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## ***Azibuyele emasisweni: Exploring the discourse of Ubuntu philosophy in social work education and practice***

Thembelihle B. MAKHANYA

### **ABSTRACT**

*Ubuntu philosophy represents the moral and ethical principle of social justice, empowerment and liberation. Social work focuses on humanity and harmony in people's existence through the collective frameworks of equality, inclusivity and justice for all. This suggests that, the interconnectedness of people and things and value for humanity that is appreciated by Ubuntu is the Afrocentric worldview to be adopted in programmes such as social work. This is to ensure that all people's identities are included in transformation and development. But social work educators and students need to understand this philosophy and discover ways for practical implanting its principles in practice. This article explores the principles of ubuntu philosophy and how they can be adopted in social work education and practice. Acknowledging the aftermaths of colonialism and apartheid which destroyed the African principle of oneness and togetherness not only in South Africa but in a wider African continent, Social Workers are called to restore the dignity of Africa and Africans through ubuntu philosophy. Concepts of ubuntu, isintu, and respect are discussed as the guiding standards for education in social work and service delivery during practice. 'Azibuyele Emasisweni' is thus a call for decolonial transformation in Social Work education and practice.*

**KEY TERMS:** *Azibuyele emasisweni, education, isintu, practice, Ubuntu, Social Work, South Africa*

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## INTRODUCTION

The wide spread of White supremacy perpetrated by colonialism and apartheid (in the context of South Africa) in Africa has degraded the fundamental African frameworks of intervention in social work. Ubuntu philosophy focus on humanity, equality and justice for all. It is the African philosophy that address the injustices of the past (if practiced and applied authentically). Although culture and tradition are not static but change as the society evolve, ubuntu philosophy need to find a way to emerge in the current society for it relevant need. This is because the philosophy speaks to the indigenisation of social work in different ways. The colonial eras that eradicated the humanity of people need utilisation of ubuntu philosophy for restoration and inclusive developments. This is also a call for decolonisation through practical implementation of ubuntu values in practice. Hence this article focuses on how social work educators, practitioners and student can understand and implement Ubuntu philosophy in practice. The paper will firstly conceptualise Ubuntu philosophy in relation to social work education and practice. By exploring the history of colonialism and apartheid in the context of South Africa, this article also discusses the value of popularising ubuntu philosophy in social work practice. The article then focuses on ubuntu principles as the decolonial framework that can be adopted in social work education for relevant practice during service delivery.

## BACKGROUND

European models had proven inadequate and not effective in responding to World issues addressed by social work (Mabvurira, 2020). This is a call for inclusive and harmonising social work philosophy and framework. Ubuntu is one of the African community values (Mabovula, 2011) that was eroded by the historical contexts of colonialism and apartheid. While Ubuntu represents the humanistic attributes which guides humanity, tolerance and respect in communities (Mabovula, 2011), it focuses on broader structures such as social justice and development. But the historical contexts of Africa brought poverty, scarcity of recourses, crime to mentioned the few which eroded the notion of ubuntu in communities and on systems of intervention. There is thus a need to rethink ubuntu attributes as building blocks of transformation and development. For South Africa, Ubuntu is a democratic society building block (Mabovula, 2011) and the restoration of shared morality. The July 2021 Phoenix massacre that claimed lives of more than 35 African people in the hands of Indian population in Durban, Kwa Zulu-Natal province (Davis, Nicolson, & Simelane, 2021) is one out of many incidents demonstrating loss of Ubuntu in society due to racial differences advanced by the colonial history. Ubuntu remains the central form of social justice (Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

Ubuntu is receiving a global attention for social work professionals as a framework for relevant practice (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). This is because the philosophy speaks to the indigenisation of social work. The colonial eras that eradicated the humanity of people need utilisation of ubuntu philosophy for restoration and inclusive developments. There are concerns of irrelevant western domination in social work globally (Tusasiirwe, 2022). Through literature review, this article analyses the relevant research done in the area of Ubuntu philosophy, mostly as a guide for Social Work practice and education. Although publications from the diaspora are not excluded but the focus is on African literature, produced by Africans. Thus, the writings by Mugumbate; Nyangura; Dladla; Mabovula; Lefa; Mahaye and Mucina guided the discussions.

