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## IN SEARCH OF CULTURALLY SENSITIVE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN THE CARE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN IN ZIMBABWE: THE CASE OF REMBA/LEMBA CULTURE

MTETWA Edmos and MUCHACHA Munyaradzi

### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the interface between cultural rites and social work. Often, the case is that cultural rites have been denigrated and vilified as primitive, oppressive and antithetical to the post-modern era to which the social work profession subscribes. This has dissuaded social workers from acknowledging positive aspects of African cultural rituals that could be tapped to advance the goals of the social work profession. We examine the subject using the Lemba/Remba cultural rites of initiating adolescents into adulthood. The paper contends that it remains vital for social workers to champion children's rights within the context of African indigenous traditions as Lemba/Remba culture.*

**KEY TERMS:** Social Work, human rights, cultural diversity, rites of passage, Lemba, Remba, Zimbabwe, South Africa

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**Note on ethics:** *This paper mentions Lemba/Remba cultural knowledge. As per Lemba/Remba culture, some of this knowledge must be kept a secret. We have respected this value by not going into detail about initiation information even though this information is available in books already researched and published by others who did not follow this ethical principle. As a journal, we respect African culture and African ethics.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The social work profession has got as its beginnings a humble history that has sometimes earned it a humble position among other professions in contemporary societies. Its close affiliation with the poor, the delinquent, the afflicted, the social outcasts including persons with disabilities, the prisoners, refugees and other stigmatized and despised human categories has earned its practitioners the mantle of careers of the poor. The profession however is foreign to Africa, having been brought either by missionaries as part of evangelical works of charity or by the colonial regimes as part of a grand political pacifist agenda (Chogugudza, 2009). As a result, it became a weapon to fight what was seen in the eyes of modern man as primitive, traditional and dangerous cultural vices and practices considered detrimental and retrogressive to the demands of life in the modern social and economic order.

It is however worth of note that the potential and capacity of the social work profession to elicit sustainable social transformation is retarded largely by internal and external setbacks endemic within the historical and practice characteristics of the profession including among others lack of recognition among other professions, limited human and material resources, inaptitude practice methodologies as well as lack of a clearly defined and socially recognized niche (Kaseke, 1991; Chogugudza, 2009; Mupedziswa, 1992).

We contend here that the present social work practitioners have not changed course in view of the call for cultural pluralism. Rather, social work practitioners have perpetuated the colonial mind set of cultural extermination. The profession cements this argument by claiming the universality of its intervention strategies across human cultures.

It is widely acclaimed that the Social Work profession originated from humanitarian, religious and democratic ideals and philosophies; and that it has universal application to meet human needs arising from personal-societal interactions, and to develop human potential. This professional orientation, dubbed the human rights and social justice became the rallying point around which the social work profession hoists its flag in defence of the marginalized and oppressed in society. To this effect, social workers are dedicated to service for the welfare and self-fulfilment of human beings; to the development and disciplined use of scientific knowledge regarding human behaviour and society; to the development of resources to meet individual, group, national and international needs and aspirations; to the enhancement and improvement of the quality of life of people; and to the achievement of social justice.

This professional orientation however has clashed with African culture and traditions that have somewhat failed to keep pace with modernity. This paper traces the clashes between the social work ethos and African rituals couched in rites of passage of the *vaRemba* culture commonly known as *Komba* (for girls) and *Murundu* (for boys). The main debate is whether these cultural practices are legal, in observance of children's rights to education, health care or to a life with dignity or they are pagan, primitive, oppressive, retrogressive and antithetical to the present-day development imperatives. Last but not least, the paper concludes by mounting a search for convergence.

