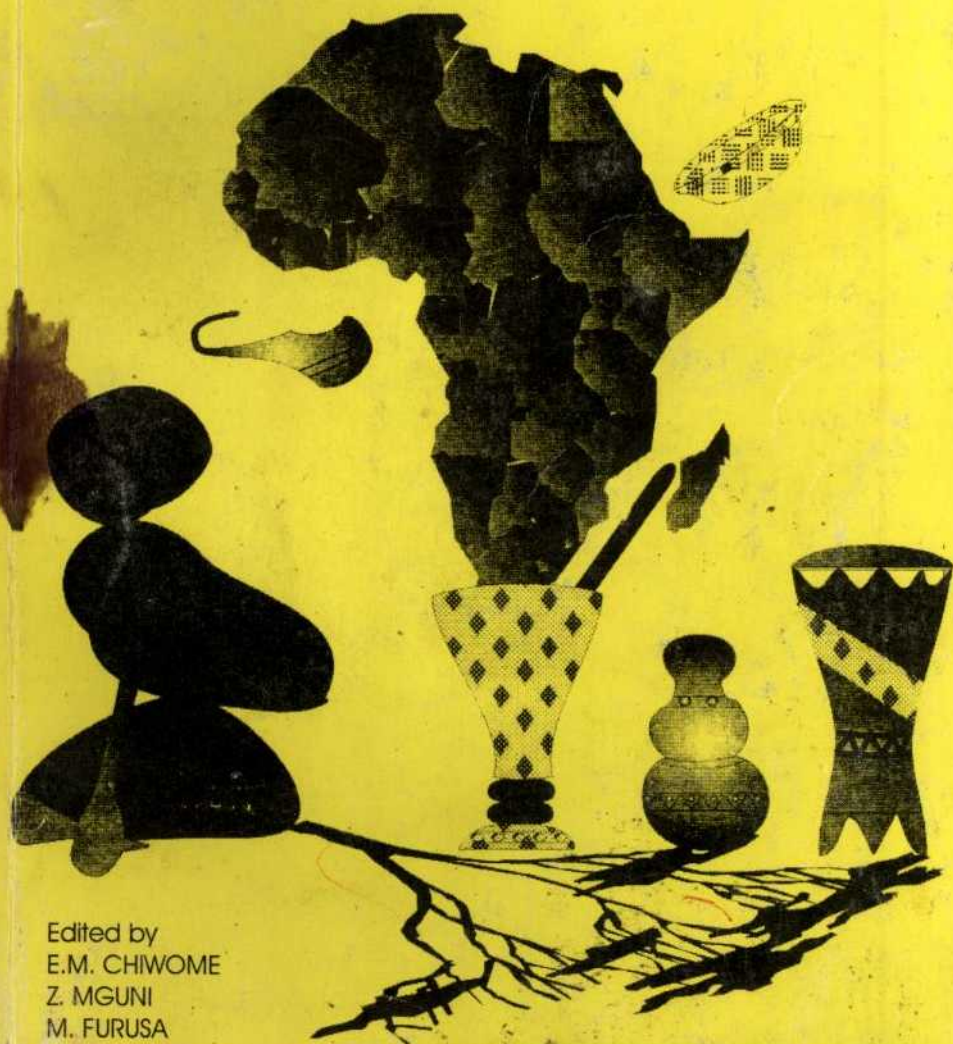


**INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNOLOGY  
IN  
AFRICAN AND DIASPORAN COMMUNITIES**

**MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES**



Edited by  
E.M. CHIWOME  
Z. MGUNI  
M. FURUSA



### THE ROLE OF *ZVIERA* IN SOCIALISATION

Levison Tatira

This chapter presents a thesis that 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.

Colonial settlers have often presented the Shona people as devoid of rational thinking. Awoonor writes about the negative attitudes Europeans had towards the Africans:

*Our cultures and complex mores, our spiritual and temporal concepts and ideals were dismissed as paganistic irrelevancies that stood in a way of cleansing tide of Christian progress and European enlightenment (Owoonor, 1975:xii).*

The Europeans' attitude reveals ethnocentrism and ignorance which in turn marginalise indigenous African values that would otherwise enhance development. The term 'development' has been defined by many scholars who include Villard (1959), Mhlaba (1991), Gecau (1991), and Soedjatmoko (1994) among others. Gecau defines development as,

*a process in which man collectively, and above all, qualitatively impresses his spiritual and cultural well being in the course of the production of his material life (Gecau, ibid:77).*

For development to take place, there should be continuity, solidarity, group identity, mass participation and peace. Other dimensions of development are freedom, tolerance, justice and health. Soedjatmoko (Ibid:2) observes that the above are often neglected when discussing development, although they 'are as crucial as capital output and export targets'. We therefore cannot talk of development without referring to the above aspects of development. In this light one views *zviera* as facilitating development among the Shona people.





