

Traditional Taboos and Conflict Resolution: An Exploration of the Nexus

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Abstract: Taboos are social regulatory systems which are community specific and seek to control the conduct of members of the community. These are world-over mechanisms. Zimbabwe is one country where the taboo systems have been in use for a long period to regulate societal behaviour. This paper is based on an on-going research on the role of traditional taboos in restraining the behaviour of the society especially in conflict resolution. The research is being conducted among the Shona people in Mazowe and Shamva districts, Zimbabwe. It is a desk analysis of various scholars' perceptions about the subject. Most scholars proffer different views about taboos with some supporting their roles in society while some simply describe them as 'avoidance rules' and myths. Some literature also presented current evidence on the effects of the avenging spirits; to some extent confirming the reality of some taboos. It is concluded that taboos have played an important role in societal regulation and control systems. However, it has been realized that while taboos have an element of falsehood, the concept can be revisited with a view to re-introduce it back in the society through a variety of means.

Keywords: Traditional taboos, conflict, conflict resolution, conflict transformation, modernity.

1. Introduction

Traditional taboos are social regulatory mechanisms that serve to moderate the behavior of members of a particular community. [1], [2] and [3] define taboos as a list of guidelines that direct conduct in particular situations whilst [4] calls them 'avoidance rules'. [5] also contributes in the debate giving out that during the pre-colonialist era, taboos were the only measure of social restraint and duty and the foundation of the entire social order. However, another school of thought argues that all these traditional African systems are fast eroding away through the inculcation of Western ideologies and technologies [6]. Since time immemorial, taboos have restrained people from engaging in socially and morally unacceptable activities. Besides the existence of the policing mechanisms by the traditional leaders like chiefs, kings and headmen, taboos also played a very vital role especially in cases where there would not be witnesses to criminal activities or third parties to intervene or restrain violence or criminal activities; individuals would just fear the consequences of the taboos. This paper looks at the nexus between traditional taboos and conflict resolution in

the Shona culture. Specifically, the paper seeks to understand the role that traditional taboos do play in society in mitigating and resolving conflicts. The paper is derived from chapter two of an ongoing doctorate research on taboos and conflict resolution in the Shona culture in Zimbabwe particularly the Zezuru in Mazowe and Shamva districts. The study is premised on the Structural-Functional theory associated with Emile Durkheim, and Talcott Parsons, which argues that society is made up of various entities that work collectively to promote social stability [7]. Amongst the entities referred to above are taboos whose absence or interruption may cause societal shocks. According to the theory, taboos are an invaluable cog in the proper and smooth function and remedial of societies the world-over.

2. Taboos' System

Understanding the concept of taboos probably requires an appreciation of various indigenous systems that influence the existence, relevance and sustenance of same. A taboo is a prohibition due to sacredness or some other reason defined by society. It is enforced by social convention and practice whereby society believes that any violator of the norms will

suffer or face some misfortune. The essence behind taboos or avoidance rules, according to [8] and [9] is that a child in a family must conform and behave like others in order to avoid an unusual occurrence. Any unusual behaviour in any member of the family would mean an outcast. Similarly, people are expected to be afraid of some behaviours and activities that they are involved in because of the repercussions thereto. Most taboos have their roots in the history or the myth of a community and initiation into a deity service.

Taboos are not cast in stone that they are static across generations and time. Instead, they can be changed, wiped off or have others devised and added onto the list depending on the prevailing circumstances and challenges, geographical location, culture and people's perception towards their resources and heritage. First and foremost, societies make norms which serve as guidelines for expected behaviours in particular societies, times and situations. It is from these norms that laws, folkways, taboos and mores are derived. A folkway is a practice for daily behaviour that individuals adhere to for convenience though no violation of any of it has serious consequences. On the other hand, a more is a practice based on morality and the society strongly believes in it so much so that any violation usually results in condemnation. Unlike the above two norms, a law is a practice that is on paper and enforced by an authorized organization. It is mandatory that its violation results in a particular sentence [10], [11].

