



**THE EFFECT OF SHONA CULTURAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES ON
MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN SMALL TO MEDIUM ENTERPRISES IN
ZIMBABWE**

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Abstract: *This paper presents findings of a research carried out to find out how Shona culture, beliefs and practices influence leadership and management practices in small businesses in Zimbabwe. The study focused on belief in witchcraft, role of ancestral spirits, extended family relationships, and use of first names, keeping eye contact, cohabitation, and individualism versus collectivism. The study concluded that while most SME owners claim to be Christians the belief in the role of ancestral spirit and “kurova guva” affects the management of their businesses. Older and more senior people are respected more and regarded as being more reliable than younger ones. The use of first names at work is discouraged as it is seen as a sign of lack of respect. Extended family relationships impact negatively on the management of SMEs especially in situations of polygamous marriages and co-habitation.*

Key words: *Culture, management practices, leadership, beliefs*

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1 INTRODUCTION

This paper presents findings of a study carried out to determine the extent to which Shona cultural beliefs and practices impact on the management of small businesses in Zimbabwe. The Shona people form the largest ethnic group in Zimbabwe. The research was carried out with 13 participants from 13 different small to medium enterprises in Harare and Masvingo. It was an indicative sample that showed that there are some beliefs and practices of the Shona culture such as belief in the extended family, witchcraft, ancestral spirit and polygamous family influenced how small businesses are managed even though owners and managers of these businesses may be Christians. The results also show that even if some managers no longer believe in the role of ancestral spirits in their lives they allow their employees time off to attend to the demands of such beliefs as “kurova guva”.

2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Zimbabwe consists of diverse ethnic and racial groups. The Shona people are the dominant group that makes up 85% of the total population (Africa.com, 2006). The Ndebeles and other smaller indigenous groups make up 16% while Asians and Whites make up the remaining 2% of the population. Basing on these figures one can conclude that the dominant culture in Zimbabwe is that of the Shona people.

For the purposes of this study culture is defined as the learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols and traditions that are held in common by the people of Zimbabwe. Researchers agree that some aspects of culture are visible while others are not visible to one’s conscious awareness (Carpernter, Barrier and Erdogan, 2010). According to Schein (2004) there are three levels of culture namely, artefacts, espoused beliefs and values and basic or underlying assumptions. At the surface level are art facts. Artefacts are visible and easily understood. They include such things as buildings, language, dress and technology. Just below the surface are beliefs and values. Beliefs and values operate at the conscious level and mostly influence how people behave. Basic or underlying assumptions are the below surface reasons why people think and act in a certain way. They are difficult to change.

Leadership is generally understood to mean the ability of an individual to influence the behaviour of another person to achieve certain goals. It is a process of how one inspires individuals to perform their best for the achievement of desired results. Management gurus often refer to management as involving the five functions of planning, staffing, leading and



organizing, implementing and controlling (Hughes et al., 2002; Shriberg et al., 2005). However the two terms are often used synonymously. This implies that leadership cannot be separated from the management of SMEs.

2.1 Shona culture

Fifty (50%) of the Zimbabwean population practice what is called the “Syncretic” religion. “Syncretic” religion is part Christian and part indigenous beliefs. Twenty-five (25%) of the population call themselves Christians while 24% practice indigenous beliefs. The remaining 1% is made up of Islam and other religions. (Africaw.com, 2006).

The Shona people believe in the existence and role of ancestral spirits in one’s life. When a person dies the spirit continues to live on and it can influence events in the community (Gelfand M, 1959). When a grown up person dies his /her spirit wanders about as it is believed to be homeless until the relatives of the deceased person welcomes back the spirit through a process known as “kurova guva” which is performed after a year. When that is done the spirit becomes legitimate and is recognized as a family spirit, (Zambuko, 2014).