The Shona impart societal values through *zvira* (riddles), *ngano* (folktales), and *zviera*, among other art forms. *Ngano* are didactic in nature. They enshrine lessons for life. Through them, children are taught, among other things, the importance of humility, perseverance, generosity, tolerance and wisdom. Folktales encourage children to be virtuous by moulding them according to societal expectations. In essence therefore, the philosophy enshrined in *ngano* typifies development as defined by both Gecau and Soedjatmoko.

The term *zviera* refers to statements that forbid certain forms of behaviour in children. An act that breaches a taboo triggers a reaction supposedly at the supernatural level. This is effective since children easily operate at make-believe 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. Every *chiera* prohibits certain forms of behaviour and gives reasons for such a prohibition. It would not be complete as a *chiera* if it did not provide a reason for its existence. In a *chiera*, children's questions are anticipated and answered implicitly. Taboos are taken from the immediate environment. Like proverbs, taboos derive their images from domestic and wild animals, household items and human beings.

Beliefs such as *ngozi* (avenging spirit) and *uroyi* (witchcraft) are sometimes used in *zviera* to discourage bad habits. *Zviera* help to uphold societal values such as the sanctity of human life, importance of fertility and respect for the small, powerless but harmless creatures in the environment; all of which are important to development. The following are examples of taboos where the *ngozi* belief is used to control children :

- \* *Ukagara pfihwa unozoponda mukadzi* (If you sit on a hearthstone you will murder your wife).
- \* *Ukarova mai unozotanda botso* (If you beat your mother you will become a ritual beggar).

In the first example, the immediate concern of the elders is that the child should not burn itself. But the elders know well that the child could argue that it knows how best to sit on the hearthstone so as to avoid burning itself. Therefore, to pre-empt such an argument or any other arguments, the threat is not of burning oneself but that of losing one's wife. The loss of one's wife is tragic. The physical burn may or may not occur, but the *ngozi* is believed to be certain to strike if a person is killed.

In the example of beating the mother, the mother-child relationship is promoted because of the fear of *ngozi*. There is no taboo relating to one's father, probably because

the father can employ other strategies to settle the score.

Apart from the foresaid, there are values that are equally important which *zviera* want to articulate. Females are particularly protected in Shona society because they are the backbone of the agrarian economy. Society depends on them and condemns any form of violence perpetrated on them. Therefore, in order not to disturb the process of food production, the base of societal production should be protected.

The family is the basic unit of society and the continuity of this unit must be maintained since development is largely dependent upon it. The protection of women against violence safeguards the integrity of the family.

*Zviera* are vital in transmitting values on issues pertaining to hygiene. In pursuance of monitoring child behaviour, *zviera* educate children on issues of hygiene, cruelty, precaution and good behaviour. The given parameters, though not strictly mutually exclusive, can be taken as a plausible basis for grouping *zviera* according to their functions in society. For society to develop, its members must be healthy. Production of goods and services demands a well-fed and healthy society. If members of society are not knowledgeable about health, they are likely to be plagued with disease which impact negatively upon development. Without basic observance of hygiene, the human resource base which is necessary for production is adversely affected.

Behaviour that might threaten general cleanliness is prohibited. Through *zviera*, hygienic standards are encouraged and maintained:

- \* *Ukawetera mumvura hauzozvari* (If you urinate in water you will fail to conceive).
- \* *Ukadya zvakatonhora semunya unonzwa mabayo* (If you eat cold leftover food you will suffer from pneumonia).
- \* *Ukagara murusero unoitamba mbeveve/dera/muroyi* (If you sit in a winnowing basket you will become deaf/ a coward/witch).




Rural society depends on open wells, rivers, springs and fountains for drinking and cooking water. It is therefore necessary to discourage contamination of water.

With regard to the second example, the Shona have had knowledge of bacteria and germs for a long time. They discourage eating of cold left-over food. Such food is supposed to be boiled or heated directly on the fire where possible, to kill germs before it is eaten.






As for the third example, the winnowing basket is used for serving as well as processing food. It would therefore be unhygienic to sit in it. It is a food tray which noone is expected to sit in.

The second category of *zviera* educates children about the danger of not being cautious. This category encourages children not to indulge in activities that could be dangerous. As has already been noted, development is not taken in only the narrow sense of material production since economic production is by itself dependent upon a requisite set of preconditions. The continuation of human society rests upon not only what is happening now, but also on what the future holds, which is largely guaranteed by socialisation. Precautionary taboos, it would seem, are largely geared towards preserving the physical well being of the child. Consider a sample of precautionary taboos that follow:

-  *Ukakwakuka mwana haazorebi* (If you jump over a child he will not grow tall).
-  *Ukaorera madota nemaoko unozoita munyama* (If you remove ashes with bare hands you will be inviting misfortune unto yourself).
-  *Ukakwakuka moto unozonzwa chipfungwa* (If you jump over a fire you will suffer from bilharzia).

