

# Against triumphalism: Mashingaidze Gomo's Pan-Africanist concept of madness

Ruby Magosvongwe<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The term madness is used in multiple ways in diverse cultural contexts. One striking continuum, however, is that across these contexts it is typically used as the opposite of achievement. Achievement relies on a set of norms within which one's success can be measured. A focus on madness is a focus on a form that challenges norms and normative orders. In what follows, I want to explore Shona ideas of madness and Mashingaidze Gomo's engagement with madness as counter discourses to imposed colonial systems of order and valorisation. I will argue that Mashingaidze Gomo appropriates the double-barrelled 'fine madness' of literary creativity that his text *A Fine Madness* is, exposing triumphalism embedded in the agency of self-narration and self-definition. His philosophically-charged and metaphoric narrative rides on ethnographically inherited canons regarding what 'madness' means and entails in the African-Shona worldview. He engages the multiple indigenous metaphoric and ethnographic interpretations of 'madness' to excavate distilled experiential knowledge and thus extrapolate meaning from the foreign-induced bombardments of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and privation of her Black progeny. Using the DRC experiences, Gomo's depictions project a problem-stricken Africa embroiled in violence. Afrofuturism and Afrotriumphalism prisms buttress auto-ethnographic readings that expose the contradictions, inconsistencies and achievements in Gomo's text. To his credit, Gomo's radicalism, manifest in his concept of 'madness,' offers an "antithesis of European reason" (Newell 2008, 483) that other 'madness' scholars evade when they engage in colonial and post-colonial discourses on Africa.

## Madness as a theme and trope in Zimbabwean literature

Madness is not a new theme in Zimbabwean Literature. In *Mapenzi*(Madmen), Ignatius Mabasa explores lack of judgement, foolishness and amnesia among the bursting township populace, wooing unwarranted social discord. Shimmer Chinodya's *Chairman of Fools* ethnographically explores the 'logic of madness' using an African family setting, partially demystifying 'madness.' On Marechera's alleged 'madness,' or more precisely schizophre-

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<sup>1</sup> ruby.magosvongwe@yahoo.com

nia, Veit-Wild argues that “the question of whether Marechera was clinically ‘mad’ or not is not important for understanding his work [...] but should be regarded instead as possessing extraordinary powers of insight and imagination” (2006, 60). On Black Nationalism and land, Chennells (2005) concurs with Lessing that the black Southern Rhodesian population cannot all be mad. British colonial psychiatry characterises Gikuyu and Mau Mau resistance to land dispossession as “mania” (Mahone 2006: 246) and “psychotic delusions” (Mahone 2006, 249).

Mahone and Newell confirm the mismatch of agendas on defining ‘madness,’ anchoring what Gomo examines. Misinformation used by colonial psychiatry to dismiss African struggles to recover lost lands and attendant heritage compounds ‘madness’ scholarship on Africa. Gomo ethno-anthropologically interrogates multidimensional angles of privation and exclusions underpinning madness and irrationality that see Africans as a shadow of their real worth. Therefore, an Afrofuturist and Afrotriumphalist prism appears apt for an examination of Gomo’s depictions of ‘distilled African madness.’ The admission that ‘madness’ in Africa signals “an individual’s privileged access to an intangible, non-human logic [...] can be seen as a positive instability” (Newell 2008, 484). Nevertheless, psycho-socially, ‘madness’ has a delinquent stigma, making it exclusionary and undesirable, generally tied up with the schizoid. Yet, among the Shona, ‘madness’ as a trope is richly varied. Meaning can only be achieved and gleaned from the undergirding ethnographic context. Philosophically, madness<sup>2</sup> does not give one the liberty to be extravagant with words, but to be pithy and concise, explicating with precision the distilled knowledge required to bridge gaps in reading and interrogating psycho-intellectual and socio-material experiences.

Gomo’s achievements lay in the distilled philosophical elements that other ‘madness’ scholars could have overlooked. His philosophy represents an “antithesis of European reason” (Newell 2008, 483). He interrogates high-sounding liberal discourses of human rights championing dignity, enlightenment and empowerment in a sea of poverty while outrightly disregarding the genesis of the ‘irrationality’ associated with the widespread privation: a form of ‘madness’ in itself, if ethnographically viewed. Thus, colonialism and its racist exclusionary policies full of treachery and trickery is madness. *A Fine Madness* is the only creative narrative on the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) of the early 1990s, pitying the Congo rebels against a coalition of the government forces aided by Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia. Gomo’s manuscript, like Tsitsi Dangarembga’s internationally acclaimed *Nervous Conditions*, was published by Ayebia Clarke overseas. *A Fine Madness*, a literary case study, is inspired by lived personal experiences, crystallised by the historical exigences of the DRC war, replicating the general plight of the African continent. The experiences rendered in Gomo’s narrative poem threaten to be paradigmatic for the

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2 *Upenzi or kupenga* in Shona.

African Continent's collective experiences. DRC metonymically symbolises a confluence of minds, conflicts, instability, tangential interests of myriad characters, a blighted African metropolis alleged to be half the size of Europe, hence the tropes of 'madness' and psychosis abound. But whose 'madness' is it exactly? And what kind of 'madness' is it?

