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UNIVERSITY EDUCATION FOR PERSONHOOD THROUGH UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

The article is pioneering the possibility of infusing the philosophical aspects of Ubuntu in the Zimbabwean university curriculum so as to impart the correct values and norms in the graduates.

Keywords: Personhood, Ubuntu

INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to explore the possibility of making every university in Zimbabwe teach a course in African Philosophy to every student, be it they specialise in medicine, engineering, commerce, social sciences or education. The purpose of such venture would primarily be heritage reclamation through education for personhood. *Ubuntu* as a moral theory would help impart the correct values and norms in the graduates. The question could be why start at university level, but the simple answer would be because it will have maximum effect. As the university education goes, so goes the nation.

Theoretical Framework

This paper borrows heavily from the postcolonial and critical theories. It also is transformative in as far as it aims to emancipate the Zimbabwean community from the mental colonisation brought about by imbibing foreign culture, values, tastes, and mannerisms. The Afrocentric views, particularly those of (Asante, 1980; Asante, 2007), Diop (1978), Letseka (2008), Metz (2009), Wa Thiongo, N. (2009) and others influence the argumentation for recentering Africa, for the Africans to reclaim self-belief, pride and confidence (Asante, 2007). The study adapts and adopts the characteristic Afrocentric questions: 'how do we see ourselves and how have others seen us? How do we regain our accountability and extricate ourselves from neo-colonial quagmire and marginalisation by Europe....?' (Asante, 2007). (Sono, 1988; Sono, 1994)'s idea of the development of a potential language which should emanate from cross cultural and cross racial conversations going on, is to be explored. In interpreting Africanised university education as a form

of resistance to imperial cultural influences, the research incorporates the ideas of postcolonial theorists, inasmuch as they explode the presupposition of any drastic change in relationship between former colony and empire after political independence, and their conceptualisation of post colonialism as an endless process of resistance and reconstruction. Postcolonial criticism principally preoccupies itself with an analysis of all cultural forms which mediate, challenge or reflect upon the relations of domination and subordination, stemming from European imperialism. A postcolonial analysis of Zimbabwean university education should therefore show that education can be used not only as medium and form of cultural affirmation and self- representation but also resistance against foreign cultural and political domination.

It is therefore possible to analyse indigenisation of education from a postcolonial position, not forgetting, however, Manuel Manrique Gil, (2010)'s caution not to idealise pre-colonial period and its ideas as the reconstructed world without sin. I bear in mind his warning that *Ubuntu* in its pure form has neither place nor appeal for the modern African whose way of life is already a cultural hybrid because of the presence of the Islamic tradition, Christian tradition and western culture. In any case *Ubuntu* is not frozen in time but is rather dynamic and continually adapting. Research could benefit from considering the positive criticisms of Mbeki (1998), Tutu (1999), Broodryk (2006) and the more recent contributions of Louw (2003), Cornell and Van Marle (2005), and Letseka (2008)'s defence of *Ubuntu* in the face of negative comments. In fashioning a definition of the term *Ubuntu,* i need to be cautious as the term has been used as hold-all bag and a catch phrase.

I consider Lephalala (2012)'s sentiments that Ubuntu is complex, elusive and multifaceted, as it mirrors the multiple and shifting nature of the African society and human relationships. Thus *Ubuntu* can mutate and offer different meanings depending on the social context. I agree with Metz (2009), Letseka (2008), Ramose (1999), and Broodryk (2006) in their conception of *Ubuntu* as a moral theory, an interactive ethic in which our humanity is shaped by our interaction with others. It translates humanness, personhood and morality. Seen in this light*, Ubuntu* hence is a well spring flowing with African ontology, epistemology and axiology. Fundamentally, it is a matter of reverence of human nature, the attention one human being gives to another, kindness, consideration and friendliness in relationship between people. Samkange and Samkange (1980)'s discourse happens to be the only serious work on *Unhu/Ubuntu* philosophy in Zimbabwe.

The second time when it was officially mentioned was during the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training of 1999. The recommendation was to have the Zimbabwean education refocused using *Ubuntu* philosophy among other recommendations. This article then is both an attempt to not only carry out the long delayed analysis of the concept Ubuntu in Zimbabwe, but also to explore different ways in which it can be incorporated in Zimbabwean university education in order to transform it into relevant meaningful entity.

