

Colour Metaphor in Zulu Culture: Courtship Communication in Beads

Biyela N. G.

University of Zululand
Private Bag X1001
Kwa Dlangezwa, 3886
Republic of South Africa

Abstract

This paper is based on Ong's theory (1982), which looks on how the shift from primary orality to literacy dramatically changes the way humans think and how this shift affects the language itself. 'Oral culture' is a term that Ong uses when referring to people who are at an oral-based stage of consciousness. These are people who are totally unfamiliar with writing and whose communication is achieved mainly through word of mouth or symbols. The paper concentrates on colour metaphors. The colours on beads give an account of the traditional lifestyle and open a window on the Zulu nation of yesteryear. These colours may signify different meanings in different societies, texts and eras. Characteristics attributed to the beads are not necessarily real characteristics of the particular colour; they are rather perceived characteristics according to folk models, which speakers borrow from the cultural environment to create new facets of meaning and to reflect human social relationships. This enriches the imagery bank for eloquent communication, especially, during courtship. From the Zulu perspective, beadwork flows from females who through special 'Zulu love letters' are able to send powerful messages to their male clients. The meaningful communication in beads depends upon the design, patterning of colours and the colour coding in which women outshine men. Standards for moral conduct vary depending on the social and political context of each society. In Zulu culture, there are certain basic principles of ethical behaviour that are required from young people of both genders so that they act with integrity in their romantic relationships. The white colour in particular, embodies the ideal values the Zulu society strives for.

Key words: beads, colour, courtship, culture, metaphor, messages, Zulu

Introduction

Zulu socio-cultural life systems and conventions have varied and changed since as a result of colonisation, Christianity and urbanization brought new education regulations, family lifestyles, 'single parenthood' situations, gender policies and working conditions to southern Africa. In traditional Zulu society, a family was the place where children were initiated into the systems of relations and brought up in accordance with society's ethical demands.

This paper underscores that since the culture of moral behaviour does not come automatically, adults have still the responsibility of assisting the youth in sifting good from bad. Many parents also try to share with their children deeply held religious, cultural and moral convictions as a foundation for ethical behaviour. Achieving these results requires hard work and restraint from parents, using discipline to instill a code of good behaviour into their children to avoid irresponsible behaviour, which can become a cause of social hostility Biyela (2009). Ethical values also need to be implemented and promoted among members of society at a young age so that children grow up with these principles for the maintenance of healthy social relationships. Edwin and Delattre (1993:2) state that if proper attitudes and behaviour are not learned early, problems can mushroom with possibly dire consequences when children are older.

In Zulu culture, moral values and purity are symbolised by the white colour. For instance, during traditional times, a special gift that a baby girl received from her mother after birth was a string of white beads that she had to wear around her lower waist throughout her adolescent years to symbolise her virginal purity. This symbol is also connected with the Princess of Heaven whom the Zulu call Nomkhubulwane. She is regarded as a powerful female intercessor during times of catastrophe such as drought. The Zulu believe that before Nomkhubulwane implores with God for rain, she goes to the mountain where she has to be surrounded by other girls marked with strings of white beads around their lower waists.

According to Berglund (1976:65), Nomkhubulwane is also a virgin and wears a string of white beads around her waist. Msimang (1975:353) explains that the Zulu nation communicate with the Heavenly Princess through virgins because she too is a maiden. The Zulu believe that the Heavenly Princess can only shower her gifts of fertility and prosperity upon the nation if the latter still promotes the values of moral behaviour in society. During traditional times, there were no formal schools of education where children could attend classes to develop knowledge they had acquired from home about different aspects of life. Thus, during formative years of those days, the youth of both sexes were grouped into regiments under an orientation programme, which also included courtship directives.

Motivation

Zulu beads communicate in a metaphorical language, which might provide a good source for collaborative interpretation and critical analysis among scholars. There is, however, not a substantial amount of academic literature on depictions of Zulu beads and their colours as powerful communication symbols. During courtship, a girl can create a beaded message with rainbow colours to engage the recipient's mind; and making the subject of discussion more vivid and memorable through emotive images.

