

TABOOS AS SOURCES OF SHONA PEOPLE'S ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

The Shona environmental taboos foster a sustainable use of the environment. Among the Shona people, an unconscious appreciation of certain 'environmental taboos' informs an esoteric environmentally based knowledge that is meant at sustainable use of nature's resources. Although the Shona society, just like any other African society, has felt the impact of cultural globalization, some of their values, such as taboos, have defied such a tide of change and continue to shape human conduct as it relates to the environment. Shona taboos highlight their moral import, are crucial in preserving the environment, and protect water sources, the natural vegetation and wildlife, and endangered nonhuman species.

Keywords: Taboos; Shona; Environment; Ethics; Sustainable

INTRODUCTION

The Shona people are the largest ethnic group in Zimbabwe. Approximately three quarters of the population belong to the Shona cluster, which is a conglomeration of a number of linguistic groups (Gwaravanda & Masaka, 2008) namely the Korekore, Karanga, Zezuru, Ndau, Kalanga, and the Manyika. The Shona cluster makes up around 76% of Zimbabwe's total population. The Ndebele cluster as well constitutes about 15% of Zimbabwe's total population (Weinrich 1982), while the Tonga, Shangaan, Venda, and other minority groups constitute the remainder (Weinrich 1977)

Taboos (*zviera*) form an integral part and parcel of the Shona morality. Among Shona people, environmental taboos have a pivotal moral role toward the ontological wellbeing of both the individual person and the environment at large. Prohibitions and restrictions through taboos on unsustainable use of certain plant species, forests, mountains, rivers, pools and nonhuman animals, among other ecological species in the ecosystem, is not a new epistemology among the Shona people, but reflects a long tradition. At the same time, they are currently very lively and continue to shape Shona environmental ethics. Although the Shona people have felt the impact of the full weight of the domineering influence of colonization and globalization, they have continued to cling on to some of their cherished values, including taboos. With regard to the continued relevance of taboos in contemporary Shona societies, Gelfand (1973) rightly notes that "the Shona possess much that is worth retaining and the prospects are that they will save a good deal of it in succeeding generations." Despite the tide of modernity and cultural imports, contemporary Shona societies remain attached to some of their fundamental values, such as taboos. Whether, one has received a western education or has been imbued with a huge dosage of the western ways of life, unflinching adherence to certain aspects of Shona way of life is an actuality. This is true of taboos. Since violation of Shona taboos are believed to invite an angry reaction at a supernatural level (Tatira, 2000), fear of the unknown discourages the would-be

offender of the Shona moral code to act in such ways that negates the moral code. One aspect of the Shona cosmology that has not succumbed to the weight of cultural globalization is the primacy of the spiritual world. Thus, since violation of taboos is thought to invoke the anger of the spiritual world, no one is prepared to act in ways that anger the spiritual world even though one had no sufficient knowledge to validate such claims.

The belief in the supernatural world and supernatural is still prevalent among African communities. Hence, for the Shona people, belief in certain avoidance rules has moral implications on the human person and how one has to relate with his surrounding environment. According to Tatira (2000),

...Shona people often use *zviera* (taboos) as one of the ways of teaching young members of their society.

The Shona had, and still have, unique ways of transmitting social values which are crucial to the development of their society. *Zviera*, among other practices, encourage conformity [to societal expectations on correct human behavior in the environment].

It is a truism that for more than a century after contact with the domineering influence of Western civilization, most traditional Shona values have, to some significant extent, undergone transformation that has tended to distort the original African “way of life”. Though it is undeniable fate of history that “since the coming of the white man in this country, the indigenous people have undergone rapid change” (Maveneka, 1970). These changes have had far reaching consequences on the African way of life. However, there are some profound values of the Shona way of life that have survived this phase of history. There is a lot that has remained untainted by outside influences, including taboos. The Shona people have always used taboos to foster desirable conduct in human beings. In this regard, Gelfand (1973) notes that the Shona people’s way of life “...possess much that is worth retaining...that they will save...for succeeding generations”, which includes taboos. Although for an outsider of the Shona cosmology, a value system that is rooted in traditional beliefs and values is likely to prompt anachronism. Shona people still hold on to taboos, among other traditional moral tools, as crucial traditional instruments that are used in enforcing desirable human behavior.