A totem, known as “mutupo” in Shona, socially identifies a clan with a certain symbol usually an animal www.mutupo.com/index.ph. Every Shona clan is identified with a totem. The totem serves the clan from being defiled through incestuous behaviour. People of the same clan share the same totem. For all intense and purpose people who share the same totem are considered to be closely related. They are assumed to be relatives and as such should not marry each other. The totem is the extension of the extended family.

Older people in the traditional Zimbabwean culture are generally perceived to be mature, to have more experience, to be exemplary, wiser and more dedicated. Respect for the old is upheld. One sign of showing respect for the elders is that when talking to elders one should not look at them directly in the eye especially if the younger person is a woman or daughter in law otherwise it is seen as a sign of disrespect. Age and seniority is respected in the Shona culture.

The traditional form of family is the extended family structure which is the opposite of the western nuclear family. The clan is also built upon extended family relationships. The extended family relationship works on the precepts of communalism as opposed to individualistic practices. It also requires one to take responsibility for caring for others



beyond one's immediate family needs. As a patriarchal society the Zimbabwean culture generally regards women as being subordinate to men although the situation is changing.

The Shona family conceive of a family as '*mhuri*'. It is not equivalent to the European conception of a family (Tatira 2010). Tatira further postulated that in a Shona family there is no extended family since members often referred to as extended family in the modern days are in actual fact family members. In the traditional conception of a family there is no nuclear nor extended family because when one talk of a family in Shona, he or she is referring to a series of families which the European might call extended family. The Shona family consists of the eldest member of the clan. According to Tatira a family encompasses my father, father's brothers, my own brothers together with their children and wives, I with my wife and my children. The surviving eldest member of that family is the head of that big or extended family and if he is away the next senior to him takes over. In practice the extended family also includes my sisters and their children.

3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

There are several racial and ethnic groupings in Zimbabwe but the Shona people form the dominant group constituting. The dominant culture in Zimbabwe is the Shona culture. In his research on culture Hofstede concluded that cultural issues affect how organisations are managed (Hofstede, 1980)). He also concluded that although culture changes there are some cultural beliefs and practices that endure the test of time. This means that strong traditional beliefs and practices often coexist with modern ones.

Rising unemployment in Zimbabwe has given rise to the formation of SMEs. While government itself is encouraging and promoting the establishment of SMEs there is need to promote effective management practices in such organizations. The researcher is not aware of any studies that have been conducted to establish the impact of Shona cultural beliefs and practices on business in Zimbabwe.

4 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to establish the effect of some Shona cultural beliefs and practices on how SMEs in Zimbabwe are managed.

5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A research was carried out to find out what aspects of Shona cultural beliefs and practices influenced management practices of SMEs in Zimbabwe. To this end guided interviews were



conducted with the use of questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to 13 respondents from 13 different SMEs. It was an indicative random sample drawn from SMEs involved in retail, hospitality, telecommunications, transport and health sectors (pharmacy). The study focused on beliefs, extended family relationships and other practices relating to age or seniority and calling employees by their first names.

The questionnaire was divided into sections namely demographics, effect of beliefs, effect of extended family relationships and effect of other practices.

Under beliefs, the following were studied:

- Belief in witchcraft
- Belief in role of ancestral spirits
- The practice of “kurova guva”
- Traditional belief in disability

Under Extended family relationships the following were studied:

- Traditional gender roles
- Effect of polygamous marriage
- Co-habitation
- Extended family relationships
- Collectivism versus individualism

The study was confined to SMEs based in Harare and Masvingo urban areas only. Not all aspects of Shona cultural beliefs and practices were studied. This makes the findings only indicative of the influence of Shona cultural belief and practices in the management of those organisations.

5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 13 people who responded to the questionnaire 75% were managers and 25% were employees. 67% were females and 33% were males. 66.7% had university education while 25 had secondary education. The other 8 % did not go up to secondary level. Table 1 is a summary of findings on the effects of Shona cultural beliefs and practices on the management of SMEs under study. The findings are presented under the themes of beliefs and practices, extended family relationships and other practices.



