Gender, Religion and/ or Culture and Academic Gullibility in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Bishau and Taringa (unpublished), in a study that culminated in a paper presented at the University of Zimbabwe 2019 Research Week, carried out broad-based research on the question of gender representation among the Jindwi people in Zimunya, Mutare, Zimbabwe. They probed the question: Gender Discourse in Zimbabwe: Whose Construct is on the Agenda? This followed Taringa and Museka's (2014; 2020) research interests on the subject of *roora*, commonly referred to as *lobola*. This study set out to test key axioms in contemporary gender discourse among academics in Zimbabwe in a bid to establish whether ordinary Zimbabweans identify with those axioms about gender in Zimbabwe today. The study selected and analysed ten studies from among Zimbabwean academics inside and outside Zimbabwe. The study reviewed these ten studies and came up with two major axioms on gender coming from them. The study then assessed these key axioms in terms of their validity through a phenomenological examination of the marriage rite among the Jindwi, a section of the Shona people living in the Zimunya area in rural areas around Mutare, Zimbabwe. The key axioms isolated for study were, first, the Shona society is patriarchal; further, patriarchy is the key causal factor for the oppression of the Shona woman in Zimbabwe; and secondly, that *roora* reduces women to mere commodities up for grabs (Togarasei, 2012:153). The study observed that the majority of ordinary Jindwi people could not confirm these constructions of gender, which most Zimbabwean academics appear to have adopted and propagate through their publications. This observation led to the key research question: how might we explain this behaviour among academics in Zimbabwe? May this be a question of gullibility in terms of adopting and propagating Western gender axioms among academics even when the reality on the ground speaks otherwise?

Keywords: *Roora*, gender, gender role, patriarchy, ritual, rite of passage

Introduction

Scholars generally refer to *roora* as *lobola*. *Lobola* or *lobolo* comes from Zulu, Xhosa, and Ndebele, while in Sesotho it is referred to as *bohali* (Ansell 2001:697). While each indigenous language has its own term for *lobola* that depicts exactly what goes on during the marriage rite, *lobola* is the term that most scholars prefer (Ansell 2001: 697). However, meaning resides in terms, and translations sometimes dilute the meaning. I will stick to the Shona term for *lobola* that the Jindwi people use, which is *roora*, to maintain the meaning the Jindwi people hold for this marriage rite.

Taringa and Museka (2020) do a good job to debate whether or not *roora* can correctly translate to bride price or bride wealth. Therefore, I will not dwell on the same subject. The need to verify the scholarly conclusions about the Shona culture in general and about gender in particular motivated this study. The study analyses a purposeful sample of studies from a number of academics in Zimbabwe and abroad, but who deal with the Shona culture and/ or religion. In this study, I take the distinction between religion and culture as blurred. I entirely agree with Beyers (2017: 1) that the distinction between religion and culture in Africa is paper thin, because religion in Africa is an identity marker, which makes it a custodian of culture. Therefore, conclusions about African culture necessarily become conclusions about African religion. As I proceed, I will use the term ‘religion’ also to embrace the culture of the Jindwi people.

In terms of the research strategy, data saturation, more than representativeness of the population, determined the sample size of ten studies. As I demonstrate in the brief review of literature below, after ten studies, the two axioms under study continued to emanate, though stated in different terms. No new data came out thereafter, and I had already determined that I had reached data saturation. All ten studies and more reach the conclusion that the Shona religion is patriarchal, and patriarchy influences Shona men to oppress women in various ways and degrees. *Roora*, which is an aspect of the Shona religion, reduces women to mere objects for sale, and therefore *roora* does not accord African women the gender equality they deserve and need.

Therefore, the goal of this study was to probe these key questions:

- Is the Shona society patriarchal, and to what extent can patriarchy be regarded as the key causal factor for the oppression of the Shona woman in Zimbabwe?

- How far valid is the assertion that patriarchy influences *roora* heavily in several ways that have affected gender relations within marriage in Zimbabwe today?
- How applicable are Western lenses to studies of the Shona culture?

Before I proceed to probe these questions, it is necessary to offer a brief review of each of the ten studies in order to maintain my observation that the key axioms on gender I refer to above, and from where the questions above come, indeed emanate from these studies.

Brief Review and Analysis of the Sample Literature

I start with five pieces of literature emphasising patriarchy, and then I will look at the other five emphasising *roora*.

