

# ***Nhimbe* practice in Zimbabwe revisited: Not only a method of socio-economic assistance but also a communal mechanism for conflict prevention and peacebuilding**

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## **Abstract**

*Nhimbe* is an endogenous knowledge practice used in community-based development for community members to provide socio-economic assistance as required. The practice is couched in people's socio-cultural and moral compass. Households in rural areas use it to assist one another on a wide range of development initiatives, especially agricultural activities to promote and sustain food security and community values. In Africa, practices similar to *nhimbe* are *Harambee* in Kenya, *Chilimba* in Zambia and *Letsema* in South Africa and Botswana. Since the 1800s or earlier, economic and social benefits have been the known key motivations for the practice of *nhimbe*. This article is a re-visit of *nhimbe* from the perspective of its contribution to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the communities where it is practised. No in-depth studies have been published concerning the conflict and peacebuilding potentials of *nhimbe*, but it is quite clear that it plays a fundamental role which emanates from its relatedness to social dimensions and community

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cohesiveness. The analysis here shows that the practice has inherent capacities for pre-conflict prevention, in-conflict mitigation, conflict management, conflict resolution, conflict transformation and post-conflict peacebuilding.

**Keywords:** community, *nhimbe*, peace, conflict, relationships, socio-economic

## 1. Introduction

The details discussed in this paper are largely informed by the extensive qualitative *nhimbe* field research the author conducted in 2009 and 2010 for his Ph.D. thesis in Development Studies at Witwatersrand University, South Africa. Further reflections on the *nhimbe* research findings have revealed that apart from it being a community socio-economic assistance practice, it also has social reservoirs of conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the communities where it is practised. One of the findings in the study revealed that 57 of the 74 (77%) community members interviewed expressed the opinion that the practice helps a community to prevent conflict and promote conflict resolution, mainly because community members often interact with one another and work together (Sithole 2014:15–16, 23, 33–34, 49). This is buttressed by a similar study conducted in Mashonaland Central Province of Zimbabwe in 2017 to establish traditional mechanisms used in communities to foster conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Of the seven mechanisms mentioned in the study, *nhimbe* was among the three that were considered to be the major ones in the rural communities studied (Mbwirire 2017:222). Mbwirire's finding supports the argument advanced in this study: that *nhimbe* could have a potential triple effect of socio-economic assistance, social cohesion, and conflict prevention. All along, the missing link has been that *nhimbe* has not been extensively analysed through the lens of conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

There is, however, an increasing need to revisit Afrocentric mechanisms for conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the African continent (Dodo 2015:52; Emeagwali and Shizha 2016:3–11; Mbwirire 2017:15, 73–89 and 201–211; Olowu 2018; 2–15; Schabas 2005:13–15; Zondi 2017:106–110), and this further motivated the author to explore *nhimbe* practice as a possible community mechanism from which a model can be

developed. In addition, an endogenous<sup>1</sup> model for transitional justice in Rwanda called *Gacaca*<sup>2</sup> was revisited post-genocide in 1997 and it was successfully administered to process trials in the country (Le Mon 2007:1–3; Schwabas 2005:3–7). On *Gacaca*, it should be pointed out that its implementation came about after the Eurocentric transitional justice used during the period 1994–1997 had failed in terms of contextual relevance and capacity to cope with the large number of alleged perpetrators of atrocities. The Eurocentric transitional justice in the country did not have all the features of justice that would be regarded as legitimate in Rwanda. Its focus is mainly retribution, while the African endogenous justice models of conflict prevention and peacebuilding tend to balance punishment, restitution, reconciliation, repentance and forgiveness in a unique socio-cultural equilibrium (Schabas 2005:13–17).

Thus, this article is an attempt to contribute towards documentation and design of community-based conflict prevention and peacebuilding mechanisms in the Zimbabwe context. This has been done through a detailed exploration and analysis of the *nhimbe* practice which is practised in most rural communities of the Shona and Ndebele people in the country (Sithole 2014:15–16).

