

# Sex and the Female Body in Shona Society

by

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## Abstract

Among the issues that contemporary Africa has excoriated in African tradition is in the misuse and abuse of sex especially by men, and in how the female body is conceptualised. Problems faced by women in Africa are largely blamed on African ways of approaching sex, together with the disregard for the female body in African culture. Hence, in Africa today, many forms of domestic and physical violence are blamed on how people approach the issues. African feminists thus, argue that traditional men have had very little if any consideration of women, and have disregard for her being and body, resulting in many cases of sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women. Therefore, this paper is an exposition of how sex and the female body were viewed in Africa, especially by the Shona of Zimbabwe utilizing Africana Womanism and Afrocentricity theoretical perspectives, with the intent to ascertain claims made by those who fight for the rights of women.

**Key words:** Shona, feminist, African culture, woman's body, abuse, violence

## Introduction

Sociologists observe that the way people behave or approach life is mainly guided by how they have been brought up to conceptualise it. As such, bad or remarkable behaviour is usually explained in terms of one's upbringing. Using the same premise, the serious rise in cases of gender and sexual violence among the Shona of Zimbabwe today is normally explained in terms of how African [Shona] tradition raised citizens. The argument is that African patriarchy in general, and Shona practice in particular, had very little if any consideration for women, who were viewed and treated as less human. Women are said to have been viewed and treated as sex objects. The payment of *lobola*, a bride price/wealth property in cash or kind wherein a prospective husband or head of his family undertakes to give to the head of a prospective wife's family in consideration of a customary marriage in Africa thus marks the beginning of a family that is usually castigated as the 'selling' of a woman to a man.

The argument is that once a woman has been 'sold' and 'bought', she is made powerless. She belongs to the man who commands her that she must respect him and satisfy his sexual needs each time he desires because he paid bride wealth. It is also argued that men take advantage of the notion that women are a weaker sex, and therefore, abuse them sexually, even without their consent.

Popular belief is that Shona culture makes men very self-centred and inconsiderate when it comes to relating with women on sexual issues. Today's men are generally criticised of lacking self-control; of behaving like bulls which move from heifer to heifer satisfying their sexual egos. Others have even used sayings such as, '*Murume ibhuru*' (A man is a bull), or '*Murume ijongwe rinofa richiita*' (A man is like a cock, which even in old age desires mating). The first saying is used to condone man's behaviour, of hoping from one woman to another. A bull moves from kraal to kraal, mating with heifers and cows. It has, and knows no boundaries. A bull is usually not looked after; if it goes astray it is believed to be in some other people's kraal. It will only come back when the desire to be out has been quenched. Sadly, the saying is used to explain and justify promiscuity that is rampant in society and which is believed to have been passed on from tradition where it was believed every man was free to have as many wives as he pleased. The second 'proverb' conveys that the man needs to, and can still mate even in old age. It is meant to capture the Shona man's so-called craving for sex, and is usually used to justify unwarranted and unwanted liaisons modern elderly men have with even very young girls. It is this behaviour which has largely led men to be blamed for the spread of the virus that causes HIV. The fact that such behaviour is buttressed by sayings which at face value appear African in origin should not mislead people into believing that tradition moulded the negative qualities that we see in today's men.

When it comes to sexual issues, just like other contemporary matters, the truth that lies un-discussed and unexposed is that today's Shona man is a product of two traditions, two worlds, African and colonial (Western). Fanon (1986) has actually described the contemporary African being as a 'Black skin in a white mask'. What he means is that contemporary Africans have adopted the values, tastes and behaviour of the coloniser to an extent that they only appear black in skin colour but think and behave like their teacher and role model, the white man. As a result, there is a great need to verify which of the two traditions has had an impact on the Shona man's character today. A closer analysis shows that today's Shona man is in fact, more of a product of the colonial (Western) tradition than he is of genuine African tradition. In addition, the Shona of Zimbabwe were colonised for nearly a century before attaining independence. As such, Chiwome (1996) warns that knowledge of a people's culture cannot be assumed to exist in the correct ideological perspective in the minds of a people who were colonised for that long. There is a great temptation and danger of regarding the alien way that was imposed on Africans as the African way of life. In other words, for people who have been dominated for that long, there is need for one to carefully examine what they consider as their way of life vis-a-vis the coloniser's way of life. As such, the belief that African tradition begets women that are abused sexually and whose bodies draw no respect from their male counterparts needs close examination before it can be upheld.

