

Monstrosity, Pedagogy, and the Snake-Son: Reimagining Shona Folktales in Informal and Formal Education

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This article examines how Shona folktales deploy monstrosity as both a cultural and a pedagogical resource across informal and formal educational contexts. Focusing on the tale of a witch and her snake-son, the study explores how oral storytelling has historically functioned as a community-based system of education, transmitting social norms, ethical values, and survival strategies. At the same time, the article argues that such narratives offer rich possibilities for contemporary educational practice, particularly in classrooms and community workshops addressing gender-based violence, mental health, and social justice. Drawing on monster theory, feminist thought, and postcolonial perspectives, the analysis demonstrates how the monstrous body encodes anxieties around marriage, secrecy, and vulnerability, while also enabling creative and critical engagement with difficult topics. By bridging Indigenous knowledge systems and modern pedagogical approaches, the article positions Shona folktales not as static cultural artifacts, but as dynamic tools for teaching, dialogue, and empowerment.

Introduction

Folktales are often treated as relics of the past, or repositories of cultural memory preserved for entertainment or heritage. Yet within many African societies, including among the Shona of Zimbabwe, folktales have historically functioned as powerful pedagogical tools. They have educated, warned, entertained, and shaped moral consciousness within the community. This article advances a dual argument. First, it positions Shona folktales as Indigenous systems of informal education, embedded in everyday social life. Second, it demonstrates their relevance as resources for contemporary formal pedagogy, particularly in addressing complex and sensitive issues such as gender-based violence, mental health, and social justice. Using the folktale of a witch and her snake-son, the article explores how monstrosity operates as a narrative device through which communities negotiate fears surrounding gender, sexuality, secrecy, and social breakdown. By tracing the pedagogical work of this tale across both informal and formal contexts, the article highlights the enduring educational power of folklore.

The Folktale

A woman who was a mysterious witch lived with a huge monstrous snake who was her son. She did not have a human child. One day she decided to find a girl for her snake-son to marry. She talked to a girl whom she told how hardworking, kind, and good-mannered her son was. The witch woman told the girl that her son had gone to faraway lands to buy jewelry and fine linen for resale. In traditional Shona society, it was normal for a girl to agree to marrying a man she had not seen before. This was also common in other societies. In Europe, there were even marriages by proxy where a woman wedded a husband who was not there and someone would be sent to stand as proxy (especially royal marriages that were negotiated between families).

Among the Shona, belonging to a family and kinsfolk is more valued than looks or money. So the girl agreed and went to stay with the woman. The woman used to sing a strange but catchy song whenever she was grinding finger millet. The girl loved the song, but she was warned never to sing it. One day, the witch woman left her new daughter-in-law alone at home while she went to a *nhimbe* (a communal work gathering). Before she left, she asked the daughter-in-law to grind some millet for their supper and reminded her never to sing the strange song. When the witch woman left, the girl took some finger millet and started grinding. She got carried away and found herself singing the forbidden song, “My husband, my husband, oh how I long to see you.” Then she heard a deep booming voice coming from the granary, “Hush, hush, my dear wife. I am here, in the silo.” The girl was fascinated by the exchange with the deep voice, and so she continued singing. However, as she continued singing, the huge snake in the granary was getting bigger and bigger, until it burst the building and went for the girl. The snake wanted to catch the girl and eat her, but she ran to where villagers were gathered with the huge monster following her. When she reached the gathering, she collapsed. The villagers heard the deep singing voice of the approaching monster and saw how it destroyed trees and anything in its path while pursuing her. Some fled in terror, but others stood their ground and fought the snake using hoes, axes, picks, and shovels until it died. When the witch realized her son was dead, she attempted to escape, but the villagers captured her and banished her from the community.

Cultural Context: Marriage, Community, and Social Order

Shona social organization has historically emphasized relationality, kinship, and communal accountability. The proverb “*rooranai vematongo*” (marry within the community) reflects a cultural logic designed to minimize risk, particularly for women entering marriage. Marriage was not an individual decision but a collective process involving elders, kinship networks, and a trusted intermediary (*munyai*) (Gelfand 1977).

This system functioned as a social safeguard. Families maintained the right to intervene, visit, and assess the well-being of the bride. These practices ensured not only her safety but also her integration into the new household. This explains why when the groom’s representatives went to pay the bride price to the girl’s family, they announced the mission of their visit by the words “*tiri kutsvagawo sadza*” (we are here to ask for someone who will cook *sadza* for our family). The act of cooking *sadza* (a Shona staple dish) not only symbolized both labor and belonging but was also grounded in the philosophy *musha mukadzi* (a woman makes a home).

