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Muroora – reflections on women and taboo in Zimbabwe

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1. Introduction[1]

Language taboo in Africa with regard to in-law relationships is a classical topic in anthropological linguistics. This has often been discussed with regard to so-called avoidance languages, where women use a special linguistic register to avoid their in-laws' names and similar sounding words (words that start with the same syllable as the name concerned). There are several well-known cases of this phenomenon in Africa, among them *Hlonipha* and *Ballishsha*. *Hlonipha* ('respect') or *isiHlonipho* is a respectful register used by speakers of Southern African Nguni languages. Similarly, *Ballishsha* is used by Kambaata women in Southern Ethiopia (Treis 2005);[2] it is a linguistic register that provides the women with linguistic strategies and vocabulary to avoid their father- and mother-in-laws' names and words that start with the same syllable.

Scholars such as Treis (2005) and Herbert (1990) have looked at avoidance registers within their cultural and social contexts and

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[1] I am grateful to the Zimbabweans who shared their perspectives on communicative and cultural backgrounds and aspects of in-law relations with me. In particular, I want to thank Helen Kauma, who invested time in helping me understand the complex communicative practices of Zimbabweans in this context.

[2] As Treis (2005: 293) states, the avoidance register is also used by female speakers of other languages in the Southern Ethiopian region.

have described other practices and behavior in these contexts, while the linguistic register has been in the focus. This short contribution aims to add to this thematic by reflecting on other communicative practices, in particular silence, ritual and non-verbal communication. The focus is on women in Zimbabwe, with particular regard to practices and ideologies among the maShona. In chiShona, the term *muroora* 'daughter/sister in law', lit. 'the one that was paid dowry for/the one that was married' is charged with complex conceptualizations that express the prescribed and desired social roles of a wife with regard to her in-laws.[3] While this discussion centers on the *muroora* and her respectful behavior towards her in-laws, it should be highlighted that there are certain taboos and prescribed behavioral norms for the *mukwasha* 'son/brother-in-law' as well; e.g. he will also most likely avoid his parents-in-laws' personal names and is (more or less) obliged to comply with his mother-in-law's requests (i.e. it would be relatively taboo for him to reject her request). The latter custom is applied to the extent that women who are in need of a favor (e.g. the help to carry something) will call a younger male stranger *mukwasha* in order to pledge him to accept her request by creating a fictive in-law relationship.

The present paper will make only a preliminary attempt at broadening the perspective on women, in-laws, avoidance and taboo/respect in Africa beyond the widely discussed context of specific avoidance registers. As cultural and social practice, taboo is always connected and/or complementary to social norms and prescribed behavior (what is taboo <-> what is expected), silence (what may not be said) as well as ritualized and anticipated (i.e. expected) communicative behavior. The next section will give an overview of women, taboo and in-law relationships in Africa, and in Zimbabwe in particular, before turning to silence, ritual communication and non-verbal communication. It is striking (or maybe not) that many works on taboo, especially with regard to African societies, tend to focus on women's practices and social rules restricting their behavior. While this paper sheds light on this dimension of taboo, too, a short discussion of gender and perspectives in the final section will raise some questions about this view and attempt to invert some of the dominant viewpoints by opening up perspectives for further research.

2. Taboo and in-law relationships

There are many different contexts and implications for taboo, which can be manifested in various cultural, social, political, religious or economic domains. Allan and Burridge define taboo as

> a proscription of behaviour that affects everyday life. […] Taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury. […] Infractions of taboos can lead to illness or death, as well as to the lesser penalties of corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism or mere disapproval. Even an unintended contravention of taboo risks condemnation and censure; generally, people can and do avoid tabooed behaviour unless they intend to violate a taboo. (Allan and Burridge 2006: 1)

[3] Pongweni elucidates: "The bachelor represented by the *munyai* [intermediary] has made a decision 'to marry', *ku-roora*, a transitive verb, while the girl has agreed 'to be married', *ku-roorwa*, as passive participant. Further, her parents will, after the success of the negotiations, 'have been married for', *ku-roorerwa*, a verb in the benefactive" (Pongweni 1996: 104).

