

MORAL DIMENSIONS OF SOME SHONA TABOOS (*ZVIERA*)

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the moral dimensions of Shona taboos. It argues that Shona taboos provide moral sanctions that help in shaping a person's unhu (virtue) in the human community. It is through such inculcation of proper behavior in the young and the grown-up that social order is enhanced in a Shona society. In order to achieve this objective, the study classifies taboos into different categories namely those that intend to promote good health, prevent bad habits and those that discourage cruelty to other living creatures. Though Shona taboos can be put into various classes, they by and large, help in shaping human conduct and fostering eco-friendly behavior. Finally, the study probes into the 'ethics' of Shona taboos' use of threats as a tool to enforce commendable character traits in human beings. The basic thesis of this study, therefore, is to show that taboos play a crucial role in Shona moral life.

Keywords: Shona; Moral; Taboos; Creatures; Health; Truth

INTRODUCTION

Of curious intellectual interest is the gravity of change that visits a people as a consequence of the full weight of a domineering influence of colonization and globalization on a people's way of life. For Gelfand (1973), "the Shona possess much that is worth retaining and the prospects are that they will save a good deal of it in succeeding generations." Indeed, among the Shona people's treasured cultural aspects that have, for generations, helped to shape the conduct of its people are taboos.

Shona taboos (*zviera*) are quite rich because of their epistemic, paternalistic and moral dimensions. They are one among a number of sanctions that are employed in order to ensure proper behavior in the Shona society. *Zviera* are strong sanctions that discourage certain forms of human behavior (Tatira, 2000b; *see also* Tatira, 2000a). It is through the use of such sanctions that people come to know of the good traits to inculcate and bad traits to avoid. In this light, Gelfand (1973) affirms that "the Shona have clear concepts of virtues and vices and they have much to say about aberrations of personality." This means that, for Gelfand, the Shona have a clear idea of what constitutes correct human behavior in society and its importance in enhancing a good life devoid of the vices that would render their society chaotic. Only through correct character traits should the relationship between human beings become possible, otherwise social stability is a mirage in a situation where people are not correctly disposed to act morally. It is in light of this quest that the Shona (Tatira, 2005) have devised ways of trying to enforce acceptable behavior among them. In order to ensure that people adhere to the Shona moral code, taboos that threaten severe punishment and misfortunes are used to tame those who may be tempted to perform anti-social actions. Though taboos perform various functions in the life of the Shona, this paper is

going to focus on the moral dimension of some Shona taboos. In this regard, the paper is going to characterize the concept of taboos and highlight their moral import.

SITUATING TABOOS IN THE SHONA WORLDVIEW

The Shona people have an obsession with the desire to inculcate right ethos in an individual. Taboos are among a number of methods through which the character of an individual is shaped in the Shona cosmology. Taboos of the Shona have a teleological nature in that they are sanctions that are meant to inculcate the most appropriate traits in the person that would make him a worthy member of his community. According to Chigidi (2009), “These avoidance rules are restrictive and not directive in the sense that they only tell the individual what not to do and not what to do” and by implication one is made to pick up desirable behavioral traits otherwise acting contrary to the dictates of taboos invites nasty consequences. A good character is a solid weapon against various anti-social behaviors. The outcome of good character is good reputation whereby a person becomes the envy of many because of his commendable dispositions. Though the inculcation of commendable character traits in individuals is a lifelong process, it is believed, among the Shona, that such moral education makes an indelible impression in one’s formative years. In this light, children are taught the difference between good and bad behavior and they also learn to avoid a number of taboos. Strong and severe warnings for those who violate the Shona moral code are quite visible in the taboos.

The actuality of punishment and a host of other nasty consequences if one dares to violate the moral code help to instill commendable moral behavior in the Shona society. It is in light of this fact that Gelfand (1979) contends that “the purpose of these taboos is to instill a sense of discipline into the children as well as one of fear.” The aspect of fear that is normally associated with Shona taboos is a way of dissuading people from performing immoral acts. Hence, it has an instrumental value in that it discourages people from certain such behaviors that run contrary to the ethos of the Shona society. Though Shona taboos are fear inducing, this fear has no intrinsic worth, but is a means to an end, that is, promotion of good behavior. Though this means of achieving a virtuous life is morally questionable, the philosophy in Shona taboos is that the end justifies the means. Fear may not be the best and ethically appropriate tool to achieve the end of a virtuous life in the Shona society, but the goodness of the end trivializes the badness of the means.

However, Gelfand mistakenly thinks that the Shona appeal to the vice of witchcraft in order to make people behave morally. Gelfand (1973) regards witchcraft beliefs as instilled in people with the purpose of “...forcing individuals to conform to the rules of society rather than risk punishment through jealousy or revenge.” Though the witch is a feared person in the Shona cosmology, it is incorrect to wholly ascribe him the role of the Shona moral custodian. Situating Shona people’s appreciation of a virtuous life in their fear for getting bewitched would make witchcraft the prime motivator of virtuous living and would, therefore, make witchcraft a valuable activity in so far as it instrumentally leads to a life of virtue. Though Gelfand (1973) rightly notes that everyone ought to avoid “...suspicion of anti-social attitudes being attributed to him”, such fears cannot be the prime movers for instilling correct dispositions in people. It is an actuality that the Shona treasures a life of *unhu* (virtue) as important in making one a worthwhile member of the community of virtuous people. Therefore, it is fallacious to treat witchcraft as a valuable tool, just like taboos, in inculcating commendable moral traits in individuals.

