



PERCEPTION AND MANAGEMENT OF HUMAN FERTILITY: A SHONA LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

The history of the Shona people has it formally and informally that fertility is an issue of major concern to the couple, family and community. However, very little literature has been documented concerning the Shona worldview of fertility, as well as its causes and effects. Most of the knowledge and belief systems exist in oral form to the extent that, there is a temptation to exaggerate and mystify as well as misrepresent the concept and its practice. This makes it difficult for outsiders and other non-practising Shona people to appreciate the value of this real life-long African belief system, which has survived the test of time. The paper seeks to offer a philosophical insight and analysis of the perception and management of human fertility among the Shona people of Zimbabwe.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to enlighten the readers on issues pertaining to Shona peoples' cultural perception of human fertility and its management in the contemporary world. The Shona people form the largest segment of the population in Zimbabwe. They are scattered all over the country with some fusion and intermarriages with other local ethnic groups such as the Ndebele, Tonga, and Venda among others. They exist dialectically as Karanga, Manyika, Ndau, Zezuru and Korekore but generally share common beliefs, practices and attitudes on issues concerning human fertility and marriage. In the Shona world view a viable marriage must produce off springs.

It is a verity that, globalisation has affected the Shona people's cultural life in various ways and has inevitably altered people's beliefs at personal and national levels. The influence of conjugal family has transformed the family institution to be more symmetrical than it was in the past. However, the subject of child bearing in every marriage set up remains one of those key issues

among the Shona and has survived the test of time for traditional intervention strategies and practices to make up for childlessness by the concerned members remain topical today in spite of HIV/AIDS and westernization.

The general belief among the Shona people is that every person has an obligation to marry and contribute to the immediate and extended family through child bearing and rearing. Thus, Weinrich (1982) states and rightly so that:

This most basic value to beget children was instilled in all members of the society from early childhood onwards [*initiation rites*]. Nobody was allowed to shirk this duty and social pressures ensured compliance. Even today a single life is still regarded as abnormal except in the case of Catholic priests and sisters.

However, these catholic priests and nuns (celibates) encourage those who are not celibate to have children and abstain from artificial contraception since it destroys life. Thus within a Shona community, people make every effort to bear children through unofficial conjugal relations, levirate and polygamy as ways of managing marriage.

Shona Peoples' Understanding of Fertility

Generally infertility is understood as the inability of an individual or couple to bear children. However, among the Shona, this condition is today understood from two incongruous perspectives, namely the traditional (African-Shona) and technical (Western) sense. The traditional sense teaches and acknowledges that all men have the capacity to bear children; hence no man can be referred to as impotent (*ngomwa*). If a couple fails to bear children the blame is usually leveled against the woman and in superstitious societies infertility is alluded to witchcraft.

This traditional view which appears to be gender insensitive is also supported in Shrylock's (1983) definition which acknowledges the existence of infertility among humans and defines it as the inability of a woman to become pregnant which may be due to underdeveloped or undeveloped sex organs for which there is usually no cure. It may be caused by constitutional conditions or overwork nervous tension, endocrine disorders (especially ovarian), infectious tumors, cervical erosions or obstructions or structures of the oviducts.

However, the traditional beliefs confirm and affirm the autocratic and patriarchal nature of the Shona societies which deny in public the undeniable reality of man's impotence which they try to manage secretly by letting in relatives to bear him children (Gelfand 1992). This dramatisation and stage management is meant to thwart the infertile man from knowing his impotence thereby protecting cultural belief that all men are fertile. Hence the Shona people's

perception and management of male fertility is paradoxical. The technical sense acknowledges the possibility of barrenness as a condition that can affect either of the parties involved in a marriage set up. Moreover, it appears to be more objective since its claim is based on evidence arrived at empirically. For the Shona people, every marriage is supposed to be fulfilled through child bearing which is the landmark of parenthood. This is affirmed by (Bourdilion1976) who notes that, parenthood is fulfilled through childbearing and rearing, which establishes status among the Shona people. That is why a multiplicity of intervention strategies is employed to avoid the tagging of the couple and families concerned if infertility is suspected.

