

# African Psychotherapy and Family's Wellbeing: A Case Study of the Shona, Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

The role of African psychotherapy in promoting family well-being in Africa cannot be underestimated. This article analyses the role of traditional Shona healing practices and their influence on family well-being. Rooted in the rich cultural beliefs of the Shona people, these practices include herbal remedies, roots, rituals, and community support, highlighting the interconnectedness of social and spiritual dimensions. The Shona understanding of wellness includes familial relationships, where relatives, such as aunts and uncles, play essential roles during crises, while friends act as informal counsellors providing vital emotional support. The article also discusses African psychotherapy as a culturally relevant approach to holistic health, recognizing that psychological issues are often experienced within the family context. Healing is viewed as a communal effort, with traditional methods like divination, herbal treatments, and rituals central to the Shona approach to well-being. By exploring these practices, the article emphasizes the importance of cultural identity and community in addressing psychological and physical challenges. It advocates for integrating indigenous healing methods into contemporary psychological care, suggesting that such practices can enhance holistic family healing. Thus, the study emphasizes that understanding and utilizing traditional Shona healing practices can provide valuable insights into psychotherapy, especially in contexts where cultural beliefs significantly influence health issues. This approach not only honours the cultural heritage of the Shona people but also promotes a more inclusive and effective healthcare system.

## Introduction

The concept of psychotherapy is widely recognized as an important tool for addressing psychological challenges and promoting well-being. However, the Shona people offer a unique perspective on this practice, deeply rooted in their cultural and spiritual traditions. The traditional Shona healing techniques and approaches are anchored in a wider religious-cultural belief system; thus, they serve the needs of the Shona people. These practices in-

volve not only the administration of herbs but also rituals, sacrifices, dreams, symbolic representations, and family and community support. Social and spiritual orders are significant dimensions in maintaining personal and community health. The Shona healing practices offer profound insight and self-understanding to patients and families affected, thereby reducing stress and addressing physical and psychosomatic disorders. Traditional African hea-

ling strategies play a crucial role in upholding the family's well-being. In traditional Shona practices, wellness is derived from the cultural understanding of the roles of family, community, and the spiritual world in human welfare.

By contrast, western psychotherapy can be perceived as a science-based approach that is mainly oriented to concrete causes of illness [Jim, Fleg, Zuniga, & Straits, 2011]. This is different from

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African psychotherapy where healing strategies are partly spiritual based on the challenges of daily life construed as a product of metaphysical influences [Sanyanga 2024]. Amidst these differences, the current status of practising psychological counselling in Africa is largely Western-based, with most Africans, especially the Shona people still resorting to their traditional means of attaining mental stability. Charema and Shizha (2008) acknowledge that the majority of Zimbabweans still find relief from the traditional informal remedies alongside modern Western-informed health services. It is important to blend the two approaches as a comprehensive healing strategy that is accommodative to Africans.

From the perspective of African psychotherapy, familial relationships are often credited with promoting the family's well-being. The roles of aunts and uncles are acknowledged by the Shona people. Friendships are also regarded as a vital support service during difficult times. The significance of a friend is equated to that of a counsellor, as friends are entrusted with family secrets and consulted when problems arise. Additionally, elders and in-laws play important roles in resolving issues of concern among individuals. The family court system is highly regarded as one of the best approaches to settling family matters. The use of herbs is also considered effective for addressing physical maladjustments.

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## African Psychotherapy: Background

Africa has a rich heritage of what past generations thought, did, and passed on to their children [Mbiti 1975]. Since ancient times, families have faced various challenges and daily struggles, which were resolved through different solutions according to diverse cultural contexts. The general understanding of psychopathology among Africans has been perceived as deterministic; thus, chance and accidents are often underestimated, while personal problems are experienced and resolved within a family context [Sanyanga, 2024]. Indigenous approaches, which include divination, friendships, the use of herbs, and counsel from elders and others, tactfully capture the importance of family and community as modes of communication for therapy and moral values.

In the precolonial era, Africans had a strong sense of the importance of cultural self-identity [Wiredu, 2008]. Although colonialism distorted African culture to varying degrees and inflicted immense psychological, religious and social wounds, efforts were made after independence to reassert true African culture in promoting healing and reconciliation. The understanding among Africans that colonialism and its impact needed to be reviewed from an African standpoint is a clear indication of the positive benefits embedded in African culture for its people. Nyerere [1966] supported the call for Africanization and argued that in Tanganyika, and later in Tanzania, Africanization should take the form of a return to Ujamaa ('fraternity' in Swahili), which he described as a traditional African form of socialism. This African socialism was founded not on class struggle but

on the harmony of the extended family, relating to a healing strategy based on a nationalistic spirit that encompasses the family as an important unit in African culture.

