

# Shona Taboos: The Language of Manufacturing Fears for Sustainable Development

by

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## Abstract

This article discusses the system of taboos or avoidance rules that the Shona people of Zimbabwe engage as a way of influencing members to conform to society's values and norms. Hence, the language of intimidation used in the taboos are meant to guarantee conformity by threatening people with unpleasant consequences should they disobey the rules. For the purpose of this discussion, taboos are placed into categories according to the kind of 'fear' that is instilled into the children who may violate the rules. And thus this article argues that Shona elders take advantage of children's love for their mothers, their future spouses, their love for children, and their love for themselves, to instill in them the fear that if they do not conform to societal expectations very unpleasant things will happen to those they love. The author acknowledges that this indigenous way of educating and knowing is now being marginalized, however, he argues for its preservation since it is seen as a potentially effective tool in the fight against HIV/AIDS pandemic.

## Introduction

Every society and every culture has its own ways of socializing its own children so that they may grow up to be responsible and socially compliant citizens. These are the ways in which the norms and values of society are inculcated into the new members. And thus part of a life long process of inculcation to ensure that an individual is socialized, since it is through this process of inculcation that one learns the principal values and symbols of the social system in which he/she participates. As Odetola and Ademola (1985:57) put it 'it is through socialization that our behaviour becomes regulated since we now possess values, goals and ambitions and live in an ordered environment.' For this reason, as Haralambos and Holborn (2000:4) note, 'every culture contains a large number of guidelines that direct conduct in particular situations'.

Correspondingly, Shona culture chose to put in place taboos in the form of what Gelfand (1979) calls 'avoidance rules' in order to control, guide and regulate the behaviour of its members (in this article the terms taboos and avoidance rules will be used interchangeably). Thus, Gelfand (1979) studied a large number of avoidance rules he collected from various schools in Zimbabwe and observed that they were meant to inculcate correct behaviour into citizens; and notes (Gelfand 1979:138) that 'The principle that emerges from these rules is that a child must conform and behave like others in order to avoid an unusual occurrence'. Gelfand therefore grouped these avoidance rules into six categories according to themes, namely, those that talk about living in the correct way, successful pregnancy, avoidance of danger, good behaviour, healthy living, and those conveying religious teachings.

Bozongwana (1983) approaches the study of Ndebele taboos from a religious perspective. He sees taboos as part of Ndebele religion. His categorization of these taboos is slightly different from that adopted earlier by Gelfand (1979) and later by Tatira (2000). Bozongwana groups them according to the people who are affected by them. Accordingly, he groups the taboos according to those that affect children, those that affect women, those that affect men, and those classified simply as general taboos. Tatira (2000) looks at Shona taboos and argues that they were a useful way of keeping check on children. He notes that children spent a lot of time on their own looking after animals, and so on and it was easy for them to do the wrong things away from the watchful eye of the elders, so taboos came in handy and ensured that children did not behave in a wayward manner. Tatira (2000:v) makes the pertinent observation that:

*...zviera zvaizobatsira pakutyisidzira tsvuuramuromo kuti dzikaita zvairambidzwa dzaizowirwa nematambudziko akaita sourwere, urema kana ndufu.*

*...taboos helped in that they instilled fear in would-be deviants that if they misbehaved misfortunes such as illnesses, deformities or death would befall them.*

These misfortunes could befall family wealth, relatives or even the entire community.

Tatira (2000) puts Shona taboos into roughly five categories according to themes. He groups them according to those that conscientise children on issues pertaining to health, those that warn against danger, those that are meant to guard against bad behaviour, those that are meant to prevent cruelty, and others grouped under miscellaneous. Unlike Gelfand (1979), Bozongwana (1983) and Tatira (2000) who collected and grouped taboos according to themes, Pfukwa (2001) looks at taboos in their practical usage. Pfukwa looks at the role played by taboos in Zimbabwe's liberation war. He too puts the taboos he discusses into categories, but he also groups them according to those that related to land, those that related to wild animals and birds, and those that related to people.

