An Alternative to Patriarchal Marriage: Mapoto Unions

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is on new marital forms of women in a growing provincial town of Masvingo in Southern Zimbabwe. The study shows that many urbanites were turning to alternative marital forms, especially to what is commonly referred to in Zimbabwe as *mapoto,* a loosely structured relation with a man which allows the woman to retain control of her life in terms of decision making. The fluidity of the urban situation made *mapoto* a viable option. Though one of the advantages of *mapoto* unions is their ability to operate outside the strictures imposed by tradition or the law, some form of legal recognition of *mapoto* might be useful in cases where one of the cohabiting partners is seeking legal redress after the break-up of a union. (Ed.)

Keywords: marriage, marital form, family

INTRODUCTION

> For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator. Therefore, marriage is a duty, a requirement from corporate society, a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and law-breaker, he is not only abnormal but 'under human'. Failure to get married means that the person has rejected society and society rejects him in return (Mbiti 1969:133).

Research into marriage patterns in Africa has tended to see the institution as something that occurs early and is universal (van de Walle 1968). While studies have shown that variations do exist in terms of age at first marriage, there has been a general agreement with the notion of the universality of African marriage (United Nations 1990). Yet, notwithstanding Mbiti's idealisation of marriage as a universal institution in African societies, there is growing evidence of the existence of marriage variants which undermine the notion of the universality of patriarchal marriage in Africa. Suda (1996:78) noted that "Cohabitation and other new experimental alternatives to traditional marriage are prevalent in urban African families". Generally, in Zimbabwe as elsewhere in Africa, the

practice of cohabitation was linked to the processes of urbanisation and the weakening of traditional institutional controls (Chavunduka 1979).

This article is premised on the view that while marriage and marital hope remained highly desired, many urbanites were turning to alternative marital forms, especially to what is commonly referred to in Zimbabwe as *mapoto* (a loosely structured relation with a man which allows the woman to retain control of her life in terms of decision making). For some women *mapoto* can be viewed as part of their survival social networks. In addition to income generating strategies for *mapoto* women, survival included domestic reproductive relations and activities such as entering into relations of various kinds with men. This ties in with what Mapetla and Machai (1998) refer to as the 'intricate relationships' of support. *Mapoto*, like social networks in general, did ensure the women's continued stay in town. *Mapoto* should therefore be seen in terms of complex, dynamic and enduring relationships that deserve the attention of researchers, policy makers, sociologists.

The focus of this article is on *mapoto* women in a growing provincial town of Masvingo in Southern Zimbabwe. The results presented in this paper are part of a larger 14-months project extending from November 1994 to December 1995, whose main focus was on how urban women dealt with impoverishment, the kinds of options open to poor women and the strategies women pursued in order to survive in town. The Masvingo study was largely qualitative, though quantitative data was also collected. I selected 58 female heads of households for the main study. In addition, 31 officials were interviewed. The research involved several intensive interviews, extended observation, informal interviews and conversations. Willing participants were obtained through the women's networks rather than random sampling.

This article draws its conclusions from six *mapoto* women constituting 12% of the total of female heads of households in the sample. Rather than aiming at generalisations based on a representative sample the article seeks to build on the in-depth case studies and to develop insights on how *mapoto* unions functioned in ways that ensured women's survival in town. *Mapoto* unions enabled some women in my sample to choose to live with men on their own terms, something impossible with traditional marriages. Relationships based on *mapoto* featured prominently as major survival techniques for some of the women in my sample.

The article is divided into five sections. The first section examines the representation of traditional forms of marriage and women's perceptions to these idealized forms of marital unions. This is followed by a discussion of the hidden costs and benefits of alternative forms of marital unions that undermine the dominance of patriarchal marriage. In addition, a general critique of *mapoto* is carried out. A summary of data on the six *mapoto* women is presented and is followed by a discussion of lessons that could be drawn from these women's experiences. The last section drawing on the discussions in preceding sections recasts the issue of *mapoto* in terms of a post-modern paradox involving a contest dominated by the politics of choice. There is a definite attempt to

deconstruct and demystify some of the popular misconceptions of *mapoto* unions.

1. REPRESENTATIONS OF TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE FORMS

In line with Mbiti's argument with regards to the universality of African patriarchal marriage, many attempts have been made before and after him to reify patriarchal marriage as the cultural ideal norm. Traditional African marriage is presented as the unchanging ideal form. The traditional form of marriage acquired a revered status, especially with the construction of customary law during the colonial period something enthusiastically inherited by the post-colonial state and its functionaries. Defending the African patriarchal marital form as part of a fight against assaults on tradition became increasingly familiar amongst functionalist anthropologists of the mid 1950s and 1960s. The idealization of patriarchal marriage in African societies is seen in the works of people like Gelfand (1984), *The Genuine Shona*, Lucy Mair (1969), *African Marriage and Social Change*, and Evans-Pritchard (1958), *Kinship and Marriage amongst the Nuer*. Ethnographers' accounts of traditional and/or changing emancipatory forms of tradition gave rise to what Jolly has called "specters of inauthenticity'.

