

# The power of a mother in Shona milieu

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## Abstract

Motherhood is a concept that is shunned and criticised by Western feminists as one of the root causes of a woman's subordination, dis-empowerment, lack of freedom and independence. It is also frowned at for binding her to what are considered as insignificant feminine duties linked to, and limited to the home, with her main arena being the kitchen. Other roles associated with being a mother, such as child-bearing, breast feeding and cooking are largely criticised as closing her out of mainstream economics and hence keeping her out of positions of influence and affluence. Using the theory of African Womanism and examples from Shona cultural milieu, the paper argues that being a mother is not only a very important and admirable position in this society, but one associated and intertwined with great power, respect, reverence among others.

## Introduction

Feminist scholarship is awash with literature that deplores the status, position and responsibilities of women as mothers. The argument is that the status of being a mother condemns a woman to domestic chores that are usually associated with a low socio-economic status hence condemning her to the periphery of mainstream socio-economic and religio-political standing. The status of being a mother is excoriated for bringing to the fore, responsibilities such as child-bearing, breast-feeding, washing and cooking, all of which are seen to reduce the woman to a lower being compared to her male counterpart.

It is argued that being a mother entails that a woman bonds herself to a man and becomes subordinate to him. Initially, it means she gets married and has *lobola* paid for her, which is considered as being 'commodified' or 'thingified' as she is 'bought' like a commodity or thing. Once *lobola* has been paid for, it is believed that she becomes powerless and plays to the tune of the man who constantly reminds her that she has to cook for him, bear him children, wash for the family because he paid *lobola*. Thus being a mother is shown as wrought with weaknesses that disadvantage the woman.

Once in the home, a mother is usually believed to be confined to domestic chores, which make her invisible, atrophied, sidelined and disrespected. It is argued that her duties do not allow her to wander away from the home, and thus she is seen to lack the freedom, independence and autonomy enjoyed by the male counterpart. In this regard the home, especially the kitchen is lampooned for making the woman passive, a bread-eater and not a bread-winner whilst the man is active and adventurous. Feminists argue that motherhood shapes a woman into a docile, listening and obeying character whilst it gives the man authority and a voice of command.

This paper posits that a mother wields a lot of power in Shona milieu, disproving claims and arguments by feminists. Power in this case refers to both the authority and freedom she has, as well as the influence she has in various situations. The paper notes that the

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mother has great influence in the life time of a Shona person. It focuses on the mother's influence and authority in the Shona boyhood period, marriage negotiations, property rights and in deliberations about family issues.

### **Theoretical framework**

The paper is informed by, and rooted in the theory of Africana Womanism. Propounded by Clenora Hudson-Weems (1993, 2004), the theory has its premise that western feminists' understanding of the nature, scope and solutions to women's problems does not apply to women of African descent. She argues that feminism was conceptualised and adopted by white women, reflecting an agenda which was designed to meet their particular needs (Hudson-Weems, 1993, p. 18). On the other hand, Africana Womanism is:

*An ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in our culture, and therefore, it focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of African women (Hudson-Weems, p. 24).*

What makes Africana Womanism the ideal theory in this regard is that it is premised and rooted in African culture and world-view. It looks at women in the context of African philosophy and way of life. It presents the African woman as having a different attitude and approach to the man in her world (Hudson-Weems, 1993, p. 7). Thus it is inward-looking and self-analytical. It explores the position, image and authority of a Shona mother from the point of view of the participants of Shona culture. p'Bitek (1986, p. 37) makes a valid assertion that only participants in a culture can pass judgement on whether a practice or custom is bad. Africana Womanism thus allows for the analysis of motherhood from the point of view of Shona people's way of life and worldview; from the point of view of participants and not on-lookers. Distancing her theory from the goal of Western feminism, Hudson-Weems (1993, p. 48) writes that:

*Indeed African women have not had that sense of powerlessness that White women speak of, nor have they been silenced or rendered voiceless by their male counterparts, as is the expressed experience of White women.*

It is this fact which the current paper seeks to vindicate; that the Shona woman, the mother, does not have the sense of powerlessness as talked about by feminists, neither is her voice not listened to, or not heeded. The paper strives to show the Shona mother as a very powerful, respected and respectable being in society.