Taboos were traditionally regarded as part of traditional education system. According to [12] and [13], societies were expected to socialise their youth into their customs, religious philosophy, ethical values and societal views of the entire community through its traditional education. There are also arguments to the effect that traditional education was responsible for the continued existence of some societies prior to the coming of contemporary technical inventions.

Taboos may cover a variety of subjects, such as restrictions on same family marriages, restrictions on consumption of some foods, conditions on dressing and killing a person or killing an animal. These taboos were grouped by [14] into six categories according to the following themes; those that talk about avoidance of danger, good behaviour, living in the correct way, successful pregnancy, healthy living, and those conveying religious teachings. [15] went on to classify the same taboos according to the people who are affected by them; those that affect men, those that affect children, those that affect women, and those simply classified as general taboos. Meanwhile, [16] has also categorised taboos into five distinct forbidden groups; actions, nourishment, themes, ideas, and signs while [17] presents a slightly different perspective to the background of taboos. Subsequently, [17] thematically groups these taboos into 5 categories; those that are meant to guard against bad behaviour, those that warn against danger, and those that conscientise children on issues pertaining to health, those that are meant to prevent cruelty, and others grouped under miscellaneous. [18] views taboos in their practical usage. Precisely, [18] groups them

according to those that related to wild animals and birds, those that related to land, and those that related to people. [19] indicated that when something is said to be taboo, it must not be touched, talked about, or looked at. All these scholars' approaches to the question about taboos are different though they seek to relay the same message.

Taboos are some of the earliest social systems that regulated society [20]. Over time, these were developed and more of them were added by religious priests and community leaders as a way of over-hauling the entire social system. Again, over time, the same religious leaders assimilated them into their sects or belief systems and transformed them into something more sacred and supernatural as they consolidated their power and control over societies. The few taboos that were not assimilated and remained in the minority religions or cultures like the traditional African system were rubbished as 'savage taboos' by philosophers and anthropologists like Cassier and others.

Overall, from the arguments posited by various scholars, it can be safely observed that taboos are strong sanctions required for the effective control of societal behaviour. It must however be realised that in many African societies Zimbabwe included, esteemed taboos are now on the periphery and rapidly phasing out mainly due to socio-economic challenges and the wave of modernisation that has flown across the borders. Their role of protecting the natural surroundings, order, peace and the uprightness of African societal structures has been exposed to extinction [21].

Since time immemorial, the Shona people had their belief systems which designed regulatory mechanisms in respective communities. That belief system worked effectively so much so that societal order was to some extent maintained. The Shona people believed that whenever a person disrespected a taboo, the ancestors sent serious misfortunes and unusual occurrences as a way of punishing. If one killed another, no matter the reason, the spirit of the dead could then return to the perpetrator usually at night and inquire why the murder was committed. The appearance of the dead was so traumatising that the perpetrator and the rest of the family were forced to seek amends. There are also instances when the dead can appear as a ghost to several other relatives of the perpetrator as a way of influencing the entire family to make amends and compensate. However [22] think otherwise as seen in their argument that Shona taboos only stir-up fear in people, which has no fundamental significance, "but is a means to an end" - good behaviour.

It is also believed in the Shona culture that the spirit of the dead comes to a member of the perpetrator's family in a trance and outline the circumstances surrounding the murder act as a way of ensuring that everyone is convinced that it is the spirit of X deceased. The spirit then makes relevant demands to the perpetrator failure of which people may start to die mysteriously. The entire family may in other cases, perish except the perpetrator so that he/she pays up. It is also believed by the Shona people that whenever a taboo has been tampered with, the entire community may be able to tell

through the subsequent implications in the community. In some cases, there may be droughts, unusual occurrences of say baboons in a village contrary to the norms and trends and that people may lose their teeth in the event that they ate their totems. In the same culture, it is believed that such offences can be done away with through a special traditional process that involves traditional brew and appeasement of the avenging spirits called 'ngozi'.