In their analyses Tatira (2000) shows that each taboo had a 'surface meaning' (a lie) and 'chokwadi chaicho' (the truth); Gelfand (1979:156) says that 'many avoidances were enforced; some of the consequences were believed by everyone, but others were empty threats employed to discipline the children'. Both Gelfand and Tatira see the element of 'lying' in the taboos. Pfukwa believes that these taboos helped to save guerrillas during Zimbabwe's liberation war, but he too does not dispute that these taboos could have been empty threats.

In his discussion of the origin of the taboo and universality of cultural symbolism Meade (1930:17) had earlier on pointed out that in both advanced societies and what he calls 'savage society' 'the motive sentiment (however) is the same, namely, that the things must not be done'. The most important relevant point he raises is that:

*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 potently conventional inhibition recoiled upon him, in particular, with deadly severity (Meade, 1930:18).*

There is consensus among all these scholars, including Meade that taboos talked about things that were not supposed to be done and that if they were violated, dire consequences would befall the offender.

## **Socialization and Social Control**

Among the Shona of Zimbabwe avoidance rules are instruments of socialization and social control. They are an indigenous way of educating and knowing that is fundamental to the equilibrium of the social system, and therefore to order in society. 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. Hence, avoidance rules serve two purposes. Firstly, they are used for purposes of directing activities and behaviour into acceptable channels. Secondly, they are also meant to avoid immediate danger, injury, embarrassment or any other unpleasant consequence. These avoidance rules are an important part of the indigenous education curriculum that has been used to inform one generation after another, resulting in many past generations that have shared the same values and attitudes.

However, the question one may ask is: why adopt a negative rather than a positive and directive approach? Shona people must have observed that it is not in the nature of young children to accept things without asking such questions as 'why?', 'how?', and 'if I do it, what will happen?' Yet, if they are told the truth about what will happen they want to test and prove whether it is indeed true. Children want to find out for themselves what it is that the elders say 'will come to pass', and in the process of finding out, they may get into trouble or cause unnecessary embarrassment, which is what the avoidance rules are meant to prevent in the first place.

In its form, the avoidance rule is made up of two parts: the first part is a kind of prohibition - 'thou shall not do this' - and the second part consists of a statement expressing the consequence of violating an interdiction. The statement expressing the consequence comes in the form of, at least to the one who gives the avoidance rule, a necessary lie.

Correspondingly, the Shona people must have realized that it would not be easy to give satisfactory and convincing explanations to these avoidance rules, so they decided to scare the children out of their wits by using 'lies'. Just as much as missionaries more than a century ago instilled fear into the Shona people by making frequent references to hell-fire in order to win converts (Chiwome, 1996:64), the Shona people also used threats of terrifying consequences as a way of controlling the young. Hence, the Shona adults must have reasoned that it was better to lie than to deal with the consequences of telling the truth.

At the base of the avoidance rules is the principle that in order for the child to conform to societal or family or group expectations he/she must be made to believe that if he/she does not conform something really terrible would happen to him/her. So too, in order to ensure that children observed the avoidance rules, the Shona people tempered with the part of the child's psyche in which is lodged the emotion of fear. Children were made to fear that if they did not conform something terrible would happen to their bodies or to those people they loved most.

And even the possibility of causing the normal atmospheric phenomenon disturbed or upset had the potential to induce fear into the child. Thus, the Shona adults were not afraid of inducing fear into their children; to them fear was a useful emotion that could be harnessed to produce positive results. Gesell and Frances (1946:296) seem to concur when they postulate that:

*From the standpoint of child guidance fear should not be too much feared. Fear is normal. Fearing is natural. Often it has a wholesome influence on the growing child. Fear, like fire, is useful in the right place at the right time; harmful if misplaced and out of control.*

## **Fear and Behavioural Outcomes**

Like Gelfand (1979), Bozongwana (1983), Tatira (2000) and Pfukwa (2001) whose works have been reviewed above, this researcher will also group the avoidance rules according to the genre of fear induced and the expected behavioural outcomes. Hence, a fear for the mother, a fear for the spouse, a fear for one's children, and a fear for self:

### **Fear for the Mother**

There are avoidance rules that thrive on the knowledge that a child, any child, loves its mother most and would not want any harm to come to her. So there are avoidance rules which, if not observed, it is said, will result in some harm happening to the offender's mother. A child is expected to conform once he/she becomes aware that his/her conduct may result in his/her mother getting harmed. For this reason there are avoidance rules like 'Do not strip a bark of a tree that has already been stripped by someone else' and 'Do not urinate together on the same spot at the same time', to which the consequence in both cases is that the offender's mother will suffer from backache. A child is not allowed to blow into a bottle because, it is reasoned, his/her mother will get into it. The rationale for all these 'lies' is that the harm that is said would come to one's mother is likely to be a stronger deterrent than the argument that if you strip the bark of a tree that has already been stripped by someone else the tree will die; or that urinating together on the same spot, especially for a boy and a girl, is indecent or is a health hazard; or that blowing into a bottle makes a loud noise that irritates the adults. 'Lies' about what would happen to their mothers induced fear into the children and they would conform. Mkanganwi (Chiwome and Gambahaya 1998:10), in a brief discussion of the impact of taboos on the young, confirms this when he says:

*...the love for my parents, particularly my mother, was something very special... you could taunt me in the most possible way and get away with it, but you could never, never refer to my mother: 'Mai vako!' (Your mother!) or whatever else about her; and be forgiven.*

A child reacts with fear whenever it senses insecurity or the threat of insecurity. In this case the avoidance rules make the child sense the insecurity of his/her mother and that forces him/her to comply. Hardly do the avoidance rules talk about the insecurity of the father. In this way children were trained to love their mothers and treat them well. At the base of such avoidance rules is the knowledge that the avenging spirit of an offended mother is more deadly than that of the father and every child needs to know that for his /her own good and for the good of society.

### **Fear for the Spouse**

Every normal Shona child grows up knowing or hoping that one day he/she will, like the adults he/she sees around him/her, marry someone he/she will love as a wife or husband. The '*Sarura Wako*' (Choose your partner) game played by the Shona children out in the full moon (*jenaguru*) provides boys and girls with training and practice in choosing partners to live with in marriage when they grow up. Shona people have forced children to conform to societal expectations by putting into place avoidance rules which, if not observed, it is postulated, would result in the death of their future husbands or wives. The elders took advantage of knowing that there is in every normal Shona child an innate preference or inclination towards heterosexual relationships and that, all things being equal (and normal) no one in his/her right frame of mind would want to lose her/his spouse. This is demonstrated by activities that take place in the '*mahumbwe*' and '*pfonda*' games where there were sometimes fights for girls (Gelfand 1979:192). Hence there are avoidance rules that prohibit children from sitting on a mortar or from sitting on a hearthstone. The consequence of violating any of these interdictions or prohibitions, as it was said, is that when you marry, your wife/husband will die. The Shona reasoned that children were more likely to obey rules if they were threatened with the death of their future spouses for sitting on a mortar, for instance, than with the truth that it was not good for children to sit on mortars because it was believed they were often used by witches in their evil activities. It is also possible that because in those days children wore no (proper) underwear because adults feared they would soil the mortar, the hearthstone or the grinding stone where mealie-meal or food was prepared. If 'lies' could make children not to sit on instruments used for preparing food then that was good for people's health. Children would not be deterred by the talk of them soiling instruments used in preparing food. But the thought of losing a future wife or husband forced a child to behave. This, therefore, was a way of training children to grow up into loving and caring wives and husbands necessary for peace and the stability of the family institution. Therefore, it was a matter of elders understanding the dynamics of the mind that produces change in people, even young people.

## Fear for one's Children

Related to this innate preference for heterosexual relationships is the innate love for children communicated to young boys and girls. Michael Gelfand (1979:169) explains how the game of 'mahumbwe' (trial-marriage) was played by children. In this game children imitated the adults using role-play. They role-played the functionality of members found in a family: grandparents, parents and children. In another game given by (Gelfand 1979:177) 'Vana Vangu Vapera' (I have lost all my children) a mother struggles hard to protect her children from a marauding beast like a lion or hyena. These are Shona games that inculcate a sense of responsibility and train children to be caring mothers/fathers who will look after their children in a responsible manner.