## 2. Objectives

Three main objectives guided the exploration of the dimensions of the *nhimbe* practice that could be regarded as peacebuilding and conflict mechanisms in Zimbabwe. These were to:

- Identify dimensions of the *nhimbe* practice that have potential for conflict prevention and peacebuilding;
- Promote awareness of such dimensions in the *nhimbe* practice; and
- Suggest a model towards community-based conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

## 3. Description of the *nhimbe* practice

Since the 1800s or earlier, *nhimbe* has been practised in Zimbabwe by various ethnic groups (Muyambo 2019:172, 175, 177–181; Sithole 2014:8;

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1 Originating from within.

2 This is a system of community justice inspired by the Rwandan socio-cultural tradition for restorative justice.

Sithole 2020:26). It is an internal and collective mechanism for community members to assist each other at household level to strengthen and sustain their socio-economic development initiatives. Crop production or farming is the most common development activity where *nhimbe* is applied. It can be argued that *nhimbe* practice is a confirmation of the characteristic of Africans in Sub-Saharan Africa who invoke collective actions at grassroots level to address community developmental challenges (Andersson 2002:35; Madziva 2011:40, 235, 284). Thus, socio-economic history has shown that when development becomes more responsive to local dynamics, this increases contextual relevance of the response, and transformative results are likely to be achieved (Chambers 2007:23, 95–96). Accordingly, *nhimbe* is such a practice which is grassroots-based and under the governance or administration of the community traditional leadership.

Essentially, *nhimbe* is a voluntary cooperative where community members in a village willingly and compassionately respond to a household's developmental need, usually a need related to food security. A household that has identified its need at any given time is free to organise a *nhimbe*: the social activity and time that people spend together at a particular household in the village to assist on a specific need. *Nhimbe* is carried out in a work-party fashion where food and beverages (alcohol and non-alcoholic beverages like *maheu*) are prepared and feasted on. It is not uncommon in the Shona and Ndebele culture to share food and drinks, as this is a social indicator of conflict prevention, peace and reconciliation. This phenomenon is proverbially expressed in the Shona Language as '*ukama igasva hunozadziswa nekudya*'. The literal meaning of this proverb is that any relationship among human beings is incomplete unless they share food and eat together. The role of food in binding social relations is discussed at length in Sithole (2014:152), and in Tavuyanago, Mutami and Mbenene (2010:2–5). In fact, the sharing of food symbolises trust, peace, restful mind and dialogue and this resonates with the African *ubuntu* social framework.

As discussed in Muyambo (2019:172) and Sithole (2014:128–138), *nhimbe* is naturally an affective community practice in which the principles of help, mutual trust, reciprocity, respect, conflict prevention, peace and solidarity are the underpinning tenets. Put differently, *nhimbe* is more likely to be practised in a community where people trust each other, espouse reciprocal socio-economic relationships, respect, peaceful

co-existence, value positive solidarity, uphold human dignity and integrity of the physical environment. Therefore, the rationale for *nhimbe* practice is to primarily foster community economic development, and concurrently, to promote and sustain social cohesion. Nonetheless, however, the principal objective of the *nhimbe* practice in any Zimbabwean community is to ensure household food security. Usually, the work party (*nhimbe* session) lasts for one full day at a given household in a village. Some of the agricultural and non-agricultural activities for which *nhimbe* is usually organised are outlined in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Common *nhimbe*-related activities in the communities**

Agricultural activities	2. Non-agricultural activities
Land preparation Threshing or shelling of grain Sowing of seeds Ox-drawn ploughing Planting Weeding Harvesting Food processing	2.1 Building houses 2.2 Foot paths and road construction and clearing 2.3 Brick moulding and transporting to construction sites 2.4 Thatching of houses 2.6 House maintenance and repairs 2.7 Construction of schools, clinics, community civic centres, wells and dams 2.5 Fencing of fields, paddocks, and homesteads

Source: Sithole 2014:152

The next section is a discussion of how a typical *nhimbe* activity is organised in a village.

#### 4. Organisation of the *nhimbe* practice

A *nhimbe* activity is not haphazardly organised and this demonstrates good governance at community level. The logical sequence of seven steps can be diagrammatically presented as in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Steps and processes in organising *nhimbe*



Source: Sithole 2014:226.