### **The mother in Shona boyhood**

#### **The Shona mother in *zviera*, taboos**

Sociology contends that children behave in ways they have been raised up to, and exude qualities they were tutored to espouse. It is often believed that Shona society teaches its children to disrespect and look down upon women in general. The indigenous people's tradition is usually castigated by feminists for the disadvantaged position and negative image of today's women. The Shona impart societal values through various oral art forms, ranging from *zvira* (riddles), *ngano* (folktales), *nziyo* (songs), as well as *zviera* (taboos). These constitute some of the moral books of the Shona people; which overtly or covertly convey the dos and don'ts of the society. Through these, Shona society mould citizens who live in line with societal dictates. They create a citizenry bound by, and appreciative of the norms and standards of life to be upheld in life. Taboos are statements that forbid certain forms of behaviour in children; which if breached trigger a reaction supposedly at the supernatural level (Tatira, 2000, p. 147). Young people are generally known to be adventurous, full of doubts and questions, and like to experiment with things. In order to curb the excessive desire to venture out, the Shona use *zviera* to prohibit certain forms of behaviour and give reasons for such prohibition (Tatira, p. 147). In *zviera*, children's

questions are anticipated and answered implicitly (Tatira, p. 147). To prohibit unwanted behaviour, the Shona make use of taboos where the mother is integral. Examples are:

*Ukagara huni iri mumoto mai vako vanozofa (If you sit on a log in a fire your mother will die)*

*Ukagara paduri mai vako vanozofa (If you sit on a mortar your mother will die)*

In the first example, Tatira (2000, p. 147) notes that the immediate concern of the elders is that the child should not burn itself. However, elders know well that the child could argue that it knows how best to sit on the log without burning itself (Tatira, p. 147). Also, in the second example, the immediate concern is about being hygienic (for Shona society stresses on hygiene, starting with the individual to the environment) and not sit on a mortar where family food is pounded. Still, the child can argue that he has just bathed or knows how to sit without making the mortar dirty. So to pre-empt such an argument, or any other, the threat is not of burning oneself or making the mortar dirty but that of losing one's mother. A mother is a very important being among the Shona and losing her is a very tragic thing in one's life. No one wants to lose their mother no matter what. The Shona have an adage '*Nherera inoguta musi wafa mai vayo*' (An orphan is only eats enough the day its mother dies). The implication is that, without a surviving mother, a child's life is doomed. The mother stands for warmth, love, security among others. Knowing the position and role she plays in one's life, the Shona use her image in curbing unwanted behaviour. Thus no child dares embark on behaviour that would make them lose an important person in their life, their mother. In this case, the mother is presented as a very powerful and influential figure whose fear of loss is strong enough to discipline children. No child further argues or questions the consequences of their unwanted behaviour.

### **Mother in boyhood games [name-calling and boxing]**

The power of a Shona mother is also seen in the games of name-calling and boxing. Young boys herding cattle usually engage in games to pass time. Some of the games include name-calling and boxing, which are quite common but whose causes and outcomes are never disclosed at home. Young boys call each other names and enjoy it quite well. They try all they can to demean and liken their opponent's stature and other bodily attributes to various flora and fauna in the environment. The game goes on and on, and a very sure way of ending the game is by making reference to one's mother or her body parts. Mkanganwi (1998, p. 10) warns that "You could taunt me in the worst possible way and get away with it, but you could never, never refer to my mother: '*Mai vako!*' [Your mother...] or whatever else about her, and be forgiven". This is very sensitive and enough provocation for a very serious fight. Thus the mere mention of one's mother in this game changes the whole complexion and everyone is prepared to die fighting for the integrity and dignity of their mother than leave it at stake. What would have started off as an enjoyable game of name-calling is immediately stalled by the mere mention of the other's mother. Here she is presented as a very sacred being that warrants no demeaning or bad word. Interestingly, this usually takes place in the forests, far away from her presence; but still her being is still held and regarded in high esteem. She thus has power and influence over her male children wherever they will be.

