

## Full Length Research Paper

# Kukumbira and the Evolution of Shona Marriage: A Case Study in Changing African Philosophies

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Accepted 11 November, 2024

This paper is a philosophical examination of African forms of marriage, particularly the customary marriage practice of *Kukumbira* (asking for a bride/woman's hand in marriage from her parents, but with her informed consent) and adopts the Shona ethnic group of Zimbabwe as a case study. It investigates the perception of the Shona people towards the customary practice of *Kukumbira*. To establish the receptivity of the traditional African marriage custom, *Kukumbira*, a study was conducted. Fifty persons (30 females and 20 males) from Masvingo and Manicaland provinces participated in the study. A questionnaire comprising closed and open items was used as a data collection tool. Data was summarized by means of frequency tables and analyzed qualitatively using evaluative descriptions. An overwhelming majority of respondents cited hefty bride wealth charges, colonial legacy and modernity as reasons for the daunting of the custom, *kukumbira*, yet they wanted the custom to continue on the grounds that it is a valuable part of their culture, respects women's human rights, stresses prohibition of pre-marital sexual conducts and that it reinforces family ties/links. However, the respondents pointed out that the custom should not be commercialized as hefty bride wealth leads to commodification of women. Those who favored abolishment of the custom and other forms of marriage where *lobola* is paid were a minority. They relegated the custom on grounds that it is at odds with gender equality that contemporary women are fighting for. They also perceived *kukumbira* and other forms of marriage where *lobola* is paid as institutions of patriarchy intended to serve males not the women concerned. This study concluded that respondents generally viewed the custom positively although they noted that it is vulnerable to be abuse by some parents who charge hefty bride wealth as well as by some husbands and in-laws who abuse the married women's rights on grounds that they bought her at a price. In view of this conclusion, it was recommended that the custom of *kukumbira* should be maintained but in such a manner that it builds affinity and social capital between families rather than creating animosity between them, and it do not expose women to abuse in marriage but respects their human rights.

**Key words:** Customary marriage practice, *Kukumbira*, Shona, relevance, *lobola*, Zimbabwe, Africa.

## INTRODUCTION

The normative marriage customs of the Shona-speaking people are characterized by the negotiation and payment of bride wealth. In Shona society, the payment of bride wealth, the main part of which is called *roora* or *lobola* for

the Shona and Ndebele<sup>1</sup> people (of Zimbabwe) respectively, is the basis of marriage and family obligations. However, despite the continuing emphasis on *lobola* payments in the ethnographic literature, studies suggest that 'deviant' types of union are becoming

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<sup>1</sup> The *SHONA* and *NDEBELE* are the two biggest tribes in Zimbabwe. The two terms can also be used to describe the standard dialects of the Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika, Ndaou and the Kalanga, and Ndebele tribes in Zimbabwe.

increasingly common, but little is known about their causes (Meekers, 1993).

This is to say there is gradual erosion of normative marriage customs in favor of more informal types of unions. This has been observed in many African societies, especially among the better educated and urban segments of the population (Meekers, 1993). Most theories attribute this decline in the prevalence of formal marriages to the gradual breakdown of the influence of the lineage and to changes in the relative status of men and women that result from socioeconomic transformations. In societies where bride wealth is high, 'there is a tendency to value premarital virginity and males (in particular fathers and brothers) have an interest in controlling the marriage patterns of women' (Obbo, 1980: 51) and consequently bride price is fairly high. High bride wealth charges have been cited by scholars such as Jean-Philippe and Frederic (2007) as contributing factors to marriage break-ups. This is the problem that many modernized societies of Africa have tried to criticize hence challenging the normative marriage customs. In general, colonialism together with globalization in Africa have been both praised on one hand and criticized on another for transforming most parts of Africa's traditions. On a negative note, the transformation of African society towards 'modernity' and the attendant socio-economic challenges colonialism imposed on African societies compelled insensitive structures of governance to hijack traditional customs and practices to serve their ulterior motives. The effects are visible in most African cultures and in social sciences where the methodological and epistemological hallmarks of the hegemonic dynamics of the African colonial era are still in place- marks that characterize and continue to shape the discourses about Africa. African traditional forms of marriage (*tsika dzokuroorana*, in Shona), is one part of the African traditional culture that has been dramatically affected under the guise of modernity. Thus, colonialism and the tide of modernization that has swept across Zimbabwe and by extension Africa are partly blamed for the daunting of the highly esteemed customary marriage practice of *kukumbira*.