Keesing (1992) draws some ironies in his argument that indigenous leaders themselves a product of colonialism are quick to criticize outsiders' views of their cultures and in the process use the colonially created identities and invented traditions to support their claims of distinct cultural forms including marriage icons. Keesing talks of idealised and romanticised representations of traditional cultures something, which never really approximates the lived experiences of many indigenous peoples. Neither do we have a single never-changing ideal marriage pattern, since even in early 20th-century traditional societies variations in the form of marriage existed.

1.1 CHANGING FAMILY FORMS

African marital forms are in a state of flux and are characterised by change. This is seen as the dominant pattern more in the context of rapid urbanisation and increased rural-urban and trans-border migrations. Chavunduka (1979) noted the emerging marriage variant of *mapoto* in urban centres. This was in response to the demands of urbanisation and emerging middle class values that put a premium on marriage in terms of its supposed benefits to the individual. Earlier, Little (1973) had observed similar patterns in many parts of Africa. Marriage was becoming increasingly less formalised and delocalised. For Suda (1996), many young people in towns were reluctant to commit themselves to a lifelong church marriage. In the context of delocalised moral values and increased

marital problems *mapoto*-type relations were on the increase and people were ready to embrace such unions as proper marriages. For Suda (1996:79), "weak moralnets coupled with the emerging sense of individualism" were contributing to the demise of the traditional marriage form. The fragility of modern African marriages was due in part to moral delocalisation and weak moralnets. Increased poverty, strains on the extended family, the growing empowerment of women, increased marital breakdown, sexual permissiveness and growing numbers of single mothers meant sexual fulfilment outside marriage was possible. In fact, Karanja (1987) noted the high prevalence of 'outside children' in modern day African societies. This was more rampant in towns where increasing numbers of women are searching for companionship and sexual fulfilment, as was the case with their male counterparts. In contrast to traditional African society, where marital and sexual relations were embedded in a system of moral obligations, today 'outside marriages' are common in contemporary African societies. In many instances, men and women live in a *mapoto* union for years before separating or formalising their union traditionally or in church or through some type of civil marriage. *Mapoto* allows monogamy to be practised alongside delocalised and clandestine polygyny.

1.2 EXPLOITATIVE SEXUAL POLITICS

Increasingly, as more and more women become empowered, they are more prepared to challenge what they see as exploitative patriarchal marriage rights. Women come to demand equality in their marriages. The realisation by many women that symmetrical marital relations are almost impossible in the traditional form of marriage is contributing to an increase in *mapoto* unions. *Mapoto* marital unions are generally characterised by openness, mutual respect, and freedom on the part of the woman to pursue her goals and desires. *Mapoto* are negotiated sexual unions challenging the dominant patriarchal relations found in traditional marriage forms. The marital power of the husband is diminished in *mapoto* partly due to the non-payment of lobola.

Schmidt (1992) linked colonial struggles in Zimbabwe to ultimate control of female sexuality and to the putting of brakes on African urbanisation. The issue of sexuality dominated colonial migration policies. Women were excluded from access to jobs, housing and other benefits of town life. Women who came to towns in defiance of colonial and patriarchal control often entered into some form of relation with men. Some of these women of independence meant operating as prostitutes, informal sector operators and as *mapoto* women. According to Schmidt, prostitution and informal unions with men offered a route to economic and social independence for many town women in colonial Zimbabwe. These kinds of sexual unions, no matter how temporary, gave rise to what Chavunduka (1979) termed *mapoto* 'marriages'. In some way *mapoto*

unions can be considered as attempts to undermine the exploitative nature of patriarchal marital unions.

2. BENEFITS AND HIDDEN COSTS OF MAPOTO

The starting point for an understanding of the effects of marriage on people's lives is the conceptualisation of patriarchy. Mies (1986) concluded that patriarchy is a cornerstone, the bedrock and foundation of most societies. Patriarchy supports and justifies relations of subordination of women in their interactions with men. The legal and social control of women is very strong. Patriarchy influences the definition of what constitutes a family, household headship, and the benefits flowing from that. As a general rule, patriarchy is the dominant structure of family organisation. Through it men wield power and control women and the fruits of their labour. Access to and control of resources at a family as well as societal level is also regulated by patriarchy. Yet, despite the powerful hold of patriarchy on people's lives, shifts have been occurring especially in the area of marital relations.