## CONCEPTUALISATION OF UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY IN SOCIAL WORK

There is no one definition of ubuntu. According to Battle (1996, p. 99) the concept Ubuntu originates from the Xhosa expression '*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu*', which means that each individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others. Ubuntu consists of the prefix *ubu*-and the stem *ntu-ubu* evokes the idea of being in general (Battle (1996). Thus, *ubu-ntu* is the fundamental ontological and epistemological category in the African thought of the Bantu-speaking people (Battle, 1996). Khoza (2005, p. 269) defines Ubuntu as "an African value system that means humanness or being human, a worldview characterised by such values as caring, sharing, compassion, communalism, communocracy and related predispositions." The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2014) defines social work as 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 knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

By its definition, social work focuses on humanity and harmony in people's existence through the collective frameworks of equality, inclusivity and justice for all. That definition can be regarded as the very basic definition and the agenda of Ubuntu philosophy. Ubuntu relate and is compatible with social work (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Mabvurira, 2020). Thus, social work educators, students, practitioners and service users need to be able to realise this link and embrace ubuntu as a social work framework. Ubuntu philosophy is also in the current global agenda in social work (Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

Ubuntu (in Nguni language) or *maat* (in Egyptian language) as the African belief system (Oviawe, 2016, p. 3) promotes humanity as the culture of life which works as a unifying factor that brings harmony in diverse people's identities (Lefa, 2015, p.1; Mahaye, 2018, p. 16). The philosophy of ubuntu is the pride and hope of the African nation (Lefa 2015, p. 1; Mahaye, 2018 p.3). Ubuntu focus on acceptable ideas and deeds (Mugumbate & Nyaangura, 2013). The adoption of this philosophy in education and practice will help students to obtain the high level of moral judgement since it encompasses the different notions that are building blocks of humanity such as spirituality and culture (Mahaye, 2018 p.12). Ubuntu allows education to be viewed as a means not of serving the market but of servicing the advancement of society by "instilling to students and practitioners a broad sense of values" (Mahaye, 2018, p.12). For instance, for inclusivity in social work practice, curriculum must be the "nursery of values" through exalting the African philosophy of ubuntu in its existence (Mahaye, 2018, p. 13).

People's existence cannot be separated from those around them thus one exists by being included in relation with others (Mahaye, 2018, p.16). Social work practice that does not speak to inclusive needs of service users indicate absence of ubuntu. It is however the tenets of Western/ Eurocentric education which values individuality that was infused in African education through coloniality (Oviawe, 2016, p.2; Makhanya & Zibane, 2020). Therefore, exclusion of indigenous people's experiences in education reflects the deficiency of borrowed educational ideologies in African philosophy. Such education does not allow for ubuntu implementation in practice. Such western ideology in education also fails to acknowledge self-realization as coming from interpersonal relationships with others (Mahaye, 2018, p. 16).

Interconnectedness of people and things that is appreciated by the philosophy of ubuntu is the Afrocentric worldview to be adopted in social work education in the process of ensuring that all identities are included in knowledge creation, development and distribution (Makhanya, 2021). Thus, for the African philosophy of ubuntu to be realised, education needs to be reform as the "community and not the collection of individuals" (Lefa, 2015, p.1; Mahaye, 2018, p. 16). This is because the philosophy of ubuntu encourages solidarity since "it knows neither colour nor race (in today's context), but only knows the human race as created by God" because education by its nature is multicultural (Mahaye, 2018, p. 17). Thus, engaging and sharing with others should be valued in institutions of higher learning for education to reflect values that are considered worthy in the society (Mahaye, 2018, p.19). Students should thus be taught to take responsibility for others and accept their authority and guidance for development (Mahaye, 2018, p. 19). Similarly, Oviawe (2016, p. 5) argued that:

There is a need to rediscover alternative paradigms like ubuntu that shift the dominant Western-Eurocentric gaze from an over-reliance on positivism, Eurocentrism, classism and individualism to a more human-centred and holistic approach that recognises the interdependences within the ecosystem of people, planet and place.

This suggests a need for higher education to offer knowledge by viewing the universe as an interconnected system of community networks (Oviawe, 2016, p.5). This will be the moving against the destructive colonial history to decolonial inclusive higher education and social work practice. This is a call for a postcolonial society that values "greater equality of opportunity and quality of life for all of its citizens" (Oviawe, 2016, p.7). There is thus a need for African education to be built under ubuntu principles of truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity and order (Lefa, 2015, p.1; Mahaye, 2018, p. 19). Umuntu umuntu ngabantu, means that "to be a human being is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and on that basis establish humane relations with them" (Ramose, 1999, p.37).