The other game is that of boxing. For those who enjoy watching boxing, they usually try all they can to bring young boys to a fight. They try many things such as '*Isa yanhingi*' which means 'Can you challenge so and so'. If the boy asked to challenge is younger or weaker than the one he is made to challenge, the obvious response is that he refuses to challenge him. The elder boys may even go a step further to ask one of the boys to physically challenge him, by knocking on his forehead as he would on a door. Still the other boy may refuse to engage into a fight with his opponent. The elder boys leave no stone unturned.

Ultimately they try the most provocative. They erect two mounds of soil (*mazamu*) for the boys, each resembling the breasts of their mothers (Gelfand, 1979, p. 16). One of the boys is asked to kick and destroy the breast of the other boy's mother. This act is regarded as insulting one's mother. The boy who all along was not keen to engage in the fight suddenly becomes furious that his mother has been insulted. He becomes fearless and vows to die fighting for the dignity of his mother which would have been challenged. So a very serious fight erupts.

Here, the mother is again deified, and her breast is very symbolic. Among the Shona, when a baby is hungry, it is breast-fed, thus the breast symbolises food for a child (Makaudze and Sipeyiye, n.d.). Again, when a child has tripped and fallen and is crying in pain, it is breast-fed and the pain dissipates. In this regard, the breast is symbolic of a pain-killer. In addition, when a baby is failing to catch some sleep, it cries and the mother usually uses her breast to lead the baby to a very comfortable and sound sleep (Makaudze and Sipeyiye, n.d.). Here the breast is a lullaby. Among the Shona, physical strength is normally explained in terms of the amount of milk one had in childhood. A healthy body is usually associated with a protracted period of lactation, *akayamwa mukaka akaguta*. Also, it is through breast-feeding that a mother can discern whether a child is ill or is mischievous. Thus the mother's breast is a symbol of good health, warmth, good food, mother's love, comfortable sleep and a pain killer, making the mother a very special being in one's life. Thus when the mound of soil symbolising her breast is destroyed, that is tantamount to insulting her, her being, her humanity and her integrity. It is to scorn one's source of life; thus scorning someone's very being. The thought of the importance of one's mother in their life drives the challenged boy mad at the enemy. The mother figure here emerges as a very powerful and influential being; a source of bravery, which spurs one into a battle that they originally did not envisage.

Although these young boys are spurred into a fight by the mere mention or challenge on the integrity of their mother, they themselves are told and taught never to anger, scold or beat up their mothers in their entire life. The Shona would say, '*Ukatuka kana kurova mai unotanda botso*' (If you scold or beat up your mother you will become a ritual beggar). So devastating and humiliating is the ritual of appeasing an angered spirit of one's mother to an extent that no child dares challenge or even scold their mother. If one angers their mother and does not mend up relations when she is still alive, the person is sure to face the dire consequences when she is dead. So disastrous is the effect of her angered spirit that some Shona even argue that her spirit is merciless because she is not a blood relative of her children since her totem is different from theirs.

### **The mother figure in marriage negotiations**

No marriage negotiations proceed without the mother or mother figure, showing that she is integral in this significant rite of passage. The mother who gave birth to a daughter should always grace the occasion of her daughter's marriage. So important is her presence that even if she had divorced with the girl's father, it is this custom that brings them together once more. Thus there are no marriage negotiations that can proceed without the mother of a daughter whose hand is being sought in marriage. The only instance where the biological mother may not attend is when she is late. Never-the-less, her younger or elder sister will be expected to attend, and in the event that there are no more sisters of hers alive, her brothers take her position. Thus the mother, just like the father has a very significant position and role to play at this stage in the life of a daughter.

