

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS' POTENTIALITIES AND DILEMMAS: CONFLICT OVER THANKSGIVING TO CHIEFS IN ZIMBABWEAN RURAL VILLAGES

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Abstract

The transformation of society towards modernity and the attendant socio-economic challenges it has imposed on African societies have compelled insensitive traditional structures of governance to hijack traditional customs and practices to serve their ulterior motives. Thanksgiving to chiefs (kubika chiutsi, in Shona language), is one such traditional practice that has been manipulated to serve the self-aggrandizement of Zimbabwean traditional chiefs in rural areas under the guise of subjects' gratitude expression to traditional authority. We employ benevolent theory as a theoretical lens to unravel both the potentialities and the dilemmas that surround this highly contentious practice. While acknowledging thanksgiving to chiefs as an adhesive that tightly bounds subordinates to established traditional authority thus fostering a cohesive society in ancient times, we argue that in contemporary Zimbabwe, the practice unfolds as benevolent despotism (by chiefs) unleashed on pauperised masses. Many rural people conceive thanksgiving to chiefs as an idealized version of the "tragedy of the commons" as chiefs misconstrue them (subjects) for tradable communally owned commodities. Drawing on our reflections of our experiences in Zimbabwe, our argument is that the tradition of thanksgiving is riddled with absurdities, injustices and abuses-itself a crime against humanity committed by African chiefs veneered by relentless pursuit of tradition and custodianship. The paper thus contributes to the African cultural practices and mainstream human rights debates in Zimbabwe predicated on the contradictions between preservation of traditional customs and forces of change towards modernity.

Key words: *Traditional customary practices, thanksgiving to chiefs, traditional authority, global consumerism, human rights abuse*

Introduction

Though there is monumental literature that examines African traditional practices in Africa on the one hand (Beall and Ngonyama 2009, Cox 2008, 2009, Kambarami 2006, Kazembe 2009, Kazembe 2008) and human rights promotion practices on the other (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2008, Pavlish 2009, Struensee, n.y.). There is patchy literature that examines the nexus between the preservation of African traditional customary practices and the safeguard of human rights of the ordinary African citizen. At best, academics and sociologists have conceived these constituencies of academic research as irreconcilable research spheres that are beyond compromise. Drawing on the Zimbabwean concept of *kubika chiutsi* (thanksgiving to chiefs), this work contributes to this grey area by demonstrating that traditional customary practices have been abused by chiefs to serve their selfish motives. The abuse of this traditional customary construct has triggered and perpetuated horrendous suffering for the ordinary Zimbabwean villagers thus consequently, becoming an intriguing human rights issue.

While appreciating the long history that thanksgiving to chiefs evolved particularly as a socialization and solidarity consolidation ritual for society, we seek to challenge the self-enrichment motivation that has driven this practice in contemporary rural Zimbabwe. We attribute the controversy surrounding thanksgiving to chiefs to the dilemmas and contradictions between winds of social change propelled by modernity and the inertia in traditional leadership practices. The monetarisation of the developing countries' economies compounded by the astronomical rise in the cost of living have compelled traditional leaders (traditionally not salaried) to devise strategic survival mechanisms for coping with these economic tides. As such, the thanksgiving concept has been revolutionised not only to suit the globalization values of lavish consumerism, but rather as a form of traditional hierarchy collusion, that entrenches its relentless thirst for social power and hegemony. A related challenge is the entanglement of the practice in the functionality of the cosmological world, particularly, the operation of the Deity (God).

Traditional chiefs' roles and social influence

Thanksgiving is “the act of giving thanks” (Pearshall 1999: 512) as a gesture of gratitude towards God, god or chief. Depending on to whom thanksgiving is directed, a “prayer of gratitude” normally marked the act (ibid), dances, and merrymaking. To grasp the concept of thanksgiving to chiefs, it is essential to foreground this part of our work in the huge portfolio that chiefs assume in the social configuration and maintenance of the Shona society, especially its customs and practices. Traditional leadership (kraal heads, headmen and chiefs) in ancient times had significant social and symbolic values in Africa, particularly as custodians of traditional customs, values and practices, as adjudicators of traditional and social disputes (fights, divorces, witchcraft accusations, land disputes) and as embodiments of the rich cultural heritage and wisdom gained through social experience. Resultantly, the subjects conceived their traditional leadership hierarchy as armor bearers of peace, cultural preservation and symbols of social cohesion whose providence was worthy of acknowledgement. In the colonial Rhodesia (pre-independent Zimbabwe), traditional leadership were critical opinion makers for the masses and strategic advisors of both the colonial administrators and the freedom fighters. During the liberation war in present day Zimbabwe, Beall and Ngonyama (2009) observes, Ian Smith’s Rhodesian Front sought the support and co-operation of chiefs in a bid to combat the national guerrillas, an assumption based on long history of collusion with colonial administrations. Although some co-operated, some chose to work with Zimbabwean African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) with positive outcomes (ibid). Kazembe (2009) complements this view by emphasising that during the liberation struggle, traditional leaders performed a significant role through their cooperation with the spirit mediums who were critical advisors of freedom fighters in the war of liberation. He elaborates that traditional leaders were also modeled as custodians of traditional religions that boosted cultural identity and pride in the face of competing religions like Christianity- a religion associated with the ruling minority. Unsurprisingly, traditional authority was conceived as a paragon of accumulated wisdom that traversed the test of

times and in consequence, an embodiment of rational decision making and public opinion for the majority of subjects.