The colonial governments and missionaries who are considered champions of modernity had a strong impact on the Shona, not only on their political organization and economy, but also on kinship systems, gender roles and traditional customs. Although some traditional beliefs and practices still prevail, there are many valued traditional practices that have failed to stand the test of time and others that are gravitating towards extinction like the normative marriage custom of *Kukumbira* due to the aforesaid phenomenon-modernization. The Shona tend to prioritize the modern.

The issue of *kukumbira*, however, remains controversial and warrants discussion because among the Shona like in any other African society, formal marriage is something greatly sacred and respected. In

contemporary Zimbabwe, marriage is understood as a union and bond between two people of the opposite sex. Heterosexual relations are often prized over homosexual ties for their procreative capacity that often consolidates the bond, not only between couples but also their families. More so, procreation is significant since in the Shona culture one's own being is believed to be immortalized, that is, 'the person does not only live in the present, but in the future' (Gonese, 1999: 20). The legacy bequeathed to the individual by his ancestors is continued after his/her death through procreation. The family name is perpetuated and the link between ancestors and the living is assured. Without children, therefore, the family genealogy and identity ultimately die off. In view of this, a childless marriage is considered a misfortune or a curse from the ancestors or God. This is because procreation is not only a profound function of a marital relationship but guarantees societal regeneration to ensure its continued existence.

Unsurprisingly, though some women prefer to remain single, marriage remains an important indicator of female status, and many women believe that an unsatisfactory marriage or a brief one is preferable to not being married at all (Obbo, 1980: 106). Consequently, resentments of the institution of marriage (or of male domination) frequently result not in outright rejection of married life, but rather in a postponement of marriage; for example, until the woman has completed her education or until she has accumulated a certain amount of wealth of her own. Alternatively, some women think it is better to value individualism and consumerism as ways of promoting self independence. As such, they prefer gaining social status and minimize control by parents and husbands by entering into informal forms of unions like cohabitation. These informal marriages are believed to expose both partners to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases than formal ones like *Kukumbira*.

Basing on the results obtained from both open and closed questionnaire items, this paper challenges, criticizes all forces that underplay the customary marriage practice of *kukumbira* among the Shona. The paper advances the argument by majority of the respondents that *kukumbira* custom demonstrates love and commitment of men in marriage, builds affinity and social capital rather than creating animosity between families, do not cause abuse of women in marriage but respects women's human rights. Thus, the key conclusion from the paper is that though modernity has demonized the custom of *kukumbira*, the latter should be promoted in Zimbabwe and by extension Africa on the grounds that it is a valuable part of the African culture, it strengthens family ties and promote consensual relationships based on 'free will' and transparent choice.

### **Understanding the concept of 'Kukumbira'**

*Kukumbira* is a customary marriage system where a

grown up girl marries off, with her 'informed consent' and that of her parents, a man of her own choice (Kileff and Kileff, 1970). It is a formal way of asking for a bride/woman's hand in marriage from her parents, *but with her informed consent*. In the Shona culture, *kukumbira* is the most legitimate and esteemed traditional customary marriage system. In this practice, the suitor is invited to the home of the fiancée for preliminary introduction. He becomes an authentic suitor if he agrees to marry. Thereafter the process of marriage begins. The boy's parents look for a *munyai* (intermediator) (Kileff and Kileff, 1970: 34) who is usually a neighbor and well respected old man with wisdom and knowledge of the Shona customs. Depending on the families being involved, some intermediators charge a fee for their services but others feel they perform a social service. The father of the boy (*mukuwasha*: Son-in-law) sends the intermediary to the father of the girl (*tezvara*). He does not approach the father of the girl directly. He goes through a neighbor, an aunt (*vatete*) or a grandmother of the girl (*ambuya*) who guides him to the homestead. Failure to observe this norm may result in the intermediary paying a fine (Kileff and Kileff, 1970). The intermediary explains the purpose of his visit, the intention to marry. He utters the expression, '*Ndinokumbira kubikirwa*' (I would like someone to cook for me) (Kileff and Kileff, 1970: 35). At the same time, the intermediary produces a *badza* (hoe) (nowadays money can be used instead of a hoe) and hands it over to the companion (aunt/grandmother/neighbor) who will then hand it to the father of the girl. This stands for *muromo* (literally meaning mouth) - permission to speak to the in-laws. The girl is called upon to confirm knowledge of the suitor and to seek her informed consent to enter into marriage with him before other proceedings. When this is done, the *munyai* pays a certain amount called *masunungurahomwe* (loosening the pocket) to enable him to obtain money. This was US\$0.01 in the past, and ranges from \$4 to 8 these days. The contemporary wide gap difference of *masunungurahomwe* is probably a result of mixed conceptions and the changing philosophy in marriage practices across the country. The girl who is about to be married, her sisters, aunts or friends pick up a certain amount of money. This is expected to be a reasonable amount of money. After this *munyai* pays *makandinzwanani*? (who told you about me [having a daughter]?) in which the father inquires from *munyai* how he came to know his daughter. Next, the father asks for a certain amount (*pfuma*) called *rugaba/rusambo*. In the past it was US\$0.25-0.33 but it now varies (Kileff and Kileff, 1970: 36). *Rugaba* can be paid later if the *munyai* is not financially liquid. This money covers the burden the parents underwent to bring up their daughter. It also covers the benefits the husband and his family will enjoy after marrying the girl like child bearing. The *munyai* is then asked for *danga* (head of cattle). The total number of cattle can be ten or less. Nowadays, some people

