DEBATES

'Forward to the Past': Dilemmas of rural women's empowerment in Zimbabwe

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Introduction

A number of African philosophers have contributed various perspectives on African discourse on development (Wiredu, 1980, 2000; Masolo, 1994; Oruka, 1997; Gyekye, 1997; Karp and Masolo, 2000; Achieng-Odhiambo, 2000; Kebede, 2003) although not much philosophical consideration has been directed at the nexus between cultural revitalisation, women and development within a postcolonial context. More often that not, debate on African development in this postcolonial era has assumed the nature of the irresolvable conflict at the heart of the whole African postcolonial enterprise between modernity and tradition, otherwise put as the two schools of universalism and particularism respectively. While the particularist school argues that the rehabilitation of African tradition and its institutions is the only route to development, the universalist school on the other hand maintains that development in Africa hinges on a successful exchange of the traditional cultural institutions for the modern ones (Kebede, 2003).

The current policy by the Zimbabwean government to strengthen traditional leadership and their attendant institutions reflects a particularist position that development in Africa requires a successful restoration of traditional African cultural institutions and references together with the requisite philosophical thinking. This work, which is an attempt to look at rural women and the patriarchal hold, comes at a time when issues of gender, women's empowerment and emancipation are so topical in the country with the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development almost stealing the show during the 2006 debates in parliament and outside with its Domestic Violence Bill, which has now been enacted into law. It also comes against the backdrop of reports that traditional chiefs are instituting 'reforms' with regard to the general conduct of rural women in line with traditional cultural expectations.

This paper, therefore, constitutes an attempt to apply analytic and philosophical reasoning to the 'noble' attempt by government of engaging in what may be described paradoxically as 'marching forward to the past'. It examines whether the government, in doing so, is not, at the same time, undermining much of what it had achieved since independence in the emancipation and empowerment of rural women by once again

strengthening the patriarchal hold. The term empowerment is here used to refer to deliberate efforts by government to bring people who are outside the decision making process into participating (Rowlands: 1999) by undoing such things as negative social constructions, so that the people affected would come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and influence the course of their own life and that of the community in which they live. In the end this work also seeks to elaborate a framework likely to promote a positive process of change without falling into what Wiredu (1980) identified some time ago as pitfalls that can afflict the modern African society, namely, anachronism, authoritarianism and supernaturalism.

Theoretical framework

This work is located within the broader framework of the tradition versus modernity debate, also mirrored in the antagonism between universalism and particularism in African philosophy. The position that the recent drive in Zimbabwe to revitalise traditional leadership and their attendant institutions undermines the positive achievements made since independence in the emancipation and empowerment of the rural women by further strengthening the patriarchal hold is the focus of this analysis. The investigation considers the existential realities of the rural women and how they are affected by the revitalisation of traditional leadership institutions. The work reflects on concrete lived experiences of the rural women as they interact with their environment in their bounded locales defined in terms of belonging to this or that chief. As Gyekye (1997) noted, the attempt by Africans to develop or situate themselves most satisfactorily in the social, political and intellectual formation of the contemporary world have been beset by daunting problems, failures and frustrations. It is against this backdrop that this work seeks to draw on the analytical tools of philosophy that entail the critical and systematic examination of fundamental ideas underlying human experience and existence, to bring to light some of the unintended effects of the revitalisation of traditional leadership institutions on the life of rural women. While there may be differences here and there on the position of women in the different tribal groupings and from one chief to the other, the fact that most tribes are patriarchal allows for a treatment of Zimbabwean rural women as one group with almost similar experiences.

Discourses on Development

'Development' in all its many senses and with its complex associations with ideas about progress, modernity, and rationality, is an important theme in African philosophical literature (Karp and Masolo, 2000). As a number of postcolonial African intellectuals may bear testimony, the topic of development is so complex that it sends all those who attempt to theorise about it in various directions depending on their academic slant and in some cases political persuasion. Within this complex and sometimes confusing terrain can be identified various schools of thought, some of which are at loggerheads with each other. This work singles out one of these perspectives for discussion in this work, that is, the particularist school. The particularist school is always looked at in contradistinction to its universalist counterpart. In philosophical terms the universalist school holds that successful development in Africa depends on a complete overhaul or transformation of the old,