Wells (2003) looks at evidence from a University of Zimbabwe oral history project featuring rural women in colonial Rhodesia. According to the study, several elderly women from the colonial Rhodesia played an active role in undermining patriarchal customs, which they experienced as oppressive. The patriarchal customs that they are said to have undermined included the custom of having husbands chosen for them, involvement in income generation, which was a preserve of men and pursuit of formal education becoming more and more autonomous in their operations. Wells' study purports to compliment other pieces of research that depict women of that period primarily resisting patriarchal customs they perceived as oppressive.

Wells drew her conclusion from interviews carried out by a group of University of Zimbabwe students with elderly women, whom the students had invited to tell their stories. According to the results from students' interviews, the elderly women from the colonial period 'unleashed reservoirs of pent-up emotion' over, and fiercely condemned, the suffering they had experienced due to customary patriarchy over the years (Wells 2003: 114). I have serious misgivings about Wells' study, but those would be a subject for another study. For example, the design is vague and the population ill defined. Thus, the constant reference to 'many rural women' whose number is never really stated does not surprise me. In addition, it is very difficult to determine the sample size from where the conclusions were drawn and therefore it is difficult to ascertain the validity of the conclusions. What is of interest for now is that the

study rests on the assumption that during the colonial era, the Shona society was patriarchal. Even now it is still patriarchal, although patriarchy is fast fading away due to resistance from ‘many’ women.

A close analysis of the research write-up reveals some tension between what is stated explicitly and what is not, but which forms an irritating undergrowth within the research, causing the outbursts against an assumed ‘patriarchy enemy’ that must be done away with at all costs. Wells (2003: 114) herself states that when she presented the findings of her study at a seminar at the University of Zimbabwe in November 1994, black male historians disputed the possibility that African women had done anything but passively accept their status in society, alleging that students must have distorted their data. The skin colour and gender of the historians put aside, throughout Wells punctuated the research write-up with footnotes, explaining what probably turned out to be flaws in the student research assistants’ data collection and data generation procedures. The tension comes out clearly even in her contradictory assertions such as ‘although also limited in scope’ the data “‘substantially expand the input from African women’. How can findings that are limited in scope expand the input of the women in a ‘substantial way’? I can go on with my critique that exposes Wells’ bias and deliberate effort towards the conclusion that the Shona society is patriarchal, but I have said enough to demonstrate that she reached that conclusion hurriedly and from a surface analysis of a culture in which she should have immersed herself for some time. Worse, she was not patient enough at least to pause to listen to the critique of ‘black male historians’ and discard it later after verifying it.

However, despite the loopholes I pointed out, I ignored others for lack of time and space. Wells’ study and similar ones from some foreign and senior researchers like her seem to have influenced a number of academics to look at the Shona religion and related religious constructions of gender through the lenses of patriarchy. I demonstrate this using examples that follow.

Mutekwe and Modiba (2012) evaluate gender sensitivity and balance in selected textbooks in the Zimbabwean school curriculum. Their study examined both the content and discourse of selected history textbooks in which the authors assessed gender sensitivity and balance against the backdrop of interpretations of participants’ verbatim statements during focus-group discussions. The researchers studied four history textbooks, namely Birmingham and Martin (1983), Makuyana (1994), Mlambo (1995), and Barnes *et al.* (2010). The study concluded, among other conclusions, that the textbooks embodied a

great deal of patriarchal values and ideologies, gender biases, imbalances and stereotypes. The study further concluded that the gender representations in textbooks overtly and covertly affected students. Logically, the study recommended a careful selection of textbooks for schools that would avoid gender bias and/or stereotypes and would ensure gender sensitivity and balance. The study envisaged a hidden curriculum within the textbooks comprising gendered and patriarchal ideologies, which schools consciously or unconsciously subtly transmit to pupils.

I cannot claim to be a historian per se, but I can say with confidence that history differs from fiction and a history textbook differs from a novel that contains a fictitious story. A picture in a history textbook depicts, or is supposed to depict, what really transpired in space and time. Yet Mutekwe and Modiba (2012: 370) lament that Makuyana's book, for example, is gender insensitive and unbalanced, because a picture on page 186 of the book shows four men, Smith, Muzorewa, Sithole and Chirau, signing the 1978 Agreement. Worse, the researchers insinuate in their conclusion that Makuyana and the other three historians include such pictures to peddle their patriarchal ideologies. If the signing of the 1978 Agreement involved four men, how else was Makuyana supposed to depict it? Was he supposed to manufacture a woman representative to include in the picture for the sake of being gender sensitive? This critique serves to show that the researchers already had predetermined lenses with which they looked at the history textbooks. The lenses led them to their predetermined conclusion that patriarchy is a key feature of the Shona society.