Not all marital unions are patriarchal in the sense of being based on male dominance. Our discussion of *mapoto* is a case in point as it illuminates and enables us to see the shifts and changes occurring at the household level in terms of marital power. Marital relations in *mapoto* marriages are generally negotiated and power tends to be diffuse since the man does not enjoy total possession and control of the woman. *Mapoto* relationships flow from mutual understandings, are less binding and have no legal backing making them susceptible to breaking up if mutual understanding between couples ends. The fact that *mapoto* are loosely structured relations is their main strength as marital unions. *Mapoto*, as evidenced from conversations with the Masvingo women in such unions, are characterised by negotiations between couples before important decisions are reached. This is what Kimane and Ntimo-Makara (1998) refer to as the emergence of 'negotiating man'. Generally, men in patriarchal marriages, despite the changes taking place, still wield a lot of power over women. This power has legal backing, which is not the case in *mapoto* marriages.

The vulnerability of married women, a characteristic feature of patriarchal marriage, is absent in *mapoto*. The women generally feel empowered. Independently or in consultation with the men in their lives, they make the decisions and choices which they consider strategic and useful in their lives. Their self-esteem is generally higher than that of married women. The *mapoto* women in the sample were more forceful and confident in themselves compared to women in other categories with regards to their marital status. This results partly from the collapse of the false dichotomy that pits women as the subordinate partners with their men. Through legal provision, as is the case in Lesotho or, by implication, in Zimbabwe, a minority status is conferred on married women. One can see the advantage of *mapoto* in that the women are

regarded as of independent means and mind. They are not tied down by conjugal rights and marital power, which often, though not explicitly stated, confers power on men.

Family law in Zimbabwe undercuts married women's rights. The call for the elimination of all forms of discrimination and, by implication, for equality between men and women is undermined by the enshrinement of customary law in national constitutions. Generally, when it comes to rights, customary law is retrogressive in many respects and all married men know this. Clearly, then, the law is not on the side of married women. The rights discourse diminishes with marriage and *mapoto* restores it on the few women who choose this option. This is possible, given that in *mapoto* no lobola (marriage transactions or bride wealth) has been paid. Other rights that flow to *mapoto* women who are married are not automatically guaranteed, included property rights and the all-important issue of child custody.

In Zimbabwe, as is the general situation in most African countries, marriage confers on the husband unlimited rights of sexual access to the woman's body. There is no such a thing as marital rape. In the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic this is the death-trap which married women have to live with. The situation of *mapoto* women is slightly different. *Mapoto* women to some extent have a certain degree of control over matters of sexuality. They are in a position to negotiate with the men in their lives and can demand protective and safe sex practices, given the nature of their relationships. Many women in my study agreed that it was impossible for a married woman to demand the use of condoms by the husband, even though she might be aware of his philandering behaviour. As noted by Bell (1997:240), generally "marriage [implies] a loss of sexual freedom and the onset of domestic obligations with no apparent benefits".

Mapoto women are in a better position to influence their social and economic environment. By establishing sexual relations with men, *mapoto* women are able to position themselves in ways that can result in their self-improvement as well as in the survival of their households. The alliances or relationships some of my respondents entered into with men were, according to them, on their own terms. The women were forging new types of partnerships with men. In many cases it was the man who moved in, on the understanding that he would contribute a share of the rent, food, and domestic labour. It was not sex that featured uppermost in the women's relationship with men. The cohabiting women in my sample all, without exception, preferred that these relationships should remain informal. They did not want to 'hang themselves' by entering into a formalised relationship. Their decision to cohabit was a conscious one as it freed them from what they perceived as the limiting and constraining effects of marriage. As noted by Mapetla and Machai (1998), the advantages to the women of informal relationships are that "men who become bossy or are stingy with money are not tolerated... they quickly send them off. When they become unemployed and are a liability they also expel them". These options would not be possible in a formalised relationship. However, it should be mentioned that the *mapoto* women were not totally rejecting patriarchal

marriage, but they sought to modify it. These women still favoured the marital option as the desired end result, but they were cautious and not too eager to formalise relationships as it results in a foreclosure of one's options. *Mapoto*, then, could be seen as a negotiated structural arrangement that conferred rights, responsibilities and obligations on the parties without being too limiting on the women.

Another advantage of *mapoto* is in relation to the direction of flow of resources. In fact there exists a possibility that a married woman might gain nothing from the marriage, but this is the opposite in *mapoto*. Usually, the direction of flow of resources to the woman is greater in *mapoto* unions than in a formal marriage. According to Masvingo female heads of households, *mapoto* offered a safer home environment, women were less abused in a *mapoto* than in a formal marriage, they remained independent to make their own decisions, and they kept the man on his toes as he had to 'deliver' or else risk the relationship being terminated. In many ways *mapoto* relationships were on the women's own terms.