Background to the Quest of University Education for Personhood

University was born out of the necessity to improve the quality of the life of man. In order to achieve its goal, the university must transmit the cultural heritage of the past, along with its inherent moral and spiritual values, while at the same time inspiring the vision to improve upon it. By becoming the custodian of society`s educational needs, the university has signed up for the responsibility, duty and onus of carrying the philosophical heritage of the human race. This duty it has been carrying out quite well. However new challenges have arisen for the university education institutions in Zimbabwe. The first crucial challenge emanates from a historical situation. It is undeniable that history is like a long rope of fibre. Each fibre begins where others end. Together they cover the full length. The history of man is punctuated by revolutions big or small; good or bad. For the African/Zimbabwean, the big, bad events that punctuate his/her history are Slavery, Colonisation, and Globalisation, all guises of Western Imperialism. The education being dispensed in Zimbabwean institutions is still foreign since it was designed in Europe. The culture and values are foreign to indigenous Zimbabwean people. This is so precisely because as argued by Scheurich, and Young, (cited in Chilisa (2012) "when any group within a largely complex civilization significantly dominates other groups for hundreds of years, the ways of the dominant group (its epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies) not only become the dominant ways of that civilisation, but also these ways become so embedded that they typically are seen as natural or appropriate norms rather than as historically evolved social constructions."

A number of curricular forms have been attempted since independence but with no significant effect. All attempts to indigenise were piece-meal and so the education remained largely colonial and Western in orientation. Therefore, there has been more of continuity than change (Manyumwa, 1999). One cannot help but agree with Khoza (2012) who states that the great tension for the twenty-first Century African is that he has inherited two streams, individualism from Euro-Western education and its attendant tenets on one hand and communal and relational ontology from his African forebears. Khoza (2012) goes on to declare that "lack of understanding of the philosophical differences between the two paradigms constitute the biggest crisis facing Africans. We cannot hope to totally reject the Western heritage and neither can we dismiss the African heritage Ubuntu. African culture now of necessity contains essential components of both spheres".

In light of the foregoing the focus of the paper is the exploration of the meaning of *Unhu/Ubuntu* philosophy in Zimbabwean university education. The project should go beyond a mere regurgitation of ancient wisdom, but should focus on highlighting ethical insights that help solve the problems the education is facing. I hope to show that the foreign values are alienating edifices that do not help the Zimbabwean person in his/her response to the existential conditions confronting him/her. I seek to argue for the fusion of principles of *Unhu/Ubuntu* philosophy with the current curriculum in order to create a relevant and meaningful education that help to recentre the Zimbabwean in his/her search for solutions to problems that confront him/her in his/her day to day living. A close analysis of the curriculum is the best way that maybe embarked upon in order to

fully grasp the problems and ways of how university education may be made relevant and appropriate in the 21ˢᵗ century. Through indigenising university curriculum, we hope to show the African not to hold the mistaken view "that the best in terms of human goods and values can be found only from European history and culture" (Ramose, 1999).

Scope of educating for Personhood through *Ubuntu*

As Zimbabweans we need distinct Zimbabwean voices on issues of national importance. The question is; why should we as Africans fight Western imperialism? We need to rid ourselves of the yoke of colonization in all its forms. As Manuel Manrique Gil, (2010:3) noted, "at colonization point, the mission was not only to conquer physically but totally annihilate African thought systems and values. The project was to create two dichotomies, one primitive, traditional African versus civilized, modern European discoveries." African identity and knowledge are the two related contested spheres. This is so precisely because African thought systems were violently disturbed by the colonial experience. The goal of Western ideology at colonization was and still is to make African people think that they have no culture or if they had, what they had was worthless. We hence need a project which totally decolonizes African/Zimbabwean institutions of the colonial vestiges. "As Africans we still answer the question why the need for Afrocentric philosophy by answering why not? As Africans who else would we have at the centre? .... Afrocentricity resembles the black man, speaks to him, looks like him and wants for him what he wants for himself" (Asante, 1980). Mathabe (cited in Sono (1988) is right in declaring that as an African scholar, "it is necessary to define my Africanness and be rid of the shackles of definition by the Other". It is queer for the African to reject Afrocentricity. As Asante (1980) notes, a black person without Afrocentricism operates in a negative manner; his manner is contradictory to himself and is destructive to his personal and collective growth and development. Western scholarship is a by-product of Eurocentricity hence it follows African scholarship must of necessity be informed by and be a product of Afrocentricity. We need to counter the half-truth as peddled by Bozeman(cited in Sono (1988) that "the norm of thought, scholarship, history, science is that of Euro-America."