With a slightly different motivation, Mapuva (2013) looks at recent literature on women and gender in a bid to highlight violations of women's rights against the backdrop of a predominantly patriarchal Zimbabwean society. In his study of the role of the Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), in articulating the role of women in nation building by, *inter alia*, observing their rights, Mapuva is honest enough to betray his sources of influence, which are the global recognition and efforts to uphold the status of women. I am not interested in the specific conclusion that Mapuva reaches. What I need to underscore is that like the rest, he begins and proceeds from the axiom that the Zimbabwean society is patriarchal.

Manyonganise (2015) offers a more detailed analysis of the patriarchal nature of Zimbabwean society in her analysis of Ubuntu, which is arguably the defining philosophy and ethic not just of Zimbabwe but of Africa as a whole.

Her study sought to examine how most academic writings shower eulogies on the concept of *Hunhu* (*Ubuntu* in Shona) as the indispensable African philosophy and ethic, without attention to the detail of how the philosophy and ethic intersect with gender. Agreeing with Mangena (2009: 20), Manyonganise (2015: 2) argues that despite the communitarian nature of *Hunhu*, the philosophy is riddled with the whims and caprices of patriarchy. She then goes into a detailed analysis of evidence from the social life of Shona women where these ‘whims’ and ‘caprices’ of patriarchy manifest to disadvantage and oppress women. In doing this, Manyonganise cites several studies from Zimbabwean and non-Zimbabwean researchers that she agrees with, covering a wide spectrum from Chimuka (2001) to more recent studies like Chitando and Mateveke (2012). Going through her study accorded me the opportunity to get a satisfactory sense of what those other academics think about patriarchy and gender constructions among the Shona in Zimbabwe.

Despite efforts at providing a balance, Manyonganise’s analysis still betrays the tension I refer to regarding what the academics state and what prevails on the ground. Manyonganise (2015: 1) acknowledges openly that *Ubuntu* is embraced not just in Africa but even abroad as an African ethic that defines an individual’s Africanness. She claims that beyond the African borders other ethnic groups, interestingly including Westerners, pondering how it can be embraced in their contexts. Manyonganise, as expected, does not pursue this observation to its logical conclusion, which would entail raising a very critical question: if *Ubuntu* as a philosophy were this patriarchal and oppressive to the extent to which it is vilified, would it be this attractive and charming so as to draw the attention of the global community? Academics appear to have been gullible enough to accept the critique wholesale without questioning it.

Chikunda and Chikunda (2016) explore the underlying mechanisms that influence gender transformation in the uptake of science subjects by the girl child in Zimbabwe. They argue that despite the strides made concerning gender equality in education in Zimbabwe today, gender disparity persists in terms of the general uptake of natural science subjects by the girl child. This is because the natural science teachers succumb to patriarchy and other forms of gender inequality caused by structures deeply imbued in the societal norms of the Shona culture. The two academics single out patriarchy as a cultural norm that decisively plays a determining role in constraining the uptake of natural science subjects by the girl child. Suffering from the effects of patri-

archy, the teacher educators in the natural science subjects that the two scholars studied demonstrated a very limited grasp of gender-responsive pedagogies. The two scholars observed that the teacher educators concerned perpetuated the fundamental belief that girls are socialised to do easier stuff and should reserve difficult subjects like the natural sciences for boys. The study makes several observations and recommendations, which are not the current focus of my paper. However, the two scholars engage in a reflexive exercise in which they criticise their own theory as too deterministic and argue for openness in considering other factors that may be at play in terms of the uptake of natural science subjects by the girl child. The two scholars do not consider revisiting their lenses of patriarchy with which they penetrated the subject, which they probably gullibly adopted from previous studies, especially from Western scholars that dominate their paper.

Below I make the same observations regarding the selected literature on *roora*. I begin my review with a 2001 study on *roora* from a London-based scholar, Nicola Ansell. Although it is an early study, like Wells' study on patriarchy, the study provides the basic analytic lenses with which the selected African academics looked at *roora*.

