

The Re-conceptualization of Shona and Venda Taboos: Towards An Afrocentric Discourse

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Abstract

Colonialist thinking relegates most indigenous oral art forms as primitive and highly superstitious. Further, it adores Western ways of understanding reality, which are usually believed to be scientific and beyond reproach. However, the relegation of African oral literature and worldview to the backyard cripples not only the creativity of the indigenous people, but also robs them of a very subtle and effective way of understanding and dealing with reality. Such indigenous literature and knowledge remain vital, especially in vindicating the nobility and authenticity of African thinking and practice. Drawing examples from Shona and Venda taboos, and using Afrocentricity literary theory, this paper's conviction is that a re-examination into this rich cultural heritage via taboos is a good way to help African people re-define life in their own way, absent of an often puzzling and confused life in accordance with alien modern cultural directives.

Keywords: colonialist, taboos, Afrocentricity, worldview, heritage, Shona, Venda.

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Introduction

Through colonization, many Africans have been made to believe and accept that their ways of life were primitive and sadistic. On the other hand, Western ways have been associated with, and even in most cases, misconstrued as civilization. Today, many African people still measure development and civilization in terms of how close they have mimicked and aped the white man's doings (Kurotwi, 2003: 52), the closer the better. Paradoxically, at a time when most African people have parroted Western ways of life, their problems have worsened, and they seem baffled and unable to deal with them. Among the challenges faced by today's Africa are: the disparaged image of women, circulation of pornographic material, a rise in rape cases, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, erratic rainfall patterns, environmental degradation and pollution.

Traditional Africa, diverse as it is, seems to be the genuine source of confidence in Africa today, as people carve their destiny in life and not follow in the footsteps of those external to their experiences. For example, as traditional food and medicine were once despised and condemned as fit for prehistoric humans; today there is a call for people to revert to consuming such foods and medicines to minimize the effects of HIV and AIDS. It is from the same premise that this work stresses the nobility of African taboos as a way of inspiring the direction and worldview that Africa ought to take today. As Chinweizu and Madubuike (1980) point out, African oral literature is the uncontested reservoir of the African's imagination and worldview. Hence, we have particularly focused on Shona and Venda taboos to examine the underlying indigenous aspects of African philosophy. The paper encourages what Baker (1980, 141) considers as "the journey back"; a journey meant to unearth, re-discover and explain the cultural wealth of the past and its significance for the benefit of today's citizens. In this journey back, even the obvious needs reiteration in order to encourage both insiders and outsiders to revisit their assumptions about the art and culture in question (Chiwome 1996a, v). And thus, not unusual in a colonial context, knowledge of such cannot be assumed to exist in the correct ideological perspective in the minds of people who were colonized for nearly a century (ibid).

In focusing on the Shona and Venda, it should help to disprove colonialist thinking that African people are different by virtue of them belonging to different regional, ethnic and geopolitical situations, including the question of language diversity. Thus, the taboos from these ethnic groups (the Shona and Venda) vindicate that Africans are by-and-large connected despite linguistic and geographical boundaries created by the colonizer. And the other reason for focusing on these ethnic groups is that they are believed to be related, and thus, sharing the same historical features as exemplified by the Great Zimbabwe monuments among the Shona and the Mapungubwe monuments among the Venda of South Africa as Mapungubwe pottery types for example are akin to those of early Zimbabwe (Davidson 1996). Research has also shown that when a Venda medium is possessed, they speak in Shona, and make reference to the Great Zimbabwe, a site they are believed to be linked to. Here, our focus will be on taboos that relate to morality, the position and image of women, and the conservation of the environment and other natural resources, in an effort to show how issues that baffle modern society were approached in the past.