### **COLONIALISM AND APARTHEID: CALL FOR UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY IN DECOLONISATION.**

Both the coloniser and colonised need to understand the human degrading strategies of coloniality. And how colonial histories in the present can be dealt with by adopting ubuntu philosophy in practice. Although this article focuses on social work practice, the philosophy is relevant for multiple disciplines that engage with advancement of humanity and development.

Colonialism was characterised by domination and oppression of Africa. This was the colonial racism which demonstrated how Europeans ruled over "blacks" for the advancement of "whites" (Tsotsi, 2000, p. 6). Such power imposition and control were proclaimed as "white people burden of developing African countries" (Birmingham, 1995, p. 1). South Africa gained its independence from colonialism around 1902 (Okoth, 2006). But colonialism continued in the country through apartheid. Apartheid was a racial segregation system in South Africa that was enforced through legislation by the National Party from 1948 to 1994 (Makhanya, 2021). The Bantu Education

Act of 1952 was one of the discrimination policies governed the apartheid government education system, ensuring that Africans receive minimal education, which sustained them in the oppressed group (SA history online, 2018). The University Education Act 45 of 1959 also extended its ruling by prohibiting African students from attending "whites" universities (SAHO, 2018). Social work education and practice in the country also emanated from this historical context of racial segregations and different services and education for different races (Smith, 2008).

The South African Council of Social Service Profession as the guiding board for the social work profession in the country, could not envision the decolonial education. There was no uniformity in South African universities in social work curricula (Mamphiswana & Noyoo, 2016). Although the council set requirements for social work education and training in South Africa, but for every university to formulate its curriculum. It can be acknowledged that even in developed countries, there is no curriculum uniform. Nevertheless, in a country such as South Africa that is characterised by historical institutional discrimination, lack of uniformity was designed to differentiate African education from that of other racial groups.

Decolonisation is the "change that colonised countries go through when they become politically independent from their former colonisers" (Oelofsen, 2015, p. 130). Decoloniality is a school of thought used principally by an emerging Latin American movement that focuses on untangling the production of knowledge from a primarily Eurocentric episteme. It critiques the perceived universality of Western knowledge and the superiority of Western culture. Decoloniality is the practice of decolonisation by critically examining dominant practices and knowledge in modern society (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). The article argues that both processes through the adoption of ubuntu are necessary for transformation in social work education and practice. Tamburro (2013) also asserted that the current social work training and practice should be evaluated to avoid colonial theories and approaches.

Although colonialism and apartheid ended, it did not symbolize the end of 'White supremacy' (Dladla, 2017, p. 39). The liberation negotiations did not exalt Ubuntu as an African philosophy of undoing the injustices of the past. South African higher education institutions in the year 2015 and 2016 were dominated by the #FeesMustFall student protests, which called for 'free, decolonised higher education'. The students have called for contextually relevant curricula that would be free from the colonial influences (Kreitzer, 2012; Mbembe, 2016). Social work disciplines are not immune to such calls since it is reluctant to address known discriminatory curriculum norms (Mamphiswana & Noyoo, 2006). Restructuring is necessary since social work training was skewed to maintain colonial and apartheid systems and professionals were not equipped with skills to deal with the disempowered African population (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). Smith (2008) also called for social work education to engage with socio-political realities of the post-colonial and post-apartheid regime to engage with inequality, oppression, and cultural hegemony critically.

Several studies have been conducted to address decolonisation in higher education. For example, in Canada, Abdi (2006) has examined the Eurocentric discourses and African philosophies and epistemologies of education. Tamburro (2013) conducted a study focusing on the inclusion of decolonisation in social work education and practice. Le Grange (2014) in Cape Town examined the Africanisation of the university curriculum. Thus, decolonisation concern has received much attention in South African universities. As a result, the 2017 Social Work International Conference held in Johannesburg, focused on the decolonisation of social work education. However, the battle of decolonisation is still at an infant stage. This article proposes ubuntu as the decolonial process to be appreciated in social education and practice. There is a need for society to have a zeal for quality and inclusive education which leads to practice that exalt critical thinking (Mahaye, 2018, p. 3).

## UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE.

### **Abantu and Isintu**

As suggested by Dladla (2017, P. 43) this paper is against the adoption of ubuntu in social work education and practice without 'Abantu and Isintu' traditions. The teaching material used and practice guidelines must be critical observed if it originates from Abantu people, who are the owners of the philosophy. And Isintu which symbolises the cultures that foregrounds the philosophy of ubuntu (Dladla, 2017). Otherwise the shallow versions of ubuntu dominated by White supremacy and European point of view will sustain the epistemicide uphold by coloniality.