The above-mentioned games illustrate that children are a high priority in Shona society. Accordingly, there are a large number of avoidance rules that also illustrate that children are a high priority in any traditional Shona marriage. The traditional Shona person values children more than he values love (that is, if love means having strong feelings towards someone you find romantically and sexually attractive). Love is important, but if it fails to produce children then there are serious problems. In traditional Shona society if a marriage fails to produce children measures are taken to correct that anomaly. Marriage customs such as *kupindira* (using a substitute husband) and *chigadzamapfiwa* (substitute wife) are meant to ensure that a marital union 'produces' children. Marriage practices such as *barika* (polygamy), *kugara nhaka* (inheriting a dead relative's wife), *chitsaramvi* (a young girl given to a man in his old age by his wife's relatives), *musengabere* (kidnapping and marrying a girl without her expressed consent), *chimhurira* (courtship involving coercion or force applied by a girl's aunt), *kuganha*, which, according to Kabweza (1979:61), could be done by a girl '*nokunge (musikana) agarisa paumhandara nokushaya anoroora*' (a desperate girl literary dumping herself at a boy's home leading to another kind of forced marriage), do not result from mutual love relationships (although that relationship may later develop) and yet they almost guarantee, among other things, that children are born. And once children are born, they should not be allowed to die just because someone cannot obey simple rules even if they are avoidance rules.

The importance of children in Shona traditional society (as explained above) is shown by the fact that violation of a large number of avoidance rules is said to be punishable by either infertility or barrenness or by giving birth to a deformed child. Threatening children with horrifying consequences like these was a sure enough guarantee for compliance. No child could grow up imagining that it would be fine to love someone in marriage without him/her being able to add the icing on the cake by having a child. Shona society capitalized on the Shona people's obsession with love for children that manifests itself early in life, even in children's games, to force the young citizens to conform to societal and family expectations. So there are avoidance rules which, if not obeyed, are said to have consequences that infringe on the very sensitive area of fertility or barrenness.

For example, a woman should not eat the breast of an animal because it is said that she will not conceive; one is not allowed to beat someone with grass because it is said that he/she will be barren; two women are not allowed to stir *sadza* in the same pot at the same time because, it is said, both will be sterile. Instead of telling the truth that these are just uncouth behaviours that should be avoided, and instead of telling the truth that sitting on a hearthstone or sitting on a log that is on the fire will get you burnt, the more frightening consequence that one will be sterile is preferred. Elders were saying to the young, 'conform or else you will not be able to have the children you love so much'. Shona elders knew that if for the love of children you obeyed such rules then it was good for your health and you were protected from possible injury.

Related to this are a large number of avoidance rules which, if disregarded, are said to be punishable by giving birth to crippled children. For example, instead of telling the truth that it does not show good manners to tie your head with a bark, or that it does not show regard for the less fortunate to laugh at a disabled person, children were told that these behaviours were punishable by giving birth to crippled children. Indulging in a sex relationship with a relative (incest) was also said to result in producing crippled babies. Children are more likely to be scared by the threat of the possibility of being condemned with deformed babies than by being told the truth about the uncouthness of certain behaviours.

Indeed, the process of giving birth to a child follows a prolonged period of pregnancy (9 months), thus the Shona elders came up with numerous bizarre incidents associated with childbearing that are said to be punishments for disregarding certain avoidance rules. The whole idea is to ensure that a pregnant woman is properly treated, is not unnecessarily upset, and that she too monitors her own appetite and be selective in what she eats. This is important for the health of her unborn baby and for her own health. In this regard it is essential, as Bozongwana (1983:8) explains, that:

*The woman's attitude towards the procreation phenomenon underlies her important role of moulding and nourishing the new member from the womb to childhood.*

Hence, all social and religious observances associated with pregnancy and child-birth are meant to guarantee successful delivery of healthy babies by healthy mothers.

And conversely, there is a litany of bizarre consequences for violating the interdictions that would force any child, and even adults, to conform. Some of the avoidances include that: a woman is not allowed to eat a diaphragm or a cow's udder; a pregnant woman is not allowed to look at a baboon or monkey; it is not allowed to leave a room in which there is a pregnant woman going backwards; it is not allowed to put pieces of firewood crossing each other in the fireplace in a house in which there is a pregnant woman; a girl is not allowed to tie her waist with two belts; girls are not allowed to look at blind puppies; children are not allowed to sit in the doorway of a house in which there is a pregnant woman.