Ansell (2001) looks at the concept of *roora*, which she calls 'bride wealth or *lobola*'. Although she studied the concept as it is practised in Southern Africa she zeroed in on Lesotho and Zimbabwe, looking at how the Basotho in Lesotho and the Shona in Zimbabwe carry out the practice of *roora*. Ansell's conclusions are drawn from analyses of a series of focus-group discussions among senior students at two rural secondary schools, for which she used pseudonyms as Mahloko High School in Lesotho and Ruchera Secondary School in Zimbabwe (Ansell 2001: 705). Ansell's study is important for my study in that it compares the students' views on *roora* with both historical and contemporary academic interpretations of the practice (Ansell 2001: 697). This is quite similar to what I am doing here: comparing results from the field with academic interpretations of elements of Shona culture.

Ansell makes several key positive observations about *roora*, which she must have taken from her field study, because my field study led me to the same observations. It is clear from Ansell's study that *roora* is a significant element of marriage among the Basotho of Lesotho and the Shona of Zimbabwe (Ansell 2001: 697). In fact, using the indefinite article to describe the value of *roora*, especially among the vaJindwi that I studied, is an

understatement. *Roora* is the significant element of marriage among this Shona group. Ansell does not seem to pursue this key observation to probe exactly why it is a significant element of marriage, because of her obvious preconceptions, which she brings into her analysis of field notes in a very pronounced way. It becomes obvious as one reads her analysis of the results from the field that she provides an explanation on every positive aspect of *roora*, especially why the African cultures studied continue to embrace the practice, despite serious efforts to paint it negatively. The lenses she used to penetrate the data she got from the field like control, equal rights, property rights, men's space, commercialization of *roora*, patriarchy and gender relations, seem to have contributed to the tension that characterizes her study where a practice that she describes so negatively continues among the Africa cultures she studied unabated. Ansell concludes, as her title states, that the practice continues simply because the Basotho and Shona people think it is their culture. Apart from lacking respect for the people studied, ontologically and epistemologically such a conclusion is empty because it lacks a deep axiological appreciation of *roora* and the African culture in general. Unfortunately, African academics, a sample of whom I review below, adopted Western lenses like those that Ansell used to analyse African cultural elements like *roora*, without questioning their applicability to the African context. I demonstrate this through brief reviews of selected studies on *roora* below.

Mawere and Mawere (2010) carry a philosophical examination of African forms of marriage, especially the customary marriage practice of *kukumbira* (asking for a bride/woman's hand in marriage from her parents, but with her informed consent). Their study was particularly interesting for me because it took the Shona ethnic group of Zimbabwe as a case study. After a thorough analysis of the perception of the Shona people towards the customary practice of *kukumbira* and their receptivity of this traditional Shona marriage custom, the two scholars made several observations that were of interest to me. First, the study observes that an overwhelming majority of respondents give a thumbs-up to the marriage practice because they think it is very valuable. It is valuable as a crucial part of the Shona culture that respects women's human rights, stresses the prohibition of pre-marital sexual conduct and it reinforces family ties. The minority, despite being a minority, raised points that are subjects of my study here. Mawere and Mawere (2010) point out that the custom should not be commercialized, as hefty bride wealth leads to the commodification of women. This observation led to their main point that the

custom is at odds with gender equality that contemporary women are fighting for, especially that this practice and other forms of marriage where *roora* is paid take place within the context of patriarchy that was meant to serve males, not the women concerned. This makes the practice open to abuse by some parents who charge hefty bride wealth, as well as by some husbands and in-laws who abuse the married women's rights on the grounds that they have bought them at a price. The study concludes that the custom of *kukumbira* should be maintained, but for purposes of building family ties, avoiding abuse of women in marriage and promoting respect of human rights.

This study reveals that the practice of *roora* has a functional value among the Shona and that is why it continues. However, as I stated earlier, in their analysis, Mawere and Mawere employ Western lenses like gender equality, commercialization, patriarchy and human rights abuse to penetrate the data from the field. They do not raise critical questions like whether or not there is a significant causal relationship between *roora* and the abuse of women in a marriage relationship. The study seems to adopt Western lenses of analysis as standard and the study and the others below inevitably develop a one-size-fits-all approach to culture.

