# TOWARDS AFROCENTRIC SOCIAL WORK: PLOTTING A NEW PATH FOR SOCIAL WORK THEORY AND PRACTICE IN AFRICA THROUGH UBUNTU

## KUREVAKWESU, Wilberforce and MAUSHE, Francis

## ABSTRACT

This conceptual article reflects that social work, after being wholesomely transferred from the West to Africa, came with several traits of Western society. These aspects are undoubtedly affecting the relevance of the profession in African settings because Africa had and still has its own value systems. This paper critically argues that for social work to have a wider appeal in Africa and for it to be as impactful as it has been in Western society, it needs to be redefined in line with local value systems. One of the most important concepts of the African value systems is that of Ubuntu, and this paper tries to find a common ground for Ubuntu and social work theory and practice towards the creation of Afrocentric social work. Ubuntu shapes humanness in the African context and ignoring it will continually sweep social work into obscurity. Furthermore, there has been a rise in studies on how the relevance of social work in African settings can be improved and most of these studies have focused on the adoption of developmental social work whilst neglecting the notion of Ubuntu.

**KEY TERMS**: *Ubuntu, social work, Africa, value systems, relevance, theory, practice*

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.*

*Author/s details: Wilberforce Kurevakwesu, Master of Social Work Student, University of Zimbabwe, Email. wilberkurevakwesu@yahoo.com*

*Francis Maushe, Lecturer and Chairperson, Department of Social Work, Bindura University of Science Education*

## THE AFRICAN NOTION OF UBUNTU

Before colonialism, Africa had its own unique value systems and for the colonialists to effectively get into Africa, they had to break these value systems (Igbon, 2011:96; Pwiti and Ndoro, 1999:143). A rhetoric argument has vacillated between a return to the precolonial past as 'value' rearmament and a total break from that same past (Pwiti and Ndoro, 1999:143). This argument, to the writers of this article seems to be rhetoric because there is no going back to the past as the world has dramatically changed and old systems have been eroded to unredeemable depths. Rather, what needs to be done is to accept the change that has occurred and try to realign the western values that came with colonialism with the remnants of our own local value systems. Africa, as Igbon (2011:96) argued, had its own value systems before colonialism and it is noteworthy at this juncture to be mindful of the fact that some remnants of the African value systems are still there and they are still being followed widely in several, if not all African settings.

One of the basic tenets or notions of the African value systems is the notion of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a Nguni term that relates to 'humanity'. According to Lefa (2015:4), Ubuntu is central to the African way of life or African culture and as such, it affects the well-being of people. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has been known for invoking the principle of Ubuntu in South Africa (Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013:88), and he defined it as a belief that a person is a human being through other people, that one's notion of being human is shaped and determined inseparably by that of others. He further argued that when someone brutalizes the next person, they would have also dehumanized themselves (Jolley, 2011:6). Thus, Ubuntu becomes a very powerful contrivance to fortify a community with dignity and uniqueness that are achieved through mutualism, empathy, kindness, and the commitment of the community (Jolley, 2011:6). Actually, the very roots of Ubuntu emerged from the old 'African village', where spans of kinfolks existed in peace together and they managed to weave persons, communities, and villages for the benefit of the society. Accordingly, Ubuntu has stalwartly shaped societies where persons behave with respect and dignity towards each other and it has bound and linked them together to produce a better community. This conceptual article reflects that social work, after being wholesomely transferred from the West to Africa, came with several traits of western society.

## CONNECTING SOCIAL WORK AND UBUNTU

In Zimbabwe, the Council of Social Workers (CSW) describes Ubuntu as humaneness (Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013:91). The Code of Ethics of Social Workers in Zimbabwe (Statutory Instrument 146 of 2012) pointed out that Ubuntu places prominence on the core values of human cohesion, compassion, dignity and the humaneness in every individual and that, a person is a person through other persons (CSW Code of Ethics, 2012:2). It additionally stated that the main goal of social work relates to supporting social justice, Ubuntu, human rights, change that is positive, problem solving and developments in individual and societal relations and social development (CSW Code of Ethics, 2012:3). As espoused by the CSW, social workers have a mandate to promote Ubuntu as it is a core tenet of social work in Africa, and thus, in Zimbabwe also.