The punishment for disregarding all these avoidance rules and many others include: having difficulties in marriage, giving birth to a still born, giving birth to a child who dies immediately after, having a miscarriage, giving birth to a child who looks like a baboon, giving birth to a breech baby, or never to conceive again. Some of these rules were applied even to adults. But for the children, even though they were not yet mature enough to comprehend these complex matters, the bottom line is that there is one thing that they internalized- the birth of a child, their future child perhaps, in clumsy and very unpleasant circumstances. So to avoid that, both children and adults would observe the avoidance rules.

From what has been said so far it is obvious that from quite an early age images of sex, parenthood and child-bearing are there in the child's mind. Gesell and Frances (1946: 116) noted that as early as six years,

*A child's sex interests spread and penetrate many new and varied fields. Six (six year old) is interested in marriage, the origins of babies, pregnancy, birth, the opposite sex, sex role, and a new baby in the family.*

It is in those areas where the child's interest spread that the Shona adults chose to define punishments for failure to observe certain avoidance rules.

### **Fear for One-self**

Children were not only scared by the possibility of some terrible things happening to others- parents, future spouses, future off-springs, and to their virility or fertility. They were also kept in check by the fear of the possibility of horrible things happening to their own physical bodies. There are certain avoidance rules that, if disregarded, it was said, would result in personal suffering by the violator of the interdiction himself/herself in the form of an illness or an unpleasant deformity. Mkanganwi (Chiwome and Gambahaya 1998:10) is emphatic that nothing was more deterrent: 'We feared abnormality of any description-the norm was very powerful'. Children, for instance, are not allowed to eat their totem animal, for if they do, it is said, they will lose their teeth (Aschwanden 1982:120). Very often when Shona people see a person with decayed teeth or one who has lost the teeth altogether they say, 'He ate his totem'. Licking a knife is dangerous because one may cut one's tongue. Yet, instead of telling children this truth, adults choose to frighten them by 'lying' to them that they would grow one tooth on top of another. Telling a child the truth that if he/she licks a knife he/she will cut himself/herself will not deter him/her because he/she can always argue that he/she is more careful than people think. But if fate decides to create disorder in his/her mouth; he/she cannot control that. That frightens him/her.

There are a number of avoidance rules therefore that, if not obeyed, it is said, will result in unpleasant illnesses. For instance, growing boils on the buttocks is a common ailment given by elders as punishment for not observing certain taboos such as defecating in a footpath used by human traffic or for sitting in the doorway. The Shona knew that telling the truth that depositing one's stool in a footpath is offensive to people and that sitting in the doorway is obstructing human traffic would not deter would-be offenders. If anything, they would do it because to the young it is fun. If adults see the offensive stuff, well, that's their problem. But once threatened with growing boils on their own buttocks they comply and observe the avoidance rules. This is a way of ensuring proper social behaviour. Avoidance rules such as these ensure that children internalize society's culture for, as Haralambos and Holborn (2000:508) argue 'Unless culture is internalized-that is, absorbed and accepted-society would cease to exist since without shared values social life would be impossible.'

The indigenous Shona knows that eating while lying down or singing while eating is dangerous because the possibility of choking is always there and that can be fatal. However, once told that eating while lying down or while singing makes one to develop two navels or to grow mumps children will not do it. Children do not want to grow two navels and they know that mumps are a terrible disposition for which one can be isolated from the others, itself being a kind of punishment considering the way children want to play with others. Deformities such as failing to grow (midgets) and developing unusually big heads are said to result from violating avoidance rules that forbid children from jumping over someone or rules that forbid men from licking a pot in which food has been prepared. The real reason is not that the offenders would get deformed. The rationale is that if children are allowed to jump over each other an accident may happen and someone may get injured; and it is shameful for a man to be seen licking a pot that has been used to prepare food. After all, Shona tradition does not expect men to clean pots. Patriarchal tradition says it's a woman's job. Dangerous practices like walking with your back facing where you are going (which may cause you to stumble, fall and get injured) are said to cause one to be eaten by lions; and urinating into the hearth and spitting into someone's face are also said to cause one to suffer from bilharzia and to be spat at by a snake, respectively. All these are unpleasant happenings, illnesses and dispositions which children do not want to happen to themselves and therefore are effective control mechanisms crafted by the Shona people to ensure conformity with family and societal expectations. Conformity in turn ensures good health by eliminating the possibility of hazards such as injury, choking or spreading diseases carried in saliva or urine.