In general African traditional view, certain special places have spiritual significance and are used as locations for rituals and sacrifices, for example, sacred groves, shrines, mountains and rivers (Gonese 1999). Drawing on Gonese, we assert that the Zimbabwean chief's homestead is revered as a place of refuge for his subjects for several reasons, namely, the place where subjects initially congregate to make sacrifices and prayers of supplication for rain before going to the sacred mountains, where they gather in a witch naming and during cleansing ceremony. In case of natural calamities like drought, the Shonas in Zimbabwe also descend on the chiefs' homestead to secure grain harvested from his *zunde ramambo*.¹ As such, the chiefs in traditional Shona culture are revered as symbols of social protection, social cohesion and cultural preservation.

The close connection between traditional leadership and spirit mediums further gave the subjects the assurance that traditional chiefs were agents through which divine connections between subjects and their ancestors' divine providence could be secured and guaranteed. Chiefs collaborated with rainmakers whose "duties [were] to solicit God's help in providing rain or in halting it if too much falls" (Millar 2004: p. 3). It is against this complex web of social relations that chieftdom was embroiled, and the fundamental role that it played in the survival and sustenance of society that the concept of thanksgiving to chiefs should be understood. In light of the momentous servitude chiefs performed, their subjects felt unconsciously compelled to extend their gratitude to them for the holy grail of treasures that they so benevolently provided or whose provision they mediated. These ranged from land, to rains, grain, social and political protection, and as custodians of tradition and culture.

¹ *Zunde ramambo* is the Shona phrase for the chief's vast piece of land that is communally owned. Subjects take turns yearly to till this land, weed it and to harvest it using their resources and the chiefs.' The harvest is kept in silos at the chiefs' home for storage and this grain is shared among subjects in times of drought or when other calamities like El-Nino waves and cyclones strike.

Theoretical framework

The moral theory of Benevolence

Our conception of benevolence as the guiding principle of chiefs' providence is deeply informed by the moral philosophy of David Hume and Joseph Butler. As Vanterpool (1988) suggests, for Hume (1888/1973), benevolence is construed as compassion for others in need, often marked by disinterested caring acts of generosity or kindness (T 602-606)². He elaborates that benevolence is parasitic on sympathy in the sense that a motive for rendering assistance to others in distress requires a certain amount of sympathy (T 579). Interpreting Hume's views on benevolence, we contend that traditional Shona leadership' provision of treasures to their subjects was informed by sheer sympathy to ease the agony of their subjects, whatever it form- landlessness, hunger, protection, wisdom and knowledge. Yet, Hume emphasises limited benevolence by tying sympathy to a particular set of people, in particular those who are in the benefactor's inner circle rather than complete strangers. (Ibid further notes that) Hume also suggests that even though sympathy is an original natural propensity, it is also true that it is easier to show limited sympathy- for example, sympathy towards close relatives and friends than it is to show extensive sympathy (for example, fellow-feeling for complete strangers) (T 580-81).

Hume observes that the expression of sympathy can be for private (limited) or public (extensive) good-the former referring to altruism expressed towards people in one's inner circles (close family and close friends) and the later relating to people who lie in one's outer circle. The altruism expressed by traditional chiefs towards their subjects in ancient times could be conceived as a form of limited good because once strangers were accepted into the community, they were incorporated into the family clan as members. The sympathy that is directed at the people in one's closely-knit inner circle is often driven by

² Citations from Hume's book: *A Treatise of human nature* and the appropriate page numbers

automatic psychological reflexes than that expressed for public good that is conceivably as controlled conformity. As Vanterpool (1988) drawing on Hume suggests:

Benevolence, we may say, is a virtue to the extent that it is a response to some identifiable need upon noticing the adverse circumstance of a fellow-member of the human race with whom we sense a common belongingness (p. 96).

In light of the above, benevolence is informed by the need to alleviate the pain or problem of a victim whom one identifies with by assisting him/ her at their point of need. Hume's broader application of benevolence unconsciously imposes some sense of reciprocity, as the beneficiary often feels obliged to return the favour to the benefactor even when the benefactor does not publicly proclaim or anticipates this.