Theoretical Framework

This exercise makes its observations and argument based on the theory of Afrocentricity propagated by Asante (1990, 1993, 1998, 2003, and 2007) which posits that Western ways of explaining and shaping reality more often than not, produce unwanted and awkward results if implemented on African soil. Thus, it calls for "...all African phenomena, activities and ways of life to be looked at and be given meaning from the standpoint and worldview of Africans" (Asante 2007, 29; Gray 2001, 3). Hence, in further explanation, it is:

... a perspective which holds that African people can, and should see, study and interpret, and interact with people, life, and all reality from the vantage point of sane African people – rather than from the vantage point of European people, or Asian, or other non-African people, or from the vantage point of African people who are alienated from Africanness.

The theory thus strives to analyze and give meaning to phenomena from a genuine African point of worldview, as African and European worldviews (for example) are different, making it uneasy to neatly import and implement ideas from one cultural milieu to the other. Hence, Afrocentricity makes a valid assertion that African ways of looking at and understanding reality have a lot of positives, which ironically were repudiated and jettisoned at the instigation of colonialism in Africa.

In context, we suggest that taboos in Africa are within an oral art form, and so in appreciating their nature and significance, it can only be understood meaningfully by using a theory by and for African people, therefore, making Afrocentricity the ideal theory to incorporate a set of ideas that can possibly explain African facts or events. Thus, the theory challenges contemporary Africans to re-look at, unearth, revive, modify and revivify such indigenous oral art forms for their benefit. Using the theory, the importance of Shona and Venda taboos in explaining and handling issues and challenges posed by life becomes vindicated. Kurotwi (2004, 16) rightly observes that the moment one of us suggests we do things the African way, 99% of us would castigate him and tell him to move with the times; which sadly are considered the white man's times. Yet, focusing on past oral art forms is strong ground to show that traditional Africa was far from being primitive and backward, for it addressed issues that contemporary Africa is battling to address today. Thus, this paper uses Afrocentricity theory because it "stands as both a corrective and a critique" (Asante 2007, 37). In unity, this presentation is indeed a critique and corrective in the sense that it disproves and corrects the prejudices, distortions and falsifications peddled by colonialist scholarship about African people's oral art forms, like taboos.

Taboos

Taboos, or *zviera* refer to statements that forbid certain forms of behavior in children (Tatira 2000, 147). Each taboo prohibits certain forms of behavior and gives the reason for such prohibition (ibid). In their youth, children are very adventurous, doubtful about many things and fond of questioning and experimenting with things, including their bodies. Hence, in order to curb the excessive desire to venture out, there is a ready consequence for each prohibition (ibid). Taboos, like other African oral art forms, are based on the immediate environment and are passed from one generation to the next. They are part of the early oral art forms children are exposed to, meant to inculcate in them an indigenous philosophy and worldview. Thus, taboos are also an expression of culture as lived and celebrated in society. The Shona and Venda taboos presented here are meant to vindicate that the people were neither primitive nor backward, but advanced and humane, for they were aware of and could handle issues that modern society is currently battling to contain.

Taboos and Morality

Morality was one of the highly celebrated virtues in traditional Africa. From childhood right through marriage, the people highly regarded moral uprightness. Sexual liaisons before and outside marriage had no place in society. What Chiwome observes among the Shona equally applies among the Venda, that premarital sex was a taboo and pre-marital pregnancy a disgrace (1996b, 53). While they loved children, the Shona and Venda believed that a child born out of wedlock disgraced the parents. The following taboos bear testimony to the morality of the people:

Shona:

Ukadongorera mukadzi akashama unoita shohwera
(If you look at a naked woman you will develop a boil on your eye)

Venda:

U bva bundu liṭoni u ṭhongomela muthu a tshi ṭamba
(If you look at a naked woman you will develop a boil on your eye)

A hu farwi ḍamu ḷa khaladzi
(It's taboo to touch your sister's breast).

The Shona and Venda knew very well that the habit of looking at naked women or touching their body parts would never be an end in itself, but it would become a means to an end. Such would invoke in men the desire to sleep around with women. To curb such irresponsible behavior, they made it heinous to look at naked women. To the Shona and Venda, one may not see the naked body of members of the opposite sex unless they are married (Chiwome 1996b, 54).