Conceptualizing taboos not simply as avoidance rules that are merely observed by the Shona people, but as pedagogical tools aimed at inculcating desirable behavior, the paper assesses the extent to which taboos inform an ‘environmental ethic’ that emphasizes on deep ecological awareness even though they may appear, on the surface, to be simple prohibitions on unsustainable use of certain aspects of nature, such as sacred sites, mountains, rivers, pools, and some nonhuman animals. Shona environmental taboos transcend simple prohibitions on certain sacred sites, plants and nonhuman animal species, pools, and rivers, among others, and enforce a desirable and sustainable use of the environment. In this regard, Gelfand (1979) argues, and rightly so, that “when [a] collection of [Shona] avoidance rules is studied, it is evident that correct behavior is being emphasized.” Thus taboo wisdom is examined as promoting desirable environmental ethics among the Shona people.

UNDERSTANDING TABOO WISDOM AMONG THE SHONA

Taboos are 'avoidance rules' that forbid members of the human community from performing certain actions, such as eating some kinds of food, walking on or visiting some sites that are regarded as sacred, cruelty to nonhuman animals, and using nature's resources in an unsustainable manner. For the Shona people, taboos are understood as specific rules that forbid people from performing certain actions, otherwise the performance of such forbidden actions is a negation of the moral code that govern human conduct. The violators of the Shona moral code as contained in taboos are said to invite misfortunes, for the community and themselves, such as bad luck, disease, drought, and death. Tatira (2000) said,

The term *zviera* refers to statements that forbid certain forms of behavior in children [and adults]. An act that breaches a taboo triggers a reaction supposedly at the supernatural level. Without this fear of the unknown, young people are generally adventurous, full of doubts and questions, and like experimenting with things. To curb the excessive desire to venture out, there is a ready consequence for each prohibition.

Since religion is central to the Shona worldview, reference to supernatural beings in trying to dissuade people from performing certain actions that are regarded as immoral is effective because the Shona spiritual beings are both feared and respected. Hence, a breach of taboos is understood as a provocation of the Shona spiritual beings and an invitation of severe punishment.

Shona adherence to totems is one of the typical examples of the observance of taboos. For example, if a person belongs to the patrilineal clan of *vaera Nzou* (those that must not eat elephant meat), then he is prohibited from eating these nonhuman animals. It becomes part of that person's ethos to avoid taking elephants as a source of meat. For the Shona people, going against such prohibition invites illness or the loss of the offender's teeth. Totemism is crucial in extending some moral consideration to nonhuman animals. Violation of taboos is feared because of the nasty consequences that the offender would face. The observance of taboos promotes a virtuous life that fosters a desirable environmental ethic, while the breaking of taboos leads the moral agent to a vicious life that disregards not only the moral standing of the environment, but also its sustainable use.

The undesirable consequences of violating taboos tend to affect both the offender and the offended, for instance, the Shona taboo that says that if a person urinates in water, one would catch bilharzias. This is meant to prevent pollution of a water source that could potentially pose a health threat to human and nonhuman users of this water source. Violation of this taboo is believed to lead to the suffering of the offender, society, and the environment. This understanding of morality emanates from the African communitarian view of the human person (Menkiti, 2006) where an individual person's action can only be understood within the context of his community. In other words, violation of a taboo by an individual, among the Shona people, does not only affect the individual person, but other things in nature as well. The individual person's ontological status can only be understood by reference to the community. As Ramose (1999) sees it, "neither the individual nor the community can define and pursue their respective purposes without recognizing their mutual foundedness and their complementarity." It is apparent among the Shona people that a violation of taboos by an individual almost always boils

down to the society at large, especially in the context of ecological problems that may result from the breaking of certain environmental taboos.

People are forced to avoid going against the prescriptions of taboos because doing so brings about undesirable consequences not only to the offender, but to society. Thus, taboos have an impact on people's behavioral patterns. They promote good behavior among people from childhood to adulthood. In this light, Bourdillon (1976) noted that "there are many things that influence people's behavior. The patterns of thinking and acting that have been instilled into us as children are fundamental to our instinctive patterns of behavior in adulthood..." One such pattern of thinking are taboos that are introduced and inculcated into the minds of children from tender ages as a way of promoting good behavior that also encompasses a sound environmental ethic. Even though the teaching of taboos is achieved through indoctrination, (Peters, 1973), it brings about desirable behavioral patterns that also promote a sound environmental ethic.