For instance, in Zimbabwe, *hunhu* (personhood) is a term from the Shona language, which has the same meaning as *ubuntu* from the Nguni language. On that basis, "the attention one human being gives to another—thus the kindness, courtesy, consideration, and friendliness in the relationship between people; a code of behaviour, an attitude toward other people and life—is embodied in *Hunhu* or *Ubuntu*" [Samkange & Samkange, 1980: 39]. *Hunhu* communally upholds cultural values. Given this position, Beach [1994] notes that being in a family entails a high sense of belonging among the Shona, similar to many African cultures. Challenges and setbacks are part of a family; when one part is affected, the whole unit is affected as well [Kiminyo, 2004]. To live in harmony as a unit, the family endeavours to seek remedies to daily living problems for security and stability. Such remedies are typically traditional ones that stem from generational customs, as asserted by Manteiro-Ferreira [2014]. On that basis, it is evident how personhood or cultural identity, with all its values, can significantly impact the family's well-being. Mwiti and Al Duek [2007:224] reaffirm this: "Growing up in Africa is not just about growing up in Africa." This pertains to the values that African parents wish to impart to their children—attitudes that are authentic, tested, and tried. This focus becomes the goal of child training through early development and maturation, leading to a

unique socialized individual who can be approached distinctively when faced with challenges.

Ndlovu and Hove [2015] maintain that psychotherapy, as a healing process, has been a component of societies since time immemorial. They further attest that the Zimbabwean context is no exception, as problems existed and were solved long before the advent of professional counselling in the Ndebele and Shona communities. This is attested by the presence of counselling institutions in all human communities, where people share their sorrows, mentor, empower, and advise one another. The Shona people, however, utilize both traditional (informal) and modern counselling services, which are formalized. Focusing on this, the influence of Eurocentric counselling theory, research, and practice among the Shona people has sometimes demonized and oppressed individuals and groups whose cultures lie outside the Eurocentric counselling framework.



## Person and Community in African Traditional Thought

The African philosopher Menkit [1984], in his theory of person and community in traditional African thought, maintains that an individual is defined with reference to the surrounding community and social circumstances that shape the individual. He disputes the Western view that perceives a person as an abstract entity characterized as a lone individual. According to him, an individual comes to recognize himself as a person first by knowing his community. Full personhood is not simply given at the very beginning of one's life but is attained after one is initiated into society [Menkit 1984]. To attain this personhood, the rituals of incorporation and the principal necessity of learning the social rules by which the community lives are fundamental in transforming a person to attain social selfhood. This view differentiates African personhood from the Western view, thereby providing insight into how African psychotherapy can be significant in the African family context, suggesting its uniqueness.

African psychotherapy, referred to as 'African Indigenous counselling' or 'African traditional counselling,' can be defined as a sub-discipline within the currently more inclusive field of psychotherapy in Africa that is devoted to the study of the psychological healing systems indigenous to traditional communities in Africa [Madu et al., 1996; Nwoye, 2010:26–43]. African psychotherapy is also defined as the systematic study of the patterned ways, rituals, theories, and techniques invented in indigenous African communities for addressing the psychological needs and problems of living in the African world. There is a clear distinction between how psychological problems are managed from an African traditional perspective and a Western perspective. Whereas the Western perspective relies heavily on 'talking therapy' to empower the client, the African traditional perspective takes the responsibility for resolving the problem away from the client by performing mystic rituals and sometimes including others in treatment, such as extended family members, friends, and even ancestors.

In African psychotherapy, the natural and supernatural elements are inextricably interwoven, and health is not seen merely as a biological matter but as a bond between the human body and the soul in total harmony. Family well-being is characterized by the ability of every member to connect and manage daily challenges collectively. Therapies commonly employed in the African healing system include holding court systems, consulting elders, per-

forming rituals, using herbs, and involving familial relations in resolving issues of concern. Cultural healing strategies are important for the Shona; they strongly believe in them, making it difficult to separate these practices from their culture when offering assistance. The African therapies employ techniques similar to those used in Western psychotherapy, though adapted to cultural contexts.

African healing is partly spiritual since it is linked to causes such as misfortune, disease, and death [Kiminyo 2004]. The existence of all events to determinism, suggests that misfortunes are caused either by God, by humans, or by other powers beyond God. He credits healing in an African context to belief in the powers of God or ancestors, payment of compensation, and collective grieving. A family's well-being is not defined by the absence of problems but by the ability of the family to function normally, with all its members contributing to coping with disappointments, celebrating successes, and making decisions [Behnke & MacDermid, 2004]. Given the difficulty of defining individual well-being, defining and measuring family well-being is even more complex. One approach is to assume that family well-being is the sum of its parts; that is, if each individual in a family displays or reports positive well-being, the family's well-being would be considered high. In this approach, the unit of analysis is the individual, and conclusions about the family are drawn based on data from or about individuals and their experiences.