retrograde and traditional African worldview and its replacement with key aspects of Western modernity that have seen the transformation of the Western world into what is claimed to be a 'developed' or 'modernised' one. Hence the transformation of Africa from being traditional to becoming modern, for this school, depends on the extent to which Africa successfully imbibes Western modes of thinking and existence. In other words modernisation in Africa is seen as requiring a whole change of worldview, a complete shift of paradigm. On the other hand there are those to whom the issue of the role of indigenous values and institutions in the development of Africa remains a matter of grave concern. It is against this backdrop that there is now an increasing demand among Afrocentric scholars, development experts, and African philosophers that indigenous institutions, values, and practices should be recognised as the motor of participatory development strategies in Africa. As such there is not only a growing demand to utilise indigenous institutions, but also to rationalise and formalise them as the basis for social transformation in Africa. This position represents the particularist school of thought. The motivation is to look inward and from within the African traditional culture to find appropriate ways of transforming communities for the better without compromising on authenticity and African identity, that is, without uprooting the African from his or her humane social and existential framework.

Recent developments in Zimbabwe traceable to the so called 'fast track' land reform movement that started in the year 2000 have also witnessed a renewed focus on traditional leadership institutions and their role as the guardians of tradition and custodians of the land. Traditional leaders have been identified as important agents of development by the ZANU PF government and they have been called on to partner government in issues of development, especially in the rural areas where they have dominion. This renewed focus on traditional leaders has also seen their empowerment and revitalisation of their almost defunct roles as well as other traditional practices that had remained forgotten since independence. While there could be all sorts of hypotheses (some of them political survival) to explain this sudden valorisation of traditional chieftaincy by the government, one thing that cannot be doubted anymore is that the whole institution of traditional leadership has been rejuvenated.

This restorationist agenda fits in very well within the particularist school of thought on development which holds that the only route to true African development lies in a successful revitalisation of African traditions. True African development requires an authentic African foundation that can only be found in its unique ideas that formed the basis of life and social organization before the unfortunate encounter of the African world with European modernity. This restorationism is in part driven by the ingrained feeling among many of what it means to be postcolonial and it forms the basis for arguing for a rehabilitation of tradition and all its nostalgic paraphernalia. In order to move forward there is need to rewind the clock and establish links with familiar landmarks of yesteryear so that the journey into the future can be undertaken with a much more focused and clearly defined African purpose.

In this endeavour philosophy is assigned an important role to play. As a critico-creative enterprise philosophy has to engage itself in, among other things, creatively destroying the relic of the African colonial inheritance as a prerequisite to authentic development. It has to help the Africans fight the unfortunate tendency of submissive dependency manifesting itself in the uncritical imitation of the West. In other words

African philosophy must assist Africans find their way back to the village; it should play a major role in assisting the African successfully undertake what Mazrui (1999) paradoxically describes as 'marching forward to the past'. This is the cultural restorationist task for postcolonial African philosophy. In Zimbabwe this is the logic behind all the efforts to salvage chivanhu, that is, that whole gamut of practices, beliefs, leadership institutions, social arrangements, norms and values that characterised life in traditional indigenous societies so that it can constitute the basis for fashioning an authentic formula for development for the country.

This argument and drive for authenticity has grown even stronger today as relations between Zimbabwe and the West continue to be strained because of the land issue. The government has redirected its efforts towards a restoration of what it views as the people's pre-colonial philosophical thinking and cultural references. This they argue will enable indigenous peoples to interpret and organise the modern world from their own standpoint without always having to look up to the West to put in place a development agenda for them. This sits well with the Afrocentric argument that in order to deal with the contemporary challenges confronting the continent Africa needs to look from within her traditions and be able to place them at the centre of African development. This Afrocentric position is at the heart of the debate in this paper as it represents a whole new philosophy that the ruling ZANU PF government has adopted and has been strengthening since the year 2000.

Developments since independence

A number of eminent scholars have produced illuminating work on the plight of women in Zimbabwe since independence (Gaidzanwa 1985, Kazembe 1986, Batezat and Mwalo 1989, Tichagwa 1998, McFaden 1999, Lewis 2003, Esof 2005, to select just a few), and much more research has continued to be produced in this area. This paper is not going to spend time describing or enumerating efforts undertaken by government to uplift the status of women since independence save for highlighting only those aspects that have a bearing to this discussion. One thing that is clear from the outset is that the government was committed to changing the plight of women in Zimbabwe since independence in 1980. As noted by Batezat and Mwalo (1989), at independence women were for the first time in the history of the country officially recognised as an oppressed group and as such were the target of a conscious government policy to change their situation. The government wanted to transform the status of women so that they could assume their rightful position in society and work alongside their male counterparts in the development of the nation.

