

CONTRIBUTION BY HONOURABLE ANNA SHIWEDA TO THE MOTION ON THE OCCURANCE OF CHILD MARRIAGES IN NAMIBIA AND THE ROLE THAT POTENTIALLY HARMFUL CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL PRACTICES MIGHT BE PLAYING IN PROMOTING CHILD MARRIAGES

Honourable Speaker

Honourable Members

I rise to contribute to the motion as tabled by Honourable Van den Heever of the DTA of Namibia on potentially harmful cultural and traditional practices that might promote child marriages.

Honourable Speaker, a paper written by **SANTOS MAHATO**, entitled: "**Causes and Consequences of Child Marriages: A Perspective**", identifies three main forces that drive child marriages namely, **poverty, the need to reinforce social ties and the belief that it offers protection.**

These three forces do not in any way refer to cultural and traditional practices to be some of the contributors to child marriages, as it is being alleged. Generally, when one considers different cultural and traditional practices in Africa, one will come to understand that there are valid reasons for the creation and institutionalisation of such practices. These reasons are based on fundamental and solid social and cultural values that need to be appreciated within the context of the African marriage philosophy. According to **Bénézet Bujo** in a book entitled: "**Plea for Change of Models of Marriage**": Traditional African marriage has a communal character and is dynamic in nature. This means that African marriage involves the participation of the entire community and it is not one stage or one phase contract, but is a process that entails different successive stages which require specific cultural and traditional practices and rituals to be conducted. In other words, the whole community partakes in the preparation of the Young man and Young woman who plan to tie the knot even before they declare their intentions to each other, and to their families. The preparation starts with the education of the young people on what is good marriage relationship. It then proceeds with the initiation through to the actual marriage ceremony. At each stage, appropriate ritual, cultural and traditional practices are carried out. It is, therefore, important for us to put things into the correct African context and

perspective when we critique these traditional and cultural practices and relate them to child marriage. Failing to do so may lead to wrong conclusions and wrong policy decisions or formulation.

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Lets us for example examine the Olufuko or Efundula Leengoma in Namibia, which is a cultural practice of the Ovawambo people, and which has been in existence long before Christianity came to that part of the country. Some of the reasons for conducting Olufuko can be presented as follows:

1. Initiation of young girls, symbolising a transition from **childhood to womanhood**. During the period of initiation, young girls are prepared for adulthood through teachings on life in general, household management skills and discipline. During this period they are subjected to deprivations and hardships in order to cultivate their endurance for life. **Bénézet Bujo** states that: ***"Initiation is indispensable to African communities as life can only be managed by discipline and discipline requires thorough preparation and discipline consisted of hardship that young people had to undergo"***. All this could be seen during the Olufoko in the olden days and may be today as well. **Bujo** concludes that ***"With the loss of initiation as a discipline of keeping the family together married life has been hurt to the roots. The modern "coca cola culture" praised by the media is spreading across Africa hedonism and so people are becoming more and more unprepared for sacrifices or endurance. It is then not surprising that there is a huge increase in the number of divorces, families splitting up, war, street children and similar phenomena"***. If one looks at what is happening in our country today this statement has merit. For example, a high number (+1000) of divorces cases were registered at our courts in 2016 and most of these divorces involve young couples. Therefore, the revival of our traditional and cultural practices, such as, Olufuko is essential for the survival of core social institutions such as marriages.

2. Cleanse or purify young girls and preventing them from falling pregnant before entering into marriage. Traditionally, in some cultures it was or still believed that if the young girl becomes pregnant without going through this traditional ceremony or initiation the members of her family might die or something terrible may happen. Therefore, girls kept themselves clean until they were properly married off. Otherwise, who would want to cause the death of a family member?
3. Testing them for pregnancy during the ceremony. Those that are found to be pregnant during the Olufuko initiation are not allowed to participate in the ceremony any further and it could be considered to be an embarrassment or an abomination for the family.
4. Preparing adult girls for their future marriages. Those girls who pass the ritual test during the ceremony do not get married immediately but have to wait until they reach the correct age before they enter into marriage. They, therefore, remain in their parents' houses until they are proposed for marriage, while they continue going to school or learn household skills such as, cooking, prepare the traditional "omalodu", make odjove (Marula oil) and many others. Should they be proposed for marriage before the right age they still have to wait until they are old enough to get married. During the said waiting period, such a girl will restrain and keep herself away from men.

It should be noted that it is not automatic that once a girl passes through Olufuko she will go straight into a marriage. There is another stage that considers aspects such as, age, maturity, preparedness of the young girl and engagement and mutual acceptance of the families involved. It is clear from this point that Olufuko is not intended to marry away young girls thereby promoting child marriages. This particular practice can be equated to someone who celebrates her 21st birthday or who is confirmed at a young age (nowadays we see children getting confirmed at the tender age of 12 or 13). Doing so does not give such a girl or boy a straight passport to marriage or to go practice unbecoming behaviours. Follow-up preparations such as, **pre-marriage education** still need to be done before such a girl is married. Therefore, the timing for

marriage is well taken into account during and after the Olufuko Ceremony is conducted

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As you may appreciate from the traditional and cultural practices associated with our Olufuko there are valid and genuine reasons for practicing them.

Therefore, in the final analysis, I would like to conclude by stating that it is not appropriate for us, as law makers, to generalise that traditional and cultural practices such as Olufuko could promote child marriages.

What we may have to do before drawing such conclusions of this nature, is to:

- 1) Research and understand the reasons and essence of traditional and cultural practices; and**
- 2) Research and understand the main causes of child marriages and address them accordingly. However, in our search for solutions to this scourge we should not compromise our African traditions and cultural values because they, definitely, have a role to play.**

As you may have noticed from the reasons for olufuko that I have enumerated earlier, it is clear that the Olufuko is not intended to promote child marriage but to prepare the young girls for womanhood, discipline and future marriage when the time is right and the girls are adequately prepared.

If the impression is still being created that Olufuko could promote child marriages and with implication teenage pregnancy, then we should be given the statistics, through the research proposed above, on how many underage girls were married off after having gone through the Olufuko Ceremony.

I fully support the reference of this motion to the relevant Parliamentary Standing Committee as this Committee could provide more clarity on this very important subject. My advice to the Committee is for it not to consider the traditional and cultural practices under discussion only through the prism of the western cultural models, but also to take into account the African cultural and traditional perspectives of these practices and the value they play in an African community.

I thank you and I so submit