Modern thinking believes that whilst a mother gives birth and goes through many challenges to raise a girl child, she does not in the end have any meaningful benefit especially at the marriage of the child. Some have likened the plight of the mother in

this case, to that of a fork and knife which bend from toil but never taste the food. The implication is that mothers do not get anything from the marriage of their daughters. Others even present cases where mothers do not have a say in the negotiations of their daughters' marriages. It is argued that their voice is never sought, listened to or obeyed. This has also made outsiders to Shona culture blame marriage for sidelining the wishes of women who are mothers. However, a closer look at Shona custom shows that the mother does not only have benefits, but that such negotiations are a platform where she makes her demands, which are heeded and met. The mother gets personal wealth in the form of a beast, *mombe yeumai* (Aschwanden, 1982, p. 145; Gombe, 1998, p. 106), which is always a heifer. This beast is always given to her each time a daughter of hers is married (Gombe, 1998, p. 107) and unlike those given to the father, which may be in form of money or other gadgets, hers is always given as a live beast.

Another very important thing to note in marriage negotiations is that, out of the people who present demands during a daughter's marriage, such as the father, aunt, sisters, grandmothers, it is only the mother's demands that are not negotiated. The mother's demands cannot be negotiated downwards. Whatever demands she makes are paid without question, and paid in full as well as timorously. The father's demands are usually half-met and in some cases he may die without having received all his dues from an in-law. However, with the mother, the Shona always strive to make it a point that she receives her dues in time and that by the time she dies all her demands shall have been met. If she dies without having been given her dues, catastrophic events befall the in-law's family (Gombe, 1998, p. 107).

### **Mother and property rights**

Popular belief is that a woman never had property in her own right, but that property has always belonged to the man. As Mr. Stella Sundayi, cited by Barnes and Win (1992, p. 64) observes of the colonial era:

*[A woman] was not allowed to have a bank account: your brother's name had to be written [on the bank book]. Yes!...you had to put a man's name. "Where would a woman get money from?" [they would ask]...it had to be in your father or brother's name. A man's name, not a woman's. "A woman doesn't own anything," [the relatives would say]...everything you had worked for was theirs and you were left... [with nothing].*

The colonial period demeaned the position and status of Shona women. Colonial laws forbade them from owning anything, even the smallest item like a National Identity card and the popular saying of the time was, "A woman is a donkey, she does not have even a *chitupa* (I.D card)" [Barnes and Win, 1992, p. 138]. Whilst the above applies for the colonial period, the traditional Shona milieu poses a different scenario. At face value, it may appear that the father gets a lot of wealth at the marriage of his daughter as compared to the mother, rendering the Shona custom of bride wealth to be unfair on the part of the mother. It is true that the father gets more cattle compared to the mother, usually about five or six beasts compared to the mother's one heifer. However, in Shona way of life, it is the responsibility of every father to pay *lobola* for each of his son's first wife. Thus the beasts given to the father, though they may be many, may even be passed on to another family to bring a daughter-in-law. In fact, the Shona have a custom known as *chipanda*, where each of his sons is linked up to a daughter so that the bride wealth obtained for a daughter's marriage is used to bring in a new daughter-in-law. Thus the father simply acts as an intermediary through which bride wealth passes from an in-law to bring a daughter-in-law. The only situation when a father may remain with many beasts is when he has many daughters as compared to sons because whilst daughters bring in wealth, sons sent out the same wealth. In the meantime, all the heifers given to the mother at the marriage of each

daughter, and their off-springs, should they be there, are not passed on. Gombe (1998, p.190) observes that in Shona life, married and unmarried women could have wealth that surpassed that of men. In the nascent stages of their marriage, a woman is given a cow, *gomwe* by her husband, then goats. Thereafter, as a mother, she gets *mombe dzeumai* (the special cow she receives from her son-in-law when he pays bride wealth) when her daughters get married. Commenting on a mother's wealth, Gombe (1998, p. 107) says:

*Mombe idzi nyangwe dai dzowanda sei ndedzamai, dzinotongwa namai uye dzinogara dziri dzerutivi rwekwamai. Asi mai vanogona zvavo kudzishandisa samadiro avo.*

(These cattle, even if they become very many belong to the mother, she has authority over them and they always belong to her maternal relatives' side. But she can use them as she pleases).

