whilst Tirenje is constantly associated with rural life in intimate contact with her natural environment. The South African, Studs Letanka, describes her to Chieza, the Zimbabwean, and Pitso, another South African:

‘Two women could not be more different than Chirundu’s. This one — Tirenje — is firmly built, compact — you know — not flabby.... The face was once round, but I am sure it has been weathered by some loneliness or grief. And yet the eyes are still steady, they look you straight in the face, as if they were telling you of something vital in the woman that can never be destroyed.... Braids her hair and puts on a headcloth when she goes out. You look at her and are contented to know Africa still makes them — her kind.’ (p.99)

Like Chimba, Studs Letanka associates Tirenje with what is enduring and, by implication, with the endurance of Africa herself.

In contrast with Tirenje, Monde’s proper environment, as Studs
Letanka suggests, is the cocktail party. Chimba herself is very much aware of Monde’s social usefulness. ‘She made protocol feel like a thing rolling on ball bearings, conducted at the same time with grace, self-confidence’ (p.47). Mphahlele does not, however, suggest that Tirenje is incapable of functioning in an environment which is different from that to which she has been accustomed. It is Chimba who insists on excluding her from the new context into which he has entered as an important politician.

Chimba’s desire to have two wives under the colonial ordinance which forbids this also represents an attempt to hold on to old privileges while using the transitional period through which his society is passing to gain new ones. Chimba clearly belongs to the class of the new elite which is repeatedly examined in the Anglophone African novel in relation to the masses from whom they develop separate interests in the post-independence period. Looked at unsympathetically, Chimba is typical of those who choose not to reconstruct guidelines for the society but who take advantage of the state of confusion in the society to make themselves more powerful. Looked at sympathetically, Chimba is himself a victim of forces which he attempts to resist. Studs Letanka, who has no reason to sympathize with Chimba, admits, for example, that he might be ‘a radical of some sort who is trying to shake a social code people have always taken for granted’ (p.101). Clearly too, Tirenje makes things difficult for Chimba by demanding his loyalty: ‘...I selected you among many men,’ she tells him, ‘I have pegged my piece of land. No woman but me is going to graze on that land’ (p.45).

Monde, secure in the knowledge of her practical usefulness to Chimba, is able to tolerate the existence of the other wife. At first she merely expresses curiosity about the woman whom she has replaced in Chimba’s affection. Later, confronted by Tirenje, she reacts savagely. Tirenje, finding herself increasingly pushed to the background of Chimba’s life and finally denied even financial support, is driven to despair and brings the charge of bigamy against Chimba. Chimba is found guilty, and it is clear that reconciliation between himself and Tirenje has become impossible.

The show of strength by someone whom he had considered a docile ally angers Chimba. He regards Tirenje’s challenge to his power as a betrayal. He feels similarly betrayed by his nephew Moyo who has become secretary of the trade union movement which challenges his policies as Minister of Transport and Public Works. For Chimba, Tirenje and Moyo come to symbolize the forces which threaten his political power. His resentment against the workers and ‘grass roots’ who
supported the national front for self-rule, and are now demanding a part in policy-making, merges with that against Tirenje who gave him emotional support during the formative period of his political career and who is now demanding the recognition which, she feels, is owing to her. The analogy between the breakdown of Chimba’s kinship relations and the breakdown of relations between the politicians and their formerly submissive supporters is clear, for example, when Chimba, reflecting on the changed attitudes of Tirenja and Moyo, observes:

Yesterday they were weak and helpless and simpler to understand. Today they are complicated, they are in a position to wield power. And largely because they have each enlisted the support of others, they virtually broke into the arsenal and grabbed the weapons with which to threaten me — the labour union and the white man’s law. (p.25)

It is important to note that Chimba began his political career as a school teacher. Speaking various local languages, but with a lifestyle not much different from that of the ordinary people, he made himself into a link between the masses and the elite and between the regional and central party organization. The years of Chimba’s harmonious relationship with Tirenje, 1959-1964, coincide with the period during which he organized popular support in the Copperbelt for the party. Immediately following Independence, when he is rewarded with a Cabinet post, he goes to live permanently in the city, leaving Tirenje and the children behind in the Copperbelt. As Chimba becomes more and more involved with central government, he grows further and further away from Tirenje and comes to depend on Monde. His decision to build a new house and to marry Monde, which is intended at the personal level to test his relationship with Tirenje and to force her into a subordinate role, also symbolizes the transfer of his interests as a politician from a regional to a metropolitan level. His decision also indicates that from that point on he will identify with the elite rather than with the masses.