Children are crucial in any marriage contract among the Shona people. They are a determinant factor in one's social status, respect and honor. Children give a marriage some form of stability and dignity [*kupa mhuri chiremera nerutsigo*].

Fertility [child-bearing] among the Shona people is strongly believed to be a sign of manhood and womanhood. Thus Mbiti (1990) submits that, For Africans, marriage is the focus for existence. It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. Marriage and procreation is a unit, without procreation, marriage is incomplete. A person with no descendants in effect quenches the fire of life. Although the Shona people discourage its members from procreating without getting married, those who bear children without getting married have a better social status than those without children even if they are culturally married. So, the society attaches more value to a sexual union that is fruitful than a marriage which is unproductive.

Testing For Fertility among the Shona

Growing in a Shona society generally is not an event but an educational process that involves passing through different stages with different tutors in African culture and practice. This education cherishes the transmission of certain explicit cultural ideals (Bourdillon; 1998). Gelfand (1992) further notes that childbearing is one of the prospectus that informs aims and objectives of a successful marriage and family. Thus, to become a family person is not an abrupt exercise, but it involves some form of grilling through certain initiation rites which act as detectors of one's fertility including sex education. This is common among the Venda, Tshangani and Tonga among others. Thus, deliberate efforts are made to detect potential threats to one's marriage which are linked to fertility. A number of cultural practices, which are believed to be some of the pointers to institute one's fertility, are devised. In spite of some skepticism surrounding the verification methodologies in the contemporary world, such fertility tests among the Shona people are more common with males than females.

Masturbation is a worldwide phenomenon but in most communities other than African [Shona] it is a remedy for sexual desires, hence it acts as an itinerary to some sexual satisfaction. In the

Shona context, besides sexual satisfaction some Shona people have adopted masturbation as a litmus test for men's fertility (Bourdillon, 1998). Whenever the boys are showing signs of maturity, such as wet dreams, the male elders of the society will take the young boys to the river where they will command them to masturbate in the water / pool. It is assumed that the sperms of a potentially fertile boy will sink faster, while those of a potentially infertile will float or may take time to sink (Bourdillon, 1998). Also, the grade of one's fertility is determined by the quantity, quality and density of the sperms produced. A potentially fertile man ejaculates thicker and condensed milk- like sperms, while a potentially infertile man is believed to produce small and watery sperms. One informant indicated that among the Kore kore the sperms are taken for examination by the wife's aunt when the couple visits her for their first formal sexual episode. Traditionally the aunt is supposed to prepare the bedding and collect the bedding sheet with the man's sperms for examination. It is believed that if the sperms are thick, or have bonded the sheets or are visible by a naked eye, it is a pointer to fertility and the reverse is true. Thus, whenever there is suspicion of childlessness, concerned members of each couple ask whether they have visited the aunt. The rationale is to get the starting point that will lead them to possible cause and corrective measures to follow next. Basing on this tour, it is possible for the woman to know the condition of her spouse compared to hers within the marriage.

Another informant indicated that in some African communities like the Shona. When boys urinate, the adults make a thorough assessment of the strength of the spray of urine. It is understood that, the way one's urine sprays determines one's fertility grade. If the urine drops closer to the subject it suggests possible infertility for it points to production of weaker sperms which may fail to fertilize the ovum and spray that covers a long distance may suggest production and ejaculation of strong sperms that may be strong enough to fertilise a woman's egg.

The Spiritual World and Fertility

The Shona people's lives and world view is obsessed with belief in supernatural forces which direct and influence their course of life. The belief in cause and effect is also central to most if not all-African cultures. This is part of African culture that makes the Africans [Shona] a distinctive people from other racial groups such as Europeans. Sanford, (1975) defines causation as the capacity to make something happen, allowing or enabling something to happen or preventing something from happening. This understanding is predicated on the maxim that there is no effect without a cause and no action or reality may bring itself into existence.