While the impression given above is positive as far as *mapoto* networks and relationships are concerned, this would be an oversimplification or mere exaggeration of the situation if potential or actual negative effects are not also referred to. For instance, in the light of the AIDS pandemic the usefulness of *mapoto* relationships needs examination. Shouldn't we consider *mapoto* a death trap? My respondents were fully aware of the ravages of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Many conceded that women in their situations were driven to enter into a *mapoto* union by poverty. Sex was a secondary consideration and not the prime motive for such relationships. However, unlike women in a formal marriage who my respondents regarded as 'sitting ducks' in the face of HIV/AIDS, many felt that they were in a better position to demand safe sex practices. If ever the *mapoto* women engaged in unprotected sex it was not because they had no choice but other considerations outweighed the perceived dangers. The sexual experiences of the women in my study reveal greater possibilities of safe sex in *mapoto* unions than otherwise thought. I would admit, however, that all sex is risky. However, it appears paradoxical that the dangers are much more in a formal marital union where the rights and obligations of married persons make it hard for the parties to demand safe sex practices.

The absence of traditional support networks to intervene in the event of conflict between spouses is seen as a major factor explaining the instability of these unions. All my respondents conceded that *mapoto* are not life-long unions. It was expected that at some point they would end. This influenced *mapoto* women's investment decisions.

The increasing incidence of marital break-ups is contributing to the increase in *mapoto* relationships as many women and men want to take their time before committing themselves to legal unions. The need to avoid the complications of the law when the marriage breaks down is an attractive aspect of *mapoto,* yet it is this flexibility that increases *mapoto* women's vulnerability, as recourse to the law is not an option. The implication is that the legal lacunae created by *mapoto*

need to be taken into account by lawmakers so as to protect the women and children of these loosely structured unions. However, the point stressed in this paper is that the advantages of *mapoto* unions far outweigh the perceived disadvantages. These unions are far more beneficial to a woman's well being than formal patriarchal marriages based on customary or civil marriage law.

3. RIDING THE TIGER, MAPOTO AS SURVIVAL STRATEGY

Mapoto relationships approximate in many ways what Mararike (1999) refers to as the 'intangible and tangible assets' that people need in order to survive in rural or urban contexts. It was clear during my fieldwork that the universality of the patriarchal marriage form is an over-exaggeration. Alternative marital forms existed. Urban environments like that in Masvingo were conducive to the emergence of *mapoto*. Yet in the light of male opposition, the double moral standards and the public and official denunciations of *mapoto*, it was an option chosen by women who were entrepreneurial, innovative, determined and risk-takers. In other words, *mapoto* attracted the cream of the crop. In many instances, entry into *mapoto* was not for the faint-hearted, given societal opposition to this form of marital union.

 Mapoto operated as survival strategy for the women in my sample. Obbo (1986:193) observed that women quite often try "to protect themselves against what they perceive as material and status vulnerability that results from divorce, widowhood, or remaining single". Women try, often successfully, to improve their social and economic status through establishing various types of relationships with men. While conceding that the strategy of manipulating womanhood and motherhood as a transactional tool did not always work for all women, Obbo argued that it enabled some women to access financial and material resources (sometimes including housing) from their lovers, even though this might not result in marriage. This strategy worked for some of my respondents: one respondent in the 'burnt-out' category lived mostly on maintenance money, while those in *mapoto* relationships and some prostitutes were able to hang on in the city through the pursuit of this strategy.

 All my respondents living with men in *mapoto* relationships had a reasonably positive view of the arrangement, irrespective of their poverty category. In all *mapoto* cases, the men contributed to the household budget and the women retained their autonomy and control over the use of their incomes. This raised the issue that in some ways the high marital hope amongst my respondents was being pursued within a 'radical traditionalist' feminist perspective. Wifehood, motherhood and radicalising 'traditions' were options that were useful for some women in their pursuit of independence and autonomy. It was not the total rejection of marriage as such that characterised women's responses but, rather, a rejection of oppressive patriarchal relations in favour of the more egalitarian *mapoto* unions. In fact, given the high premium

accorded to marriage, its variant in the form of *mapoto* was considered a better option in the event of formal marriage not materialising. The idiom or language used in formal marital unions dominated *mapoto* relationships. The *mapoto* couples were referred to as husband and wife, and to a large extent they perceived themselves as such. *Mapoto* had become an acceptable alternative to formal marriage.

