

AFRICAN ETHICS AND THE FAMILY LIFE: ATTESTATIONS OF THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS ETHICS IN THE SHONA SOCIETY, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

In many parts of the world, family life is fragile as its structures continue to weaken and get broken down. The study explores the nature of the Shona family in Zimbabwe. It observes that the family is fragmenting due to several factors. Some of the factors are a result of the impact of globalization, the weakening of the indigenous religion and culture, escalating poverty and the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on the contemporary Shona society in Zimbabwe. Though many of the Shona people profess to be Christians or Moslems, the teachings of these religions on family life have not prevented it from fast disintegrating into the abyss. The paper argues that if the stable and durable structures of the Shona family life are to be addressed properly, it is important to engage the indigenous African ethics on the basis of the beliefs, culture and concepts of the Shona people. This paper therefore aims to explore what insights can be gained from the indigenous socio-religious ethics of the Shona people as panacea of (re)strengthening family structures, and specifically with consequential benefits for women and children who constitute the most vulnerable classes of people in Zimbabwe.

Key words: Ethics, Culture, Family, African Traditional Religion, Shona, Zimbabwe

Introduction

-A young man is thinking of getting married, and there is a problem. He is working in a city, and has little chance to spend much time in his home area. Indeed, he intends to make the city his permanent home. But in the city, he is without close kin and alone. He wants the companion of a wife. His parents however, expect him to follow the traditions of their culture, in which they have brought him up. They expect their children to live with her husband's parents after her marriage many years ago, even though her husband was working away from home. Now the young man expects their sons' wives to come and stay with them and to help them in the home. If the young man fails to comply with this custom, his family for leading him astray, will blame his wife. If he does comply, he will still be alone in the city without the companionship that he wanted from marriage. What should he do?¹⁶²

The citation above provides one example of the many tensions that arise when Shona culture interfaces with the tide of globalization in contemporary Zimbabwe. The tensions have resulted in paradigmatic shifts in many aspects of traditional Shona culture. The study is an attempt to illustrate the impact of globalization on the African institution of the family with special reference to the

¹⁶² Bourdillon, M. F. C. *Where Are the Ancestors? Changing Culture in Zimbabwe*, Harare: UZ Publications, 1997, p 1.

Shona people in Zimbabwe. The study starts with an enumerative description of the main characteristics of globalization with emphasis on its cultural dimensions and then relates those features to the explanation of major shifts in the traditional institution of the Shona family, particularly in the areas of fertility, patriarchy and sexuality and gender and family life or child-parent relationships. It must be noted that at the heart of the study, the human rights ethics response is engaged to mitigate and reconcile the problematics of cultural universality and cultural particularism engendered in the processes of changes and resistance. In a way, the study posits that the problems that are related to the unstoppable interface between globalization and the African institution of the family can best be evaluated on the basis of a benign universal human rights ethics approach.

Situating Globalization in the Context of Change

It is necessary to attempt a characterization of globalization in order to explore the impact of globalization upon the traditional institution of the African family. A call for the characteristics of globalization is also a call to tackle the demanding task of formulating an operational definition, in view of the fact that it is a contested concept that has proven to be notoriously hard to pin down¹⁶³. As a concept, globalization is –ambiguous and is interpreted in arbitrary ways.¹⁶⁴ In addition, in an effort to define globalization, –... we shouldn't be surprised that the notion isn't always clear¹⁶⁵. In fact, the notion of globalization calls humanity to recognize that people (all people) –...occupy one world and represent one culture, the human race, who share a common lot with all creation.¹⁶⁶ Hence, although there are differences in emphasis, it is possible to identify the hallmarks of globalization that can help to illustrate its consequences on the African culture.