African cultures appreciate the notion of causality very well just as sciences put it. Thus, Gyekye, (1997) and Gelfand, (1981) note that the notion of causality is crucial to all African forms of life. However, causes of mishaps that befall humanity in the African worldview are generally understood in terms of mystical powers.

For Gyekye (1997), even though some Shona people are aware of the purely scientific causal explanations, they do not often consider them as profound enough to offer complete satisfaction in accounting for the events of life that they feel need an explanation. This leads them to give up on the search for empirical causal explanations, even of causal relations between natural phenomena, but resort to supernatural explanations. .

For the Shona people, it may be true that some viruses cause diseases but, science may not be able to fully address the questions 'why' and 'how' a given person became a victim of infertility. It is a truism that science can tell us that the person got infected because he, for example, exposed himself to conditions that resulted in the infection. For the Shona some mystical powers are believed to be somehow responsible for any misfortunes that befall man (Kileff;1997). Thus the failure of a woman to have children can be linked to the anger of the ancestors [*vadzimu*] perhaps because the victim or members of her family may have done something contrary to their will. This is premised on the belief that the *vadzimu* are all knowing and all-powerful and are responsible for the living members' predicaments as well as fortunes (Bourdillion; 1998).

If the ancestors are exonerated, then the belief takes the dimension of witchcraft. Witches are believed to possess extraordinary and nefarious powers for destructive purposes. (Bourdillion 1998). In this case, either the woman is a witch or has been bewitched. So, she is supposed to be either divorced or sent back to her family for exorcism and rituals to cleanse her of the evil spirit that blocks her fertility, lest the husband can get another wife (Gelfand; 1992).

Thus, the Shona people's faith in agentive causality at times leads them to postulate mystical powers as causal agents to events in this world, both positive and negative. For instance, despite the scientific explanation and evidence for the presence of infertility among men, the Shona people are failing to come to terms with it publicly as they do it with women. Thus they stage manage male fertility by employing traditional intervention strategies that down play men's infertility.

Thus, traditional avenues are pursued as a panacea to this crisis and a *n'anga* may be consulted for he is regarded as a solution to this predicament and has the capacity to dialogue with the spiritual world in order to explain that which afflict those in this mundane world. Thus Bourdillion (1976 see also Lagerwerf 1992), argues that until the ultimate cause of such misfortunes is unearthed and appropriate rituals as recommended by the spirit medium (*svikiro*) are done, there remains the frightening possibility of further trouble striking. For example, the wife may fall pregnant but she may experience miscarriages until the necessary rituals are performed customarily.

The ancestors, both maternal and paternal are believed to be possible causes of infertility if they are offended by the living. For instance the non-payment of lobola may result in sterility. Some

informants pointed out that the maternal spirits are responsible for infertility, so if a man fails to pay the mother in law her dues she may evoke the spiritual powers to cause this mishap.

MENSURATION

This is a natural female condition of losing blood from the uterus monthly at puberty. Usually the menstrual periods which are associated with excruciating pains point to possible future infertility. Some informants argued that there are two types of menstrual pains namely male and female. The male one is believed to be incurable, but the female one if correctly diagnosed, poses no threat to one's fertility.

ENEMIES

Enemies can cause infertility especially among women. For instance, they can pick the ladies underwear and consult a herbalist who would temper with some evil medicine [*muti*] that causes infertility. It is believed that enemies can do this if the ancestors have opened doors for them and such enemies collaborate with the victims' close relatives. Thus, without the aid of other family members, the Shona people find it obscure to believe that witches and other enemies can cause mishaps to one's marriage because naturally, every person needs to have a family including the witches and enemies themselves.

In some cases, a jilted woman or man can consult a traditional healer or herbalist to 'fix' the partner. For example a ditched woman may take the cloth used to clean the penis after sexual intercourse or a love token to a *n'anga* or witches who may use their supernatural powers that can cause infertility. The *n'anga* can obstruct the process of fertilization (*kusunga chibereko*), a condition that can only be reversed by a more powerful *n'anga* or a herbalist or by coming to terms with the jilted person.