convert cattle to cash payment, but some cattle are compulsory. The father (of the girl) gets his own *mhindura* (bull) which is dedicated to the paternal spirits. The mother gets her most highly regarded and valued beast (*mombe youmai*). The beast is dedicated to the maternal spirits. After all this is done, the girl would be accompanied by her aunts/ elder sisters to the house of the boy. It should be noted that unlike in other forms of marriage, in the customary practice of *kukumbira*, all these procedures are expected to be done before the girl and the boy experience any sexual conduct with each other. Though the boy's virginity is not tested upon marriage, both are expected to be virgins and the woman's virginity is tested by her aunts. If the girl passes the test, she is showered with gifts from both families.

### Marital unions among the Shona

It should be noted that in the Shona culture as in some other African traditional cultures, there are many traditional customary marriage practices each with a sequence of rituals, negotiations and transactions that differ from group to group but, by and large, similarly conceive marriage as a binding union and commitment of co-existence between two people of the opposite sex. The marriage relationship is underpinned by procreation, love and companionship. The important aspect of this love and companionship is sexual conduct.

At least, four main types of marital unions can be identified in Zimbabwe: Traditional customary marriage, religious marriage, civil marriage and mutual consent union/cohabitation. All marriage systems under traditional customary marriage are anchored on the payment of *lobola* (bride wealth) by the bridegroom's family to the bride's family. Traditionally, the Shona considered *lobola* as a noble custom that functioned as a safeguard against marital dissolution because it generally needs to be repaid upon divorce (Bere-Chikara in Meekers, 1993). The payment of *lobola* also gave man custody of the children resulting from the union-rights to genetical inheritance (Goody, 1973). Normally, a woman's father would not allow her to take up residence with her partner until these bride wealth payments had started (Bourdillon, 1998: 315). A system based on bride wealth payment implies that the family groups have a vested interest in the marriage and that their influence over the married couple is considerable (Meekers, 1993). Thus, normally formal marriage necessitates the consent of both families and is a process that involves a series of procedures that can go for months if not years.

Traditional customary practice is the traditional Shona form of marriage commonly practiced by other ethnic groups across the country and the continent. Under the traditional form of marriage, there are also sub- marriage systems. *Kukumbira* is one of these marriage systems, yet the most highly regarded form of marriage among

**Table 1.** Details of the people who participated in the study.

Occupation	Gender	
	Male	Female
Teacher	2	4
With and without primary education	3	5
Health worker	2	4
Soldier	2	1
Police	3	3
Farmers and Agritex officers	3	4
Unemployed	2	3
Journalist	1	1
Students in tertiary education	2	5

the Shona and other ethnic groups across the country.