It is for this reason that this paper embarks on what Barker (1980) regards as the ‘journey back’; a journey meant to unearth the Shona people’s view and attitude towards sex and the female’s body. It is a process also identified by Cabral (1973) as ‘A return to the source’; meant to have a clearer way of how the Africans [Shona] viewed these issues before foreign intrusion. Such a journey back can only bring out realistic results if done from an Africana Womanist and Afrocentricity literary theoretical constructs that look at reality and life from an African point of view.

## **Theoretical Grounding**

Propounded by Hudson-Weems (1993, 2004), Africana womanism is a reaction to feminist scholarship on male-female relations. Whereas Western feminist scholarship identifies women’s problems through a lens that is identified as men with patriarchy and tradition, and as such, men, patriarchal society and tradition are crusaded and fought against in a bid to emancipate women. On the other hand, Africana Womanism observes and contends that the Africana woman and the Western women have different problems, concerns and agendas, and since the problems, concerns and agenda of the Africana woman are different from those of the Western, there is a need for a theory that is properly labelled and more attuned to the needs of the Africana woman (Hudson-Weems 1993). Thus Africana Womanism is:

An ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in our culture, and therefore it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women (Hudson-Weems 1993, 24).

The theory is corrective and a critique. It seeks to correct the views of Western feminist scholarship about the way women in general and African in particular are presented and viewed. It also critiques the limitations of such Western views, especially in relation to what is in the African milieu.

The paper also supports its views with the theory of Afrocentricity propounded by Asante (1987, 1988 & 2007) as a response to the distortions peddled by Western-oriented scholarship on African experiences, culture and worldview. The argument is that Western ways of understanding reality do so from the cultural image and human interest of Europeans who have a warped and paternalist attitude towards Africa and her diverse cultural heritage. Hence, Afrocentricity strives to address the crisis by “repositioning the African person and reality from the margins of European thought, attitude, and doctrines to a centred, positively located place within the realm of science and culture” (Asante 2007, 30). Among the important questions asked by the theory is: How do we see ourselves and how have others seen us? In answering the question the theory calls for the liberation of the mind from any notion that Europe is the teacher and Africa is the pupil. The theory, like African womanism, is thus both corrective and a critique.

Furthermore, the theory is corrective and a critique in the sense that it seeks to correct and interrogate the views by African feminists concerning African men and culture. And in using a judicious mixture of the two theories, this work strives to examine African feminists' views about sex and how the woman's body is regarded vis-a-vis how the same are viewed and conceptualised in a Shona milieu.

### **Brief Background: The Shona of Zimbabwe**

Before 1890 the term Shona was not used to describe the people it refers to today. The people did not refer themselves as 'Shona'. Rather, they used the local chieftaincy groups to identify themselves. Ranger (1985, 4) says, "...It seems to me clear that before 1890 no one called themselves Shona at all, if anyone belonged to a Ndebele state they did not think that this was the same thing as belonging to a tribe or ethnicity." The term Shona is, an invention coined by Clement Doke to refer to speakers of Ndau, Manyika, Korekore, Zezuru and Karanga dialects in modern Zimbabwe (Doke 2005).