Naming of a Child

Among the Shona, naming children at birth has social significance in that it ensures survival of one's name and is an acknowledgement of the individual's importance within the family. Thus paternal relatives name their kith and kin's children and these names recur from generation to generation. However some parents may object to some names which are linked to relatives with a bad reputation like witchcraft and sorcery for fear of duplication of character which is evil. As a result the relative whose name was objected may be bitter to the extent that, she may appeal to the *n'angas* for assistance to ensure the girl will not bear any children until the parents submit to the demand.

The Manyika people have a common practice called {*kuturika*} which literally means hanging. Through this practice, parents may ask a herbalist to make some concoctions and hide them somewhere to allow their daughters to enjoy (umhandara) premarital sex. When they feel that

their children should get married and have children they simply ask the herbalist to hang down the concoction or *muti*. However if it happens that the herbalist dies before she unplugs the muti or forgets where she put the medicine, this may result in infertility for it would need someone more knowledgeable to reverse the condition.

Avenging Spirits and Fertility

Shona cultural practice encourages fair treatment of fellow human beings in spite of social and economic status. Hence if a family member ill-treats a worker either by not giving him his dues till he passes on, the spirit of the dead person (*ngozi*) is believed to have the capacity to cause infertility as a way of revenging. Such infertility can affect the immediate family members or later generations (Bourdillion, 1998). In the Shona tradition, there is no curse and harsh punishment in life that outweighs that of being barren. It is a bad social tag for it marks the end of one's genealogy and heritage.

Pledged Wife

Informants highlighted that the Shona people believe that the avenging spirit [*ngozi*] may be appeased by seconding a wife to the relatives of the deceased. Usually the spirit of a dead man demands a young girl as wife for compensation. If the parents pledge to fulfill the spirit's demands, and later on violate the pledge by marrying the girl to a different family, the belief is that the girl will not conceive. The *ngozi* will obstruct any conception, and this problem can only cease when the affected is sent to the family of the deceased man as a wife.

The Karanga culture values the concept of entrusting a child to the couple's maternal parents until one is a grown up. In return the parents are encouraged to offer the grandparents some token of appreciation in the form of material goods depending on affordability and availability. Failure to honor this is believed to result in infertility of the woman or her progeny as punishment for lack of gratitude since the maternal spirits are believed to be responsible for fertility. The maternal spirits can cause infertility to the woman whose mother has not been duly honored with a beast usually a heifer as *lobola* [*n'ombe youmai*]. If the woman escapes from infertility the punishment may be meted on her offspring. This beast is supposed to be dedicated to the maternal spirits, which will induce fertility. Moreover the spirit of a dead woman can inflict her children with infertility if her clothes [*matata*] are not distributed among her relatives and are left to perish on their own.

It is also believed among the Shona that unsafe abortion in adolescents and young adults is a major cause of secondary infertility. For the Manyika and Karanga people if one commits abortion one will be punished by the ancestors in the long run by being infertile since children is a gift from and belong to the *vadzimu*.

Remedies to the Problem of Fertility

Children among the Shona people are regarded as the greatest wealth, for they guarantee the continuity of the group over time and all members are encouraged to keep the chain of procreation unbroken. The absolute necessity to have children, in order to perpetuate and extend the lineage has given rise to customs designed to safeguard woman's fertility under all circumstances. Thus Weinrich (1982) acknowledges that if a woman did not fall pregnant, the engagement was dissolved. Even today, if no children are born, and even if a marriage has already been formalized with the District Commissioner or the church, it is still dissolved; or if it does survive, a man is likely to marry an additional wife as he did in the past. Hence the welfare of the individual woman is subordinated to the welfare of the wider kinship group; women must bear children or be rejected.

The same idea is shared by Aschwanden (1973) who adds that children [especially boys] are the very symbol of a person's identity. They are an essential part of a man's own being, to the degree that a man makes no distinction between himself and his sons. Thus it will be naïve in a Shona culture to talk of a stable and complete marriage, without children.