It is important to note that the individual within the Shona society, just as in other African societies, does not live in a moral island. A human being can only be fully comprehended as an inseparable part of the whole (Menkiti, 2006). This communitarian view of the individual emanates from the realization that the moral life a human being is shaped by not only the community of physical beings but also spiritual forces. In this regard, Gelfand (1979) makes an important observation that though “the origin of...taboos is unknown...they bring home to the child the realization that other forces exist besides the physical ones” in the moral education of members of the Shona society. Since enforcement of Shona moral code has a spiritual dimension, the apprentices of Shona morality come to know of “...the existence of spiritual powers, so important in the Shona religion” (Gelfand, 1979; *see also* Bourdillon, 1987) such as *midzimu* (ancestral spirits) and *Mwari* (Shona God) who provide the living with, among others, direction and appropriate moral guidance (Asante, 2000). The Shona believe that spiritual forces are custodians of their moral code. Ancestral spirits play a crucial role in making sure that one picks up desirable character traits and avoid vices.

The Shona believe that ancestral spirits help in ensuring that one’s character is good provided that that person does not offend them through, among others, failure to perform periodic rituals in their honor as well as a host of other social misdemeanors such as incest (*makunakuna*). Therefore, the violation of taboos can be seen as a direct provocation of ancestral spirits who are the custodian of the moral code. Tatira (2000b) concurs with Gelfand when he notes that “an act that breaches a taboo triggers a reaction supposedly at the supernatural level. This is effective since children easily operate at make-believe level. Without this fear of the unknown, young people are generally adventurous, full of doubts and questions, and like experimenting with things.” He rightly notes that taboos are effective moral tools because their violation invites the ire of ancestral spirits who are one of the key pillars of Shona religion. However, he seems to ignore the fact that taboos in the Shona cosmology are not only relevant among children but indispensable throughout one’s course of life. For the Shona, *ukagara paduri, vakadzi vose vaunoroora vanofa* (if you sit on the mortar in which grain is pounded, all the wives that you marry would die). Such a taboo discourages both young and old males from doing such a bad act because it threatens very serious consequences to the one who may be tempted to violate it. Even in one’s adulthood, such a moral sanction remains relevant because no one is prepared to threaten the life of his wife by sitting on the mortar given the Shona belief in *ngozi* (avenging spirits). For the Shona, if a person is willfully killed, his spirit will come back to haunt the killer and his relatives. Since the loss of one’s wife through willful actions is a tragedy that invites *ngozi*, this bad habit of sitting on the mortar is avoided because of the fear of *ngozi*. Thus, taboos are a form of moral education that one is introduced to in the formative years of one’ character and have lifetime relevance.

For Gelfand (1979), through informal instruction at home, the young are taught “...what taboos they should know...” in the life-long Shona syllabi. Such informal teaching is expertly scheduled not to interfere with other important preoccupations of human life. So, nights after meals and completion of household chores as well as spring when there is relatively little work to be done in the fields and gardens, furnish the ideal time to inculcate commendable traits of conduct in the young so that they become members of the community that exudes with *unhu*. *Unhu* as understood by the Shona entails a state of character that is acceptable not only by the person concerned but more importantly by his society (*see* Menkiti, 1984). Such commendable traits are derived from moral education administered and influenced by, among others, parents, family sages and group practices. Thus, a sound moral education administered through taboos help in preparing and perfecting the young to earn an ethical life external to the family confines and in the public domain.

Unlike proverbs and riddles whose method of imparting is, to some extent, dialogical, taboos are teleological commands that are meant to shape the conduct of a person, as he is perceived as a member of a community. Gelfand (1979) would want to call taboos 'avoidance rules' precisely because they implore their recipients to desist from certain behaviors because of their undesirable tendencies within a community of other beings. For him, avoidance rules or taboos are one of the three Shona pillars that prepare one into a whole person who has an understanding of reality and whose conduct is admirable. The other two pillars are proverbs and riddles. These pillars are taught to the young until adulthood. Almost always "...when a child has misbehaved in some way, an appropriate...avoidance rule...may be cited" (Gelfand, 1979) as a way of correcting that immoral act. Thus, the Shona's penchant for a good life devoid of bad human qualities is achieved partly by the role taboos play in regulating the conduct of members of society given the actuality of conflicting interests when and wherever there are more than one person in a given physical space.

The richness of Shona taboos as exhibited in its moral and paternalistic dimensions underlines the centrality of *unhu* among the Shona. *Unhu* for the Shona is exhibited, among others, through one's interaction with fellow human beings, the environment and the way he caters for his hygienic requirements. For this reason, therefore, the paper is going to discuss taboos about health, good and bad habits and those that discourage cruelty not only to fellow human beings but also to the whole community of sentient beings and the environment in general. The totality of these taboos put together is crucial in inculcating disposition that makes a person well-disposed to exhibit *unhu* through his utterances, words and deeds. Though scholarship has tended to come up with various categories of taboos (Gelfand, 1979; Tatira, 2000b), this paper argues that taboos have one central goal in that they aim towards the perfection of one's character in all facets of human life.

One key attribute of Shona taboos is that they have sublime moral import. The moral import is not apparent from a face value analysis but requires a passionate exposition in order to unearth the real moral sanctions behind them. Another attribute of Shona taboos is that in order to inculcate correct character traits in an individual, one is prevented from doing certain actions by revealing the nasty and fear-inducing consequences of doing so. Granted the actuality that humanity desires a good life and loathes a miserable one, through moral sanctions that tell apprentices that if one behaves in a certain way, his life will be affected in a negative way, people would tend to avoid vices and opt for a virtuous life.

Shona taboos do not reveal the correct consequences for performing certain actions but give a consequence that a human being naturally loathes and fears. Therefore, for one to comprehend the complexity of Shona taboos, one has to look at their common and hidden meaning. For example, the Shona people are discouraged from sitting on hearthstones on the common understanding that doing so would lead one to murder his wife or one's wife will die. Through fear of losing a wife as a result of such an undesirable habit of sitting on hearthstones, one would avoid doing so. However, the real reason why people are discouraged from sitting on hearthstones has nothing to do with causing death to one's partner but is a sanction meant to inculcate virtues of cleanliness in individuals.