The Shona people have for a long time believed in endogenous African traditional systems as part of the social regulatory mechanisms. This has been noted by various scholars [23], [17], [18], [22] and [9] who all agree that taboos, traditional leadership, traditional spirits, customs and cultural values have collectively maintained and nurtured peace, harmony and development. The Zezuru people have also employed various effective modes in attending to different conflict situations; unhu/ubuntu, the court system (dare), the elders (tete/sekuru), compensation (kuripa), taboos (zviera), silence (kunyarara) and retaliation (kutsiva) [9]. Augmenting the above systems, the Shona people traditionally visit rural homes where the rest of the extended families are based to rekindle relationships and familiarise with their traditional customs. These urban/rural visits are also meant to commemorate significant traditional rituals and cultural proceedings like appeasement of the dead (kurova makuva), initiation, title-taking, marriage ceremonies, memorial ceremonies, spiritual dance ceremonies (bira) and enthronement of village bulls (kudira mombe dzemusha) amongst several others. To some extent, these ceremonies resolve conflicts that may have developed within the families over a period or according to the belief, resolving conflicts instigated by the spirits of the dead. [24] alludes to the theory of 'unhuism' which is grounded in the critical upholding of traditional values and beliefs as another way of maintaining peace and stability. [24] argues that any violation of these ethical values enshrined in 'unhuism' is a transgression to the whole neighbourhood and is punishable.

It has also been observed that the Shona communities hold with high esteem some traditional institutions like public shrines, the elderly, children, names, places, cemeteries, and mountains amongst others for their respective roles in the unification of families and communities, conservation of resources, identity of a people, communicate with spirits, passing-on life, and social entertainment. Traditional leaders according to [25] and [26] had their roles that stretched from social, economic, moral to political ensuring peace, stability and development. They catered for the welfare of the people by providing with land for agriculture and grazing which was core in the lives of the people economically and ran a programme called 'Zunde Ramambo' (Chief's granary) which provided for the poor and orphans in times of droughts and other emergencies. The traditional leadership system had always served as mediators, judges and advisors whose verdicts were respected and taken with high esteem unlike the present day politician's rulings which are plagued with corruption, inconsistencies and biases. The traditional leadership system [27] also oversees the collection of village levies, taxes, rates and charges payable in terms of the Rural

District Councils' Act. According to the Zimbabwean laws, the guardian and defender of all public property is the chief who ensures that all the roads, telephones, dip-tanks and wells amongst others are kept in good order and safely.

2. Challenges Facing Taboos

It has been noted that while taboos have some important role in society, they have been rendered irrelevant by a variety of challenges some of which have been necessitated by society while others are natural changes impacting on society [28]. Some of the challenges cited include dense population [29] which results in competition for resources and the blending of cultures and systems, and secularization [30] and [31] which leads to a reduction in the significance of the ideals institutionalized in religion for the integration and legitimization of daily lives in the contemporary society. Others cited include modernization and urbanization which have also seen societies abandoning some of their traditional beliefs and systems that are considered archaic. The introduction of formal education and government sanctions and political interference amongst others have seriously negatively affected the relevance of taboos as some policies do not promote the involvement of local and public participation.

3. The Shona's Perception of Conflict Resolution

This is an old practice that has sustained various societies and has been written widely by Johan Galtung, John Paul Lederach, Chris Mitchell, Peter Wallensteen and William Zartman amongst others. This is an important element in the application of traditional taboo system as both are basically two sides of the same coin. Conflict resolution is a general practice which is used to attend to issues of instability and controversy with a view to reach an immediate solution. Societies have had some in-built mechanisms to deal with conflicts. Similarly, societies and cultures have equally different approaches to conflict resolution; all being integral in peace-building and development work, social transformation and social justice as they are multidisciplinary, multilevel, multicultural and analytic.

Closely akin to the concept of conflict resolution is conflict transformation which is about looking and considering a particular conflict with a view to understanding its dynamics; the substance, the background, and its configuration [32, 33]. According to [32], conflict transformation is about lessening of violence and enhancing justice, direct contact and social structures and the important connections in human relationships which may not be visible.