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Zimbabwe is unusual among African states because, despite its size, it has only two large ethnic groups: the Shona, which comprises 82% of the population, and the Ndebele, which accounts for 14%, along with non-African minorities and a few smaller ethnic groups such as the Tonga, Sena, Hlengwe, Venda, and Sotho [Beach 1993]. The Shona are further subdivided into groups based on modern adaptations of old names rather than historical reality. Among these groupings are the Manyika, Zezuru, Korekore, and Karanga, which are typically Shona in cultural values and customs, apart from differences in dialects and pronunciations [McFarland, 1995: 246; Beach, 1993]. Zimunya, in particular, is an area in the province of Manicaland in Zimbabwe, under the chieftainship of Chief Zimunya, where most practices are culturally oriented. Parents raise their children with initiation styles aimed at promoting cultural awareness, observance of taboos, living in harmony, using charms for protection against misfortunes, and participation in traditional rituals. Following this trend, there is clear evidence of a lifestyle that contains a deeply ingrained mindset geared toward solving problems or misfortunes in its own way.

Currently, the status of psychological counselling practice in Zimbabwe is largely Western-based. Modern scientific research has ignored the spiritual and social dimensions of traditional medicine [Dzingirayi 2022]. This alone indicates a lack of serious integration of the socio-cultural and religious beliefs of traditional African peoples into practice. While Kaela [2013] points out that it is challenging to separate religion from healing in the faith of the Shona people, the need to under-

stand this culture remains paramount. Given that the Shona are the largest single ethnic group in Zimbabwe, it is essential to determine the extent of African indigenous healing practices concerning family well-being.

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## The Role of African Psychotherapy on the Family's Well-Being

The concept of African psychotherapy, as articulated by Mbiti [1969], attests that Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its religious system with a set of beliefs and practices that permeate all aspects of life to such an extent that it is a challenge to isolate it. He further maintains that:

**“Wherever an African is, there is his religion; he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony, and if he is educated he takes it to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament” p. 2**

The view that Africans are deeply religious demonstrates how religion dominates the African mind. This can be accredited to the restoration of the force of life as the vital force of the moral orientation of African religion, which is unmistakable. For Magesa [1997:174], “whenever and wherever there is a diminishment of life, something must be done to restore it”. This reflects the significance of African healing to a community for the reinstatement of life. The family's well-being is determined by its ability to maintain a healthy balance emotionally, physically, economically, and spiritually. Conversely, if these attributes are not well stabilized, an unhealthy family will exist. The family will be considered ‘sick,’ and healing will be needed for the well-being of that family [Schwartz, 1997]. Suggestive of this, some African families endeavour to identify and address the root and source of their suffering to attain stability. There is a proverb in the Shona tradition

which states, Chiripo chariuraya, zizi harifi nemhepo, meaning ‘something has killed the owl; it cannot just be the wind’ (Masaka & Chemhuru [2011]; Zvarevashe [1970]). Apart from observable signs, there are always some underlying and unforeseen causes of disease and misfortune. The Shona people in Zimbabwe commonly relate their problems to either the hand of God, ancestors (vadzimu), witchcraft (varoyi), or evil spirits (mweya yetsvina). From this perspective, the Shona typically apply their traditional ways of identifying this causative ‘being’ to correct or reverse the problem collectively as a family.

There is an interrelatedness between intrinsic (psychic and immaterial) and extrinsic (social and material) factors that impact one's ability to both influence and respond to problems of daily living in an African context [Phillips 1990]. From an African worldview, the world is one of extraordinary harmony, which constitutes the natural order. This natural order implies that people's lives and relationships within and between lives are purposeful and orderly while being fundamentally spiritual. There is a clear interrelatedness of this with the family, where each member is dependent on the other, making it a unit of its own. This partly entails that if one part is not functioning well, the family will be out of order; hence, to maintain this natural order, there is a need for a remedy. Thus, specific cultural healing strategies become a solution. How then does an African family perceive a challenge, and what is done to settle this?

Events that happen or exist have a cause, and this cause is seen to have greater power and right than

or superior to the effect of the cause. For example, events such as birth, marriage, fertility, drought, or illness are said to be intentionally caused [Magesa 1997; Kiminyo 2004]. While this is mainly attributed to a person, divine or human, the cause of occurrence can be proved through divination, memory, reasoning, and judgment. Thus, it follows that chance and accidents are not emphasized in African society; thus, it is essential to find out, ‘What caused it?’, ‘Why did it happen?’, and ‘Who did it?’ In light of this, traditional strategies that align with African beliefs are preferred by some African families to facilitate wellness.