## **The Question of Sustainability**

The taboo system as a means of social control worked perfectly well for as long as the linguistic, social, cultural and economic environment remained constant and largely unchanged. Urbanization and industrialization with their consequences of high social and geographical mobility, as well as accessibility of a large number of children to education has made it difficult to sustain this practice in its original form.

With children starting school early it has become increasingly difficult to sustain a system that in traditional society thrived on the 'ignorance' of the children. These days children go to school early and spend the best part of their time with their peers in an environment of books, and if they are lucky, in an environment of computers. Baker (1994:92) seems to make a correct observation when he says that:

*While traditional society put a lot of emphasis on obedience, respect and discipline and subservience modern education seems to favour a more democratic and liberal approach.*

The school encourages divergent thinking, creativity and individualism which tend to undermine the traditional mode of doing things and the basis for the implementation of the taboo system. The young people laugh off as 'lies' what the elders say would happen to them if they did certain things. Much more than yesterday's child, today's child insists on wanting to know 'why?', 'what would happen?', and 'how?' and if the explanation does not seem to make sense to him/her, he/she may not observe the avoidance rule as long as he/she thinks it does not harm him/her immediately.

A young person will challenge the elders that '*munonyepa*' (You are lying). While in traditional society it was taboo to call adults liars it is not so sacred now. The child will not sit on a hearthstone may be because it is hot, but the story that if he/she sits on it the wife/husband he/she will marry in future will die makes no sense to him/her any more. Children now know from what they see happening in their families and from the information highway that people die of HIV/AIDS related illnesses and not because their husbands /wives once sat on a hearthstone or on a mortar. They now know that people die in man-made wars and in natural disasters such as the EL Nino or the Tsunami. They know that people die in road accidents and in political violence, and not because someone they married once sat on a mortar or on a grinding stone. They know these things because these days children are allowed to view dead bodies and yet in the past they were not allowed to do that, and deaths were also quite rare. This story of deaths caused by sitting on mortars and grinding-stones has been dismissed as only superstition one cannot explain except that it is connected to the creation and death myths (Bozongwana 1983:9). At any rate in an age in which post-mortems are conducted to determine the causes of deaths, no one has ever been certified to have died because his parent when a child once violated an interdiction by sitting on a hearthstone, a grinding stone or on a mortar. What one did or does may not be of any consequence to the young. Children may no longer share the same perceptions with their elders who are the custodians of society's values and norms.

It is a pity that the system of taboos does not seem to hold any more. What has been happening in the past seems to support the contention that this has been one of the best ways of ensuring internalization of culture by young people. For example, many adults of Shona descent today would not sit on a mortar, or on a grinding stone, or on a hearthstone because they were thoroughly socialized through the use of avoidance rules to regard that as taboo. As Tischler (1983:92) says:

*Every society has means of training and of social control that are brought to bear on each person, making it difficult for individuals to act or even think in ways that deviate too far from the groups values and norms.*

Norms tell us the things we should both do and not do. Many Shonas who belong to the older generation do not pass salt by hand to another person because they were socialized through the taboo system to believe that if they did they would always quarrel with the person they handed salt to. The older generation of Shona people has come to accept that explanation as correct. Hence they follow the practice of putting salt down for the other person to pick it up for himself/herself. Many Shonas prefer not to eat their “totem animal” unless that has been sanctioned by way of eating traditional herbs (*muti*). These are values and norms internalized many years ago through the taboo system in early Shona childhood. At no time should a society do without a social practice that has served it so well from time immemorial.

A useful social practice should not just be discarded. Perhaps what is required is to improve the taboo system and move with the times, say by invoking images and symbols that are relevant and familiar to today’s young people. For example, there is need to come up with avoidance rules that focus on real problems affecting the youths today instead of continuing to fictionalize and fantasize about mortars, grinding-stones, hearthstones, and dying parents and spouses.