It is in light of the intricacy of Shona taboos that apprentices are shaped into a people that cherish a life of *unhu* as opposed to a life of *unhu hwakaipa* (vicious character). Thus, Shona ethics as reflected in taboos employs a carrot and stick approach in that apprentices are made to believe that failure to live a life of *unhu*, bad things will visit them. Though the end justifies the means, the means is problematic in that it instills *unhu* in people through means that outsiders of the

Shona society would regard as unethical and controversial. However, such a method of inculcating *unhu* in the young achieves its desirable result *albeit* through use of uncouth tactics that threatens nasty personal and family consequences to the one who dares to violate them.

TABOOS THAT PROMOTE GOOD HEALTH

Shona people are well known for their penchant for a hygienic living, cleanliness and environmental consciousness. For Tatira (2000b), “*zviera* are vital in transmitting values on issues pertaining to hygiene...cruelty, precaution and good behavior” on members of society. Their traditional houses are generally neatly built, decorated, thatched and kept clean. This penchant for cleanliness transcends the upkeep of the individual to cover one’s character as exhibited through his interactions with other beings and his relation to the world external to him in general. It is a Shona actuality that one’s *unhu* is also exhibited by the manner in which he deals with not only human beings but also other living creatures and the environment in general.

According to the traditional African metaphysical outlook, human beings tend to be cosmically humble and, therefore, not only more respectful of other people but also more cautious in their attitudes to plants, animals and inanimate things, and the various visible forces of the world (Tangwa, 2006; *see also* Duri & Mapara, 2007). Thus, one is attracted to the Shona people’s harmony with nature and sustainable use of natural resources through, among others, their pole and dagga houses that are thatched with grass, and neatly arranged in a linear order along mountains and rivers. However, despite the Shona’s environmental consciousness and quest for sound hygienic standards, there are members of their society who may be tempted to engage in activities that go against these virtues. Because of the Shona’s obsession with maintaining good health through hygienic living and prevention of anti-social activities thereof, a number of *zviera* are put in place. One taboo that attempts to entrench good hygienic standards among human beings is that:

Ukagara papfihwa, unouraya mukadzi
(If you sit on a hearthstone, you will kill your wife)

This taboo is directed at someone who has the habit of sitting on hearthstones that form the pillars of a fireplace. A Shona fireplace is made up of three stones that are meant to anchor cooking pots. The hearth is, thus, a very important place in Shona cosmology because it defines womanhood and symbolizes aspects of Shona sexuality (Ashwanden, 1982). It is the woman’s territory that has a sacredness that must be respected because it symbolizes his sexual parts. The presence of *moto* (fire) in man among the Shona means presence of productive sexual activity and its absence means lack of productive sexual activity between the man and the women. The man must be able to ‘cause a fire’ on the ‘hearth’ literally meaning that he must be able to make a woman pregnant. Thus, the taboo gives sanctions to those who may be tempted to sit on the pillars of this important and sacred place in the Shona worldview. It implores people not to sit on hearthstones because doing so would lead one to kill one’s partner or the partner would die mysteriously. The taboo touches on a very delicate aspect of life. Among the Shona, for a person to be respected as a *munhu*, he or she must be married and have children. Thus, anything that threatens the demise of one’s partner brings a lot of fear to him.

However, the actual reason for such a moral sanction is that it is unhealthy to seat on a place where food is prepared. By their very nature, hearthstones are sooty and whoever comes into contact with them risks being corrupted by their soot. Thus, seating on hearthstones makes one’s buttocks blackish as a result of the soot. Another reason for such a moral

sanction is that one can get burnt if the hearthstones are hot and one also may be tempted to move them away thereby destroying the fireplace. Therefore, there is a sense in which seating on hearthstones is an affront to Shona ethos. The moral sanction is strongly emphasized especially on men who have the habit of sitting on hearthstones. Men are required to be as far as possible from the cooking place so as to allow women enough space and time to prepare food for the family without unnecessary interference. So, if a man has the habit of sitting on hearthstones when a woman is cooking, he is tempted to make comments about how she ought to prepare food that may eventually offend his wife, parent or sister who would be cooking. For that reason, the Shona have devised clever ways of dissuading people from sitting on hearthstones.

The second taboo under this category is:

Ukaitira tsvina munzira, unoita mamota kumagaro
(If you excrete on the road, you develop boils on the buttocks)

Even though the Shona have a penchant for cleanliness, there are some among them who may show a lack of *unhu* by excreting on pathways (*nzira*) not only because they are not aware of the badness of doing so, but also for sadistic reasons. Such vicious characters may be motivated by the desire to make passer byes step on them and get annoyed thereof. In addition, young people who are, by and large, targets of this avoidance rule may not know the wrongness of excreting on pathways. As a result, such a moral sanction is meant for such people who may be tempted to excrete on pathways. Those who do so and those who have a potential of doing so are warned that such actions would invite painful boils on the buttocks (*magaro*). Such a serious affliction would affect one's movements and can be a subject of ridicule, if people discover that one has boils on the buttocks. Thus, because of fear of such consequences, one would always try to avoid excreting on pathways. As if to confirm the 'truth' of such a moral sanction, some people may develop boils on the buttocks after excreting on pathways. Though the development of such boils may be just but accidental after one had excreted on the road, the Shona often fail to make a distinction between a commonsensical consequence of such a bad deed and the medical explanation for the development of boils.

The actual consequence of excreting on the road is that it is unhygienic to do so because pedestrians, especially those who are bare footed may accidentally step on them and thereby risk catching disease-causing bacteria that may be carried in human stools such as cholera bacteria. In addition, small children may play with these stools thereby compromising their health. The offender also risks being seen and assaulted by passer-byes, overrun by vehicles or scotch carts. The normal reaction of a Shona when he comes across a stool along the road is to question the character of the offender. The character of the offender is reflected in his deed of excreting on human pathways. Terms such as *imbwa* (dog) and *benzi* (a mad fellow) are normally used to characterize the *unhu* of this person. Thus, the Shona do not take lightly those people whose flawed character compromises the health and well-being of members of society. In light of this, therefore, it is immoral and unhygienic to excrete along human pathways. Threats of witchcraft are also used in order to dissuade people from engaging in such immoral acts. The Shona believe that some bad people can take one's stools and bewitch them such that the culprit would have great difficulties in excreting and urinating.