Accordingly, we wish to delineate four main traits that underlie the core essence of globalization today. First, the contours of globalization involve the creation of new and multiplications of existing social networks and activities that increasingly overcome traditional political, economic, and geographical boundaries. Second, globalization is reflected in the expansion and stretching of social relations, activities, and interdependencies. Third, globalization involves the intensification and acceleration of social exchanges and activities. Fourth, globalization entails the creation, expansion, and intensification of social interconnections and interdependencies that do not occur merely on an objective, material level. Notwithstanding, society becomes aware of the growing manifestation of the social interdependence and enormous acceleration of social interactions themselves¹⁶⁷. It is the heightened awareness of this interconnectivity, and the effects of this consciousness upon people, that make globalization real and important for understanding cultural change. In this manner, globalization is therefore a complex set of characteristics and not a single one.

¹⁶³ Steger, M.B. *Globalization: A Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p 7.

¹⁶⁴ Hinkelmmert, F. –Globalization as Cover-Up: An Ideology to disguise and Justify current Wrongs¹⁶⁴ in *Concilium*, No.5, 2001.

¹⁶⁵ Giddens, A. *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives*; London: Profile Books, 2003, p 7.

¹⁶⁶ Petersen, R.L., Simion, M. *Tracing Contours: Reflections on World Mission and Christianity*, Boston: Boston theological Institute, 2010, p 49.

¹⁶⁷ Steger, Op Cit, p 11.

The above characteristics affect our economic, political and cultural lives. The economic and political connectivity among nations is both sustained and reflected in the astonishing developments in communication technologies, so that messages and visual images can be communicated almost instantaneously worldwide. So, the characteristic features of globalization depend mainly on technologies: the quick transportation, computerization, digitization, satellite communications, television, mobile phone, facebook, twitter, and Internet. In fact, globalizations as experienced by most people can be grouped into three main categories communications and technology, the interlinking and opening up of the world and the benefits from products and services. These categories do affect society in direct and indirect ways but in either manner, indigenous cultural values come into confrontation with foreign values in a cross-cultural arena.

In the Zimbabwean context, the institution of the indigenous Shona family has been imprinted upon by the wave of globalization, especially in the areas of patriarchy, kinship, gender and sexual equality. The basic foundations of these ingredients of the Shona family are being eroded. First, like most African societies, the Shona society is premised on a communitarian spirit. The central belief is that the community, primarily the basic family unit, is the paramount social reality apart from which humanity cannot exist. This is further understood as sacred phenomenon created by God, protected by divinities and governed by the ancestral spirits. Full participation in the community is a fundamental requirement of all humans. It comprises the nature of religious devotion, thus:

To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of this group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements is to be out of the whole picture. Therefore, to be without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion¹⁶⁸.

In this context, the ancestors comprise the principal link between the community and the realm of the spirit. As already noted, the idea of community is the primacy of the institution of the family in the spheres of social reality and personal identity. It is the locus of the human moral development. The Shona family is a large, closely-knit community of blood relatives that is constitutive of the life and destiny of each of its members. All family members are believed to have descended from a common ancestor. Moreover, in the traditional Shona families all the elderly men and women, including uncles and aunts, are called father and mother, while those closer to one's own age are called sisters and brothers. With such kinship relationship in place, all concerned are duty-bound to accept the corresponding behavior(s) as prescribed by tradition and culture. Besides the Shona defining themselves in terms of their family, they do so in accordance with their place in the family, which like all the social realities in Africa is hierarchically ordered from the oldest living member to the youngest. The family hierarchy is merely an extension of the cosmological order that begins with God and extends through ancestors to the elders of the family. In this top-down patriarchal rule is the

¹⁶⁸Mbiti, J.S. *African Religions and Philosophy*; New York: Doubleday and Company, 1969, p 3.

cultural norm in the family¹⁶⁹. For instance, the eldest son in each generation occupies a special place of primacy amongst all his siblings. It is this cultural primacy that has been underpinning the social institution of patriarchy in indigenous African society in general and the Shona society in particular. Although this study is not an advocate for patriarchy, it argues that the norm of social primacy is vital in ensuring cohesion of the family.