Butler (1969) emphasises that human psychology is motivated by passion and one of which is "benevolence- which has as its object the happiness of others." (Butler 1969 cited in Eastland 1990:p. 191). Butler (1969) emphasises that: "Happiness or satisfaction consists only in the enjoyment of these objects which are by nature suited to our several particular appetites, passions, and affections" (section 417). This passion for altruism is a clear expression of the need to pursue happiness and contentment through the demonstration of care, servitude and respect for those cared for. As such, while benevolence is deeply rooted in one's expression of good will towards the other, this gratitude expression is an integral part of one's pursuit for self-love. Estlund (1990) exudes this by alluding that:

One of Butler's recurrent lessons is that attention to one's benevolent passions is integral to happiness; it is an ineliminable part of the balanced pattern of satisfaction which is, according to nature, human happiness. It is precisely the neglect of one's own benevolent passions which is the premier failing of self-love, and the result of the failure is selfishness and lost happiness (p. 192).

We infer that while benevolence is targeted at the welfare of the other it is not mutually exclusive with the pursuit of one's personal happiness. Underlying this passion for

other's wellbeing and happiness, is the nourishment and satisfactions of one's self esteem which is bordered by happiness and self-love. In their fulfillment of their royal duties and the benevolent provision of resources (grazing land, land for tillage, hills and forests for hunting, grain provision during drought, protection) to their subjects, kings and chiefs are driven by self pride and self love nourished by provision of these life necessities in rural contexts. That is, Chiefs and headman take pleasure and pride in the fact that neighborhoods conceived their people as the most well fed, highly garrisoned, peaceful and happiest subjects. In Butler's (1969) view: "It is contrived and implausible to stipulate, however, that benevolence excludes from its object the benevolent concerns of the cared-for others without any reason to think they are any less important to that person's well-being." (Butler 1969 cited in Estlund 1990: p. 192).

At its rudimentary level, the benevolence asserted in Butler's moral theory is informed by purity of the heart and preservation of personal dignity. Although, this pursuit of happiness embodies an element of self-love (some form of self-interest), it is bi-directional to the extent that it seeks the genuine saturation of the utility of those cared for. Complementing Butler's (1969) view of benevolence, Rossler's (2004) account of genuine altruism asserts that:

Any little joy, if desired by the other person, can become an unlimited present to both. Persons can make each other such presents. The 'excess value' (mehrwert) hereby comes from a positive feedback." p. 69).

This version of benevolence guided ancient chiefs and headmen in their administration of thanksgiving. They provided institutional resources (like wisdom based on historical experiences, safeguarded traditional customs and practices like marriage and bride price payments, resolved marriage and land disputes, administered land allocations and administered natural resource conservation practices) in ways that ensured that subjects were deemed fairly treated and therefore, gratified. To this end, the subjects provided thanksgiving ceremonies as a token of appreciation for the good will and treasures that the chiefs so benevolently provided to them.

One feature of Butlerian theory, according to Estlund (1990) is that a person's good (happiness) necessarily includes some degree of satisfaction of their benevolent passions. We infer that the burning desire to do good for others thus is an outward manifestation of an internal passion (happiness, pure heart). To complement this, Livnat (2003) suggests that a benevolent person attempts to ease the suffering of others out of care and concern for them no matter what the source of their suffering is. While the suffering may be as a consequence of natural causes, sheer recklessness, uninformed decisions, the interventions to ease this agony are provided independent of the source of this suffering. In a rural setting, peasants may suffer from hunger or starvation due to drought, laziness, poor planning for the rain season and lack of inputs because of abject poverty. In all these circumstances, in ancient times, true altruism would compel the traditional chiefs and headmen to provide grain to their subjects /peasants irrespective of the cause of hunger. The subjects' thanksgiving to chiefs was done in recognition of these kings's good heart, just as a token of appreciation.

Unraveling Thanksgiving: Its Origins and Variations

Biblical Proclamation of Thanksgiving

The social construct of thanksgiving is practically traceable from the Holy Bible teachings. Arguably, the first well-documented account of thanksgiving in the Bible is in Genesis 4: verse 3-4, where Cain and Abel brought some first fruits from the soil and fat portions from some of the first born of his flock respectively. These offerings were expressions of gratitude to God for provision of rain that replenished the earth and gave them good harvests. Subsequently, the next account of "thanksgiving" is in Genesis 18 where Abraham prepared a thanksgiving feast for three men (or angels) who came with the glad tidings that his wife would conceive and bear for him a son called Isaac. Abraham, who was reportedly advanced in age (about 100 years), in honour of God's benevolence to him, slaughtered a fat calf and ate with these men. Although, not necessarily expected to be a reciprocal process, a benevolent act in biblical notions often carried with it unconscious notions of reciprocity between the benefactor and the beneficiary, as highlighted in accounts above.