In his discussion of Pauline challenges to African masculinities, Togarasei (2012) discusses marriage within the context of I Corinthians 7. Among other things, he discusses the issue of *roora* among the Shona, during which discussion he calls for the abolition of the custom. For him Shona men accumulate bride wealth for purposes of recognition as men and therefore, payment of bride price becomes a masculine attribute which, among other things, is a marker denoting that the man has enough money to take care of his wife (Togarasei 2012: 153). Togarasei betrays his Western lenses when he supports LaFont (2007)'s argument that *roora* today is regarded as payment for the bride and it boils down to the conclusion that the husband and his family purchase the woman in her totality, including her domestic labour and her children (Togarasei 2012: 153). He immediately points to *roora* as the cause of the married woman's inferior position that makes her powerless to fight against all sorts of physical abuse in marriage. It is not immediately clear how Togarasei establishes this causal relationship between *roora* and masculinity, let alone, abuse in marriage, other than the lenses that he used to look at the practice. Unfortunately, evidence of data from the field is lacking and what comes out are Togarasei's opinions. It would have been interesting to see how Togarasei's opinions would compare with data from the field.

Chiweshe (2016) isolates two Western lenses, commercialisation of *roora* and patriarchy, to penetrate gender and power relations in Zimbabwe. The study analyses how the commercialisation of *roora* has had an impact women's bodies in Zimbabwe today. He concludes that the conversion of *roora* into cash has resulted in the commercialisation of *roora* and this has led to a widespread belief that marriage payments are synonymous with buying a wife (Chiweshe 2016: 229, 235). This has impacted gender relations in marriage, as women are left with little power to negotiate on issues such as safe sex or the use of family planning methods (Chiweshe, 2016: 239). Again, there is a lot of ideological and axiomatic tension in this study, probably emanating from Chiweshe's lenses that influenced him to just gloss over the value of the practice that would have provided an answer to the puzzle about the persistence of the custom, despite its obvious flaws that Chiweshe (2016: 236) belabours to document. Like Mawere and Mawere, Chiweshe fails to raise critical questions. For example, does the practice of *roora* have structures that prevent its commercialisation and abuse? It is strange that Chiweshe (2016: 236) observes that the custom has obvious flaws and yet it persists among the Zimbabweans. Does this not call for an empirical axiological study of the reasons why this is so? In fact, he does not even raise these questions as areas for further study. Chisi (2018) almost comes to the same conclusions as Chiweshe.

Chisi (2018) carried out research on the pastoral challenges the practice of *roora* poses for the Zimbabwean society. *Inter alia*, this study looked at the challenges of *roora* within the context of the economic meltdown in Zimbabwe which, according to the study, has resulted in the majority of men being unemployed. Allegedly, according to the study, *roora* becomes a main source of income when it is due and this makes men strive to maximize on *roora*. I am not clear on what evidence some of the conclusions were based, but the study managed to conclude that Shona men now send their daughters to school and care for them properly to increase their worth when they get married. Education and status are key determinants of *lobola* charged. Shona men endeavour to recoup all expenses paid on rearing their daughters plus profit. Men now perceive their daughters the same way an investor looks at his investment. As I stated earlier, field evidence for this conclusion is lacking, but throughout Chisi applies the Western lenses I indicated earlier to analyse the cases isolated for study and those lenses seem to be the bases for the conclusion that the study makes.

The five studies that place emphasis on *roora*, which I isolated for review, all show some tension between their conclusions and the evidence they gathered on the ground. The two axioms under study tend to override the value of *roora*, which all the studies seem to endorse. I take particular interest in this tension, because that tension helps to vindicate and put to the fore the point in my analysis. My point is that the scholars' approach to Shona culture is skewed in that they approach the culture with a pre-determined meaning that they construct using Western axioms and inappropriately attribute it to the phenomena under study. I isolate the Shona rite, *roora*, which I approach using empirical interpretive phenomenology to see if I can come up with meaning that is different from the reviewed articles.

Empirical Interpretive Phenomenology as the Methodology for the Study

The brief literature review above was meant to problematize the study. The brief literature review revealed that academics who did research on the Shona cultural elements under study used lenses which Westerners must have prescribed. The task in this section is now to instrumentalize the study. It is necessary to make explicit how data were gathered, presented and interpreted and therefore, to briefly make explicit the academic basis for my claims.

The broad focus of the study was basically to look at the lived experiences of the people of Zimunya, Mutare, Zimbabwe. I isolated three cases involving *roora* for analysis from among the Jindwi people. I focused in particular on how 'the mode of being' of this Jindwi cultural phenomenon is constituted within a particular meaning-context, that of the Jindwi. In their distinction between several types of phenomenological methodologies, Soule and Freeman (2019: 858) describe interpretive phenomenology as an approach that is based on Heidegger's conception of intentionality that mainly looks at how modes of phenomena are constituted within particular meaning contexts. Therefore, my methodology of choice was the qualitative methodology of empirical interpretive phenomenology.