To seek permission from the village head to organise a *nhimbe* is a social requirement which is actively and consistently enforced by the traditional leadership in the communities where it is practised. At the same time, this provides an opportunity for the village head to verify that there is no other *nhimbe* already organised in the village. This is important, because the community by-law that regulates the practice, though not documented, states that only one *nhimbe* at a time should be organised in a village in order to ensure a high turnout to respond to the household need concerned. This helps to avoid unnecessary negative competition for community members to attend one's *nhimbe*. Without this regulation or social policy, such competition could cause tensions or disputes in the community.

Upon being given approval, the household proceeds with invitations in the village which include date, place and nature of the work. The task

specification is important so that people know the knowledge, skills and equipment required for the work. It should be noted that every household in the village gets invited to the *nhimbe* and this prevents potential conflicts that could erupt if some households are left out. Non-participation by a household in other people's *nhimbe* meetings is quite significant because when that household organises its own in the future, less people than expected may attend.

As noted earlier, the third step confirms the essentiality of food in the *nhimbe* practice. For this reason, the *nhimbe* organiser plans for food and beverages to be served on the day of the *nhimbe*. It should be pointed out that while provision of food is a social obligation, sometimes some households in the village may not have sufficient food to serve the *nhimbe* participants. In that situation, other community members voluntarily provide the required food if requested. This social gesture by other community members to provide food so that the planned *nhimbe* goes on is an indication of the value of positive solidarity. This act is also an element of the reciprocal relationship that anchors the social life of *nhimbe* practitioners. That is, it is a form of 'social favour' investment that is expected to be reciprocated in similar situations in the future. Nevertheless, it is quite common in the *nhimbe* practice that people carry out the required work at a household even without food served, because the underlining motivation is to voluntarily assist one another in times of need for the socio-economic good of the community.

The fourth step illustrates the centrality of supervision to ensure that the *nhimbe* participants produce quality work. For this role, the *nhimbe* organiser has to appoint, among the family members or friends, one person who will coordinate and supervise the work on the day. It should be pointed out that the person chosen should be a trusted one with a good social standing in society. These characteristics of a *nhimbe* work supervisor are vital to prevent any likelihood of conflict – if, for instance the supervisor is not liked in the community.

The fifth step is the work itself under the leadership of the household's appointed task supervisor. The nature of the actual work should not deviate from the description provided during the invitations. This, in itself, prevents potential conflict between the *nhimbe* organiser and the *nhimbe* participants if and when they discover that what they prepared for is different from the actual work.

The feasting is the sixth step whereby the *nhimbe* participants eat and drink. To a lesser extent, eating and drinking happens during the work, but the more elaborate eating and drinking takes place after the work has been completed. Usually, the *nhimbe* participants finish the given task between 11 am and 1 pm, depending on the level of difficulty and magnitude of the task. Socialisation that occurs from lunch time till late in the evening comprises eating, drinking, singing, dancing and cracking of jokes. Furthermore, bilateral and multi-lateral conversations intensify where people share personal and community issues.

The final step is the vote of thanks given firstly by the *nhimbe* host and then by the village head or his/her representative. Key elements of the village head's closing remarks 'include praising community members for working together in peace and helping one another on development initiatives' and 'shar[ing] important community announcements' (Sithole 2014:227). After the vote of thanks and closing remarks have been provided, people are free to stay a bit longer and continue socialising or leave for their respective homes.

## 5. Theoretical underpinning

Interdependence Theory is a general theory which has guided discussion of the community conflict prevention and peacebuilding aspects of the *nhimbe* practice. Scholars argued that it is one of the classic theories in the social and behavioural sciences which was developed in the late 1950s (Johnson and Johnson 2009:366–370); Rusbult and Van Lange 2012:2049–2056). In social sciences and humanities, the interdependence refers to the reciprocal interaction between two or more individuals or groups of individuals in a given social setting, community or society at large. As currently understood, the underpinning concept in the theory is that one's behaviour is highly likely to influence some kind of behavioural response/reaction during the course of the social interaction. The theory has a wide application in sociology, psychology, politics and economics for various situations that demand an act of interdependence between or among the individuals or groups of individuals concerned (Kumar et al. 2009:644–647; Johnson and Johnson 2006:494–496).