In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the Bible proclaims different thanksgiving feasts that were organised by the Israelites in honour of the God's benevolence expressed as first fruits offerings, grain offering and for forgiveness of sin (guilt offering). Israelites adored God as the chief architect of the universe, sovereign ruler of the cosmology and therefore, adorned him for the rains, the good harvest, and protection against their enemies. The complexity of God's benevolence is that it was tightly coupled with a compendium of commandments and laws that the Israelites had to adhere to as a basis for its continued provision. Chiefly, was the acknowledgement of God as a true and jealous God who had to be worshiped alone (monotheism) and they were forbidden from worshiping of foreign gods and idols. Yet, a critical strand of thought to the one above emerges from the belief that Israelites and humankind by extension, did not accept and love God first, but rather it was through God's love for mankind (benevolence) that Jesus was created long before creation as the ultimate source of redemption of mankind from their iniquities and transgressions. As such, biblically, Jesus (God's only begotten Son) is an incarnation of God who was sent to deliver humanity. If this conception of benevolence is adhered to, then God's benevolence to humanity is conceived to be independent of Israelites and humankind's offer of thanksgiving to God.

In Davidic times, thanksgiving proceedings embraced the custom of having choir directors leading the choirs in hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God. Nehemiah suggests this when he proclaims that: "long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the singers and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God" (Nehemiah 12: verse 46). Israelites gratified God for the blessings that He bestowed to them in terms of fruitful vineyards, health families, bountiful harvests, herds of beasts and protection from their enemies. In this regard, the concepts of benevolence and thanksgiving became complex constructions that were reciprocal and mutually beneficial, when in the natural sense; the application of benevolence does not necessarily carry compulsive notions of reciprocity, but rather internal desire to do good for the other.

Thanksgiving from a historical perspective

Outside biblical contexts, thanksgiving can be traced back to the 16th century when the first thanksgiving dinner is reported to have occurred. The famous “first thanksgiving feast” is believed to have occurred in autumn of 1621, when the pilgrims organised the feast immediately after their first harvest (Bastian, 2009). Bastian elaborates that the feast took place in Plymouth, Massachusetts, as a gesture of thanking to God who assisted them survive the bitter winter, and to thank Indians who had inducted them into successful agriculture (Ibid).

In 1621, Bastian documents, Squanto, a native Indian taught the pilgrims to survive on agriculture, which helped all of them survive. In response to drought the same year, pilgrims called for a day of fasting and prayer to please God and to ask for a bountiful harvest in the coming season. It is believed that God answered their prayers with rain that same day and their crops blossomed. In the autumn of 1621, Bastian elaborates, they held a grand celebration where Indians were invited and they thanked God for his favors. This communal dinner is popularly known as ‘the first thanksgiving feast’ to this day (Ibid). In the United States and Canada, for example, the traditional “First feast” formed the basis for the modern “Thanksgiving Day” celebrated on the fourth Thursday in November every year.

Thanksgiving in Africa

Bastian (2009) notes that thanksgiving in Africa took various forms such as first fruits festival, harvest festival and thanksgiving to chiefs. African harvest festivals had a lot of religious significance. Bastian elaborates that they were and are still characterised by lots of dancing and singing by dancers wearing traditional masks and outfits. A popular dance sequence involves a good ghost who safeguards after their crops and scares away the bad ghosts who devour the crops. An example is the Homowo Festival of Africa, a celebration of a traditional harvest festival from the Ga people of Ghana, the largest cultural festival of its kind (Ibid). For the Ga people, Bastian elaborates, the word Homowo implies “hooting at hunger.” The origin of Homowo is tied to the Ga people

(Bastian, 2009) who braved hunger in their migration across Africa. Later when they had bountiful harvests, they held a feast at which they jeered at the hunger and the tumultuous times they had endured. This was the first Homowo.

Bastian further suggests that another harvest festival celebrated in West Africa is Yam festival, a popular harvest festival celebrated in days of ceremonies and offerings to God and ancestors. People offer yams to God and ancestors first before they distribute them to the rest of the village. It is within this rich history of African traditional religious and cultural practices that the Zimbabwean practice of *kubika chiutsi* (thanksgiving to chiefs) should be understood. The patchy literature on the practice is an oxymoron for us-both a motivation to contribute to this literature as well as a constraint concerning intellectual resources to draw on in constructing and framing an argument.

Zimbabwe's thanksgiving to chiefs (kubika chiutsi) in the Past

Customary practices like *kubika chiutsi* are enduring hallmarks of how traditional customs construct and shape human conduct and relations of production over generations. As Lightfoot-Klein (1989) suggests in Africa:

Custom in Africa is stronger than domination, stronger than the law, stronger even than religion. Over the years, customary practices have been incorporated into religion, and ultimately have come to be believed by their practitioners to be demanded by their adopted gods, whoever they may be (Lightfoot-Klein 1989 cited by Okome, 2003:71).