The use of this qualitative research methodology underpinned by constructivism arising from phenomenology was determined by one key consideration: empirical interpretative phenomenology leads to a more informed understanding of phenomena from the perspective of participants, which is what I think lacked in the selected works reviewed. In particular, empirical

interpretive phenomenology is designed to determine and understand the beliefs of the devotee from the devotee's perspective. I am indeed cognizant of reservations which some scholars have on this objective of phenomenology like those that Manen (2017: 776-777) raises. However, empirical interpretive phenomenology remains my methodology of choice because my aim is to get to the unique meaning (*eidos*) of phenomena among the Jindwi. As such, it is best suited to investigate major claims that I highlighted from the brief review of literature above and to see if the Jindwi people can easily identify with those claims about their culture, especially in relation to gender. The focus and key objective of the research are on 'pulling out' the people's story about elements of their culture in relation to gender and then seek to listen to their description of what their subjective world is like for them.

Ultimately, from the descriptions, I then arrived at my statement of eidetic intuition regarding the essential meaning of the isolated rite. I then looked at how they shape constructions of gender in Zimbabwe.

Population

It was not possible to focus on all Shona-speaking groups in Zimbabwe. We zeroed in on the Shona people in Manicaland, mainly the Jindwi in Zimunya and Marange (Bocha), and some Manyika people in and around Zimunya in Manicaland, Zimbabwe. Similarly, it was not possible to investigate all aspects of the Jindwi and Manyika cultural and/or indigenous religious phenomena. However, I took comfort in the fact that, thick descriptions work well with few, but key cultural and/or religious phenomena isolated for study. One key rite of passage was selected for observation, namely *roora* (marriage rite). Therefore, the population comprised the Jindwi and Manyika people in and around the Zimunya and Marange areas in Manicaland who are familiar with the two rites of passage isolated for study. It is unusual to state a population for such a qualitative study as ours, but we do so in order to demarcate the boundaries from where data were generated until we reached saturation point

Sample

A purposeful sample of carefully chosen participants was chosen from among family people with the experiences of the two rites of passage stated above to avoid accusations of bias. Three key informants were identified because of

their age: one informant was 94 years and female; two other informants were male, one 97 years and the other 101 years old. They were deemed as key informants because we assumed that at the time they were born the white settlers had just settled in Zimbabwe. Therefore, chances of their descriptions of *roora* and the death rite to be free of Western bias were very high. Their descriptions compared with the descriptions of generations younger than them, which gave us an indication of the historical development of the cultural practices in question.

Data Generation and Presentation

I carried out interviews among as many Jindwi people as possible until we could not get any new data. At that point (saturation point) we sat down to sort out the descriptions of the phenomena and to name the phenomena for purposes of ease of discerning the phenomena. The descriptions from key informants were regarded as the primitive forms of the phenomena and therefore, the primary data.

Thick Description as My Data Analysis Method

Consistent with the philosophical assumptions of empirical interpretive phenomenology, for data analysis I will use thick description that gives voice to the participants or devotees' beliefs and concerns within their worldview (Thompson 2001:63). The principle behind this is that when we describe phenomena in sufficient detail we can evaluate the extent to which conclusions drawn from observations of the phenomena can be transferable to other settings, times and/or people (RWJF 2008: para. 1). In this paper I describe in sufficient detail one rite of passage, *roora*, indicated earlier, among the Jindwi in Zimunya, in Mutare, an eastern border area in Zimbabwe. While in doing so I give voice to the Jindwi. The description will be thick enough to allow my conclusions regarding constructions of gender exhibited through the rite to be transferable to other Shona groups within Zimbabwe and perhaps abroad to other African people.

Thick Description of the Marriage Rite, *Roora*

Below I describe three families who have recently been involved in the mar-

riage rite, *roora*. For ethical reasons of protecting the participants, I have used pseudonyms to refer to both the surnames and some family members of the three families in question. I called the first family the Mutseswa family, the second the Musweuyu family, and the third, the Butau family. The Mutseswa family referred to the marriage rite as *doodzi* and reserved the term *roora* to refer to the bride-wealth itself. The Musweuyu and the Butau family concurred, although they preferred the term *kuroorwa kwemwana* to *doodzi*. In the two latter cases, a daughter of the family was getting married, while in the case of the Mutseswa family it was their son who was getting married. The marriage rite for the Mutseswa and the Butau families, respectively took place in an urban set-up while the marriage rite involving the Musweuyu family took place at their rural homestead.