TABOOS THAT PREVENT BAD HABITS

In the Shona worldview, the term *unhu* is used to refer to *tsika* (good character). Normally a person with a commendable disposition is referred to as *munhu chaiye*, meaning a person of good character. For the Shona (Gelfand, 1981), *unhu* plays a supreme role in people's lives as they interact with fellow human beings and all that constitute the world external to them. Thus, for the Shona, a good person is the one who exhibits good behavior towards others as reflected in his actions and interactions with not only fellow human beings but also the whole of nature. Such a person is liked and respected in the community because of his good dispositions.

For Gelfand (1973), that "... state of being approved of, or that quality which causes a person's presence to be appreciated and to give a feeling of pleasure to others is called *unhu*." *Unhu* among the Shona is a product of moral education conducted by, among others, parents, sages and group practices that are inherited from past generations. So, various stakeholders in the community teach *unhu* to members, a concept that can be equated to the western concept of virtue. Thus, a good man among the Shona lives a life of *unhu* and his commendable character is reflected by his actions as he interacts with fellow human beings and the external world in general. The importance that the Shona people attach to commendable character is reflected in taboos that encourages good behavior and discourages bad behavior.

One typical example of such taboos is:

Ukadongorera munhu achigeza, unoita showera

(If you peep on a person who is bathing, you will develop pimples on your eyelids)

The Shona treasures the natural beauty of a person. In the traditional Shona society, people normally bath in rivers and streams and most of the bathing places have assumed some form of permanence. There are bathing places for the male and female members of society respectively. No one is supposed to violate this unwritten rule that men are not supposed to bath at woman's bathing spots and vice versa. Men who crave to see those women that they desire most in their natural beauty, that is, in their nakedness when bathing normally do the bad habit of peeping on women who are bathing. Fearing the actuality that such extraordinary desires might turn out into a neurosis that may open flood gates to such fantasies leading to vices such as rape and adulterous relationships, Shona people have come up with sanctions that discourage people from exposing themselves to situations that may tempt them to indulge in anti-social activities as a result of such uncouth practices. This taboo posits that the offender's perceptual tools, that is, eyes, would develop painful pimples as a result of such uncouth peeping.

Highlighting the dangers that visit the one who violates this taboo, therefore, helps in curtailing such immoral acts. It is interesting to note that some of these avoidance rules have assumed the status of '*the truth*' in that most people in the Shona society accept that whenever one develops pimples on the eye lids, it is because one, in one way or another, peeped at a naked person bathing. Thus, the one who develops pimples on the eyelids, especially men, may fear being laughed at for having peeped at naked women. However, the actual truth is that such nefarious and clandestine lust for one's beauty in one's nakedness may invite temptations on the part of the perceiver to fulfill his abnormal desires for a certain person by uncouth means. Such a person is regarded as a bad person and his excessive passions make him more disposed to rape his victims because he is so desirous of naked women. For Tatira (2000b), members of society ought to be assured of their privacy through such "taboos [that] repress symptoms of potentially criminal behavior." Among the Shona, a person who covets (*kuchiva*) is a threat to social order because he is attracted to what is not his such as a

neighbor's wife or children and material possessions. Such a person is driven by a strong impulse that forces him to do certain things that are immoral. Gelfand (1973) equates a covetous person to a "...a witch, since his covetousness might drive to the practices of witchcraft in order to achieve his desires." Therefore, the Shona try to discourage such bad character traits by the strongest moral sanctions that threaten ill health for the one who dares to do such immoral actions.

Ukateedzera chirema, unoita chiremawo

(If you imitate a lame person, you will become lame too)

The Shona may view people with disabilities with suspicion because it is generally agreed that such mishaps are causally related to certain actions or non-actions by parents or family members. Though the Shona believe that deformities in a person can be a result of biological abnormalities, it is commonly believed that deformities that one is born with are, among others, a result of the anger of *vadzimu*. The punishment and retribution of *vadzimu* can be manifested in the form of deformities in the children of the offending persons.

Disability is also blamed on the works of jealous witches who do not want to see a certain family having able-bodied children. Thus, it is believed that disability is 'contagious' in that the one who openly laughs at or imitate, for example, the awkward walks of a disabled person would also become lame. No one wants the burdens and negative public perception associated with being lame. Therefore, through the moral threat that if one were to imitate a lame person one risks being lame also, people feel morally obligated to respect people with disabilities. This is enough moral sanction to discourage people from belittling the humanity of disabled people despite their biological abnormalities.

Therefore, the Shona discourage people from looking down upon members of society who are lame through making disparaging remarks about their biological conditions. Such moral sanctions are enforced through threats that the one who go against this taboo risks being lame too. Thus, *kunyomba* (abusing or mocking) those who are lame is a bad human quality that the Shona normally blame on lack of adequate moral education. A person who belittles another human being on the basis of one's disability lacks *unhu* and the Shona have a clever way of curtailing such bad habits through appropriate taboos.