Traditional African society recognizes the role of traditional healers, herbalists, spiritualists and elders who are knowledgeable about traditional medicine in general and matters to do with the diagnosis and management of fertility. For instance, Bolaji, (1973) posits that in the West Coast of Africa, the sea goddess, Olokun, is believed to be the giver of fertility, wealth and the good things of life. The role of native doctors, herbalists, spiritualists and the new churches may be said to be that of fertility counselors and psychotherapists in Western medical interpretation. In the Shona culture, infertility is managed by relatives who are mature enough to confide secrets such as the aunts, close friends, cousins, brothers and sisters - in - law. These people are morally entitled to assist the infertile couple directly or indirectly in procreation depending on the circumstance.

METHODS OF INTERVENTION

In theory the Shona people believe and advertise that all men are fertile, but in practice they acknowledge possibility of men's infertility. This is evident in the intervention strategies used by relatives to bear children on behalf of the suspected infertile men with their wives. Bourdillion (1998) and Gelafand (1992) acknowledge the existence of a famous Shona cultural practice called *kupindira* [letting in a male relative to bear children on behalf of the infertile husband]. In rare cases some informants admitted that the man who may be suspicious of his fertility status may ask his closest friend (*sahwira*) to bear him children for a fee called *zvirigo* usually it is a goat or beast. If it is a woman who is suspected of infertility the man will be

entitled to be polygamous by getting another wife from his in laws or he may marry from another family (Bourdillion; 1998 and Gelfand; 1992)

Suspected Male Infertility

Although the Shona tradition teaches that all men are fertile, some experiments carried out point to male infertility. It is culturally a taboo to publicise man's infertility or weaknesses. Even if the woman knows about the man's weaknesses it is culturally degrading and dehumanizing for her to announce it (Bourdillion;1998). The Herald of Friday 25 November (2011) cites two cases of two men who committed suicide over failed marriages. In the first case the man was alleged to be weak in bed failing to satisfy the wife while the second case involved a man who had deserted his wife for ten months. On his return he found her with another partner but could not stomach it (The Herald Friday 25 November 2011).

Gombe (1998:77) argues that infertility in a man is considered degrading as can be noted from some Shona terms which are derogatory such as *akarasa katemo* (he lost his small axe), *ngomwa* (impotent), *dzakamwa dzikasiya mazenga* [the bees drank the honey and left the residues]. These terms and phrases are a pointer to male infertility but in a dignified manner. It will not be pointing to a particular individual in his presence for cultural reasons and socialization which has it unequivocally that all men are fertile.

The autocratic and patriarchal nature of Shona culture seeks to protect and perpetuate male chauvinism, hence it disguises man's infertility from the individual concerned. As a result, some measures are sought to ensure that the man ignorantly gets children with his wife by letting in certain male relatives such as a younger brother, a cousin or a nephew (son of the man's sister). This arrangement is done with the aid of very few, mature and respectable immediate family members such as the aunt [sister to the man or sister to the man's father] and rarely the husband's mother.

The two meet privately when there is need for a child only to minimize the chances of getting caught by third parties. If the husband and wife live in geographically detached areas intervention measures are taken to ensure that they coincide with the occasional visits of the parties. Thus the husband will no doubt his wife's pregnancy although it is generally a taboo in most African communities for a married woman to bear children with an outsider (*mutorwa*). The infertile man can hire his friend (*sahwira*) without the knowledge of his relatives to bear him children. The hired man is paid a fee called (*zvirigo*) in Shona in form of a goat, beast or sheep. Oral tradition has it that the infertile husband can sue his friend [*sahwira*] if he claims paternity or discloses the information at a later stage since he will have been paid for the service rendered.