Chavunduka's (1979) findings regarding *mapoto* were corroborated by my study. For a *mapoto* couple this type of marriage variant is becoming the norm. Women of independent means, and even women amongst the poor, pursued the *mapoto* strategy. *Mapoto* relationships were considered ideal in that they offered a much safer home environment. In the case of marital abuse, a women could easily opt out. Men in *mapoto* were kept on their toes and had to deliver, both in material and emotional terms, lest they found themselves kicked out or abandoned by the woman. Because the men had not paid bride wealth they lacked the traditional recognised claims over the women and hence could only maintain the relationship on the basis of mutual respect and understanding of their partners.

Mapoto functioned as a survival option for a minority amongst my respondents. It guaranteed the flow of material resources in addition to offering emotional support. In *mapoto*, while the man was not considered the head of household, he was still expected to act as a provider or to part-contribute to household maintenance, lest he got kicked out. *Mapoto* enabled people to pool resources, and at the same time those involved received conjugal rights. For some of my respondents, *mapoto* created a space that enabled them to cope with urban existence. The way *mapoto* unions operated demonstrated that these forms of marital union played an important role and had become one of the strategies for urban survival amongst some of the women in my sample. More importantly, *mapoto* relationships were characterised by a high degree of equality between the partners, making it possible for couples in these unions to negotiate their way. *Mapoto* were creating a class of negotiating men, something that is positive in terms of future gender relations.

3.1 HIV/AIDS AND MAPOTO UNIONS

While the threat of HIV/AIDS is of great concern and cannot be ignored by those involved in *mapoto*, the *mapoto* women, unlike their formally married counterparts, could do something about the threat to their lives. My six respondents felt that *mapoto* women had a much better control of their bodies compared to women in formalised marital unions. In this regard *mapoto* not only offered economic and emotional support but also contributed to the survival chances of an individual woman. In a *mapoto* relationship a woman could demand and enforce the adoption of safe sex practices with a high chance of success. Women in *mapoto* relationships were more empowered to stand for

their rights, including the right to the practice of safe sex. In this regard we can begin to see *mapoto* in a positive light as a survival option under difficult urban environments characterised by increasing poverty. In a way, *mapoto* unions were not a death trap, as they are generally portrayed.

3.2 TRICKY WOMEN AND NEGOTIATING MEN

A question that needs to be answered is about how this group of women managed to create a class of negotiating men in a highly patriarchal society such as was the case in Masvingo. Chavunduka (1979), Gelfand (1984) and Mararike (1998) noted that Shona people attributed the bizarre behaviour of men in marriage or marital relationships to bewitchment by 'tricky' women. *Mapoto* women were seen as money sharks who lure men to their side through charms and through the use of herbs, a process known as *mupfuhwira* (love blinded). The effects on a *mapoto* man are similar to married men under the spell of their wives. Mararike (1998:90) noted that under such situations "the women create, out of their husbands, clients who are subservient and serviceable to their interests and agendas". It then follows that to free *mapoto* men from the disorienting effects of a *mupfuhwira* spell the intervention of medicine men is needed. While m*upfuhwira* might be seen as disadvantageous to men it clearly serves a purpose for the *mapoto* women and ensures that they cope with the demands of town life. On the other hand, it could be argued that negotiating men represent a new breed of men who truly believe in equality and are prepared to forego the privileges of patriarchal marriage.

4. CASE EXAMPLES OF MAPOTO WOMEN RESPONDENTS IN MASVINGO

A descriptive account of six *mapoto* women selected from my larger research sample is presented in this section. The experience of the six respondents showed that the pursuit of the marital strategy had had different outcomes for different individuals at different times. All of the *mapoto* women were double-rooted: they maintained one foot in town and the other in the village. This was in response to their socio-economic conditions. *Mapoto* women were finding it hard to make ends meet. Their age range was between 32 and 45 years, making them middle-aged women in the middle to end of their reproductive cycle. Pseudonyms rather than letters are used in the text. Previous publications have mostly adhered to the use of letter symbols to stand for different women.

Anna, a 32-year-old mother of three (4, 8, and 16 year-olds), lived under very stressful conditions. She was in the 'hanging-on'[1] group. She was a divorcee who had been forced to leave two of her elder children in the care of her mother-in-law. The four-year-old toddler stayed with Anna's aunt. Anna shared a room with another two-person household in addition to her own urban household of five people. In the shared room was herself, her 40-year-old *mapoto* partner, an 18-year-old sister's daughter, and her brother's two children aged 7 and 14, one of them in the first grade and the other in the seventh. Her main source of income was food vending. She regularly did crocheting for a woman cross-border trader. Her *mapoto* partner worked in a retail shop. He contributed an equal share towards the household expenses. While Anna was quite happy with her *mapoto* man, she had no intention of entering into a formal marriage. This was mainly due to her past experiences and the fear of losing her independence. Though she was struggling financially, Anna's self esteem had grown. She had lived in Masvingo for eight years.