Thus these cattle come for, and belong to the mother. The *pfuma* from the marriage of her daughters and their off-springs are all personally hers. During her lifetime, a woman has complete control of such property (May, 1983, p. 65; Weinrich, 1982, p. 42). She can dispose of them without the consent of her husband. She can use the cattle to marry a wife for her brother's son or even to slaughter one or so, for a meal. Under no circumstances may a member of her family use this cow or its offspring, and should this have been done, the cow must be replaced as soon as possible (Weinrich, 1982, p. 42). Hudson-Weems (1993, p. 27) warns that modern Africana women should not be fooled by feminist thinking into believing that feminism fights for their economic independence, for this has always been the way of life for Africana women long before the advent of feminism. The Africana mother has economic freedom and economic rights as seen through the cattle she has and the freedom with which she can dispose them.

Also, when the Shona mother dies, these cattle are not used even by the husband. Rather they are driven to her maternal home. Again, if she dies before the *mombe yeumai* beast has been given to her by her in-law that is not the end of it. Still the in-law is expected to give the beast to the mother's elder or younger sister. Thus the mother is so powerful as to have her claims and dues honoured even after her death. Again, those who might be given the cattle after her death have to be very responsible. If they abuse the cattle or use them in ways deemed not proper, the spirit of the dead mother returns to hound the people until repercussions are met (Gombe, 1998, p. 108). Such is the power of the mother that everyone tries to please her during her lifetime and after.

She can also have wealth from her own activities like being a diviner, midwife, potter, basket weaving, known as *maoko* property (Aschwandan, 1982, pp. 187 – 204; May, 1983, p. 65). From these activities, she can barter and have such things as chickens, goats and sheep as reward or payment. Gelfand (1973, p. 31) stresses that again, such acquisitions are her personal property. He adds that she is entitled to her earnings if she is a diviner, midwife, potter or any other. The only privilege the family has is to enjoy the services of these during her lifetime. Once she is no more, these privileges also come to an end. Furusa (2006, p. 4) makes a vital observation that:

*The denial of women's rights to own property (during the colonial era) was in direct violation of the principles and practices, for example, Shona culture in which the only person who owns private property is the woman. Whatever my mother owns belongs to her. No member of the Furusa family, including her children, has right to it. We only have the privilege to share it with her while she is living. On the other hand, whatever the father owns belongs to the whole family, including our mother.*

Should the family face challenges and are loaned some of these things, like a cow or cattle, goats, chickens to extricate themselves from a crisis situation, they will have to replace them (Gombe, 1998, p. 108). If they do not they will experience difficult situations out of her anger.

In cases of divorce, a mother has the authority to take along with her all her property which include grains in her granary, animals like goats, cattle and chickens (Kabweza 1979, p. 85). This is because these things belonged to her in the first place. This is contrary to colonial thinking that all she took away with her was a single item, her *gupuro* (divorce token). It would appear that a mother was bound to suffer by being made to go away empty-handed. Thus the mother in Shona milieu is seen wielding a lot of power over wealth and property.

