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## ETHICS AMONG THE SHONA

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### Abstract

*This essay is a contribution towards an appreciation of Hunhu/Ubuntu as the basis of African philosophy. It seeks to demonstrate, by means of a specific example taken from an African text, that within the African culture there are still some values worth promoting. The argument to be proffered is that values of Hunhu in Shona are quite rich and, if cultivated, could contribute to an enrichment of human civilization.*

### INTRODUCTION

This article serves a dual purpose. First, it is a direct reaction to the work of Michael Gelfand who, on the one hand, admits that the Shona had commendable moral values but, on the other, explains that these were mere survival instincts.<sup>1</sup> It seeks to show that he contradicted himself by appraising the Shona as having moral values but, at the same time, arguing that these were mere instincts. He appears to have looked at the Shona people from a prejudicial perspective. As a result, he seems to have developed a conceptual blight, which prevented him from penetrating into, and openly acknowledging the presence of metaphysical and epistemological principles in the Shona worldview.

The article is a contribution towards efforts by post-colonial African philosophers to shift emphasis from the dominant Euro-centric conception of human values to a pluralistic one in which the cultures of other peoples are to be recognised as contributing to and enriching an understanding of humanity as a whole. The Shona people in particular and the African people in general have been presented as having a distorted humanity precisely because some Europeans were bent on undermining their cultures in the name of civilisation. Secondly, the article tries to point to a philosophical foundation of Shona ethics with the hope of contributing towards the ongoing movement of cultural revival in Africa. The article first examines existing scholarship on African

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1 Michael Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona: Survival Values of an African Culture* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1973), 101.

cultures before analysing Gelfand's work and his understanding of Shona values. Finally, it attempts to reconstruct the system of Shona values.

### SCHOLARSHIP ON AFRICAN CULTURE IN GENERAL AND SHONA CULTURE IN PARTICULAR

Studies on indigenous cultures in Zimbabwe, which were carried out by ethnographers before independence, were driven by Euro-centrism.<sup>2</sup> The problem is not that the scholars were European; rather the problem lies in the fact that they subscribed to a Euro-centric conception of history that made them biased against Africans and their institutions. Tsenay Serequeberhan defines Euro-centrism as "a pervasive bias located in modernity's self-consciousness of itself" which "is grounded at its core in the metaphysical belief or idea (*idée*) that European existence is qualitatively superior to other forms of human life".<sup>3</sup>

Modernity has been construed as "the globalisation of Europe" which manifested itself in imperialism and colonialism.<sup>4</sup> The philosophy of history, which projects European existence as true human existence, is explicitly expressed in the writings of Hume, Kant, Hegel and Marx and, more recently, in Fukuyama.<sup>5</sup> It justified empire building as a way of exporting European civilisation. This school of thought had no respect whatsoever for Africans. For instance, Hume did not believe that Africans were capable of accomplishing anything worth recognising.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Kant thought that Africans were an inferior and useless breed of mankind, who were fit only to assume the role of servitude.<sup>7</sup>

According to both Hume and Kant's anthropology of races, Africans (Negroes) were irrational. Since rationality had been used to distinguish man from the rest of the animals, or to signify humanness, if the African was not rational, it followed that he/she was not human and, hence, was not capable of moral character; the very basis of dignity and respect.<sup>8</sup> This perspective of the African people arguably coloured colonial researchers' views about Shona culture even before they met the people.

2 Tsenay Serequeberhan, "The Critique of Eurocentrism and the Practice of African Philosophy" in Emmanuel Chikudi-Eze (ed) *Post-Colonial African Philosophy* (Blackwell, Cambridge, 1997), 142.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 Fukuyama actually thinks that Europe occupies the central stage and other cultures, the periphery. Those in the periphery, for him, will of their own accord, strive to be part of the civilized centre.

6 Eze-Chikudi, *Post-Colonial African Philosophy*, 7.

7 *Ibid.*, 116.

8 *Ibid.*, 120-1.