We infer from Lightfoot-Klein (1989) that the strong nexus between custom (as conduct that has been tried and tested over generations), ancestral legacy where it derives its roots, and by extension, the invisible cosmology contribute to traditional customs' assumption of sentimental and symbolic importance. The facts that customs are connected to the cosmology, compounded by the belief that cosmology embodies explanatory powers for inexplicable circumstances make people revere traditional customs like *kubika chiutsi*. For example, the view that abrogation of certain traditional customs invites punishment from God and African ancestors while obedience ushers in

blessings and good treasures testifies to the fact that possibilities for resistance to *kubika chiutsi* may be limited.

Kubika chiutsi as an induction process for new comers

In Zimbabwean society, thanksgiving to chiefs referred to customary practice involving Karanga and Ndau subjects honouring their traditional leadership (chiefs/ headman/kraal head) with traditional beer, chicken and social praises for the traditional institutional resources³ that traditional leadership hierarchy provides. This has been commonplace among these tribes since time immemorial. While many traditional customs are being marginalized and phasing out in many parts of Africa especially in towns and cities (Mawere and Kadenge forthcoming), *kubika chiutsi* practice has managed to stand the test of time in many rural areas in mid and southern eastern Zimbabwe countrywide.

Traditionally, this custom was a way of expressing gratitude to the chief who granted a place (a homestead) and land to a newly settled community member and his family. *Kubika chiutsi* was also a way of socialization-a strategy to induct the newcomer into the cultural practices of that community and integrating the new family into the new society to cultivate social cohesion and solidarity. This induction and immersion process into community customs and tradition resonates with Odetola and Ademola (1985:57) who aptly suggest that: “it is through socialization that our behavior becomes regulated since we now possess values, goals and ambitions and live in an ordered environment.” We interpret this to imply that the learning of customs and traditional practices is not automatic, but rather unfolds through acculturation processes involving the new members’ induction into the repertoires, genres of interaction and practices of the community he has become a constituent part of.

Kubika chiutsi as gratitude expression

Traditionally, thanksgiving to chiefs also posed a form of expression of gratitude to the chiefs for the land that new subjects tilled as a source of survival. Upon harvesting their

³ We coin this term to mean treasures and investments that surround traditional leadership’s governance like their wisdom, goodwill for subjects, natural resources conservation practices, divine and political protection, provision of grazing and farming land, connections with rain makers and spirit mediums.

first crops, the new family would appropriate a portion of their harvest (any amount), use it to brew beer which would be taken to the chief's palace (*dare*). Here, the new member would present what he has before the chief and his officials as a gesture of gratitude to the chief. The chief and the ancestors/spirits of the land (*vadzimu venyika*) would be thanked for their benevolence in bestowing him a good harvest. All villagers would participate in this familiarization and socialization process that involved singing, dancing and the beating of drums. The community members would also socialise with beer, eating of chicken and pap, thus inducting and immersing the new comer into community customs and tradition.

Chigidi (2009:2) observes that “every society and every culture has its own ways of socializing its own people” so that they are made socially responsible and compliant citizens. We perceive thanksgiving to chiefs as one way through which the norms and values of society were inculcated into the new members so that they groomed into law abiding and socially responsible natives of that village or clan. *Kubika chiutsi* was also conceived as a form of transition for a new comer from a stranger to an established dweller who could participate in the cultural customs and rites of that community. For example, if the new comer was an elderly mature women who had transcended the child bearing age, she would be called to participate in the brewing of *mukwerera*.⁴ If they are older men with wisdom and experience, they could participate in the *dare*⁵ where they join the chieftaincy counsel that advises the Chief in the adjudication of civil cases. Alternatively, they would groom boys through hunting, teaching them the values of manhood in the Shona culture, and participate in boys' initiation ceremonies.⁶ Thanksgiving thus constituted an important rite of passage for the new comers' involvement in the legitimate cultural practices of the community and their social acceptance by community members. This reciprocity and social exchange was useful for

⁴ *Mukwerera* is the traditional beer that is brewed for the rain making God of the area. Sexually inactive old women who are believed to be spiritually clean prepare the beer.

⁵ *Dare* is the Shona traditional court that tries civil cases and settle social disputes.

⁶ Initiation ceremonies in the Karanga culture no longer involve circumcision as done in ancient times, but rather involve inducting young men into the practices of manhood like assuming responsibility, protection of the family and sharing collectively generated wisdom.

promoting social cohesion and the sustenance of traditional customs and practices into the posterity.