### **The kitchen as an empowering tool**

Every married woman has, and must have a kitchen to and for her even at a polygamous marriage regardless of the number of wives. In western circles the kitchen limits the woman's influence, authority and freedom. They argue that it condemns the woman to insignificant chores in a society and condemns her to oblivion. In Shona culture, this kitchen accords her autonomy, independence and power. She determines what has to be eaten, by who and when. She owns it together with much if not all of the property therein to an extent that if any of the gadgets in there are broken even by mistake, they have to be replaced. Some of the gadgets like cooking and stirring sticks, wooden plates may have been made for her by the husband. If he also breaks any of these accidentally, he is expected to replace them. When the mother of the house dies, no one will use that kitchen and its gadgets except one permitted by custom to do so. If any other woman not related to her takes up the kitchen and gadgets, she will experience serious problems. In this regard, the Shona mother has real spiritual power.

Makaudze and Viriri (2012, pp. 43-45) observe a lot that happens in the mother's kitchen. Serious deliberations by members about the Shona family take place in the kitchen. The child's umbilical cord is buried in the kitchen. The teaching of children at a very tender age takes places in the kitchen, with the mother and grandmother being the teachers. Marriage negotiations, which mark a very significant step in a *muShona's* life are conducted in the kitchen. The family's ancestral spirits are venerated in the kitchen, making the mother's place an important temple of Shona religion. More so, the family's food bank is the kitchen, and the undoubted manager being the mother who decides what has to be eaten, by who and when. The rest of the food except grain is stored in the kitchen, where meat is smoked, seed for the next planting kept and protected from grain borers, milk is processed and kept. The mother is at the centre of all this, making her the manager, economist, accountant of the whole family.

Unlike Euro-feminist thinking that the kitchen limits the mother's place of operation, the Shona kitchen licenses her to wander away, not only from the kitchen, but even from the home (Makaudze & Viriri, 2012, p. 44). Just like the father, she busies herself with activities meant to boost the family's food security. She is found in the forests collecting firewood, wild spinach and wild fruits as well as in the rivers doing gold panning as well as catching fish for the family dish. She is then seen pounding and grinding grain, beating floors and decorating the homestead through an assortment of soils. Her work requires a lot of strength and resilience which is not found in the Western woman (Hudson-Weems, 1993). Thus whilst in western circles women are generally considered to be weaker sexes, the Shona mother is the exact opposite. She has great power and agility. Thus the Shona mother also has, and demonstrates physical power.

Owing to these duties the Shona have an adage, *Musha mukadzi* (A home is because of a woman). The woman in reference here is the mother. The saying captures her socio-economic roles, influence and decisions which start within the house and spread out to the whole society. The adage shows that the Shona as whole do not only see, experience and enjoy the significance of motherhood, but also that they acknowledge it, adore it, praise it and consider it a heritage which has to be immortalised through a proverb. Thus much as the family is the centre of society at large, the Shona mother is the axis of the family unit (Chabata & Mashiri, 2012, p. 103). She is considered to be the engine with which the family runs and without which it cannot function; life in the family revolves around her (*ibid.*).

### **The mother and important family decisions**

Selling of cattle and disposing of other family property

Although the mother has personal wealth in the form of cattle, goats, sheep and chickens, she still has a strong voice in the other wealth that belongs to the family. This other wealth, which normally is in the hands of the father, belongs not only to the father. Instead, it belongs to every member of the family, the mother included. As such, when such wealth is being sold or disposed of, the father does not do as pleases him. Rather, he shares the news with his wife, who helps think through and also gives her opinion. Gelfand (1968, p. 42) observes that when it comes to disposing of any family property, whether it be an ox or some other possession, the wife must be consulted and the husband should obtain her consent before selling anything. He is not a free agent in the disposal or acquisition of property (Gelfand, p. 42). Such shows that the mother has a strong voice and commands respect from her husband.