Both conflict resolution and transformation systems in the Shona society are facilitated through a variety of vehicles and institutions. One such institution is the African Traditional Religion which has been passed on from generation to generation and which [34] argues is stored in the peoples' mythology and folktales, music and dances, liturgies and shrines and in proverbs and terse phrases. It is complimented

by the belief in superstition and myths. Superstitions are old-age beliefs by humanity on some unproved and magical actions [12] and [35] whilst myths are beliefs and unproven stories about a people that are passed on to generations as reality [36]. African traditional religion also comes with its endogenous conflict resolution mechanisms. At the centre of African traditional religion is the belief in ancestors who, according to [37] and [38] are responsible for family issues, habits, customs and ethical norms and relevant punishments that may be meted on transgressors of the hallowed traditions of the community. The Shona people therefore, try to observe such taboos (hallowed traditions) so that they ensure harmony in their relationship with one another and other supernatural beings. To a great extent, it is this invisible police mechanism by the ancestors that then deters the would-be offenders from committing crimes. To the Shona people, the individual realm, the natural realm and the divine realm are connected.

Endogenous knowledge is wisdom that is initiated from within communities, rooted in and developing from local contexts [39]. Endogenous knowledge is based on local methods, wisdom, information, institutions, and resources and is a multifarious and holistic system that cuts across political, social, and economic aspects of people's lives. Alternative endogenous conflict resolution mechanisms in this study is referring to endogenous means like unassisted negotiation (nhaurirano), third-party intervention (conciliation or mediation) (yananiso), and compensation (kuripa) [39], [9]. Others, according to [9] are silence which [40] calls 'amnesia' and seek to forget and delay apologies while [41] cites restorative justice system which seeks to re-establish relationships as far as possible, both between victim and wrongdoer and inside the wider neighbourhood to which they live. These methods are communal, exceptional, context-specific, casual, recuperative, and varied and create an atmosphere for people to interact and engage in dialogue freely and openly and that the selection of people in the resolution processes is entirely by the conflicting parties themselves, which ensures transparency and trust among the people [42].

The Shona people also make use of the concept of totemism in conflict resolution and transformation. Totems 'mitupo' are symbols or artifacts that represent a people and identify people of the same genealogy over time. They serve as a unifier among members of the same ethnic group and control their relationships with natural resources. According to [28], it is generally sacrilegious for an ethnic member to eat meat from an animal of their totem or cut a totem plant. Totemic beliefs have therefore improved peaceful ethnic life and family relations. Society elders and religious leaders employ totems for rite processes and sacrifices in-order to bring peace in the neighbourhood [28].

In the event that a crime has been committed, there are various approaches to its resolution; either appropriate compensation is paid for a permanent solution or exorcism is conducted to suppress the matter. Exorcism as an attempt at cleansing a person from bad omen 'kugeza munyama', has

also to some extent, been necessitated by a rise in numbers involving cruelty and taking other people's lives [36].

4. Avenging Spirits

At the bottom of all the taboo systems lies what is regarded as the justice delivery system driven by avenging spirits. What is interesting with the avenging spirits is that even if a perpetrator of crime is convicted in a court of law and serves a sentence, traditionally, some appeasement still has to be done to attend to the soul of the dead and the remaining family. The concept of the avenging spirits is an efficient restraint in crimes like murder especially where relevant policing authorities seem to be supportive of the crimes. The effects of the avenging spirits are seen through; psychological trauma, mental break-down, strange deaths and weird ailments amongst others. Such weird repercussions were recorded in Chiweshe communal areas leading to Mashonaland Central Governor in 2011 warning villagers at Nzvimbo Growth Point against practicing witchcraft. His warning followed a spate of unexplained deaths in the district which, however have been allegedly attributed to the crimes of 2008 political violence [42].