5.1 Summary of Findings

Table 1 Summary of Findings

Variable	%Strongly Disagree	%Disagree	%Agree	%Strongly agree
Beliefs				
Belief in witchcraft	25	0	42	33
Role of ancestral spirits	46	8	46	0
Belief in “kurova guva”	39	23	23	15
Disability	46	27	27	0
Gender roles	0	0	54	46
Extended family Relationships				
Polygamous marriages	8	0	46	46
Co-habitation	8	15	23	54
Extended family relationships	0	15	39	46
Collectivism vs individualism	0	8	59	33
Other practices				
Age and seniority	10	15	45	30
Calling employees by first name	31	39	15	15
Keeping eye contact	15	15	39	31

5.2 Belief in witchcraft

The results as depicted in the table above reflect the articulated assertion of an indicative sample of 13 representing 13 different organisations. The table shows that 42 % agreed and 33 strongly agreed giving a combined 75% agreeing on the belief of witchcraft having an influence on management practices of small businesses whilst only 25% believed otherwise. Respondents claimed that with the number of murder cases of children and women for business ritual purposes increasing it shows that witchcraft still influenced how small businesses are run. From a managerial perspective respondents also argued that there is still a strong belief in ‘mushonga’ to enhance positive business performance and also witchcraft can play a strong role to enhance business failure due to jealousy of fellow competitors or relatives. From an employee perspective most respondents indicated the issue of being careful not to eat any food one s offered by employees at work and also not to share even one’s work gadgets with others as they can bewitch you thereby leading to decrease in work performance. A notable example was that of drivers not willing to share a vehicle. The 25% who strongly disagreed believed that witchcraft had no role to play in management of small businesses as the belief had been overtaken by Christianity.



5.3 Role of ancestral spirits

Out of 13 respondents 46% strongly disagreed and 8% disagreed that ancestral spirits had an influence on how small businesses are managed. Belief in the role of ancestral spirits in one's life has been overtaken by Christianity. The 46 % who agreed believed that ancestral spirits played an important part in the success or failure of a business. In case of perceived or forecasted failure in business, a cleansing ceremony had to be done to appease the angry family spirit so that the business succeeds. This shows that there is still a strong belief in the influence of ancestral spirits in the management of small businesses.

5.4 Belief in the practice of "kurova guva"

About 23 % agreed and 15% strongly agreed with the statement making a total of 38% of the respondents of the indicative sample believing that the practice '*kurova guva*' had an influence on small business management whilst a combined 62% disagreed with the statement. The respondents argued that there is need to fulfil the requirements of practices like '*kurova guva*' for one's business to succeed as they believed that by not performing these rituals the spirit of the dead person will bring bad luck into the operation of the business , especially if the person was an elder person. However all managers including those who disagreed with the statement indicated that they gave their employees time off to attend these functions as and when need arose.

5.5 Belief that disability influences how the organisation is managed

Only 27% agreed that disability had an influence whilst 73% disagreed with the statement. The majority of the respondents acknowledged that the roots of the Shona culture viewed someone who is disabled as someone who is '*cursed*'. Nowadays they argued that the belief had no effect on management because the stigma had well been overtaken by events. People are now are that disabled or physically challenged people are not cursed. The 27% who agreed with the statement indicated that disability influenced recruitment practice in small businesses in that challenged people are often not preferred.

5.6 The traditional gender roles

Almost all the 13 respondents of the indicative sample 'agreed' with 54 % agreeing and 46 % strongly agreeing that the traditional gender roles of who cares for children has an influence on how they are managing their small businesses. The respondents were ascertaining that the fact that women are still being given maternity leave and time off to take care of their



sick child babies shows that the traditional Shona culture gender roles of who take care of children has an influence on the management of SMEs.

Follow up interviews with the respondents revealed that 77% of male subordinates and 75% of female subordinates preferred male leaders. The cultural norm is that men are to be held in higher positions than women even if the women have better educational qualifications. Women are supposed to be subordinate to men. Women are regarded as being more submissive than men. The assumption is therefore that male leaders would find it easier to work with women than with men. This reflects other studies which argue that women themselves are often reluctant to run for leadership positions as partly being explained by the cultural inhibitions on women speaking in public.