TABOOS THAT DISCOURAGE CRUELTY TO OTHER LIVING CREATURES

The Shona have an environmental ethic that takes into account the interests of not only sentient beings, but the whole of nature in general. Though they do not disapprove of sustainable use of nature's resources including other living creatures for, among others, draught power and food, they are against wanton destruction of fauna and flora without justification. They also take great exception to the cruelty to animals because for them, all animals are sentient and therefore deserve to be given moral consideration. According to ESS (2010), there was a common cultural belief in the African cosmology that forbade unwarranted killing and brutalization of wild animals, "...especially those which society held in contempt such as hyenas and monkeys, and also the young of all species" and "there can be little doubt that these strategies emanated from people who had concern for their environment and its ecosystems, an attitude which enabled societies to conserve their resources on a sustainable basis without written legislation." For them, a person who exhibit violent surges through, for instance, wanton cutting down of trees without any need for them and cruelty to other living creatures lacks *unhu* in that a person trained to act in moderation is not supposed to show lack of concern even to the rest of fauna and

flora. Lalonde (2010) argues that African societies have "...positive traditional management practices that have been adapted and passed down over countless generations in harmony with the short and long-term carrying capacities of the local ecosystem. Some of these positive practices are based on symbolism, and involve spiritual rituals, religious practices, social taboos, and sacred animal totems.

For the Shona, the natural environment has certain sacred places that are so indispensable in their religious beliefs such as certain mountains, curves, rivers, grave sites and forests that ought not to be defiled through, among others, undue cutting down of trees that grace them and killing of other living creatures for the sake of it. Therefore, the Shona cherish a life of living in harmony with the natural environment and what it holds. The Shona people's dislike for cruelty to other living creatures and the environment in general is reflected through a number of *zviera* such as the following:

Ukauraya datya matenga, anotadza kunaisa mvura
(If you kill a frog, heavens will fail to bring down rain)

It is a truism in all cultures that rain or water is indispensable for the sustenance of life on earth. Both animals and vegetation needs water for their continued survival. Therefore, any human action or otherwise that tends to compromise the availability of water is feared and discouraged. Thus, in order to stop cruelty to animals such as frogs (*matatya*), the Shona have devised a way of stopping such cruel and immoral acts.

Among the Shona, frogs are not a delicacy. So, whoever kills a frog is not killing it for justifiable purpose of consuming it, but simply for, perhaps, sadistic reasons. Even though the Shona people approve of killing animals for meat, they strongly disapprove of people who kill animals simply for the pleasure of doing so. Shona myths have it that traditional wells that are normally graced by a large population of frogs are blessed because frogs would insure an unlimited supply of water as a result of their urine. Thus, killing frogs would not only have the ripple effects of preventing rain from falling, but also wells will dry up.

However, the actual truth behind such a taboo is that, because of the Shona's passionate environmental ethic, the killing of small creatures such as frogs for no justifiable purpose is immoral. It reflects the flawed character of the person who performs such immoral acts in that wanton destruction of the lives of other living creatures may open floodgates for abuse even of human beings. The Shona often remark that *mhuka netupuka tune ropawo sevanhu* (animals and other small creatures have blood too) meaning that they are capable of experiencing pleasure and pain just like sentient human beings. In this regard, that which has blood must be treated with respect as an end in itself. Thus, a person who beats up his donkeys, pigs, or cattle is normally reprimanded for doing so because these animals also feel pain and the reasoning is that no one has a right to inflict pain or end the life of other living creatures without a genuine reason. In this regard, cruelty to other living creatures may lead to a slippery slope scenario whereby the offender may extend such cruelty to human beings.

Italian Medieval philosopher, Thomas Aquinas (Tranøy, 1964), British empiricist, John Locke (Regan, 1983) and German rationalist philosopher, Immanuel Kant (Singer, 1993) argued that human beings ought not be cruel to other living creatures because doing so may harden one's heart towards fellow human beings. Regan (Singer, 1993) quotes Locke as having remarked that:

One thing that I have frequently observed in children, that when they have got possession of any poor Creature, they are apt to use it ill: they often *torment*, and treat very roughly, young Birds, Butterflies, and such other poor Animals, which fall into their Hands, and that with a seeming kind of Pleasure. This, I think should be watched in them, and if they incline to any such *Cruelty*, they should be taught the contrary Usage. For the Custom of Tormenting and Killing of Beasts, will, by Degrees, harden their Minds even towards Men: and they, who delight in the Suffering and Destruction of Inferior Creatures, will not be apt to be very compassionate, or benign to those of their own kind...

So, a tormentor of other living creatures may extend his cruelty to human beings. While Aquinas and Kant argued that other living creatures could not be ascribed direct moral status because they are not rational, Locke appealed to the criterion of sentiency to ascribe some form of moral status to other living creatures. For Aquinas and Kant (Boss, 1999), other living creatures ought not to be mistreated only in so far as doing so may hurt their owners. Thus, for them, other living creatures have instrumental as opposed to intrinsic worth. A thing has intrinsic worth if it is important in its own self, while a being has instrumental value only in so far as it is a means to some end. In the Shona worldview, other living creatures have intrinsic value in so far as they are sentient. Thus, such a moral sanction discourages the mistreatment of other living creatures, big or small, for sadistic reasons.

Ukatasva imbwa, unozoita muroyi
(If you ride a dog, you will become a witch)

Because of the vilification and isolation that often visits a person accused of witchcraft, no one is willing to be associated with witchcraft, for whatever reasons. Such fears of being associated with witchcraft (Lagerwerf, 1992; Zvarevashe, 1970) are used to discourage people from riding a dog. The Shona believe that, in their nocturnal escapades, witches ride on hyenas or fellow human beings, and a person who often claims tiredness in the morning is normally said to have been rode by a witch during the night. It is possibly from this practice that the Shona commonly believe that whoever rides a dog is simply behaving like a witch that rides hyenas and human beings at night on his evil errands.

A dog is a small animal that, ordinarily, cannot sustain the weight of a human being. So, riding a dog is simply being cruel to it. In light of the Shona people's concern for the welfare of other living creatures, particularly the domesticated ones, those who have a habit of riding dogs are reprimanded from doing so by way of taboos. Riding a dog, therefore, reflects badly on the character of the one who does this action because such action totally disregards the pain and anguish that the dog undergoes as a result of such an action. The dog may bite the rider because the pain it undergoes may be too unbearable. Therefore, a person of *unhu* cannot stoop so low to ride a dog.