On that basis, healing from African worldviews encompasses knowledge and practices used in the diagnosis, prevention, and elimination of physical, mental, and social imbalances [Shange and Ross 2022]. These practices are based on knowledge derived exclusively from practical experiences and observations handed down from generation to generation, mostly orally. Approaches to healing from an African perspective, therefore, include practical and open relationships. The approach is directive, deals with the supernatural and natural worlds, focuses on who caused the problem, and aims at social cohesion [Kaela, 2013]. The restoration of health, whether mental or physical, from an African perspective—and Shona in particular—lies within the social, cultural, and historical contexts. The key question here concerns how African families heal after a misfortune such as death or any other problem that may arise.

## Healing Strategies Applied in African Psychotherapy

Given that, from African world-views, the root cause of wellness or ill health is partly explained in metaphysical terms, healers and their patients prefer directive treatments or mostly externally oriented methods, for example, rituals, cleansing, enactments, and sacrifices [Sanyanga, 2024; Meyer et al., 2003]. In traditional Shona practices, for example, wellness is derived from the cultural understanding of the role of family, community, and the spiritual world in human welfare. These healing strategies can be viewed as social methods and techniques in the Shona traditional healing practices that are spiritually based [Machinga 2011].

### *Kubata Maoko (Holding Hands)*

In dealing with the loss of a loved one, the act of kubata maoko (literately translated as ‘holding hands’) is supported as a useful strategy by all the participants involved. This practice is a unique Shona way of mourning the dead. When an individual dies in a family, the family members or immediate relatives gather in the specific home where the person has died and wait for all those who will come to offer condolences. Drums and lamentation songs are played throughout the day and night as people dance. Upon arriving at the mourning home, people echo a cry, and this is often performed by women. The other women who are already present at the house respond in the same tune of cry as they hold hands, an act called kubata maoko in Shona. After a while, the bereaved person or a family member will narrate the story of how the incident occurred. During the narration, there will be total silence followed by a loud cry after the narration. This process is repeated for everyone

who comes to the home. Close friends will imitate what was normally liked by the deceased and may sometimes wear the clothes of the late person to remind the mourners that the person is indeed gone, an act referred to as kumemera, which means imitation in Shona. All of this is part of the process of kubata maoko, providing significant consolation as it allows the mourners to navigate the grieving process with limited or no chances of denial, which might lead to problems in the future.

### *Use of Herbs, Roots, and Protective Charms*

In the Shona culture, traditional healers possess knowledge of herbs, roots, and even fruits that can prevent, protect, or cure diseases and pain [Machinga, 2011]. When people visit traditional healers, the first requirement for healing is to have confidence in the healer. Those seeking help must believe in the traditional healer’s supernatural powers, the healer’s ability to deal with unseen mysterious forces, and the healer’s capacity to convey messages from the spiritual world. These traditional healers employ various methods and techniques such as divination, cleansing rituals, protective charms, and herbs to cure and heal [Chavhunduka, 1994]. The traditional healers’ attire plays a significant role in healing rituals. Traditional healers wear impressive ritual dresses and surround themselves with ritual objects when performing healing rituals.

While some of these outfits consist of red colours with images of a lion (shumba) or a leopard (ingwe) among the Shona, this can impress clients and lead them to view the healers as skilled and powerful. Even their names ser-

ve as a technique to influence their patients. For example, the names include Mafirakureva (‘he who dies for the truth of exposing evil’), Ndambaguwa (‘he who exposes evildoers to the public’), and Hazvirovi (‘nothing can be concealed’), among others [Kaela, 2013]. The possibility of abusive and unscrupulous practitioners is sometimes unavoidable. The existence of the Zimbabwean National Association of Traditional Healers (ZINATHA) acts as a watchdog, mandating that every traditional healer register with the association.

Charms are produced by medicine men and women from materials such as herbs, roots, bark, insects, skins, bones, and animal horns [Gehman 2002]. These objects are empowered magically through the repetition of specific words, a chanting style that the Shona refer to as kudetemba. These charms and herbs are believed to be useful in attracting a lover, gaining employment, protecting from witchcraft, accumulating wealth, preventing illness, and many other purposes. Among the Shona people, the effectiveness of charms or herbs depends on the materials used and the words employed in administering them [Chavhunduka, 1994].

Among the commonly used herbs and charms in Shona culture, the most popular preventive medicine for spiritually influenced chronic illnesses is a type of plant called chifumuro (‘exposer’), which is believed to possess magical power, making a person involuntarily confess evil intentions whenever he or she comes into contact with someone who has it. The Shona typically carry this with them when going to public places

for protection, and children going to boarding schools are also given it for protection against evil. The chifumuro root is tied onto a fiber or a string prepared from the bark of a tree that the diviner recommends and is worn around the waist or neck of children; for elders, it is usually carried in their pockets. This charm (dumwa) is suggested to be both curative and preventive.