This relational system was underpinned by *hunhu/ubuntu*, a philosophy of interdependence and shared humanity (Mapara and Mudzanire 2013). Practices such as *nhimbe* (communal work gathering) reinforced this ethic, serving not only as economic cooperation but also as spaces of communication, social monitoring, and knowledge exchange. Against this backdrop, the snake-son folktale represents a breakdown of these protective structures. The young woman is married without communal oversight, verification, or kinship involvement. Monstrosity, therefore, emerges not only in the snake but also in the collapse of social systems meant to safeguard individuals.

Folktales as Informal Pedagogies in Shona Society

I am a Shona folklorist and storyteller who started telling stories before I could read or write. In traditional Shona society, folktales function as informal yet highly effective systems of education. Storytelling is participatory, dialogic, and embedded in everyday life, often led by elderly women whose performances combine narrative, song, and audience interaction. The snake-son folktale exemplifies this pedagogical role in several ways.

First, it teaches social vigilance. The narrative warns against marriages that bypass communal processes, highlighting the dangers of secrecy and isolation.

Second, it encodes taboo subjects that include sexuality, deception, and violence through the use of metaphor. The snake becomes a symbolic representation of hidden danger within intimate relationships, allowing sensitive issues to be explored indirectly.

Third, it promotes critical awareness. The daughter-in-law's curiosity and eventual transgression demonstrate the importance of questioning authority and seeking knowledge. This reflects an Indigenous form of critical literacy grounded in interpretation and lived experience.

Fourth, it calls for reflection that keeping secrets can be a dangerous thing because some secrets can end up destabilizing and even traumatizing whole communities. The witch's keeping a monster snake-son did not ultimately guarantee peace of mind or social security. This makes the story serve as a warning that such lifestyles often end in tragedy.

Finally, the communal killing of the snake reinforces collective responsibility, while simultaneously critiquing the community's earlier failure to intervene. In this sense, the folktale educates not only individuals but also the community itself, reminding it of its ethical obligations.

Through these functions, the folktale operates as part of a living educational system, shaping behavior, values, and social consciousness.

Monstrosity in Formal Educational Contexts

While rooted in oral tradition, the snake-son folktale also offers significant potential for contemporary formal education. Educators often turn to monsters because they serve as liminal figures, marking boundaries of acceptable behavior and embodying what a community wishes to exclude or regulate (Cohen 1996; Douglas 1966). In the Shona folktale, the witch represents a distorted form of motherhood: instead of nurturing, she deceives and endangers her daughter-in-law by hiding the true nature of her son. Her snake-son embodies monstrosity both physically and symbolically, his grotesque growth paralleling unchecked desire and the dangers of suppressed truth.

In classroom settings, the folktale can be mobilized to:

- Introduce symbolic analysis and narrative interpretation
- Explore gender, power, and social norms
- Facilitate intercultural dialogue on constructions of “the monstrous”
- Encourage creative and participatory learning

For educators, this tale offers a way to discuss the social process of monsterization: how individuals or groups are cast as “monstrous” to regulate norms (Gilmore 2003). Students can examine how individuals or groups are labelled as deviant or dangerous, and how such labels operate in contemporary contexts, including stigma, marginalization, and social exclusion. In this way, the folktale becomes not simply an object of study but also a pedagogical tool for critical engagement.

Learning Complex Subjects Through Monsters

One of the most compelling reasons to teach with monsters is their ability to open up difficult conversations. The snake-son folktale allows educators to address complex subjects in culturally resonant ways.

Gender and Sexuality: The tale highlights women’s vulnerability in deceptive marital arrangements (Schmidt 1992). This Shona tale can be discussed alongside stories like the Danish King Lindorm tale (see Appendix) in which a snake-son demands a wife, and when a beautiful princess is found and brought to her husband, she “is not allowed to see her groom until the ceremony; and as soon as they get into the bridal chamber he ‘splits her apart’” (Pettitt 2023). Of interest is the violence exhibited by both snake-husbands in these two stories.

The Environment: The snake’s destructive emergence reflects anxieties about ecological imbalance, underscoring human fears about nature’s destructive power when boundaries are transgressed (Zvarevashe 1990). Shona people call themselves “children of the soil,” demonstrating the deep relationship between them and the environment (Kahari 2016). When people maliciously kill animals, burn forests, extract minerals, or cut down trees, they disrespect Mother Earth and disrupt the balance of *pasichigare*, the precolonial days when the earth was still settled/stable/unmoved.

The Body: The snake’s monstrous expansion symbolizes fears of uncontrollable desire and transformation (Cohen 1996). The grotesque size and swelling may also be a way of educating girls about the way the male sexual organ gets roused, especially when taking into consideration the belief that snakes may also have phallic associations (Tracey 1934). In the King Lindorm folktale, while the snake does not swell, the act of splitting the princesses apart can be used to discuss difficult gender-based violence issues like rape and passion killings.