### Diverse concepts of madness in Shona

'Mania,' 'madness,' 'neurosis,' 'mental instability,' 'mental disorder,' 'insanity,' 'lunacy,' 'psychotic delusions,' 'delirium,' 'hysteria,' 'perversion,' 'nervous breakdown,' whatever terms and their causes, like disability, have been and remain universally undesirable as they deviate from the socially-constructed norms and values. The condition in its multiple forms solicits stigma, in addition to posing certain challenges and dangers to incumbents and their respective communities and societies. Further, whatever nomenclature or terminology distinguishes the condition, the incumbents are seen to have gone off the rails of a desirable 'normal' social life, normalcy here being culturally determined. In the indigenous Zimbabwean Shona context, 'madness'/*kupenga* is a paradoxical oxymoron, depicting either foolishness in the sense of imbecility or distinction, with the latter carrying either positivity or negativity. The terms *Kupenga*, *Upenzi* or madness are used in a playful way as cultural banter or could be outright derogatory, and do therefore not automatically signify psychosis, schizophrenia or any other de facto psychic derangement.

Ethno-anthropologically among Zimbabwean indigenous Shonas, 'madness' also symptomatically evinces metaphysical transgression, desiring metaphysical solutions for stability to be restored and regained, but using material resources for psycho-spiritual appeasement. Avenging spirits or *ngozi* and *kutanda botso*<sup>3</sup> for example, depict spiritual retributions that manifest themselves through delirium, lunacy or imbecility, and other untoward conduct. The differences in management resonate with social, intellectual and psycho-spiritual tools at the incumbents' disposal, and these are widely culturally-based.

Apart from mental psychosis or dementia, 'madness' can also be ethnographically and metaphorically understood as symptomatic of social deviance, delinquency and cultural alienation, including rigid impenetrable minds leading to ungovernable behaviour, among other undesirable social, intellectual and spiritual dispositions. In a positive light, 'madness'/*kupenga* in the Shona language could also mean 'excellence/distinction/unparalleled expertise,' antithetical to 'lunacy/imbecility/schizophrenia.' It is not uncommon hearing people admit: "*Akapenga*," meaning a guru; "*Anopenga*," meaning schizoid;

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3 A traditional rite performed by an individual as punishment for transgressing against one's parents. Usually the incumbent wears sack cloth or rags and moves barefoot in the village begging for grain. He is mocked and shunned for the wrong-doing, generally believed to be part of the retribution that eventually cleanses and restores the individual. The rite is usually performed as acceptance of guilt and remorse for untoward conduct.

or “*Akazvipengera*,” meaning distinguished. The incumbent is *benzi* or madman. *Kupenga* or madness therefore ethnographically solicits context(s) for apt appreciation. Extreme tripartite privation also attracts labels of ‘madness.’ Depending on the prism at use, ‘madness’ can ricochet at those claiming authority to name and label others who are deemed psycho-intellectually inferior. Thus, madness cannot be fully appreciated outside socio-cultural contexts. It is value-laden.

### A fine madness?

Gomo ironically appropriates diverse denotations of ‘madness’ metaphorically to interrogate evident psycho-social, economic and political disorders in Africa, including their underlying causes. *A Fine Madness* attempts to appreciate the “pathologization of the African subject” (Mahone 2006, 242) by so-called champions of democratic governance and human rights ambassadors, civilisation bearers, and crusaders of sustainable development in violence-torn and underdeveloped countries, especially Africa. Encapsulated as ‘a fine madness,’ the attempt is a recognisable achievement.

Like Vambe’s *An Ill-fated People*, and Swift’s Lilliputians, Gomo subtly juxtaposes black powerlessness and destitution in divinely-ordained homelands vis-à-vis power and privilege earned and anchored by virulent military brutality of Western dehumanising capitalistic domination. *A Fine Madness* satirises why ‘madness’ could be ‘distilled’ and positive. Ordinarily, ‘madness’ could never be appropriated and deciphered as ‘fine,’ neither can it be regarded as ‘achievement.’ Yet, here we are, celebrating ‘madness’ as a trope in understanding underprivileged sections of humanity. Africa’s cause and plight rolled into one, remains vicious “intellectual warfare” (Carruthers 1999), aspects that Gomo examines. Afrofuturism and Afrotriumphalism prisms aesthetically project Africa’s flowering and genuine renewal. Other western-designed prisms metonymically classify Africa as largely “collective psychological instability” (Mahone 2006, 243).

Gomo’s ‘metaphoric madness’ could be deciphered ‘protest literature,’ presuming it presumptuous and unbalanced in its unearthing erased and silenced histories. Dichotomous models and discourses adeptly convey worldview divergences. Far from being apologetic about alleged failed leadership, under-development and rampant corruption in the post-independence African state, Gomo exposes the dehumanising trauma, including the masked colonial maladies that continue ravaging Africa. “[T]he significance of the label[s] is that [they] attach the problem very neatly to individuals presumed to be troubled or ‘unbalanced’ in some way and denied the existence of other sources of social, [psychological, spiritual and political] tension” (Mahone 2006, 244). If you are going to imagine yourself in the future, you have to know where you’ve come from (Chivaura 2016; Onyebuchi 2018): a literary trope that is double-barrelled, ‘a fine madness.’

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