In two cases, the marriage ceremony took place in two different suburbs in Mutare. In the third case, the marriage ceremony took place in the rural areas, *kumusha*. All participants and informants agreed that traditionally the rite should take place *kumusha* and specifically in the round hut, *musha*, at the homestead. From the two rites under study, I came to know that the round hut was a significant building at the homestead. All three key informants agreed in principle that this hut is more than a simple shelter. It carries a religious, if not sacred, significance among the Jindwi. *Musha* is what Cohen (2011: 195) refers to as the *axis mundi*, the symbolic centre of the Jindwi religious cosmos. Interestingly, at the Musweuyu homestead there were two big houses where the close to fifty-strong participants to the ceremony could fit in and sit comfortably. However, they squeezed themselves into this round hut.

When I learnt about the significance of this round hut, I interviewed some elders from the Butau family who also had a daughter who was getting married. They too confirmed they had a serious debate about the venue. They wanted the ceremony to take place *kumusha*, but the Covid-19 induced lockdown conditions restricted them. I also interviewed representatives of the in-laws to the Musetswa family regarding the venue of the marriage rite. They gave a similar answer.

However, the constraints on the venue notwithstanding, all three the marriage ceremonies involved the same symbolic figures representing the families of the two parties to the marriage. In each case, the groom's delegation comprised the groom's brother or brothers, the groom's *sekuru* (uncle as in the brother of the groom's mother) and either *tete* (the groom's sister or sister of the groom's father) or *mukwasha* (*tete*'s husband) and a brother of the groom's

father. In all three cases, *sekuru* was *samaukuru*, that is, the head of the delegation. Variations were in others who accompanied this core group stated above, like the groom's best friend or friends who, together with the groom, remained outside the in-laws' homestead waiting to be called at the appropriate time during the ceremony. In all three cases, the bride's father invited all his immediate siblings as well as his brothers and sisters from the extended family. The bride's mother also invited her sisters to the ceremony. In the case of the Butau family, the bride's mother had only one sister present, but she invited her brother's wife. While the numbers were limited in the case of the ceremonies that took place in Mutare urban, it was clear that more would have been involved, had the environment been conducive. It became apparent that among the Jindwi marriage is a bond that transcends the two parties to the marriage.

In all three cases, *tete* (sister to the bride's father) played a key role in the marriage rite. She acted as the 'bridge' of communication between the groom's delegation and *vanatezvara* (the in-laws). The rite began with the ritual of *kukumbira ndiro* (asking for a wooden bowl/plate) from the mother who is the owner of the round hut and everything in it. I asked what would happen if she refused to give them the plate. All key informants were unanimous that if the mother refused she would be sending a clear message that she was not approving the marriage and therefore, the ceremony should not go on, although this was very rare.

There were variations regarding the other preliminary charges. Common were *mavhuramuromo* (a fee for requesting the in-laws to open their mouths), *manon'ora nzeve* (a fee for requesting the in-laws to open their ears), *matekenyandebvu* (It was not immediately clear what this was for, but it seems that it is an acknowledgement fee that when growing up the bride used to play with her father's beard. Put simply, this is an acknowledgement of the father's role in the upbringing of his daughter). There were other such small charges. I asked why it was not possible for the in-laws just to charge one lump sum. Again all three key informants agreed that each of the little charges was a ritual pointing to a certain element in both the existing relationship and that which the ceremony intended to build. During the ceremony, the money charged in each case was placed in the *ndiro*, which was then circulated around all the in-laws present, including the women, for all to witness. When all have looked, the in-law leading the ceremony would remove the money from the *ndiro* and go on to the next charge. In all three cases, it was clear that of all the charges, there was strict emphasis on *mafukidza dumbu* (this is an equivalent of *mate-*

kenya ndebvu in that it is an acknowledgement of the role of the mother carrying her daughter for nine months in the womb), *mombe yemusana* (explanations of the meaning and ritual significance of this varied. The general agreement was that this was a fee, usually paid as a live cow, given to the bride's mother for carrying the pregnancy and nursing her daughter to adulthood).

Besides, all three cases involved Christian families. Each ceremony ended with the ritual of *kukumbira muchato* (requesting to have a white wedding). In all three cases, the in-laws granted permission on one condition, namely that the groom would have paid everything that was due to the bride's mother. All men whom I interviewed acknowledged that they prioritized this, especially *mombe yemusana*. Almost all of the men whom I interviewed associated this with some spiritual misfortune if the cow was not 'paid'. This also included other 'payments' due to the mother of the bride.