Mutwa (cited in Sono (1988) rightly urges Africans to look at the world through cultured eyes of Africa when he states that "before our people can progress, they must discover their soul and their soul lies in heritage. The heritage that they have been conditioned to discard with contempt. The heritage that they had been conditioned to look askance upon. There lies your soul, Africa." Our heritage unfortunately has been stolen. History as presented through the dominant Western scholarship is that Ancient Egypt civilisation which is the cradle of human civilisation was white and not black. This is a deliberate falsification and the truth is "that Black world is the initiator of Western civilisation" (Diop, 1978).

The Zimbabwean citizen is a formerly colonised Other (Chilisa, 2012). The Zimbabwean education is still largely Western in its orientation (Manyumwa, 1999). Its aims and goals are inimical to the formerly colonised Zimbabwe an people and so it has an alienating effect. Aims and goals of an

education system should come from the philosophy of life of the Zimbabwean people. In this case it is the philosophy of *Unhu/Ubuntu* (Samkange and Samkange, 1980). (Note well: in Zimbabwe the terms *Unhu and Ubuntu* mean the same thing, since *Unhu* is a Shona variation and Ubuntu is also an Ndebele variation. So, in this research article, the terms are used interchangeably or combined). This is an attempt to answer the question of "how is it possible to decolonize (social) research in/on the non- western developing countries to ensure that the people's human condition is not constructed through Western hegemony and ideology?" (Idemudia in (Chilisa, 2012). Weare proposing use of *Unhu/Ubuntu* philosophy as the bedrock upon which university education in Zimbabwe can be based. We hope to show as (Swanson, 2007) indicates that the *Unhu/Ubuntu* philosophy "contributes to disrupting and decolonizing hegemonic meanings, provides an opportunity for renewal and transformation in our desire for egalitarianism human dignity."

Since the Zimbabwean university system is founded on the philosophies of British thought (as epitomized by the Ox-bridge education tradition), to Africanise this institution, we need to make *Unhu/Ubuntu* the African moral theory upon which we base what Metz (2009) call the final ends (put simply, these are the aims and goals of a university). We agree with the first three final ends as given by Metz (2009) which are as follows;

(1) Foster Development
This is done by teaching courses that empowers the graduates to engage in economic activities that create employment. The goal is to train and produce highly skilled individuals who then participate in the economic activities of the community.

(2) Promote Culture
This is easily done by adopting the culture of the formerly colonised majority Other. The aim is to recentre the Other's way of life, showing its importance so as to help heal the broken identity and low self-esteem of the formerly colonised Other. The African university must be
engaged in indigenous knowledge research so as to allow the study of the Other by the Other, rather than have former colonisers prescribing what the Other is or should be.

(3) Redress the injustice, through affirmative action
The issue of equality of opportunity means redressing the formerly colonised/disadvantaged so that they are at par with the rest of the humanity. The fourth goal of the African university which Metz (2009) rejects but which i endorse is

(4) Promote Personhood
The main aim is to produce a morally upright individual, whose values are at par with the African community. The African epistemology and metaphysics are relational and so the African university should produce a product who values interconnectedness and interdependence. The person should feel that "I am because we are" (Samkange and Samkange, 1980). *Unhu/Ubuntu* as an African

moral theory Metz (2009), which reconnects us with our past and connects us to the present in the process of informing our future, should permeate throughout all studies at university level. Just as Information and Communication Technologies have become a medium of learning in every discipline, the *Unhu/Ubuntu* principles, can and should be taught to all university students through a Centre for *Unhu/Ubuntu* philosophy. The same reason that only a small percentage of the community ever pass through the university gates as students, the same principle should hold true also for education for personhood. The ripple effect factor that is effective in the dissemination of engineers, doctors and other professionals should also hold true for promotion of personhood. If our significant others in the communities become morally upright, dispensing their duties as per the dictates of the *Unhu/Ubuntu* philosophy, then a great number of people who may never pass through the university will be positively impacted.