To achieve this goal a number of initiatives were undertaken that ranged from landmark legal reforms that were meant to safeguard the rights of women such as the famous Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982. Since then legal reforms have continued with the enactment of several laws, the most recent being the much publicised Domestic Violence Bill of 2006 which has now become law. The point being made is that the commitment of the government to raise the status of women has never been in question right from the beginning. As soon as it became a member of the United Nations and the now African Union the government ratified a number of regional and international instruments and protocols that had a strong bearing on the status of women in the country (Tichangwa: 1998). Over the years the government has always

had a Ministry to deal with issues of gender and women's affairs, thus demonstrating its unwavering commitment to the upliftment of women. The idea was to eliminate all customary, social, economic, and legal constraints that inhibited women's full participation in the development of their country. In its national gender policy the government spelt out one of its aims as that of ensuring that women, especially those in the rural areas, become aware of their social, economic, political and cultural rights. This in itself was recognition of the disparity between the plight of rural women and their counterparts in the urban areas. While the government appears to have made these strides, all of which are undoubtedly commendable, developments since the turn of the century raise some important issues. Connected to the fast track land reform and the emergence of serious opposition in the political landscape and further compounded by the hostile attitude of the international community towards the country, there have been new developments that may have far-reaching consequences for the empowerment of women in Zimbabwe, particularly in the rural areas.

With the adoption of its anti-imperialist, anti-Eurocentric and Afrocentric stance at both the national and international level, the government has instituted a number of reforms whose overall effects are yet to be fully documented. While the government has always been cognizant of the position of chiefs and traditional leaders, there has been a sudden surge in interest in the status of traditional authorities, including attempts to restore the power and other ceremonial functions of customary leaders. Thus over the years a number of steps have been taken to improve the status of traditional leaders judicially, materially and politically. A number of traditional leaders who were stripped of their position as chiefs during the colonial period are being restored. More and more chiefs are being installed. Besides being on the government payroll, positive discrimination is being used in giving these traditional leaders farms acquired during recent land tenure changes, vehicles, and electricity supplies at their homesteads. Through the new Ministry of Rural and Social Amenities standard homes are being constructed for the chiefs on the basis of restoring their traditional status. There is a conscious and deliberate government policy to transform chiefs, to empower them, to make them a strong arm of government and even an adjunct of the ruling ZANU PF government.

In previous years, traditional leadership functions since independence were to some extent usurped by Village Development Committees (VIDCOs) and Ward Development Committees (WADCOs). These functions are being restored to their pre-colonial owners. It is ironical that it is the same government that had no faith in the traditional leadership as champions for positive change that has suddenly reinvested its faith in them. The question that most people have asked is why this sudden interest in traditional leadership? While there is still speculation, one thing that has now become almost clear and uncontested is the ZANU PF government's own political survival. To be able to control the rural electorate in the face of serious opposition the ZANU PF government required focal persons, that is, respected individuals in society who were capable of influencing events in their communities and the only people who could assist in that endeavour were the traditional leaders because of their direct control of the rural populace. Because of the attention (both materially and politically) that the ruling ZANU PF government is giving them, most traditional leaders have unquestionably become partisan to the extent that some of them threaten their subjects

suspected of belonging to the opposition with expulsion from their areas of jurisdiction.

The renewal and rejuvenation of this traditional leadership institution also means much in terms of the power relations obtaining in the rural areas. Some the traditional leaders have become so overzealous in the exercise of their power and because this power is openly backed by the government, a number of them are coming up with various initiatives ranging from rules of governance to codes of conduct for their subjects, some of which may be in contravention of the national constitution itself. Since they have been given their powers back a number of traditional leaders have instituted several changes in the areas of dominion that they believe are reflective of what used to obtain before the transformation brought about by colonialism. As a result a number of traditional practices and belief systems are being resuscitated by these traditional leaders. Among those that come to mind are the national rain ceremonies and Chief Makoni's controversial virginity testing. While the government may surely be against some of the reforms being instituted by the traditional leaders, they go uncensored because the government seems prepared for that trade-off as long as the traditional leaders continue to play an important role in the political survival of the ruling ZANU PF government.

Meanwhile, since Zimbabwe is mostly a patriarchal society, the reforms these traditional leaders are instituting are invariably patriarchal driven and as such pro-male and without doubt anti-women. Through this revitalisation of traditional leadership institutions, government has facilitated a reawakening of the patriarchal values and customs some of which were fading with the passage of time. There is a clear resuscitation of male dominance and ultimate control of events in the rural areas that has a negative effect on women and their capacity to participate openly in the affairs of their community and to make decision for themselves.