## BACKGROUND

### Social work as a human rights profession

According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2012) social work has, from its conception, been a human rights profession, having as its basic tenet the intrinsic value of every human being and as one of its main aims the promotion of equitable social structures, which can offer people security and development while upholding their dignity'. Similarly, Mtetwa and Muchacha (2013) observed that the social work profession clearly and closely aligns itself with human rights, particularly in relation to upholding the importance of individual worth, dignity and freedom, affirming liberty and spear heading social justice. In essence, the social work profession is obliged to uphold the inherent dignity and worth of every person and respect the human rights expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). Similarly, The International Federation of Social Workers ethical statement stipulates that "*Social work's core ethical principles are consonant with human rights philosophy, such as honouring the "intrinsic value of every person," and its use of individual and collective action to promote social justice in the form of "equitable social structures that provide people security and development while upholding their dignity"*" (IFSW, 1988:1). In a more recent policy statement, the IFSW maintains: "The social work profession, through historical and empirical evidence, is convinced that the achievement of human rights for all people is a fundamental prerequisite for a caring world and the survival of the human race. To this effect, the closing statement enshrined in the global definition of social work emphasizes that principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (IFSW, 2014). This affirms the centrality of social justice and human rights to the social work profession.

The social work profession accepts its share of responsibility for working to oppose and eliminate all violations of human rights" (IFSW, 2012). To that end, social workers are sanctioned to prevent and eliminate domination

of, exploitation of, and deprivation of freedom and liberties against any person or group on any basis and safeguard individual freedoms (International Federation of Social Workers, 2012). Emphasizing this synergy, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008)'s educational policy (2.1.5), dictates that social workers be capacitated to safeguard and promote human rights. This policy states:

*Each person, regardless of position in society, has basic human rights, such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. Social workers recognize the global interconnections of oppression and are knowledgeable about theories of justice and strategies to promote human and civil rights. Social work incorporates social justice practices in organizations, institutions, and society to ensure that these basic human rights are distributed equitably and without prejudice (CSWE, 2008: 15).*

The centrality of the social work profession to the human rights discourse is further cemented by the manual on Human Rights and Social Work, which states that:

*More than many professions, social work educators and practitioners are conscious that their concerns are closely linked to respect for human rights. They accept the premise that human rights and fundamental freedoms are indivisible, and that the full realization of civil and political rights is impossible without enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights" (United Nations Centre for Human Rights, 1994: 5).*

The key assumption of the synergy and relationship of social work and human rights is the universalism of human rights and its core principles. The notion of universality implies that the human rights principles are applicable to the entire human race and are beyond culture, race, colour, religion and nationality (Ife, 2001; Reichert, 2006, Healy, 2008, Mtetwa and Muchacha, 2013). Writing about social work and human rights in the Middle East, Al Gharaibeh (2011) observes that:

*Developing human rights is the struggle for meeting the need for freedom and equality everywhere in the world. Human rights are not purchased, gained or inherited; they are simply the ownership of the people that are human beings. They are inherent in every individual, regardless of race, sex, religion, political opinion (or any other opinion), national or social origin; they are indivisible (Al Gharaibeh, 2011: 231).*

The principle of universality is established, for example, in Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights that states thus: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. This international human rights treaty also points in recognition and support of universalism that:

*All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. The international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis. While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms (Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights).*

The notion of universalism is founded and anchored upon egalitarian principles of social justice. As such, it has often dominated the human rights and civil liberties of many Western countries (Ife, 2001). It is premised on the social ethics of universal moral equality, a principal value position propagating the notion that human beings are of equal worth despite varied backgrounds. Inevitably, the globalisation crusade, through its cross pollination and transmission of values across the world has played a major role in this universalisation of human rights. This paper acknowledges the key role human rights play in facilitating social change and development, however it questions the doctrine of universal application of human rights in social work practice, given the diverse cultural and traditional backgrounds within which social work is practiced.

### **Points of divergence and controversy: social work and cultural diversity**

The quest for human diversity is central to the social work profession. As such, social workers are implored to advance and defend the right of every human being to be different. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples defends cultural diversity as an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity (United Nations, 2008). It implies a commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the rights of persons belonging to minorities and those of indigenous peoples.