They specify later that "[t]aboo refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts" (ibid.: 11). Taboo, especially in the context of classical anthropological studies, following the perspective established by James Cook through his experiences in Polynesia, can thus refer to numerous different types of social and communicative behavior. One of the ways in which taboo manifests itself linguistically is through avoidance speech, i.e. a linguistic strategy of dealing with a taboo: "Avoidance speech styles help prevent conflict in relationships that are potentially volatile" (Allan and Burridge 2006: 9). As mentioned above, there are several described cases of in-law avoidance registers in Africa, including Hlonipha in Southern Africa and Ballishsha in Southern Ethiopia. Both of these practices are, however, as the respective authors state, declining and often not practiced by younger women anymore (for a discussion see Treis 2005: 315-18). I anticipate, based on observations of women's respectful behavior towards their in-laws, that while the linguistic avoidance register might disappear, certain taboos and connected practices, such as avoiding calling the in-laws by their given names, will prevail due to the importance of family relationships and the expression of respect in some societies.[4]

The practices around *Hlonipha* and other in-law avoidance practices center on the proscription against using the name of one's father- and/or mother-in-law (Finlayson 1981; Herbert 1990). This is connected to conceptualizations of personal names with regard to identity and power relationships. In fact, while this section focuses on avoidance language and in-laws, it is important to point out that taboo often affects names and naming practices, not only with regard to in-laws. Allan and Burridge write:

> One's name is an inalienable part of one's identity; it is the essence of self and it is a means by which one is known to one's fellows. An assault on one's name is treated as comparable with, or even worse than, an assault on one's body. So names are tabooed in many communities. Calling a name risks malevolence falling on the name-bearer and the caller. […] Inappropriate naming, name-calling and addressing is subject to censoring and censorship. (Allan and Burridge 2006: 125)

Herbert (1990) states that Hlonipha, although it also affects men's behavior and communicative practices to a certain extent, is mostly practiced by women, for whom social regulations are stronger. For instance, while nobody is allowed to call a chief by his name, and children do not use their parents', aunts' and uncles' personal names, a woman must avoid the name of her father-in-law and usually also does not use the names of her mother-in-law and her husband. She also avoids eye contact with her parents-in-law. Other regulations for her include the covering of her head and breasts in the presence of her parents-in-law, restrictions on the places she is allowed to enter and stay in in her father-in-law's homestead, and restrictions on food preparation and consumption (Herbert 1990; see also Finlayson

[4] With regard to Zimbabwe, for example, some of my interview partners have expressed that while certain cultural practices change and adapt over time through globalization, social change, urbanization etc., the significance of respect among many maShona may even be increasing and becoming significant in new contexts with regard to in-law relations or marriage, for example with regard to current trends in *roora* ('dowry') negotiations.

1981). Allan and Burridge (2006: 129) explain the taboo on the father-in-law's name:

> Note that it is the sound of the name, and of all syllables within it, that must be avoided. This is because calling a name draws attention to the name-bearer, and also to the caller. To use a male in-law's name draws attention to the name-bearer and puts him at risk.

And because the wife (like in other patrilocal societies) gets married into the husband's homestead, she is marked as an outsider:

> Any behaviour that focuses attention on her is disallowed: a wife is not permitted to talk loudly or to call out (to a child, for instance; she has to get another child to do this). The wife must avoid drawing attention to herself. Because she retains allegiance to her birth group and their ancestors, she is an outsider. (ibid.)

A specific linguistic practice connected to this taboo is the use of a special register to avoid the pronunciation of tabooed names and syllables and through that to express respect. In avoidance languages, several strategies are employed to change words or create new ones, in order to avoid the tabooed names of the in-laws. Allan and Burridge (2006: 127-28) mention

> [e]uphemisms […] created by circumlocution, phonological modification, extending the meaning of a near-synonym (thus reintroducing rarely used words into the basic vocabulary), borrowing from another language, or even […] coining a new word.