Shona taboo wisdom fosters a certain way of behaving that advances the well-being of the individual, the society and the environment. This tripartite understanding of the value of taboo wisdom can be exemplified by the case of a person who urinates in a river. According to this taboo, if a person urinates in a river, he risks suffering from bilharzia, a painful infection that causes a lot of discomfort to the patient's private parts. Therefore, fear of such pain and suffering deters people from urinating in water sources. Thus, a critical examination of the philosophy behind this taboo shows that urinating in the river negates a sound environmental ethic through pollution of water sources. Such behavior harms the aquatic creatures in the river as well as human persons who may need to use the water for domestic purposes. According to Gelfand (1979), "the principle that emerges from... the taboos is that a child must conform and behave like others in order to avoid an unusual occurrence." However, what remains important within the philosophy of Shona taboos are the moral injunctions that they foster and not simply the observance of principles that lead to desirable human conduct. The meaning that is carried in taboos is so subtle that children and adults cannot easily interpret the kind of moral teaching being conveyed. Although taboos have been adhered to primarily because of the fear associated with violating them, most importantly, they have a deep moral teaching that they convey. Thus, the Shona people had, and still have, unique ways of transmitting social values that are crucial to the development of their society (Tatira, 2000).

ENVIRONMENTAL THRUST OF SHONA TABOOS

The Shona people have always looked at the environment as a very important and inseparable part of the human community. For them, the environment is important to the well-being of the individual. Thus, the communitarian nature of Shona society can be understood in the context of the moral relationship that is struck between the individual and the environment through the observance of taboos. Such teachings complement and cement a good moral relationship between the individual person and the environment. Though Mbiti's (1969) contention that "I am because we are", is anthropocentric as it characterizes the relationship between the individual and his society, it can also be applicable to the relationship between the human community and the environment. In this context, the society is what it is because of the existence of the environment that provides it with some of its needs and wants. Tatira (2000) rightly notes that "the Shona people realize the importance of preserving the environment as a factor in overall development. This knowledge is manifested in some of the taboos that

control child behavior in relation to the environment.” Thus, Shona taboos are ethical tools that do not only foster good human relations, but also promote good relations between human beings and nature.

However, the African communitarian way of life does not end at the level of the human community, as Mbiti seems to imply. The individual human person or the communities of human persons among the Shona do not live separately as moral islands, neither do they live in a moral vacuum. Rather, human persons actually live, and ought to live, in harmony with the environment. Therefore, Shona taboos, just like those of any other social grouping, must be understood as moral rules that regulate human behavior, especially as it impacts negatively on the environment. In this regard, taboos are meant to make the individual adjust his interests so that they conform to those of the society and the environment at large. It can be proposed that the ‘I’ in Mbiti’s declaration “I am because we are” should take on board the interests of the individual human persons, while the ‘we’ becomes a broader term referring to the human community and the environment. Such a conception of the relationship between the human society and the environment foster a sound environmental ethic that does not only take into account the well-being of the individual and his community, but also that of the environment. The environment should be construed as an end in itself in a similar way that human beings are perceived, rather than viewing it as a mere means to some human ends. Thus, taboos have an esoteric role towards nature if considered in terms of their embedded environmental role that they play.

Besides being a source of environmental ethics, Shona taboos also cultivate a concept of wholeness between the human community and the environment. By and large, observance of the Shona environmental taboos brings about a sustainable use of the environment and takes into account its wholeness. Thus, Ramose (1999) notes that:

The principle of wholeness applies also with regard to the relation between human beings and the physical or objective nature. To care for one another, therefore, implies caring for the physical nature as well. Without such care, the interdependence between human beings and the physical nature would be undermined.

The idea of wholeness of the human being in relation to the environment as enshrined in Shona taboos is important in fostering a sustainable use and preservation of the various natural resources, such as water sources, natural vegetation, wildlife, and endangered non-human species.