This is why at night, boys and girls slept separately. The distinct bedrooms helped especially keep the body of the woman sacred. In addition, girl-children were bathed separately from boy-children, and when they were grown-up, boys were always expected to shout “*Pane vari kugeza here?*” (Are there any people bathing?) each time they approached a place where women may use for bathing. Boys and girls were taught and expected to uphold chastity until marriage. This is why the Shona and Venda, occasionally undertook virginity tests to establish if girls especially, had not been defiled. Marriage was considered a goal that everyone strove to achieve. Taboos thus helped Shona and Venda make sure children were safeguarded against irresponsible behavior. In doing so, they avoided a host of problems which modern society has failed to deal with.

Through such taboos, society treasured the collective sense of responsibility meant to nurture its citizens. The task was not left to the individual or a naïve child who often would be vulnerable and succumb to the challenges presented by life. Taboos on morality successfully kept especially boy children’s eyes away from naked women, something contemporary society has unsuccessfully struggled to do. At the same time, girl children were taught to sit, dress and walk in manners that would not expose particular body parts. Thus Shona and Venda taboos successfully outlawed pornography in whatever means or form.

Both young boys and girls were discouraged from actions that would arouse their feelings or the feelings of others that would persuade them to experiment with their bodies before being mature enough to assume parental responsibilities. This discouraged unwanted pregnancies, cases of baby-dumping, and in the same environment, abortion. Rape cases were very rare and sexually transmitted diseases quite uncommon. Through taboos, it was fashionable for boys and girls to safeguard their virginity and morality well before, and outside marriage. Girls who safeguarded their virginity were not lampooned as backward and naïve. Rather, they were highly rewarded with the *chimanda* ceremony where an animal was slaughtered in their honor. There was no need to teach about or distribute protective and other family planning materials as it happens today. Taboos were the condoms and family planning material of the time. Having stayed among African people and having understood a lot about their morality, Gelfand writes in awe, “The morals of the African as I know him, are exemplary and I doubt if they can be improved” (1968, 36). He adds that adultery was considered one of the worst offences. Thus, a re-look at Shona and Venda taboos shows that today, society can still revisit African tradition as a way of curving out African solutions to problems posed by modernity.

Taboos and Position of Women

Many conferences and fora today are inundated with debates about the position, image and attitude that society has towards women. There are even efforts to abolish African traditional customs and ways of socializing children, most of which are criticized as backward and primitive and blamed for women’s suffering and disadvantaged positions in life. Today’s argument is that African women have, since time immemorial, been oppressed, looked down upon and that African ways of socializing children need to be abolished in order to change the way women are perceived. As a result, resources, time and efforts are being channeled towards fighting African men and customs.

However, a look at Shona and Venḡa taboos shows that most of these efforts and criticism of African ways of socializing children are clear cases of misdirected anger. It shows that modern society is grappling with symptoms whose underlying causes, they are unable to decipher. The following list of taboos shows how women were regarded, and how children are taught to view them in traditional Africa:

Shona:

Ukagara huni iri pamoto mai kana mukadzi wako anofa
(If you sit on a log in a fire your mother or wife will die)

Ukagara pfihwa unozoponda mukadzi
(If you sit on a hearthstone you will kill your wife)

Ukagara paguyo unofirwa nemukadzi
(If you sit on a grinding stone your wife will die)

Venḡa:

U dzula kha mutuli nga muthu muḡuku zwi a ila, muḡana wa mme u a vhavha
(If a young person sits on a mortar it results in one's mother experiencing back ache).