The above insight brings the central idea of the Shona understanding of a person to the fore. In Shona traditional life, a person does not exist alone but corporately, that is, a person exists in relation to other people in the community. It is the community that makes, creates or produces the person. Physical birth is not enough: the child must go through some rites de passage so that one becomes fully integrated into the entire society. Thus, the value the Shona people place on the person is not the primary good. Instead, the family always assumes priority over individual members¹⁷⁰. This idea of a person is implied in Shona ethics, particularly in the idea of justice. In all human activities the Shona people are primarily concerned with two forms of justice. First, the person's obligations to the community as mediated through the many dealings individuals have with one another. Second, the community's obligation to its members and itself is vital to ensure cohesion. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of justice is the preservation and promotion of society.

Further, like most African families, the most important feature of the Shona family is kinship which is usually reckoned through blood and betrothal. Kinship plays a number of roles in the community. For instance, it controls social relationships of people in the family, governs marital customs and regulations, determines the behavior of one individual in relation to others. It was noted already that all the elderly men and women, including aunts and uncles, are called father and mother whilst those closer to one's on age are called brothers and sisters. This is the kind of kinship ethics that glues families together.

In addition, it must be stated that members of the extended family have a lot to say about marriages of younger relatives. Parents play an integral role in all negotiations related to marriage. The man (would-be groom) and the woman (would-be bride) have very little to say by themselves. So, the communitarian nature of the Shona family affects all relationships within their sphere.

Procreation is always viewed as the primarily purpose of marriage. Ordinarily, the Shona people pray for fertility during the rituals to ensure that each individual person accepts one's sexuality and gender roles with elegance and humility. Childless marriages are regarded as a misfortune because children are the necessary agents for maintaining the link between the ancestors and the living family. Under such circumstances polygamy is fully justified as substitute for male impotency¹⁷¹. This means that sexual relations are a means to an end, and that end is procreation. Generally, these observations on Shona practices are premised on the context of African family social ethic. The basic elements of such an ethic, as implied in this study, are derived from and reflective of the unity among the four fully inter-dependent constitutive spheres of the indigenous African family life: Mwari (God), midzimu (ancestors), muzi (family) and munhu (person). For example, since a person is part of the community, the latter must assume responsibility for both the good and bad actions of the former. Whenever one's bad actions offend Mwari and midzimu the community is affected as well. In this way, Africans do not view misfortune and wrong doing as

¹⁶⁹ Paris, P. J. *The Spirituality of African Peoples*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, p78.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 1995, p 110.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 1995, p 77.

strictly an individual matter. Clearly, it is these traditional cultural and ethical values that come into strong confrontation with cross-cultural indentation due to globalization. As the study observes, the Shona family has become a site for struggles between tradition and globalization in the Zimbabwean context. In the next section, we highlight the nature of the interface between globalization and traditional Shona family.

The Shona Family and Cross-cultural Indentation

Globalization has had profound effects on the Shona family, particularly at the level of personal lives. Some family issues such as kinship, patriarchy, marriage, sexuality and gender have been heavily impacted upon in quite negative and positive ways. A number of Shona customs are being lost and usurped by western values. First, there has been a major shift in the family life on the value of kinship. The community life traditionally sustained through kinship has changed in view of the fact that family ties are breaking down. For instance, there is loss of family solidarity. Second, the traditional extended family system is gradually being replaced by the nuclear family system. The main influence has been the impact of technological revolution. For instance, the television has exerted the greatest influence on people at individual level. Through television and films, new cultures are being imported, foreign customs being incorporated and adopted into Shona ways of life. It is globalization that creates new existential trends like hedonism, individualism, consumerism and materialism that transform people's lives. The study also observed that global technologies like the Internet and Mobile Cell Phones allow supersonic communication between countries or people. This swift communication has resulted in an increased interrelatedness. For instance, local Shona people previously separated by geography, ethnicity, politics and religion with the rest of the outside world are now brought close to one another. Globalization has allowed a continuous flow of ideas, information, music, fashion, values and other human shades of tastes mediated through people-on-the-move around the globe. All these have affected the lives of people; especially the young ones who no longer perceive the family as a cosmological extension to the spiritual realities.