Motivated by the colour metaphor in beads and 'oral culture' as accentuated by Ong (1982), I became interested in exploring the language of beads, which I perceived as an under-utilised indigenous treasure trove. This gap motivated me to select certain colour metaphors as key codes for courtship communication.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Ong's theory (1982), which looks on how the shift from primary orality to literacy changes the way humans communicate. Ong refers to the electronic mode of communication, which is dominated by television and telephones as secondary orality as this type of communication combines both orality and print. Relevant to this study is what Ong calls 'oral culture,' which is a term that he uses as referring specifically to people who are at an oral-based stage of consciousness, and whose communication is achieved mainly through word of mouth or non-verbal language. Zulu society also can be referred to as amateurs in the world of writing, as writing in this society was introduced by missionaries towards the end of the 19th century. The bead colour metaphors, that facilitated the traditional Zulu society's precepts, originated from the crude 'oral culture'. Interfaced with Ong's theory of 'oral culture' is the conceptual metaphor because the language of beads is also metaphorical. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) for example, use the English conceptual metaphor 'love is a journey', which is based on conceptualizing love as a journey. The metaphor is not only talking about love but there is also a deep reasoning about it because lovers are perceived as travellers on a long journey with a variety of impediments. Despite challenges on their journey, the lovers reach their destination eventually through their common life goals; cemented by their love and commitment to each other. In Zulu culture, such concepts and sentiments are often expressed by girls through the language of beads and its colours within a courtship context.

Regimentation (*ukubuthwa*)

I have already mentioned that the Zulu social lifestyle have somehow been affected by modernism and other aspects of life. However, some sections of this paper will take us back to the good old days to illustrate the clear picture of how things were. In Zulu society, girls were divided into two distinct groups. There were senior girls (*amaqhikiza*) who already had romantic partners and who also acted as mentors for adolescent girls (*amatshitshi*) who were about to enter the courtship arena. *Izintombi* (ladies) is a collective term referring to both young and senior girls (Biyela 1998:21). Like their female counterparts, young males were also divided into two groups. *Amabhungu* were boys who were not yet involved in the matters of the heart. The fully developed young men (*izinsizwa*) who already had romantic partners also acted as mentors for boys who were amateurs in romantic relationships. On both genders, each regiment had a leader who administered the love affairs of the members under his or her charge. This is why Krige (1936:118) says that now a days, young Zulu men can get married any time they like after puberty, but in the olden days this could not happen because like their female counterparts they were also governed by strict regimentation and courtship rules to help them maintain their 'whiteness', namely, the virginal beauty until marriage.

Courtship Patterns: The String Of White Beads

Bryant (1929:562) states: ‘Courting knows nor race nor age. It is instinctive in mankind, and as old. Why even the animals and birds indulge and are adept at it?’ Courtship like other social phenomena differs across generations as well as societies in many ways. There are also devices and social programmes, which every nation implements to regulate and evaluate the processes of courtship to preserve the nation’s identity as well as its cultural strategy.

Patterns of courtship also differ in respect of who initiates it, rules, and methods of communication and length of time it takes. For instance, in traditional Zulu culture, the duration for courtship was a minimum of two years. The belief was that a potential couple needed a longer time together to discover possible incompatibilities prior to their final commitment to each other. Although both partners might be seeking some kind of immediate physical satisfaction, at the same time they were both looking for someone with qualities of trust, loving and caring. Little (1982:24) attests that both men and women want partners who will first of all be loving mates and, second, caring parents.

The courtship period was the most critical phase for a girl because if she decided to *qoma*, which means falling in love for the first time, she had to separate with her ‘other self’, the string of white beads, which was her pride and honour. Through it, she could tell the nation that her heart belonged to no one yet. The suitor who had been accepted by the girl would not accept anything else except the precious string of white beads. This was a guarantee of the girl’s commitment to her first lover. For validity and transparency, the suitor had to receive the white string in the presence of the girl’s leader and other witnesses. In receiving the white string of beads, the young man also commits himself to protect and preserve the body of his beloved until their ‘white wedding’ day. After accepting the conditions and responsibilities from the leader, the lucky young man has to put the white string around his neck to safeguard it as he will do to the pure love he has been given. Xulu (2002:20) confirms that a white bead conveys a positive message of love, purity, goodness, happiness and virginity. But from the Chinese point of view, it is the red colour that brings positive things such as luck and joy (Qiang 2011:100).