## METHODS

The study involved a selected sample of 50 people (30 female and 20 male) from the provinces of Masvingo and Manicaland (both rural and urban areas) in Zimbabwe. The people participated in the study were from different societal classes, ranging from the educated to the uneducated and the working to the non-working class. They range from the ages of 16 to 40 years. This age group was considered appropriate for the study given that most of the marriages in Zimbabwe occur between the aforesaid ranges. More women than men were sampled for the mere reason that it is generally believed women are normally less represented or misrepresented in social science researches. Though the researchers were mindful that it was necessary to provide population data for the two provinces, which according to United Nations, 2002 estimates were 1.3 and 1.6 million for Masvingo and Manicaland, respectively, and they were cognizant of the high levels of migration of Zimbabweans over the recent years owing to its political atmosphere. For this reason, the researchers opted to work only with the aforementioned sample figures and not go beyond calculating the percentage of the respondents as compared to the total population of the areas where research was carried out. Since the respondents were from different societal classes, the researchers hoped for a balanced research result that could be representative of the Shona culture. The researchers administered questionnaires with both open and closed items (open questionnaire and closed questionnaire) to the participants in the different areas they were found. The open questionnaire was used as it enables the respondent to reply as s/he likes and does not confine the latter to a single alternative (Behr, 1988). In fact, it evokes a fuller and richer response as it goes beyond statistical data into hidden motivations that lie behind attitudes, interests, preferences and decisions. Open questionnaire possibly probes deeper than the closed questionnaire. On the other hand, the closed form of questionnaire was used because it facilitates answering and makes it easier for the researcher to code and classify responses especially in this case where a large number of questionnaires were to be dealt with. Both questionnaires were used because in practice, a good questionnaire should contain both open and closed forms of questions so that responses from the two forms can be checked and compared (Behr, 1988). The participants responded to questionnaire items individually and participation was voluntary. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. They were asked not to write their names or any

identifying information on the questionnaire. The researchers collected the questionnaires immediately after they were completed by respondents. Collected data were tabulated to show frequencies before being subjected to evaluative analysis. The Tables 1 and 2, respectively contain details of the people who participated in the study and the data that was gathered during the study:

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Discussion based on results from closed questionnaire items

The research results in Table 1 show both positive and negative perceptions of *kukumbira* customary practice. There were mixed feelings with regard to whether *kukumbira* makes a husband socially superior to her wife and with regard to whether *kukumbira* promotes gender inequality. On whether *kukumbira* customary practice should be abolished, an overwhelming majority (43 out of 50) of respondents disagreed, thus showing support for the continued existence of the customary practice. This finding concurs with results from Getecha and Chipika's (1995) survey in which 97% of Zimbabwean women interviewed on *lobola* indicated that *lobola* should not be abolished. It also relates to studies conducted among university students by Burn (2005) from the neighboring country, South Africa, where similar findings were reported. In Burn's (2005) studies, most students perceived *lobola* as a valuable and indispensable part of African culture that should be continued and carried on to posterity. It however disagrees with the minority's view of the custom and a study by Nicola (2001) who argued for the (re)negotiation of *lobola* in Southern Africa though part and parcel of our culture. Yet drawing on Burn (2005) and Getecha and Chipika's (1995) studies and of course the present study, it is clear that *Kukumbira* like *lobola* in general is enduring not only among the countryside population, but the urbanized and educated populace. This second May's (1993) view that marriage customs where *lobola* is paid are a few of the most enduring part of the African culture.

**Table 2.** Responses to closed questionnaire items.

Item	Response		
	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Uncertain
Kukumbira degrades women's dignity	7	43	0
Kukumbira shows women are tradable property	6	43	1
Kukumbira shows man values his wife	40	6	4
Kukumbira helps keeping divorce rates low	38	9	3
Kukumbira strengthens bride and bridegroom family ties	40	6	4
Kukumbira shows the man is committed to marriage	45	0	5
Kukumbira promotes gender inequality	15	30	5
Kukumbira makes husband superior to his wife	26	20	4
Kukumbira reduces rate of unwanted pregnancies	40	7	3
Kukumbira contributes to women's oppression	10	35	5
Kukumbira reduces family poverty	38	7	5
Kukumbira should be abolished though it is part of our culture	6	43	1
Kukumbira is a gesture of respect and gratitude to the wife and her parents	45	4	1
Abolition of kukumbira would aggravates abuse and violation of women's human rights	46	4	0

Support for tradition and culture showed by a majority of respondents participated in this study, most of whom were women, contradicts findings from a study carried out in the United States of America by Eshelman (Chalfant and LaBeff, 1988) which revealed that education and modernity make people, especially women, less tradition bound. The results seem to suggest that both urban and rural Africans as well as the working and non-working class, though in varying degrees, support tradition and consider tradition, as represented by *kukumbira* customary practice, to be sacred.

