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Tradition and Innovation in Shona Literature

CHAKAIPA'S KARIKOGA GUMIREMISEVE

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Patrick Chakaipa's first novel, Karikoga Gumiremiseve, was published in 1958, twenty-six years after his birth in Guvamombe, a village in the Mhondoro Tribal Trust Land. Like most African youths, he spent his early years looking after the family's livestock. First he looked after goats and sheep and kept close to the female world; this was a time for folk tales and riddles. Then later he looked after cattle and went with his father and other adult members of the community on hunting expeditions; this was a time for historical legends and proverbs. The first period is one of fantasy and the second is the period of reality; or, in other words, one is the period of the world of animals and of make-believe, and the other is the period of real human beings, their struggle for existence and their aspirations.

Karikoga Gumiremiseve stems directly from both worlds, the world of fantasy and the world of reality, and thus is a synthesis of romance and reality. We cannot understand or appreciate this novel unless we go back to the study of the folk tale (runqano; pl. ngano), for Chakaipa's work is clearly based upon one of the many stories in Zezuru folk-lore, which is called 'Karikoga':

Once upon a time a child was born and his mother died soon after giving birth. On hearing about the death of his wife the father died of shock thus leaving the newly born baby without parents. These unfortunate circumstances earned him the name Karikoga, because he was the only child of his dead parents. No relations volunteered to foster the child, but at last an old couple offered to look after him and bring him up. The foster parents did not look after the child as well as they could have done and so he grew up despised by the other boys of his age group. Because he was tormented, teased and despised by the members of his community, he developed special gifts, notably the gifts of speaking well, hunting, courage, determination and that of an indomitable will. Courage became part and parcel of his nature and he excelled in all that he tried to do.

There are two types of song which Karikoga is made to sing each time he is confronted by problems, which are basically of two sorts, human problems and those involving animals. Firstly, when confronted by human problems such as cruel treatment from fellow playmates or from his foster parents, Karikoga sings an elegiac song which is half-pathetic and half-comic in tone. It is expressive of the sudden and unexpected death of his parents:
Dai ndina amai,
Zuva, Karingewe-e, ndosiya-siya.
Vaidya vachindipawo
Zuva, Karingewe-e, ndosiya-siya.
Pasi ndipo panziiona chete,
Zuva, Karingewe-e, ndosiya-siya.
Vaidya vachiti, ‘Mwana’.*

If I had a mother,
Oh Time, leave me alone.
She would offer me food when she ate herself,
Oh Time, leave me alone.
It’s only the gods who know,
Oh Time, leave me alone.
She would say, ‘Here you are my child’.

The tone of the complaint is set by: ‘If I had a mother (Dai ndina amai)’; and the response to this statement of sorrow is simply: ‘She would feed me’. One is made keenly aware of the strange relationship between his past and present experience. One feels the built-up tension or emotion of Karikoga experienced through his identity with, and separation from, his past self. The old ideas of motherhood, the need for parental care, and his past experience all lend themselves to the expression and communication of sincere emotion.

Secondly is the animal-hunting song, sung for the purpose of building up tensions which are meant to be released on solving the problem, in this case, on making a kill; hence the repetitious use of the verb ‘shoot’ in what is essentially an action song. ‘The union between lyric and drama could hardly be closer’:

Shoot, shoot, shoot, I shoot.
Shoot the lonely Karinge
I shoot everywhere.

It is by these sorts of songs that Karikoga’s character is expressed; indeed in traditional verse, particular tunes or songs are always associated with particular persons or actions. and those who have had the opportunity of listening to these stories will recall the songs that go with them. This is also borne out by the fact that, more often than not, the characters of the stories are remembered more than the stories themselves, although the characters and the songs are inseparable.

**FORM**

Songs alone, however, are not sufficient to hold the story together. Zezuru traditional literature is a spoken art and its production and dissemination is in the hands of the community; and as it depends for its life and transmission on memory, it must have form if it is to live longer than the individual story-teller, sarungano.

The *rungano* has a definite form which form has enabled it to be passed on from generation to generation; it begins with one of a number of phrases, which all have the sense of. ‘Once upon a time’ and always ends with ‘Here is where the story-teller died’. The beginning, the end, and, allowing for flexibility, the middle part of the story also, are prescribed by custom and tradition. As a stylistic device, some story-tellers begin their story with a song. All *ngano* require an audience, and although active participation is not an absolute necessity, there is a standard response ‘Dzepfunde’.*

Obviously the middle part of the story is the most important. It is this part, the central part of the ‘spindle’, which allows the sarungano liberty and freedom to tell the story in as artistic and stylistic a way as possible. During his narration, the sarungano is allowed to divorce himself from the rest of the members of his group and to become, or to identify himself as, an individual creative artist. His role as sarungano allows him to use his imagination which the group, under other circumstances, usually frustrates. This, with the dance, pottery-making and iron-work, is one of the few occasions in traditional Shona society when originality goes unchallenged; otherwise a display of cleverness is generally resented, and talented people are often believed to be bewitched by jealous witches.