Mental Health: The forbidden song represents suppressed emotion that erupts when silenced (Kristeva 1982). Yet, the unspoken trauma is not only affecting the girl but also the snake-son and the witch woman who live in isolation, without family. While we see the witch woman going to join others at the communal work gathering, when all the people go back to their homes after the work, she is further isolated since she has now lost her snake-son, her daughter-in-law, and her home because she has been banished.

By embedding these issues within narrative, the folktale enables discussion without direct confrontation, making it particularly effective in contexts where cultural taboos limit open dialogue.

Pedagogical Applications in Contemporary Settings

Monsters endure because they embody contradiction: They are both frightening and fascinating. The Shona expression “kuyevedzwa nemavara eshato” (being dazzled by the python’s beauty) captures this duality. This emotional complexity makes monsters effective pedagogical tools. They engage learners imaginatively while allowing exploration of fear, curiosity, and transgression in meaningful ways. Three settings that engage the appeal and power of monsters today follow below.

1.

Gender-Based Violence Education

The folktale can be used in workshops to explore themes of deception, silencing (“hush, hush”), and hidden danger in intimate relationships. Participants can relate the narrative to lived experiences, creating a culturally grounded entry point into discussions of gender-based violence. The emotional manipulation and deception by the witch are a form of violence because they constitute a breach of trust that causes deep psychological and emotional harm on the girl. In the King Lindorm tale, the snake-son’s act of killing his victims by splitting them apart is the worst form of gender-based violence one might see.

2.

Classroom Pedagogy

Educators can design interactive activities such as:

- **Role-play and alternative endings**
 - Become a character in this folktale: the daughter-in-law, the witch, the snake-son, or a villager. Explain your understanding of what is happening in the story. Describe your fears and wishes.
 - Imagine other possible endings of the folktale. How would things have been if the girl had not started to run, if the villagers had taken action before, or if the snake had confessed at the outset? Would the girl have loved the snake-husband if he had turned into a handsome man with super powers?
- **Critical rewriting from marginalized perspectives**
 - Rewrite the story as told by the daughter-in-law from the perspective of her interior monologue.
 - Can you trace “silence” in the story? What interests are served by the silent parts?
 - Tell the story again from the perspective of the witch or the snake-son and explain what drives them. Are they merely “monsters,” or do they react to social exclusion, loneliness, and intimidation?
 - Translate the folktale into a contemporary context, such as online communication or migration. Who or what may now serve as the “snake”? How does deception function in the new reality?
- **Comparative folklore analysis**
 - Compare the story of the snake-son with another folk narrative in which a secret husband or wife is hidden, such as Kirin Narayan’s “The Daughter-in-Law with No Groom” (1997) or the Danish folktale, “King Lindorm” (2026). Discuss

their similarities and differences regarding danger portrayal (see Appendix for summaries of these tales).

- How do the stories interpret gender norms, marriage, and social values? What do you think about how they use language?
- **Visual and creative interpretation**
 - Illustrate a significant episode of the folktale (such as the emergence of the snake, the girl singing, or the confrontation of the community). Add a brief description of what it highlights.
 - Translate the folktale into another form of expression (comics, video, poetry, or music). How does such translation affect the message?

These approaches foster engagement, creativity, and critical thinking. They also give voice and agency to learners (Freire 1972).

3.

Mental Health Education

The hidden and growing snake provides a powerful metaphor for:

- Suppressed emotions
- Trauma
- Psychological distress
- Dangerous secrets

Such metaphors enable culturally accessible discussions of physical and mental health in contexts where direct discourse may be difficult.

Shifting Meanings of Monstrosity

The symbolic meaning of the snake evolves across time while retaining core associations. Traditionally, it represented fears surrounding unknown husbands and unsafe marriages. In contemporary contexts, it may signify gender-based violence, toxic relationships, or hidden illnesses and diseases such as HIV and AIDS (Muchemwa 2002). Shona audiences might find empowerment in reimagining the snake not only as danger but also as a challenge to oppressive structures of marriage and gender. By tracing these continuities and changes, educators highlight the adaptability of the folktale: The snake remains a powerful figure precisely because it can be reinterpreted to address new contexts while still carrying echoes of its earlier symbolic work (Mapara and Mpofu-Hamadziripi 2014).

