

2013

Exploring African philosophy: The value of ubuntu in social work

Jacob Mugumbate

University of Wollongong, jmugumba@uow.edu.au

Andrew Nyanguru

University of Zimbabwe

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mugumbate, Jacob and Nyanguru, Andrew, "Exploring African philosophy: The value of ubuntu in social work" (2013). *Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers*. 3266.

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/3266>

Exploring African philosophy: The value of ubuntu in social work

Abstract

This paper looks at the concept of ubuntu, how it has been applied in different fields and lessons that can be drawn for the social work profession. Ubuntu can best be described as an African philosophy that places emphasis on 'being self through others'. It is a form of humanism which can be expressed in the phrases 'I am because of who we all are' and ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu in Zulu language. So far, it has been successfully applied in theology, management and computer science. This paper concludes that its utilisation in these disciplines makes it suitable for application in social work especially to enhance practice ethics, community work and conduct in research. the paper was based on desk research.

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Mugumbate, J. & Nyanguru, A. (2013). Exploring African philosophy: The value of ubuntu in social work. African Journal of Social Work, 3 (1), 82-100.

EXPLORING AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: THE VALUE OF UBUNTU IN SOCIAL WORK

Mugumbate, Jacob^a and Nyanguru, Andrew^b

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the concept of ubuntu, how it has been applied in different fields and lessons that can be drawn for the social work profession. Ubuntu can best be described as an African philosophy that places emphasis on 'being self through others'. It is a form of humanism which can be expressed in the phrases 'I am because of who we all are' and ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu in Zulu language. So far, it has been successfully applied in theology, management and computer science. This paper concludes that its utilisation in these disciplines makes it suitable for application in social work especially to enhance practice ethics, community work and conduct in research. the paper was based on desk research.

KEY TERMS: ubuntu; African philosophy; social work; humanism

^a Department of Social Work, Bindura University of Science Education, Zimbabwe. Contacts: jmugumbate@buse.ac.zw, P. Bag 1020 Bindura

^b School of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe.
Contacts: P. Bag 66022 Kopje, Harare.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores ubuntu and makes an attempt to relate it to social work. Ubuntu is an African philosophy that places emphasis on ‘being human through other people’. It has been succinctly reflected in the phrase *I am because of who we all are*. It has been applied in theology by the likes of Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Tutu, 2000), in politics by the likes of anti-apartheid icon former South African President Nelson Mandela (Mandela, 1994), in management by the likes of Professor Lovemore Mbigi (Mbigi, 1997) and in the field of computer science, Linux has developed a software named Ubuntu which is developed and shared free of charge.

This paper is a culmination of a review of selected literature on ubuntu. The purpose of the review was to establish the place of the ubuntu philosophy in the study and practice of social work. It aimed at establishing the basic tenets of ubuntu and how it has been applied in various settings. Literature reviewed was that which emanated in Africa but because it was limited, a review of literature from outside Africa was included.

BACKGROUND

Ubuntu echoes the African thought of acceptable ideas and deeds. Ubuntu can best be described as humanism from the African perspective as proposed by the former head of the Zambian

government, Dr. Kenneth Kaunda. It is Africa's worldview of societal relations. It is a social and humanistic ethic.

African thoughts through ubuntu

Ubuntu relates to bonding with others. This is in line with what the word expresses in most African languages: being self because of others. This is also in line with the popular Zulu saying: *ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. Such sayings as *I am because we are and I am human because I belong*, express this tenet. This means that in African philosophy, an individual is human if he or she says *I participate, therefore I am*. In Western aphorism, Hailey (2008) argued that the individual is expected to say *I think, therefore I am*.

Samkange and Samkange (1980) highlight the three maxims of *hunhuisism* or ubuntuism. The first maxim asserts that *to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them*. And the second maxim means that *if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life*. The third maxim as a principle deeply embedded in traditional African political philosophy says that *the king owed his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him*.

Various words have been used to describe the presence of ubuntu. Some of these are sympathy, compassion, benevolence, solidarity, hospitality, generosity, sharing, openness, affirming, available, kindness, caring, harmony, interdependence, obedience, collectivity and consensus. Ubuntu is opposite to vengeance, opposite to confrontation, opposite to retribution and that ubuntu values life, dignity, compassion, humaneness harmony and reconciliation (Hailey, 2008; Wichtner-Zoia, 2012; Tutu, 2008).