Most traders, missionaries and colonial administrators, though conducting their research for different reasons, had this foundational philosophy that Africans were incapable of contributing anything to human civilisation, for they lacked true rational and moral character.<sup>9</sup>

If it is correct that some scholars of European descent were driven by a Euro-centric philosophy of history, how can they be expected to have genuinely sought to establish the truth about African cultures? It is the contention of this article that these studies were done in bad faith and, hence, there is need to re-examine their assumptions and contributions. In his book *Discourse and Method*, Descartes, a French philosopher, argued that if one wanted to rebuild a city on the place where an old one existed, one had first to destroy the old city and not build the new one on top of the old. Similarly, in order to establish colonial empires in Africa, Europe had to destroy existing African social and political structures to make way for the new civilisation. Using the same approach, it would appear that if Africans wish to restore or to reconstruct their institutions, they first of all have to destroy Euro-centric views of African social and philosophical institutions.

Positive scholarship on African culture, in general, and the Shona culture in particular, has recently emerged. For instance, Chimhundu (1980), Samkange (1980), Hamutinyeyi *et al* (1987), Mutsvairo *et al* (1997) and Ramose (1999) have initiated what, hopefully, will be a growing trend of promoting serious research on Shona culture. What is distinctive about their approach is that it is an honest and insightful insiders' perspective which reveals the richness and diversity of Shona culture, unlike the Euro-centric studies by outsiders who tended to misrepresent and distort it.

In his book *The Genuine Shona*, Gelfand correctly observes that the Shona had a high moral system when he says:

The Shona have clear concepts of the virtues and vices and they have much to say about the aberrations of personality. So they have a definite idea of what constitutes behaviour in their society and its importance. Good relations between one man and another are bound to suffer if one should commit an anti-social act.<sup>10</sup>

He admits in the passage above that Europeans, who first came into contact with the Shona, found a complex moral order. He admits also, as a number of anthropologists and moral philosophers do, that moral values are subjective and therefore, relative to particular contexts and

9 *Ibid.*, 116.

10 Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona*, 52.

situations.<sup>11</sup> For Gelfand, Shona virtues were socially determined and in line with their conception of virtue.

Furthermore, Gelfand identified a wide range of values, which regulated conduct and moulded 'hunhu' [commendable character] all of which are intricately linked to religious beliefs.<sup>12</sup> According to him, this helps to explain why the Shona were highly ordered. In his words,

It needs very little imagination on the part of anyone living in Rhodesia of the late twentieth century to picture the country as it was without medical services, without roads or quick transport, without mills or bakeries, without a police force vigilant to suppress factional fighting. In the Rhodesia of a century ago and still in the Rhodesia of ten centuries ago, man stood at bay. Survival was possible only with the help of other men. But even then, if men united to defend themselves against a hostile environment, safety would be an illusion if the community were a divided one.<sup>13</sup>

In this passage, Gelfand acknowledged that there was social cohesion among the Shona and that this cohesion was based on their system of values.

Gelfand correctly identified a number of virtues upheld by the Shona, such as truthfulness, humility, love, compassion, self-control, forgiveness, mercifulness, sufficiency, trustworthiness, strength, courage and industriousness, among others.<sup>14</sup> He also identified some vices such as detraction, lying, pride, covetousness, revenge, hatred, ingratitude, negligence, aggressiveness and selfishness.<sup>15</sup>

Gelfand thought, however, that the Shona system, which appeared well organised and elaborate, was, in reality, not based on moral values but on the need for survival. He stated:

When we speak of the teleology of the lymphatic system, of a human body, we are speaking about an end; the defence of a human system against bacterial invasion and the observable fact that the lymphatic system of the human body is a means towards an end. The reaction to an attack on the human system, when an epidermis is broken, is not conscious, but it does take place. In much the same way, the teleology of Shona culture is not something of which the Shona individual is conscious; it is rather something of which the observer of Shona culture becomes aware the more he observes the people. The end of Shona culture is survival. The means towards the end hinge on the complexus of beliefs, practices, taboos, social conventions and so on that have, in

11 J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977), Chapter 1.

12 Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona*, 102.