The interdependence theory is relevant to guide our discussion of how the *nhimbe* practice contributes to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the communities. This is because of the key elements of the theory,

namely social interaction and relationship building, coupled with the natural insatiable need of humanity to depend upon one another in a variety of life requirements (Rusbult and Van Lange 2008:2051–2061). Collectively, these aspects of the theory resonate quite well with the *nhimbe* practice, as a practice hinged on the collective good and social capital of the community members. The theory therefore explains why, without the community value of interdependence, *nhimbe* would not have endured the passage of time since the 1800s. Notably, its contribution to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the communities that practise it would not have been a subject of discussion today (see the next section).

## **6. Discussion**

This discussion explores aspects of the *nhimbe* practice that contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the communities. The analysis and connections of the practice to conflict prevention and peacebuilding are largely based on the fact that, from the foregoing description, *nhimbe* is a platform where aspects of social cohesion are reinforced. Thus, seven dimensions of the *nhimbe* practice that contribute to community conflict prevention and peacebuilding are presented and discussed. They are community values, familial relationships, knowledge transfer of totems and taboos, regularity of interaction, health and medicine, marriage and family and human rights.

### **6.1 Community values**

From the 74 community members interviewed during the *nhimbe* study in 2010, 73 (99%) emphatically mentioned that apart from socio-economic assistance, *nhimbe* is a platform for people to learn and enforce community moral values. Quoted in Sithole (2014:202), one of the interviewees emphasised the community value dimension of *nhimbe*, saying, 'It [*nhimbe*] is a practice that encompasses values, ideals and social institutions for a people in a given community'. As discussed earlier, traditional leadership is central to the governance and practice of *nhimbe* in the communities. Their social role as custodians or gatekeepers of community culture and normative practices makes them vital players in the sharing and enforcement of community values. Madziva (2011:235) and Sithole (2020:24 and 2014:226–227) came to similar conclusions that traditional leaders are paramount in the enforcement

of progressive community values. As is the norm, participation in *nhimbe* is inclusive of all ages. Thus, at a *nhimbe*, community values, social norms and practices including aspects of environmental conservation are shared and handed down from generation to generation.

The added value of this regular sharing and sustaining of a common interpretation of the values, explicitly and implicitly, at a *nhimbe*, is that it helps to promote social cohesion in the communities.

## 6.2 Familial relationships

Undoubtedly, familial relationships form a crucial socio-cultural base in the African communities (Iganus and Haruna 2017:2–3; Idang 2015:101, 103–105, 108; Makiwane and Kaunda 2018:1–3; Mafumbate 2019:7–11; Noma, Aker and Freeman 2012:15, 25). The statement below by Iganus and Haruna (2017:1) emphasises this characterisation of the African community sociology on community values:

Scholars of the family know that traditional values in Africa are primarily not for the individual but for his family and community of which he is part. In other words, there are no persons that are without a family. Members live in kinship adhering strictly to the norms and values of their family and the society at large.

The quotation above epitomises the family unit as a vital community structure that makes community life meaningful as a result of the reality and practice of peaceful co-existence. In this regard, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 16 is a stark reminder to everyone that without effective and sustainable mechanisms at all levels of society to prevent conflict, it is highly likely that peace will be disturbed at an amazingly accelerated rate. At grassroots level, *nhimbe* is considered a responsive and inclusive practice in the Zimbabwe rural communities because households collectively respond to each other's socio-economic challenges. In assisting each other on livelihood activities like farming, this ensures that households are food secure and that the chance of conflicts arising because of food insecurity is decreased. The unfortunate direct relationship between food insecurity in a community and conflict has been extensively documented in Brinkman and Hendrix (2011:5–8, 13–14), Hendrix and Brinkman (2012:2–6), Helland and Sørbo (2014:23–25) and Messer and Cohen (2020:2–4). Given the characteristics and the socio-economic role of *nhimbe* in the communities, it is certain

that the practice plays a vital role towards conflict prevention in the Zimbabwe communities who still practise it. It should also be noted that this is not a linear relationship, because conflict can also cause food insecurity, a point that resonates with studies by Hendrix and Brinkman (2012:12–17), Messer and Cohen (2020:4–5) and Tavuyanago, Mutami and Mbenene (2010:5–7). As already indicated above, it is quite apparent that *nhimbe* has a triple effect in the community, namely the strengthening of household food security, the general promotion of social cohesion among families or households, and conflict prevention through the strengthening of the social aspects of familial relationships. This familial relationship dimension brings *nhimbe* in line with the SDG 16 objective: ‘Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels’ (United Nations 2019:54). As a non-discriminatory practice, *nhimbe* has the potential to stimulate sustainable community development through reinforcement of familial relationships, which in turn promotes conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