### *Divination*

Divination is a process conducted by a diviner or traditional healer to unveil the mysteries of human life [Mbiti 1969]. He or she is equated to a psychiatrist, counsellor, and healer of human miseries using ancestral and/or spiritual powers in African tradition. Geh-

man [2005] defines a diviner as a specialist who seeks to diagnose disease or discover solutions to problems through the manipulation of objects using various techniques and employing items such as divining stones, seeds, nuts, and gourds. Diviners receive communication through dreams and visions from the spirit world. While the process of divination in Africa is carried out in various ways, Kaela [2013] credits the aspect of divination in Shona traditional religion as a group affair rather than an individual and private endeavour. Diviners are said to insist on group consultations for transparency and to resolve social conflicts that might underlie sickness, allowing a family to consult as a group. The diviners

use connotations such as ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to understand their client’s problems collectively. A visit to the diviner is usually an agreement among family members, and the feedback they receive from the diviner is typically based on a common goal. This can be compared to group counselling, where a counsellor facilitates a group of individuals who may have a common challenge, employing various skills to enable healing. Although a diviner might not be trained as a counsellor, some of the techniques he or she applies greatly benefit the psychological well-being of individuals. For instance, questioning and probing help the client understand his or her problem and provide a gateway to finding solutions.

## The Role of Spiritual and Familial Relationships

The traditional Shona believe in the spiritual world; everything in nature originates from One God, whom they call Mwari (‘God’), Musikavanhu (‘God the Creator of Humanity’), or Samasimba (‘God Almighty’). Mwari communicates with humanity through guardian and territorial spirits, who act as mediators between humans and God. The ancestral spirits appear through spirit mediums. Interaction with God and ancestral spirits is made possible by performing rituals and ceremonies and connecting with the non-local world through these spirit mediums. The notion of the non-local world and beyond-self experiences is central to Shona culture. Among the Shona, the physical world is seen and controlled by a hierarchy of spiritual beings, each

with its specific functions, and everything is understood in terms of this structured spiritual world [Mbuyayesango 2001]. Hence, certain challenges are viewed not only as physical or psychological but as spiritual sicknesses, which can only be treated by engaging the spiritual world. From this perspective, it is evident that spirituality influences the Shona people’s way of handling daily challenges.

### *Reconciliation*

When one wrongs another in Shona circles, it is commonly believed that the result is experiencing bad luck or illness. To atone for this, the family is told to brew millet beer, slaughter beasts, and gather with the adversary’s family to appease the ancestral spirits through a process called Bira. Bira is a ri-

tual involving an offering of beer to appease the ancestors. The ritual is supposed to be attended by all members of the lineage and involves honouring the common ancestors through songs and dance to suspend all the social differences that gave rise to illness [Kaela, 2013]. When the individual’s problem has lessened, cleansing and confessional rituals are performed at the family’s homestead. The family will be requested to participate in a communal reparation ritual, and the families of the stranger spirits are invited to the pacifying ceremony. By involving the family, the care of the whole results in optimal balance, strength, and resilience within the family system.

### *The Role of Tete, Sahwira, and the Family Court System*

The figure of the tete ('aunt') in Shona tradition plays and still plays, a crucial role in counseling, especially for young ladies. She is usually the father's sister and, in some cases, is referred to as baba vechikadzi ('female father'). The aunt is to constantly give advice to her brother's children from a very young age through marriage. She plays a pivotal role of guidance in her brother's family and would be constantly called upon in times of need. Gelfand [1979] notes that girls are similarly taught by their aunts (vana tete) and grandmothers (vana mbuya), to be chaste until they get married. Girls are taught how to sit modestly, when to keep aloof from males, what to say and what not to say in the presence of the opposite sex, how to react to courting proposals, how to behave toward a boyfriend, how to behave when married, to avoid annoying her husband, to control her temper in general, and to avoid sexual intercourse until married and adultery. The aunt does not only play an advisory role to her brother's children but also to her brother's marriage. She is often called upon to solve disputes between her brother and his wife.

