

‘Going under the Traditional Knife’: Linking African Traditional Education and the Ethic of Identity through Shangani Culture, Zimbabwe

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The paradigm of African traditional education, especially in the backdrop of some cultural practices, continues to attract interest in the contemporary discourses in African Studies. On one hand, the colonial quest was to exterminate African traditions which were perceived as ‘primitive’. On the other, a fresh quest on the ‘resurrection’ of traditional African heritage continues to gather momentum. This study observes that the colonial quest was superficial because it was based, not on objective reality but rather on human prejudice. Despite the hard socio-economic challenges in Africa, largely as a result of the impact of globalisation, the study posits that the African traditional scheme of education endures on because it embodies the liveliness of a particular African existentiality. In this regard, the study tests the thesis by investigating the rite of circumcision (hoko) among the Shangani people in Zimbabwe. This ritual forms one of the key moments in the rhythmic life of the people and constitutes a vibrant mark of continuity in African traditional education and cultural identity. Accordingly, the main aim of the study is to expose and discover the vitality of the circumcision rite as part of the education in traditional Shangani society

Keywords: African traditional education, culture, hoko, identity, ritual, Shangani, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

The cultural practices on *rites de passage* (stages of life) constitute a repository of a pragmatic scheme of traditional education in Africa. The cultural practices continue to be manifest in a number of countries, especially in the sub Saharan region. For instance, despite the social influences of globalisation, new technological advances in health and the scary fear of contracting the HIV and AIDS epidemic, one such enduring traditional practice which is popular is *hoko* (the rite of circumcision). It is a rite that is practised in many communities, for example, in Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe. As Schoffeleers (1979:5) has revealed, traditional societies which still practise *rites de passages* in Africa tend to be cultic in terms of their sociological profile, political organisation and cultural outlook.

The focus of the research is on the rite of circumcision known among the Shangani people as *hoko*. In terms of a working definition, a rite is a traditional sacrament or formality which is done on *tikhomba* (males who are prepared for circumcision). A rite is performed in a socio-religious setting and could be used interchangeably with the term, ritual. It will be realised that every ritual is performed in a strict socio-religious setting. The foregoing insight underlies why the Europeans, especially the early generation of missionaries, failed to unlock the jinx behind the logic of traditional education in the context of its metaphysical worldview. As will be briefly pointed out later in the study, that failure is

ubiquitously manifest in colonial perspectives.

In general, it must be noted that, for the African people, the traditional forms of education are motivated by what the people themselves believe in. Moreover, as Wiredu (1996:16-17) has pointed out, African traditional cultural systems spring from people’s lived experiences and thereto makes life to be in harmony with the total environment. For instance, certain cultural practices are still very evident among the Sena people in northern Mozambique and the Mpondo, Themba and Xhosa people in South Africa. In Zimbabwe, the rite of circumcision is still being practised by the Ndebele people who live in the western Matabeleland province, VaRemba and Shangani people, regarded as a minority ethnic groups who live in the southern Masvingo province of Zimbabwe. As Fafunwa and Aisiku (1982) have highlighted, the traditional ethnic communities in Africa have unique religio-cultural beliefs that are enduring through the initiation or process of education. Such insights are valid given the fact that the traditional cultural categories still function to offer a relevant African philosophy of education in post-colonial countries. Africans have had ideas, beliefs and cultural practices that are pragmatic but that Western philosophy (and civilization, too) continues to erode in our day. This is one reason why the study is significant. Accordingly, the study attempts to explicate on those enduring practices which are the sources of traditional education in Zimbabwe. Put differently, the study envisions discovering why there is a

resurgence of interest by some communities to undertake the initiation rite of circumcision. The research focuses on the Shangani people who live under Chief Mpapa and Chief Sengwe, both of Chiredzi district in the southern Masvingo province of Zimbabwe.

In terms of the scope and delimitation, the study focused on the circumcision of males only. The reason was that a phenomenological method which is heavily based on fieldwork was unconceivable if it was directed on females because the operation is almost secretive in nature. Even with males, it was difficult to make a breakthrough because the whole gamut of the circumcision rite is almost occultist in its ethos. It is occultist because the initiates 'undergo the traditional knife', the physical surgery so to speak, like one undertaking an 'official' secret oath to the *mikwembo* (ancestors). Therefore, the study was generally designed in such a way that information obtained from the male circumcision would serve as a window in addressing the issue of female circumcision in Shangani society in Zimbabwe.