One step forward and two steps backwards

The institution of traditional leadership under discussion encompasses village heads, headmen and chiefs together with their council of elders. By tradition most of these leaders are male. Since independence male reaction to legislation that sought to change the status of women has reflected their concern to maintain the status quo within the family and control over women's labour and sexuality (Batezat and Mwalo: 1989). Men have always wanted to keep intact institutionalised values and practices that would continue to keep women within their subordinate position, silent and disempowered. Traditional African culture played an important role in limiting women to restricted social roles and operating mainly as wives, daughters and mothers. Venturing outside these prescribed social spaces attracted criticism and scorn from both the males and other women who had remained adherents of the traditional order. Now with the restoration of traditional leadership institutions one can imagine with a fair degree of assurance the role that these traditional leaders will play, especially with the help of their predominantly male council of elders, in the subjugation of the women.

A contentious issue that has characterised the debate is whether the empowerment of women would not result in the disempowerment of men. However while in a broader sense women's empowerment is aimed at not only changing the nature and direction of

forces (such as legal and institutional) that marginalise women but also at revisiting perceptions of custom and culture which perpetuate the subordination of women and the girl child, most conservative men view it as a threat to the status quo. Research has shown that rural areas abound with such kinds of men. Many of the traditional leaders being thrust to the fore to champion the restoration of traditional cultural values, morality and custom that formed the bedrock of social organisation and life in indigenous pre-colonial societies are taking the opportunity to reassert male dominance and control.

Therefore the whole move towards cultural conservatism and traditionalism is inevitably privileging the male figures and hence strengthening the patriarchal hold. As Lewis (2003) observed, salvaging a receding past, while seen as the antidote to a host of colonial and neo-colonial ills, has its own problems. Fictions of an undiluted African culture are suddenly thrown into prominence and they are placed at the disposal of men to use as weapons for enforcing women's obedience, with the charge of 'Westernisation' being proffered for any women who may fail to conform. Women so castigated are pressurised to modify their 'untraditional' behaviour or lose respect. As society tries to re-imagine its past it reawakens those inventions about what ought to be the correct behaviour for an African woman. Often these imaginaries are embedded in the repertoire of beliefs, images and stories from their traditional past, a past constructed and being reconstructed by the dominant males. As Meena (1992) pointed out, women who are independent minded, assertive and aggressive are depicted as evil, vicious, immoral and uncultured while the more submissive, humble and dependant characters are regarded as having the ideal qualities of the African woman. It is also important to note that while several legal reforms have been instituted to challenge the status quo in order to empower women in Zimbabwe patriarchal values have not died but have continued to simmer under the surface waiting for an opportunity to re-emerge. Now with this government thrust to empower traditional leaders as custodians of culture and tradition the opportunity seems to have availed itself for the patriarchal values to reassert themselves.

At this point it may be important to highlight specific developments that have been witnessed in the country that are meant to subordinate women. That traditional leadership institutions would work to reverse other positive developments recorded so far in the empowerment of rural women comes out clearly the moment one looks at the very structure of these leadership institutions. The village head, the chief and the council of elders are predominantly male except in very exceptional circumstances. This situation places the male members of the society in a position to institute policies and recommend to women behaviour that conforms to their male expectations. Chief Makoni is a good example. The reintroduction of virginity testing for girls alone instituted by Chief Makoni in his area, while representing a moral retrieval system to combat the spread of the deadly HIV and AIDS pandemic, resonates with a gender biased approach to maintain and further reduce women to sex tools for men (Gundani: 2004). It is probably in this area that the much criticised law in Zimbabwe of the Access to Information and the Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) could be put to better use in protecting the vulnerable girl child rather than protecting corrupt government officials against exposure for their evil deeds.

While some may argue that the chief receives support from women in his community it needs to be pointed out quickly that such women must be few in numbers because, by its very arrangement, the traditional leadership institution only allows elderly women to participate in such important deliberations. However in traditional African culture those elderly women are not really women for they have been socially constructed as 'male-females' due to their menopausal status (Mugo: 2004). Furthermore due to the fact that throughout their entire life the elderly women were socialised to accept male dominance and that they are now taken as the custodians of tradition, an honour in itself, they are reluctant to question the rationale of any such practices. And after all with their lack of exposure and in most cases tired bodies they are less likely to dream of rocking the boat. The men are delighted to get them on board and work as partners in maintaining male domination.