The child-parent relations have changed as children feel that whatever is espoused through film and TV programmes is worth emulating and adopting. Because of patriarchal authority the friction that ensures between the young people and gerontocrats in Shona society has led the former to leave the families to go and live on the streets in towns and cities across the country. We observed that age group is no longer the basis for rights and solidarity in families, as the young demand freedom and autonomy from parents and community elders. In fact, there is no longer respect for age, elders and ancestors, and together with the rites de passages have been taken to the deep end in the contemporary Shona society. This trend continues to be disappointingly unstoppable in Zimbabwe. We need to note that, positively, some facilities feel that their children are becoming global citizens and able to appreciate foreign cultures to mirror their human reality, but which contrasts the ideal Shona worldview.

Third, there is a shift in the area of sexuality and gender relations in Shona society. Fertility, the key life goal in the traditional family is declining, as people through interconnectedness are aware of global family planning programmes. The spread of education and health services and the provisions of free contraceptives fuel this changing pattern of existence. In fact, global processes such as waves of birth control and family planning, and international gender discourse are accessible through the TV. So, traditional gender roles are broken down as a result of cross-cultural indentation in

Zimbabwe. The reduction in fertility has led to the erosion of patriarchy and the socialization of the family institution and sexuality. Sexuality has largely been freed from religious taboos and its links to family formation. The gap between premarital sex and formal marriage has widened. In Sacks' words, this means 'Sexuality has declared its independence from marriage. Better bed than wed'¹⁷² This means that there seems to be no moral rules in the context of personal relationships in view of the fact that marriage is shrinking as a normative construction although it still retains a central place in human relations. In light of the cross-cultural indentation, largely on account of globalization, we propose to engage ethical criteria to evaluate the problematics that we delineated as invasive in Shona society.

Efficacy of a human rights ethics response: critiquing the debate

The issue of human rights is a universal acclamation. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that despite many works on the subject of human rights and the importance it has acquired in domestic and international law; there is still lack of agreement even on the meaning of terms such as 'right' or 'human right'. Today, a violation of human rights constitutes the most worrying challenges of our times for the entire world civilization. We wish to define the term 'rights' as things a person is allowed to be or to do or to have. Every person is entitled to inalienable rights by the exclusive *raison d'être* of being a person. As for 'human rights', these exist for every one's protection against people who might want to dehumanize others.

Accordingly, human rights exist to help people get along with each other peacefully. One notable person who saw that human rights are universally endowed for everyone was Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was President of the United States of America from 1933 to 1945. Mrs. Roosevelt queried 'Where, after all, do universal rights begin?' She went on to posit that human rights must begin 'In small places, close to home, so close that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet, they are the world of the individual person...Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world'.¹⁷³ This citation is relevant to provide the framework for human rights ethics response advanced in this study.

Zimbabwe is a signatory to the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights which pronounces universal rights as valid for every individual human being regardless of race, color, sex, religion, birth, etc. These point to the most important feature of the idea of human rights: the protection of the individual. This means the protection of the individual against powerful institutions of state, society, religion or others. In fact, human rights protect individual self-determination and free agency. The foregoing idea is elaborated, thus:

Human rights define the minimum of what is necessary in order to guarantee the freedom of the individual agency and the freedom of self-determination. By the definition of inalienable rights such as, the right to life and security, the right to freedom from torture, inhuman treatment and discrimination, the right to protection

¹⁷² Sacks, J. *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality and Society in a Secular Age*, London: Continuum, 1991, p15).