A hu dzulwi nḡha ha mutuli nga muthu wa tshinnani vha shavha uri u ḡo feliwa nga musadzi
(If a man sits on a mortar that will result in the death of his wife)

Whilst these *taboos* were used to stamp out mischievous behavior among especially boy children, they at the same time exude a Shona and Venḡa worldview about women. In many of the given cases, the immediate concern of the elders was that the child should avoid burning itself or that it was unhygienic to sit where mealie-meal was ground. However, the elders knew that the child could argue that it knew how best to sit on the hearthstone without burning his or her self (Tatira 2000, 147). Therefore, to pre-empt such an argument or any other arguments, the threat was not of burning oneself, but of losing a very important family member, one's mother or wife. An African child shuddered at the thought of losing a mother, or worse killing her themselves. Killing her would result in *ngozi*, an angry spirit which would gruesomely avenge the death of its bearer. Hence, the Shona have a taboo which states *Ukatuka kana kurova mai unotanda botso* (If you scold or beat your mother you will suffer terribly), and similarly, the Venḡa have *U sema mubebi zwi khou ḡisa tshinyama / maḡudzi* (If you scold your parent you will experience bad luck).

The taboos show that a mother was not supposed to suffer ill-treatment of whatever sort, be it scolding, beating or worse, being killed. Among African people, she stood for love, care, protection, providence, without which life would be very difficult (Makaudze and Gudhlanga 2012). The significance of one's mother was also expressed through the maxim, '*Nherera inoguta musu wafa mai vayo*' (An orphan is only satisfied the day its mother dies). The proverb hazarded the numerous challenges that befell those without living mothers.

Contemporary society is battling against children who beat, and in extreme cases kill their mothers for many reasons such as to gain wealth, or if they are girls, in the fighting over a lover. Yet, traditionally, knowing and appreciating the role and position a mother had in one's life, one dared not do anything that would result in her injury, discomfort or death. Interestingly, among the Shona and Venda, one did not have a single mother because all the younger or elderly sisters of one's mother (both in the nuclear and extended families) were undoubtedly one's mothers (ibid). Again, among the Shona and Venda every woman was a mother to someone and invariably, no one ever wanted to lose them (ibid). Thus the Shona and Venda children were taught the importance of women. Thus, to avoid counter-arguments from boy children about their behavior, the death of someone special (a mother) was mentioned, and that deterred children away from mischief.

The taboos also brought out the significance of women as wives in African life. Boys especially, were warned against doing things that would result in the death of their wives and no boy dared embark on any of those things. In the Shona and Venda milieu, a wife brought respect and honor to a man. An unmarried man, regardless of his age, was called by his first name, was never given a piece of land to farm and when dead, his spirit was not venerated (Gombe 1998, 179). Among the Shona, the unmarried man was despised and called *tsvimborume* (Aschwanden 1982, 161). Thus a wife was integral in one's life that it was the goal of every man to get a wife for marriage. Also, the significance of the wife was expressed through the adages '*Musha mukadzi*' [Shona] (A wife makes a home), *Musaḍi u fhaḍa muḍi* [Venda] (A wife makes a home) which convey the focal position that a woman occupied in a home. The death of a wife also meant the disintegration and collapse of the family and home.

In juxtaposition, in Shona and Venda cosmology, this made it deplorable and difficult or even impossible for anyone to harass, beat, or ill-treat their wives. The image of women (wives) in Shona child socialization is that women are very special beings, whose death was very costly. As such, losing a wife was considered so tragic that it was used (in taboos) to make children desist from bad behavior. Thus, traditional Africa was never unsophisticated or backward, and in contrast it cultivated healthy male-female relations as opposed to contemporary society. Gelfand makes a valid observation that, "It is unfair to say that the African treated his womenfolk badly and showed little consideration for them" (1968, 42). He adds, "No fault can be found with the husband and wife relationship in the traditional life of the African..." (Gelfand 1968, 43).