For example, the avoidance rules can be employed to tackle the HIV/AIDS pandemic. For instance, why can’t it be said that ‘If you have sex while you are still young you will suffer from chicken pox’; ‘If you become intimate with an animal your private parts will disappear one day’; ‘If you kiss a boy/girl you will lose all your hair’; ‘If you hug a boy/girl you will be raped by a vagabond’; ‘If you become intimate with a relative you will die in your sleep’; ‘If you become intimate with another man/woman (homosexuality/lesbianism) you will be struck by lightning’. Avoidance rules such as these, and expressed in descent Shona language of course, will invoke in the minds of the young frightening images that will scare them from improper sexual behaviour. That would save lives. It must be remembered that n’angas (who are feared and respected in Shona society) are saying that having sex with a relative or with an animal will cure AIDS. No wonder cases of incest and bestiality are on the increase. Avoidance rules can be used to counter such misinformation and save lives, which will spearhead development for the good of society. We can take a clue from what happened in Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle where abstinence from sex was one of the most important unwritten rules. Pfukwa (Vambe 2001:29), says:

*It was claimed that if you indulged in sex one would die in action. We do not know of any who died as a direct result of fornication but it was a very effective deterrent in preventing guerrillas from having and raising families during the war.*

Pfukwa (Vambe 2001:29) argues that during the Zimbabwe liberation war social taboos were a more effective deterrent than any physical punishment meted out to those who did not observe the taboos. Pfukwa's point is that social taboos served lives (and the revolution). In this age of HIV/AIDS avoidance rules meant to prevent sexual promiscuity can do no less provided enough conditions of fear are created.

Avoidance rules can also be harnessed to inculcate positive attitudes towards African traditional foods. In the light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic there has been so much talk about the importance of Africans resorting to their traditional foods. A certain white lady appearing on Zimbabwe television once advised that, 'If your ancestor did not eat it, do not eat it'. But many years of imitating white culture have denuded the Zimbabwean African of his taste for African traditional foods. Now in this age of opportunistic diseases and HIV/AIDS people are being encouraged to once again resort to their traditional dishes. In these circumstances, the avoidance rules can come handy and be used to reorient the African, starting with today's children. Such avoidance rules should, however, show originality and innovation. For example, instead of saying, 'Thou shall not do certain things because, if you do, this or that will happen', society should be innovative and creative and say, 'If you don't do certain things this or that will happen'. For instance one can say, 'If you do not eat okra you will suffer from herpes', or 'If you do not eat boiled dry maize (*mangai/manjoko*) you will not recover from an illness if it strikes'; or 'A child who does not eat fried caterpillars will give birth to a child who will be very dull in school'. The devices employed here are 'directive' rather than 'restrictive', because the interdiction does not say, 'do not'; it says, 'if you do not...'. In other words, it is saying, 'do xyz'. In this way activities will be directed into acceptable or recommended channels. This will inculcate into children love and respect for food habits that will have lasting positive effects on their health. However, if society does not want to deviate too much from its ways of doing things then let the avoidance rules talk of diseases children know or have heard about rather than things that they are not familiar with. Children may not believe these things easily but if used as frequently and with much conviction as with yesterday's avoidance rules, they will give them something to think about.

## **Conclusion**

Every society has its own ways of socializing its own members so that they grow up sharing the same goals and values with other members in that society and Shona society is no exception. It is important that members of the same society conform to societal expectations and members of the same family conform to family or group expectations. It is inconceivable to imagine a social system without rules or guidelines that regulate its members' behaviour. Compliance with rules means one is a good citizen of his/her society. It makes a person virtuous. Observance of the rules enables the individual to internalize his people's culture.

Otherwise society would cease to exist since without shared values social life would not be possible. Although it is now difficult to sustain the use of avoidance rules, it should still be encouraged and be recognized as one of the most effective forms of social control, especially in this age of HIV and AIDS. The Shona evolved the avoidance rules as a means of socializing its members into good citizens and this social practice is a useful indigenous way of knowing that can be used for sustainable development.

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