### **Marrying of an additional wife**

Unlike colonialist thinking, polygamy is not the way of life for every Shona man, nor is it driven by high sexual tendencies. In a society where husbandless-ness and wifelessness are treated with contempt, and where same sex marriages are abhorred, polygamy is one of the many ways that the Shona exploit to ensure that each woman or man has a marriage partner. Owing to the many challenges associated with it, not every man is an ideal candidate for a polygamous marriage. The Shona know the socio-economic challenges confronting those in such types of marriages and their warning is '*Barika moto unopisa*' (Polygamy is a very challenging experience). The idea is to make those who opt for such a marriage do so having considered the pros and cons. As a result, not every Shona man aspires to have many wives. This becomes a prerogative of very rich men of society, who include blacksmiths, great hunters, chiefs and traditional healers. These have the economic muscle to look after polygamous families. Thus polygamy is one of the Shona ways of redistributing wealth since these rich people would pay bride wealth to all the families, in particular poor families who might have been driven by need to ask for their daughter's hand in marriage with the well-to-do man.

Even so, the mother is so powerful in the polygamous marriage set-up. A man who aspires to take an additional wife does not do as it pleases him. He has to confide in her if he intends to have another wife. He does not take her by surprise. He tells her his opinion and seeks hers on the matter. In some cases, she can actually advise her husband to take an additional wife, giving her own reasons. Gelfand (1973, p. 176) notes that, generally, if a man is to marry another wife, he will have to obtain prior approval from the *vahosi* for him to do so. Rukuni (2007, p. 56) concurs that in the past a man could only have or marry another wife, after the family agrees to the proposition; as a matter of fact, the existing wife or wives would have to sanction that decision, because after all, they would be faced with another addition to the household. Once he has confided in her, she can actually assist in convincing the targeted woman to accept his proposal. Secret marital or sexual liaisons are not at all acceptable! (Rukuni, p. 56). The same applies to other decisions to be

taken on family matters. Although the husband is the head of the family, his, according to Rukuni (2007, p. 54) is not an executive role. In fact, in an African household the man is not supposed to dictate or even take most of the decisions (Rukuni, p. 54). If a decision has to be taken, the greater part of the voice is given to the mother of the family, because she is more likely to understand the issues at home. But once a decision has been made, the father as a nominal head of the family, is expected to uphold the decision and communicate it outside the family, and is also responsible for protecting the integrity of the decision thereby maintaining the integrity of the household (Rukuni, p. 54). Summing up all the observations made above, Bourdillon (1976, p. 53) remarks that 'It is interesting to note that women have more influence in the homestead than they dare, or their menfolk care, to admit.'

### **The mother *and*, and *in* inheritance**

This is a custom where a woman who loses her husband is made to choose a husband from the surviving family members of the deceased. It is one of the Shona customs that have drawn the wrath of Western feminists for its purported oppressive nature. It is a custom where it is believed that the woman's wish and voice are never accorded an ear or respected. It is believed women are victims of a barbaric custom which condemns them to forced marriages devoid of love as shown through Chitsike's novel, *Magora Panyama* (1999). An insider's perspective of the practice shows that it is not as inhumane as it is made to appear by contemporary scholars. It is a custom borne out of very caring institutions. In a society where everyone is supposed to marry and to be married, the custom serves to address more importantly, the wishes and interests of the mother and children left behind.

Under this custom, the mother is given a platform to decide on a husband of her choice. If she does not want to be inherited by any of her former husband's relatives, she simply throws the water onto the ground (Gombe, 1998, p. 186). The people know what it means and men would clap their hands and women ululate. If she is still young, she will have made a statement that she is keen to leave the family and start afresh elsewhere. If she is old, she will have indicated her desire just to stay and be looked after by her children. Such decision is all her personal and independent choice. If she is still young and decides to leave her husbands' home, what is only expected after this is that part of the bride wealth that had been paid for her would be returned since she would be married to someone from a different family. Also, if she wants to remain in her deceased husband's family, she is still free to make a choice. She can still give the dish of water to her son or to her aunt. This means that she wants to remain within the household, but does not desire to have a man to live and sleep with her as wife (Gombe, p. 186).