Contemporary society has severe problems of sons that beat their mothers and husbands who harass, beat and even maim their wives for even very flimsy reasons like failing to cook for them in time or for giving them food that is not warm. The recent passing of the Domestic Violence Act by the Zimbabwean government shows the frantic efforts being made to stop the rot in modern families. Yet, cases of violence are always on the increase. This is because such legislation does not take into account the culture of the people in question. Instead of crafting and promulgating law after law, most of which are always broken, there is due need to tap from the traditional way of cultivating sound male-female relations. What is clear is that contrary to feminist and other Euro-centric scholarship that African ways of socializing children like taboos are outdated and lead to the disparaged image that contemporary women wield, the ways are in fact rational and civilised. Thus it is unjustifiable to spend many resources, efforts and time in fighting African ways of socializing children. Instead, such resources, time and energy should be spend unearthing, revitalizing and sprucing up such oral art forms whose gender sensitivity is beyond reproach.

Taboos and Conservation: The Environment and Other Natural Resources

Traditional society jealously guarded against the devastation of the environment and other natural resources. Focus was not only on exploring and exploiting the environment, but equal attention was devoted to safeguarding it against extinction or pollution. This curbed problems such as erratic rainfall patterns, desertification, siltation, global warming, as well as chronic diseases. Traditional ways of environmental conservation maintained a balance in the ecological system. Taboos were the legislation and the Environmental Management Agencies (EMA) of the time. In today's Zimbabwe, environmental management agencies safeguard and punish those who threaten the being of the environment. In the past, it was taboos that fought wars against environmental degradation. They minimized excessive firewood collection, emission of toxic substances into the water, air or land. They were the environmental police who maintained order and peaceful existence between people, the flora and the fauna. Unlike the relations between the EMA and society today, which is like the hunter and the hunted, with taboos, they were part and parcel of the art, education and day-to-day living of the indigenous people. Unlike the EMA and today's people, taboos and traditional Africans were never on a collision path. Indigenous people cooperated with taboos about the environment. Through taboos, the people always saw themselves as responsible for safeguarding the environment. Yet contemporary citizens see it as the duty of the EMA to safeguard the environment.

One subtle but very effective way of protecting the environment against degradation, extinction or pollution through the taboos of Shona and Venda society was via the practice of *mutupo*, totemism. A totem is an animal, or part of an animal (the animal may be staying in the water or on land), which is considered taboo by people of that totem. Taboo simply meant that the animal was not killed or unduly harassed by members of the totemic group (Gombe 1998, 28).

Every Shona and Venḁa had a totemic group to which they belonged and a totemic animal they identified themselves with, vindicating Gelfand's observation that African faith is characteristically identified with nature, and it is closely linked with the surrounding environment (1968, 7). The animal was chosen because of certain admirable characteristics of appearance or demeanor which members of the clan were supposed to emulate (Pongweni 1996, xi). He further explains,

The totemic animal has a taboo attached to it or to part of its carcass such that the totem-bearer is forbidden to eat it. Infringement of this taboo has certain concomitant magical sanctions, such as loss of teeth or leprosy (*maperembudzi*). [ibid: 9].

It was taboo for anyone to kill or eat an animal of their totem. The Shona taboo states 'Ukadya mutupo unobva mazino' (If you eat your totem all your teeth will fall off), and the Venḁa say, 'U ḁa mutupo zwi a ila muthu u a sina maḁo' (It is taboo to eat one's totem, you will lose your teeth). Aschwanden (1982, 120) adds that eating a totem was committing a crime similar to incest, whose punishment was severe. It was strongly believed that those who ate their totems also developed a rash all over their bodies, went blind, or became sterile, punishments that were imposed by ancestral spirits (ibid). Those of the Shumba [Shona], Mudau [Venḁa] totem did not kill a lion, those of the Mbizi, Mbiḁi spared the zebra, the Zhou [Shona], and Nḁou [Venda] identified with the elephant. Also, the Dziva [Shona], Ngweḁa, Mbedzi, Siziba [Venda] would not kill a crocodile or hippopotamus, and they would not eat fish whilst those of the Shava would not harm the eland. In addition, those of the Hungwe [Shona], Nyoni [Venḁa] would not eat birds, and the Moyos would not eat the heart just like the Sokos [Shona], Shoko [Venḁa] would not harm or kill a monkey or baboon. Thus people would not kill animals haphazardly. Rather, there was selective hunting and killing of game. Eating a totem was likened to incest; that is, like having sexual relations with one's sister. By not eating the *mutupo* the Shona and Venḁa gave the expression that they had no sexual relations with their sisters (Aschwanden 1982, 120). Thus animals that were edible were spared by the practice of totemism, showing that the people had a very natural way of sparing the fauna in their environment. The problem in modernity is that poaching has substituted totemism and traditional selective hunting, because poachers do not identify with any animal. Any animal can be killed for as long as it fetches a good price on the market, despite that it may be the poacher's totemic animal.

