THE INTERFACE BETWEEN BOTHO AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN BOTSWANA: TOWARDS AFROCENTRIC MODELS

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ABSTRACT

This short paper looks at the interface between botho *and social work practice in Botswana, and how it can be applied towards Afrocentric models in relation to social work education and practice in the context of Botswana and elsewhere in the African continent. Using secondary data, this paper examines ubuntu/botho as an African philosophy that places emphasis on "I am a person through other people" which depicts the human need for, and existence through, interdependency. This principle is in line with the profession's commitment to promoting positive human relationships in social interactions and transactions. The paper concludes by asking pertinent questions regarding the subject matter. It also proposes an Afrocentric model of social work that will be anchored on indigenous cultural values and principles.*

KEY TERMS: *Ubuntu/Botho, Social Work, Afrocentric, Indigenization, Botswana, Africa*

This article appeared in a special issue of the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW) titled *Ubuntu Social Work*. The special issue focused on short articles that advanced the theory and practice of ubuntu in social work. In the special issue, these definitions were used:

- *Ubuntu refers to a collection of values and practices that black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world.*
- *Ubuntu social work refers to social work that is theoretically, pedagogically and practically grounded in ubuntu.*
- *The term ubuntu is expressed differently is several African communities and languages but all referring to the same thing. In Angola, it is known as gimuntu, Botswana (muthu), Burkina Faso (maaya), Burundi (ubuntu), Cameroon (bato), Congo (bantu), Congo Democratic Republic (bomoto/bantu), Cote d'Ivoire (maaya), Equatorial Guinea (maaya), Guinea (maaya), Gambia (maaya), Ghana (biako ye), Kenya (utu/munto/mondo), Liberia (maaya), Malawi (umunthu), Mali (maaya/hadama de ya), Mozambique (vumuntu), Namibia (omundu), Nigeria (mutunchi/iwa/agwa), Rwanda (bantu), Sierra Leonne (maaya), South Africa (ubuntu/botho), Tanzania (utu/obuntu/bumuntu), Uganda (obuntu), Zambia (umunthu/ubuntu) and Zimbabwe (hunhu/unhu/botho/ubuntu). It is also found in other Bantu countries not mentioned here.*

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INTRODUCTION

In Botswana, the term *botho* (or *ubuntu* in South Africa) is an indigenous concept upon which human relationships were anchored from time immemorial. The concept assumes that human beings like to peacefully co-exist with one another, are committed to utilization and sharing of locally available resources in their social environment for individual and collective gain and are willing to work together to achieve common social goals. In traditional Tswana society, *botho* defined interpersonal, intra-/inter-family, inter-group, communal and social relationships as well the character and identity of a person. Within that context, botho asserts that a person's identity can only find meaning within the socio-cultural context within which he/she was raised. The word *'botho'* is derived from the proverb, "*motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe* (literally, 'a person is a person with, through and because of other people'). In fact, this principle is common to Sub-Saharan African societies (Mbiti, 2008; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Rwelamila, Talukhaba & Ngowi, 1999).

UBUNTU/BOTHO CONCEPT IN BOTSWANA

The concept *'botho'* was the guiding principle in the crafting of Botswana's Vision 2016 initiative (Morapedi, 2018). The document explained that *botho* was a key tenet of African culture, which served as a social contract of mutual respect, responsibility, and accountability by the members of society towards each other. It further noted that the concept defined a process for earning respect by first giving to others, and to gain empowerment by empowering others. Additionally, the philosophy of *botho* encouraged people to applaud rather than resent those who succeed. The *botho* philosophy also disapproved of any form of anti-social, disgraceful, inhumane, and criminal behaviour, while at the same time promoting the idea of social justice for all. The essence of the argument was that the spirit of *botho* ought to be felt in every sphere of life, such as the home, the community, the education system, and the workplace (Government of Botswana, 1997). It was meant to inspire and promote social harmony (*kagisano)*.

