

## THE DEMISE OF THE SHONA FAMILY IN ZIMBABWE: A CONSEQUENCE FOR PROBLEMATIC CHILDREN IN SCHOOL

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### ABSTRACT

*The study sought to explore the impact of the traditional Shona family (mhuri) and the emerging new family structures in Zimbabwe on the educability of children growing in these emerging family structures. The study was conducted in Chitungwiza, a dormant town for Harare. The purposive sampling technique was adopted to come up with research participants. In collecting data in-depth interviews and content analysis were used. The study established that the problem of absent fatherhood and lone parenthood that come with contemporary family structures like the small house family in Zimbabwe, tend to pose problems for children's socialisation and educability. Children coming from households with minimum or no parental involvement have been observed to engage in quite a number of anti-school activities such as bullying, truancy and late coming to school. Since contemporary pedagogical theories and principles tend to emphasise the complementary roles of parents and teachers in the education of children, it therefore follows that lack of social capital and financial capital as a result of absent fatherhood and subsequent lone parenthood in contemporary families in Zimbabwe tend to compromise the educability of children growing in such contexts. The study recommends that the ideals of the traditional Shona family be continued to be revered and that there be awareness campaigns on the role of parents on the education of their children.*

**Keywords:** Mhuri, small house, pedagogical theories, absent fatherhood, lone parenthood

### INTRODUCTION

The family background tends to have tremendous bearing on the academic performance of learners. Sociologists, especially functionalists argue that the family and education as social institutions have a robust symbiotic relationship (Ritzer, 2012). However, this symbiotic relationship between the contemporary Shona family and education seems to be under threat by, cultural imperialism, acculturation and globalisation. It has been observed that the traditional structure, organisation and role of the Shona family seem to have transformed in its bid to embrace the so called modernity. Thus the demise of the Shona concept of family (*mhuri*) has culminated in the emergence of new family households (small house families, single parent families, child headed families etc.) which however seem to have created a 'cold' bond between children and their parents. It would also seem that these contemporary family structures have negated their primary responsibilities; supporting and socialising children into the accepted norms and values of society. This paper therefore argues that the demise of the Shona concept of *mhuri* has become detrimental to the well-being of learners at school. The paper starts by examining in detail literature on the nature and role of the

traditional Shona *mhuri*. In-depth interviews and Focused Group Discussions are outlined as the qualitative data collecting methods. Finally data are presented as emerging themes and the analysis is informed by Giddens' Structuration theory.

### The Concept of Shona family

Traditionally before colonialism and westernisation the Shona as a people conceived of a Shona family as *mhuri*. Arguably, this was not quite equivalent to the western conception of a family (Tatira 2010:13; Chirozva, Mubaya & Mukamuri (2012:4). Tatira goes further to say that in the traditional Shona society we do not have extended family because members who are often referred to as extended family members in the modern days are in actual fact members of the family. Thus in the traditional Shona conception of the family, there is no nuclear family, no extended family but what they have is a family. In other words when we talk of a family in Shona, we are referring to a series of families which the Western societies might call extended families (Tatira 2010:13; Zinyemba & Machingambi 2014:271 & Gwakwa 2014:354). It is interesting to note that in the traditional Shona society the kinship system was closely knit and the sense of belonging was an integral part of that system.

Tatira observed that a Shona family (*mhuri*) consists of the eldest member of the clan, his brothers, their children and their children's children. In this family organisation, the surviving eldest member of that *mhuri* becomes the head of the *mhuri* (Tatira 2010:13). It is also interesting to note that if one male member of the *mhuri* decides to marry polygynously, the new wife becomes part of the *mhuri* and receives social, emotional or even material support from the *mhuri*. The *mhuri* was therefore a close knit system of kinship that emphasises homogeneity and solidarity. It also follows that in the case of labour migrancy or death of the husband the wives continue to receive support from the *mhuri*. For the traditional Shona society, the wife belongs to the *mhuri* and not an individual (Gelfand 1977; Chavhunduka 1979:20 & Tatira 2010:13). It's no wonder that the phenomenon of single motherhood or matri-focal family was very rare in such a family set up. However I should be quick to point out that a wife in the *mhuri* received different types of support from the entire *mhuri* except for sexual gratification. This was a prerogative for the husband. The case of the *small house* phenomenon thus becomes of interest since the 'new wife' is kept a secret, isolated and detached from the entire *mhuri*. In this family organisation; a child belonged to every adult member of the family and the teaching of moral values was the responsibility of every adult member of the family or even the entire family.