13 *Ibid.*, 65-81.

14 *Ibid.*, 82-100.

15 *Ibid.*, 101.

fact, succeeded in assisting the Shona people to survive as a people for a longer period of time, than the English people, as such have survived.<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting to note how Gelfand relegates the Shona system of values to instinctive behaviour. If the Shona were highly ordered, as evidenced by the fact that the behaviour of the people was well regulated, and if the Shona had a conception of what was good, as evidenced by the efforts to promote '*hunhu*' [humanity], why should they be regarded as irrational? In addition, if the Shona were aware of virtues such as '*ururami*' (rectitude)<sup>17</sup> and vices such as '*hundyire*' (covetousness),<sup>18</sup> how can they be considered to have had no moral character?

Gelfand's view of the irrationality of the Shona value system reveals the basic suppositions underlying European intellectualism, namely, that Africans, in general, and the Shona, in particular, were, qualitatively, not different from other non-rational animals. Consequently, they could not have had the capacity to develop religious and moral systems comparable to those of the West.<sup>19</sup> What the Africans were projecting was pseudo-rationality, hence the need to explain this away.<sup>20</sup> Thus Gelfand conducted clinical studies and interviewed his Shona patients on what they knew about themselves,<sup>21</sup> in order, scientifically, to discover the emotional make-up of the living Shona.<sup>22</sup> It is contended here that Gelfand's medical research methodology was ill-equipped to bring out the underlying ontological as well as gnomic scheme of the Shona people.

The point has to be made, however, that, while there were broad similarities in Western scholars' views about Africa, there were some differences among them, which have to be acknowledged. For example, while Hegel, Hume and Kant denied that Africans had contributed anything to world history, scholars such as Levy-Bruhl, P. Tempels, and Gelfand accepted the fact that there were non-western cultures that were important in their own respect. Nevertheless, they all shared the assumption that European civilisation was the dominant force in world history. The net effect was the marginalisation of non-European cultures.

To return to Gelfand, one may be struck by what appears to be an attempt to denounce the rationality of the Shona and present it as reflexivity. For instance, he wrote:

The teleology of Shona culture is not the same as the sum of what any number of Shona individuals seem to consider the most desirable

16 *Ibid.*, 74.

17 *Ibid.*, 92.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Presence Africaine, Paris, 1959), 50-56.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona*, 104.

22 *Ibid.*

things in life. Just as it is hardly possible for any human deliberately to arrest the flow of lymph, because the lymphatic system has its own teleology, so there is in Shona culture something stronger than any individual or any number of individuals to which individual likes and dislikes have to be subordinated. The existence of this higher imperative is recognized in a simple proverb, '*Murao ndishe*', that is to say, 'Not any man but traditional custom is the ruler of the people . . .' The imperatives of Shona culture might perhaps be reduced to the three basic guidelines 'live together', 'keep the peace', and 'multiply'.<sup>23</sup>

This raises the question of how Gelfand can talk of "a higher imperative", if Shona values were instinctive. Why should the Shona people's conduct be regulated by the "three basic guidelines" if it was not informed by a well-conceived system of morals? It was not logical for him to both affirm and undermine Shona institutions at the same time. Moreover, he deliberately ignored oral traditions,<sup>24</sup> which would have given him access to Shona culture and allowed him to appreciate the metaphysical views which explained what he saw in normative practices of the Shona people.<sup>25</sup>

### THE SOURCE OF MORALS AMONG THE SHONA

Contrary to what most Western scholars thought, the Shona people had developed effective social institutions and had evolved an elaborate religion.<sup>26</sup> They had a functional legal system, which found its expression in the *Dare* concept (*Dare* was a place for the administration of justice).<sup>27</sup> They also had an ethic.<sup>28</sup> Samkange and Ramose claim that these institutions were based on *Hunhuism/Ubuntuism*<sup>29</sup> or *Ubuntu* philosophy.<sup>30</sup> The Shona had thus evolved a complex culture of their own which was not, indeed should not have expected to be, akin to those found in Europe in order for them to be recognised.

23 *Ibid.*, 102.