The ubuntu language

Ubuntu derives from Nguni and Bantu languages of Africa. In Zulu language of South Africa the word symbolises being human. This meaning is also expressed in other languages. In Shona, a Zimbabwe language, the word *unhu* means the same thing (Samkange and Samkange, 1980). The same meaning is expressed by *ubuthosi* in Ndebele, another Zimbabwe language. In Botswana, the word *botho* expresses the same meaning whilst in Tanzania it is *bumuntu*. Congo, Angola, Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda use the words *bomoto*, *gimuntu*, *umunthu*, *vumuntu* and *umuntu* respectively. Of all these words, and many others not mentioned here, the word ubuntu has gained popularity mainly because it has been popularised in South Africa where a simple *google* search will show that ubuntu is attached to a lot of things: ubuntu schools, ubuntu conferences, ubuntu names, ubuntu loans, ubuntu child care, ubuntu awards, ubuntu counselling services and many others.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the word deeply denotes generally acceptable ideas and deeds in society although in South Africa the emphasis seems to be on collectivity as in *shosholoz*. The same emphasis of ubuntu is reflected in the Ndebele language in Zimbabwe. The Ndebele language borrows from Zulu language. In Ndebele, words like *sisonke* express collectivity, being together.

In the Shona language of Zimbabwe and related dialects, the word *unhu* connotes being human or humaneness. It focuses so much on acceptable human behaviour. *Hapana nezvemunhu* (there is no person in you) in Shona does not mean there is no physical human being, it means that this physical human being is only available in flesh but their behaviour does not make them a human being. *Uri mhuka yemunhu* (you are an animal of a person) reflects a person without *unhu*. Animals are biological, but they do not have the deeds of *unhu*. In other uses in Shona, the word still reflects the Zulu meaning of ubuntu. Sayings like *munhu munhu nevanhu* reflects collectivity.

Kali kokha nkanyama, tili awiri ntiwanthu, is a Chewa phrase in Malawi which means 'one person is like an animal, two are a community). The proverbial tone *mwana wa mnzako ngwako yemwe, ukachenjera manja udy naye* meaning 'your neighbor's child is your own' represents the togetherness element of ubuntu.

Wichtner-Zoia (2012) notes that in Kinyarwanda, the mother tongue in Rwanda, and in Kirundi, the mother tongue in Burundi, ubuntu

reflects human generosity. When in these languages they say *gira ubuntu* they are asking for society to be generous, to have consideration and be humane towards others.

Wichtner-Zoia (2012) further observes that in Runyakitara which is the collection of dialects spoken by the Banyankore, Banyoro, Batooro and Bakiga of Western Uganda and also the Bahaya, Banyambo and others of Northern Tanzania, *ubuntu* refers to the human characteristics of generosity, consideration and humaneness towards others in the community. In Luganda, the dialect of Central Uganda *ubuntu-bulamu* refers to the same characteristics.

Coverage and applicability of ubuntu philosophy

Ubuntu as a philosophy is attributable to blacks of Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa. However, its application is now worldwide (Wichtner-Zoia, 2012 and Hailey, 2008). In computer science, the Ubuntu software, a Linux based application developed in the USA, is open source software that has been widely distributed. The software is based on the sharing tenet of ubuntu. Western culture has not been spared the influence of ubuntu. Besides the Linux example, ubuntu has also been applied at various levels. Madonna, named her film *I am because we are* on Malawi orphans, a reflection of ubuntu influence. Bill Clinton used the term ubuntu to call for people centeredness in Labour Party policy when he addressed the party's conference in 2006. Ubuntu diplomacy has been introduced by the United States of America Department of State which says it 'will be

a convener, bringing people together from across regions and sectors to work together on issues of common interest'. Even the American Episcopal Church had the theme ubuntu for its 76th Convention.

TENETS OF UBUNTU AND HOW IT HAS BEEN APPLIED

Ubuntu as African spirituality: Tutu

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, by far the biggest advocate of ubuntu, gave a quite exciting contribution to this philosophy. His view is that in African ontology, ubuntu symbolises the backbone of African spirituality. He says that western countries gave the world economic stand points like capitalism; Africa has not been able to contribute that much to the economy. However, the social ethic of ubuntu has been Africa's largest contribution to the world. The Nobel Laureate ubuntu is the essence of being human. He further stated that the quality of ubuntu gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them (Tutu, 2000).