Tirenje’s unwillingness to accept a subordinate role in Chimba’s future is the major source of conflict in the novel. One of her intentions in bringing a court case against him is to force him back into contact with those whom he has abandoned. Like Chimba, Tirenje sees a parallel between her broken marriage and the broken contract between the political elite and the masses. For Tirenje, the breakdown of her marriage which she frequently refers to as ‘the burning down of the house’, symbolizes the process by which Chimba, who had begun by fighting the ‘colonialist’ elements in the society, is drawn away from his former purpose.
The symbolic significance of 'burning the house down' is important in 
the Central African context of which Mphahlele writes. As Eleanor 
Preston-Whyte has observed, 'It is a basic precept of all Southern Bantu 
societies that, once established, a house should not be allowed to die 
out.' Throughout Chirundu, the house is used as the material symbol of 
alliances formed. Its symbolic meaning in the context of the novel is cul-
turally derived, for in Bantu society, 'each new marriage is seen as estab-
lishing the house of the woman concerned'. Thus Tirenje describes the 
process of her coming together with Chimba and his defiance of the code 
of conduct insisted on by his father and Hackett as the 'building of the 
house'. Similarly, the house which Chimba builds in the city and 
occupies with Monde becomes, for Tirenje, the material symbol of a new 
alliance and a new loyalty, while for Chimba it becomes a symbol of his 
independence within the political group to which he belongs. Tirenje's 
final revenge is to burn down Chimba's house in the city when he is 
imprisoned for bigamy.

The failure of Chimba's plan to establish two houses is symptomatic of 
his failure to operate between two levels of the society. In the final 
analysis, as Tirenje points out to him, he has been no more successful in 
dealing with problems of social adjustment than his father for whom he 
shows such contempt: 'It has come to the same thing — you have burned 
down a house — I saw flames and could not stop the fire — perhaps 
tomorrow another house will go down in flames and yet another be put 
up' (p.93). Tirenje's words show little hope for the society adjusting 
effectively to change. Christianity had led Chimba's father to one 
extreme; nationalism has led Chimba to the other. In their changed 
social environments neither had found a means of ensuring the survival 
of 'the house' — the society.

A feature of the imagery of Chirundu is the frequent reference to 
animals. Many of the animals which Mphahlele mentions in Chirundu are 
directly related to Bantu folklore and heroic poetry and derive referential 
value from this. They also have significance because of their association 
with social and religious ritual. The frequent animal references both have 
an effect on the quality of the language and create an awareness of a 
distinctive cultural environment. In Chirundu, Mphahlele uses compar-
sions with and allusions to animals to convey certain concepts and to con-
tribute to characterization. The most important and consistently 
developed reference is to the python which, in Chirundu, is a symbol of 
power.

The python is, in the first instance, a symbol which is explained by 
tradition and is meaningful to characters in the novel because they belong
to a central African society. Monica Wilson has observed that the python is 'a symbol of ultimate power down the eastern side of Africa from the Sudan to the Cape'. \(^9\) The symbolization fixed in cultural lore is carried over and elaborated in the novel. Thus Moyo's grandfather, Old Mutiso, tells him: 'Everyone needs to know him [the python] — he is king, ancestor — you need to look at him a long time although you are frightened ... to know the size of \(nsato\) is to know the size of your fear...'} (p.116). Each of the three main characters, Chimba, Tirenje and Moyo, has a childhood encounter with the python, and as a result of these encounters, the python has a personal significance for each of them. For all of them, however, the sight of the python coiled around its victim becomes a compelling concrete image for exercise of naked power.

Chimba's encounter with the python had given him 'a glimpse into the externals of power'. He is impressed by the fear which the python inspires and its remoteness from other creatures, even its young. He observes:

'I had learned a lot about the ways of the python when I was a boy. Almost every adventurous boy in our area — anywhere in Central Africa — sooner or later meets with \(nsato\). Or more exactly, finds him. For he is king of his territory. Fangs, none, but sharp teeth, yes; fights only when wounded or attacked; seldom wants human flesh, only if he has gone mad, surrounds his eggs to incubate them.... The day I saw the King, he scared me almost out of my mind. You never want to see him again. All you need to know is that he lives in the neighbourhood.' (pp.16-17)

The python excites Chimba's admiration and provides a model for the exercise of political power. In his political life he sees such power in the President whom he describes: 'Deceptively soft eyes oozing compassion. But you know it was compassion bestowed from a position of power. You could not mistake this when he declared policy. Ah, there is \(nsato\) for you: the python that will only come at you if you bother him or threaten him in his own lair' (p.38).

The fact that Chimba is of the Bemba ethnic group seems especially significant here. \(^11\) Chimba's concept of power is authoritarian. It is power which resides largely in the personality of the man who wields it and depends on the extent to which he can inspire respect or instil fear. Thus Chimba feels a kind of kinship with the python. At crucial points in his political career, the thought of the python retiring to its den to emerge again with new strength becomes a symbol of his own capacity to survive.