It should be argued, however, that though the majority of respondents generally viewed the custom positively, they pointed out that it is prone to abuse by some parents who overcharge *lobola* as well as by some husbands and in-laws who abuse the married women's rights on grounds that they bought her at a price. This finding is in keeping with Jean-Philippe and Frederic's (2007) research results data collected in the Senegal River valley. Basing on their data, the duo argues that bride price should be set at levels lower than those justified by the bride's relative scarcity in the marriage market. For Platteau and Gaspart, this has the advantages of: (1) Guaranteeing the married woman's happiness in the marriage and, (2) It reduces the probability of break-up of her marriage. In this light, we philosophize that the custom of *kukumbira* should be maintained in such a manner that: (1) Heft bride wealth is not charged by the bride's family; (2) It builds affinity and social capital between families rather than creating animosity between them; (3) Do not expose women in marriage to abuse but respects women's human rights and, (4) Stresses prohibition of pre-marital

sex - sexual relations that may result in unwanted pregnancies and contraction of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

#### ***Possible causes of the loss of respect for Kukumbira custom: Colonial legacy and modernity?***

Questions surrounding colonialism and modernity and their meanings weigh heavily on students and scholars who study Africa (Geschiere et al., 2009). This is because becoming modern carries a lot of different meanings and puts concepts of culture and tradition into uneasy use. Thus when dealing with questions to do with modernity and tradition, serious lingering questions arise: 'How can we discuss modernity without lapsing into a Western-dominated view of history? How do we avoid losing sight of the diversity of local forms? How and why it is that modernity has such a powerful impact on African lives?' (Geschiere et al., 2009). This paper using results obtained from both open and closed questionnaire items makes an attempt to provide a new perspective on how a better future might be implemented in Zimbabwe when it comes to issues to do with modernity and valued traditions like *kukumbira*.

Modernity has been differently defined. Hooker (1996) defines modernity as the sense or the idea that the present is discontinuous with the past, which through a process of social and cultural change (either through improvement, that is, progress, or through decline) life in the present is fundamentally different from life in the past. This sense or idea as a world view contrasts with tradition which is simply 'the sense that the present is continuous with the past, that the present in some way repeats the

forms, behavior, and events of the past' (Hooker, 1996). Hooker's understanding of modernity seem to correspond with some of the contemporary Shonas who think customary practices such as *kukumbira* are now valueless and a thing of the past. Consequently, there is resentment of the traditional subordination of women to their husbands in the modern Shona society especially among some learned and urbanized women. This is often cited as another reason for the decline in bride wealth marriages. In traditional bride wealth marriages, husbands have authority; husbands expect their wives to be obedient, and they tend to make claims on their wives' labor and income (Obbo, 1980; Bledsoe 1990). In an attempt to avoid such conflicts a growing group of women now try to escape male control by steering clear from bride wealth marriages (Bledsoe, 1980; MacGaffey, 1988: 172; Obbo, 1980: 44, 153; Oppong, 1980; Stichter and Parpart, 1988; Goody, 1990: 131). It is worth noting that this option of avoiding formal marriage is only open to those women who have sufficient resources outside of marriage such as professionals, better educated, urban, and wealthy women. Rather than contracting a formal marriage, these women prefer unmarried cohabitation or prefer to have lovers who do not live permanently with them because this allows them to maintain their liberty.

It was however revealed by results from both open and closed questionnaire items that while liberty has recently been acknowledged as a necessity to humankind-both man and women, single parenthood always have negative impacts on their children who grow up calling father to all the boyfriends the mother brings home. As one respondent puts it: 'The misconceptions of freedom by some members of our society in the recent past have resulted in the loss of respect for culture and marriage and, as matter of consequence breaks-ups of many families over the years. This has in turn negatively affected the psychology and behavior of children who grow up with single parents instead of both'.

More so, the open questionnaire item revealed that single parents are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and other such sexually transmitted diseases as compared to those in formal marriage. The reasons given by majority of the respondents were: (1) The chances of single parents having more than one lover are higher than those in formal marriages. As a matter of consequence, the former have a higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS than the latter and, (2) Since it is mostly the single parents who have more than one lover, their chances of spreading the disease among themselves are high. This is not to say the respondents were not aware of the fact that even those in formal marriages can contract and spread the disease. The former emphasized the rate at which this occurs among single parents as compared to the rate in those in formal marriages. In the light of these results, we therefore argue that by denying the future generations the opportunity to test the goodness of the customary practice of *kukumbira* on grounds that it

involves payment of *lobola*, the current generation is jeopardizing the rights of the future generations in the name of social survival and 'cultural freedom'.