The interviews also revealed that 80% of male managers of SMEs preferred their wives to be subordinates to them at work. Sixty seven (67%) of female leaders preferred to have their husbands to be in leadership positions to them at work, while 33% of female leaders indicated that did not mind having their husbands as subordinates to them.

Fifty five (55%) of the female subordinates indicated that they preferred their husbands to be in leadership positions to them as their bosses.

5.7 Effect of polygamous marriage

A minute 8% of 13 respondents of the indicative sample did not agree with the statement that polygamous marriage practice impacts on the management of small businesses whilst the majority of the respondents, 92% agreed to the assertion. The respondents argued that in case of death of the owner and if the owner had more than one wife and in the case that he left no will there was bound to be infighting as to who would take control of the business. It was also argued that *'more wives, more financial responsibilities'*. This ultimately leads to ultimate poor financial management. The respondents argued that whilst there is no problem with polygamous marriage in the Shona culture, their experiences in running businesses had indicated high failure rate in businesses where owners had many wives.

5.8 Cohabitation as a form of marriage impacts on the management of business

The results show that 23% agreed and 54% strongly agreed that co-habitation or *'mapoto marriage'*, impacts on the management of small businesses. A combined 77% agreed with the statement. They argued that like in polygamy those small businesses owners who engaged in cohabitation often showed poor financial management and eventually fail. It



was also highlighted that because “mapoto marriage” had no binding contract between the two involved, coupled by lack of trust in each other made each partner wanting to maximise on personal gains at the expense of the business. In the case of male owned the business, the woman tends to feel very insecure. This impacts on the financial management of the business as the woman tries as much as possible to harvest or milk from the business fearing that the relationship may end. The minority who disagreed with the statement argued that ‘*mapoto marriage*’ is something which is purely social and has nothing to do with how the business is run.

5.9 Effect of Extended family relationships

The majority of the respondents (46%) strongly agreed and 39% agreed that extended family relationships impacts on the way they SMEs are managed. Most of the respondents who were managers were also owners of the businesses. They indicated that they incorporated their extended family members in their businesses as employees despite the fact that they lacked the necessary skills and experience. This was done in order to give the relatives a source of income because they are the ones who would still take care of them if the relatives were not gainfully employed. The respondents however acknowledged that this practice usually led to failure of most of their businesses. Some of the respondents indicated that they employed their eldest son as a way of preparing them for take over when they die.

The respondents also indicated that some extended family members tended to take goods from their businesses without paying for them. Such family members do not understand that there is a separate legal entity between the owner and the business. Only 15% disagreed with the statement that extended family relationships influenced the way SMEs are managed.

The results of this study echo the findings of another study carried out to establish the challenges of recruitment and selection of staff in Zimbabwe, (Zinyemba 2013), it was found that nepotism influenced the recruitment, selection and promotion of staff. The Longman Dictionary (2013) defined nepotism as the practice of unfairly giving the best jobs to members of one’s family when one is in a position of power. It happens when those in senior management and leadership positions influence the recruitment and selection and promotion process.



In the same study (Zinyemba 2013) it was indicated that totemism influenced management practices in Zimbabwean organisations. Thirty eight percent is significant enough to indicate that totemism affected management practices. The study showed that it was not unusual to find the majority of staff in one organization sharing the same totem especially in a family owned businesses.

5.10 The concept of collectivism as opposed to individualism

About 92% agreed whilst only 8% disagreed that the concept of collectivism in Shona culture impacts on how small businesses are managed. Just like the concept of the extended family the concept of collectivism influences how SMEs are led and managed. The respondents indicated that in Shona culture the business belongs to all family members. This means that family members may interfere in the running of the business. It also means that certain decisions cannot be taken by the owner alone without consulting other family members, including even members of the extended family.

The 8% of the respondents who disagreed with the statement claimed that they had already moved away from the principle of collectivism and run their businesses on their own to avoid confusion and poor management decisions.