Figure 1: Ubuntu/Botho Concept in Botswana

- A social contract of mutual respect, responsibility, and accountability by the members of a society towards each other.
- A process for earning respect by first giving to others.
- To gain empowerment by empowering others.
- To applaud rather than resent those who succeed.
- Disapproved of any form of anti-social, disgraceful, inhuman, and criminal behaviour.
- To promote the idea of social justice for all.
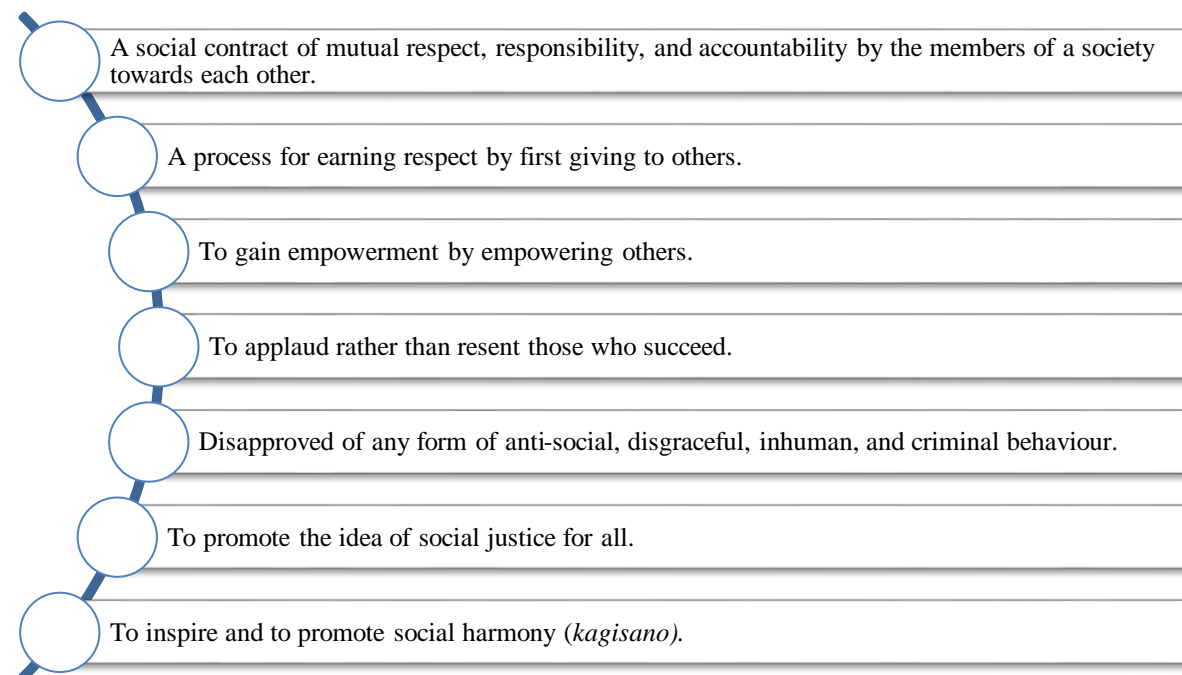- To inspire and to promote social harmony (*kagisano).*

Figure 1 was derived from Botswana's Vision 2016 initiative (Morapedi, 2018). It reinforces that *botho* is the key tenet of African culture, which serve as a social contract of mutual respect, responsibility, and accountability by the members of society towards each other. This concept resonates well with the rest of Africa where similar concepts are used (see for example, Gathogo, 2009; Mbiti, 2008; Tutu, 2004). Notably, according to Mugumbate & Chereni (2019) the ubuntu philosophy, commonly represented by communal relationality, communal ideals and human excellence forms part of the knowledge and wisdom of how African communities and families raise children. Ubuntu represents the worldviews of indigenous black populations of Sub-Saharan Africa, transmitted from generation to generation through observation, experience, language and art. It is against this backdrop that we contend that *'botho'* may be used as a guiding precept for social work education and practice in Botswana and elsewhere in Africa.

UBUNTU AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Over the decades, scholars have debated the issue of whether social work should be universal or local, Westernized or indigenized and other such binary dichotomies (Fook & Gray, 2004; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2010). Some writers have equally contested the universality of *'botho'* with some claiming it as an African principle (Tutu, 2004) while others rejected the proposition electing to view it as a global value embedded across many cultures and religions. Moreover, Mugumbate & Nyanguru (2013) notes that, ubuntu as a philosophy is attributable to blacks of Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa. They further indicated that social work with individuals endeavours to bring function on the life of dysfunctional individuals. Accordingly, it is worth to note that ubuntu has several tenets that support the achievement of social work and in particular, case work. In gerontology, in African settings, it is the responsibility of children to look after elderly members of the family. Noticeably, social work as a discipline is over three decades old and in its infancy stage in terms of documenting culturally relevant models for social work education and practice. Based on folklore, it is stated that *'botho'* was a basic ethic of care in traditional families which was translated into the care of needy or vulnerable family members including children, the elderly, people with disabilities and the poor. There is need therefore, to critically examine *'botho'* as an ethic of care as well as an organizing construct for social work practice and education.

CONCLUSION

This paper seeks to propose an Afrocentric model of social work that will be anchored on indigenous cultural values and principles. We reckon that this is an ambitious agenda which comes at a time when many developing nations are universalizing/globalizing at rapid rates. What will be the basic tenets of an Afrocentric model of social work anchored on the concept of *botho*? How will such a traditional concept fit into a rapidly developing socio-cultural environment? Can such an Afrocentric model appeal to the African continent with its vast ethnic and racial backgrounds? Will such a model be easily accepted by the pacesetters of academic social work textbooks? This paper seeks to approach this topic from the decolonization perspective which seeks to deconstruct and reconstruct social work education and practice in non-Western contexts.

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