The Zulu love Letter

In Zulu society, it is a male that is expected to initiate the dating process and to present the *ilobolo* (bride’s dowry) to the girl’s family as a sign of appreciation. A girl is given the right to jilt the male if he fails to fulfill his promises. Females are also designers and manufacturers of beadwork to communicate their desires to their male counterparts. A girl might communicate with her loved one through beadwork if she wants to avoid the discomfort of direct initial discourse on the sensitive subject of personal relations. Through the combination and arrangement of colours of beads, a girl can say it all. Men depend on their female relatives to explain beadwork symbols (The Zulu Beadwork Language 2013:1).

The white string is the first beaded communication that the girl sends to her lover. The red colour often follows the white string. A girl tells her partner that she is bursting with love for him. Before the girl suffers from ‘high blood pressure’ of love, a responsible young man has to respond, either in person or ask his female relatives to make him a relevant token of love that he can send to his girlfriend as Xulu (2002:5) states: ‘Among the Zulu, if a young man wants to give a beaded message to his fiancée, he has to get a sister or other female relative to make it for him, as the rule is so strong that women do beadwork. ‘A girl can also send a ‘Zulu love letter’ in green beads, saying, ‘I am yearning for you day and night. Come back soon, unless you will find me as thin as the grass that is being blown away by the winds’. Thinness here stands for hunger for love and care while the wind represents rivals who keep on reminding her that she made a wrong choice by loving a man with a ‘cold heart’. Temptations and confusion might flood the young girl’s mind, which could be a reason for sending the wake-up calls to her partner.

Tradition holds it that the delay in responses from Zulu young males started when they were working in the cities, far from their homes. There could be a variety of reasons for such a delay but one of them could be that young men are not allowed to wear or respond to the beaded messages until they have got an experienced interpreter to explain the message. Their female relatives were not there to interpret their ‘love letters’ and to craft the responses in time. Although a Zulu girl has all the right to reject her lover, but the education, she got during courtship orientation recommends that ‘true love’ waits. A pair of birds called Hadadah Ibis (*amankankane*) is of interest among courting males in Zulu culture. This pair represents an ideal intimate couple because most of the time the two birds are found together in finding food and shelter, and grooming each other with absolute care.

It is also said that during the brooding season, the male protects and defends the territory from invading enemies that might interfere with the mother-bird on the nest. These are highly admired characteristics of this pair; unlike birds such as eagles that are only seen together during the mating season (Biyela 2009). If the breakdown of communication is seriously interfering with the relationship of the human love birds, the string beaded in purple-bluish colour, which resemble the colours on the wings of the Hadadah Ibis should be sent to the male to remind him of his courtship promises. Besides their colour, these birds are also known for the lamenting sound they make when setting off, which the Zulu literally interpret as saying: *Mina ngahamba...* (Me, I left...). Through the colour and sound of these birds, the girl might be saying, ‘if you do not fulfill your promises now, I am leaving you for good’. This is the colour that used to speak louder to the ‘city’ young males who might have forgotten about their girls at home. Even if they did not understand the whole message, but it is said that this colour would force them to return home; taking the example of the Hadadah Ibis that often observed in the afternoon going back to their resting places.

The young male would soon get assistance from her female relatives to craft him a token, probably, in a form of a triangle called *ibheqe* with inverted apex pointing downwards, which indicates that the young man coming back from the city is unmarried and still waiting for his ‘first love.’ The three corners of the triangle represent father, mother and child. The three dominant colours in the triangle are white for reclaiming trust from his girlfriend. The blue says, heaven is my witness, I request you to marry me. The black colour stands for marriage because when a Zulu girl gets married, her fiancé provides her with a black kilt to be worn around the waist, where the white string used to be. The yellow and pink represent children, wealth and fertility that may come with marriage.