TABOOS PROTECTING WATER SOURCES

Human civilization values water as one of the most important resources for their sustenance. It is a resource within the ecosphere that is found in abundance but requires sustainable use for the sake of posterity. At one level, water fosters the well-being of human and non-human life. Water can also be used for domestic purposes, such as drinking, cooking, washing, bathing, and irrigation. It also contributes significantly towards sustaining the lives of other living things, such as nonhuman animals and plants. In considering water’s important role in the sustenance of human life and nature, Aschwanden (1989) notes that “water is not only nature’s life-giver, but, in the widest sense, it is symbol of all the kinds of sap which not only create human life, but also help sustain it. It comes from God and man, nature and the creator are united in these symbols.”

The Shona, just like other human communities, appreciate the value of water to the lives of all living things by noting that *mvura upenyu* (water is life). The analogy between water and life is simply an emphasis on the importance of water in the sustenance of life.

Shona people are conscious of a moral code that promotes the well-being of not only human beings, but also the environment. For instance, the Shona have some taboos that prohibit abuse of water sources, such as wetlands, rivers, and wells. Through these taboos, the Shona have managed, throughout history, to ensure sustainable use of water resources. Duri and Mapara (2007) concur with this idea when they argue that, “environmental management and conservation are not new [to the Shona], but they have always been part of their tradition.” They dispute colonial environmentalists’ contention that pre-colonial Africans were not conscious of the need to sustainably use the resources of nature. Thus, the Shona environmental management and conservation taboos validate the claim that Shona people had, and still have, an environmental consciousness that seeks to protect water sources like rivers, pools, dams, wetlands, wells, and springs.

In traditional Shona communities, there is a heavy dependence on open wells, rivers and springs for drinking, cooking, bathing, washing, and agricultural and industrial uses. One environmental taboo that falls within this category is *Ukachera mvura nechirongo chitema, tsime rinopwa*, which means “if you fetch water with a sooty black pot, the well will dry up”.

People feel obliged to avoid using sooty black pots to fetch water. It is important to note that this taboo discourages people from using pots that are blackened by soot from the fireplace. Thus, *zvinoera kuchera mvura mutsime nechirongo chitema* means “it is taboo to fetch water with a pot that has been blackened with soot from the fireplace”. This taboo covers other water sources such rivers, dams, and pools. As Aschwanden (1989) sees it, “[Pools], springs and swamps sustain the life of the rivers and they give the vital water. Therefore, such places are regarded as an origin of the fertility of nature. Also, they safeguard human life and are thus to be especially respected as sacred places.”

Among Shona traditional communities, the well (*tsime*) is the most common source of drinking water that deserves high levels of reverence. So, because of that, the well is a very important place that symbolizes household cleanliness. Such a high standard of cleanliness is a virtue that every individual craves for and ought to exhibit in one’s various daily chores. At the same time, boys and girls make use of the well as a meeting place for courtship. It is common among the Shona people that a guy may ask for some water to drink from the girl who would be fetching water from the well. This gesture of asking for some water, though at times without the aim of quenching thirst, is simply a sign of love for the girl who would be fetching water from the well. Thus, amongst Shona girls, no one would want the embarrassment of giving her potential suitor water using a dirty pot. This taboo is simply an attempt to promote high hygienic standards in the light of water sources and at the same time, safeguarding the welfare of the natural environment.

Ordinarily, the explanation that is given by the Shona for deterring people from using a sooty black pot to draw water from a well is that it would quickly dry up. Knowing the importance and value of water to human and nonhuman life, no one wants to deliberately contribute to the drying of wells. So, because of the fear of causing the drying up wells, an awareness of the

danger of using a sooty black pot to fetch water is implicitly instilled within the individual and the community. Hence, for that reason, an environmental ethic that promotes good health is inherent within certain Shona taboos. Tatira (2000) confirms Shona environmental awareness when he noted that taboos "...are vital in transmitting values on issues pertaining to hygiene."

An analysis of Shona environmental taboos shows that deterrence is used as a way of safeguarding their observance as ethical tools that promotes sustainable use of nature's resources. For example, in the taboo that discourages use of sooty black pots to draw water from the well because it will dry up, individuals are 'frightened' that their water source will dry up. Hence, under no circumstance whatsoever will they use a sooty black pot to draw water from the well. However, in this context, it is not empirically verifiable that the well will dry up simply because someone has used a sooty black pot to fetch water from a well.