African statesmen: promoters of ubuntu

Great African statesmen espoused the values of ubuntu. The fight to liberate Africa was in itself a value based on ubuntu: the need for equality and justice. Motivated by black academic Marcus Garvey, Kwameh Nkrumah talked about consciencism, a philosophy that relates to ubuntu. He also talked about humanism being impulsive for Africa socialism. He argued that egalitarianism was going to be

achieved through humanism. He further argued that the Union of African States, was the best way forward for Africa's progress, and declared in the first constitution of Ghana that the nation was going to surrender its sovereignty to such a union. In the same vein, Julius Nyerere referred to *ujamaa*, a community building concept based on villagisation. Based on the Arusha Declaration, Nyerere believed in Africa communal living and familyhood, although his ideas could not transform Tanzania. In Zambia, former President Kenneth Kaunda talked about Zambian humanism based on African values of mutual aid, trust and loyalty to the community. Kaunda wrote several books promoting African humanism. The reconciliatory tones by President Robert Mugabe at the end of the war of liberation in Zimbabwe in 1980, are attributable to ubuntu. There is no doubt that his beliefs in fair distribution of wealth are a result of this philosophy. Even in Libya, Maamar Gadhaffi insisted on African collectivity, which he promoted through his ideas on the formation of the United States of Africa. Nelson Mandela has also contributed to the building of ubuntu. At the end of apartheid in South Africa, the former President talked of liberating the oppressor. He is of the view that an individual belongs to the whole.

Ubuntu enters in the world of computers

Linux developed ubuntu software bringing the African philosophy spirit to the world of computers. The motivation was to bring free software to the public. Mark Shuttleworth led a team of developers to establish Ubuntu. The vision for Ubuntu is part social and part

economic: free software, available free of charge to everybody on the same terms, and funded through a portfolio of Linux services. Ubuntu still is and always will be free to use, share and develop. Ubuntu is driven by a belief that software should be free and accessible to all. Linux believes that every computer user should have the freedom to download, run, copy, distribute, study, share, change and improve their software for any purpose, without paying licensing fees, should be able to use their software in the language of their choice and should be able to use all software regardless of disability.

As in *motho ke motho ka batho*, ubuntu is *botho* in Tswana language of Botswana. It is highly valued. National principles of Botswana are: *botho*, democracy, development, self reliance and unity. In its 2016 vision, *botho* is emphasised as a philosophy that promotes respect, empowerment, justice and acceptable social behaviour.

Ubuntu in African management

Ubuntu has also been applied in management. Professor Lovemore Mbigi, a writer on African management, in his book *Ubuntu, The African Dream in Management*, argued that service quality is not only determined by what we do for the client but also by the spirit in which we render the service. Mbigi further explored the use of ubuntu in affirmative action and marketing management. In African management ubuntu represents the essentialist perspective of African culture, a homogenising concept tying Africans together.

Mbigi and Maree (1997) argued that Africa must draw on indigenous cultural practices in order to improve their management, effect transformation and make themselves more competitive. They noted that some of of ubuntu values like collectivity, solidarity, acceptance, dignity and hospitality are very crucial in managerial success.

Ubuntu in Zimbabwe social work ethics

The Code of Ethics of Social Workers in Zimbabwe produced by the Council of Social Workers (CSW) describes ubuntu as humaneness. The code further states that ubuntu, or *unhu* in Shona language, places emphasis on values of human solidarity, empathy, human dignity, holding that a person is a person through others (CSW, 2012). The Code of Ethics of Social Workers in Zimbabwe says “ubuntu/*unhu*/humaneness includes the stipulations of the philosophy that:

...places emphasis on values of human solidarity, empathy, human dignity and the humaneness in every person, and that holds that a person is a person through others.’ It further states that the mission of social work includes promoting social justice, unhu/ubuntu, human rights, positive change, problem solving and improvements in individual and community relationships and the development of society in general. In the list of core values, the code includes unhu/ubuntu among service above all, social justice, professional

integrity, competence, importance of human relationships, respect of human rights and respect of diversity.

The Council of Social Workers in Zimbabwe expects social workers to recognise and promote *unhu/ubuntu*, and appreciate the dignity and value inherent in each person. It stresses that social workers must recognise that each person deserves respect and that each person exists within a cultural setting and a community and that the individual and community shape, influence and benefit from each other.

Ubuntu in South African welfarism

South Africa's White Paper for Social Welfare of 1997 states that social development (as opposed to social welfare or social services used in other countries in Africa) shall be guided by key principles such as democracy, partnership, ubuntu, equity, and inter-sectoral collaboration, among others. The paper describes ubuntu as the principle of caring for each other's well-being and fostering the spirit of mutual support. Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual's humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being.