Nexus between the practice and the cosmological world

Fundamentally, the Karanga traditional customs and practices emphasise the close connections between the empirical world and the cosmos. Parallels can be drawn between the consequences of good and bad, given that the cosmological world (ancestors and *musikavanhu* (God, the creator)) govern the empirical world, and in consequence, judges humanity according to the virtue of their deeds. Gonese (1999) observes that the cosmovision of the Shona people is based on three worlds: the human world, the spiritual world and the natural world. He further suggests that spirit mediums act as intermediaries between mortal beings and the living dead or ancestral spirits. Transcending Gonese's view, we argue that chiefs are the adhesive vice grips that bind spirit mediums, rainmakers, and rural dwellers' social relations together by setting the ground rules in terms of cultural practices and customs observance in their communities. They lead processions of rain making ceremonies, witch-naming ceremonies and ceremonies for appeasing the dead. In light of the coordination roles in spiritual activities that chiefs perform, thanksgiving to chiefs should be conceived as a spiritual commitment of the new comers to the ancestors of the land through allegiance to the chiefs (the custodian of customary and spiritual values). In particular, the new comers are often introduced to the ancestors of the land that are believed to protect the inhabitants of that land. This is often effected through the process of *kusuma*,⁷ which involves elders of the land pouring beer onto the ground and making meditations on connecting the new comer to the ancestors for spiritual protection and material growth.

The Problems and dilemmas of Thanksgiving in Contemporary Zimbabwe: A Closer Look

⁷ *Kusuma* means introduction to the higher authority like ancestral spirits.

While benevolence seems to offer a laudable justification for the continued existence of thanksgiving, inconsistencies and dilemmas surround the practice. The dilemmas have emerged between the conceptions of benevolence by villagers on the one hand, and blatant abuses of traditional rights to leadership by chiefs in the name of benevolence. The complexities of these dilemmas are predicated on the difficulties faced by villagers (who heavily depend on traditional leadership) in challenging traditional authority, which is conceived as a holy grain, paragon of unquestionable authority. In spite of the disgruntlement and reservations about traditional practice of *kubika chiutsi*, the practice continues unabated, notwithstanding these contradictions and the flimsy foundations of defenseless villagers. In the following sections, are unpacked the different pejorative perspectives from which the concept of *kubika chiutsi* can be conceived.

Thanksgiving: A Violation of Human Rights

In many Zimbabwean rural areas today, if one seeks to settle in a new area, s/he has to approach the traditional chief/headman of the area to be rehabilitated. In Masvingo province's rural areas of Ziki, Negovanhu, Mazungunye and Mukanganwi among others, a settler is now compelled to pay hefty sums of cash by rural standards (ranging US\$200-300) before he is integrated into a new settlement. Satiated by greed and personal aggrandizement, chiefs are no longer obliged to wait for the new member to harvest the first fruits to secure their portion as thanksgiving. To aggravate the situation, the goodwill beheld in thanksgiving proceeding is now marred by headman and chiefs' lavish demands for several crates of castle beer (and wines), margarine, sugar, rich western coffee, two dozens of bread and one goat. It should be emphasized that these demands are laid on pauperized rural folks who are already economically and emotionally strained by the harsh economic climate and whose spending power has been fundamentally eroded.

From a legal point of view, rural land in Zimbabwe is communally owned⁸ and hence cannot be commoditized as private property by royalty and 'sold' for private gain. What

⁸ The new land policy has designated land in Zimbabwe into different land uses including communal land with long-term leases of 99 years where the government retains ownership, and model A farms where land is owned and used commercially, model B that involves fairly large plots of land which lie mainly in the horticultural domain, and land for safari and game reserves.

is even more disparaging is that newly married couples are also under obligation of chiefs to perform the same cultural rites despite their parents having fulfilled these expectations when they first settle in the area. Given the indivisibility and inelasticity of land and the attendant challenges of excessive land pressure, no additional land is allocated to these new couples. Resultantly, to the chagrin of their parents, they (parents) will be compelled to further partition their portion of land several fold to accommodate their ballooning extended family. The chiefs' benefits are astronomical in light of the aforementioned limitations of the land. The concerns that these cultural rites are not a function of the productive potential of the land further complicate the legality of these hefty demands. For instance, much of the tillage land in the communal Zimbabwe are highly infertile and susceptible to heavy leaching in heavy rainy as they are sandy.

To aggravate this, the law of diminishing returns dictates that the marginal productivity of the land increasingly diminishes with extended tillage despite the continual application of tillage resources (fertilisers, good seed). The human right question to pose is: Why should chiefs continue to deprive and compromise the wellbeing of their subjects by defrauding them in broad daylight under the guise of traditional custodianship? We infer that the selective application and hijacking of the principle of the tragedy of the commons⁹ by traditional leadership further complicates this human rights concern. Because chiefs and headman have an entitlement to the land as custodians and subjects have in principle, technical entitlement, the former abuse their subjects in the name of benevolence. We are baffled by these perplexing questions: If chiefs are custodians of the land, is the money they rip off subjects through 'thanksgiving' ploughed back into society? If chiefs do not own land but rather are only custodians, why should they compel their subjects to pay for what is not theirs in the first place? Besides, why should native people (the newly married couples) still fulfill thanksgiving requirements when they are already natives of that land by virtue of their fathers having done so years back?