### **6.3 Knowledge transfer of totems and taboos**

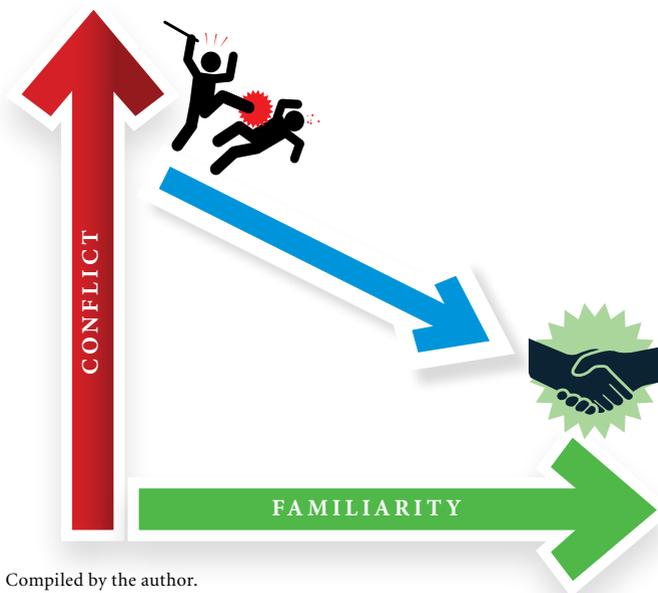
In the dense social interaction during the *nhimbe* process, especially after the work and throughout the feasting and entertainment, it often happens that totems and social prohibitions (taboos) are shared and emphasised. In fact, it is only at a *nhimbe* that some people come to know their familial relations with people in the community. For example, the totems of individuals are often mentioned in the conversations, as this is part of the norms of interpersonal communication in community gatherings like *nhimbe*. The significance of knowledge of other people’s totems is that it promotes understanding of the social sanctions or taboos that exist between people who share the same totem and therefore helps to build relationships between them (Chemhuru and Masaka 2010:123–124; Makamure and Chiminingo 2015:8–12).

Among the Shona and the Ndebele people, it is customary that one should not marry a person with whom he/she shares the same totem. Generally, taboos are social norms and values that discourage people from deviant behaviour, prevent conflict and promote peace in communities (Chivasa and Mukono 2017:25). Though this practice is no longer always observed, it does help to prevent incestuous relationships (Dodo 2015:52). In themselves, incestuous relationships can be a

potential cause of conflict in the community, and of children born with deformities/genetic disorders (Alvarez, Quinteiro and Ceballos 2011:24–40; Prayson 2016:68–70).

More generally, however, the familiarity of people to one another in a community forms a social reservoir or fortress for conflict prevention. Figure 2 illustrates the conflict preventing value of people’s familiarity in a community.

**Figure 2: Towards a theory of familiarity in conflict prevention and peacebuilding**



Compiled by the author.

The enforcement of familial relationships creates a natural conflict prevention mechanism in that it is likely to reduce misunderstandings. Disputes can in some instances arise from fierce competition between individuals in love affairs within the immediate and extended communities, especially when people do know or value their totems. At the same time, however, when individuals know and espouse their totems, this also promotes environmental conservation. This is because it is generally a taboo among the Shona and Ndebele people of

Zimbabwe to destroy the natural resources like some indigenous<sup>3</sup> trees, animals, water, and birds that form their individual totems (Muyambo and Maphosa 2014:23, 26–28; Makamure and Chimininge 2015:7–12; Rim-Rukeh, Irerhievwie and Agbozu 2013:427–432). When the environment is sufficiently conserved, the abundance of resources required to sustain life increases the radius of peace in a community. In other words, because of such abundance, the cause of conflict arising from competition over resources is reduced or eliminated (Brinkman and Hendrix 2011:1–2, 13, 17; Helland and Sørbo 2014:3–4).