Friendship is a very effective civic bond among the Shona, hence the ancient proverb hushamwari hunokunda hukama, meaning 'friendship is much stronger than blood ties' [Hamutyinei & Planner, 1987]. The Shona people of Zimbabwe have a cultural way of ensuring problems are discussed, which helps especially when a professional counsellor is not available. This phenomenon is known as the 'Sahwira culture,' where a Sahwira ('a close friend of a family or someone') becomes a listener or mediator during a time

of predicament or bereavement. A Sahwira is confided in by a family or one of the spouses and is better equipped to solve their problems, whether marital or otherwise. A Sahwira acts as a counsellor per se because he or she knows everything about the friend, to the extent that when the friend dies, he or she becomes instrumental in showing others what the deceased used to like or do. In times of marital problems, the Sahwira is the one to whom both spouses go for marital counselling. According to Gladding [2018], counselling involves the "discussion of a problem that usually has emotional content with an individual to help the individual cope with it better." In this way, the marital problem, which has extensive emotional content, is shared with the Sahwira and the affected party. Thus, Sahwira can be equated to a counsellor who helps the family balance their emotions.

Another important system is the family court (dare repamusha), which is understood as a private court session between members of a single family or between two families of the same extended family [Gwavaranda, 2011:148-155]. The family head or aunt presides over the case to bring justice to feuding parties without involving members of the public. Regarding the concept of law in Africa, Ramose [1999] views ubuntu as signifying the philosophical family atmosphere prevailing among indigenous African people. The purpose of law and the related court system is to promote unity, togetherness, and harmony, which are clear traits of the family atmosphere. This can contribute to the well-being of the family, thereby making the court system a form of therapy. Family therapy is a form of psychotherapy that seeks to reduce distress and conflict

by improving the systems of interactions between family members [Lebow and Stroud 2016]. In this perspective, the head of the family or aunt plays the role of a family therapist. With family counseling, problems are viewed as patterns or systems that need adjusting, as opposed to viewing problems as residing in the person. Focusing on this, there is a clear indication of the importance of this court system toward the well-being of the family.

### *Health Rituals and Cleansing Rituals*

A ritual is a specific behaviour, action, or activity that gives symbolic expression to certain feelings and thoughts of the actors individually or as a group [Rando 1988]. It may be a habitually repetitive behaviour or a one-time occurrence and may be performed publicly or privately. In the African context, rituals are understood as a way of communicating something of religious significance through words, symbols, and actions. As there are various rituals performed in the African context, "health rituals are always a major concern" [Mbiti, 1975: 139]. These rituals are directed at ensuring good health, healing, and protection. By contrast, cleansing or fumigation is a typical treatment strategy in the traditional African perspective. Cleansing treatment is performed to remove the causes of presenting problems or ill health, either from the inside or outside of the body of the patient and from the environment of the patient. The Shona have a common concept called mamhepo, referring to evil spirits. When an individual is challenged in any way, he or she credits this to evil spirits and their works. The result is to seek rituals to atone for such. From this perspective, the desire to visit a psychotherapist



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fulfil funeral rites to avoid causing any offence to the departed, also called the ancestors or the living dead [Mbiti 1975]. For example, there is a funeral ritual intended to publicly acknowledge that a death has occurred.

According to Chiremba and Rukuni [2002], cultural mourning practices in Zimbabwe seem to promote bereavement counselling. The Shona cultural practices behind this include Shisahwira ('friendship'). A person called Sahwira leads the grieving process. This individual engages in various antics that make the family laugh. In this mourning style, friends of the deceased or bereaved will dance, shout, sing, and even dramatize the character of the deceased. If the deceased were a prostitute, a drunkard, a pastor, or a respected businessperson in the community, they would dramatize what the deceased used to do. The laughter serves as a great antidote to the heavy, depressing atmosphere that can develop at funerals, which is tiring and debilitating. The release of tension through laughter balances the atmosphere, gives the mourners renewed energy to complete the task of burial, and reduces stress and emotions, as the bereaved may even end up laughing, thereby moving from a stressful moment to a lighter one, which promotes psychological adjustment [Rugonye & Bukaliya, 2016].

Among the Shona, the cause of depression is often attributed to a preoccupation with the memories of the deceased, coupled with a lack of support from others and loneliness during and after the burial of the closest relative.

for help with psychological balance is similar to this attitude among the traditional Shona. Such cleansing rituals include a rigorous dancing ceremony where the dancers adorn themselves with ritual outfits unique to different family spirits. Examples of these include red outfits and long chains of red, black, white, and blue beads hanging loosely from their necks onto their chests [Kaela, 2013]. This healing remedy is considered effective among the Shona, as individuals, together with their families, are usually regarded as clean afterwards.