Tendai, a 34-year-old in an informal conjugal union, had four children by her 'informal' husband, who was legally married to another woman. She had been in this type of union for sixteen years. She was in the hanging-on group. She considered independence and freedom from total control by a husband as well as mutual respect for one's partner as the main advantages of *mapoto* unions. She had lived in Masvingo for three years. Tendai maintained strong links with her rural village. She had built herself a two-roomed house in her rural village to which she intended to retire, something that was not to happen, as she died in August 1995 after a short illness. Tendai's children were aged 8, 11, 13 and 15. She was a one-room lodger who stayed with all her children except the 11-year-old, who was with the grandmother in the rural village. Although Tendai's *mapoto* husband made regular contributions towards household maintenance, she bore the greater part of the costs to maintain her household. Tendai worked as a sales lady in a shop. However, her main source of income came from her cross-border trading operations. She went down to South Africa bi-monthly.

Tambu, a 34-year-old divorcee living in a *mapoto* union was in the hanging-on group. She was a one-room lodger. Her *mapoto* husband lived with her most of the time, but visited his rural village fortnightly. She suspected that he had a village wife, although her *mapoto* husband denied this. Tambu had lived in Masvingo for 12 years. She was the mother of a 14-year-old from her previous marriage. When the divorce occurred she was not allowed by her ex-husband to gain custody of the child. Although she acknowledged that her *mapoto* partner contributed significantly to her household budget, she noted that she was the main breadwinner. Her main source of income was a formal job involving

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[1] In the Masvingo study respondents had been grouped into four socio-economic categories, namely the burnt out, i.e., those who could hardly sustain their urban existence; the hanging-on, i.e., those in difficult circumstances but struggling hard to stay in town; the coping, i.e., those who could balance the household budget, but had no savings ; and the climbing-out of poverty group, who had a healthy domestic budget and made savings and investments (Muzvidziwa 1997).

knitting for an informal sector operator who had set up a knitting business. She was grossly underpaid in this job. Tambu rarely visited her rural village; she had minimum contact with the village and was planning to stay for as long as possible in town.

Itai, a 38-year-old never-married *mapoto* woman, was also in the hanging-on group. She depended for her living on the sale of carrier bags. She did part-time knitting for a cross-border woman trader. She received a small regular rental income from her one-roomed housing unit at the Mpandawana growth point in Gutu, a rural-district in Masvingo province. Her *mapoto* partner paid rent and contributed towards the food budget. Her *mapoto* 'husband' had another wife staying in his rural village, where she took care of the rural homestead. Itai did not mind sharing her man with another woman as long he cared for her and showed her affection. They had been in the relationship for nearly ten years, but had no intention of formalising the relationship. Itai wanted to remain independent and thought marriage would chase the man away. Besides her *mapoto* partner, Itai was also a member of a *maround* (a rotating credit and savings group). She had a strong friendship network. Itai was a mother of a 20-year-old who worked as a formal sector employee at a growth point in Masvingo province. She was a room sharer with another woman in a *mapoto* union. There was no privacy where she lived as she shared premises with 18 other people. The three-roomed unit was semi-closed as a passage ran through it, making the house an open space. At the time of my field research, she had lived in Masvingo for 17 years and considered it her home.

Tsitsi, a 40-year-old divorcee now in a *mapoto* union, was like the rest of the other women in that she was in the hanging-on socio-economic group. She was the mother of five (13, 18, 20, 23 and 25 year-olds). She had been forced to leave her children behind with their father at the time of their divorce. Tsitsi had lived for 14 years in Masvingo. She came to Masvingo just before the birth of her youngest child and since then had remained in town. She only visited the communal area when there was an important function such as a wedding or funeral. She had lived with her *mapoto* partner for nine years. Unfortunately, the man had been retrenched and was solely dependent on the income earned by Tsitsi. At the time of research, Tsitsi's man made no contribution to the household. Tsitsi was a one-room lodger. She had very limited kin connections in both town and rural areas. However, she had a vibrant friendship network, and she also knew her neighbours well. Tsitsi's main source of income was as a traditional beer brewer. Knitting and crocheting for cross-border women traders and food vending involving mostly the sale of tomatoes and vegetables constituted her two secondary sources of income.

Mary, a 45-year-old, and a mother of six, depended on food vending as her main source of income. She was a recent entrant into food vending, having started food vending operations in 1992. She also crocheted for a cross-border trade on a part-time basis. She belonged to the coping poverty category. She had four children from her previous marriage and two from the *mapoto* relationship. Mary was a one-room lodger. She shared the premises with her *mapoto* partner,

a less than one-year-old baby and a two-year-old daughter, and also with the 10-year-old and 14-year-old daughters of a deceased sister. Mary's eldest daughter, a 20-year-old, was married, while her other three school-age children from an earlier marriage lived in her rural village with their maternal uncle.