In fact, the steps followed in the organisation of *nhimbe* and how it is practised clearly show that the practice has internal capacities to deal with conflict at different levels – pre-conflict prevention, in-conflict mitigation, management, resolution and transformation, and post-conflict peacebuilding. In this regard, *nhimbe* can be considered to be a community mechanism that creates a climate for prevention and/or peacebuilding and indirectly for resolution and/or transformation.

#### **6.4 Social support system**

The need for social support in life is as old as humanity itself (Emeagwali and Shizha 2016:3–5; Munyuki-Hungwe 2011:113; Mukuka, Kalikiti and Musenge 2002:97–100; Sithole 2014:142, 175, 247, 277, 306). Linked to the totems and taboos discussed above, *nhimbe* has an embedded social support system and this is evident in its essential provision and support for an environment that unites people within and between clans. As found in the study, people who share the same totem tend to positively respond to each other's issues in life, particularly when it comes to aspects as marriage, death, birth and various types of family celebrations (Iganus and Haruna 2017:103–105). Based on the author's own experience growing up in the rural areas of Zimbabwe as well as his extensive practical experience of the *nhimbe* practice, people of the same totem are less likely to provoke or engage in conflict with one another. Given that *nhimbe* is one of the community platforms where totems are shared and reinforced, this clearly shows that the practice has a conflict prevention characteristic. If for some reason a dispute erupts and the individuals involved come to realise that they belong to the same totem, the quarrel is often cooled quickly and treated as a family affair (Dodo et

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3 Naturally belonging.

al. 2014:10–11; Mbwirire 2017:44). This social dimension makes it much easier to resolve a dispute without external interference. This does not mean, however, that it is socially permissible for people with different totems to get into conflicts or to view anyone with a different totem as an enemy or a social misfit (Sithole 2014:227).

### **6.5 Regularity of *nhimbe*-induced social interaction**

Regularity of *nhimbe* activities in the communities increases face-to-face interaction among community members. Frequent interaction is in itself a social dimension which helps to prevent misunderstandings and resolve conflicts at individual, household and community level. As the study found, the social interaction at a *nhimbe* involves cracking of jokes, teases and laughter which, in themselves, are integral in reducing any latent or patent tensions. At the *nhimbe*, the jokes and teases are learnt, internalised and applied as social mechanisms for conflict prevention and peacebuilding in the communities. Generally, there is no doubt that jokes and teases are clear signs of a peaceful family, community or society at large. This viewpoint concurs with that of Tavuyanago, Mutami and Mbenene (2010:5–7) and Sithole (2014:133, 225, 286) who agree that *nhimbe* is a community ritual for the construction and maintenance of social reproduction or continuity of harmonious relationships in the community.

### **6.6 Health and medicine**

According to Hammersmith (2007:3, 33, 269) and Adu-Gyamfi and Anderson (2019:70–75), the majority of the indigenous African population relies on plant- and animal-based medicines. By implication, this means that any African community should strive to conserve and maintain a balanced biodiversity. While this is not an explicit objective of the *nhimbe* practice, people do share information, normally from oral traditional sources, on a wide range of health issues. This includes types and uses of herbs for human beings, crops and livestock. During the *nhimbe* study, it was noted that women seem to be more knowledgeable than men on the indigenous knowledge relating to health and medicine for children and the elderly. Furthermore, women were found to be more willing than men to share their knowledge of various herbs. A possible explanation for this is that women are largely caregivers of children and the elderly in the Zimbabwean context. Makaudze (2017:3) supports this notion when he observes that it is quite common for people in rural communities of Zimbabwe to care for the elderly through practices like

*nhimbe*. There is no doubt that a community which is health conscious and cares for children and the elderly is highly likely to prevent conflict and promote peace. This is so because ill health and limited responsiveness to the needs or problems of children and the elderly can contribute to conflict in a community.