It is also the 'cultural freedom' that colonialism and modernity have brought to Africa which results in the tension between modernity and tradition and the so-called crisis of modernity. The latter is the view that modernity is problematic as it replaces traditional ways of life with uncontrollable change and unmanageable alternatives (Smith, 2009). The crisis itself is merely a reflection of the fact that the present is a transitional point not focused on a clear goal in the future but simply changing through forces outside our control. We experience modernity as a proliferation of alternatives either in regard to lifestyle or historical possibilities; future directed behavior (as opposed to tradition) tends to accelerate the proliferation of alternatives. Traditional cultures see themselves as repeating a finite number of alternatives in the present; in modern cultures, the future opens up a vast field of historical and lifestyle choices. This proliferation of alternatives is a source of great anxiety and often results in cultural attempts to restrict alternatives in the face of this anxiety. Laying blame and expressing anxiety on modernity, majority of the respondents (43 out 50) affirmed Meekers' (1993) observation that the gradual erosion of traditional marriage customs (like *kukumbira*) in many African societies especially among the better educated and urban segment of the population has been a result of the impact of modernity, particularly the unbridled freedom which it embraces. The respondents elaborated that this kind of freedom has made it easier for the contemporary generation to reject their valued traditional customs and create their own sub-culture of values and norms that distorts Africans' identity. Gyekye (1997) shares the same line of thinking. He offers a philosophical interpretation and critical analysis of the African cultural experience in modern times, and notes that in their attempt to evolve ways of life appropriate to our modern world culture; African people face a number of unique societal challenges, some stemming from the values and practices of their traditional cultures, others representing the legacy of European colonialism. Gyekye considers the crumbling of traditional moral standards in the wake of rapid social change. Throughout, Gyekye challenges the notion that modernity for Africa must be equated with Western values and institutions, arguing instead that 'modernity must be forged creatively within the furnace of Africa's many-sided cultural experience' (Gyekye, 1997). Thus Meekers and Gyekye correctly second the Shona traditional perception that modernity or rather cultural assimilation has impacted negatively on Africa as it has weakened family bonds among Africans, and has challenged the shackles of some highly valued traditional customary practices like *kukumbira*.

Besides modernity, it was revealed by results from both open and closed questionnaire items that the daunting of

*Kukumbira* has been exacerbated by hefty bride wealth charges, especially in a country like Zimbabwe where economic and political turmoil since the mid 1990s have resulted in high rates of unemployment and acute poverty. The contemporary generation can no longer afford the demands of the customary practice of *kukumbira* as Zimbabwe seems to be inescapably swept up in a downward spiral of socio-economic and political vortex which has extended its tendrils into all facets of life. Alongside poverty and high unemployment rate, frequenting droughts that have rendered more than half of the Zimbabwean population poor and haunted by starvation is also to blame. In some regions, particularly the rural areas, youths have limited access to formal employment leading them to end up engaging in immoral activities such as prostitution and informal marriages that are less demanding, thereby leaving the highly esteemed *kukumbira* custom daunting to banishment.

More importantly, the study has shown that the controversial nature of *lobola* which is part of the *kukumbira* custom has also contributed to the daunting of *kukumbira* among the contemporary generation. The minority, who were against the custom of *kukumbira*, argued that the custom is a facilitator of the oppression and abuse of women in marriages. They perceived it as a dehumanizing practice that equates women to tradable property. This perception concurs with Wagner's (1999) assertion that in countries where bride wealth is still common, women are seen as property owned by their husbands. The perception is also consistent with Kambarami's (2006) argument that *lobola*, which is part of the *kukumbira* custom breeds inequality and widens the social power gap between men and women thereby placing women in a subordinate position. The payment of *lobola* was viewed as being at odds with the current wave of feminism and calls for gender equity. Some respondents (6 out of 50) noted that while it is a reality that contemporary women are fighting for a voice, they are hacked down by the custom of *lobola* which relegates them to a secondary social position in relation to men.

It should be emphasized at this juncture however that, though the study revealed that some respondents (6 out of 50) were advocating for the abolition of *kukumbira* on arguments based on modern human right discussions, majority (46 out of 50) support the custom. It is therefore the contention of this paper that all the factors discussed in the preceding paragraphs are not guarantee for the Shona people to shun the highly regarded custom of *kukumbira*. Our conception of modernity identifies with Gyekye (1997) who contends that modernity must be made to squarely fit into the African traditions and customs not to despise African values. Thus, while we support that people must be willing to prune or cut out from society those 'decayed values and customs' (like *musengabere-stealing a girl to marry*; *kuzvarira- selling a daughter into marriage*; *kutizisa- eloping a girl/young woman*; and *kubika mapoto-cohabitation*) which though

sanctioned by tradition, have outlived their usefulness and should be revised or rather substituted by more progressive ones, there are others which do not need to be substituted but carried into the future. *Kukumbira* is one such custom as it brings more goods than harm to society.