In a similar case perpetrated during the June 2008 Presidential run-off in Buhera Central Constituency, some political youth murdered a man for political reasons. The avenging spirit (ngozi) of the deceased started demanding explanation for his murder from one youth and demanding 65 head of cattle. The spirit made these demands through the youth's daughter. In an effort to exorcise the daughter, the youth took his daughter to Chipinge for some cleansing rituals after which the Ngozi temporarily stopped [44]. In 2009, youth belonging to a particular political party also murdered another man in Birchnough constituency at the instigation of an aspiring parliamentary candidate and another military officer. The body of the deceased man was later frighteningly seen seated in the mortuary after displacing other bodies. The avenging spirit has reportedly been visiting some of the leading personalities during the murder so much so that others have since consulted a traditional healer for cleansing. Still in 2008, a man allegedly murdered for political reasons in another district in Zimbabwe was reportedly appearing to the family of the suspected killer and at times carrying out some household chores in a move meant to force the family to take responsibility for the murder and possible compensate appropriately [44]. In a similar politicized murder case of 2009, the son of a Provincial Governor in Zimbabwe killed a political opponent before the avenging spirits started haunting the family demanding compensation of 35 head of cattle and US\$15 000. The compensation was paid while the accused was already serving his prison sentence [45], [44].

5. Analysis

With the contrasting arguments that have been proffered by various scholars and researchers, it is important that a critical analysis of the merits and demerits of the taboos in conflict

resolution within the Shona people be made. Various positions are clear and remain debatable. [46] have noted that the traditional chiefs in Zimbabwe have been usurped by a particular political party so much so that they can no longer discharge their duties effectively. Similarly, [47] and [48] have also realised the weaknesses with the traditional adjudication and the entire leadership system. The scholars opined that some western-educated Africans have also moved away from the customary approaches of conflict resolution opting to adopt formal court systems' arbitration and western-style mediation for allegedly being barbaric, anachronistic, an impediment to growth and revolution of the continent, undemocratic, discordant and that they have been severely manipulated by ruling regimes. What may be closer to reality is that present states must be flexible to shift towards reality and those traditional institutions and practices should be enshrined in the constitution so that they complement constitutional roles of the law enforcement agencies; simply, this could be re-invention and re-introduction in the current society. In the same light, the Nairobi Declaration of the 2nd African Indigenous Women's Conference of 2004 also noted the need for the documentation of traditional knowledge and practices as a means of preserving traditional systems.

In short, the literature observed some relevance of the traditional taboos in the regulation of the past and present societies albeit with some weaknesses. It was also observed that to some extent, rural/urban migration and the integration of different ethnic groups especially in urban, farming and mining areas had serious impact on the preservation of the taboo systems vis-à-vis conflict resolution. Despite every effort by the society to ignore the existence of hallowed traditions, perpetrators of conflicts and transgressors of societal norms are facing the consequences and having to pay the embarrassing price.

However, some quarters have indicated that the African traditional religion's method of resolving conflicts is somewhat bad, irrational and evil given some of the results that have been noted on the ground. Some of these practices include; the replacement of a murdered person by another, especially a girl child from the immediate family of the murderer, sending illnesses to deviants and offenders [49], female genital mutilation (FGM), female infanticide and early pregnancy [50, 51]. Other 'evil' practices include forced arranged marriages 'kuzvarira' and carry and marry 'musengabere', levirate inheritance, and polygynous marriages amongst others.

[16] also viewed taboos differently; as a precautionary belief that hampered open exchange of ideas as it forces adherents to follow its dictates or face punitive measures. Adding some voice to the taboo debate was [17] who indicated that the fact that taboo related matters could not be touched or tempered with meant that communities legged behind failing to develop or argue the rationale behind some actions. Interestingly, most of the scholars around the concept of taboos acknowledge that while taboos have over the years managed to control societies, there is an element of

falsehood. They also point to some need for the re-invention of the same taboos so that they remain society relevant.

6. Conclusion

The question that this paper sought to answer was on the nexus between traditional taboos and conflict resolution within the Shona people in Mazowe and Shamva districts of Zimbabwe particularly paying attention on the sustainability and effectiveness of the local indigenous systems in restraining conflicts in the face of modernity. It is important to point out that the way people view the world has transformed; technology and western culture have influenced man's intelligence and opinion about humanity which is no longer viewed in the religious sense but rather from an intellect and technical perspective. It may be a daunting task to have a position on whether traditional African systems of conflict resolution are effective and sustainable or not given a variety of conflicting arguments posited by different scholars and analysts. However, the concept of taboos, according to the consulted scholars may still play an important role in the regulation of society only if they are context-defined and flexible enough to adjust to the prevailing times and systems.

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