*The literal meaning is ‘of sorghum’, but there seems to be no meaningful translation in this context.*
The characteristics of the narrative in Chakaipa’s *Karikoga Gumiremiseve* involve the use of the following features, also characteristic of *ngano*:

i. The *-aka-* form of the verb (the past tense);^4^

ii. the *ndo-* form (the exclusive);^5^

iii. the use of the verb *-ti* or its passive form *-nzi* to precede all forms of the ideophone:
   (a) as particles, e.g., *potyo* (entering) *povo* (running away);^6^
   (b) as derived from verb, e.g., *fambe* (walking a little), *tambe* (playing a little);
   (c) as derived from other parts of speech, e.g., *tswimo* (a stick; noun), and *iyo* (Cl. 9, that one; demonstrative);^7^
   (d) as sentence constructions, e.g., *chitsoka nbhereko* (to run away) with the over-all pitch raised to bring it into line with the status of the ordinary ideophone.

iv. the use of similes and metaphors;

v. the use of the proverb for the purpose of strengthening an argument; and

vi. the use of the song for the purpose of highlighting the situation and releasing tensions, as already described.

**Fantasy and Reality**

It is in this middle part that the two main elements, fantasy and reality, are developed. Stories told within their traditional framework of form and participating audience could be creations of literary genius. Although most stories were told for the ideas and values enshrined within them, for their interpretation of personal relationships in the world of reality performed within the world of fantasy, a few, like this one, were told just for the sake of telling a humorous story. *Karikoga* is therefore a story told by the *sarungano* for the purpose of developing children’s imaginations and nothing more. *Karikoga* has an atmosphere similar to that of tales which deal with the world of animals, the world of make-believe and, indeed, the world of improbability. It therefore makes the story suitable only to be read by children between the ages of nine and thirteen.

In Chakaipa’s version, written for the new medium of print, Karikoga is similarly born in unhappy and unfortunate circumstances. He has no parents and he struggles hard to gain recognition from both his friends and the community in general. He nevertheless distinguishes himself at hunting birds and at fighting just as the traditional Karikoga did. With his spear and bow and arrows, he performs remarkable feats of courage and endurance. He fights a lion single-handed and marries without *roora* just to show that things are possible where there is the will to succeed.

His daring journey to the chief to ask for soldiers to help him track down his wife who has been captured by the formidable army of the Ndebele, and his subsequent journey into the enemy country, are new applications of imagination and fantasy, but still within the literary conventions of the folktale. The events of the journey, though boring, also deserve to be mentioned. The youth with small stature, signified by the class 12 prefix *ka-* , preventing the huge fellow, signified by the class 21 prefix *si-* , from eating *sada* makes humorous reading. This isolated incident also shows how powerful Karikoga was despite his small stature.

The story adopts a new tone as the action changes to Matabeleland. This is partly due to the fact that the author does not appear to understand the culture of the land. The description of the various escapes is wearisome and it would be pointless to ask how he receives the co-operation of the natives when he does not know their language. He is arrested, tried and sentenced; and, again, one would reveal a lack of understanding of the literary genre if one were to ask in what language the trial was conducted. Furthermore he successfully conceals his tribal identity. If all this is not the greatest weakness of the story, it must be its strongest link with the world of fantasy, the world of African folklore and make-believe. The impossible and the improbable happen in folklore. An army of five thousand strong fails to apprehend Karikoga and his wife who were hiding a few yards away. Karikoga’s fight with the army at the Munyati river is another example of fantasy. Nevertheless the use of an historical people as part of the plot makes the use of these literary conventions which are acceptable in the world of make-believe, rather questionable.

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CHARACTERIZATION

In this novel, therefore, characterization requires sympathetic understanding. Chakaipa is definitely in two worlds, the world of people and the world of animals. His genius, of course, is found in the way he blends the world of romance and fantasy with the world of reality. This explains why his characters have two types of action, those which are humanly possible and probable, and those which are improbable and belong only to the world of animals and fantasy.