The last part of this paper discusses in some detail the relevance of the *kukumbira* custom among the Shona and by extension Africa.

### **The relevance of *Kukumbira* customary practice revisited**

Traditionally, *kukumbira* is the most demanding yet the most prestigious and highly esteemed of all customary practices among the Shona people of Zimbabwe. This has been so because of its highly regarded rituals, transactions and most importantly the call for total commitment in the union. This concurs with Obbo's view that in societies where bride wealth is high, 'there is a tendency to value premarital virginity and males (in particular fathers and brothers) have an interest in controlling the marriage patterns of women' (Obbo, 1980: 51). It is in view of this, among other reasons that though *kukumbira* custom is fast losing respect and fame; it continues to be relevant today in many African societies and the Shona in particular. In this study, respondents advanced a number of reasons why *kukumbira* should not be abolished. One of the reasons that were given is that *kukumbira* is our African tradition, a part of our culture, our cultural heritage and most importantly our identity as Africans. Its abolition would therefore imply a threat to African identity. Other reasons for the continued relevance of *kukumbira* are discussed in some detail subsequently.

### ***Kukumbira* promotes women's human rights**

Results from open questionnaire items indicated that *kukumbira* is esteemed for its respect of human rights especially the women's human rights. As said earlier in this paper, the woman to be married enters into marriage out of her own informed consent. This supports the 1948 General Assembly of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which is part of the International Bill of Human Rights which pronounces all rights entitled to any person by virtue of him being a human being. According to the UDHR, human rights are violated when, a certain race, creed or group is denied recognition as a legal person; life liberty or security of person are threatened; a person is sold as or used as a slave; cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment is used on a person; arbitrary interference into personal, or private lives by the agents of the state, among others (Maritain, 1971). In view of this, denying the right to

choose is an example of violation of one's human right to freedom and arbitrary interfering into personal or private lives by another person. The democratic choice, especially on the part of the woman to be married, that *kukumbira* grants gives credit to the custom. This paces with values of modern human right teachings. This is also in keeping with the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (of which Zimbabwe is a signatory) which is against the violation of women's human rights. It is in this light that the custom of *kukumbira* should be favored, promoted and carried into posterity as it respects one's right (both men and women's right to choose) to freedom of choice. It (the custom of *kukumbira*) conforms with the article 2 of the UDHR that declares: 'Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in UDHR, without distinction of any kind such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status' (UDHR, 1948).

### **Kukumbira preserves women's dignity and value**

Data gathered from open questionnaire items also indicated that *kukumbira* like *lobola* (bride wealth) constitutes a hailed practice that preserves women's dignity when it is correctly applied: It attaches some value on the wife. Majority (45 out of 50) of the respondents revealed that a woman for whom *lobola* has not been paid is, according to Shona culture, not a legitimate wife but one of whiling up time with, a kind of toy. This wife has no full dignity even among other women. As one of the respondents aptly commented: 'Whether one likes it or not, it is natural in our culture, that a woman to whom *lobola* was not paid for is less respected by her husband's family and even her own family'. Majority of the respondents thus cited *lobola* as an indicator that the man values his wife. It was also pointed out that since the wife ensures the perpetuation of the other family, *lobola* ought to be paid for her to appreciate her value and contribution. Thus *kukumbira* was depicted as a custom that shows that the wife is valued and respected by both her parents and her husband. *Lobola* was also depicted as a custom that gives a woman a sense of self worth, 'someone' whose valued services can only be executed upon payment. These findings concur with Gelfand's (1973) conviction that *lobola* payment gives the woman value in the eyes of all, especially the man. On the same note, respondents (45 out of 50) who registered support for the *kukumbira* custom indicated that *kukumbira* shows the husband's complete acceptance of his wife and his total love and commitment to her.

It should be noted, however that conversely, the same custom of *kukumbira* is abominable when payment of *lobola* (which is part of the custom) is driven by the greed of the bride's family, that is, when the acquisition of assets is the overriding factor than their daughter's

future and welfare. It was registered by the respondents that due to the abuse and misunderstanding of the custom nowadays in Zimbabwe, many people now believe that these exchanges contribute to violence against women and other inequalities due to the perception that the women are 'sold' by their parents and subsequently 'owned' by their husbands under the *lobola* payment. *Lobola* paid during the custom of *kukumbira*, however, is correctly understood as a token paid by the bridegroom or as a form of informing the bride's family that we are now relatives from now onwards. The problem only comes in when the bride's family misunderstand *lobola* as a vehicle to affluent life and not as a tying knot that builds affinity and social capital between families.