The explanation that the well will dry up because of the use of a sooty black pot is proven false when exacted to the standards of scientific verification (Ayer, 1947). However, the Shona are not interested in the scientific verification of claims made by taboos. They take the claims of taboos as sacred and, therefore, in no need for doubting. Shona taboos are simply tailored towards deterring people from engaging in unhygienic practices that may contaminate water sources. Although the use of a sooty black pot is said to cause the drying up of a well, in essence what matters is the underlying environmental implications of such an action because a sooty black pot contaminates the water for drinking as well as posing danger to aquatic life.

Another taboo that discourages the abuse of the water sources is *ukawetera mumvura, unozorwara nechirwere chehozwe*, which means "if you urinate in a water source, you will suffer from bilharzias". In this taboo, just like in the first one, fear of contracting a disease is used as deterrent for those who may be tempted to urinate in water sources thereby polluting them. Therefore, this taboo implicitly teaches people to act in a way that is compatible with the pursuit for a livable environment even though fear of contracting a disease is used as a deterrent. Thus, the taboo is coined in order to foster environmental awareness among the Shona. In this regard, Tangwa (2006) notes that "as human beings, we carry the whole weight of moral responsibility and obligations for the whole world on our shoulders". This responsibility is not human centered, but takes into account the interests of all there is in the world.

Besides being the habitat for the various aquatic creatures that also need clean water, rivers, and other water points are important sources of water for drinking, washing, bathing, and agricultural and industrial purposes in any human society. It is against this background that the Shona have come up with various taboos that are aimed at safeguarding the well-being of not only water sources and aquatic life, but also the human community and the environment. Thus, by discouraging members of the community from urinating in rivers, the Shona people are simply worried with the extent to which urine can contaminate water and also how it affects other aquatic creatures, like fish, given the fact that urine contains some component of nitrates that causes the accumulation of algae, which is dangerous to aquatic life. Otherwise, there is no causal relation between urinating in water sources and contracting bilharzia. Hence, Shona environmental taboos are simply instruments that are aimed at protecting nature.

Shona environmental awareness takes a spiritual dimension in that ancestral spirits (*midzimu*) are said to be the custodians of nature. Therefore, they have a conscious interest in the way the living interacts with the environment. It is believed that the environment, including water sources, should be treated with respect since their misuse may provoke ancestral spirits who may in turn punish the human community with droughts and floods. Tangwa (2006) noted that “within the African traditional outlook, human beings tend to be more cosmically humble and therefore not only more respectful of other people, but also more cautious in their attitudes to plants, nonhuman animals, and inanimate things, and to the various invisible forces of the world.” Thus, such fears of provoking the ire of ancestral spirits help the Shona to live in harmony with nature.

TABOOS PROTECTING THE NATURAL VEGETATION AND WILDLIFE

Apart from protecting water sources and ensuring hygienic standards some Shona taboos are meant to protect the natural vegetation and the wildlife. These taboos affirm the intrinsic value that the natural vegetation and its wildlife have, rather than viewing them as instrumentally valuable. According to Duri & Mapara (2007), “institutional prohibitions, such as taboos, were designed to develop positive societal attitudes towards the environment. This also involved restricting the cutting and using of certain types of vegetation.” Although, in the Shona cosmology, the natural vegetation and wildlife are used, instrumentally, to fulfill men’s ends, they also have a significant value because of their spiritual significance. Certain natural vegetation and wildlife are revered because they are believed to be hosts of some spiritual forces. It is, therefore, taboo to visit or defile certain sites that are regarded as sacred. These sacred sites include certain forests and mountains that members of the Shona communities are discouraged from visiting, cutting down trees, and hunting wildlife in them. For example, it is believed that the one who visits or defiles a sacred site risks getting temporarily lost or disappearing forever, and, in some cases, becoming insane. For instance, in the Shurugwi area of the Midlands Province in Zimbabwe, there is a myth of members of the apostolic church who disappeared after they had visited and tried to conduct a church service at the summit of Guruguru Mountain, which is believed to be sacred among the Shurugwi community.