Mary maintained contact with her village through visits (at least three times a year) and remittances on a bi-monthly basis. After the death of her husband she had returned to her village of origin and had built herself a two-roomed rural homestead, as she had the intention to eventually return to the village in old age. While her *mapoto* partner contributed to the household budget, she remained the main contributor to the household income. The relationship allowed her to retain control not only of expenses but also of decisions that affected her life. She had no intention of formalising the relationship despite the birth of two children, as that would undermine her independence. She had a very cordial relationship with her partner as they shared expenses. She also admitted benefiting from the relationship in terms of emotional support.

Mary did not want to repeat what she went through when her late husband died. Her affines took all the property she and her husband had accumulated over a period of twelve years. She returned to her home village without anything and had to start all over again before she could be on her feet. She lost a home, six cattle, several goats and access to land that belonged to her husband.

The temporary nature of headship is best illustrated by two further cases from the larger sample of respondents who were classified as divorced and single, never-married persons. Their dealings with men illustrated how some women phased in and out of *mapoto.*

Bettie, a 27-year-old never-married, childless bar prostitute and a one-room lodger, did part-time knitting and crocheting for a cross-border trader she had been introduced to by a client. Bettie was in the hanging-on poverty category. She remitted money and material goods to her kin in her home village. She part-supported her brother's children's education, though they lived in the village. Bettie also visited her village at least three times a year. She maintained links with her village of origin.

As a bar prostitute Bettie mainly serviced two kinds of male prostitute clients, the 'one-off' clients and the 'urban-regular' clients. Amongst her 'urban-regulars' she had developed, in the case of two such clients, a more personalised service which included food provisions, especially their preparation, and laundry. Marital hopes appeared to influence her relationships with her regular clients. A proto-*mapoto* relationship seemed to emerge in her dealings with the two regular clients. Members of her prostitute network referred to some of her 'urban-regulars', particularly with reference to either one of the two 'urban-regulars', as *'uyu murume wasisi* Bettie ' (this one is the 'husband' of 'sister' Bettie). She went to the residences of these clients, one of whom was married, when his wife was away. Even for Bettie, a full-time prostitute, marital hope seemed to be the promise that regulated some of her relationships with her 'urban-regulars'.

Precious, a 29-year-old divorcee and a mother of eight-year-old twins, depended on food vending as her only source of income, and was the only vendor in the 'climbing out of poverty' group. She had registered on the Council's housing waiting list and was quite optimistic that, sooner rather than later, she would get a stand on which to build a house.

Precious hoped to re-marry if a suitable partner could be found. From September 1995 onwards she lived in a *mapoto* relationship. She had entered this relationship with her eyes 'wide open', and appeared to be maintaining her autonomy and independence. Her business operations seemed unaffected by the *mapoto* relationship. She acknowledged that her partner contributed to the household budget, which had resulted in increased savings on her part. It appeared from Precious's case that, where a woman is financially secure, pseudo-marital arrangements are more likely to have positive effects and autonomy is almost guaranteed.

4.1 LESSONS FROM THE CASE STUDIES

One thing that is clear from the above cases is that *mapoto* marital strategy plays an important role in the women's lives. For most women *mapoto* is an alternative form of marital arrangement that offers greater scope for the independence and autonomy for the women. The way *mapoto* unions constituted themselves has implications in terms of how we view the whole area of marriage and the issue of women's empowerment. The universality of patriarchal marriage is questioned and marriage variants such as *mapoto* do play a role in many people's lives. While it could also be argued that *mapoto* unions could also entrench patriarchy, since they require little commitment on the part of males, the level of independence enjoyed by *mapoto* women seems to defy this line of reasoning.

For instance, Mary's case showed that in some cases the marital strategy had negative consequences, particularly in the case of widowhood. While she acknowledged that during the life of her late husband they had enjoyed a close relationship and had built their own three-roomed rural homestead, all this was lost on the termination of marriage through widowhood. Yet on the other hand, *mapoto* relationships proved to be more rewarding for the women. The gains were in relation to material and emotional support. A *mapoto* woman retained control of her household resources and ran no risk of losing any property to affines in the event of a partner's death. Mugabe's exhortation, as noted by Cheater and Gaidzanwa (1996), that if women want property they must forego marriage, seems to apply in Mary's case. But it also shows that it is not marriage *per se* that is problematic but what type or form it takes. It appeared that *mapoto* was a suitable form of marital relationship that maximised the chances for a woman without necessarily undermining her independence or control of resources.