The Uncontaminated-White Wedding

When the young couple enters their marital status with uncontaminated bodies, the community rejoices as the two ‘white colours,’ symbolise a double blessing as white colour in a marriage context also expresses safety and fortune. In Chinese culture, the red colour brings *xi-red* double happiness to a wedding (Qiang 2011). There seems to be a correlation between the Zulu and the Kaguru people of Tanzania with regard to the metaphors concerning bodily and sexual orientation. According to the Kaguru, white represent safety, peace, and normality (Beidelman 1980:39).

White, a Symbol of Reconciliation

White is also associated with forgiveness. When there is a ritual of reconciliation in a Zulu family, a white bead is thrown into a dish with water. All the members of the family wash their hands in this dish that contains a white bead. The white bead in the dish signifies that reconciliation will be achieved because all the dirt that has been carried by the family members will be absorbed by the white bead and transformed into white colour too. The other national ceremony during which the white colour comes to the fore is the *ukweshwama* (festival of the first fruits). The present Zulu king, Goodwill still performs this ceremony. During Shaka’s time, tradition holds it that it was only ‘virgin’ males who had to present the sacrificial bull to the king; holding it with their bare hands. On behalf of the nation, the king would give thanks to the Creator for the good weather and the new produce and also asked the Creator for forgiveness before the nation enjoyed the new produce. This was a national unifying ritual, which bound the whole nation together in one spirit. It was at such celebrations where the warriors would parade in white shields as a symbol of peace among the people. The special Nguni cattle, the only white colour brand, affectionately called by the Zulu as ‘*inyoni kayiphumuli*’ (a bird that never rests) belong to the Zulu royal house as their white colour reminds the Zulu king to continue with his responsibility to promote peace and moral values among the people.

Conclusion

The paramount aim of Zulu society is the propagation and preservation of life through the maintenance of healthy social relationships. Young people are jealously guarded and protected by social orientation programmes, which are meant to give them a direction throughout their adolescence stage that includes matters concerning their choice of romantic partners. Beaded messages lend themselves within the courtship arena as they are used by young people of a courting age, mostly girls as a form of interaction with their male counterparts.

The white colour, without negative association, is in Zulu culture, a private and public communication of the status of one’s social life.

References

- Beidelman, T.O. (1980).*The Moral Imagination of the Kaguru*: Some Thoughts on Tricksters, Translation and Comparative Analysis: *American Ethnologist*.
- Berglund, A. I. (1976). *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*. London: C. Hurst.
- Biyela, N.G. (1998). The Figure of King Shaka in Past and Contemporary Oral Sources. Unpublished M.A. Dissertation. Durban: University of KwaZulu- Natal.
- Biyela, N.G.(2009).Popular Predictor Birds in Zulu Culture. Durban: *Alternation*. 16 (3), 35-52
- Bryant, A.T.(1929).*The Zulu People*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter.
- Edwin, J. & Delattre, A.B. (1993).*Helping Your Child Learn Responsible Behaviour*. Theodore Rebarber (ed). U.S. Department of Education.
- Krige, E.J. (1936). *The Social System of the Zulu People*.London: Longmans & Greens.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, Mark,(1980). Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language. *Journal of Philosophy*, 77 (8), 453-486.
- Little, M. (1982).*Family Breakup*. California: Jossey Bass Publishers.
- Msimang, C.T.(1975). *Kusadliwa Ngoludala*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter. Ong, W.(1982).*Orality and Literacy*. New York: Methuen.
- Qiang, H. (2011). A Study on the Metaphor of “Red” in Chinese Culture. Centre for Promoting Ideas, USA: *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 1 (3), 99-102.
- The Zulu Beadwork Language 2013:1. <http://www.marques.co.za/clients/zulu/bead.htm> (Retrieved September 9, 2013).
- Xulu, C.B.S (2002). Colour Coding and its Meaning in Zulu Women’s Beadwork: A Study of Zulu Women’s Beadwork in Fashion Design and Decoration.Unpublished M.A. Dissertation. Empangeni: University of Zululand.