The basic tenets of the concept of Ubuntu, for instance, mutualism and empathy, relate well with social work practice. By drinking from the same cup with Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013), Ubuntu can be seen as a value of African social work together with service, social justice, dignity and worth of the individual, importance and centrality of human relationships, integrity and competence. It is also important to note that the notion of Ubuntu can also be seen in all the values of social work practice in the African context. For instance, by talking of social justice, if the notion of Ubuntu is successfully applied to societies with social injustices and if people, through Ubuntu, become empathic and considerate, they will be able to effectively fight social injustice. This can be in the context of child welfare, for example, where with Ubuntu, it is said in African societies that 'it takes a village to raise a child'. This will give societal members the power or rather, the zeal to consider all children in the community as theirs and given that they see any forms of injustice being perpetrated on children, they will be able to either notify the Department of Social Welfare, the Police, or any formalized channels towards bringing about justice.

This even resonates with the international definition of social work. According to the International Federation of Social Work (2014),

> *Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge(s), social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.*

This definition of social work by the IFSW clearly shows that social work has a thrust towards social cohesion, the principles of social justice, human rights and collective responsibility together with indigenous knowledge. These concepts (values, practices and principles) are also central to the notion of Ubuntu. What has been worrying,

however, is that, in social work practice and theory in Zimbabwe, the notion of Ubuntu has received little attention, save for it being mentioned by the CSW as a basic value of social work. Social work is focused on solving societal and individual problems and in African settings, most social work practice reflects, in its entirety, Western social work. Western social work is filled up with values of Western society and as such, there has always been a need to decolonize it if it is to be relevant to African settings. So practicing social work in line with western values challenges the ecological validity of social work in Africa.

According to Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013:93), the institutionalization of children, people with disabilities, the old and child offenders has not been very successful in the African setting. These institutions never existed in the African setting as there were other methods of taking care of orphans, people with disabilities, the old and child offenders. Institutionalization came from the West and it is being used, but with minimum success (Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013:93). With the challenges encountered with the institutionalization of child offenders, pre-trial diversion was introduced in riposte (Ruparanganda and Ruparanganda, 2016:11), and this move is aligned to the notion of Ubuntu. From the discussions above, it is now clear that Ubuntu relates to the community taking care of itself through mutualism, peace, harmony and compassion. In other terms, pre-trial diversion was advocated for by social workers as a way to locally manage the issue of child offenders in an attempt to avoid institutionalization. The concept of pre-trial diversion was borrowed from Western justice systems, but it was rather Africanized in line with African values. As provided by Ruparanganda and Ruparanganda (2016:11), in 2013 alone, 77 percent of referred children had their cases diverted from the criminal justice system. This rate shows that the intervention is recording considerable success. This is partly because of its alignment to traditional African ways of dealing with child offenders and this shows the value of aligning social work to local cultural or traditional contexts and practices.

The fact that social work in Africa has not been given the dignity and worth that it deserves has also been a problem and the prescription that has been offered by several scholars is that of developmental social work (Kurevakwesu, 2017). According to Kurevakwesu (2017), the adoption of developmental social work is fast gaining more attention in Zimbabwe, throughout Africa, and the rest of the third world. However, the notion of Ubuntu has been neglected, yet it deserves the same mention as developmental social work. This is because the two focus on Africanizing social work or making social work more African and thus, helping the profession to mend its popularity as it has been obscure in professional circles (Kurevakwesu, 2017). Another example can be that of the entire child welfare system in Zimbabwe. The child welfare system was borrowed from the West and it has been difficult to effectively put into practice the Zimbabwe 'six tier' National Orphan care Policy (Muchinako, Mpambela and Muzingili, 2018:39).

The 'Six tier system' contextualized orphan care to African settings in a way, but its implementation has been difficult. It spells out the importance of the extended family and the community in childcare and it sees institutionalization as a last resort in taking care of orphans. However, in practice, institutionalization is often taken as the only route, thus, leading to overcrowding of children in childcare institutions (Muchinako *et al*., 2018:39). The National Orphan Care Policy upholds the notion of Ubuntu and the importance of family and community relationships. However, putting the system into practice has rather proven to be difficult because of resource constraints, lack of political will, and from what has been reflected in this article, the dominance of Western values. Moreover, Mugumbate and Chereni (2019:28) argued that the child welfare theory and practice in Zimbabwe still rests upon Western theories, models and practices and they advocated for social workers to adopt the notion of Ubuntu in child welfare. This is because it goes hand in glove with strengths perspectives wherein, communities already have their strengths through Ubuntu in as far as child protection is concerned (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2019:28).