Although the actuality of the sacredness of certain sites, natural vegetation, and wildlife is debatable, it is apparent that such myths help in ensuring a harmonious relationship between human societies and the whole of nature. More importantly, there is some ethical import in the taboos that discourages misuse of the nature’s resources. Such taboos implicitly inform human beings to treat and see natural vegetation and wildlife as ends in themselves, rather than assuming the once dominant western, traditional, homocentric view of ethics, where only the welfare of human beings have intrinsic moral worth (Velasquez & Rostankowski, 1985). In this regard, taboos protecting natural vegetation and wildlife foster an environmental ethic that is not anthropocentric, but one that takes on board the interconnectedness of nature. Tangwa (2006) said,

...African metaphysical outlook can be described as eco-bio-communitarian, implying recognition and acceptance of interdependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals, and humans. This contrasts with the western outlook which might be described as anthropocentric and individualistic.

The Shona recognizes the interconnectedness and coexistence between people and natural vegetation and wildlife in so far as playing a crucial role in the sustenance of human life. According to the Shona belief systems, some sacred sites, such as

mountains, have symbolic importance. For instance, it is believed that these sacred mountains developed some natural fires as a way of informing people of the advent of the rainy season. So, because of this belief, it is assumed that if such sacred areas were tempered with, traditional weather forecasting would be hindered, thereby adversely affecting the Shona farmers' agricultural plans.

Some sacred forests and mountains are reserved for certain Shona traditional ceremonies and relevant taboos help in preserving them. Such taboos discourage people from visiting these sites thereby aiding the cause for a harmonious living between human beings and the whole of nature. This has helped to maintain the naturalness of sacred places compared to other areas deemed non-sacred, because people have respect and fear of these areas. This is because sacred places are believed to be the domain of spiritual forces and, therefore, deserving utmost reverence. Such a quest for respect for sacred sites as enforced through environmental taboos fosters the interconnectedness of human beings and the rest of nature that is predicated on some form of consideration for the importance of nature. Hence, these sites cannot be visited, especially with the intention of hunting, collecting firewood, fruits, and other natural resources for fear of ancestral reprisals. These sacred sites function somewhat as nature conservation areas or as nature buffer zones. Consequently, this contributes to a general respect for nature.

The wanton destruction of the natural vegetation and wildlife has far reaching negative consequences on the work of Shona traditional healers (*n'anga*), nonhuman animal welfare, wildlife habitats, grazing areas, and climatic conditions. In essence, a heightened destruction of natural vegetation leads to deforestation that eventually threatens *fauna* and *flora* through soil erosion and global warming. In this regard, Shona taboos are important in curtailing environmental problems that are human-induced. Hence, Shona environmental taboos have an ethical import that is unconsciously passed from generation to generation. For example, the Shona people believe *ukatema muhacha, mvura haizonayo*, which means "if you cut down the *muhacha* tree, it will not rain". This taboo is based on the understanding that the *muhacha* tree (*parinari curatellifolia*) is an important fruit tree that produces fruits that are very nutritional to both human beings and animals, especially in times of drought where there would be a shortage of food. According to Duri & Mapara (2007), taboos, like that of the cutting down of *muhacha* tree, is still effective up until contemporary times because the Shona people believe that life should be respected, especially that of little nonhuman creatures that depend on wild fruits for nourishment. The Shona people also perform some rituals on the *muhacha* tree, such as rain-inducing ceremonies. As a result of the important place of the *muhacha* trees in the Shona religious worldview, people feel discouraged from unnecessarily cutting them down for human uses because they would be afraid of disturbing the rainfall pattern.

For Duri & Mapara (2007), indigenous fruit trees, like the *Muzhanje* (*vapaka kirkiana*), the *Mutamba* (*strychnos species*), the *Mutohwe* (*azanza garkaena*) and the *Munhengeni* (*ximena*), are not used as firewood. The explanations of why this is that were often given were "that they burn badly, produce a lot of smoke, the smoke produced could choke, or that they could not last long on the fire." However, for Duri and Mapara (Ibid), these explanations were coined in order to protect these tree species and ensure a continuous supply of fruits that provided the indigenous people with food and natural sugar, which were

important for their health (Ibid). Hence, taboos associated with natural vegetation are simply an attempt to sustainably protect nature's resources for the benefit of present and future generations.