Tirenje's encounter with the python makes her fearful. She admires its strength but she sees it also as a potential molester. As a child, Tirenje had gone with her mother to gather wood and they had both seen a
python constrict a goat. Tirenje associates the death of her mother, who had fallen ill immediately after and wasted away, with their encounter with the python. She remembers: ‘Nsato, the python coiled around a goat. Woman and child fall back and watch, dumbstruck — frightened, stunned by the swift movement of a giant, king of reptiles ... Ma, Ma, I am afraid! Do not be afraid my child, it is nothing — this is how the ancestors will have it’ (p.81). Although Tirenje, like her mother, accepts the power of the python and the helplessness of the goat as part of the natural order, she struggles against the law of the jungle and the strong swallowing the weak. She wants to see the python again to understand the nature of her fear and to see whether, as she tells Chimba, she can trust the python.

Tirenje’s childhood encounter with the python provides her with a concrete image for the duality which she becomes aware of in her later experiences in life. This duality is reflected, for example, in her relationship with Chimba, which she finds overpowering but, to begin with, protective. She perceives it in Chimba himself whom she comes to identify with the python. Tirenje recognizes duality also in the relationship between the politicians and the people. The politicians are admired by the people but also have the power to hurt them. Finally, she identifies the python’s power with the contradictory force of traditional authority, which may be beneficently or tyrannically exercised in her society.

The process by which Tirenje learns to accept and handle her independence and to relate to various bases of power gives rise to the metaphor of bringing the python under control. At the end of the novel, when she is conscious of having brought the various forces in her life under control, she tells Moyo:

‘...I am going to begin again, I will build another house ... I am not afraid anymore. Once I was struck dumb with terror looking at a python kill a goat. The next time I saw nsato I was a woman ... this time I was not afraid. Nsato could not hurt anyone. But when nsato leaves his lair to molest and murder human beings the world is upside down, it is a wicked thing it must be destroyed — it must be put in a cage and its den burned down.’ (pp.155-6)

The reference to Chimba who has been imprisoned and whose house she has burnt down is clear. Tirenje also refers to the recent protest marches by strikers attempting to exert some control on the politicians. Finally she is referring to the reconciliation which she has effected between her past and present and between the contradictory aspects of traditional authority.
Moyo’s encounter with the python takes place in a different psychic atmosphere from that of Chimba and Tirenje. His report of his encounter plays down the mystical power and fear surrounding the python:

‘I had seen nsato — the python — when I was about ten. It was near the white man’s farm. I was with a few other children whose parents were farm labourers. We ran to tell the white farmer, but not before we had stood for a few moments, staring at the creature, I with my heart in my throat. The white man came and shot it.’ (p. 116)

Moyo’s matter-of-fact attitude to the python is contrasted with that of his grandfather Mutiso for whom the python remains an object of reverence and fear. Old Mutiso tells Moyo, ‘When a god [the python] has you in its coils … it is folly to look at him’ (p. 116). Moyo, however, can stare at the python, which, he feels, has no power to hurt him, for the python, as it symbolizes the restrictions and less benign aspects of traditional authority, has become a victim of the white man.

The python, as I have observed above, is a traditional motif of metaphorical comparison. In Chirundu, it is associated with anyone who wields power in an absolute fashion but it is associated most consistently with Chimba. The association of the hero with the python for purposes of characterization is a feature of traditional Bantu Praise poems, in which, as Ruth Finnegan has observed, ‘It is largely through figurative and allusive forms of description that actions and qualities of people are conveyed’. Furthermore, in South African heroic poetry, as Daniel P. Kunene has pointed out, ‘The hero is often described as fighting against monsters, or as being himself a monster or other terrible creature’. In Chirundu, Mphahlele is clearly adapting one of the methods and motifs of Bantu oral narrative to the purpose of characterization. The metaphor of the python overpowering his victim is associated in successive images with Chimba to convey an impression of his character and his way of relating to other characters.

The python, the monster with which Chimba is compared is one of the many fixed symbols in South African oral narrative. It falls into the traditionally distinguished group of mythological swallowing monsters. The image of the python overpowering its victim is first used by Tirenje to describe the power which Chimba exerts over her as a lover. Chimba recalls:

Tirenje often teased me whenever we made love…. ‘You overpower me like nsato,’ she would say. ‘You hold me as if you were never going to let me go, like a python, as if you were going to eat me up alive.’ (p. 16)
This comparison of their relationship to that of the python with a victim in its coils not only points to certain qualities in Chimba himself but also brings out the particular nature of his attraction for Tirenje. For Tirenje, the image of the victim helpless in the python’s coils breeds a sense of security as well as fear. This is brought out, for example, when, reflecting on her early relationship with Chimba, she observes, ‘...you held me like nsato and nights after that I felt safe in your coils’ (p.81). As in traditional oral narrative, Mphahlele uses the same symbol to represent destructive and protective qualities. As Daniel P. Kunene has observed in his discussion of mythological swallowing monsters in South African heroic poetry:

To cover in order to imprison with the intention of destroying, is an idea that overlaps to quite an appreciable extent with that of covering to protect. And from this to the notion of the ‘covering’ of the female by the male as a demonstration of superior strength, and a demand for female submission is but a short step.17

All these meanings are contained in Tirenje’s use of the metaphor describing herself as a victim in the python’s coils.