In theory, social work in Africa has no focus on Ubuntu even though the CSW gave it recognition. The social work curricula in institutions that offer social work education has fewer or no aspects that cover the notion of Ubuntu. Efforts have been there to decolonize African social work and resultantly create Afrocentric Social Work (Ibrahima and Mattaini, 2019; Mathebane and Sekudu, 2018). This has been happening in several aspects, but the notion of Ubuntu, especially in Zimbabwe, has been neglected, yet it is very important. In other terms, there is no Afrocentric social work without bringing into perspective the notion of Ubuntu. The aspect of Ubuntu is what defines humanness in the African context and social workers are there to deal with individuals who are in a cultural system defined by Ubuntu. For social workers to effectively deal with individual and societal problems, they thus need to understand thoroughly the notion of Ubuntu.

As argued by Kurevakwesu (2017), changing the way in which social workers approach changes in theory and practice starts with the institutions that offer social work education and then extends to the CSW and their practice settings. These three, as posited by Kurevakwesu (2017), act as a three-legged pot and they need to work in full collaboration. It is also important to note that in every field of practice or profession, theory shapes practice, and it will yield nothing if we just focus on trying to change practice methods without first transforming theory. As such, drumming in the concept or notion of Ubuntu into social work theory should start in institutions of social work training, as this is where practitioners are trained (Mathebane and Sekudu, 2018). Aspects related to Ubuntu need to be identified and fortified in courses that are offered. An example of another course in social work, apart

from child welfare would be community health. In community health, one aspect that is looked at is that of the role of social workers in food security. There are concepts of Ubuntu known in Zimbabwe as *Nhimbe* and *Zunde raMambo* that can help in bringing about food security (Tavuyanago, Mutami and Mbenene, 2010; Mavhura, 2017). These need to form part of social work theory in this regard. Moreover, in practice, there might be need for social workers to advocate for the sustenance and fortification of these cultural practices as they help in improving community health, thus, making social work theory and practice more African and Ubuntu-focused.

## TOWARDS AFROCENTRIC SOCIAL WORK: PLOTTING A NEW PATH

*A part model for Afrocentric social work*
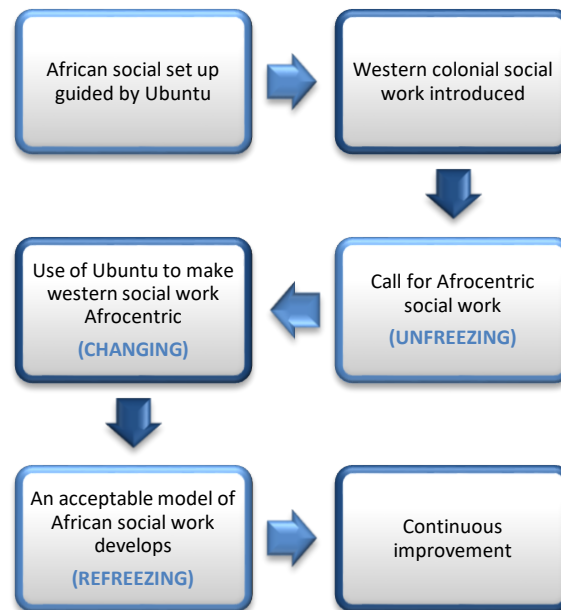


The authors used Kurt Lewin's three-step model or change theory because of its inclination towards change (Robbins and Coulter, 2012:152). According to Lewin, successful change can be planned and requires unfreezing the status quo, changing to a new state, and refreezing to make the change permanent. The status quo is considered equilibrium. To move away from this equilibrium, unfreezing is necessary (Robbins and Coulter, 2012:153). Unfreezing can be thought of as preparing for the needed change. It can be done by increasing the driving forces, which are forces pushing for change; by decreasing the restraining forces, which are forces that resist change; or by combining the two approaches (Robbins and Coulter, 2012:153). Once unfreezing is done, the change itself can be implemented. However, merely introducing change does not ensure that it will take hold. The new situation needs to be refrozen so that it can be sustained over time. Unless this last step is done, there is a strong chance that things will revert back to the old equilibrium state or the old ways of doing things. The objective of refreezing, then, is to stabilize the new situation by reinforcing the new comportments.