Contesting Perspectives on Identity

The contesting western and culturalist perspectives on the discourses concerning identity or identities are long standing in scholarship. The concept of identity is complex and presupposes that every ethno-linguistic group is unique. In the context of this study, uniqueness implies that every culture has its own lens of looking at things in the phenomenal world. For this reason, it is prudent to briefly highlight two competing perspectives on the issue of identity.

The western perspective is represented by the old colonial school of thought that perceived African traditional education and categories of heritage as 'primitive'. The white writers of the old colonial school of thought claimed that the rite of circumcision in particular was barbaric. For instance, Hammond-Tooke (1962:79) said that circumcision must be abandoned because it is cruel, deleterious on health and difficult to mobilise especially, for example, in times of war and social upheaval. It must be mentioned that white missionaries and travellers, for instance, took traditional categories of life like *mikwembo* (ancestors), *mandlozi* (esoteric type of spirits), praying to deities and ritual worship as 'fetishistic' and rejected them. The colonial perspective was inspired by the centre-periphery theory. Through this theory, missionaries assumed that what was good for Westerners carried universal benevolence. For instance, western culture was superimposed upon Africa during the colonial rule because it was regarded as good for Africans. According to Banana (1992: 53), the westerners perceived traditional forms of education as having no utility value. In addition, Amanze (1998:53) has

stated that missionaries in Africa saw themselves to be in a battle with Satan. That is, the destruction of African traditions was perceived to symbolise the destruction of the devil and the coming to light of the victory of Christ. This prejudicial attitude perhaps answers why the white missionaries were so active in providing the western forms of education. Its thrust was to down play the vitality of traditional education. Nevertheless, for much of the colonial period, western education was criticised for being superficial because it was too theoretical in nature. In the wake of certain pedagogical dissonances in the western philosophies when applied on local education systems in post-colonial Africa, many curriculum planners in Africa are reverting to inform contemporary education with the philosophies of African traditional education. The essence of the latter philosophy is anchored in the culturalist perspective, as highlighted below.

The culturalist perspective, which the study conjures, posits that the foregoing western perspective is abhorrent. As anchored in pan Africanist ideals, the culturalist school of thought contends that African traditional system of education is pragmatic in nature. It must be pointed out that the philosophy of pragmatism deals with practical issues (Dewey, 1944:321). A number of writers, who associated themselves with the cause of de-colonisation after 1960 and also those who have championed the programme of an African *Renaissance* have been the advocates of a culturalist school of thought which emphasises pragmatism. In general, the culturalist school observes that the traditional form of education is vital in fostering and integrating the wholistic fabric of society.

In line with the above insight, one basic way of societal integration is to generate the human psychological energy through the ritual operation in order to increase social cohesion needed to bind people and social structures together. Ter Haar, Moyo and Nondo (1992:45) observe that this in turn is responsible for sustaining the survival and the continuity of human life and the development of society as a whole. This development is only possible through the power of education. In this regard, the culturalist philosophy perceives education as a process of initiation (Hirst and Peters, 1970:14). Thus, African scholars agree that the process of education is a universal activity. If a society neglects to impart education on its people, it becomes self-destruction for that society (Peresuh, 1996). For this reason, it was Julius Nyerere (1971), the founding president of modern Tanzania, who asserted that every schema of education reflects culture of a people because culture is a window to address the world around in its existential totality. Thus, put simply, culture is education and education is culture in any given community.

It must also be noted that the culturalist school of thought perceives culture as a way of doing things by an individual or a group of people who profess sharing common ideas, aspirations, interests and goals which anchor a particular human existentiality. In a recent study by Maposa (2011:21-25) the taxonomy of culture is underlined, thus: firstly, culture is cognitive, to presuppose that it is a mental activity. As such, culture is linked to human consciousness through the process of education. Secondly, culture is collective, to a state of moral development. As such, culture develops from simple to complex forms. Thirdly, culture is concrete, to presuppose that it is describable in nature. As such, there is always something good and functional in every material culture of traditional education. Fourthly and lastly, culture is social, to presuppose that it is a universal category. As such, cultural norms, values, mores and beliefs do vary across cultures but what defines people, as a human race, are cultural universals (Wiredu, 1996).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was principally anchored in fieldwork as an extension of the phenomenological method. As Cox (1996) has highlighted, the phenomenological method is helpful because through its principles of *epoche* and *eidetic intuition*, it enables the researcher to respect and investigate a people's particular institutions, social behaviour and aspects of religion like an 'insider'. Fieldwork was done in Chiredzi district in the southern Masvingo province in Zimbabwe. In this regard, a sample of fifty (50) respondents was considered for interviewing. As Bless and Smith (1985:21) have commented, 'interviews are a direct method of obtaining data through face-to-face' in order to get access to what is inside a person's head. The respondents were drawn from a population of traditional elders, headmen, initiated males, and uninitiated boys.