Women practicing Hlonipha usually do not call their parents-in-law by their names and will not only avoid their father-in-law's name but also words that start with the same syllable. The linguistic register of Hlonipha therefore contains lexemes (borrowed or creatively coined) and paraphrases which replace numerous words, especially nouns (Herbert 1990). Married women in Ethiopia practicing Ballishsha will not utter the names of their (senior) in-laws and also avoid words that start with the same syllable. Treis (2005) describes a number of strategies that make up the Ballishsha register, including a core vocabulary that consists of (not recently) borrowed and coined words ("semantic doublets"), periphrasis and derivation, the use of synonyms and semantically similar words, antonyms, borrowings, and a term denoting 'the unspeakable' (Treis 2005).

In Zimbabwe, no avoidance language or register has been described to date. However, there are taboos and behavioral proscriptions in several domains, including in-law relationships. Among the maShona, many *varoora* will avoid the names of her parents-in-law, and probably also of her brothers- and sisters-in-law (especially when they are older), but above all the name of her father-in-law is highly taboo for her. While there is no avoidance language or register[5], she will use other respectful titles, in particular kinship terms, to address him appropriately. However, while the focus here and in many other discussions is on women and cultural or social norms regulating women's behavior, men are also affected by these taboos concerning in-law relationships (and other social relationships, for instance with regard to social status). For example, there is also a taboo

[5] At least in a synchronic perspective.

against men calling their mother-in-law by her name; many men will also avoid eye-contact and will use respectful kinship terms and titles to address their (older) in-law family.

The social roles and expectations of the *muroora* are often highlighted and sometimes discussed in family meetings and even in popular media such as music (for a recent example see for instance the song *Type ye mababy* 'type of girls' by the singer Nox) or movies (for example the films *Neria* [1993], based on a novel by Tsitsi Dangarembga, or *Lobola* [2010]). The popularity of "the *muroora*" as a social figure and cultural theme testifies to the significance and value of in-law relationships and of women in general. The complex guidelines that a *muroora* is supposed to follow and fulfill aim at expressing respect to her in-laws and also being respected by them in return. Especially at the beginning of the marriage, when she is still in the complex process of becoming a member of her husband's family, and her parents-in-law do not yet know her very well, her behavior is often monitored and judged. Taboo in this context is a complex matter that involves several different aspects of proscribed behavior and communication. It may involve domains such as addressing, praising, physical movement and positioning in the homestead, food preparation and consumption, among others. It should be highlighted that these cultural practices and social roles are not merely rules to reprimand women, but serve as social strategies for establishing family relationships, constructing identities and negotiating power relations. A *muroora* can and does also play with those social norms and respectful behavior for her own benefit, and can gain social prestige and power through her in-law agency. In the following, we will briefly look at three aspects that are connected to communication between a *muroora* and her husband, as well as in-laws.

3. Silence

In general, there is an ideal of the virtuous *muroora* as a quiet and pious woman. Hence, while the previous contributions discussed above have focused on linguistic practices, there is also the significant aspect of silence. If a *muroora* practices silence in appropriate contexts (in particular social situations and family conversations) she will usually be respected and even praised by her in-laws. If she is very talkative and voices her opinions in front of her parents-in-law (especially in the first phase of the marriage) she could be regarded as rude and disrespectful. In that regard, there are also issues that she should not mention directly to her parents-in-law or maybe even to her husband in some instances. If she wants to communicate particular things with her in-law family, especially problematic issues, there are social regulations for this: her *tete* (her father's sister) will serve as a mediator between her and the in-laws and is her contact person whenever she wants to discuss marriage issues. The *tete* is in the social position of expressing criticism to her niece's in-laws and assisting in negotiating. Therefore, while silence in general is seen as a virtuous trait, silence in a particular communicative situation can be a strategy to approach a social issue through another communicative channel or mediator.

Silence in this context is not only a social constraint on the *muroora* but can also be used by her as a communicative tool to strengthen family ties and exploit other communicative channels (such as indirect communication and

speaking to other family members, such as younger sisters-in-law). In other words, while one might easily judge silence as a reprimand, it can also be a powerful tool employed by the *muroora* to achieve a certain reaction or effect, for instance to please members of the in-law family, to construct an identity as a modest wife or to actively withdraw from harmful (communicative) situations. In this regard, silence is an agentive means of communication that is meaningful in specific social contexts and that can create different effects in people's lives. Silence can mean so many different things: it can express agreement or disagreement, consent or disapproval; it can signal a thinking process or a refusal to react. In that regard, silence is never non-communication but is employed by the *muroora* as a statement that might be more complex to unpack than actual speech.