It could also be interesting to look at the monstrosity and witchcraft in this story as a possible commentary on colonialism. Parui (2025) observes that Tsitsi Dangarembga's book *Nervous Conditions* (1988) presents colonialism as a "witchcraft" or unnatural, alienating force that destroys Indigenous identity and imposes mental, emotional, and social "nervous conditions" on its subjects. Being colonized essentially creates a state of perpetual anxiety, tension, and neurosis. This adaptability reflects the dynamic nature of folklore. As Raymond Williams (1989) suggests,

culture consists of both inherited meanings and newly produced interpretations. The snake remains constant, but its meanings shift.

The Shona still use traditional idioms that reference snakes as metaphors for today's behaviors. Examples are:

Mwana wenyoka inyoka. (The young one of a snake is still a snake.) This is the equivalent of the English idiom, a chip off the old block.

Uri nyoka chaiyo. (You are such a snake.) This is used to communicate emotional anguish by someone who has had something evil done to them.

Kunakurirwa nyoka mhenyu. (To have someone toss a live snake at you.) The idiom means to be put in harm's way because the snake can bite you, the equivalent of the English idiom to throw someone under the bus.

Rava zuru rakapinda nyoka. (An anthill that one saw a snake going into.) The idiom means to continue being afraid of something from past experiences or encounters.

Hakuna dunhu risina nyoka. (There is no area without snakes.) Evil people are found everywhere.

Chakashata chakashata nyoka haigarwi nayo mumba. (Evil will never turn into good, humans do not share a house with a snake.) Here the snake signifies an evil person, specifically a witch who should not be befriended because they will harm you.

Kurova munhu senyoka yapinda mumba. (To beat up someone like a snake that has entered a house.) A snake is greatly feared and loathed such that if it is found in a house it is beaten to a pulp.

Monsters, Marginality, and Voice

Monsters also function as symbols of marginality and, at the same time, resistance. The witch, although vilified, represents exclusion, loneliness, and alternative forms of power. Her actions, while harmful, reflect an attempt to negotiate belonging within a system that has marginalized her. At the same time, the daughter-in-law's voice, which is expressed through song, becomes a site of both danger and empowerment. Her act of singing breaks imposed silence and reveals hidden truth. From an educational perspective, this highlights the importance of voice, agency, and critical engagement. The folktale thus aligns with pedagogical frameworks that emphasize speaking against oppression and questioning authority.

Teacher Tip from the Editors:

Ask your students to identify proverbs or sayings they know that include a snake or other monsters in your class discussion.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the Shona folktale of the witch and her snake-son operates across two interconnected pedagogical domains. As an informal educational system, it transmits cultural values, social warnings, and interpretive skills through communal storytelling practices. As a formal educational resource, it provides powerful opportunities for engaging learners in critical discussions on gender, physical and mental health, and social justice. Its enduring relevance lies in its adaptability. While rooted in specific cultural contexts, its themes

resonate across time and space. Monstrosity, therefore, is not merely a source of fear, but also a tool for reflection, critique, and transformation. By bringing Shona folktales into contemporary educational spaces, educators can bridge Indigenous knowledge systems and modern pedagogical practices, creating learning environments that are culturally grounded, critically engaged, and socially meaningful.

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Appendix: Two Tale Summaries

Summary of the King Lindworm Tale

A “half-man, half-snake” lindworm is born, as one of twins, to a queen, who, in an effort to overcome her childless situation, has followed the advice of an old woman who tells her to eat one of two roses, one red, one white, but not both. She forgot and ate both, causing the first twin to be a lindworm. The second twin is perfect in every way. When he grows up and sets off to find a bride, the lindworm insists that a bride be found for him before his younger brother can marry. Because none of the chosen maidens are pleased by him, he eats each until a shepherd's daughter who spoke to the same crone is brought to marry him, wearing every dress she owns. The lindworm tells her to take off her dress, but she insists he shed a skin for each dress she removes. Eventually his human form is revealed beneath the last skin. Some versions of the story omit the lindworm's twin, and the gender of the soothsayer varies. (King Lindworm 2026)

Summary of The Daughter-in-Law with No Groom

A merchant and his wife have no son but desire a daughter-in-law. The wife suggests a deceptive plan: Marry a girl by using a dagger to represent the non-existent groom. The wedding takes place, and the bride moves in with her new in-laws. They lie to her, claiming her husband is away working. Unhappy and suspicious, the bride notices her mother-in-law strictly forbids her from opening a specific cupboard. One day, fueled by curiosity, she opens it and discovers a very handsome boy hidden inside. He explains that he cannot leave his confinement unless a specific condition is met: There must be a feast with no one to serve, and the merchant must call out, "If anyone is listening, come out to serve." Seizing the opportunity, the daughter-in-law arranges a feast. Once the guests are seated and a server is needed, she instructs her father-in-law to repeat the exact phrase at the door three times. The handsome boy emerges from the cupboard, serves the happy crowd, and is finally freed to live openly as her husband. (Narayan 1997)