In the event that she chooses someone to be a husband who would also sleep with her, the chosen man is supposed to give her a beast, known as *sendekauta*, which would allow her to agree to mate with him. In these cases, it is clear that this mother is free to make personal decisions; is independent to follow the desires of her heart as well and is powerful enough to make decisions that are listened to, obeyed and confirmed by society. Her voice and choice are final and society stands by that. Thus this mother is shown as a powerful, independent, respectable and respected human being. Even when she chooses a man, she is supposed to be honoured through being given a beast. Such is a way to show how deified she is, not a sex object as many feminists have propounded. If she has not been accorded the beast it is within the woman's power and mandate to deny him sex and he cannot report it to anyone, and should he report it, he will never win the court case.

Also, whilst contemporary belief is that inheritance is a custom where a mother is made to suffer and lose all the wealth she worked for (as shown by Chitsike in *Magora Panyama*),

this Shona custom proves otherwise. What has been noted earlier in the discussion is that a mother's wealth can be so much as to surpass that of the man. At inheritance, she does not lose what she worked for, or what belongs to her. Gelfand (1977, p. 44) correctly observes that "The widow is asked if she has any cattle of her own. If so they are left for her and the rest given to the eldest son." The fact that she is asked if she has cattle of her own implies that society knows that a mother is entitled to, and can have such wealth, disproving feminist claims about property ownership rights. Gombe further notes that even the cattle that will be handed over to the eldest son are still very much controlled by the mother. He says:

*Pfuma iya yakasiwa inenge yave kutongwa nomwana uyu achibatsirana namai vake. Nyangwe zvavo vanga vasingapiwi pfuma iyi mbune, vakadzi vanga vaine simba rokuona kuti yashandiswa nomutoo kwawo wokukwidziridza zvido zvemhuri iyi. Ndivo vanetenge vari mapata kiyi anoshanda ari mumashure memwana wavo. (Gombe, 1998, p. 190)*

The wealth left behind by the deceased will be under the jurisdiction of the son who will be assisted by his mother. Even though the wealth would not have been left directly in her hands, women (that is the mother) had great authority in making sure it was being used for the good of the family. In fact, the woman held the keys to the wealth, working behind her son.

It becomes clear that the Shona mother is a very authoritative being. She influences and directs things within the home and family in general.

### **The mother and other crises situations**

The mother's power and influence are also seen pervading crises situations. Whenever a Shona child is hurt, beaten up or injured, it cries calling out to its mother, 'Mhaiweeee!' The mother is the first port of call for any child seeking comfort or solace. Even elderly people when they face very difficult situations to which they know solutions are not easy to come by, they unwittingly call out their mothers, 'Mhaiweeeee!'

The mother's ancestral spirits are known to be very powerful and loving. However, if they are annoyed or angered, they cause untold harm to the siblings. When the Shona face a terribly serious problem, they normally have an adage 'Mudzimu wamai wadambura mbereko' which means the mother's ancestral spirits have forsaken its siblings. The Shona believe that the maternal ancestors are so powerful and extreme in meting punishment on wrongdoers than the paternal ones. This is associated with the idea that a mother has a different totem from her children and so feels no sympathy when angered. This is unlike the paternal spirits who share the same totem with their children and so are believed to be more tolerant and forgiving. This makes a Shona mother command the greatest and unparalleled respect.

### **Conclusion**

Motherhood is a concept highly criticised and crusaded against by especially feminists. They argue that being bound to a man, and having a family, with children to look after disempowers a woman. Also, they argue that motherhood condemns them to domestic and feminine duties that are at the periphery of mainstream social and economic activities of a society. In a mother, feminists see docility, a sidelined and powerless voice, loss of dignity, humanity and integrity. However, a closer look at Shona milieu shows that motherhood is intertwined with great respect, authority, independence and economic emancipation, virtues enshrined in the Africana Womanist theory propounded by Hudson-Weems. It is for this reason that Gelfand (1968, p. 43) strongly advises that "It is wrong to judge the African without spending some time with the people in their villages in order to better understand their practices and motives."

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