There were certain animals which were not considered edible by the Shona and Venḁa. For example, the lion, python, elephant, zebra, baboon, monkey and other bird species like rain bird, crow, owl, and the stoke bird. However, these could still have been hunted and killed for their skins or for trade with other ethnic groups or for any other valid reason. These animals remained precious and so were saved through the taboo system. Killing some of these animals was considered taboo. Some of these animals were believed to bring misfortunes if killed.

For instance, it was believed that if a baboon was killed, there would be drought in the area in concern. Likewise, if a rain bird, *haya* (Shona), *khwara* (Venda) was killed, there were similar setbacks. A python was also not supposed to be killed. Also, birds that had built their nests around the homestead were considered part of the homestead and were not trapped. When fishing, if fishermen dragged big and small fish in a net, the smaller fish were thrown back into the pool and the bigger ones collected for a meal. Kurotwi (2003, 12) captures this well when he says:

Due to the black man's harmony with nature, we were aware that wild animals, forests, fauna and flora, are as much part of our survival in the same way we were part of theirs. For that reason, we kept a very scientifically calculated check on our wild animals, only killing enough for our consumption and leaving enough for the balance of nature.

However, with the challenges posed by modernity, even animals that were formerly taboo and those which were ordinarily spared are killed in game parks and sold under the guise of edible game meat. In Zimbabwe, at the height of inflation, between 2005 and 2010, for example, many people consumed meat from formerly shunned animals like baboons, zebras, under the banner of game meat. Again, the fact that hunting is now done by licensed people makes many animals vulnerable. Such hunters hunt and kill all sorts of animals and sell to unsuspecting people, exposing them to animals which ordinarily they would not have killed themselves for totemic reasons. Worse still, some Zimbabweans have been converted into the Christian faith and believe that deifying totemic animals is the same as worshipping other gods, something vehemently despised by the new religion, thus, many of them eat animals that they would have not eaten before which ultimately threatens the animal population and the entire environment.

The Shona and Venda were not just sensitive to the animal kingdom, but even to the plant kingdom. Certain trees were usually spared from destruction. It was considered taboo to destroy fruit trees and to use them as firewood. Thus, most trees that produce fruits which would feed people were spared. These include *munyii*, *mutamba*, *mutsubvu*, *mushumha*, *muchakata*, *mutohwe*, *munzvuru* among the Shona and *muñii*, *muvhuyu*, *mutabva*, among the Venda. Again, certain trees were not considered suitable for firewood. Among these are *muora*, *muzeze*, *mugwatikwati*, *mutara*, *mubvumira*, *mushambahuro*, *mupfura*, *mubvamaropa*, *mupanda* among the Shona and *musu*, *mufula*, *mudzwiri* among the Venda. It was considered taboo to use such trees as firewood. Kurotwi emphasizes that:

We only cleared those parts of the forest we needed for agriculture leaving those we didn't need in order for us to have abundant natural and fresh air supply. They now accuse us of deforestation when they are the ones who have caused that deforestation by packing us in our millions on small patches of arid land and naturally, by sheer numbers the vegetation clears succumbing to stamping by millions of pairs of feet day in day out (2003, 12).