So far, the python as a symbol serves to indicate Tirenje’s awareness of a balance in Chimba’s nature between a desire to have power over someone in order to dominate and to protect. This balance is further suggested by certain associations which the python has in African religion and folklore. In certain African societies, as John Mbiti has pointed out, the python is considered to be an intermediary between human and spirit world.18 In Southern Bantu society, in particular, the python is characterized as ‘the snake that holds together’.19 It is admired for its calm and even temperament as well as for its strength. When Chimba begins to abuse his power, he is associated with other animals also. Thus Chimba recalls one of his visits to Tirenje after he has set up house in the city with Monde:

‘You do not hold me like a python any longer,’ she [Tirenje] said teasingly one morning ... I took her with a ferocity that surprised even me. As we lay panting side by side she said, ‘That was not a python, it was a leopard.’ (p.43)

Tirenje now compares Chimba with the leopard which ravages and kills more than it can eat. The python image is, however, sustained. She later associates Chimba with the python gone mad: ‘Has the python gone mad because of a long time of hunger? Gone mad because he is full of himself,’ (p.81) she asks as she understands the full extent of his abuse of power.
Our final view of Chimba is that of a wild animal trapped in a cage. His nephew, Moyo, tells the Zimbabwean, Chieza, that he is reluctant to visit Chimba in prison. It is clear that, like Tirenje, Moyo associates Chimba with the python — in this case ‘the mean python’ which the older people had told him about in his childhood, one which the white hunters had been combing the bush for ‘so that they could take the skin or take him alive in a cage’ (p.116). Moyo observes to Chieza:

I think I am afraid somewhat. It’s the kind of fear — I think — you know when you’ve got a killer of an animal in a cage — you know it can’t break out — but you go and touch the wall of the cage — and something — something seems to tug at your nerves — you tremble ever so little — the slightest movement in the cage makes you jump or jerk or anything. (p.157)

For Moyo, as for Tirenje, the killer python serves as a concrete image of what he fears most — tyrannical abuse of political power.

The attitudes of the major characters to the python give us an insight into the psychic worlds which they inhabit. The python becomes an effective symbol of power in Chirundu not only because of the fear or wonder which it excites in the individual who encounters it but also because of the significance attached to it in the traditions of Bantu society as a whole. Like Achebe, Mphahlele draws on the special symbolic value which the python has in the religion and folklore of many African societies. As a result, Mphahlele makes the python both a symbol of power and a symbol of traditional Africa. This, however, becomes one of the main problems in the development of the novel, for in the python, we have a symbol which, on the one hand, is insistently associated with Chimba and, on the other, represents values which he attempts to exploit.

NOTES

3. Chirundu (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1979), p.27. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
4. Chimba refers to the occasion on which Hackett had reprimanded him for making Tirenje pregnant and had attempted to force him to marry her.
5. These utterances are close in style to Bemba marriage ceremonial songs as reported, for example, by Audrey I. Richards in *Chisungu* (London: Faber, 1956), pp.196-8.

6. On teachers as marginal élites, see, for example, Linda A. Dove, ‘Teachers in Politics in Ex-Colonial Countries’, *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, XVII (July 1979), No 2, 176-91.


8. Ibid., p.179.


11. On the particularly autocratic nature of chieftainship in Bemba society, see Audrey I. Richards, *Land, Labour, Diet in Northern Rhodesia*.


14. On the use of symbols in South African oral narrative, see Harold Scheub, ‘Fixed and Nonfixed Symbols in Xhosa and Zulu Oral Narrative Tradition’, *Journal of American Folklore* 85 (1972), 267-73. Although Mphahlele does not develop his use of symbol in a manner identical with that which Scheub describes, there are some similarities. In Xhosa and Zulu narrative, Scheub notes, the symbol is made more complex through ‘a metaphorizing process’ which creates ‘a network of unstable symbols that complement and develop from the fixed symbols’ (p.267).


16. This is also a reference to Chimba’s virility. Among the animal symbols used in the Bemba wedding festivities is a huge coiled serpent. See Audrey I. Richards, *Chisungu*, pp. 82 and 87, and Monica Wilson, *Religion and the Transformation of Society*, p.57.


18. See *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p.71. As Mbiti points out, the living dead are thought to visit human beings in this form.


20. Moyo is clearly thinking of the colonial authorities ‘whittling down the power of the local chiefs’. 