### **Kukumbira reduces women's human rights abuse and violation**

More interestingly was the view that abolition of *kukumbira* for reasons that it violates women's human rights would yield opposite results. Majority (46 out of 50) who defended the perpetuation of *kukumbira* argued that if the custom is abolished merely because it involves payment of *lobola* that seems to violate women's human rights, women would be abused at an even more alarming rate. As one respondent remarked: 'If *kukumbira* is abolished on grounds that it involves *lobola*, the man would take it as a simple thing to marry and divorce, abusing and violating women, causing serious gender inequality problems than we are experiencing today'. A number of respondents echoed similar sentiments. They noted that *kukumbira* preserves marriages thereby reducing the divorce rate. This is because a woman for whom *kukumbira* customary marriage was used has more self worth and is more valued and respected, not only by his husband but also her own parents and community. She is a role model for both younger sisters and young unmarried girls in the community. This finding concurs with Gelfand's (1981) belief that *lobola* payment, which is part of *kukumbira*, gives the woman value in the eyes of all, especially the husband. It is also in keeping with Hamisu's (2000) assertion that bride wealth is a socially stabilizing factor.

However, while a majority of respondents showed support for the custom of *kukumbira* and its *lobola* payment, they were quick to point out that abuse of the custom has detrimental effects on marriage. They noted that *lobola* should not be commercialized as overcharging leads to the wife being treated as a piece of tradable property. The implication of this response is that if hefty bride wealth is charged the son-in-law will no longer feel indebted to his in-laws and will not be willing to offer them any economic assistance. Thus while a large bride wealth gives status to the wife and to the marriage, in some areas *lobola* payments have 'inflated to a degree that



disturbs many' (Bourdillon, 1998: 45) and cause some people to view formal traditional marriage systems like *kukumbira* with suspicion.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper's thrust based on results from both open and closed questionnaire items was to call for the reversal of all the emerging deviant types of marriages in contemporary Africa and Zimbabwe in particular in favor of *Kukumbira* customary marriage. Using results from both the open and closed questionnaire items carried out in Zimbabwe, the paper argued that the custom of *kukumbira* has overwhelming merits especially in building affinity and social capital among families, reducing family poverty and preserving women dignity among others, yet it is fast disappearing in Zimbabwe and other African societies. Factors resulting to the daunting of this customary practice are numerous, of which the chief ones were: (1) Heft bride wealth charges; (2) Acute poverty and high unemployment rates; (3) Modernity which has resulted in cultural assimilation and cultural decadence in the contemporary society, and (4) Campaigns by some human right groups which mistakenly perceive *lobola* as the same as buying/selling a woman.

In the light of the aforementioned, the paper has recommended that the Zimbabwean government, independent organizations and the Zimbabwe traditional custodians of culture such as chiefs and councilors work to ensure that the highly esteemed *kukumbira* customary practice is not abused by both parties, the bride groom and the bride's families. Thus, though it was acknowledged that it might be logical to condemn the custom of *kukumbira* for being patriarch, prone to abuse, time consuming and demanding, results from the study showed that the practice works positively. It is the eradication of the driving forces like greed, obsession with modernity, moral degradation and compounding factors such as economic squalors the country is experiencing that can guarantee the smooth practice and perpetuation of the highly valued custom of *kukumbira*.

More importantly, the paper basing on results from both open and closed questionnaire items stressed that it is not financial gain and material treasures that are at the centre of *kukumbira* custom, but the commitment in marriage and need to strengthen family ties. The eradication of greed and other forms of custom abuse, the root causes of the controversy over *kukumbira* and *lobola* in general, that violate the essence of the custom necessitates moral rehabilitation of the poor families and moving beyond government social safety nets to self-empowerment projects, be they agricultural or indigenous technology based. On the same note, it was concluded that men who abuse their wives on the grounds that they have paid *lobola* under the custom of *kukumbira* show

lack of understanding of the essence of this cultural practice. To this end, we recommend the urgent need for the government, custodians of culture and human rights organizations to get the message to all stakeholders that *kukumbira* custom is a valuable part of the African culture and should not be considered as a money-spinning project and justification for women oppression. Public sensitization on the continued relevance of *kukumbira* through more balanced media could be another leeway. This wave work can educate all stakeholders on the essence of *kukumbira* customary practice and payment of *lobola* as well as the girl child on her rights as a human being. Otherwise, either abuse of the custom or its daunting into banishment will continue to take its toll in Zimbabwe, both effects of which have dramatic impact on the African culture and identity.

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