¹⁷³ Hubbard, L.R. *What are Human Rights?*, Harare: Zimpride, 2001, p 2.

against arbitrary arrest, the right to fair legal proceedings, to freedom of opinion and expression, to free choice of one's spouse or mate etc, the idea of human rights sets limits to those collectives and institutions in which we usually live, limits which for the sake of the basic liberty of the individual are not to be transgressed.¹⁷⁴

It is this notion of the individual as advanced above that makes most people to intrinsically link human rights with western thought, culture and civilizations. In fact, the current formulation of human rights may be seen to contain three elements that reflect those western values: That the fundamental unit of society is the individual, not the family, the primary basis for securing human existence in society is through rights, not duties and that the primary method of securing rights is through legalism where- under rights can be adjudicated upon.¹⁷⁵

The study adopts the foregoing portrait of the language and notions of Human Rights that were developed in the West because these are perceived as relevant to identify some resonances and dissonances between them and Shona culture. In fact, Chapter Three on the Declaration of Rights, Article 11 of the Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe spells out the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual. The constitution of Zimbabwe states thus: –Whereas every person in Zimbabwe is entitled to the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual, that is to say, the right whatever his race, tribe, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed or sex, but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest!.

The implication is that if human rights are primarily understood as rights for the protection of individuals, then a further crucial aspect is that these rights hold for all individuals in an equal way and that therefore the claim for their validity is universal. Taken together, the ideas of equality and universality do point to the problem of how to justify the universal validity of the human rights idea within the horizon of different cultures, religions and ideologies. To mitigate this problem, most scholars take recourse to the notions of human dignity, free individual and self-determination as patterned in the West to be normative. Nevertheless, the identity of western origin to the concepts above does not necessarily determine the range of their validity. Rather, the critical issue is to point out the relativistic position that most Africans uphold. The position is: –what we call universal human rights are in fact an expression above all of western values derived from the enlightenment. Understood in this light, the human rights idea is at best misguided in its core claim that it embodies universal values and at worst a blend of moral hubris and cultural imperialism.¹⁷⁶ This implies an Africans' relativist argument that human rights are unduly biased towards morally individualistic societies and cultures at the necessary expense of the communal moral complexion of many African societies.

The most penetrating analysis of these problems that haunt the nature of human rights has been given by the Dutch missiologist; J. van der Ven (2004) who draws our attention to the concept of human rights by taking the concern over the presumed incompatibility between human rights and communal moral systems head on. After acknowledging the western origin of human rights and the attendant

¹⁷⁴Schmidt-Leukel, P. –Buddhism and the Idea of Human Rights!, in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, Vol.14 (2), 2004, p 217.

¹⁷⁵ Ali,S.S. *Gender and Human Rights in Islam and International Law*, London: 2000, p18.

¹⁷⁶ Schmidt-Leuken, Op Cit, p 219.

individualistic characteristics, he explores the question whether on closest scrutiny, human rights historically are a product of the West's growing concern with the individual. In the light of Hegel's idea of mutual recognition he argues that on closer scrutiny they prove to embody the social constriction of human beings. This is supported by the recognition of three generations of human rights one of which are collective rights that are far more attuned to the communal and collective basis of many individual lives. First generations human rights consist primarily of civil, political and judicial rights. Second generations rights are super-individual rights involving right to development, right to health environment, right to peace and right to national self-determination.¹⁷⁷

The problem of the western origin and individualism raised in this section seems to be the majority opinion and one to which most Shona traditionalists would subscribe. If human rights in their present formulations are indeed a western construct, should the Shona simply renounce human rights and withdraw from any discussion on the issue? This may not be possible because the idea of human rights that has been described above is implied in the Preamble of the Constitution of Zimbabwe adopted in 1979 and amended several times. The said Preamble mentions a commitment to freedom, peace, justice and tolerance. It reads,

...acknowledging the supremacy of God and recognizing our diversity, we the people of Zimbabwe, recalling our heroic resistance to slavery, colonialism racism domination, exalt and extol the brave men and women who scarified their lives during the Chimurenga/Imfazwe and national liberation struggles, honor compatriots who have toiled for the progress of our country: celebrate our natural resources and the richness of our various traditions and cultures bequeathed to us by forefathers and providence, cherish freedom, peace, justice, tolerance, prosperity, patriotism in search of a new different frontier under a common destiny.¹⁷⁸