At this point, what is important to note is that the Shona people conceived a *mhuri* as a big cluster of closely knit kinship and traditionally the family was premised on expansive kinship network. According to Tatira (2010:14) as well as Zinyemba and Machingambi (2014:271) there is no sense in the Shona world view, in referring to one's father's brother, cousin, father, sister or even niece as a member of the extended family because in the Shona world view such members are an integral part of the family unit. For instance Tatira (2010:14) elaborates that a grandfather cannot be seen as a member of the extended family because he holds influence and he is the foundation of the family, thus if he is removed and relegated to the extended lot, the *mhuri* becomes incomplete and ceases to function properly. It would thus follow that the concept nuclear family is useless in this milieu since the concept of a family is more elaborate. It can thus be noted that the traditional Shona conception of family is at variance with the western ideal type of a family. In this regard Gwakwa (2014) and Tatira (2010:4) reiterate that what the Shona people conceive to be family is *mhuri* which for the lack of appropriate term can be referred to as 'connected families' rather than extended. Hence these connected families make up the big family which is *mhuri*.

Each family member has a role to play in the larger family hence no need to label him or her as part of the extended family but is indeed part of the family unit with specific responsibilities to undertake (Tatira 2010:15 and Mawere & Mawere 2010:224). It should be noted that in this traditional Shona family set up, absent fatherhood had very little impact on the family because other male members in the *mhuri* played the role of the father figure providing both social fatherhood and economic fatherhood. However, it should also be noted that the advent of colonialism marked the demise of the notion of *mhuri* because of cultural imperialism imposed by the Western colonisers. On the same note Tatira (2010:15) as well as Chirozva et al (2006:20) observe that when western education was introduced to the African Shona people of Zimbabwe, the Shona culture was deliberately and systematically undermined and left out hence the Shona people were taught western culture at the expense of their culture. By implication most of the Shona norms, customs, values including marriage practices and family organisations were discouraged hence the western notions of extended and nuclear families were emphasised. It can therefore be argued that because of cultural imperialism a wife in the Shona society now belongs to the individual rather than to the entire family. Similarly children now belong to a particular family rather than the entire *mhuri* or community. Hence in cases of absent fatherhood, the so called nuclear family becomes vulnerable and exposed to social and economic challenges. Thus this study is situated in the context of modernity where there are individualistic tendencies among the Shona people making it interesting to interrogate the relationship between the contemporary Shona family and education.

### **The Impact of Globalisation on the Traditional African Family**

Globalisation has also contributed to the decline of the value and reverence placed on African traditional marital practices, family solidarity and kinship ties. According to Chirozva, et al (2006:23) globalisation has fostered new forms of migration which are detrimental to the stability of the traditional African family. Consequently international migration has weakened family ties, especially where some members (spouses) migrate to Europe, Americas and even southern African region in search of better employment opportunities. Globalisation has also seen vast amounts of information passing from one society to another either through electronic or print media(Chirozva et al 2006:24).Such information has ‘diluted’ the African traditional marital practices(including polygyny) as well as kinship ties as Africans adopted western ideals and culture. The process has resulted in what some sociologists regard as cultural imperialism. In this regard cultural imperialism has affected the social organisation of the traditional Shona family hence the study explored the impact of the contemporary Shona family background on students’ behaviour in school and their academic performance.