### **6.7 Marriage and family**

During their interactions with adults at a *nhimbe*, the adolescents informally learn about sexual and reproductive health. As for the married members of the community, *nhimbe* provides an opportunity for them to seek or receive marriage counselling from their peers. Due to the taboo associated with sex and sexual reproductive health in most families in Zimbabwe, it is rare for a parent to talk with his or her biological children on the subject. In this regard, *nhimbe* becomes a particular variation of the extended family system, with a capacity for providing a conducive environment in which all members of the community can discuss social issues – as individuals, householders and community members. Still widely practised in most African countries, the extended family is a social value system with the unique capacity of providing a safety net for members of the family who might be in socio-economic distress. It is also a community value that encourages families to celebrate together with kin outside of and beyond the nuclear family circle (Foster 2000:57–60). So *nhimbe* offers a social platform for community members to freely engage into conversations with children of other parents on these issues. In short, the *nhimbe* practice provides young people and adults alike an opportunity for marriage and family socialisation (Thompson 2010:183, 188; Sithole 2014:140, 146) and this helps to prevent potential conflicts in families and by implication promote peace.

### **6.8 Social inclusion**

As alluded to earlier, the key principle of *nhimbe* practice is social inclusion. This is evidenced in that no one is deliberately excluded from participating in any organised *nhimbe* in the community. Every household in the community indeed has the right to receive assistance from community members whenever a need arises, but no one is coerced to do so. Reciprocity underpins community members' choice to participate in *nhimbés*. In other words, the community sociology is that the people who are most welcome to participate are those who have a good track record of participation at such meetings. This emphasises the

reciprocal relationship nature of the *nhimbe* practice (Thompson 2010:189). An exception to the application of reciprocity is when *nhimbe* is done to assist vulnerable households such as those of the elderly and people with disabilities, and those headed by orphans or children (Sithole 2014:170, 197, 220). For these situations, it is not expected that the vulnerable persons reciprocally participate in the *nhimbes*. This exception, however, does not affect the social inclusion dimension of *nhimbe* with its focus on reducing inequalities within communities. In this regard, *nhimbe* contributes to conflict prevention because of its social inclusion feature whereby socio-economic inequality is minimised. Of course, when there is an increasing inequality gap in society, it tends to provide fertile ground for conflicts to erupt (Bahgat et al. 2017; Bircan, Brück and Vothknecht 2010:4–5; Cramer 2003:397, 404–410).

## 7. Conclusion

As discussed in the preceding sections, it is clear that *nhimbe* is an endogenous conflict prevention and peacebuilding mechanism. Furthermore, *nhimbe* is an inclusive community mechanism which is largely used for household food security. It is a practice which is anchored onto a community's socio-cultural obligations to promote conflict prevention, foster peace and indirectly promote conflict resolution and transformation. The familial relationships that also underpin the *nhimbe* practice contribute towards community social cohesion. Generally, *nhimbe* is a social resource with multiple benefits to the community beyond the socio-economic assistance for which it has been known for centuries. Essentially, it has internal inter-locking capacities in pre-conflict prevention, in-conflict mitigation, conflict management, conflict resolution, conflict transformation and post-conflict peacebuilding.

## 8. Recommendations

The recommendations are underpinned by the African decolonial discourse where the emphasis is on resolving problems in Africa through means primarily derived from Afrocentric approaches. This is because development is less meaningful and sustainable if one, one's community, or society at large, uses 'imported' socio-cultural norms and practices when approaching inter-cultural problems.

Thus, the foregoing discussion has shown that *nhimbe* is a community-

based practice in communities among people with close kinship bonds. From this understanding, the following are recommended to the Government of Zimbabwe and the African Union:

Firstly, that conflict prevention and peacebuilding models/frameworks in rural communities be designed with consideration of socio-cultural endogenous factors and existing social networks in the communities;

Secondly, that the norms and practices of totems and taboos be revisited to inform the design of conflict prevention and peacebuilding models that help to unlock and reinforce the potential in the practices for sustainable restoration of relationships in communities;

Thirdly, towards achieving SDG 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, a deliberate strengthening of grassroots traditional social network institutions like *nhimbe* should be undertaken. When community social networks are recognised and strengthened, it ensures a bottom-up approach in the implementation of community initiatives.

Finally, policymakers and the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) in Zimbabwe may need to review the contribution of traditional practices like *nhimbe* in the sustainable peacebuilding agenda. If the social reservoirs in the *nhimbe* and similar practices are properly integrated into conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategies, it is highly likely that Africa might soon experience a peaceful climate, as well as accelerated transformative and sustainable development.

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