24 Orature is an elusive concept. Scholars use it to refer to oral literature, but still this is controversial.

25 Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona*, 103.

26 *Ibid.*, 110-137.

27 There is considerable literature in the works for example, Gombe J. M. *The Shona Idiom* (Mercury Press, Harare, 1995); Holleman J. F. *Shona Customary Law* (Oxford University Press, 1952); Goldin B. and Gelfand M. *African Law and Custom in Rhodesia* (Juta and Co. Ltd., Cape Town, 1975); May Joan, *Zimbabwean Women in Customary and Colonial Law* (Mambo Press/Holmes McDougall, 1983); May Joan, *Changing People, Changing Laws* (Mambo Press, 1987) pointing to the fact that Africans had an elaborate legal system.

28 Look also at Shona folklore tales.

29 Stanlake Samkange and Tommie-Marrie Samkange, *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy* (Salisbury, Graham Publishing, 1980), 9.

30 Magobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu* (Harare, Mond Books, 1999), 49.

Like other societies, the Shona were interested in cosmological issues and, also like other societies, their attempts to explain how the world came about led them into religious speculation. They concluded that the world came from "*Musiki*" or "*Mwari*" (the most powerful Spiritual being who created the heavens and the earth and sustains all things) or "*Nyadenga*" (He who dwells in the Heavens). Referring to the Shona conception of God, Gelfand wrote:

According to Shona philosophy, God has no shape. He is not in the form of a human being. The Shona say that the creator is, as far as they know, a whiff 'of wind or air' who inhabits the Heavens above but who may be found also in places as the depth of the earth, in the mountains or forests. The Shona are vague about the form of the Creator.<sup>31</sup>

Gelfand's understanding of the Shona concept of God was clearly flawed, for he misunderstood the fact that, for the Shona, God was not "air" but "spirit", for, while the Shona word "*mweya*" may mean "air", when used in the context of *Mwari mweya*, it translates into 'God is a Spiritual Being'.

God's other appellation among the Shona is "*Musikavanhu*" (He who created man).<sup>32</sup> Metaphysically speaking, one can deduce that there exist in the universe three modes of being which are; the spiritual, and physical beings as well as a combination of the first two modes. The spiritual mode of being can be instantiated by *Mwari* Himself, '*Vadzimu*' (ancestral spirits) and '*Mashave*' (other spirits which are not necessarily ancestral), while the physical mode can be instantiated by '*gomo*' (mountain), '*muti*', (tree) and '*gwavava*' (a member of the lizard family). The spiritual and physical modes of being, interfuse into animate objects such as '*munhu*' (human being), '*mbongoro*' (donkey) and other sentient beings. The modes of being found in the universe relate to one another but, ultimately, spiritual beings are more powerful than the other modes of being, at least in the sense that *Mwari*, who is spirit, created all else. These modes of being are known because they present themselves to the sensory receptors and also because they reveal themselves (in the case of spiritual beings) in certain ways. Magobe Ramose (1999) has given an elaborate exposition of *Ubuntu* (*Hunhu*) philosophy; the basis of ontology and epistemology for the Bantu-speaking people of which the Shona is part. According to him, the existential condition, namely being, is one and is pivoted on *ubuntu* (*hunhu*).<sup>33</sup> *Hunhu* is the ontological, epistemological and moral fountain of African philosophy, hence he says:

31 Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona*, 111.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, 49.



the African tree of knowledge stems from *ubuntu* with which it is connected indivisibly. *Ubuntu* then is the wellspring flowing with African ontology and epistemology.<sup>34</sup>

Ramose observes that *Ubuntu/Hunhu* is a conjunction of two words *ubu-* and *-ntu*. *Ubu* signifies "being" in general before concrete manifestation into particular objects such as *howa*, *chinyanegore*, *dhumukwa*.<sup>35</sup> Thus he says:

*Ubu-* evokes the idea of being in general. It is the enfolded being before it manifests itself in the concrete form or mode of ex-istence of a particular entity. *Ubu-* as enfolded being is always oriented towards unfoldment, that is, incessant continual concrete manifestation through particular forms or modes of being. In this sense *ubu-* is always oriented towards *-ntu*.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, it must be noted that though linguistically separate, *ubu-* and *-ntu* are not metaphysically distinct — they are just two aspects of the same reality:

On the contrary, they are mutually founding in the sense that they are two aspects of being as a one-ness and an indivisible whole-ness. Accordingly *ubuntu* is the fundamental ontological and epistemological category in African thought of the Bantu-speaking people. It is the indivisible one-ness and whole-ness of ontology and epistemology. *Ubu-* as the generalized understanding of being, may be said to be distinctly ontological, whereas, *-ntu*, as the nodal point at which being assumes concrete form or a mode of being in the process of continual unfoldment, may be said to be distinctly epistemological.<sup>37</sup>

In the case of *munhu/umuntu*, the prefix *mu/umu* is like *hu-/ubu-* in the sense that *hu-/ubu-* designates general being, while *mu-/umu-* is a specific instantiation of being. *Munhu/umuntu* depicts human beings, the originator of social institutions.<sup>38</sup> He argues:

*Umuntu*, then, is the specific concrete manifestation of *umu-*: it is the movement away from generalised to concrete objects. *Umuntu* is the specific entity, which continues to conduct an enquiry into being, experience, knowledge and truth.<sup>39</sup>

Since *Hunhu/Ubuntu* is the fountain of African thought, it may therefore be invoked to explain language and conduct. '*Munhu*', as part of *hunhu* (being) is a metaphysical entity, namely, the individual human being.

34 *Ibid.*, 49.

35 *Ibid.*, 50.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, 51.

39 *Ibid.*

However, since life is a shared enterprise, *munhu vanhu*, namely, one's humanity is affirmed as one affirms the humanity of others and vice versa. According to Ramose, therefore,

Umuntu ngumuntu ngavantu (Motho ke motho ka batho). Although English language does not exhaust the meaning of this maxim or aphorism, it may nonetheless be construed to mean that to be a human being is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them. Ubuntu, understood as being human (human-ness), a humane, respectful and polite attitude towards others constitutes the core meaning of this aphorism.<sup>40</sup>

The Shona realised that life was lived in the community. Ultimately, the individual's conduct was sanctioned by the same society. It was considered to be good if it satisfied the requirements of *hunhu* and was condemned if it did not. However, as Samkange<sup>41</sup> rightly observed, the conception of *hunhu* was bound to vary "to the extent that individual groups have undergone changes not experienced by others".<sup>42</sup> In general however, conduct had to be in line with the community's conception of *hunhu hwemunhu* (the moral character befitting a cultured human being).

In the chapter where they discussed "*hunhu*", Stanlake and Tommie-Marrie Samkange provided the following telling example of this concept which I paraphrase thus; While driving in the Mhondoro village one day, [Samkange's] chevrolet got stuck in a ditch. Two youngsters from a nearby village inspanned four oxen and towed the car out. He thanked them profusely and was at the point of doing what every Westerner (white man) would have done in the circumstances — paying them. An old man came onto the scene, recognizing Samkange, he greeted him as "*tezvara*" (father-in-law) and stopped the boys from taking the payment on the grounds of "*hunhu*" — "*Nokuti hahungave hunhu ihwo hwo. Hazviite kuti nditambire chinhu kwaari iye mwana wake ndiinaye mumba*".<sup>43</sup> [Because that would not be consistent with *hunhu* philosophy. I cannot accept payment when I am living with his daughter in my house.]

Samkange argues that *munhu* in Shona and *umuntu* in Ndebele "means a person, a human being or humanness".<sup>44</sup> Samkange emphasized that the Shona and the Ndebele made a distinction between white and black, hence the statement "*Hona munhu uyo ari kufamba nemurungu*" or in iSindebele, "*Nanguyana umuntu uhamba lo mlungu*" (There is a '*munhu*' walking with the white man).<sup>45</sup> He also says:

40 *Ibid.*, 52.