### *Mourning Rituals*

Mourning the dead is a practice mediated by religious and cultural practices in different societies [Maloka 1995]. This usually involves core beliefs and customs, spiritual practices, and certain expected behaviours that symbolize mourning the death of a loved one. For example, when a death has occurred, there are prescribed behaviours and rituals performed, such as what is worn, how the bereaved are addressed, how feelings should be dealt with, and what will be done to symbolize the separation of the deceased from the people who are left behind [Parkes et al., 1997]. In African societies, meticulous care is taken to

When bereaved, some individuals experience delayed or aborted grieving, which can, in turn, give rise to suicidal ideations. Among the Shona, grieving individuals are easily recognized by wearing black clothes or shaving their heads. This is done for identification as the bereaved so that people can easily recognize and empathize with them. While this act is viewed culturally, it helps bring awareness into one's cognition that he or she is bereaved. This also helps people in the community identify and console the bereaved, thereby providing them with the necessary support needed to cope with grief.

### *The Role of Folktales and Taboos*

Among Shona society, folktales are a part of everyday life. These folktales are mainly concerned with sustaining relationships and maintaining and indoctrinating peaceful coexistence between individuals and groups within communities [Chitando, 2008; Mazuruse 2010]. According to the Shona past folktales (ngano) feature a lot of characterization involving both human and animal characters. In these characters, there are heroes representing virtues triumphing over villains who signify vices. Tsodzo [1992] outlines three major types of ngano and their purposes in Shona culture: ngano dzemhuka ('folktales with animals as characters'), ngano dzavanhu nemhuka ('folktales with both human and animal characters'), and ngano dzavanhu chete ('folktales with human characters only').

In the traditional Shona culture, folktales are usually narrated during recreational times around the fire as a family sits together before going to bed. Gombe [2006] states the importance of ngano as a socialization method on issues such as conflict, wisdom, and selfishness among others, to young people, as no area of Shona's life is beyond the scope of ngano. Following this, folktales help correct the way people perceive things around them and acquire good attitudes. In a way, these folktales can be seen as a form of psychoeducation for the Shona people. Psychoeducation as a therapeutic focus in which clients learn practical and positive emotional and behavioral skills to improve life adjustment, management of emotions, and self-awareness. Through folktales, people learn valuable life skills for managing their behavior, emotions, and relationships, ultimately improving their mental health through practical life skills strategies [Belmont 2016].

Taboos (zviera) are typically applied in a family setup as a strategy for teaching children societal norms and promoting one's security. Tatira [2000] acknowledges taboos (zviera) as avoidance rules that forbid members of the human community from performing certain actions, such as eating some kinds of food or walking on or visiting some sites regarded as sacred. For the Shona people, taboos are understood as specific rules that forbid people from performing certain actions; otherwise,

the performance of such forbidden actions negates the moral code governing human conduct. Examples of some of these taboos, as cited by Tatira [2000], include:

**“ukarova mai unozotanda botso (if you beat your mother, you will become a ritual beggar), ukawetera mumvura hauzozvari (if you urinate in water, you will fail to conceive), ukadya zvakatonhora semunya unonzwa mabayo (if you eat cold leftover food, you will suffer from pneumonia), and ukapfira musope unozvara musope (if you spit upon the sight of an albino, you will conceive one).”**

Violators of the Shona moral code as contained in taboos are said to invite misfortunes, both for the community and themselves, such as bad luck, disease, drought, and death [Chemhuru and Masaka 2010]. For this reason, taboos impact people's behavioural patterns, promoting good behaviour among individuals from childhood to adulthood. Among the many influences on people's behaviour, the patterns of thinking and acting instilled in them as children are fundamental to their instinctive patterns of behaviour in adulthood [Bourdillon, 1976]. In this case, formal patterns of thinking in the form of taboos are introduced and inculcated into the minds of children from a young age as a way of promoting good behaviour that also encompasses sound familial ethics.

## **The Effects of Shona Healing Approaches on the Family's Well-being**

To determine the well-being of the family, the emotional, social, spiritual, and physical domains are vital. Despite the existence of formal counselling, African healing approaches still play an important role in maintaining the family's well-being. The cultural healing strategies remain significant in the modern world of the Shona people. The African healing strategies are effective, and people believe in them. The collectivity of the Shona in facing a challenge is a key approach to daily difficulties. As Magesa [1997] notes, “Whenever and wherever there is diminishment of life, something must be done to restore it.” The cultural healing practices are not always effective, as they sometimes fail; hence, they need a replacement. In addition to this, some strategies seem to be only a belief system that individuals endeavour to uphold to attain peace.

### *Emotional Well-being*

According to the Shona traditional culture, rituals have the power to help patients and families disengage from negatives and intentionally focus on creating positive emotional states. For instance, offering sacrifices to ancestors demonstrates respect for the ancestral spirits, ensuring protection from spiritual entities and creating a sense of security. Daugherty and Hlubocky [2008: 85] state: “When we have a thought or feeling, the brain responds by releasing corresponding neurochemicals. The parts of the brain that are involved in emotion are rich receptors for those chemicals.” Feeling guilty after wronging a neighbour usually brings distress, which further affects one's thoughts and feelings; thus, performing some rituals helps in emotional-somatic discharge

and cognitive awareness of one's surroundings. The rituals that the family participates in purify and discharge adverse thoughts, thereby restoring balance and positive inner experiences. Observing taboos promotes psychological security, hygiene, and respect for others in the family and community at large [Tatira 2000].