The researcher also interviewed informants from the neighbouring South Africa, because it is where the Shangani people historically originated from. Therefore, the researcher spent four (4) weeks of intense fieldwork in South Africa. Rationally, it was a sound selection because all the respondents practise common rituals which are persistent in the traditional form of education among the Shangani people. This sampling also reflected a sum total of village people who share common characteristics pertaining to the belief systems on culture within the Shangani society. The study also used secondary sources in the form of published books. The literature which has been discussed in the foregoing section (above) provides some insights into the nature and status of tradition culture, heritage and education *vis a vis* past western historiography on Africa.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Description and Analysis of the Rite of Circumcision

The rite of circumcision is performed in a far away *enhoveni* (the forest area), which lies about ten kilometres from the rest of the community. There, *madzenga* (the boys at the forest) and their *vadzabi* (accompanying elders) erect some temporary huts to sojourn. Whereas in the past, the rite among the Shangani was done between May and July during winter, today it is being conducted between August and early September during autumn. The shift of season for the rite has been influenced by the need for food security, that is, when there are varieties of food available to the initiates. As a matter of fact, the circumcised boys require a lot of food to eat because the operation is associated with the loss of bountiful blood. This loss needs to be compensated through provision of enough food. Due to climate change, the Shangani communities largely complete harvesting grains after the month of June. In addition, the August-September period coincides with the time when the would-be initiates (boys) are on vacation holidays in the school system in Zimbabwe. Therefore, the change in the cycle of the rite of circumcision is dictated by circumstances of necessity rather than Shangani culture.

The rite of circumcision lasts from three weeks to six weeks, where the boys 'undergo the traditional knife' in the forest. The forest provides the boys with a variety of experiences and they have to experience physical, educational, emotional, psychological, moral and spiritual metamorphosis in order to attain adulthood. The boys proudly proclaim, '*hi ya hokweni*', that is, 'we are going to be circumcised to become men'. What happens is that the foreskin of the penis is cut off by using a sharp but unsterilised traditional instrument or knife. The operation or the traditional surgery is painfully (rather cruelly) done but the initiates are not expected to shed tears at all because the operation is perceived to be facilitating the initiates make *ntwanano* (a mystical union) with their *Muvumbi*, that is, Creator (also known as *Xikwembu* or God). Although some boys are reported to have died as victims of a careless surgery 'under the traditional knife', it must be pointed out that no one is expected to *ku baleka* (run away). Stories of how cowards ran away in the past and how the inalienable Shangani 'law' eventually caught up with the delinquents have acted as deterrents to this day! As has been highlighted before, the physical operation is associated with profuse loss of blood around the penis and this is what differentiates an initiated man from an uninitiated one. The painful loss of blood is a condition for passing through the threshold to the privileges and responsibilities of courageous adulthood. As much as the informants had to acclaim, the agonizing loss of blood though a 'guarded secret', ultimately manifests itself as the

cultural insignia of masculine identity in the Shangani society.

In the end, the boys emerge from seclusion and return home with a triumphalist spirit. The tangible sign of triumphalism is seen through the 'graduated' boys who would be in white clad. The initiated boys return to their homes clad in white shorts, white T/shirts, barefooted and with a bare hair-cut. The boys are also given *thuba*, that is, a wooden stick. It is a distinctive mark for the initiated men. The *thuba* is meant for masculine identity in Shangani culture. When the initiated boys approach women, the women are expected to kneel down as a sign of respect. This triumphalist spirit symbolises happiness and a fresh lease of life. The initiates themselves, interviewed for the study, agreed that after the ordeal, they returned home as *tikhomba*, that is, as *different people, full people* and *responsible people* and were given new names that revealed the extent to which they had undergone the deep-seated transformation of their existential lives. They lost their childhood names and received the new names that signified their vitality in the society. It must be pointed out that the newly acquired names carry existential meanings and identities.