### **Abantu**

Since ubuntu derives from Nguni languages of Africa, Ubuntu must be grounded on Abantu languages. Foreign language/s in learning and teaching increase low-self-esteem and anxiety among indigenous students (Rubio, 2007). Such pressure can negatively impact not only the academic progress and learning of students but also in practice. This leads to education failing to equip social workers with the very basic skills of being able to effectively communicate with clients in practice (Schenk et al. 2015) for context-specific service delivery. For instance, Ncube (2019) has questioned the reasons for African education to be rendered according to former colonizers' languages. He argues that, when this is done, Africans lose their sense of being in the consumptions of languages of the colonial master (Ncube 2019). Non-English-speaking students become alienated in class

engagements because of their limited English vocabulary (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020). The issue of non-enunciation and poor elocution are alienating experiences that perpetuate poor English communication skills which generate fear and feeling of incompetency among the indigenous students (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020).

The central aspiration is on the valuing of the African invested mode of knowledge production for sustainable education. This suggests a desire for incorporation, consideration, and validation of indigenous languages as equal partners with the Northern academy. Mamanda Ngozi (2009) has also argued for the impossibilities of learning that emanates from one side, as it demotivates diversity. There is a need for diverse knowledge production and transmission for epistemological relevance in social work education. Thus, the inclusion of indigenous languages in the curriculum is the basis of decolonisation that values the intellectual capacity of the African continent (Oelofsen, 2015). This means that decolonial education should be African-centred to seek to develop indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) through language in academia. Similarly, Nyoka (2019) has argued how un-silencing the intellectual voices of indigenous people has the potential to develop sustainable education in South Africa.

### *Isintu*

The cultures and traditions of Abantu people must be valued in education and practice. Hence the article is titled ‘*azibuyele emasizweni*’. The narration of ‘*Azibuyele Emasizweni*’ will dilute the original meaning of the words and lose essence in translation. But to allow this paper to live in the Westernised society, the literal meaningless meaning of the words is ‘let go back to our cultures or original form’. Ubuntu practitioner must understand, learn and adopt the cultures of people to be served (Dladla, 2017). The focus is on their original way of living and of doing things without trying to impose colonial cultures. By so doing indigenous people way of life get to be re-centred for effective service delivery (Chitumba, 2013). These are also the basis of social justice, freedom and liberation for all (Mugumbate, 2021). Ubuntu philosophy does not only focus on individual but on family, community, spirituality, society and environment (Mugumbate, 2021). The word empowerment and social justice also remains central to the process (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). This is also a call for culturally sensitive social work (Tusasiirwe, 2022).

“Before our people can progress, they must discover their soul and their soul lies in heritage...” (Chitumba, 2013, p. 1271). It important to show the value of Isintu to heal the broken identities and low self-esteem, mostly for these who were previously oppressed (Chitumba, 2013). The university research must also actively engage with indigenous knowledge to ensure teaching that is centred on Isintu. This will allow for meaningful and developmental practice. This also speak to the redressing the injustices of the past by upholding the values of previously oppressed. Ubuntu philosophy in practice is a call for equal opportunity for all. It is through Isintu in Ubuntu that can one understand the African culture (Nzimakwe, 2014). And all have the right to stand on their cultural practices as equals (Mayaka and Truell, 2021). Hence Van Breda (2019) suggested that, Ubuntu needs to be developed as the African theory in Social Work.

### **Humanity, tolerance and respect**

Humanity is the emancipation focus against colonialism (Mabovula, 2011). Through humanity imbedded in ubuntu philosophy, social work sees equality in all human beings (Mayaka & Truell, 2021) and interconnectedness with others (van Breda, 2019). Tolerance suggest that, “Disagreements need not cause harm, if there is tolerance and respect for other’s viewpoint in the community structure” (Mabovula, 2011, p. 41). Therefore, tolerance aim to encourage people to take into consideration others viewpoints and not disregards them. Since South African is said to be a rainbow nation, therefore living side by side with others despite differences is a true freedom (Mabovula, 2011) and ubuntu. Respect as the guiding principle for relationships (Mabovula, 2011), need to shelter humanity and tolerance. This can be done by placing value to others wellbeing (Nzimakwe, 2014).