4. Ritual communication

Ritual communication can be an important means of constructing social relationships and identity in Zimbabwe (see Hollington forthcoming) and elsewhere. Forms of address and greetings have already been mentioned and fall into this category. A culturally significant form of ritual communication among the maShona (and beyond) is praise poetry. There are different kinds of chiShona praise poetry, the most common one being clan praise poetry, which focuses on the clan's totem (see for instance Hodza & Fortune 1979; Pongweni 1996). These and other praise poems have specific contexts of usage in marriages, where they are often recited by spouses as an expression of gratitude. A *muroora*, in this context, is expected to learn the clan praises of her husband's clan and totem and to be able to recite them in appropriate situations (e.g. when receiving something from her husband). It is often expected especially for a woman to be able to recite the poem of her husband's totem. Building on Hodza's work, Pongweni writes: "the bride who failed to reciprocate poetically was sent back to her people with the label 'inefficiency' for re-education" (Pongweni 1996: 16). In this context, not knowing or not being able to recite the clan praise poem can be regarded as a breaking of taboo. This shows that taboo is not only about refraining from doing or saying something or using alternative linguistic practices (such as avoidance language), but also a lack of knowledge and ability to perform something that is expected.

Apart from clan praise poetry, there is also love and "bedroom" poetry, which married partners use to thank and appreciate each other. This form of poetry draws on images and figurative language for the sexual act, in which "[m]ale DOES female" and "[f]emale is DONE by male" (Chimhundu 1995: 149), which partners use to praise each other. Socially and culturally defined gender roles underlie these kinds of poems. Apart from the sexual act, women in this kind of poetry, as well as in other forms of chiShona literature, are praised for "beauty, fertility, dignity, kindness, generosity, loyalty and hard work" (ibid.: 151). Learning the social roles prescribed for women in maShona societies is part of the socialization process, in which oral literature plays an important role. Likewise, women can also use poetry and forms of verbal art to express personal attitudes and issues. While basically praising the addressee, praise poetry can also offer a space to (indirectly, figuratively and often jokingly)

express criticism in a way that would be taboo in direct communication.

5. Non-verbal communication

There a numerous non-verbal aspects of communication that a *muroora* is expected to perform in an appropriate manner in order to respect her in-laws. They are connected to the concept of taboo in similar ways as the discussed verbal communication. Not fulfilling the expected non-verbal communicative behavior can (especially when it happens repeatedly) be regarded as a breaking of taboo and can be socially punished.

The most widely discussed and already mentioned strategy is the avoidance of eye-contact, which has also been described by Herbert (1990) and Treis (2005) for other African contexts. Eye-contact, in other words, is thus a taboo, especially for the newly married woman. Non-verbal communication in this context is a wide field, as many physical acts of the *muroora*, for instance, where she sits, which rooms she enters, where she eats or how she cooks, can be read as communicative practices. For instance, she is supposed to sit lower down than her father-in-law, especially during meals (e.g. on a smaller chair or stool or on the floor) or eat separately. Moreover, the respectful greetings and terms of address are expected to be used by a muroora, and non-verbally as well as verbally the contact with her in-laws also includes, as mentioned above, avoiding eye-contact (which is usually done by looking down) and names while using respectful greetings. The greetings and terms of address should employ the honorific plural forms of chiShona, such as *makadini*, a commonly used respectful greeting which uses the plural *ma-* instead of the second person singular *wa-*. The respectful greetings which are part of the verbal communication are accompanied by non-verbal gestures: in particular, the *muroora* might kneel down and clap her hands (*kuwuchira*) while greeting her father-in-law, especially at the beginning of the marriage when she meets her father-in-law for the first times. The clapping of hands is a commonly employed gesture (by men and women) which expresses respect and gratitude. People usually clap during greetings (especially when greeting elders or older family members and in-laws) and when thanks are expressed. With this large set of possibilities, a *muroora* can make conscious choices with regard to forms of non-verbal communication that may be regarded as respectful or disrespectful by her in-laws. Thus, non-verbal communication is an important aspect of in-law relationships and offers a *muroor*a many options to add nuances to her constructions of identity and social relationships. These social rules for communication (verbal and non-verbal) are part of the prescribed behavior of a *muroora* and violating these social norms can lead to social sanctions such as being excluded, reprimanded or ignored. In this regard, it makes sense to widen the scope of taboo by including perspectives on social norms and prescribed (communicative) behavior. Taboo, then, is not only about consequences that follow certain behavior or non-behavior, rule conformity or non-conformity, but it should be seen as a complex and dynamic fabric with many nuances and shapes. As Allan and Burridge (2006) illustrate, taboo is part of culturally and socially rooted practices and hence needs to be investigated with regard to small stories to arrive at a big picture. Non-verbal communication,