Wildlife management, too, is an indispensable aspect of the Shona environmental management. Shona environmental ethics as captured in their taboos, which differs from the western traditional anthropocentric view of ethics that is inspired by Aristotle (Singer, 1985), who argued that:

Plants exist for the sake of animals and brute beasts for the sake of man-domestic animals for his use and food, wild ones...for food and other accessories of life, such as clothing and various tools. Since nature makes nothing purposeless or in vain, it is undeniably true that she has made all animals for the sake of man.

Shona taboos are compatible with the modern sentient-based ethics that was popularized by Utilitarian philosophers, such as Bentham (1748-1832), Mill (1806-1873) and Singer (Singer, 1993; Boss, 1999), who argued that all sentient beings must be accorded with moral consideration. Sentience is the ability to experience pain and pleasure. Therefore, in their interactions with nonhuman animals, human beings must be conscious of the need to respect nonhuman animals on the grounds of sentience. Bentham propounded one of the most famous theories that advocates for the ascription of moral status to nonhuman animals. He held that an act is right if it gives the greatest net amount of pleasure, wrong if it brings about net unhappiness to the ones affected by the action. For him, the important feature to put nonhuman animals in the moral realm must not be reason or whether they can talk, but whether they can suffer (Regan, 1983). However, Mill rejected Bentham's exclusively quantitative comparison of pleasures and insisted that pleasures differ in quality (Miller, 1983), but he still took nonhuman animal pleasures and suffering to be of moral significance on their own.

Having noted that the human propensity for abuse of nonhuman animals and the difficulty of reconciling the interests of humans with those of nonhuman animals, it can be argued that the concept of totem (*mutupo*) is a wildlife conservation strategy. According to the Shona people, they say *ukadya mutupo wako, unozobva mazino*, which means if you eat your totem animal, you will lose your teeth.

It is taboo, among the Shona, for one to eat one's totem animal (Bourdillon, 1976). Otherwise, one risks losing one's teeth for violating this taboo. Although fear of losing one's teeth is cited as the reason for not eating one's totem nonhuman animal, it can be argued that such a strategy fosters wildlife conservation. Such a strategy helps to regulate the use of various nonhuman animal species and ensure that communities have adequate natural resources for the benefit of both present and future generations. For Gelfand (1973), these conservation strategies are based on "...the principle of exogamy" where one group or family among the Shona communities, depending on patrilineal identity, is prohibited from eating certain nonhuman animals, birds, and fish species as a way of regulating the human usage of nonhuman animals. Duri & Mapara (2007) noted that taboos concerning totems "...were institutional wildlife conservation measures meant to preserve various animal species so that they could be saved from extinction due to unchecked hunting."

TABOOS PROTECTING ENDANGERED NONHUMAN ANIMAL SPECIES

Within the ecosystem, there are certain rare nonhuman animal species that are facing extinction, such as pythons, pangolins, fish, and rhinoceros. In this regard, the Shona people have devised strategies of curbing unsustainable use of such nonhuman animal species by way of taboos. These taboos do not only prohibit unsustainable use of nonhuman animals, but also prohibits cruelty to creatures, especially those that are defenseless and harmless. Through such taboos, the Shona teach people to take nonhuman animals as beings that deserve some form of moral consideration.

Endangered species deserve to be respected because they also contribute to human well-beings and development through the provision of meat, medicines, and objects of trade. In this light, Tatira (2000) argues that “*zviera* help to uphold societal values, such as the sanctity of human life, importance of fertility and respect of the small, powerless but harmless creatures in the environment; all of which are important to development.” The Shona also have a taboo which says *ukauraya shato, mvura haizonayi* and it means “if you kill a python, rain will not fall.” Being a rare, innocent, symbolic reptile (though, at times, very dangerous if provoked), the python is one snake, among other creatures, that are protected by the Shona society. For the Shona people, the python has some symbolic importance. It is believed that an adult (who is sexually active) can come across a python; however, those individuals who are not sexually active cannot encounter it first. Otherwise, if someone who has never had sexual experience before sees a python before it has been seen by an adult, it would be considered a bad omen (*shura*) of things to come. Normally, such bad omens manifest themselves in the form of sickness or death of a very close relative. Because of that belief, the Shona, thus, protect the python as an endangered species since it is symbolic in foretelling events of what the future holds for human beings. Thus, the fear of inviting a drought as a result of killing of pythons acts as a deterrent to unnecessary killing of endangered nonhuman animal species.