However, there are theories that explain the emergence of the name Shona. One theory is that it appears to have been first used by the Ndebele as a derogatory term for the people they defeated, particularly the Rozvi (Bourdillon 1987). The Rozvi would hide in the mountains, *ukutshona* in Ndebele and ultimately came the term Shona (Bourdillon 1987). The other theory is that all the people referred to as Shona today descended from one family called Mbire, of the Soko who were ruled by one paramount chief (Chigwedere 1980). Mutswairo (1996) also provides another theory which supports that of Chigwedere wherein he argues that the so-called Shona are Mbire, and not Shona. To support this claim, he goes back into the oral history of the Shona to identify them as Mbire. In this current discussion, the term Shona is used to refer to speakers of Manyika, Karanga, Zezuru, Korekore and Ndau who occupy present day Zimbabwe.

### **Sex as Conveyed: Shona Children's Games and Songs**

Children's games are one of the many ways that African society socialised its people. The games produced learners who would have adopted the tastes, values, and way of life and worldview of the Africans. Male-female relations, position and attitude towards sex as well as the way the female body was perceived are some of the issues that were cultivated and nurtured through children's games. Having graduated from this 'school' system, the youngsters lived and celebrated the philosophy of life enshrined therein. Many of these games were played with children of both sexes participating on an equal footing.

Although African children participated and enjoyed many games and songs, I briefly limit my insight to the Shona songs of '*Sarura wako*', '*Zipote zipote*', and the game of *mahumbwe* (a mock marriage) played by male and female.

In '*Sarura wako*' (Choose your partner), children took turns, leading the song where each would mention the qualities of their ideal life partner. If it were a boy leading, he would mention the qualities of a girl of his dreams, and if it were a girl, she would also mention the qualities of her ideal male partner. The same philosophy is exuded through the game '*Zipote zipote*' (Going round and round). In this game, children formed a circle and took turns to sing, going round the circle whilst dancing. As the child went round the circle, s/he sang, indicating that they were looking for a partner who would wash dishes for him/her. The child ended the song-cum-dance by picking up a partner of their choice. If a boy went round, he sang of a girl and ultimately picked one. If it was the turn of a girl, she mentioned the qualities of the boy she desired and ended up picking one. A boy or girl would never pick a partner of the same totem or relation as hers/his. If this happened, the child was laughed at.

The game marked the beginning of Shona lessons about sex. Through this game, even before puberty, stress was laid on the importance of marriage with a selected partner (Gelfand 1968). Thus they were taught that husbandless-ness or wifelessness were not virtues in African society (p'Bitek 1986). So the children looked forward to having a partner. At the same time, the game taught the children that although it was imperative for them to choose partners, same sex relationships had no place among Africans. Thus, it was unimaginable that a boy would pick another boy as a partner, nor would a girl also pick another girl in a heterosexual society. Gelfand (1968, 108) explains that "the whole atmosphere tended to encourage normal sexual relationships; homosexuality, bestiality and lesbianism seemed to have had no place in this society and were extremely rare." That is why it was unimaginable for a young boy to choose another as their partner, the same with the girls. Again, children would not pick a partner from his or her relations. If this happened, the child was laughed at and would correct their choice. This instilled in them the knowledge that a marriage partner was not chosen from one's kindred, but from a distant relative. This outlawed intimate relations between relatives. Cases of rape between relatives (such as father and daughter, uncle and daughter, brother and sister, mother and son) as happen today were nipped in the bud. These were made heinous from as early as childhood. Also, same sex relations, which are becoming topical today, were tabooed from childhood, and so no one indulged in such.

The same philosophy was propagated through the *mahumbwe*, mock marriage game. Whereas the songs taught the children what to expect in an ideal partner, the *mahumbwe* game enabled them to 'put it into practice'. The game was played by children of between five and thirteen years. In this game, the children chose partners and established mock families. The elderly boys and girls assumed the roles of fathers and mothers (minus intimacy) whilst the young ones took the place of children. Those who played the roles of husband and wife needed not be related, and they were members of the opposite sex. This made the children very aware of the fact that intimate relations between related people were abhorred and that same sex marriage among the Shona were taboo.