Cases abound in rural areas of traditional leaders who have prescribed dress codes for women and not for men. In a number of rural areas women are discouraged from wearing trousers or miniskirts and in some cases they can be fined for doing so (ZBC TV Programme: Toringepi 2006). To justify the imposition of such restrictions, traditional leaders and their mostly geriatric teams often appeal to supernatural explanations whose validity can not be questioned, for example, that too much freedom for women would upset clan spirits resulting in them withholding the much needed rains as punishment. Thus to avoid such disasters women are required to put on the kind of attire that is traditionally acceptable in the eyes of men. This in some way is only a pretext for exerting control over women. In other places women who are unmarried cannot have a rural home registered in their name, but it must be in the name of their male sibling no matter how young.

While things such as these may not appear so vital, they do affect the self esteem of the rural women and stifle thinking. Furthermore strengthening traditional beliefs systems inevitably rekindles the suspicion of witchcraft and it is rural women more that anyone else who bear the brunt of the humiliation associated with this practice. Some traditional leaders have already promised to ask government to revisit the Witchcraft Suppression Act and accord them the power to handle complaints of this nature in their areas of jurisdiction. The rekindling of traditional belief systems also means that cases of giving away the girl child to appease avenging spirits could now be silently on the increase, as most rural elders in Zimbabwe still believe in that practice. The chiefs are also reintroducing a number of taboos, most of which target women of child bearing age from exploring or venturing into specific areas and participating in certain activities because they are 'not clean' as they still experience monthly periods. All these are examples of how women have once again fallen victim to the male orchestrated tools of subordination.

In some of the traditional court sessions that the writer witnessed, unless women are directly involved in the case as the accused, complainants or witnesses they are encouraged to respect their male counterparts who are regarded as more intelligent by keeping their mouths shut. In cases that involve domestic misunderstandings between men and women in the villages, women stand very little chance of obtaining a favourable ruling because of the bias and geriatric composition of the council. Women are already regarded with much suspicion in the rural areas as they are regarded as the trouble makers because are traditionally taken as rumour mongers, liars and of weak

minds and generally untrustworthy. Only elderly women are an exception. Even where a man has been required by the traditional fine system to brew free beer for the village elders and other members of the community, the practice hurts the women more than it does to the guilty husband because the wife has literally to do everything in that brewing process while the men merely offer the use of the homestead. This is unlike the civil courts where each man must suffer his own punishment.

In the past two decades encouraging strides had been made regarding the empowerment of women, even while rural men were lagging behind. A major problem that had remained was the issue of negotiating on equal terms as partners in the home on a number of issues such as pregnancy and child bearing. Informal discussion with a number of rural men revealed that while women have been allowed by their husbands to use family planning methods such as the popular pill, when the man decided to have a baby the woman was simply ordered to stop, in most cases with no negotiation. Now given the ongoing rejuvenation of the patriarchal hold being premised on 'returning to out traditions' and 'our own ways', negotiation based families are likely to be replaced in no time with a domineering male chauvinistic attitude, buttressed by the village elders who all of a sudden have become champions of a new renaissance. In all this the point being made is that signs are already there that a number of women will suffer because of this return to the source that is being championed by the traditional leaders with the blessing of government. The general philosophy among most elders is that tradition must be supported because it represents things that have always existed, and what has always existed is useful and normal and it is what defines who we are as a people. This kind of thinking inevitably strengthens the patriarchal values which have the negative effect of further subordinating rural women. One wonders whether rural women are not being sacrificed on the altar for other reasons that could be politically motivated under the pretext of preserving African cultural values.

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to demonstrate how the government programme to empower traditional leaders and their attendant institutions is in turn strengthening the patriarchal hold that it declared to be a retrogressive force at independence in 1980. The effects of these reforms have witnessed a further erosion of the status that women had acquired over the years. As the custodians of tradition the chiefs and their council of male elders are working to restore the normative status of men as was defined prior to the coming of the whites. The suspicion of the West deriving from the government's anti-imperialist rhetoric has also translated into a kind of strong cultural conservatism and restorationism with innuendos of male dominance especially in the rural areas. From these developments an important lesson one may draw is that a serious examination of traditional African traditions is at all times necessary if they are to be made viable frameworks for development. The traditional leaders who have always been wary at the waning of their power as a result of what they describe as bad influence from the West also require a reorientation to be able to distinguish appropriate values from the past against those that are outmoded to avoid the danger of rendering whole communities under their jurisdiction anachronistic.

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