Notably, the Declaration provides a twofold strategy that ‘aims at empowering indigenous groups by according them control over the issues which are internal to their communities’ and ‘it refers to procedures of participation and consultation in order to ensure that these Peoples are involved in the life of the larger society of a State’ (Errico, 2007: 755). In view of the purported universality and indivisibility of human rights as discussed above, this paper argues for the particularization and contextualization if not indigenization of human rights. To this effect, the argument is for the outright paradigm shift, especially for the social work profession from a colonial and sometimes racist mentality wherein the supremacy of western and foreign ideals is revered at the detriment of African indigenous ways of life. This signals the decolonization of social work practice in Africa.

## REMBBA/LEMBA CULTURE

The *vaRemba/baLemba* (thereafter used interchangeably) people of Zimbabwe are largely found in Mberengwa, Midlands province and Mapakomhere, Masvingo Province and in Gutu, Buhera, Hwedza, Chitsungo, Muzarabani, Gokwe, Hurungwe and other areas. They are found in South Africa among the Venda in Limpopo Province. They are also found in Botswana, Malawi, Zambia and other countries. They belong to the *Zhou*, Ndlovu (elephant) or *Mbeva* (mouse) totems. The Remba have many cultural rites, but in this paper, we will focus on their rites of passage (initiation) into adulthood for boys and girls. These rites can be described as indigenous initiation schools. They have a clear structure with a syllabus, rules, teachers and leaders. There are no written records, everything is kept in memory form and passed down from generation to generation through song, dance, poetry and other forms of African non-written literature. The initiation rite for girls is called *Komba* while that for boys is *Murundu* or *Mwenyi*. The *Komba* and *Murundu* practices initiate new entrants into adult life, with different teachings for boys and girls in line with the expected gender roles. The *vaRemba* rite is a highly resilient tribal secret observed across generations. This cultural rite however has been difficult to access from outside because insiders were not allowed to disclose its secrets (Mabuwa, 1993; Shoko, 2009). The *Komba* details are largely kept a secret both from the Remba who have not participated in the ritual and to non-Remba people or *vasenzi* in Remba terminology. To this effect, anyone found divulging these ritual secrets is fined a beast or subjected to customary beating or to both beating and fine as the case may be. However, due to increased modernity the influence of these norms has been weakened (Shoko, 2009).

### Komba

For girls to qualify for enrolment into the *Komba* rite, first, the girl should have reached her first menstruation (Thabethe, 2008). Significantly, this marks the girl’s maturity and graduation into adulthood wherein she must be prepared and equipped for the demands of adult life. Second, the girl must be a virgin. Third, the non-Remba women married into Remba families are initiated into the culture. In their marital life, they conform to the *VaRemba* traditions and customs (Mabuwa, 1993).

The main teachings of the *Komba* rite are to help the girls understand menstruation and hygiene (Shoko, 2009). Menstruation is a sensitive process among the *vaRemba*. Once the process starts, the initiates are taught to maintain the secret. A menstruating woman undergoes several restrictions in social life (Shoko, 2009). She must abstain from cooking food in the kitchen, brewing beer for ritual purposes, indulging in sexual intercourse, entering a cattle kraal or polishing a hut using cow dung. The same restrictions also apply to a woman who has just given birth (Mabuwa, 1993). In addition, girls are initiated into culturally appropriate behaviours, morals, relationships with the opposite sex, self-respect and submission (Thabethe, 2008). In the light of their physiological changes and the likely consequences, “girls are taught not to be in private places with persons of the opposite sex including paying one’s boyfriend a visit without company, or walking in the woods alone or at night and they must not allow boys or men to touch their bodies” (Thabethe, 2008:31). Other teachings imparted to *vaRemba* women include daily living skills. Girls are taught the basic roles of a woman in society, such as respect for the husband and in-laws. They are also taught socio-cultural norms that include dating, sexual conduct, self-reliance, brewing beer and ritual ceremonial duties, and the use of African medicines (Mabuwa, 1993).