A person who does such a cruel act to another living creature loses respect in society. Such a person has *utsinye* (cruelty) or has *mwoyo wakaipa* (a bad heart) because his deeds are predicated on unnecessary infliction of pain on other sentient beings. Therefore, such a person ought to be discouraged through the avoidance rule that implores people not to misuse or abuse other living creatures. Such a person may fair badly in his relations to fellow human beings. The Shona regard domesticated animals such as dogs as important 'stakeholders' at the homestead because there are certain key responsibilities that they have and do with distinction such as protecting the household from intruders as well as

safeguarding its owner if he is in danger of being attacked by fellow human beings and other living creatures. Therefore, the Shona see dogs as key members of the family and this entails that they ought not to be unnecessarily mistreated.

Therefore, the one who abuses dogs and other living creatures exhibits a bad conscience and therefore moral insensitivity to other living creatures. Just like the Shona, British hedonistic utilitarian, Jeremy Bentham (Boss, 1999) advocated for the ascription of moral status to other living creatures. Utilitarianism as conceptualized by Bentham holds that an action is right if it brings about net amount of pleasure to the ones affected by that given action. He argues that the criterion for the ascription of moral rights to other living creatures ought not to be based on, among others, the ability to reason and talk, but on the ability to experience pain and pleasure. For him (Miller, 1983), "...the question is not, Can they reason, nor Can they talk? but, can they suffer." Among the Shona, a person who unnecessarily inflicts pain on a living creature is simply a bad man because his cruelty to other living creatures may end up negatively affecting his conduct in the human society. In view of this, the Shona regards the one who abuses other living creatures as having a serious moral defect that may have slippery slope effects to human beings as well. Hence, taboos are one of the major sources of Shona environmental ethics. However, "colonialism and modern western thought regarded these cultural systems as backward, superstitious and inimical to rapid economic growth. It introduced laws which dealt a devastating blow to the environmentally-friendly culture which governed the day-to-day activities of indigenous people. Through the use of force, white settlers appropriated large tracts of rich land and forced the majority of African people into the most denuded animal-free areas, which they called reserves" (Kasere, 2010). It is an actuality that after years of colonial subjugation, the Shona and other indigenous social groupings still clings to their age-old belief systems on, among others, the superiority of the spiritual forces and the fact that morally scandalous behavior such as disregard of certain avoidance rules attracts the ire of these spiritual forces.

SHONA TABOOS AND SUSTAINABLE USE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Conservation and sustainable use of nature's resources are not impositions from the world external to Africa through, among others, colonialism and globalization as pro-West scholars would want to argue. In the context of Zimbabwe's concerted efforts to foster and enhance sustainable use of the environment through programs such as CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources) (Mapedza, 2007), the power to ensure biodiversity and sustainable use of nature's animal and other resources is vested in grassroots people. However, the efforts by such bodies to foster eco-friendly attitudes (Kasere, 2010) among people in Zimbabwe is just but a complementary endeavor to strengthen the cultural values of the indigenous people as reflected in, among others, taboos that have ensured a responsible use of nature's resources. Kasere (2010) rightly notes that "the cultural component in Campfire not only proves to the world that sustainability is not a creation of western scholarship, as many would argue, but also explains why Campfire has managed to rapidly win the hearts of millions of Zimbabweans when other programs, both in Zimbabwe and abroad, could not make it beyond the design stage." Thus, there is a sense in which responsible use of nature's resources predates colonialism and other Western inroads into the Shona and other African societies.

Kasere (2010) repudiates the prevailing contention that conceptualizes "...Africans as non-conservationists at heart who have fallen in love with Campfire only because of the meat and money it generates. My contention, on the contrary, is that the program has been accepted by people because it does not contradict the African wisdom about environment. While economic incentives are indispensable, the program preaches and practices sustainable consumption as a vehicle

for development. This is the language the Zimbabwean people and their ancestors have been practicing since time immemorial.” A cursory look at the taboos that discourages people from harming the environment in various ways such as brutalization of some vulnerable creatures and pollution amply shows that the Shona and other African social groupings have always valued the need to exploit nature’s resources in a sustainable way. For example, people are discouraged from cutting down wild fruit trees primarily because doing so would compromise the livelihood of both human and other living creatures that depend on nature’s providence for sustenance. In addition, some of nature’s endowments such as rivers, big trees and mountains were accorded spiritual significance (Osei, 2006) because, by and large, they were seen as the sanctuary of the spiritual realm and therefore in need of jealous protection. For Kasere (2010), “certain forests were sacred and highly protected ...[implying] the scientific importance of preserving forests for the regulation of hydrological cycles and exchanges of gases and nutrients...Any human being risked disappearing for good if he tried to trespass into the area. Some traditional leaders, particularly chiefs, were buried in these sacred forests, and certain protocol had to be applied before any human encroachment could be allowed.” Thus, the religious importance of some of nature’s endowments meant that they could not be defiled and tempered with through, among others, wanton exploitation and pollution. Prohibitions against misuse of nature’s resources through taboos have been shown to help to foster sustainable use of the environment that ensures biodiversity. Atiti (2010) also subscribes to the notion that “respect for ancestral spirits directly contributed to biodiversity conservation. For instance, plants that existed in shrines were protected, as trees were not felled there. The belief that ancestral spirits lived in caves and rock shelters among some communities; assured conservation of biodiversity, where such physical structures were found. The landscape and trees in such sites were protected against destruction. Trees that were regarded as sacred or ceremonial were never used for any purpose. In many local communities, all big trees were respected and large forests were regarded as sacred.” Thus, taboos are among a number of well-thought out strategies among the Shona and other African societies of sustainable (Chigidi, 2009) management of nature’s resources for the sake of the present generations and posterity. Thus, taboos are among a number of strategies used by the Shona to foster sustainable use of the environment and to ensure biodiversity.