5.11 Age and seniority at work

Only 10% strongly disagreed and only another 15% disagreed that age and seniority influences the management of SMEs. The majority of the respondents (45% agreed and 30% strongly agreed) agreed that age and seniority had an influence on how small businesses are managed. The respondents argued that in most cases the older people and the most senior are more responsible. This influenced the way people are hired and promoted to senior positions. In addition they also argued that the young ones respect the elder people in their businesses. An example is that of a Managing Director of an SME who always feels compelled to start by saying “*Good Morning*” to a driver before giving him instructions” because the driver is older than him.

Those who did not agree with the statement argued that they preferred young graduates to take up managerial positions in their businesses because those older and more senior employees are resistant to changes in the business environment.



Follow up interviews with the respondents showed that 67% of managers preferred subordinates who were younger than them while on the other hand fifty (50%) of subordinates preferred managers who were older than them.

5.12 Calling employees by their first name

The Shona culture discourages elderly people from calling each other by first names. The majority of the respondents (70%) did not agree with the statement that calling each other using first names is encouraged. They indicated that they use surnames. The respondents pointed out that they wanted managers to respect subordinates as well as subordinate to respect each other, thus they do not encourage calling each other by first names. In addition they suggested that one can call someone with his or her totem rather than their first names. The respondents further highlighted that in case of married women they encouraged calling them with their husband's surname for example '*Mai Shamu*'.

Other 30% of the respondents however claimed that they encourage calling each other by their first names as it made it easier for managers to give orders even to elder subordinates and also to cultivate the culture of good interpersonal relationships between employees.

5.13 Keeping eye contact when talking to management is encouraged and practiced

Keeping eye contact when talking to an elderly person is generally discouraged in the Shona culture as it is a sign of disrespect. The results show that 69% of the respondents argued that it is encouraged to keep eye contact when communicating with each other at work. They argued that keeping any eye contact when talking to management is encouraged in their businesses as it shows that the employee is confident and possesses good communication skills. It is a sign that the employee is paying attention. The other 31% of the respondents claimed that keeping eye contact is discouraged. They argued that staff should not look at the manager straight in the eye as it shows lack of respect and in the case of women it might suggest sexual harassment.

6 CONCLUSIONS

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this study as stated below.

- a. Respect for age and seniority is regarded highly in the Zimbabwean culture. Age influences leadership and management in SMEs in Zimbabwe with subordinates preferring leaders who are older than them and managers preferring subordinates who are younger than them. Men strongly believe that women should be under



them especially if their wives work in the same organization. Females themselves also believe that they should not be on top of their husbands at work in the same organisations. It can therefore be concluded that women still play a subordinate role to men in how SMEs are managed.

- b. Belief in witchcraft still exists and has an influence in how SMEs operate especially among employees.
- c. The situation as regards traditional belief in disability has changed. Challenged people can work and depending on the degree of disability. However disability still influenced recruitment practice in small businesses in that challenged people are often not preferred.
- d. Extended family relationships and collectivism to a large extent influence how SMEs are managed.
- e. The respondents argued that if the manager or owner share the same totem with a certain staff member it is difficult to discipline that staff member as there is a belief that they automatically become relatives based on the fact that they do share the same totem.
- f. While managers of most SMEs claim to be Christians who do not seem to value some religious beliefs which are rooted in the Shona culture such as the role of ancestral spirits and “kurova guva” they all indicated that they gave their employees time off to attend these functions as and when need arose. This goes on to show that belief in ancestral spirits and “kurova guva influences management practices in SMEs.
- g. The traditional practice of not calling each other at work by first names is very much practised as a sign of respect for both manager and employee.
- h. Age and seniority has an influence on the practice of management in most SMEs as older and more senior people are regarded as being more responsible than young ones. However there is a move towards the employment of younger people who are more learned with university qualifications.
- i. Polygamous marriages and or co-habitation negatively impacts on effective management of SMEs.



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