The people also had ways of ensuring a clean environment and atmosphere. Water sources, the forest and the air were all kept clean. Waste of whatever kind would barely find its way into water sources and other surroundings. The people dug pits where solid waste was thrown into, and then burnt. As Gelfand notes, “The African is inherently clean and the village and huts I have visited are neat and tidy. The yard is well swept” (1968, 46). The following taboos vindicate the Shona and Venḁa as very hygienic people, contrary to what colonialists propagated:

Shona:

Ukacheresa mvura nehari ine matsito tsime rinopwa
(If you fetch water using a pot with soot, the well dries up)

Ukawetera mumvura hauzozvari
(If you urinate into water you will not sire children)

Ukaitira tsvina munzira unoita mamota pamagaro/ magaro anosvuuka
(If you excrete along a path you will develop boils on your buttocks/ your buttocks will become sore).

Mvura yagezeswa mwana hairaswi pose pose, mwana anozoondoroka
(Water that has been used for bathing a baby should not be thrown everywhere; the child will become thin and frivolous)

Venḁa:

Wa rundela maḁini a u bebi
(If you urinate into a water source you will not give birth)

U dzula nḁha ha tswiya zwi a ila, vhuhali vhu a anda
(If you sit on a hearthstone you will have high libido)

The first two focus on protecting water sources. The Shona and Venḁa treasure having clean sources of water. As such, they are against any form of contamination. Out of these taboos, the Shona and Venḁa did not hesitate to drink water from most sources because they knew that most water sources were protected in one way or another. As such, the Shona had a saying, ‘*Mvura haina n’anga*’ (Water has no purifier). The statement shows the conviction which the people had in water drawn from most sources. Society had built very responsible citizens and so they did not hesitate to drink from most sources. Hence, it was unheard of that communities would go without clean drinking water. This is in total contrast with modern life where many Zimbabwean cities go for weeks, and in some cases months without drinking water.

Despite the availability of such water sources as dams, water shortages continue to haunt contemporary society. This is because most water sources have been polluted through sewage leaks and deposits, as well as emissions from industries and factories. In towns for example, whenever refuse is not collected by the city council, residents take it upon themselves and heap it in the neighborhood, creating a breeding place for flies. The dirt from such rubbish always finds itself into water sources. Such water therefore needs to be treated using chemicals that are not only inaccessible, but hardly affordable. Treating such water costs a lot of money which most city councils can hardly afford. The treatment of Chitungwiza City water for example, is said to require at least nine (9) different chemicals which cost an estimated \$2 million dollars every month (*Zimbabwe Television Programme, "This Morning"* on 9 July 2012). Such is worsened by the fact that people no longer feel responsible for safeguarding water sources. They consider this the responsibility of municipalities and EMA, yet a look at taboos shows that indigenous people have a sense of responsibility towards resources.

The other given taboos center on cleanliness of the environment. The people did not tolerate the throwing of litter anywhere and anyhow. Writing about his experiences among the Shona, Gelfand says, "I have never observed dirt in the villages of Africa, certainly nothing that is seen in a city slum" (1968, 48). Every citizen was responsible enough to make sure that dirt is not scattered all over the place. Bath water especially that of babies; had a lot of dirt especially owing to the fact that at tender ages children usually relieve themselves in their clothing. Throwing such water everywhere was a sure way of inviting flies and threats of disease outbreaks. Such water was poured into a dug-out and covered with soil. The people were so hygienic as to cover their waste with soil each time they relieved themselves in the bush. Gelfand makes crucial observations about African people when he writes,

... the African has his own sanitation system. He relieves himself in the bush close to his village and is always most careful to cover his excreta with soil. All Africans are very particular about the adequate disposal of all excreta and any linen which may have touched the body... (1968, 47).

This is unlike today where people sometimes gather for church occasions under trees and away from ablution facilities. Dirt is thus scattered all over and this has resulted in cholera outbreaks in many places in recent years.

Way Forward: Summation

It is undoubted that African oral art forms were far from being backward and unsophisticated. Hence, taboos are actually literature from a society that is aware of issues that contemporary Africa is grappling with, yet, failing to address. The indigenous people were very moral and thus emphasized the need to abstain from sex and remain faithful to a partner.