⁹ The tragedy of the commons can be understood as the misuse/abuse of treasures that are communally owned that everyone has a legitimate entitlement to by virtue of being a native of that place. Chiefs misconstrue their subjects as commodities that they can own communally and trade for private gain.

In view of the critical questions raised above, we argue that Zimbabwean traditional chiefs and headman are abusing human rights through the veneers of custodianship and tradition. The General Assembly of the United Nations of 1948 adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (UDHR Summit, 2009) that entrenches civil rights and natural rights. One such right is the treatment of fellow human being with some dignity and respect. 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; when 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 (ibid).

The inhuman, unjust treatment of peasants and undermining of human dignity embodied in thanksgiving-a practice that nourishes the ego and feeds the insatiable desire for consumerism of chiefs serves as a living example of gross abuse of human rights. Subjects are denied the right to enjoy and maximize their utility from using land-“a public good,” that is natural and God given. This amounts to an arbitrary interference in the personal or private lives by another person. Yet article 2 of the UDHR declares that “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). *Kubika chiutsi* is, therefore, a cruel and inhuman treatment that violates the right to be treated fairly and with dignity.

Thanksgiving as benevolent despotism

Traditionally, African traditional chiefs were considered as the custodians of culture, land and other natural resources that belonged to the community. However, in Zimbabwe this custodianship has transformed into subtle forms of benevolent despotism where traditional leadership has assumed arbitrary power to exert their whimsical will on defenseless subjects reeling in abject poverty. Through their social construction as caregivers and stewards of the general populace, traditional leadership (as benevolent

caregivers) has manipulated these conceptions to assume absolute powers that usurp and abrogate the liberties of the governed.

Chiefs become benevolent despots who appropriate, sell land and adjudicate land disputes. The scandalous incidents of these land aristocrats abusing their powers in the name of thanksgiving, in particular selling land/space in monetary terms or through demands for material goods serves as paragons of benevolent despotism. God endowed natural resources, which should benefit the poorest in society, have fallen prey to the oligarchy. A recent incident of “Chief Chiyadzwa of Marange district in Manica who was allegedly caught in possession of 8kgs of diamonds” (Studio 7 News, 03/03/2010) is just a tip of an iceberg of shocking corrupt practices by land aristocrats meted on the productive potential of the agro based rural peasants. In this case, the Chief pleaded not guilty in the Mutare magistrate court claiming that the consignment was bequeathed to him by his late father (who was a chief), who secured it as thanksgiving from the so-called illegal miners/dealers. We interpret that granting illegal miners/dealers permission to exploit a national resource through kickbacks or bribes that chiefs euphemistically consider as thanksgiving amounts to gross abuse of traditional powers in the name of custodianship. It is also abuse of the traditional practice of thanksgiving itself -abuse of privilege (of being the royalty) and denotes unguided selfish ambition. This is because throughout history, national resources such as minerals were never offered as thanksgiving to chiefs. Rather, they were (are still) controlled by the Ministry of Mines and Energy, not traditional chiefs.

Thanksgiving as Daylight Robbery

We can draw an analogy of this practice, namely, being dispossessed of one’s own property by a robber who later sells the same property to its bona fide bearer. If robbery is condemned worldwide because of its denigrating and negative effects, we question why the same practice is permitted to prevail in the name of tradition and custodianship. In light of the above, we philosophize that *kubika chiutsi* is a paragon of daylight robbery and flogging of villagers’ source of livelihood.

Thanksgiving as killing the goose that lays golden eggs

Given that contemporary thanksgiving to chiefs and headmen is realized through meeting demands (like domestic herds, grain¹⁰, money and groceries)-treasures that take centre stage in peasant agricultural activity, it is clear that thanksgiving breaks the agricultural productivity cycle. Some very poor rural families depend on goats and chickens for manure for land productivity and horticulture, and on meager monetary base usually in form of remittances from urbanites for purchasing fertilizers and seeds. Traditional authority's demands are tantamount to killing the goose that lays golden eggs. By dispossessing the peasant farmers of their meager resources, the concept of *kubika chiutsi* shortchanges the productivity cycle, aggravates poverty situations in rural communities, and is overtly counterproductive.