41 Samkange, *Hunhuism*, 39.

42 *Ibid.*, 35-6.

43 *Ibid.*, 38.

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*, 39.

It is presumed that Bantu people — by and large, share a common conception of Hunhuism which varies only to the extent that individual groups have undergone changes not experienced by others. Thus, for instance, the code of behaviour, the attitude to other people and to life of a ruler or an induna, in a highly centralized Nguni kingdom, will be different from that of an 'Ishe' in a less centralized and less martial Shona state.<sup>46</sup>

What the Samkanges say suggests that person-hood or humanness was limited to the Bantu peoples.<sup>47</sup> This is an intriguing observation in that it seems to exclude some human beings from *vanhu* and may easily pass for an essentialist conception of identity. What is interesting however is that, without even considering foreigners, there were members of the respective communities who would deviate from the expected conduct who would attract the question: "*munhu here?*" (Is this expressive of *hunhu*)?

Furthermore, in as much as foreigners were not cultured in *hunhu*, they would never be *vanhu* in the social and moral sense of the term since they would not be socialised in *hunhu*. However, there was nothing precluding someone who might appear different from the rest of the Shona, such as *masope* (albinos), from being socialised as *munhu*. Thus, it is clear that with respect to identity the Shona were not committed to essentialism. In addition, emphasis on *hunhu/ubuntu* was socially expedient. It was an attempt at 'identity' and 'differentiation'. Those who did not display *hunhu* were considered deviants and so risked being ostracized for they posed a threat to the stability and peace within the '*nyika*' (territory). In addition, children were socialized along the lines of *hunhu* so that the values would be carried forward.

In the Shona worldview, people were looked at as different from and more dignified than other animals, hence the proverbs '*Munhu-munhu haaenzani nembwa* (A person is a person s/he cannot be compared to a dog) or *Murombo munhu*' (Even the poor is a person too).<sup>48</sup> The goal of morality was to improve '*munhu*' informed by '*hunhu*'. It was believed that this would contribute towards the grand goal of self-realization. Practically, '*munhu ane hunhu*' (a well-cultured person) was conceived as endowed with a disposition to act virtuously. He/she would exhibit "*tsika dzakanaka*" (virtuous behaviour). Shona virtues considered fundamental for community life can be put into numerous broad categories:

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Hamutyineyi, M. et al., *Tsumo-Shumo: Shona Proverbial Lore and Wisdom* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1974), 33.

'*kunzwanana*' (mutual understanding), '*kugarisana*' (peaceful co-existence), '*kuwadzana*' (fellowship), '*hushamwari*' (friendship), '*kudyidzana*' (this word captures the idea of mutual hospitality but is not reducible to it), and '*mushandirapamwe*' (co-operation). These concepts express major values, which can be broken down into minor values; the function of which was to facilitate conduct in the community.

It is interesting to note that the social and economic environment of the Shona people largely determined their conceptions of conduct and other aspects of life. This is a point noted by Bourdillon (1982) when he says: "To understand the Shona, we have to look at their past, the history from which they arose".<sup>49</sup> By analysing how the Shona people were organised politically, socially and economically, it could become clear how they developed their moral and other values. It must, however, be borne in mind that, although the material culture of a people determines, to a greater extent, the consciousness of a people,<sup>50</sup> metaphysical consciousness remains the ideal by which cultures progress. The Shona were a people sustained by a subsistence economy.<sup>51</sup> Their communitarian view of relationships, co-operation, mutual respect, and understanding was informed by this condition. Insecurity from possible foreign attacks was a driving force to their solidarity.

Gelfand thought that all was hinged on the teleology of survival, which controlled every aspect of Shona existence and behaviour.<sup>52</sup> 'Survival' means 'preservation' according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*.<sup>53</sup> While it is true that preservation of the group or sub-groups was paramount, it would be grossly incorrect to view that as instinctive, for that would undermine their rationality. There are certain concepts such as '*kununa*' (in the proverb '*kakara kasingapambari hakanuni*' (A lazy creature will not grow fat) or '*Kupfuma kunowanikwa nedikita*' (Industry is the gateway to riches) which suggests that, for the Shona, the aim of human life was to promote one's happiness or well being and the flourishing of society as a whole.