With the advent of the internet, the world in this cyber era has become a global village where traditional African family values sink into oblivion as African societies embrace ‘modernity’ at the expense of their cultural values (Chirozva et al 2006:25).Thus globalisation has seen Africans focusing more on economic life as opposed to social life that mediated relationships between members of family and society. In this view Chirozva et al further elaborate that while some technologies have eased problems for the traditional African family, some have obliterated the beliefs and traditions which hitherto mediated relationships between families. In concurrence Golding (1994:7) expounds that globalisation has a homogenising effect and its basic mission has been inviting traditional African families to partake of the ‘standardised’, routinised, streamlined and global consumer culture. In other words globalisation has introduced hegemonic modes of social life and organisation of western origin which reduce African traditional marital and familial systems. Thus due to globalisation typical African marriage systems (including polygyny) and kinship ties of extended family units are disintegrating and slowly eroding the glue that held the family

together. The study thus explores the contemporary Shona family as a background to learning and academic achievement of students in the school.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: GIDDENS' STRUCTURATION THEORY

According to Giddens (2009) the theory of Structuration holds that all human action is performed within the context of pre-existing social structure which is governed by a set of norms and values of a given society. However, the social structure, norms and values are not permanent and external, but are sustained and modified by human action. Thus structure and action constrain each other in an evolving way. It would thus follow that the Shona concept of *mhuri* was created by the Shona people as they interacted and was governed by norms and values of the traditional Shona society. However, the other emerging family structures like the single parent family, the *small house* family thus become an innovation (agency) by the Shona for confronting changing circumstances in the context of modernity. According to Giddens' structuration theory people create structures which in turn constrain their behaviour. Hence the emerging family structures have a bearing on the well-being of children growing in the contexts of such households. Generally sociologists agree that family background has a direct bearing on students' performance in school. Giddens' Structuration theory thus helps us to understand behaviours and challenges faced by children growing in these emerging family structures especially with reference to their schooling experience.

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach to guide the process of collecting, presenting, and analysing data on the impact of emerging family structures on pupils' behaviour and academic achievement. Qualitative research is informed by the interpretivist paradigm. As a research paradigm, interpretivism allows an in-depth exploration of the experiences, attitudes, feelings and perceptions of the research participants on a given phenomenon (Neuman 1997:67). In this regard the study adopted qualitative data collecting methods in the form of in-depth interviews and focused group discussions to explore the perceptions on the demise of the Shona family and children's well-being in school.

The study was carried in Chitungwiza a dormant town for Harare. Purposive sampling was utilised in identifying men and women in different family structures, for example, single parent families, *small house* families as well as children living in such households, and teachers teaching children from such family backgrounds. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method in which participants are selected for a specific purpose, usually because of their unique position, experience and knowledge (Baxter & Jack 2008:9 and Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2007:114). Patton (2007:181) concurs and adds that the thrust of purposive sampling is to identify information rich sites. By implication, I selected participants in the emerging family structures and teachers teaching children from such contexts because of their respective experiences.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study established that modern family structures such as nuclear family, single parent family, *small house* households and child headed households are differently structured and organised from the traditional Shona *mhuri*. The study also revealed that most modern families have both spouses working. In most cases the father is formally employed while the mother is informally engaged; selling some vegetables or some wares or even engaged in cross border trading. The gender divide line in terms of role allocation remains pervasive and conspicuous in these emerging family structures. Single parent families' structures usually constitute a mother and her dependent children. In fact, evidence from the study show

that there was not even one family where there was a father living with his dependent children. One interesting emerging family structure is the *small house* union which typically resembles a matri-focal family. Of importance to note was the fact that the so called modern families rarely interact with their extended family members.