The relationships of the characters in the novel are consequently not of one kind because they are realistic as well as fantastic. Karikoga’s courage and determination to marry his wife are praiseworthy and credible but his ability to go deep into enemy territory, and his escape, is from the world of the folk tale. His fight with the lion and the snake is manly, but his fight with an army five thousand strong is fantastic. Karikoga’s meals on sadza were traditional, but his eating hyena’s meat which is obnoxious to most Shona peoples, is an attempt at humour which misfires.

Perhaps what is more interesting in this story is the fact that the Ndebele characters are real people and are well characterized, since this story stems from actual accounts of how the Ndebele came to pillage and plunder the Shona people. This is because the characters in the first part of the story come from the world of folklore and those in the second (the Ndebele) from the world of Shona tradition. In this ambiguity lies the essential difference between this novel and his four other novels.

It is therefore wide of the mark to say, as one critic has, that ‘the novel has the same dramatic qualities as Garandichauya’; it is, however, nearer the mark to say that ‘the characters in Garandichauya are more polished and sophisticated’, if by ‘polished and sophisticated’ he means they are well rounded. For there can be little resemblance in dramatic qualities between the characters who have two aspects both realistic and fantastic as in Karikoga, and characters who are rounded, as in Garandichauya.

Chakaipa’s characterization has been enhanced by his traditional device of giving them names which throw light on and almost predetermine their role. There are four types of names in Shona culture, but all the names in the novel are of the type called Mazita emadunhurivira. They are the nicknames which are given to people after observing their natural inclinations or idiosyncrasies: Karikoga (the only child), Marunjeya (the follower), Gwara (the coward), Shambaropa (the expert hunter), Benvumundiro (the glutton).

LANGUAGE

As already pointed out Chakaipa’s language stems directly from the world of the African folktale, the rungeno, and the best way of demonstrating this point is to quote:

Before they sat down to rest, the lion burst open the door and came into the shelter. There was immediate pandemonium. Some ran to the entrance while others ran towards the lion. There was complete confusion. The lion pounced on Shambaropa and was on the point of devouring him. The others were already outside. Karikoga on seeing his danger, put all thought of death away and seized the lion by its neck. It let Shambaropa go and chased after him. It was all for biting him but he kept on clinging to its mane. He did not know how he had got on to the lion’s back. All he knew was that he was there.
His problem was to get down. He feared
that, if he jumped off, he would be eaten
up, so he kept on holding on. The lion ran
off with him on its back, but before it had
gone far, it collided with a tree, and died.
This is what saved Karikoga. After this he
went to join his companions.

On his arrival he found all the men in a
state of confusion. Shambaropa sat there,
bleeding. The men were crying. The only
person whom he missed was Gwara (the
coward). He looked into the shelter and
found him there unconscious. He went up
close to see what had killed him but could
find nothing. He did not have a single
scratch. He thought maybe he had been
bitten by a snake but there was no snake to
be seen within the vicinity.

Nobody saw Karikoga when he arrived at
the shelter. They all thought he had been
eaten up by the lion. Even when he came
inside, nobody noticed it. It was only when
he enquired about Gwara's death that people
realised that it was Karikoga. They fetched
water and poured it over Gwara and he
came to life again.

Here is a narrative description of an adven-
ture which is ‘more thrilling than credible.’

The bond between reality and fantasy in
mutual interaction is created before our eyes
and action both realistic and fantastic is the
final result. The whole passage pictures a man
with the desire and steadfast will to achieve not
only his own survival but also the survival of
his companions who were in the grip of terror.

Tension is built in
right from the beginning and reaches its climax
when Karikoga is on the back of the lion hold-
ing fast onto its mane. Karikoga's embarrass-
ment is given and we all wonder how he is
going to escape or who is going to save him
from impending disaster. As in traditional
folklore, we know that something will happen
to save the hero from death. The lion crashes
into a tree and dies, thus releasing the tension
which has been built up over a period. This
does not help people struggling with incredulity.

It does not give an answer to questions of how
or why. The only answer possible lies in the
conventions of folklore.