After the game, young girls were usually taken to the rivers for inspection by their aunts. The act was to establish if no girl had been defiled. According to Gelfand (1968) the practice made certain that the girl resisted temptation and remained chaste for the person that would marry her. In most cases, the girls were found undefiled and this was followed by jubilation and feasting. In very rare occasions, a girl would be found defiled. The boy who would have defiled the girl would be punished strongly. Chidyausiku (1984) narrates of a boy who was punished for defiling a girl. The boy's reproductive organ was chopped off, and the elder who presided over it warned that such was the punishment to be meted on those who defiled girls. The girl also received her share of punishment. She was taken into the forest and placed on a hole where vicious ants had been smoked out, and they stung her mercilessly.

In the above case, the *mahumbwe* game further shows how sex was viewed among the Shona. It was not for immature people. It was something that was not to be misdirected. It was meant for married couples only. Sex outside marriage was never tolerated. Young boys and girls were not supposed to experiment with their reproductive organs. Those found playing with them were beaten. Shona philosophy about sex was that it had to wait. The Shona had a proverb, '*Regai dzive shiri, mazai haana muto*' (Let them grow into birds, eggs have no gravy). The proverb warned youngsters, and even elders in society against having liaisons with minors, but let them grow into adults. This made it uncommon to have cases where minors were abused by elders. It was stressed to youngsters that they should wait patiently until they were old enough. Patience as a virtue was cultivated into Shona children through many ways. One of the ways was the Shona feeding habits. The Shona ate as a group and the elderly was supposed to eat first and the youngest joined last. The youngest was supposed to wait for all his elderly brothers to pick morsels or pick pieces of meat, regardless of how hungry he was. This taught him to curb his appetite, and wait for his turn which would come at an appropriate time. In the same vein, children were taught not to rush into matters relating to sex. Girls were warned that premarital sex reduced their chances of happy marriages in the future (Chiwome 1996). As a result of such teachings, the young girls had no feeling of hurry or urgency about securing a husband.

## **Sex education in Shona Adolescence**

Adolescence was of greatest concern to the Shona elders because they were shaping the heir to the father and mother, and to the grandfather and grandmother. They were shaping the future, and if they made a mess, they made a mess of future society (Chigwedere 1996). From the adolescent girl, they were shaping a family ambassador, for the way she behaved at the other hand (at her husband's home) did not only reflect on them but advertised what sort of people they were (ibid). It was very common that when a proposal was tendered, the girl's first reaction was to show her disinterest in the boy no matter how interested she was in him. She had to spurn his offers of marriage on more than two occasions. This helped her ascertain if he was so serious as to warrant the position of a husband to her and father to her children.

The Shona insisted that at marriage a girl should be chaste and this helped reduce child sex abuse. Even the bride wealth was set with the understanding that the girl was undefiled. Again, a man should have paid *lobola* to deserve the right for intimacy with a woman (Chiwome 1996). In other words, sex was not for recreation, but for procreation, and so was to be done at the appropriate time. Any moral misbehaviour on the part of the girl threatened to ruin her chances of marriage. Immorality deprived her and her parents of the *chimanda/masungiro* heifer, which was her pride and that of her mother. A girl who was married defiled disgraced her parents. If an in-law discovered that the girl was defiled, there were ways of communicating this to her parents. They would send them a blanket or cloth which was pierced or send them a coin with a hole in the midst, symbolic of the state they found the girl in. It simply meant that she was found without fat or *manda*. Once this had happened the parents were sure they would lose out on the *chimanda* beast, which was slaughtered in recognition of the efforts that culminated in the girl being married a virgin. This was a very high prize considering that cattle were then very few and very highly prized. In addition to losing the *chimanda* heifer, they were expected to reduce the number of cattle that they would have charged as bride wealth. So humiliating was the exercise such that families made it a collective activity to safeguard the chastity of their children. This could not be kept a secret because the *chimanda* ritual was a public function and the relatives concerned gathered on the day to consume meat; and so if there was no beast slaughtered, it immediately indicated to the gathering what had happened unless there was adequate and satisfactory explanation to it (Chigwedere 1996).