It is true to say that African people have been silenced in the educational conversations during the periods of slavery and colonisation. That silencing took the form of provision of foreign education of servitude (Settee, 2007). She goes on to say that, "in terms of our Western schooling, we inherited a colonial system that did not critique our circumstances, pose solutions to community problems or consider our organic indigenous experience." The form and content of western education brought about value systems that are different from the African's. The African needs to see the world from an Afrocentric view. In the globalisation agenda, his voice is being drowned. The West is again busy in the process of giving itself the rights to stewardship of the earth. The African should therefore demand his voice, his space in the manner in which the world is run. It is therefore not by accident that this study's concern is the establishment of Unhu/ Ubuntu philosophy as the underlying principles governing education in Zimbabwe.

The significance of this position may be summarized as follows:

Create a Socio-Political and Moral Theoretical Framework upon Which to Base Our Educational Practice

At independence, the government adopted scientific socialism as the theory or philosophy guiding the nation. In line with this philosophy, "Education-with-Production" became the nation's educational practice. At the demise of the Soviet Union, the mainstay of communism, the Zimbabwean government discarded socialism and reluctantly embraced capitalism. While in practice capitalism is the norm, yet our leaders at every turn disown it and denigrate the philosophy behind the practice. The nation has thus been radar- less. Proclaiming dissatisfaction with the attendant Western education, the government, through its Permanent Secretary of Higher Education (2007), intoned that, "since many school leavers failed to get employment, the curriculum was blamed for unemployment. Various sections of society began to question the relevance of the curriculum…. The government had to review the curriculum. It instituted the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (1999) that recommended refocusing of education on the sciences, mathematics, technology, life skills and Ubuntu".

Thirteen years later, there has not been serious research on how to implement the recommendation of refocusing education based on Ubuntu philosophy. This chapter then is an attempt to fill that theoretical void. Besides the findings that may come out of the venture, what is very significant is that it is "making a call for a reinterpretation of African history and culture away from its colonial construction and aiming to challenge the dominant narratives of international relations and open a space in which alternative views of Africa's future may be advanced"(Manuel Manrique Gil 2010) . The more Ubuntu philosophy is talked about, the more it gains currency in the Zimbabwean community.

University is the Flagship of Education and So Indigenization Should Start at This Level

The significance of rooting university education on values and principles of Ubuntu philosophy is of gigantic proportions when we consider that university affect directly and indirectly the quality and direction of that society' s education. Chivore, B. (1990) sums up the idea when he says that "in my judgement, Higher Education represent the most effective approach for reaching an entire nation and affecting the skills, knowledge and attitudes of its people…. In a real sense as university education goes, so goes the nation".

Breaking Academic Imperialism

Given the fetish and septic wound inflicted by colonialism on Zimbabwe an people, any study that mitigates the fatality of the wound is most welcome and significant. In order to reverse the mental colonisation, the best way to begin the process is to indigenize and Africanise the Zimbabwean education using *Ubuntu* as a socio-political and moral theory upon which to base the education. *(Mahoso, 2012)* seems to be on strong ground when he says that "the challenge for an African university should be viewed as a call that insists that all critical and transformative educators in Africa embrace an indigenous African world-view and root their nation's educational paradigms in an indigenous socio-cultural and epistemological framework. Among others, this implies that all educational curricula in Africa should have Africa as their focus and as a result be indigenous-grounded or oriented". This is what Chilisa (2012) calls breaking academic imperialism through indigenization of education. Swanson (2007) in the same vein talks of the Southern African philosophy of Ubuntu as a perspective full of possibilities of disrupting neoliberalism and decolonising hegemonic meanings. Within the postcolonial discourse Ubuntu philosophy provide on avenue for challenging neo-colonialism.

Production of Ideal Citizens

Besides helping Zimbabwean people to gain their identity and self-esteem, a meaningful education informed by *Ubuntu* philosophy may see its graduates being better citizens, employment creators and morally upright leaders who shun corruption. There are plenty positive spinoffs when one is a recipient of relevant and meaningful education that is grounded in one's values.

Answering the Clarion Call

There is an insistent call to incorporate *Unhu/Ubuntu* principles in Zimbabwe. The problem is that a philosophical analysis of the concept and its suitability for Zimbabwean education has not been done. It is hoped that after this attempt at clarification, Zimbabwean universities may take up the gauntlet and lead the nation in the implementation of Ubuntu as the social and moral theory that informs Zimbabwean education.

CONCLUSION

There is no excuse for us not to incorporate Ubuntu as a moral theory that helps us to teach university education for personhood. Our university education needs transformation and indigenization. This paper ends by posing two crucial questions as follows: "when are African feet ever going to divorce European shoes?" and also, "is the West still in charge of the cannons of African scholarship?"

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