'*Kununa*' symbolizes abundance. Physical and mental health is normally promoted by the availability of adequate life-sustaining and life-enhancing resources such as food and tools as well as by stable and peaceful environments. '*Dikita*' (sweat) signifies industry. The Shona were quite aware that people had to work hard in order to improve

49 Bourdillon M. F.C., *The Shona Peoples* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1987), 3.

50 *Ibid.*

51 *Ibid.*

52 Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona*, 103.

53 *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995), 204.

themselves. They had to transform their environment through engaging themselves in the productive process. As they produced more, they changed themselves and so could afford to be happy. This clearly shows that the Shona system of values was a great deal more than just survival values. The Shona knew that people had to chart the course of their destiny, hence the sayings; '*Hupenyu mutoro*' (Life is a formidable challenge) and '*Hupenyu makwikwi*' (Life is a race).

"Life", the Shona believed, "is like a heavy load that one cannot easily carry all by oneself". This realisation necessitates the group approach to the challenges of life. Since life is like a race, individuals or groups of individuals have to face the challenge. In a bid to meet the challenges of life, the Shona discovered values worth promoting in the community. Experience was the chief educator. Elders in the village had gone through varied experiences, such as wars, famine, joy, disease and death. They also observed nature and other animals around them, hence they could capture the truths of their experiences in symbolic and figurative language in order to teach the young and the inexperienced what to expect in life. Shona proverbs, to which Gombe ascribes pedagogic and judiciary functions, were developed and utilised to express some of these views of life.<sup>54</sup>

The Shona developed meta-concepts such as '*kuenzanisa/kuenzaisa*' (justice conceived as fairness); '*kukodzera/kuringana*' (justice as desert); '*kudzorera pamavambo*' (retributive justice); a concept captured in the story of "*Mutongi gava maenzanise*", and '*kugovera*' (distributive justice); '*hunaku*' (goodness), '*kuzvibata*' (self-discipline) and '*rudo*' (love), among others. All these concepts were designed to address the various needs of society and helped to promote '*kunzwana*', '*kugarisana*', which were considered pre-conditions for peace, stability and flourishing of the whole society.

The emphasis on '*kugara kunzwana*' (mutual understanding and respect), according to Chimhundu (1980), shows that Shona conduct was guided by the need to avoid excesses. He says:

A long list of opposing pairs of proverbs, which may superficially appear to be contradictory, can be compiled. Such pairs are intended to draw us to a golden mean: The more proverbs are grouped into classes which form contradictory pairs, the more their users appear as people who put a premium on moderation. Even those proverbs that express specific sentiments but cannot be similarly paired also tend towards the golden mean. As a guide to good behaviour, the Shona proverbs point out the need for moderation.<sup>55</sup>

54 J. M. Gombe, *The Shona Idiom* (Harare, Mercury Press, 1995), 15-22.

55 Herbert Chimhundu, "Shumo, Tsumo and Socialisation", in *Zambezia*, VIII (1980), 42-43.

The Shona had a clear conception of goodness as a social value. One's conduct was considered good if it promoted the well-being of the community. The community could only be buttressed through values such as '*kunzwana*'. This appears in the proverbial saying '*kugara kunzwana*', literally translated as "Living together is impossible without mutual respect and understanding". This was true in marriage and in other personal or civic relationships. Other concepts such as '*hukama*', '*husahwira*', '*mushandirapamwe*', '*kubatana*', '*kuvimbika*', '*kunyarana*', '*kukudzana*' and '*kudyidzana*', among many others, also feature regularly in traditional literature. For the Shona, life in the '*nyika*' was inconceivable without *kunzwana*. Good relations were characterised by mutual understanding and respect. '*Kudyidzana*' (dining together) practically reflected '*kunzwana*'. In a number of folklore tales insights on Shona values can be obtained. In some cases, the animals were presented as blood relatives of others.<sup>56</sup>