I paid particular attention on the charges involved and how each family arrived at the figures. I discovered that each family had a predetermined figure for each item. The reason why the bride's extended family gather is to make sure the bride's father does not go outside the agreed family boundaries in terms of charges. The *roora* applies across the clan, irrespective of the daughters' educational background or employment status. This is why *roora* is charged in cattle. If someone wants to pay cash, the family sits down to agree on the monetary value of each cow using current rates.

From an in-depth analysis of the three cases discussed above, accusations of gender bias may be without basis. The very first ritual places the mother at a vantage point to decide whether or not her daughter should be married to the groom. When I asked whether it was fair to give the bride's father the bulk of the *roora* when the mother was only getting *mafukidza dumbu* and *mombe yemusana*, all key informants were unanimous to affirm fairness in the practice. What the mother got was truly hers to take to her family and the bride's father does not query. However, what the bride's father got belonged to the family, which included the mother. She can sell any off the cattle that the father gets from the *roora* without any consequence, but her husband has no say whatsoever on *mombe yemusana*. The mother has priority in terms of what the groom should pay first. Besides, there is a sense in which her position and status in the family is spiritual, if not sacred.

Overall, the Jindwi consider marriage as relational. Marriage is an essential part of the Jindwi (Shona) culture. It defines who they are, as one elderly man had this to say:

Kubvisa roora, kubvisa pfuma inhaka yatakasiirwa namadziteteguru edu, inzira yekuratidza kuumba ukama pakati pemhuri mbiri Mukadzi haagari mumusha asina kuroorwa.. ingozi kana akafa asina kubvisirwa pfuma. Mukadzi anopiwa chiremera chake kana aroorwa, abvisirwa (Paying *roora* is an inheritance from our ancestors; it is a way of building relationships among the two families ... A wife cannot stay in the family without *roora* being paid; if she dies without being married her spirit becomes an avenging spirit. A woman is given her proper place and sacred status through, and in, marriage).

It is interesting that the marriage rite does not exhaust itself with *roora*. The rite ends with a meal prepared from the food items brought by the sons-in-law to fulfil another important idiom among the Jindwi, *ukama igasva unadziswa nekudya* (gaps in relations are filled through or during meals). Later, when the bride eventually joins her husband's family there is another ritual, *mashandwa* or *mabumbwe*, symbolising the cementing of relationship between the two families.

Conclusion

If by patriarchy we mean a system of society in which the father or eldest son is the head of the family and descent is reckoned through the male line, then indeed data confirmed that the Jindwi society is patriarchal. While the mother is the owner of the round hut, the father is the one who leads the ritual ceremonies in the hut. However, if by patriarchy, we mean a system of society in which men hold power and women are largely excluded from it, then indeed the Jindwi society is certainly not patriarchal.

Data on the rites of passage that I described showed that we could not easily discern power dynamics between the two genders in such a simplistic way. The male among the Jindwi is not inherently and normatively a conduit for the exercise of power. Similarly, the female is not inherently and normatively a subordinate recipient of male power. The rituals comprising the marriage rite showed various levels of consultation between males and females involved. Power struggles between the two genders were not at the centre of the rite. In fact, the emphasis on prioritizing *mombe yemusana* elevated the mother figure almost to a venerated and/or sacred status.

Data confirmed that rather than being commercial, *roora* is relational.

All the relations are invited and they take part in the decision-making. The price of *roora* is determined not by an individual, but by the family, both the immediate and the extended family. What also emanated from the data was that the marriage contract is not between the two individuals but between the two families. This is evidenced from the Shona statement, '*warume wako awo*', referring to her husband, his brothers and sisters. This showed us that among the Jindwi, the terms *murume* and *mukadzi* are not gendered and so, the Jindwi do not always organise their life around biological sex differences. The big question then is: if this is what is coming from the data, where are we getting the prevailing gender constructs among some academics in Zimbabwe? Indeed, there are challenges associated with generalizing findings from a case study and there may be a need to test these conclusions with more Shona and perhaps Ndebele groups beyond the Jindwi. However, given the fact that the data were checked for consistency mainly through member checking and audit trails, and therefore considered trustworthy for the Jindwi society, the question above can still be raised in respect of this particular case. The study may be a wake-up call to academics who are gullible enough to consider every Western analysis of elements of our culture as valid enough to adopt.

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