In addition, a Remba woman is taught household duties. These include preparing and serving food to her husband and family, waking up early, fetching firewood and drawing water from the river, as well as various farming techniques and practices (Shoko, 2009). A Remba woman is expected to be productive and self-sufficient. Laziness is not condoned. When greeting elders, she must kneel or bend her knees as sign of respect (Thabethe, 2008; Shoko, 2009). In line with these cultural expectations, all Remba women are given special utensils that become their personal belongings. These utensils include plates, cups, mortar and pestle, baskets, four clay pots, *chirongo* for keeping and carrying water, *shambakodzi* for cooking *sadza*, *hadyana* for cooking relish and *chipfuko* for keeping traditional beer (Shoko, 2009).

According to Thabethe (2008), the girls are encouraged to be chaste and to preserve themselves for marriage. As a result, at the end of the initiation ceremony, girls are subjected to virginity checking. Some aspects of the *Komba* training for girls involve playing songs and dance. These are explicit sexually suggestive songs and dance

conducted at night. The procedure starts earlier in the morning when initiates are taken to a river. They are undressed and induced to sing and dance whilst naked. The purpose of the songs and dance is to strengthen the initiates. During the rites, the Remba women observe strict discipline. Once a girl starts the initiation rite, she is not expected to abscond, if she does, the parents must pay a fine of a beast as punishment (Shoko, 2009).

The Komba rite reaches its peak in a great ceremonial dance that escorts the initiates back home from the training camp, usually after one or two months of training. The function resembles modern-day wedding or Swazi reed ceremonies. The girls' parents are advised of the date and in turn they prepare beer and food and invite all their kith and kin. "The Komba are made to tie their heads with a red belt across the forehead. This belt symbolizes menstrual blood. They also tie the breasts with a green piece of cloth and wear a short skirt called *mbikiza* (Shoko, 2009). Those who are found virgins cover their faces with a white decorated cloth whilst those who have lost their virginity cover in blue cloth that has a hole in the middle" (Mabuwa 1993:30).

### Murundu

For boys, the process is somewhat different although conducted simultaneously with that of girls (Shoko, 2009). The initiation for boys, *murundu*, like that of the girls, takes place during the same period in June to July in the cold winter. In the first place, the boys are summoned during the night. It is often a joyful moment for the boys and their families where no one is expected to resist (Mabuwa, 1993). They are led to a forest in the mountains very far away from the village. Anyone who enquires about them is told that they are "home". It is a time of discretion about their whereabouts (Shoko, 2009). Unlike girls, boys get circumcised as part of the initiation process. Only experienced and well-trained cultural surgeons can perform this task in a safe, hygienic and culturally acceptable manner. This process is a socially significant act which culminates in a boy's integration into the community and grants him acceptance and respect from other community members (Stinson, 2008). The process follows a certain pattern. In the past, the boys would chase and catch wild animals such as rabbits, using traditional weapons such as bows, arrows, spears and knobkerries (Shoko, 2009). They were required to get as much food as possible so that it will last the whole period of training (Shoko, 2009). Nowadays, family members mostly contribute to the food and other requirements. Secondly, there are competitions that are done to help with screening those who are young or unwell (Mabuwa, 1993). Thirdly, the boys are taught how to build makeshift huts that resemble the homes that they will live in during adult life. This teaches the boys to be productive and to be supportive of their families (Shoko, 2009). Finally, the boys are taken through the process of safe circumcision, a surgical operation performed by experienced and permitted adults. It is safe because the community, family, and boys are prepared for it psychologically, socially and spiritually, it is economically affordable, culturally acceptable and performed by experienced Lemba surgeons. This circumcision is the final separation from the attributes of youth (Foto 1992: 21). During their time of healing, the boys learn life skills, survival skills, entrepreneurial skills, hygiene, ritual slaughter, traditional history, morals, culture, poetry and songs (Shoko, 2009). At the end of the circumcision rite, the ceremony to bring back home the initiates is held. It is organised in such a way that it does not clash with that of the girls, which is held separately but at the same time of the year (Mabuwa, 1993). The ceremony is led by the instructors, who inform the *zvikonzi* (chief's messengers), who will, in turn notify the Chief to prepare for the returning boys. The *ihosi* or Chief will then invite his people to prepare millet beer for the occasion in honour of the initiates.