Even though some fear-inducing ‘lies’ are used as a deterrent to those who have a penchant to exploit nature’s resources in an unsustainable way, the real reason behind such prohibition is the desire that ensure a more responsible use of nature’s resources. Kasere (2010) rightly asserts that “long before Dr David Livingstone had set foot in Southern Africa, Zimbabweans had cultural links with their environment second to that of no other known culture in the world. They had a distinct culture of conservation overseen by the chief, in a *tete-à-tete* with the great Shona spirit Mhondoro. From childhood, everyone was taught both the material and spiritual value of trees, forests, animals, water, snakes, birds and all other natural resources.” Thus, unwarranted cutting down of trees and exploitation other endowments of nature was not acceptable for conservation purposes as well as for religious reasons. Where earthly police have proved to be incapable of enforcing sustainable use of nature’s resources, taboos through their fear-inducing mechanisms that rope the spiritual world have proved to be a lifelong panacea to the human-directed threat to biodiversity and sustainable use of nature’s resources thereof.

Even though natural resources in the traditional Shona societies and other African social groupings suffer the fate of “the tragedy of the commons”, such common ownership, contrary to common notion that it breeds irresponsibility in resource utilization, has proved to be a panacea to unsustainable use of nature’s resources since the communal eye as reflected in prohibitions contained in taboos serve as a decisive deterrent to irresponsible exploitation of the environment. Careless

use of nature's resources reflects badly on the offender's character and this has unpleasant consequences on the offender because nature as conceived in the African cosmology has a spiritual dimension. Violation of the avoidance rules attract both earthly and spiritual punishments that vary with the nature and degree of the offence. Another factor that cemented sustainable use of the environment is totemism whereby human clans are identified with a particular totem. Kasere (2010) reckons that "although the system was not protectionist par excellence, these totemic groups represented interest groups for their respective animals and could not stand total depletion or abuse. Western animal rights groups; who from their well-ventilated animal-free offices, shout their worry for aesthetic reasons that they have more concern for wildlife than do Zimbabweans; should be reminded that that of wildlife in this country had far more to do with the belief system of indigenous people who associated their survival with that of certain species. They can never be considered less caring than foreigners about the extinction of wildlife." These totems forbid the killing of certain wild life species that represent certain people's totem. Thus, the systems of totems help in ensuring biodiversity and responsible use of nature's resources.

The threat of punishment as contained in taboos makes the would-be offenders reconsider their decision because of the severity of the punishment that goes with violating certain taboos. In this regard, "punishment for violating the cultural environmental laws in Zimbabwe before colonialism was extremely severe. As the sovereign and overall custodian of the environment, the chief executed his divine right to safeguard the environment with a strong hand" (Kasere, 2010). With the environment viewed in its totality as a common heritage that is indispensable for the survival of humanity, no one had unrestricted freedom to exploit the environment with impunity to the disadvantage of all. Since nature's resources are communally owned, each and everyone has a responsibility to safeguard the environment "...and therefore had an interest in the behavior of others. To make matters worse, everyone knew that the invisible Mhondoro [lion] spirit watched over their behavior, and deviants risked a series of misfortunes or provoking a natural disaster that would affect the entire community if they lacked observance" (Kasere, 2010). In this regard, the spiritual flavor that is associated with Shona taboos assist in fostering sustainable use of the environment. Mhondoro (lion) spirit is a revered Shona territorial spirit (Bourdillon, 1987) that is believed to have dominion over a larger area and the anger that is brought about by this spirit is analogous to that of a lion that roars with death-inducing thunder. Fear of reprisal from the Mhondoro that is consequent upon violation of certain taboos provide decisive checks and balances to those who may be tempted to so act in a manner that negates the sustainable use of the environment. Through use of taboos that act as mechanisms of frightening members of society from behaving in certain ways that they deem to be socially unacceptable, the Shona and other African societies have succeeded in influencing the behavior of their members in a desirable way.

THE QUESTION OF *TRUTH* IN SHONA TABOOS

What is implicit in the Shona taboos are their epistemic and moral aspects laced in a thoroughly paternalistic thinking. Shona taboos give knowledge of what constitute good and bad human behavior. According to Shona ethics as reflected in taboos, people must know that good human behavior leads to social acceptance and appreciation of one's commendable disposition by everyone who interacts with this person. On the other hand, a person who is disposed to act in a vicious way is despised by society because almost always his actions are anti-social. Thus, through knowledge of taboos, people come to know of the right character traits to uphold and inculcate and the bad character traits to avoid and drop.

Taboos are recounted to the young as part of their moral education. They are paternalistic in that they, by and large, attempt to prevent people from engaging in activities that are anti-social and, therefore, immoral. Thus, through the knowledge of the good, one becomes well-disposed to act virtuously and through knowledge of the vices; one becomes disposed to almost always avoid exhibiting moral decadence through his actions.

However, one may question the morality of Shona taboos as a means of influencing right conduct in moral agents and avoiding bad traits. It can be argued that the knowledge as contained in Shona taboos is traditional knowledge in that it satisfies the belief condition. The apprentices of this knowledge are supposed to take it without questioning its truth-value and justification. By and large, such knowledge very much falls short of knowledge as conceptualized in the Western philosophical tradition where it is defined as justified true belief. Such a definition of knowledge finds inspiration from Plato's *Theaetetus* (Potter, 1987). For a belief to be regarded as a piece of knowledge, it must be true and warranted by sufficient and relevant evidence. However, the question of the truth and justification conditions in Shona taboos seem not to be important, perhaps, because the quest of truth telling and furnishing of evidence is not important here, but what is important is that people are sufficiently discouraged from engaging in anti-social behavior.