Some explicit declarations on the Rights are found in Chapter Three of the Constitution of Zimbabwe. Some of the declarations are fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual, protection of right to life, protection of right to personal liberty, protection from deprivation of property, protection from arbitrary search, provisions to secure protection of law, protection of freedom of conscience, protection of freedom of expression, protection of freedom of assembly and association. We believe that a proper understanding of the human rights ethic is vital to mitigate the challenges that emerge in the interface between globalization and the indigenous Shona culture in the Zimbabwean context. We propose human rights ethics based on continuously contested core set of global values, set of global rights and responsibilities that respect the sanctity of life, liberty, justice, equality and mutual respect to be sacrosanct in strengthening family life today. We are thinking of a shift from a bad universal human rights ethics discourse that fosters cultural imperialism, imposed westernization or cultural homogenization upon which globalization is anchored. This also entails a shift from an ethical particularism tied to the idea of culture as essentially tied to a local place, the idea of culture as a particularity tied to the idea of culture as a circumscribed home. We call for human rights ethics response based on the tradition of liberalism in which individualism is not the defining characteristic of liberalism but one which contains a broader account of the relationship between the individual and society. The study defends this approach because the overall impact of the shift caused by globalization on the indigenous Shona culture is one from communalism based on

¹⁷⁷Van der Ven, A. J. -Is there a Good of Human Rights?!, Unpublished Material, 2004, p 18.

¹⁷⁸ -Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe in <http://www.crlp.org/pr-9-0630zimhtml>.

kinship to that of individualism based on autonomy. This shift is more akin to –practical rationality and ethical judgment¹⁷⁹. This is rationality that displays in the exercise of moral judgments an interconnection between what is more universal and what is more particular or local. This leads to crisis-crossing of moral judgments. If built into what we call a universal human rights ethics approach, it may retain the vital aspects of traditional Shona family of marriage, sexuality, gender, kinship, child-parent relationship and patriarchy without fostering cultural homogeneity or cultural particularism associated with globalization.

Concluding remarks

The study demonstrated that some main features of globalization have had profound effects on the traditional Shona paradigm of the family. There have been several paradigm shifts in the areas of kinship, patriarchy, fertility, sexuality, gender and child-parent relationships. These shifts are mainly a result of global cultural flows linked to economic and political dimensions of globalization which is manifest in the interconnectedness of Shona society with the rest of the world. The global cultural flows are driven mainly by rapid developments in transport and the communication revolution. Their influence has generated a heightened sense of individualism and consumerism that are contrary to the communitarian spirit of the Shona people. This, apparently, has made the family a site for struggle as some people take particularistic and protectionist positions and think that we maintain or go back to the way the traditional family was, an institution based on a culture of honor that is inherently linked to gross inequalities. It was also made clear that, today, other people take a universalistic view and want to stand back and distance themselves from their former culture. This scenario naturally raises an ethical question on the search for an alternative roadmap.

The study made it abundantly clear that to begin to think that the Shona people can go back to the ‘dry bones’ of their cultural roots is not a realistic introspection. It continues to be evident that the modern man cannot be a prisoner of culture in view of the fact that no culture is static. This is why the study was undertaken against the backdrop of a surging globalization that is imprinting upon the indigenous culture of the Shona. After all, African culture, as exemplified by Shona culture, has not been preserved exactly as it was several centuries ago, given the fact that every culture is dynamic in nature. The issue is: since all the living cultures necessarily change over time, the African culture cannot only adapt its ethical insights related to kinship relationships, communalism, reciprocity, obligation, rites of passage, justice and consultation to the problems related to children, women and sexuality but can also alter them in important ways that help to address these problems. The study made it clear that we can continuously debate the impact and implication of globalization on the Shona traditional family in the context of a benign universal human rights ethics that can enable people to live with the tension between the universal and the particular living with the paradox of globalization in its cultural indebtedness. We believe and thereto conclude that a human rights ethics paradigm could be vital in mediating the impinging problems that are affecting family life in Zimbabwean society.

¹⁷⁹ Fiorenza, F. S. -The Challenge of Pluralism and Globalization to Ethical Reflection in Concilium, No.4, 2001, p 79.

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