Due to pressure and competition from other rites of passage, such as those offered by Christians and modern-day institutions such as schools, Remba rites are presently taking a somewhat low profile in a number of communities. However, the *murundu* rite has been maintained. Circumcision practices are much safer because traditional surgeons are being trained in hygiene, although more could be done especially in the context of HIV. In areas where the institutional framework exists to support these rites, such as in Mberengwa where *vaRemba* have their own chieftainship, it has been easy to maintain these rites. In fact, circumcision has been adopted in many African countries as one of the methods to reduce HIV infection.

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE VAREMBA TRADITIONAL RITES ON THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

Various scholars have proffered differing interpretations when it comes to whether these rites are just, fair and humane in today's society. This paper argues that most of these rites have survived to this day largely due to their relevance in the socialization of children into acceptable and chaste members of their communities. For instance, training on menstrual management provides the rare opportunity where girls take time to talk about what is otherwise a taboo in their culture (Thabethe, 2008). Issues of hygiene, sexual precautions as well as the general interpretation of the meanings of this stage of life are critical to the development of a girl child. More so, this becomes all the more important these days since paternal aunts who had the duty of imparting this information to their nieces are now a rarity due to urbanization.

The other issue of contention is sexually explicit information being given to young girls before marriage. This has been heavily criticized for spoiling teenagers and encouraging pre-marital sex. Depending on whether or not

tradition is ardently adhered to, this could form fertile grounds for the spread of HIV and AIDS in the communities. This however is not peculiar to Remba and other traditional rituals and teachings. Modern society is currently seized with the question of how much sexual and reproductive health information to parcel out to adolescents, with such countries as South Africa advocating for the provision of contraceptives to school age teenagers as a ploy to prevent sexually transmitted infections including HIV and AIDS as well as unwanted pregnancies among adolescents.

In the middle of these competing views of what constitutes the most viable ways of bringing up children, this paper argues for the promotion of local indigenous ways of life. In support of the same view, Vincent (2008) writing on the initiation practices of the Xhosa contended that the initiation process represented a means of entrenching social norms and imparting cultural knowledge to children. Similarly, Gwata (2009) observed that initiation is a time when “boys became men” and “girls become women” through their assuming a more socially responsible approach to life. As a sign of the richness of this tradition, the whole Remba community is expected to provide the necessary logistics and social support to ensure that this traditional rite goes smoothly. This expectation goes for every member including those families with no initiates. It is therefore a shared responsibility in which the whole Remba community celebrates and participates. This collective responsibility, communalism and collaboration is a key characteristic of many African communities. To this effect, child care and protection is not confined to a single household but to the whole community. Capitalizing on this social virtue, the social work profession is poised to record significant gains in the area of child protection including safeguarding children’s rights. In light of this deep-seated African value commonly known to as *Unhu/Ubuntu*, social work must seek to understand and collaborate with rather than seeking to oppose and brush aside as primitive, pagan, and suspect any cultural traditions of African indigenous peoples.