A boy who would have deflowered a girl was also punished strongly and made to pay damages. Even if the man was willing to marry her he still had to pay damages to her father (Gelfand 1968). He would also have put his family name into disrepute, and chances of other members being turned away by girls were very high. He would have created a bad name for himself and the whole society. No family wanted to be associated with bad traits (Chigwedere 1996). As such, male members of families also made sure that they brought up their children in humane ways to avoid labelling. Thus the Shona parents never failed to let it known to their children that 'spoiling' or 'damaging' a girl was a most serious offence for either party and caused both boy or girl to be careful and avoid sexual relations before marriage (Gelfand 1968). As Chiwome (1996) observes, the individual was accountable for the behaviour of the family and the family was in turn accountable for its member's behaviour to the society.

## **Sex in Shona Marriage**

Among the Shona, sexual intimacy was only a prerogative of husband and wife, nothing more or less. Chiwome's (1996) perception reflected Shona practice; that a man should have paid *lobola* to deserve the right to be intimate with a woman. Even so, sexual activity in marriage was not a privilege but a right of both the man and woman concerned and this was stressed during adolescence so that each would cater for the urge of the other (Chigwedere 1996). For married couples, it was not a forced or violent activity. There was nothing like a wife being sexually abused by her husband in marriage.

Modern cases of sexual abuse where women claim to have been forced by their husbands were unheard of. Why today's citizens sexually abuse women is perhaps because they lack the necessary know-how of how the act was to be approached; a know-how that was passed on by elders such as grandfathers, uncles and cousins. Traditionally, every sexual encounter was preceded by enough and satisfactory preparatory work. Sexual intimacy among the Shona was not an event, it was a process.

Hence, in the Shona milieu a true husband would not rape his wife, and also, even outside marriage, it was disgusting and greatly surprising for a man to rape a woman, and those who did were looked upon as the worst of men and thus, tarnished themselves and their extended families (Chigwedere 1996). And also, among the Shona, sexual relations with someone's wife is considered taboo and is reflected in the proverb '*Mukadzi wemumwe ndiambuya*' (Someone's wife is your mother-in-law), based in the truths and reflective history of the people's experiences and philosophy (Chabata and Mashiri 2012). Hence, the proverb meant that it is taboo for any man to flirt with or propose love to a married woman (ibid), and notwithstanding, among the Shona, a mother-in-law or *ambuyawasha* was a very respected and deified being in that the relationship was such that one would not look her in the face or shake her hand in greeting. When one would meet his mother-in-law along a road, they would greet each other kneeling on different sides of the road and looking away from each other (Chigidi 1988). And thus, conversation with a mother-in-law was only limited to issues like health, weather conditions and farming, and not anything personal. Here, the metaphorical comparison between a married woman and a mother-in-law symbolises the level of respectability she had and the degree of repugnance society had for any act that threatened such respect.

More importantly, love making was considered a sacred act in which ancestors were invited to participate, done through the recital of praise poetry, known as *nhetembo dzemugudza*. Using this poetry the husband and wife praised, encouraged and thanked each other together with their ancestors in the act. So dramatic was the exercise that it had to be done away from the sight and ears of children, hence, the bedroom for the father and mother was usually away from that of children with the idea to make sure the children were not exposed to sexual language and activity before they matured. Chigwedere (1996) observes that marriage had its own services and pleasures but above all, it was a means to an end, and that end being children. The individual was only important in as far as he/she was the beginning of a lineage which was expected to be ever-lengthening to eternity or to the end of world (ibid). In traditional Shona, there was only one dead African that died without children or whose lineage came to an end at any moment even though it may be five hundred or one thousand years after his/her own death (ibid). Such a person would not be having descendants on earth and there would be no one to invoke his/her spirit to partake with the living, and so he/she was surely dead.



And the fact that children were important in marriage made childless marriages threatened with break-up, unless the husband received another daughter by his father-in-law to give him children, or if he was allowed to marry another wife. This also explains why polygamous marriages had a place in Shona milieu, and secondly, was because of the custom of inheritance where a young man would inherit the wife of his late elder brother, and by custom, this became his wife, however, sex between the two was only made possible if the man gave the wife a beast, *sendekauta* that gave him permission, and if he had not given her the beast, the woman had every right to deny him sex.