Some of the most popular new names which carry notions of identity within the Shangani culture include, for instance: *Hanyani* (one who lives longer), *Hatlani* (one who gets prematurely initiated), *Xithlavangoma* (one who gets initiated first), *Musengi* (one who judges) and *Chavani* (one who is forced to be circumcised). The general perception, however, is that these new names continue to shape the personality of their bearers. Hence, this is how the new names constitute a social badge for human identity within the Shangani society in Zimbabwe. The respective families and villages welcome the new names by way of a social celebration and through a socio-religious ceremony known as *ku yimba* (joyous occasion), where *byala* (traditional brewed beer) is drunk and conveyed with the traditional ecstatic songs and dances done to evoke the deities to partake in this euphoric cultural panorama.

Evidently, through this *hoko* ritual, the rite of circumcision is significant both to the individual and to the community. The boys are introduced to the realm of the religious sphere of their existentiality. In addition, this is one particular pointer that the rite of circumcision is a vital repository of a traditional scheme of education which, according to Gelfand (1977:12), imparts some training which is pragmatic for the indigenous people. Broadly speaking, the ritual provides a necessary scheme of traditional education which is so vital for the initiates to survive within the matrix of a society which exhibits some cultic characteristics.

As Mbiti (1991:115) has also observed, the rite of circumcision is very crucial because it supplies a bridge that separates an individual from an earlier stage of seemingly passive life and officially propels that individual into the next stage which is socially more productive. Therefore, it could be asserted that the circumcision rite is a mark of *ndhavuko*, that is, cultural identity. It must be noted that what remains when the foreskin is cut off on the penis of the initiate becomes a permanent scar of identity. This is a true scar of a genuine Shangani personality or identity. Without those scars, an individual cannot be fully integrated in the community. The conception is that the individual is symbolically and mystically sealed to his family and village. In the same way, the family and village are symbolically and mystically re-sealed to the initiated boy. Clearly, what can be noted is that through this symbolical function of a ritual, the initiated boys come to enter into the state of practical responsibility in which they are eligible to inherit new rights and obligations in their respective families and society. This is why a ritual is a fountain of human training and therefore, African traditional form of education is vital.

According to Atkinson (1999:112), the rite of circumcision is significant because it is a repository of the broad scheme of traditional education in which parents plan to impart the needs of their children and also pass on the traditions or heritage of society. Through the *hoko* rite, the study observed that the scheme of traditional training is associated with five realms of education. The study identified five principal realms associated with the ritual, thus:

- Village elders always function as the *educators* for the young.
- The traditional education is *practical* or *vocational* in its ethos.
- For the rite recognises some form of traditional 'syllabus'. Its content constitutes an *informal curriculum* manifest through myths, folklores, proverbs, songs etc.
- Initiation rites are done in the context of a *time-frame*. Within the Shangani society, the rite of circumcision is normally done in three to six weeks and during autumn, following the harvest of grains to ensure food security.
- The *pedagogical setting* of the ritual is the forest, which is an ideal place of seclusion. For instance, the forest area is regarded as sacred and is perceived to embody the religious consciousness of the people. This is why every ritual is religious in nature.

It must be appreciated that the above realms are significant because, taken together, they are part and parcel of the essential Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs) or ethno-science current in African studies. When the above realms are met, human awakening to many things takes place.

First and foremost, in moral terms, the boys are taught an all-round personality about what the Shangani call, *vumunhu*, which is generally perceived in African philosophy as *Ubuntu/Unhu*. Simply put, Ramose (1996) says that *Ubuntu/Unhu* is humanness or good personality. *Unhuism* instills the development in children of the quality of good discipline. This quality of good discipline, as Lambert et al (1985) have observed, is a necessary prerequisite for cognitive learning which will eventually create in the youths the virtues of reflective decision-making and responsible citizenship in society. At any rate, this type of learning is participatory and pragmatic in nature. That is, the boys in the forest acquire the secret knowledge of their village by doing, through reciting family and village stories, recounting proverbs, folklores and learning of vocational skills. Evidently, the vitality of the rite of circumcision, which is the subject of the present study, bears testimony to the foregoing insights.

Secondly, Rice (1996:67) says that in sociological terms, the forest is also the place of gender-role socialisation. In this study, socialisation means a process by which initiated boys are taught the intricacies of the social dynamics of society. It also implies the ways the boys are made fit for life in caring companionship with others. For instance, the boys are inducted to respect gender relations and especially to avoid unnecessary body conduct with female. In the forest, the initiates are told particularistic myths, riddles, folklores, poems, songs and legends which carry the moral values of the community. In the backdrop of these categories of culture, it can be argued that the incidences of crime, such as rape cases, are minimal in those societies which are still strictly regulated by ethos of the traditional forms of education in Shangani society.