Another of the contentious issues revolves around the timing. These ritual ceremonies among the Remba take place in winter when so called formal schools are in session. Inevitably, this deprives children the best opportunity for school. It is however here argued that although modern and western education has had supremacy over traditional African instructional methods, care should be taken not to antagonize the two as this runs the risk of producing citizens that are highly schooled and not educated. As Vygotsky (1978) opines, cultural vices and practices have a fundamental role in the development of cognition, every idea learned in this kind of interaction since early stages in life is integrated into the individual’s mental structure throughout the whole lifespan (Vygotsky, 1978). Emphasizing the centrality of cultural rites and traditions to the wholesome development of the human being, Article (II) of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that Indigenous Peoples have the right to be free from any kind of discrimination, in the exercise of their rights, in particular those rites based on their Indigenous origin or cultural identity. The declaration further affirms that all doctrines, policies and practices based on or advocating for the superiority of peoples or individuals on the basis of national origin or racial, religious, ethnic or cultural differences are racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable (United Nations, 2008). This therefore calls for due diligence and sensitivity on the part of the social work profession. The most sustainable route is to try and strike a balance between the need to promote and protect children’s right to formal education and the necessity to accommodate informal educational practices couched in traditional cultural rites, this implies safeguarding human rights without undermining or negating the communities’ cultural practices. For social workers to promote human rights, they must strive to defend the cultures and traditions of the indigenous peoples among whom they work in line with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2008).

Finally, yet importantly, on virginity checking, it has been argued that this amounts to the invasion of one’s privacy thereby infringing upon one’s rights. In the case of Zimbabwe, such a practice is outlawed in terms of the Domestic Violence Act. This however is debatable, as some still believe that such a practice discourages adolescent girls from indulging in pre-marital sex (Thabethe, 2008). Pursuant to the need to promote the dignity and worthy of all human beings is the belief inherent in the social work profession that this is a universal and therefore inalienable rights. On the same note, Mtetwa and Muchacha (2013) emphasize that the social work profession clearly and closely aligns itself with the modern human rights perspective, particularly in relation to upholding the importance of individual worth, dignity and freedom, affirming liberty and spear heading social justice.

It is here argued that in its defence of the dignity and worthy of all human beings, the social work profession as practiced within the context of Remba culture should not mount a sustained ploy to decimate the traditional practices in the name of modernity, rather it should seek first and foremost to understand the social, spiritual and material pillars anchoring this practice and then engage the community on the basis of equality and mutuality. As an academic discipline as well, the social work profession should not lose sight of the fact that behind all the outward and apparently unreasonable traditional norms and practices lies “a mental mechanism which gives them a meaning and a moral significance” (Durkheim, 1976: 348). Precisely, cultural practices and rituals should be understood by social workers as mechanisms where members of a society inculcate and communicate values and ways of living through psychological, social and symbolic interactions and teaching (Stinson, 2008).

The interpretation of what is meant by dignity varies across cultures. Due to its parentage, the social work profession in Africa has tended to take a western model of dignity and worth of every human being. Sexual prowess, the possession of basic medical knowledge, marital harmony as well as ownership of household assets constitute prime symbols of the dignity and worth of a woman in the Remba culture. Similarly, circumcision, endurance, hard work and love symbolize the dignity and worth of boys and men in the same culture. As Gwata (2009) would have it, the cultural practice which not only marks a boy's transition to manhood but also affords him legitimate membership in the tribal community should not only be understood as such by those external to it rather, it must be equally respected and revered. With this understanding, social workers should seek to appreciate rather than vilify these cultural practices if ever they are to earn professional recognition by indigenous beneficiaries of their services. This paper argues that in its quest to promote, protect and defend human rights and social justice, the social work profession should avoid antagonizing itself with the communities it seeks to serve. Rather, social workers stand to benefit from a judicious infusion of indigenous cultural rites and traditions into their practice wisdom.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has chronicled the notion of the social work profession as a human rights issue. Using the *vaRemba/baLemba Komba* and *Murundu* rites of passage, the paper has shown that it is possible for the social work profession to harmoniously champion children's rights within the context of African indigenous culture. Concerns relating to children's right to education as well as the right to live a life with dignity can be equally protected by the judicious application of both western and indigenous cultural rites without imposing the superiority of the other. This is likely to decolonize the social work profession thereby booking it a respectable place within the indigenous people.

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