The underpinning factor regarding all these precautionary taboos is that of alerting children of the dangers of indulging in activities that can result in their being incapacitated. The images invoking danger such as fire and hot ashes, are inhibiting.

The Shona people realise the importance of preserving the environment as a factor in overall development. This knowledge is manifest in some of the taboos that control child behaviour in relation to the environment. It has been observed across cultures that children can destroy the environment for fun. The unchecked destruction of seemingly unimportant elements of the natural environment can impact negatively upon the ecosystem. This ties with Soedjatmoko's (1986) observation which links development and environmental preservation. Development should be for the betterment of the people and their environment. The following are some taboos that teach children to be mindful of the natural environment:

-  *Ukauraya datya mvura haizonayi* (If you kill a frog there will be drought).
-  *Ukauraya mutsunyamutsunya mombe dzinoita maronda paminyatso* (If you kill a praying mantis cows will crack their teats).
-  *Ukauraya kiti inopfuka* (If you kill a cat its spirit will torment you).

The given taboos are designed to protect the environment on which society depends.



The fourth set comprises *zviera* which discourage bad behaviour. In relation to good behaviour, Gelfand writes:

*The imperatives of the Shona culture might be reduced to the three basic guidelines: live together, keep peace and multiply (Gelfand, 1973:102).*

The immediate concern of the people is to mould a full personality which then becomes an asset to society. The following are some of the taboos that are used to inculcate good citizenship which is a vital component of development:

- Ⓒ *Ukadongorera munhu achigeza unoita showera* (If you look at a person bathing you develop a swollen eyebrow).
- Ⓒ *Ukaseka chirema unozvara chirema* (If you laugh upon the sight of a cripple you will beget one).
- Ⓒ *Ukapfira musupe unozvara musupe* (If you spit upon the sight of an albino you will conceive one).

The three taboos address the issue of psychological security within society. People with disability are not to be looked upon as inferior to others. Shona society reminds its members that some members of society, though different from others, should not be discriminated against on the basis of their physical differences. These taboos persuade members of society to work together with disabled members. It can be deduced that the catch phrase, 'Disability is not inability', was long observed through *zviera*. A society which discourages discrimination among its members develops faster through tapping different talents.

The first *chiera* prevents children from being curious of the anatomy of the opposite sex. Rural people sometimes bath in the open air where members of society are supposed to be assured of their privacy. Taboos repress symptoms of potentially criminal behaviour. Other forms of anti-social behaviour such as theft, murder and aggression among others, are discouraged by taboos. That way, the Shona promote harmony by discouraging criminal behaviour, thus providing an enabling environment for development.

## CONCLUSION

Development has been used in the broad sense that accommodates both its spiritual and material dimensions. In this argument, particular emphasis has been accorded to dimensions of development such as tolerance, health, environmental preservation and good citizenship. Taboos transmit values which help develop human resources. Issues of hygiene, precautionousness, good behaviour, tolerance, mass participation,



continuity of the group, solidarity and human dignity are integral to development. Art which promotes these values should therefore be promoted.

### WORKS CITED

Awoonor, K. 1975. *The Breast of the Earth : A Survey of the History, Culture and Literature of Africa South of the Sahara*. New York: Anchor.

Gecau, K. 1991. 'Culture and the Tasks of Development in Africa : Lessons from the Kenyan Experience'. In *Cultural Struggle and Development in Southern Africa*. Edited by P. Kaarsholm. Harare: Baobab Books. 1991.

Gelfand, M. 1976. *The Genuine Shona*. Gwelo: Mambo Press.

Kaarsholm, P. (ed). 1991. *Cultural Struggle and Development in Southern Africa*. London: James Currey.

Mhlaba, L. 1991. 'Local Cultures and Development in Zimbabwe : The Case of Matebeland'. In *Cultural Struggle and Development in Southern Africa*.

Soedjatmoko, K.C. 1986. 'Development Reconsidered : The Human Dimension'. In *Transforming Humanity : The Visionary Writing of Soedjatmoko*. Edited by K.C. Soedjatmoko and K. Newland. Tokyo: United Nations University Press. 1986.

Villard, H.H. 1959. *Economic Development*. Rine Hart & Longman, New York.

The Duma world is very much a man's world. Everything which mattered (and especially women) belonged to the men, and was run by them. The women have the power (and above all, the means) to do much, unless, of course, she has something on behalf of a man. The Duma women had little responsibility and