Suspected Female Infertility

Suspected female infertility is culturally taken to be easier and lighter to handle for the condition is self evident and both families can openly discuss it. The husband's family can suggest or demand for a second wife via a middleman if he has paid up the bride price [*roora*]. Before the man asks for a seconding wife from his in laws, or looks for another wife elsewhere, he is encouraged by elders to try his manhood with other women outside marriage. At the same time his relatives will be testing their daughter in law's fertility through *kupindira* practice using the husband's close relatives. Among such relatives are the husbands' younger brothers and nephews. If the woman proves to be fertile this way then the family would rely on the method to cover up for their son.

If on numerous attempts the wife fails to conceive, only then would her husband ask for a seconding wife from her family or if he manages to have children with an outsider he can ask for a seconding wife from his in laws. The in - laws may second a younger sister to bear children for the infertile couple before the husband demands one because of *lobola* paid which must commensurate or be paid back . Thus the man may end up being polygamous in a bid to get children. This however would not mean divorce of the first wife. She remains at the homestead as a well-respected figure. Usually, her consent is asked for before the second wife comes.

MORAL IMPLICATIONS

With the HIV/AIDS pandemic there is need for a critical reflection on the ways of perceiving and managing human infertility. A cursory look at the cultural practices employed to manage infertility reveals that humanity is exposed to more dangers such as HIV/AIDS scourge which is destroying lives. There are moral challenges emanating from the practices which need a rational approach without necessarily condemning the whole system. Some precautionary measures need be considered and followed to curb especially the horrific HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 December 05 article 1 declares that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in the spirit of brotherhood. Thus it is incumbent upon the individuals and their moral communities to carefully reconsider the traditional route of hiring a nephew or donating a seconding a wife to woman and man respectively without the individuals consent and verification of the HIV/AIDS status. To unilaterally impose such cultural practices without factoring in the net effect it has upon the individuals is treat humanity merely as a means to an end, not as ends in themselves.

In most cases it is the young girls who are seconded as wives to their aunts and elder sisters. This bars them from exercising their rights and freedom to choose and determine their own

destiny. Thus the woman's autonomy and self respect is lost at such a tender age and she is forced to enter into a marriage contract without individual input. It thus becomes a marriage of convenience. It fosters the notion that marriage which does not achieve the intended purpose of (reproduction) is incomplete. In the eyes of the seconded wife the essence of marriage is childbearing and not love. This has a net effect of being abused in some cases by their spouses since they are treated as sexual objects and breeding machines of men.

All this will be done in the spirit of serving the interests of the beneficiaries of the marriage contract based on lobola. The seconding wife is made to behave according to the dictates of the culture which at times treats her as an object of the family which paid dowry. Her rights and freedom are padlocked by the patriarchal beliefs which are to some extent oppressive to women. Thus, to second a wife without her consent is to violate her rights and freedom of choice such as the freedom to choose her own life partner. In the case of a nephew or younger brother who assists his uncle and elder brother respectively in bearing children their wives' rights are also violated especially the right and freedom to have a single husband. Though it was traditionally normative today some people would view this practice to continue with the traditional practice of seconding a wife and hiring either a nephew or younger brother to assist the infertile couple as morally repugnant. This is based on the current thinking and practice of human rights at a global level. Even the rights of a man who inherits a seconding wife are violated because he does so to fulfill societal expectations not that he has love. Chances of disharmony, incompatibility and incongruence between the two parties are high since there was no courtship from the start. At times the established relationship may be difficult to terminate since we are dealing with the domain of feelings which are difficult to switch on and off as per societal expectation. This may sour relations between relatives especially if the other spouse discovers the truth.

CONCLUSION

The paper has noted the centrality attached to child bearing in most marriage set ups among the Shona as evidenced by a multiplicity of intervention strategies to make up for the suspected and confirmed infertility cases. While the concern with the question of child bearing is justified given that the future of any given community hinges upon procreation as one of the critical functions of the marriage institution, the paper advocates the need for a cautious approach to the selection and eventual implementation of some of these intervention strategies. The aforementioned intervention strategies have some social, psychological, mental, emotional and moral implications to the welfare of the concerned individuals, the family and the society at large.

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