Benefits of ubuntu spirit in social work

In social case work

Social work with individuals endeavours to bring function on the life of dysfunctional individuals. Ubuntu has several tenets that support achievement of social case work. In gerontology, in African settings, it is the responsibility of children to look after elderly members of the family. A child with *unhu* looks after their family, inner or extended. In Shona, the phrases *kukura kurerwa* and *chirere chichazokurerawo* proclaims that every person grows up through the efforts of others and in the same vein, everyone should contribute towards development of others. A person with *unhu* is respectful towards development of others. A person with *unhu* is respectful especially of elders. This value is emphasized in Botswana.

In counselling, ubuntu values have stronger roots. A person with *unhu* will not take part in elicited behaviour like prostitution, bribery, delinquency and corruption. Homosexuality has been derided in Africa although it has been accepted worldwide. Its ridicule comes from the fact that *hazvina unhu* (it lacks ubuntu).

Institutionalisation of children, disabled persons, old people and offenders has not been very successful in the African setting. These institutions never existed in the Africa setting. The nuclear family cared for its disabled and elderly members. Orphaned children were cared for by the immediate and extended family. Offenders who committed serious crimes like murder and beating their mothers (or causing them immense hate), were ordered to go round the community to beg for forgiveness and resources to appease the

deceased person or their mother. In Shona, this practice is known as *kutanda botso*. Other strategies used as opposed to prisons include beating, compensation in form of cattle (and at times girl children) and banishment from the community. Imprisonment in jails makes offenders better criminals. Reference can be made to juvenile offenders who when they taste jail, they may become jail birds. The focus on diversion and community service used in Zimbabwe and other countries improves rehabilitation and integration.

Institutionalised people are stigmatised. This is because in the African setting, care should be provided in the family. When the family fails, which is often rare, the community provides the support. This has been the basis of Zimbabwe's welfare system based on the six tier system which states that children in need of care must get support from these systems, in order of priority: nuclear family, extended family, community, foster, adoption and institutions.

In group work

Social work with groups utilises the group as a strategy to solve social problems. Groups are a key feature in African society. What binds groups together is the ubuntu spirit. However, group work as it stands in social work is meant to bring people from varying backgrounds together to solve their problems through group processes. This looks alien in the African context because in most cases problems are solved within the family and not with aliens.

Human beings are gregarious in nature. Most colonial governments in order to punish African leaders would place them in solitary confinement. For example, Mandela spent 27 years in solitary confinement. Most African leaders were treated in the same manner in order to damage political groupings.

In community work

In the African continent, it takes a village to raise a child or in Malawi language *mwana wa mnzako ngwako yemwe, ukachenjera manja udyana naye*. There is a very strong focus on community.

Ubuntu has greater relevance in the application of social work with communities. *Unhu* inters that the community lives as a collective. In community work, cooperation and collaboration are key principles. The concept of *zunderamambo* in Zimbabwe and perhaps other parts of Africa is based on ubuntu values. The concept involves community members working together to grow food that is kept by the king for distribution to the need.

Further to this, in Zimbabwe being a mother does not merely represent mother of your own biological children. It goes the same direction for being a father. Thus, a community with *unhu* will never have orphans. Mothers are mothers for the whole community. In fact, in the Shona culture, referring to someone as step sister, step daughter, step son or half sister is unheard of. Your father's brother's is your father, his wife your mother, his child your sister or brother.

A story is often told of a white employer with black employees. One of the employees, whom the authors choose to call Mambara, asked for leave two times to bury 'his deceased father'. On the third occasion, the employer fired him for 'seeking to get leave to bury his third deceased father'. The white employer wondered how many 'fathers' Mambara had. Although Mambara tried to explain that in his society, all his fathers' brothers are his fathers, he was not spared.

In managing community conflicts, the application of African traditional jurisprudence, leadership and governance is usually helpful and this is espoused in the values of ubuntu. In the concept of *unhu*, crimes committed by one individual on another extend far beyond the two individuals and has far-reaching implications to the people among whom the perpetrator of the crime comes from. *Unhu* jurisprudence tends to support remedies and punishments that tend to bring people together. This could be the reason why Africans believe in *ngozi*, an avenging spirit. *Ngozi* does not only affect the individual who commits an offence, but all those related to him (Mahoso, 2013) and at times even the community. According to mahoso, *ngozi* is an indication of the connection between the soul of a deceased person to their *dzinza* (bloodline) and *nhaka* (heritage).