Shona taboos are obsessed with instilling fear in moral agents so that they do not perform certain actions. The fear element is at the expediency of truth telling. Gelfand (1979) notes that "many avoidance rules [are] enforced; some of the consequences of breaking them [are] believed by everyone, but others [are] empty threats employed to discipline children. Those feared most and therefore obeyed [are] the ones that [threaten] death to the people who [break] them." However, the supposed 'emptiness' of such 'threats' is not apparent among the Shona because if people were to 'know' that they are but just empty threats, they would not abide by them. Hence, they would cease to be effective moral tools. For instance, when a Shona taboo says that if you sit on the road, you develop boils on the buttocks, truth as it is generally understood is not being told because there is no relationship whatsoever between the biological causes of boils and the action of sitting on the road. Though the Shona acknowledge the actuality that every effect has a cause, upon philosophical analysis, the cause-effect relationships as reflected in taboos seem to be loose. Thus, the failure as exhibited in Shona taboos, to tell the true consequences of certain actions may be seen as an instance of moral mis-education in that the true consequences of certain actions are substituted for those that instill fear and discipline thereof. This might have tragic consequences to the acquisition of indubitable and infallible knowledge of the consequences of engaging in certain actions.

Telling moral apprentices fear-inducing taboos may achieve the desired result of influencing their moral decisions in the desired fashion, but that would not improve their moral knowledge in the true sense because falsehoods can never be termed knowledge in the strictest sense. The tendency is, therefore, that falsehoods become institutionalized to the extent that they are taken as the *truth* as it may be passed on from generation to generation as knowledge. The consequences of some taboos have become so entrenched in people's minds such that they now believe them beyond any reasonable doubt. For instance, the common consequence of the taboo that if you pip on women who are naked you will develop pimples is widely accepted. So, if one were seen with pimples on his eyes, people would strongly believe that he has done the uncouth action of peeping at naked women. Therefore, upon seeing such a person, they would automatically doubt his moral uprightness. Thus, such education that informs its apprentices that the presence of pimples on one's eye

lids is a result of the immoral act of peeping on women who are naked is not only unethical, but also prevents moral apprentices from knowing the true consequences of performing given actions.

There is a sense in which taboos can be seen as contradicting the Shona cardinal virtue of truth-telling (*kutaura chokwadi*) in that moral apprentices are not told the truth about the consequences of certain behaviors, but those consequences that would make a person feel totally discouraged from acting thus. From a tender age, children are taught about the badness of lying (*kunyepa*) and the one who commits this vice is heavily punished. The Shona, however, believe that truth-telling is situational and contextual in that there are certain cases where truth-telling is moral and others when it is immoral. In light of these exceptions, therefore, there is nothing strange or immoral for the Shona to falsify the consequences of certain behaviors if doing so leads to desirable behavioral changes among human beings. Despite the apparent mis-education that is characteristic of taboos, members of the Shona society still cling on to such a clever way of fostering desirable behavior in people. According Meade (1930) as quoted by Chigidi (2009):

To respect taboo was a duty towards society, because whoever broke it caught the taboo contagion and transmitted it to everyone and everything he came into contact with. Thus it behoved the community to enjoin respect for taboo, and even more, it behoved the individual to avoid contact with things taboo, otherwise his infraction of this potentially conventional inhibition recoiled upon him, in particular, with deadly severity.

Defenders of Shona taboos would say that the reason why the correct consequences of performing certain actions are substituted for the fear-inducing ones is that since these taboos are primarily meant for the young, they must be crafted and presented in such a manner that would totally discourage one from performing certain actions for the fear of some nasty consequences thereof. Thus, the one who steals other people's crops (*kuba zvirimwa zvevamwe*) feels the moral pressure to avoid doing so because if he thus acts, he risks developing an extraordinarily big stomach that is an embarrassment in the public. Thus, this common consequence of stealing instills fear into the would-be thief such that he would desist from doing so.

Though the implicit moral lesson in this taboo is that the thief risks being harmed and despised by his victims and the community in general for his anti-social acts, a morally frightening consequence is given in order to ensure correct behavior that extols the safety of private property. Stealing (*kuba*) is a serious moral defect that is highly despised such that a concoction called *rukwa* is used to punish the thief. It is believed that *rukwa* causes the thief and whoever would have consumed the stolen crops to, among other effects, die or become deformed. For Gelfand (1973), if the thief and his family members "...eat any of the crops to which the medicine (*rukwa*) has been applied, a thief and his family would develop swollen abdomens or burning red mouths." Thus, the use of *rukwa* is meant to guard against bad deeds among members of a given society.

Though not all crops are protected by *rukwa*, the Shona generalize that whoever steals crops risks developing an extraordinarily big tummy or red mouths. In this taboo, it can be seen that the common consequence and the true consequence are loosely in agreement. The common consequence has a tendency of universalizing the result of the character defect of stealing to include all instances of stealing. This, to some extent, shows that not all Shona taboos are totally instances of moral mis-education. Some taboos' common consequences and true consequences tend to loosely

agree. Therefore, even though most Shona taboos seem to lead to moral mis-education, what is important is that they endeavor to inculcate the correct character dispositions in their apprentices and discourages bad character disposition. Thus, the common thread of Shona taboos is that they aim towards shaping the conduct of people in order to make them worthy members of society.

CONCLUSION

The study reflected on the moral dimensions of Shona taboos. It noted that Shona taboos are meant to instill correct dispositions in people through fear-inducing moral sanctions. The paper also noted that even though Shona taboos have limitations in that they do not disclose the true consequences of certain human character defects, the most important aspect of these taboos is to inculcate commendable character traits in their apprentices that would make them worthy members of society that would not only behave in a desirable way towards fellow human beings, but also relate to the environment in a manner that embodies respect for biodiversity as well as sustainable exploitation of nature's resources. Shona taboos provide prohibitions that forbid people from behaving in such manners that are a threat to the welfare and wellbeing of fellow human beings and the rest of the environment. Even though taboos foster commendable character traits among people through threat of severe reprisals for the ones who violate them, they have desirable utility because they help to keep the wicked in check. In this regard, though the means of enforcing desirable behavior among people are morally questionable, the end justifies the means.

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