In the story, '*Tsuro na Gudo*', these animals are '*sekuru nemuzukuru*' (The hare and the baboon are presented as uncle and nephew). In other cases, the relationship was one based on civic friendship. All the non-blood relationships were entered into in trust until one of the parties behaved badly. In all these stories, *hushamwari/husahwira* (genuine friendship was strengthened by '*kudyidzana*' — mutual hospitality). Extending a hand of friendship was always symbolised by sharing food, hence the proverb '*Hukama igasva hunotozadziswa nekudya*' (No relationship is complete unless the parties end up dinning together). Food is a source of life, or of the rejuvenation of strength. One way of promoting another's well-being was to provide a source of life, or a renewal of power. This is more than just goodwill. It is how the community was regenerated, strengthened and realized.

Many studies of Shona culture conceived of '*kunzwana nekudyidzana*' simply as "civic friendship and hospitality". For example, the Rhodesian Ministry of Information, Immigration and Tourism produced a pamphlet in 1969 entitled *The Man and His Ways* in which the indigenous peoples were depicted as hospitable. Another scholar who made explicit reference to hospitality was Posselt (1978) who wrote:

Hospitality has always been a shining virtue of the natives; it is readily extended to all members of a family or clan. The stranger, provided he does not belong to a hostile community, will receive shelter and food.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, the Shona welcomed visitors (relatives, friends and sometimes complete strangers), whom they fed and provided with shelter throughout

56 G. Fortune, *Ngano*, Vol. I, II, III (Harare, Mercury Press, 1980).

57 Posselt F. W. T, *Fact and Fiction* (Bulawayo, Books of Rhodesia, 1978), 111.

their stay. It was their profound belief that '*kunzwanana*' (civic friendship) would follow as a natural consequence. This does not mean, as often suggested, that they were too accommodative or over-tolerant to the extent of making themselves easily taken advantage of. '*Kudyidzana*' (mutual hospitality) did not mean that the Shona were laying themselves open to exploitation, for they strongly believed in the adage: one good turn deserves another ('*Kandiro kanoenda kunobva kamwe*'). In modern ethical theory, this is akin to the maxim 'Do unto others what you would have them do unto you'. '*Kunzwanana*', the broader concept under which '*kudyidzana*' falls, implies a mutual desire to promote each other's well-being, happiness and self-realisation. Necessarily built into it are values of mutual respect, co-operation, love, and recognition.

To be a member of a '*nyika*' meant that all others recognised the fact that no one, not even the chief, was permitted to trample on one's basic interests. '*Hundyire*' (covetousness) was a term which was used to refer to the process of using 'natural might and greed' rather than the application of the principles of 'justice' to distribute social goods and services to the self and to others. *Hundyire* was highly discouraged, hence the proverb "*Garwe haridyi chebamba, charo chinoza neronga*" (A crocodile does not raid for food, its food comes to it through the water). The '*sadunhu*' (territorial head) and even '*Ishe*' (later given the name 'paramount chief' by colonial administrators) were enjoined to respect the people they led, hence the saying '*Ishe vanhu*' or '*Nyika vanhu*' (It is the subjects that are the source of the ruler's authority). There were checks and balances on all social life in accordance with the principle of moderation. Any excesses were considered detrimental to the political community.

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to show that ethics as understood by the Shona people was hinged on '*hunhu*' (commendable character). Moral virtues were built into conduct in order to promote the success and well-being of the community and, consequently, the happiness of the citizens. Moderation was a very important value regulating conduct and was central to the understanding of '*kugarisana*' and '*kunzwanana*'. It is wrong to look at the Shona worldview as hinged on mere survival. The Shona had a copious understanding of life and *munhu* was understood as an industrious agent responsible for carving his destiny.

Finally, this article has shown that the Shona had a rich worldview, which was more complex than Western scholars either understood or appreciated. While modernity has eroded aspects of the Shona culture, much still remains intact, particularly the concept of *hunhu* still holds

and needs to be cultivated in order to enhance the Shona people's sense of identity and to contribute to the rich diversity of the world's plurality of cultures.

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