Conversely, the divination process involves questions to which clients respond with a ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ depending on what they agree on [Kaela, 2013]. This can be seen as a probing technique aimed at giving the diviner clues about the problem to provide proper treatment while enabling the client to internalize his or her problems as part of the healing process, as discussed previously. By involving many people through the divination process in search of the problem, the issue thereby becomes a family problem, not just an individual's problem, relieving the individual psychologically from the burden of illness. Bourdillon [1996] point out that divination is also a time when social problems underlying the sickness may be sorted out, thus reducing anxiety in the patient and setting the individual, together with the family, on the path to discovery.

### *Social, Spiritual, and Physical Well-being*

In the Shona culture, bira is a communal ritual aimed at removing the responsibility of illness from the patient. All households of the extended family are expected to contribute grain to be used for brewing the ritual beer [Jakarasi, 2024]. Building on what has been discussed earlier, the bira ritual helps in resolving social tensions that may be underlying the illness of an individual, promoting unity

among family members and strengthening social ties. The songs and dances can also be considered a cathartic experience aimed at releasing emotional tension and facilitating peace and happiness. This indicates that traditional festivals do not only serve as entertainment but also as outlets for tensions or sources of healing. As Kilonzo and Hogan [1999] note, each ritual in the traditional mourning process has a deep psychological function. Mourning rituals serve multiple functions for the family of the bereaved. In traditional African religious cultural practices, mourning rituals address both the needs of the family and the community. For example, people come to terms with the reality of death during the funeral, and the community's traditional, ethnic, or religious identity is reaffirmed, thus aiding in social well-being.

The traditional Shona healing practices are based upon various cultural-religious beliefs; thus, health and healing practices are interrelated with traditional cultural beliefs [Sanyanga, 2024]. The traditional Shona believe that all around human nature lie broader realities in the form of boundless spiritual worlds, which influence human welfare in various ways. For the Shona, health is not merely the absence of disease but also harmony and a correct relationship with the surrounding boundless spiritual worlds. Maintaining healthy relationships with the natural and supernatural promotes the spiritual well-being of a family. Rituals and festivals in African tradition are religious ways of implementing the values and beliefs of society, and “without them, African life will be dull” [Mbiti, 1975: 143]. This is an important

way of nourishing individuals spiritually, thereby facilitating the spiritual well-being of a family at large. This can be seen as one of the existential therapies that help promote healing and forgiveness among families by focusing on the belief that inner conflict within a person [Wong, 2010].

Physical and mental health is normally promoted by the availability of adequate life-sustaining and life-enhancing resources such as food and tools, as well as by a stable and peaceful environment [Chimuka 2001]. The emphasis on *kugara kunzwana* ('mutual understanding and respect'), according to Chimhundu [1980], shows that Shona's conduct is guided by the need to avoid excesses. From the communal activities performed in the Shona cultural context, it can be noted that the physical well-being of the family is promoted. The Shona believe that life is like a heavy load that cannot be easily carried by one person [Gelfand 1981]. This realization necessitates a group approach to the challenges of life, thereby lessening emotional tension and promoting physical well-being.



Shona Boy, July 2012 © Gerhard Huber

## Conclusion

This paper analyzed the role of African psychotherapy on the family's well-being, with reference to the Shona of Zimbabwe. The paper has demonstrated the need for the modification of African healing strategies by packaging herbs in neat containers with labels and instructions on how to use them. The practical formalization of African healing therapies and their introduction into the formal health care system, with continued sensitization, are important ways of improving African healing systems. Updating people with current information on how to cope with challenges that cannot be addressed through cultural practices is also vital. The contribution of the family to one's well-being can be of great help in difficult moments; hence, working toward the cohesiveness of the family system can enhance the effectiveness of African healing systems. Moreover, the importan-

ce of applying a variety of strategies allows traditional healers and users to select the proper strategies that best suit the problem for effective healing. There may also be a need to establish institutes that study and conduct research for the promotion of these cultural strategies. Appreciating the richness of Shona culture is another recommendation. Furthermore, the integration of cultural strategies in professional counseling can accommodate clients whose worldviews lie outside the Eurocentric one, making them feel accepted and understood. From that perspective, it might be vital for cultural figures who help the people to receive short courses or workshops for the enhancement of cultural healing strategies amid this changing world. Traditional practices such as *kubata maoko* during moments of grief can be strengthened among the Shona, as they promote the grieving process.

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