Challenging the custom of thanksgiving: The Zimbabwean Rural Dilemma

In Zimbabwean societies and indeed the African societies in general, it is a truism that thanksgiving to chiefs (*kubika chiutsi*) can foster a cohesive and united society if pragmatically applied. That is, when founded on the foundations of custodianship, benevolence and gratitude expression, rather than sheer greed, abuse of privilege and selfish ambition. Due to the abuse and misinterpretation of thanksgiving in contemporary Zimbabwe, critics assert that it constitutes a crime against humanity as it perpetuates hierarchical social classes, deeply asymmetrical relations of power and simmering profiteering in what is supposedly an egalitarian society. Centrifugal forces of global consumerism are enacted and reproduced through the processes of glocal realities of chieftaincy that ride on the wave of custodianship and imputed benevolence.

We challenge this practice that seems deeply anchored in misinterpretation of the operation of canonical Biblical texts that present God (the supernatural, omnipresent and omniscient being who is the celestial dweller and controller of the universe) as the divine benevolent Father of mankind who controls the destiny of mankind and is the executor of divine providence. Chiefs misconstrue this as the same authority that is bestowed to them

¹⁰ In traditional agricultural systems like monoculture, harvested grain was often taken as seed for the following year as money for treated agricultural seed was often scarce.

by virtue of the position they occupy as cultural administrators that connects the living and the living dead/ the spiritual realm. Chiefs and headman have manipulated this opportunity to impose disguised ‘paternalism’ that is firmly rooted in unparalleled hegemony and self-enrichment. Yet, the original version of thanksgiving in the African culture as in biblical contexts is founded on notions the spirit of gratitude, good heart and altruism.

Thus, in contemporary times punctuated by economic turmoil in a dollarized economy in Zimbabwe, the poor villagers are caught in the horns of a dilemma. The dilemma is whether they could object to a practice traced from historical tradition as a source of socialization and blessing from the chiefs and the spiritual world on the one hand, and insulating themselves from self-aggrandizement of chiefs, on the other. Our conception of a dilemma identifies with Boss’ (1998:481) which is “a situation whereby one is required to make a decision on a contentious issue, but either the decision has serious or undesirable consequences.” As noted by Barker (1994:50), “a child is born culture-free; one is born into a culture”. While it is truism that one may assume the culture into which s/he is born, it is equally important to emphasise that breaking away from tradition is momentous for any normal human being. However, this cannot serve as a foundation for unjust human suffering especially even where alternatives are conceivably limited.

From this understanding, we argue that in such tension between preservation of tradition riddled with manipulations and continuity with global values of consumerism that threatens lives of the villagers, panaceas are hard to come by. In the light of the above, it is imperative that the Government of Zimbabwe and independent organizations intervene so that the traditional customary practice of *kubika chiutsi* is either absolved or reverted to its original foundations informed by goodwill and solidarity in society. *Zunde ramambo* (the chief’s field/village granary)¹¹ is one example of such customs that is informed by collective ownership and mutual dependence.

¹¹ In this custom, people of the same village/community come together and establish a common field, usually in the name of the chief, where they would grow their crops collectively. The harvested crop is kept at the chiefs’ palace as ‘reserve granary’ and would be used by villagers when drought strikes

Conclusion

This work has unraveled the concept of thanksgiving to chiefs exposing the different dimensions that it has assumed as it was constructed and evolved over the years in rural Zimbabwe. We have emphasized that traditional versions of *kubika chiutsi* were premised on bona fide benevolence, mutual dependence, and socialization into the values of a community. More importantly, traditional leadership played a crucial role of inducting new comers into the community who expressed their gratitude through their first harvest, a prototype of the Biblical practice of thanksgiving to God by Israelites for their first fruits.

In contemporary times in rural Zimbabwe, we have argued that some self-seeking chiefs and headmen have subtly hijacked the concept of thanksgiving to feed their ego and capitalist driven motives of consumerism. We have argued that the tensions and contradictions that surround the practices are several: the need to demonstrate allegiance to established traditional authority and poverty-stricken position of many of rural dwellers. More crucially, is the dilemma between resisting traditional practices that form the social fabric of the Shona culture, and the attended connection between observance of culture and the blessings from the spiritual world on one hand, and the consequences of resisting what can be conceived as chiefs' insatiable appetites for global consumerism and abuse of legitimate traditional office.

We have argued that thanksgiving has a potential to disrupt the agricultural productivity cycle, and it constitutes a violation of rural people's human rights and dignity that has to be confronted head-on. We have recommended that collaborative efforts by the government of Zimbabwe and civil society could cultivate civil education against the abuse of the practice. Alternatively, heavy fines could be imposed on offenders or the practice can be abolished wholesale if the former proves futile. However, it is also acknowledged that fear of victimization of their families by chiefs could also militate against subjects/rural people suing chiefs who abuse the custom. This is because given

the traditional form of the matter; the chiefs may turn out to be both the villain and adjudicator of the cases involving their excesses /abuses. Nevertheless, the paper suggests that civic education to villagers at grassroots level could instill some critical consciousness, awareness of human rights, and culprits brought to book.

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