It would appear that what we probably need is a radicalisation of tradition, in such a way as to create a space that allows women to enter into marital unions that contribute positively to their well-being. There is also a need to prepare society to accept alternative marital unions such as *mapoto*. Judging by *mapoto* women's rationality, we need to unpack the myths surrounding *mapoto* and to do away with the stigmatisation of this form of marital variant. The above case examples show that it is quite possible to pursue the goal of empowering women even within the context of a marital union. What my respondents professed was not a rejection of marriage; on the contrary, it demonstrates a strong preference for and pursuit of the marital strategy that leads to independence and autonomy.

Mapoto respondents' main concern was how best to deal with growing impoverishment. These women had practical needs that had to be met first. It is my view that this situation is likely to continue in this way for some time to come. The above cases probably suggest that an indigenous feminism embracing the marital strategy could be adopted without compromising the search for women's empowerment and equality with men. This is possible for as long as the central concern of any strategy is to improve the lives of women. *Mapoto* is both a response to and an outcome of the demands of a changing urbanising society such as was the case in Masvingo. Urbanisation had given rise to alternative marital forms that preserved the interests of the women partners. The flexibility of *mapoto* was attractive to my respondents, as they did not feel the constraining weight of a formal marriage with all the accompanying rituals and expectations. *Mapoto* were thus profitable both in social and in financial terms, thereby guaranteeing the women's continued stay in town.

4.2 THE POLITICS OF CHOICE

The story of *mapoto* women demonstrates attempts to move away from the cultural straitjacket that seeks to privilege the patriarchal marriage form as the ideal type of marriage. *Mapoto* involves a definite fight and attempt to break from constraints imposed by tradition. *Mapoto* marriage demonstrates a post-modern paradox in that as a marriage variant it is both a contest with tradition and with one's own value system; and at the same time illustrates the freedom that comes to individuals in situations where they are able to make a choice with regards to marital form. Choice liberates *mapoto* women from the limiting weight of tradition. The experience of the women discussed in this paper shows the merits of accepting the plurality of marital forms. The experience of *mapoto* women shows a break from the dominance of patriarchal marital form in emerging urban areas.

Through case presentations this paper has tried to deconstruct and demystify some of the popular misconceptions of *mapoto* unions. There is nothing inherently wrong with m*apoto. Mapoto* unions are just as functional and useful for household maintenance, and in some ways fared better in terms of individual

autonomy. The really concern for those interested in family studies should be the ability to create a space for men and women to enable them to make choices regarding the type of marital union that best suit them. Choosing to be or not to be in *mapoto*, as illustrated by the women discussed in this paper, is political in that it involves a struggle against dominant traditional values that privilege the patriarchal marital form. *Mapoto* strengthens the search for meaning in a marital union and personal independence.

5. CONCLUSION

The importance of this work in the context of studies of the 'African family and marriage' cannot be overlooked. Given that the definition of a 'family' has a western bias, it seems that the definition of 'marriage' is also western. This study shows that conceptions of African marital forms need to be re-evaluated to show the range of possibilities for human behaviour. The article contributes to an understanding of male/female marital relations in the context of changing rural-urban environments. It provides researchers with an opportunity to continue to probe the ways in which some women survive outside patriarchal marriage. The fluidity of the urban situation made *mapoto* a viable option. It was something women phased in and out of in the course of their life cycle. Though one of the advantages of *mapoto* unions is their ability to operate outside the strictures imposed by tradition or the law, some form of legal recognition of *mapoto* might be useful in cases where one of the cohabiting partners is seeking legal redress after the break-up of a union.

The rapid transformational changes fuelled by increasing urbanisation have given rise to a flexible marital union in the form of *mapoto*. A significant proportion of men and women in town have a *mapoto* partner. Despite the realisation that *mapoto* were of a temporary duration, the women in my sample had a positive view of this marital form. These women showed that at times the relationships of prostitutes-clients, divorcees, widowed and the never-married phased into *mapoto*, and some *mapoto* arrangements ended up as registered or recognised marriages. *Mapoto* thus fell within the ambit of a marital strategy that female-heads of households in my sample sometimes adopted as an urban survival strategy.

In conclusion, I should hasten to say that the decision to enter into *mapoto* union by the women in my sample was a largely a rational response to their lived experiences. These women had seen and could weigh up the benefits and disadvantages of *mapoto* unions, and they were convinced that, in their cases, *mapoto* was a viable and flexible option. *Mapoto* thus effectively functioned as an alternative to patriarchal marital forms. In some ways, *mapoto* unions experienced less exploitative sexual relationships. It is in the light of the foregoing discussions that this paper argues not only for recognition and

acceptance of *mapoto* unions but also for their inclusion in the literature on marital forms.

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