Gender relations were never a sore issue in the past. Society handled it well through its oral art forms which were part of the child socialization process. In addition, taboos were a societal way of safeguarding the environment from extinction, pollution or degradation. The position and significance of taboos in African life makes it worthwhile to derive positives.

And thus, there is a need for African people to have home-grown solutions to problems posed by life. Taboos were an African way of handling issues. Today's researchers also believe that Western ways and solutions to problems bedeviling Africans more often than not do not produce the desired results. In most cases, Western-grown solutions worsen; instead of reduce the impact of given problems. Most alien solutions do not work well for, and on African soil mainly because Europe and Africa are two distinct landscapes whose worldview and cultural orientation are usually antagonistic (Chinewizu and Madubiike 1980).

Second, Africa needs to look into herself to develop solutions to the problems posed by life as seen in the modern call for people to revert to traditional foods and its associated medicine in boosting the immune system of people who, prior to the call were easily succumbing to the HIV and AIDS epidemic owing to lack of proper food. Such becomes a leaf from which this presentation urges contemporary Zimbabweans to unearth, explore, revivify and modernize traditional ways and approaches in order to curb the disastrous impact posed by contemporary challenges. A look at Shona and Venda taboos amply shows that there is a lot that modern society can learn from its traditional counterpart on how to address issues like the circulation of pornographic material, the rise in rape cases, the proliferation of abortion, baby-dumping, prolonged droughts, and gender inequality, among other societal challenges.

In traditional Africa, taboos were part of societal education. However, their absence in today's socialization and curricula shows how much society is losing out. African languages, which were quite sensitive to nature need to be revitalized and accorded their place in society and the school curricula. Looking down upon the indigenous languages of the people in today's society has also starved people of a very rich heritage embedded and conveyed through them. Kurotwi (2004) makes a scathing attack on the nature of education in Zimbabwe today. He argues that our education demonstrates that we are being educated in the, "eating with white people" way with the whiteness dictating what is to be eaten, how, when and where, resulting in all sorts of stomach ailments, but despite the diarrhea, we still want to boast about eating with white people (Kurotwi 2004, 10). He adds that the education system was designed to make Africans accept that they are actually savages who needed the white man to get out of the savagery which has resulted in everything concerning African people being removed from our original education system so that the African could now demonize themselves even in the absence of the white man (ibid, 10).

There is also a great need to modernize African art forms like taboos. However, it may not be easy to argue for the observance of old taboos especially in this era of science. Owing to the advent of modern science, most of what is contained in taboos would be resisted by children, arguing that it is all lies. However, Chigidi (2009, 185) warns that "a useful social practice should not just be discarded." Perhaps what is required is to come up with avoidance rules that focus on real problems affecting the youth today, instead of continuing to fictionalize and fantasize about dying parents and spouses (ibid).

In other words, what could be important is to research important issues addressed by taboos so that they can be packaged in ways that appeal to modern society. For example, it would be more appealing to say, “*Ukatema miti mvura haizonayi*” (If you cut down trees it affects rainfall patterns), “*Ukadongorera munhukadzi akashama uchaita bhinya*” (If you peep at naked women you will become a rapist). Thus, what is important to inculcate are the principles enshrined in old taboos, such as teaching and celebrating morality, gender equality, sacredness of the woman’s body, conservation of one’s environment, among other things wherein taboos can become a sustainable art form, based upon consistent values.

Conclusion

Colonialist thinking demonized African oral art forms, labeling them as backward and primitive and in need of a total shake-up. Colonialism thus presided over the demise of African cultural values, practices as well as art forms. Taboos have shown that African oral art forms are far from being backward and primitive, for they successfully conveyed and addressed issues that seem to baffle modern society. The case for taboos has also illustrated that there is a great need for African people to develop home-grown solutions to combat the challenges posed by life, and simultaneously, there is also a need to modernize such oral art forms so that their appeal and significance to society will remain guaranteed.

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