A Shona traditional healer also uses the python’s bones for making his beads (*chuma*) that forms part of his regalia. He also uses the python’s fat in order to prepare his concoctions. Hence, the taboo that a python should not be killed is meant to protect it from being wantonly killed as it is construed as a very useful creature to the Shona society, given its symbolic and medicinal functions. Duri & Mapara (2007) argued that:

...the pre-colonial African communities [including the Shona society] exhibited considerable awareness of the dangers associated with ecological decay and the importance of living in harmony with their environment. They had a wide range of techniques to preserve their environment.

Among the Shona, just like in other societies, people may be tempted to kill defenseless and innocent creatures, such as frogs, for fun. Such unchecked destruction of the seemingly unimportant elements of the natural environment can have a negative impact on the ecosystem. Singer (1985) stated “when we, humans, change the environment in which we live, we often harm ourselves.” Thus, the wanton destruction of endangered species has adverse effects on, not only such species per se, but also on human beings at large. Hence, the Shona environmental taboos teach people to be mindful of endangered nonhuman animal species and the natural environment. In addition, these taboos teach people to desist from being cruel to defenseless and harmless creatures within the environment.

Another taboo that prohibits cruelty to endangered species is *ukauraya mutsumwatsumwa, n'ombe dzako dzinozotsemuka minyatso*, which means “if you kill a praying mantis, your cows will crack their teats”. A praying mantis (*mutsumwatsumwa*) is a harmless insect. It is believed that if one kills it, the teats of the udders of the offender’s cows would develop cracks that would make it difficult to milk them. Considering the importance of cows among the Shona as providers of dietary needs and as stores of value, no one is prepared to risk losing his cows by killing a praying mantis. Besides being a symbol of wealth, the cow can also be used for various other purposes like the payment of lobola, labor, meat, and milk. It is because of these important uses of the Shona cow that no one is prepared to abuse the praying mantis for fear of losing one’s wealth. Hence, this taboo indirectly protects endangered species, like the harmless praying mantis. It cautions people not to be ruthless to harmless creatures within the ecosystem. Otherwise, such ruthlessness may end up hardening one’s heart toward fellow human beings.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has established that the Shona environmental taboos foster a sustainable use of the environment. It noted that among the Shona people, an unconscious appreciation of certain ‘environmental taboos’ informs an esoteric environmentally based knowledge that is meant at a sustainable use of nature’s resources. The Shona have an environmental ethic that takes into account the interests of not only sentient beings, but also nature. Although they do not disapprove of a sustainable use of nature’s resources, including other living creatures for draught power and food, they are against wanton destruction of *fauna* and *flora* without justification. They also take great exception to the cruelty to animals because for them, all animals are sentient and therefore deserve to be given moral consideration. For them, a person who exhibits violent surges through cutting down trees without any need for them and cruelty to other living creatures lacks *unhu*.

For Shona societies, the natural environment has certain sacred places that are so indispensable in their religious beliefs, such as certain mountains, curves, rivers, grave sites, and forests that ought not to be defiled through undue cutting down of trees that grace them and killing of other living creatures for the sake of it. Therefore, the Shona cherish a life of living in harmony with the natural environment and what it holds, as reflected by their penchant to use the environment in a sustainable way. Shona taboos are one of the methods through which desirable conduct is fostered in human beings. For a person to be said to be morally upright, he has to exhibit desirable conduct not only to fellow human beings, but to nature. Shona taboos are crucial not only in preserving the natural environment, but also for fostering sustainable use of nature’s resources. No one is supposed to abuse nature’s resources with impunity because these resources are not there just for this generation, but also for future generations. Thus, the tragedy of the commons whereby lack of ownership of nature’s resources led to the abuse of the environment and is prevented by well crafted avoidance rules that are aimed at sustainable use of nature’s resources. Shona taboos, lastly, protects the water sources, the natural vegetation and wildlife, and the endangered nonhuman animal species. Shona taboos, worldwide, are important in fostering a sustainable use of the nature’s resources.

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