Humanity view Ubuntu as a collection of African values that focus on people as “authentic human beings” (Mugumbate, 2021). This authenticity also relies on ubuntu as orature and focusing on lived experiences than documented sources of ubuntu, which are very limited if they exist. For social work education and practice to capture these elements, students, teachers and practitioners must be exposed and understand meanings behind folklore, songs, stories, poems, teasing, epics, jokes or humour, irony and proverbs (Mugumbate, 2021). It is out of such oral tradition and experiences where rich African culture can be found. However, the current author agrees with Mucina (2020), when highlighting the need to seek consent when extracting, observing, understanding and redistributing such experiences. Consent seeking is a form of respect which is a guiding principle of ubuntu philosophy. This direction should not only focus on education and practice but also on `ubuntu philosophy in social work research.

Humanity, tolerance and respect also focuses on what Mbiti (1969, p. 106, cited on Mugumbate, 2021) view as:

What happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say ‘I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am’.

The above is the translation of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. This is what Samkange and Samkange (1980, cited on Mugumbate, 2021) suggest as valuing of humanity, respect for relationships and leadership that is people centred. Thus, ubuntu should shape not only practice but the choice of literature in teaching. Ubuntu philosophy suggest that an individual is part of a larger society. It thus concerns itself with micro, meso and macro issues. Such focus speaks to the values of social work since its view a person in the environment. This suggest that, Ubuntu also allows one to maintain rational connections with others (Mucina, 2013). Mucina further suggested that among others, the following principles guide respect in Ubuntu philosophy:

- One is the reflection of existence of ancestors.
- Ubuntu is for the wholeness and integrity with the nature
- We give thanks for what we have received
- The spirit of land and water is honoured in different ways
- The dead are honoured because they live in parallel world with the living

Social work needs to take these and other principles of ubuntu into practice, education and research. This suggest that, it is limiting to the African context to adopt Western perspectives only to analyse the experiences of the African people, instead of drawing on a diverse knowledge. Indigenous perspective from the West in African academia overlook the real challenges facing indigenous African communities. If social work principles and values as stipulated in different policies, contradict experiences of indigenous communities in practice, its calls for critical review with inclusiveness in mind. For social protection in social work, ubuntu provides the guiding framework (Mayaka & Truell, 2021), by ensuring that the wellbeing needs of all people are met. Mkhize, Mathe and Buthelezi (2014) particularly highlight that the social work code of ethics continues to be dominated by the epistemological paradigms of the Western colonial conquerors.

Ubuntu forces one to believe that ‘your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth, and your salvation is my salvation’ (Nzimakwe, 2014). One can also not speak about respect and humanity and fail to adhere to accountability and transparency (Nzimakwe, 2014) because these are the very basis of the philosophy. This is the call for environmental justice through self-determination (Mayaka & Truell, 2021) in social work education and practice. Ubuntu is against the strategies that highlight people’s uniqueness instead of togetherness and equality (Devi dee, 2020). However, the current author argues for critical consciousness of togetherness and equality to not polarized and apply equality that ignores the struggles of the previously disadvantaged groups. Ubuntu also call for ethical decision making and practice, which guides social work (Mabvurira, 2020). Thus, ubuntu is the basis for fairness consideration in development of social work practice. Community good, fairness, respect and bringing no harm are not only the guiding principles of social work but they also speak to Ubuntu philosophy (Mabvurira, 2020). Hence the compatibility between Social Work and Ubuntu philosophy need to be acknowledged as the basis of decoloniality in the profession.

## CONCLUSION

The above discussion suggest that Ubuntu philosophy should shape the way one think about social work. Ubuntu focuses on undoing the injustices of the past through valuing lived experiences of others. This is compatible with social work. The connection between the two can be regarded as the decoloniality that aims to sustain indigenous knowledges. This article has also revealed that ubuntu philosophy can be adopted at any level such as by practitioners, students, educators, service users and so on. Therefore, ubuntu is a comprehensive African philosophy of decoloniality in social work education and practice. Although ubuntu philosophy originated in Africa. The article does not suggest for it to be adopted in Africa only. The world as a whole has the potential to get harmony and equal economic and social development under the Ubuntu philosophy. However, none African scholars or Eurocentric African scholars must adopt the philosophy not out of White supremacy interpretations. But it must emanate from its original source of Abantu and Isintu and using the original principles and values of the philosophy. That is how social work practice and education can be standardized around the world through ubuntu philosophy.

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