An interview with a father in a nuclear family reveals;

*We visit our parents in the rural area at least once a year, during the Christmas festival. We stay there for three or four days. As you know these days things are difficult, you don't just travel for the sake of it. There must be a good reason for travelling. Unless there is a funeral we visit our parents once a year.*

It can therefore be argued that the current family structures like the nuclear family, single parent family and even the *small house* family tend to emphasise individualism. Individualism is an alien phenomenon borrowed from the western culture and is against the spirit of belonging entrenched in the Shona concept of *mhuri*. Such families that remain detached from the extended family tend to be inundated with a myriad of social problems including failure to socialise children into acceptable members of society. A number of sociologists have argued that the family and the school complement each other in socialising children (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008). However this study has revealed that individualistic tendencies inculcated by the so called modern families tend to have children who pose a lot of behaviour problems at school. It can also be observed that there seems to be a discontinuity in what goes on in the contemporary family and what happens in the school.

In an interview with one of the female single parent who had three children all of them in the primary school also reveals;

*I have no time with my children because I wake up at 5 am to make some orders for the vegetables to sell at the market. I am back around 7pm when we close the market. Usually I find my youngest child (six years old) already in bed.*

Such sentiments depict a cold bond between the mother and her children. The fact that there are no longer elderly family members to look after and mentor the children signify the decay of the cultural imperatives of the traditional Shona *mhuri* which once held family members together (Tatira, 2010). It also signifies attitudes of individualism which are characteristic of western families brought by cultural imperialism in the pretext of globalisation.

A follow-up with children in this family to school revealed that these children were a behaviour problem to the teachers. They were found to play truancy, engage in bullying activities, late submission of work and sometimes fail to complete their work. Homework is always half done or never done at all. An interview with one teacher who taught the grade 5 pupil from the a lone parent family revealed;

*I can describe the behaviour of this child as careless and uncultured. She comes to school late, rarely does her homework. At times she does not come to school at all. She speaks to me as if she is speaking to her friend. At grade 5 she already has boyfriends. She does not behave in expected feminine manner, but she is always fighting with boys.*

Such behaviour shows a wide gap between children who were socialised in the traditional Shona extended family and those growing up in the so called modern families. Parents are always not there to guide and assist with homework. In contrast to these modern families, the traditional family emphasised obedience and respect for adults and teachers rarely experienced behaviour problems with children at school. According to Parsons the family is the child factory where appropriate behaviour is churned out (Giddens, 2009). By implication

if children lack manners and behaviour compatible with the expectations of society, it is the family that should be blamed. In any case, the family is the agent of primary socialisation. The above sentiments reveal that the lone parent family structures constrain the behaviour of children raised in such contexts and consequently affect their behaviour and ultimately their academic performance and achievement in school. It wouldn't be surprising to realise that the child is abused at home by the mother's sexual partners. The so called modern family in this regard ceases to be a haven for children as was the case with the traditional Shona family where a child in the *mhuri* was everyone's child and the child was answerable to every elder member of the *mhuri* or even the greater community. An interview with one woman from a nuclear family also reveals:

*My day starts at 4am, when I wake up to go to the vegetable market to make some orders. I am back home at around 7 pm to 8 pm from selling vegetable at my market stall. My husband is employed and is away the whole day. Most of the time our children are on their own because we cannot afford a maid.*

Similarly, an interview with the husband in the same household reveals:

*I leave home at 6 am for work, after work I pass through the 'waterhole' for one or two drinks. So I am home at 7pm or 8 pm.*

It is quite clear that in this household, most of the time children are alone at home. There is no one to assist or supervise them on their homework. Such parents may not be aware whether their children are attending school or not. Due to the demise of the extended families such children are more likely to behave in ways that are inconsistent with the expectations of society. Such behaviours may have grave implications on children's academic performance at school.

A follow up with those children at school revealed that John (not real name) who is in grade 5 is sometimes away from school suggesting truant behaviour. However, teachers commented that his sister is well behaved and actually performs well in school. It has been revealed that John actually belongs to some anti-school gangs and is known for notorious behaviour. Teachers say communication with parents has never helped because they don't respond. It can therefore be argued that the demise of the Shona of *mhuri* has had ripple effects on the behaviour of children in general and at school in particular. The interdependence of the school and the family in terms of socialisation of children seems to have ceased as the so called modern family tends to abdicate its primary responsibilities.