In administration of social work services

Ubuntu, as suggested by Samkange and Samkange (1980) is reflected in leaders who lead with their subjects. Such leaders are

selfless and do not impose their will. A leader who has *unhu* is selfless and consults widely and listens to subjects. This sums up African management which has also been explored by Mbigi.

In social work research

This method of social work is aimed at generating knowledge. Research has always existed even in the African setting. However, the research paradigms differed. In the African setting, mythology and lived experiences especially from elders were key elements in the research process. Sources of knowledge in the African setting are elders and *svikiros* (spirit mediums). Current research, based on positivism, does not recognise these sources of knowledge.

In most African settings, when researching on sampled individuals, the researcher is often perplexed to find that most villagers are interested in the process and they will indeed attend the interview and will be willing to take part together with the sampled individuals. This belief perhaps stems from the concept of *dare*, a practice whereby ideas are generated and verified by a group of people.

Current research can be enhanced through adoption of ubuntu as a research ethic. Ubuntu is like an umbrella research ethic. It entails researching for productive purposes only, with people in mind.

CRITICISM AND WEAKNESSES

Ubuntu has had its own share of criticism. Hailey (2008) questioned whether ubuntu can be universally applied across cultures. It has been argued that because it is not homogenous, it may not be universally applicable. This challenge is made worse by the fact that ubuntu has no solid framework, what it means and what makes it up cannot be theorised. But sympathisers have pointed out to the fact that globally accepted practices, like democracy, are by no means universally applied but they have found their way into most communities. It is in the same vein that ubuntu must find its way into every society. Another criticism has been on the strengths of ubuntu values. It has been argued that some of the values weaken societies. For example, respect for authority and openness to new ideas has often been cited as a contributory factor to colonisation in Africa which promoted disenfranchisement, culture erosion and dependence. The weaker tenets of ubuntu may be used to make Africans submissive and dependent. Reference can be made to the divide and rule tactic used by colonialists in Africa. On another hand, those preying on African resources may emphasise the values that make Africans dependent. A case in point is how ubuntu has been used to celebrate South Africa's reconciliation efforts. This has led to South Africans remaining without economic resources despite the availability of an all embracing constitution and a welfare system based on ubuntu. On the other side, Presidents like Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe are derided for taking back the country's land from former colonisers. This act, together with an empowerment exercise meant to economically empower indigenous people, is regarded by

outsiders and other fellow Africans, including other Zimbabweans, as ubuntuless. Yet equality is a strong ubuntu tenet. Lastly, it has also been argued that ubuntu may give people a very strong identity, resulting in herd mentality. Often, xenophobia attacks in South Africa are cited as an example. However, Africa requires a strong identity that goes well with its culture. In true ubuntu, Africa will be able to protect its culture, beliefs, economic interests and its future.

CONCLUSION

Ubuntu brings to the world what Western civilisation failed to bring. It brings the human face to every aspect of life. It therefore has its place in social work. When applied to social work, ubuntu stands for a humane social work, using humane methods to achieve human goals. Social workers have a twin responsibility of embracing ubuntu and using the values of ubuntu to influence their peers and clients.

REFERENCES

- Battle, M.; 1997. *Reconciliation: The ubuntu theology of Desmond Tutu*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- Council of Social Workers (CSW); 2012. Social workers code of ethics. Statutory Instrument 146 of 2012.
- Hailey, J.; 2008. Ubuntu: a literature review. Document. London: Tutu Foundation.
- Mahoso, T.; 2013. Ngozi. Sunday Mail Newspaper, 14-20 July 2013, p.D2.
- Mandela, N.; 1994. *A long walk to freedom*. Boston, Little Brown.
- Mbigi, L.; 1997. *Ubuntu: the African dream in management*. Randburg: Knowledge Resources.
- Mbigi, L. and Mare, J.; 1995. *Ubuntu: the spirit of African transformation management*. Randburg, Knowledge Resources.
- Tutu, D.; 2000. *No future without forgiveness: A Personal Overview of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. London: Rider Random House.
- South African Government; 1996. White Paper on Welfare. Government Gazette Number 16943.
- Samkange, S. J. W. T. and Samkange, S.; 1980. *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indegenous Political Philosophy*. Harare: Graham Publishing.
- Wichtner-Zoia, Y.; 2012. Could the philosophy of ubuntu support community connections, development and economic prosperity in your community? Available from: http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/ubuntu_is_powerful_thinking (Accessed 5 June 2013).