Thirdly, in practical terms, it could be posited that rituals are significant in as far as they help to entrench the traditional African welfare system which is rooted in the principles of mutual co-operation and mutual obligation which shape the terrains of the traditional moral education. For instance, these principles are important to ensure the durability of the ideal marriage in Shangani society. Fourthly, in religious terms, the initiated boys are grilled to obey the wisdom of the village elders through obscure proverbs, legends, myths, folklores and songs. Mbiti (1991:115) states that the boys are further taught to make an oath in the name of religious functionaries. This quality of spiritual education (or rather training) is metaphysical in nature yet it carries utility values in the African culturalist perspective.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In general, the study has established that traditional African practices, in their cultural milieu, are the

sources and resources for Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKSs) which sustain essential norms and utility values for society. The IKSs continue to be vital in Africa to sustain a holistic African existentiality. In the backdrop of this insight, the vitality of the African traditional scheme of education comes to the forefront of the study. Accordingly, the study showed that *hoko* (the rite of circumcision), as part and parcel of the said traditional practices, constitutes one of the key moments in the rhythmic life of the Shangani people in Zimbabwe. In a way, this *hoko* rite constitutes a vital socio-religious syllabus of existential life for the initiates to develop a wholesome pattern of behaviour through education which enables them to live a stable life in society. Within the broad base of traditional education, it was made clear that the setting and duration of operation of the rite of circumcision provide an existential window for the initiates to learn to endure hardships, live with one another well, obey instructions, acquire the secrets of the community, internalise the matrimonial relationships and learn to be in harmony with the environment as a whole. For instance, whereas the makeshift-huts in the forest signify dying and regeneration of the initiates, they are in fact temporarily built as training ground to inculcate in boys the skills of hard work for survival and virtues of human endurance and willpower. As the study has emphasized, these are some of the key elements that are quite inescapable under the traditional form of education which the *rites de passage* (for instance, *hoko*) envision to achieve. In addition, the study also noted the fact that the scheme of traditional education is found to be relevant to the life and material culture of the community and to the kind of life the initiated boys as 'consumers' of this type of education are expected to lead therein. Judging in light of the rite of circumcision, the study made it clear that traditional education is constitutive of five vital realms, namely: the presence of *traditional educators*, *procedure of education process*, *syllabus content*, *duration of training* and *the pedagogical setting*. When these realms work in unison, families tick. In a way, this is why a family is regarded as a society in miniature, sociologically speaking.

Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that the performances of traditional practices, such as the rite of circumcision or *hoko*, are facing some challenges in contemporary society. From modern medical perspectives, the operation of circumcision is increasingly being condemned because it is deemed unhygienic and the conditions are rigorous to the extent that some initiates have lost their lives. In this regard, the rite of circumcision (*hoko*) is being challenged because it is seen to be going against the tide on the sanctity of human rights. World over, discourses on human rights are critical today. Moreover, in light of the economic hardships that Zimbabwe is currently experiencing, it is not

surprising that many people, even from certain conservative quarters in Shangani society, are challenging the rite of circumcision on account of the fact that village elders and headmen demand monetary 'bush allowance' as payment for escorting the boys and conducting the rite in circumstances deemed as unbearable. It is prudent to summarise this study by evoking the words of Mbiti (1991:115) when he writes, 'we are because you are and since you are we are'. This is the quintessence of an ethic of identity which is embedded in the Shangani rite of circumcision, *hoko*. The operation of the rite of circumcision needs innovation both in terms of its *setting* and *operation*. Finally, in the light of the above findings, the study concludes by suggesting the following recommendations:

- Firstly, in terms of its setting, the tendency of seclusion is outdated as it disrupts community life and appears to encourage occultism in society. Accordingly, it is recommended that circumcision must be done at modern health institutions like clinics and hospitals. The government must undertake an advocacy education to encourage the Shangani people on this.
- Secondly, in terms of its physical operation the rite of circumcision appears a mismatch with modern dispensations on medical practice. That is, its procedures leave room for the possibility of transmitting HIV and AIDS to the initiates themselves. Accordingly, it is recommended that the professional health practitioners be allowed to administer circumcision since the rite is enduring within the Shangani cultural milieu.
- Thirdly and lastly, in view of the fact that the African traditional philosophies of education is enduring in post-colonial Africa, it is recommended that curriculum planning and innovation must blend some worthwhile traditional philosophies of education with those inherited from western philosophies of education on account of colonialism. The hybrid may work to 're-invent' the education system in Africa.

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