The afore- mentioned scenario is even worse in *small house* or single parent households where there is almost total absence of a father figure. The single mother struggles to economically support the children. She has little time to interact and socialise her children into expected norms and values. She has no time to monitor her children's school work. Neither does she have time to check on their school attendance.

During an interview one teacher explained that:

*We keep social records and I have observed that children with single parents are a problem. They come to school late, at times they play truancy. At times the uniform is not washed and they don't bath. You can tell that no one monitors them at home. One child from such a family tends to dodge lessons and leaves school earlier than others and when you listen to them talking, the language is crude; they are not polite. This is one explanation why they normally not perform well in school.*

The above sentiments point to dysfunctional socialisation in the context of the emerging family structures. From a functionalist perspective society is a social system and when one

social system becomes dysfunctional the whole social system is affected (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). By implication, the behaviour problems experienced in the school are a consequence of dysfunctional socialisation in the context *small house* and other matri-focal family structures. According to Giddens' structuration theory human behaviour is constrained by pre-existing social structures and at the same time human action creates those social structures. In other words as social actors (human beings) become innovative and create new family structures, these new family structures become accountable for people's behaviour. Looking at what is happening in schools, it can be argued that the demise of the traditional concept of the Shona *mhuri* has contributed to behaviour problems in the school. The contemporary family structures seem to focus more on economic activities at the expense of socialising children into accepted norms and values of society.

An interview with one *small house* woman reveals:

*As I have already said the father of my children has another family, he hardly finds time to visit us. When he gets such an opportunity he only spends two to three hours with us. I am always selling some vegetables so that the family can survive. So basically children are alone most of the time.*

Absent fatherhood is a cause for concern in terms of children's behaviour and personality. In fact absent fatherhood is a recent phenomenon because in the traditional Shona society there was always a father figure in the household even if the really father was absent. In the contemporary society the *small house* parents have become so busy that they can hardly spare time for children. Just like in other single parent families children have no one to guide and assist with homework. In other words parents in contemporary families tend to abdicate their socialisation responsibilities hence teachers face challenges with such children when they go to school.

## CONCLUSION

Parents in contemporary families including small house marital relationships seem to have abdicated their primary responsibilities for socialising their children into the expectations of society. It has been seen to be one of the reasons teachers struggle with students who have behaviour problems at school. Parents in the contemporary society seem to have become too busy with economic activities to the extent that they compromise their child rearing responsibilities. Most sociologists agree that the family and the school as socialising institutions are inextricably linked. The family lays the foundation for all later socialisation in the school and beyond. If the foundation is weak and shaky children will experience insurmountable problems in school and even after school. Contemporary pedagogical theories and principles tend to emphasise the complementary roles of parents and teachers in the education of children. Thus dysfunctional socialisation in the family has grave implications on the education of children. Using evidence from this study, it can be strongly argued that the traditional Shona notion of *mhuri* was very effective in the socialisation of children because it never provided opportunities for absent fatherhood, orphanhood or even single parenthood. There were always surrogate mothers and fathers to take care of children. In doing so, the primary socialisation role of the family was never compromised. Academic performance and achievement can thus be influenced by children's family background.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study thus makes the following recommendations:

1. There is need for awareness campaigns on the roles of parents on the education of their children.

2. Open days in schools should allow teachers to engage in dialogue with parents of the students they teach.
3. There is also need for communication between teachers and parents to avoid incidences of truant behaviour by students.
4. There is need for society to resuscitate the ideals and principles of the Shona notion of *mhuri* which criticised individualism.
5. Poems, dramas and simulations should be performed during open days demonstrating the consequences of abdicating parental responsibilities to their children.

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