In the context of this article, there was an African social set up which was guided by Ubuntu and this set up was destroyed by colonialism. During then, western colonial social work was introduced and currently there is a call by social workers towards Afrocentric social work and in this way, they are unfreezing the status quo. After that, as proposed by the authors, Ubuntu will need to be used to make western social work Afrocentric as proposed in the above section. Refreezing will need to be done once Ubuntu has been made part of the social work discourse and this can be through the promulgation of policies and making Afrocentric social work a permanent feature of in social work curriculum.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The authors of this article recommend that the notion of Ubuntu be fully incorporated into social work theory and practice. There is need to make sure that aspects related to Ubuntu do commingle with those in Social work. This will stand as an attempt to Africanize social work, which currently reflects Western values. These Western values have affected the relevance and recognition of the social work profession. Kurevakwesu (2017) posed the question, 'If the dignity and worth of the social work profession is being trampled upon, how is social work going to be able to improve the dignity and worth of people?' The dignity and worth of the profession in African settings

has been poor (Mupedziswa, 2015; Kurevakwesu, 2017) and this needs to be fixed if social workers are to regain their place in professional circles and in society. This can only happen if the profession aligns itself with the values of the existing African value system of which Ubuntu is a part. Furthermore, there is need to make sure that the provisions of the CSW Code of Ethics of 2012 on the importance of Ubuntu do not go to waste. As such, social workers need to make sure that the lyrics that were provided by the CSW be transformed into a powerful song by the institutions of social work training, the government's Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare's Department of Social Welfare and all social workers in Zimbabwe. If the concepts related to Ubuntu are interwoven with social work theory, then it will be easy to put the values of Ubuntu in practice. Moreover, after all being said, Africa is unique and as such, needs its own unique ways of interpreting, defining and solving social problems and these ways have to be connected to the factors that make Africa unique, for instance, as was the discussion in this article, its cultural values and tenets.

# REFERENCES

Council of Social Workers Zimbabwe (CSW), 2012. *Social Workers (Code of Ethics) By-laws 2012: Statutory Instrument 146 of 2012.* Accessed on 26 October 2019 from https://www.ifsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Zimbabwe-Social-Workers-Code-of-Ethics.pdf

Ibrahima, A. B. and Mattaini, M. A., 2019. Social work in Africa: Decolonizing methodologies and approaches. *International Social Work, 62 (2),* 799-813.

Igboin, B. O., 2011. Colonialism and African cultural values. *African Journal of History and Culture, 3(6),* 96-103.

International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), 2014. Global Definition of the Social Work Profession. Accessed on 25 October 2019, https://anzasw.nz/international-federation-of-social-workers-ifsw/

Jolley, R. D., 2011. *'Ubuntu': A Person is a Person through other Persons.* A Master of Arts Thesis submitted to Southern Utah University.

Kurevakwesu, W., 2017. The Social Work Profession In Zimbabwe: A Critical Approach on the Position of Social Work on Zimbabwe's Development. *AfroAsian Journal of Social Sciences.* VIII(I), *Quarter         I,* 1-19.

Lefa, B. J., 2015. *The African Philosophy of Ubuntu in South African education.* A Masters Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of education and social sciences, Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Mathebane, M. S. and Sekudu, J., 2018. Decolonizing the curriculum that underpins social work education  in South Africa. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development.* 30(1),    1-19.

Mavhura, E., 2017. Building resilience to food insecurity in rural communities: Evidence from traditional institutions in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Disaster Risk Studies (Jamba). 9(1):* 453.

Muchinako, G. A.; Mpambela, M. and Muzingili, T., 2018. The Time for Reflection: Foster Care as a Child Protection Model in Zimbabwe. *African Journal of Social Work, 8(2),* 38-45.

Mugumbate, J. and Chereni, A., 2019. Using African Ubuntu Theory in Social Work with Children in Zimbabwe. *African Journal of Social Work, 9(1),* 27-34.

Mugumbate, J. and Nyanguru, A., 2013. Exploring African Philosophy: The Value of Ubuntu in Social Work. *African Journal of Social Work*, *3(1),* 82-100.

Mupedziswa, R. (2015). *Promoting the Dignity and Worth of the People: The Role of the Social Work Profession, With Particular Focus on Africa*. Keynote Address of International Social Work Day Celebrations 2015. Harare: University of Zimbabwe.

Pwiti, G. and Ndoro, W., 1999. The Legacy of Colonialism: Perceptions of the Cultural Heritage in Southern Africa, with Special Reference to Zimbabwe. *The African Archaeological Review,* 16(3), 143-153.

Robbins, S. P. and Coulter, M., 2012. *Management.* 11th Edition. Boston: Prentice Hall.

Ruparanganda, B. and Ruparanganda, L., 2016. Reformations in Zimbabwe's Juvenile Justice System. *African Journal of Social Work*, *6(1),* 7-13.

Tavuyanago, B.; Mutami, N. and Mbenene, K., 2010. Traditional Grain Crops in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Zimbabwe: A Factor for Food Security and Social Cohesion among the Shona People. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa, 12(6),* 1-8.