in this regard, shows how fine-graded bodily movements and conscious decisions as well as unconscious slippages are linked to taboo.

6. Conclusion: what remains

The discussion in this paper has focused on the *muroora* and her in-law relationships, and has illustrated that not expressing respect through various communicative practices is often regarded as the breaking of taboo and as an offence. This can be sanctioned in various ways by comments, rejection or even by sending the *muroora* home to her parents. On the other hand, we have seen that the communicative means at a *muroora's* disposal are also employed by her for agentive communication, which constructs identity and social relationships and which provides her with tools for negotiating power within the family. While the social norms discussed here are often presented as "traditional" and "handed down from the ancestors" within maShona society, it is necessary to stress that they also change and adapt through the course of time. The practices that mark respectful behavior today may not be employed tomorrow.

Like many other contributions before, this paper has – again – focused on women and social restrictions. There seems to be a tendency to focus on women, especially when writing about social or cultural restrictions in the Global South. So what remains are a number of questions: why are women's taboos so much more discussed? Are there more taboos for women than for men? As this is a prominent theme in (linguistic) anthropology, I wonder how this is related to the multitude of ethnographic works on patriarchal societies that focus on the subordinate role of women in various cultural settings? Are there more taboos for men that we do not talk or write about? I have pointed out a few times that there are also several taboos and restrictions for men with regard to their in-laws, and a more extensive study on men and in-law relations would probably reveal complex social practices linked to taboo. After all, maintaining a patriarchal society requires strict rules and regulations and sanctions for male behavior as well. An important question, in this regard, is how taboo is connected to (heteronormative) masculinities. To bring in a very different example, Farquharson (2005) and Farquharson & Jones (2014) write about (linguistic) taboos for men in Jamaica connected to homophobia and the desire to construct heteronormative masculine identities. Farquharson and Jones write: "Many young Jamaican males, in conversation, will try to avoid any words or expressions associated with homosexuals or homosexuality. For example, since about the beginning of the last decade, the word *fish* has been added to the long list of designations for gay men. This means that some young men, when in the company of their peers, will not order fish in the market or at a local eatery but will ask instead for *swim-around*. The word *men*, from the plural of English *man*, is Jamaican slang which arose in the 1990s to refer to a male homosexual, and words or parts of words that contain phonetic strings which are close to *man* or *men* are also avoided. Therefore, place names such as *Manchester, Mandeville* and *Montego Bay* have their first syllable replaced by *gyal* 'girl' as their initial element, producing *Gyalchester, Gyaldeville* and *Gyaltego Bay*" (Farquharson & Jones 2014: 121-122). While there are numerous publications that discuss and deconstruct patriarchy and focus on masculinities, these

studies usually do not center on language and taboo, although they certainly touch upon relevant issues. Hence, more studies on taboo, language, men and patriarchy, not only in the Global South, but also in European and American societies would complement the partly one-sided perspectives on taboo and language.

This paper has also attempted to shift the attention from merely describing taboos for women in Zimbabwe as social or cultural restrictions by including a perspective that acknowledges female agency and ways in which women consciously employ communicative strategies in building their in-law relationships.

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