## **Female Being and Body**

The woman's body, just like the man's, received admiration from society. Shona society had attributes that were admired in a female body. A beautiful body of a fully grown woman among the Shona, just like the Acholi of Uganda that p'Bitek (1986) talks about, had big and round buttocks, big and stiff breasts, smooth legs, round face with a centrally placed nose, white teeth (if a gap existed between the front teeth, the better), medium ears and a brown complexion. However, via proverb there was a warning to especially men not to be swayed by women's outward beauty, without ascertaining the inner or moral beauty, because what could appear attractive from the outside could be very decadent within, thus, external beauty had to be matched with internal beauty. Gelfand (1968, 105) stresses that:

The boy was attracted more by her qualities than simply by beauty or a good figure. It is true that the girl's appearance mattered at first. No doubt he was attracted by a particular girl, but he laid more stress on her character, her suitability as a mother and a good wife.

Thus a woman's body was only considered beautiful if it did not deter her from undertaking the roles expected of her by society (Makaudze and Gudhlanga 2012). The body was to be physically strong in order to enable the woman to carry out the tasks expected of her in society, such as carrying firewood on her head, carrying babies on her back, breast-feeding, pounding and grinding mealie-meal, among others tasks. And if the woman who had admirable bodily features turned out to be lazy, garrulous or of loose morals, then she was not considered beautiful. Such a woman was regarded as, '*Akazvarwa chembere dzaenda kudoro*' (She was born when the grandmas had gone to drink beer, meaning there was no one to school her into dictates of the society), and she risked dying without any man having proposed love to her. Thus to the Shona, beauty of the body was linked to one's morals, and in that respect, a woman whose body was not so attractive but who performed the duties expected of her well was considered more beautiful. Thus to the Shona, inner beauty was more important and long lasting than outward beauty which withered away with time (Makaudze and Gudhlanga 2012).

At early ages, children were trained to interact in groups so as to minimise the temptation of them experimenting with their bodies. When in groups, children rarely exposed their bodies. That is why many Shona games were done by children participating in groups. Examples are *mahumbwe* and such songs as ‘*Zipote zipote*’, ‘*Sarura wako*’, ‘*Gondo guru*’, ‘*Hwai hwai huyai*’, which had no room for isolation and temptation of wanting to experiment with one’s body. And unless when playing games, boys and girls were usually not allowed to play together or seek each other’s company. They could only talk to each other when in a group setting, and any idea of sexual discussion would be condemned (Gelfand 1968). Thus, what was key was that there was no attempt to deny knowledge, only that knowledge was given only at an age when the boy or girl could appreciate it (ibid, 103).

Although boys and girls played together during the day, at night boys slept alone in the *gota*, boys’ quarters, while girls slept alone in the *nhanga*, girls’ quarters. The separate bedrooms encouraged purity by keeping the body of the opposite sex, particularly that of women sacred (Chiwome 1996). Among the Shona, one was not allowed to see the naked body of members of the opposite sex unless they were married. It is for the same reason that boys and girls used different sides of their quarters to use the restroom. At night, people are usually scantily dressed and the emergency of a relief may not allow someone to be properly dressed, for this reason, each sex used the back of its quarters, thus minimising chances of colliding with members of the other sex who might be scantily dressed.

In addition, when it was time to bath, girl-children were bathed separately from boys. When they were old enough to bathe themselves in the river, they again used separate bath places along the river (Chiwome 1996). Whenever men approached a point which women could use for bathing, they were expected to shout across in order to find out whether there were any naked women in the vicinity; ‘*Kune vari kugeza here?*’ (Are there any people bathing?). If there were, they would respond, after which they asked for a passage, ‘*Tipindewo*’ (Could we please pass!). When they got dressed the women would respond, ‘*Pindai!*’ (You may pass!), after which they crossed the river (Chiwome 1996). This came from the instruction they received from their grandfathers, of learning to look up to the other sex with respect (Gelfand 1968). Such behaviour led Gelfand (ibid) to remark that it is clear that in matters of sexual instruction, the African child seems to have the advantage over the European child whose parents are often too reserved or shy to explain to them these delicate matters.