There is nothing here corresponding to magi-
cal aids which figure in so many folk tales.
What is related is frankly implausible and un-
acceptable precisely because the author has
made his tale so realistic. The author takes
refuge here in humour in order to deflect
attention from the difficulties into which the
two-sided nature of the story and his over-
emphasis of the realistic at this point have led
him. The clauses within the sentences are
short and choppy, each clause conveying an
action. Note the third sentence in particular.
Idiophones have been used to make the action
vivid and graphic. It will also be noticed that
as the action is directly perceptible indirect
allusions are avoided, and there are very few
simplies or metaphors.
One day when Karikoga had come from returning his goats, a very big boy snatched from him the bird which he was plucking. The boy who snatched Karikoga's bird had an enormous stomach which looked like that of a soft-bodied cricket (tagutapadare; literally 'we have had sufficient food at the dare'). From the chaps all over his feet you would have thought he was a tortoise, he had huge eyes like an owl and ears like a ladle. The less we say about his legs the better because they were bandy. But when it came to fighting he fought like the devil. No one dared to pick a quarrel with him. He was the herd boys' king. When he saw Karikoga with his birds he assumed a threatening look. He snatched Karikoga's bird without saying a word to him.

''Tell me, brother, why do you take my birds? Don't you know that they are what I live on?''

Before he had finished saying this, a stick descended on his head. Boiling with anger and bleeding profusely, he grabbed his sticks and challenged the big boy to a fight. Within a short space of time the dust swirled up as a fight with sticks ensued. Karikoga would deliver his blows and kneel; then deliver another and stand. Benyumundiro would deliver a blow and shake his head as if he were fighting with a grown man. Karikoga welcomed this engagement.

The other boys who were unable to stop the fight stood there in amazement. They were afraid of being themselves covered with blood seeing that Karikoga was taking no nonsense that day. Just think, the huge fellows were unable to stop the fight. They stood afar off, including those who used to beat him in the past. They were afraid to be covered with blood. There was such a fight on that day that, if women had been present, they would have applauded or would have wept.

Now, after the two trek-oxen had worn each other out, they faced each other like two bulls. Each time Karikoga looked at Benyumundiro, his eyes would turn red with anger. Benyumundiro tried to deliver a blow whereupon Karikoga dodged and landed a blow on Benyumundiro's knee and he fell to the ground. Karikoga delivered a...


This description naturally falls into two parts. The first part begins in traditional style, 'Rimwe zuva (one day)', thus giving the reader the right feeling. Karikoga's stature is contrasted with Benyumundiro's huge body. One immediately thinks the small boy is going to have the worst of it from the huge and greedy Benyumundiro. But one finds oneself wrong on reading the actual account. The quarrel has been picked and our imagination is aroused.

The second part of the passage is the actual bout. We see and hear the sound made by the fighting sticks. We see the marks and blood flowing from the wounds. The small boy is fighting beyond expectation: 'He would deliver his blows as he knelt and deliver another and stand'. There is nothing else but motion which is described by the use of special words, the ideophones. The sentences though long are full of clauses each describing an action: 'Vongoti auya ari pasi, auya ari pasi;—vose vakawana mbonje'.

The picture thus drawn before us is one of a mingling of joy and sorrow and from this is born an emotion which brings one into the world of folklore fantasy, at once sharper and even more intense than in the first part. The rhythm produced by the sticks as they fall on their targets, seems to rise and fall like the flails at the threshing floor. Sometimes the rhythm is strong and flaming with hate. At last a time comes for peace and the best must come to an end; in all, a fine piece of writing.

CONCLUSION

Thus it can be seen that Chakaipa's real achievement and contribution to nascent Shona literature is that he is the first writer to use the plot of an old rungano and so to give it a new form and dimension. His genius lies in an ability to synthesise reality with fantasy: the reality of a world of historical legends of the Ndebele raids into Mashonaland, the fantasy of traditional folk-tale characters. The result of this fusion is a new rungano.
REFERENCES

1. CHAKAIPA, P. F. 1958 *Karikoga Gumiremiseve*, Cape Town, Longmans. All page references in this article, however, are to the Third Impression which was published with corrections in 1963 by Longman in Salisbury.

2. There is another version of the story known as 'Pimbirimano' in which the boy was not born normally but through his mother's shin-bone mu-pimbiri; *pimbiri* could also be an ideophone which means 'sudden appearance'. Also, he was born with a horn in his hand which enabled him to devise plans (*mano*) on the spur of the moment. The mother in this version survived, but did not like the child and sought to dispose of him. The significant difference of the two versions is that *Karikoga* symbolises the way in which man can acquire qualities in response to his environment whilst *Pimbirimano* stands for gifts which are inborn.


4. See, for example, *Karikoga Gumiremiseve*. p.1, 12.

5. See, for example, IBID., p.1, 110.

6. See, for example, IBID., p.7, 135.

7. See, for example, IBID., p.7, 135-36.


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THE RHODESIAN JOURNAL OF ECONOMICS

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