Furthermore, women were expected to dress decently and modestly, covering all crucial parts of the body. Girls were taught to sit cross-legged all the times, in particular in the presence of men (Chiwome 1996). If a child sat carelessly, she was chided (ibid). The idea was to make sure the girl’s private parts were not exposed (exposure would naturally raise in men, dirty thoughts and lead to temptations). At adolescence girls walked by themselves and worked by themselves and were expected to run away and hideaway if there was danger of exposing themselves to men, and this is also why love proposals were not directed to the girl, but to her aunts or grandmothers, thus, it was not very easy for aspiring young men to get near the girls they liked.

To limit chances of temptation, a Shona man was not supposed to walk behind a woman when on a journey. He was supposed to walk in front. There were a number of reasons to that, apart from him being in a position to defend her if danger arose, the other significant reason was to avoid the temptation of him being attracted by the swaying of her hips which could lead to immoral thoughts; hence, the Shona were very much against behaviour that would lead to men being tempted.

In line with this, they also had the taboo, '*Ukadongorera munhukadzi akashama unoita shohwera*' (If you peep at bodies of naked women you will develop a boil on your eye), a statement that would forbid certain forms of behaviour in children (Tatira 2000). Young people are generally adventurous, full of doubts and questions, and also like experimenting with things and to curb the excessive desire to venture out, there was a consequence for each prohibition (ibid). The above taboo prevented boys from being curious about the anatomy of the opposite sex and it made it heinous for them to desire to look at nude people. Those who had boils on their eyes were often laughed at and criticised of having cast their eyes on naked women. Such lampooning was meant to discourage boys from taking delight in seeing naked women. Also, in the past, Shona people bathed in the open, along rivers and there was great need to assure them of their privacy. Such was a society that cultivated and nurtured morality among its citizens. Immoral behaviour was thus minimised unlike in modern society where scantily dressed women parade before a panel of male adjudicators in beauty contests. However, in spite of a carefully worked out system, it did not mean that premarital relations or sex with married women never occurred, although it was guarded against, and in most cases, guarded successfully.

## **Conclusion**

Contrary to what has been said by contemporary scholars, the Shona have great consideration about sex and the female body. They were not a sex-craving society, but rather taught and raised children who had a clear understanding and appreciation that sex, like other duties for adults had to wait until the right time presented itself. They groomed their children to remain chaste until they entered marriages and equipped themselves with the know-how of how to please each other. All along, stress was placed on the sacredness of the woman's body which could only be seen by a man who would have paid *lobola*, and sex before and outside marriage were abhorred, making the society very sensitive to the position and welfare of women. No man was expected or allowed to vent his sexual virility on any woman who was not their wife, and some of the adages that are purportedly African do not convey or tally with the concern and philosophy of the people on this topic.

Having stayed among the Shona for a quite long while, and having been exposed to the Shona ways of doing things, Gelfand makes many valid observations about the people in question. He says the morals of the African as I know him are exemplary and I doubt if they could be improved and that (African) manners and behaviour are in many respects of a higher and more refined quality than those prevailing in Europe (1968). He adds, “No fault can be found with the husband and wife relationship in the traditional life of the African and in Mashonaland divorce was an extremely rare event under this system” (ibid, 43). And thus, he makes an overall conclusion, that “It is wrong to judge the African without spending some time with the people in their villages in order to better understand their practices and motives” (ibid, 43). What has emerged is; what contemporary Zimbabweans attribute to African ways of life is quite the opposite of how life was lived and celebrated by the people in question. Thus, this paper calls for contemporary Zimbabweans to dig deeper into the Shona past and unearth the way the Shona practiced things before making statements that distort reality.

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