



Publisher

African Journal of Social Work  
 Afri. j. soc. work  
 © National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe/Author(s)  
 ISSN Print 1563-3934  
 ISSN Online 2409-5605

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## HOW OUR LIVED UBUNTU EXPERIENCE CAN WIDEN OUR DREAMS: AN INDIGENOUS NARRATIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*Like many African Indigenous children born in the 70s, I was born into the African Indigenous liberation struggle across Southern Africa. Our political leaders then and now continue to tell us to unite under our communal Indigenous knowledges, which for us from Southern Africa has found currency and expression in the overarching philosophical theories of Ubuntu. Yet, to assume the power structures of colonial white supremacy, regardless of gender, our leaders have become the embodiment of white men in black bodies. As they intimidate and manipulate us under the structures of colonial governance, our social fear becomes our actions of accumulating colonial dreams. In the power structures of colonial governance, our Indigenous Ubuntu governance dreams are fragmented. Sisters and brothers, those dreams, will die in fragmented isolation and we will forget what it is to be relational with all our diverse relations. Conversely, we could nurture our own Indigenous governance by centring the communal health of all our relations, inclusive of our environments by critically centring our fragmented knowledges. This paper highlights a personal orature about how Ubuntu women used critical feminist Ubuntu knowledge to nurture my life across cultural boarders.*

**KEY TERMS:** Ubuntu, communal parenting, decolonisation, Indigenous governance, Indigenous African feminism

### KEY DATES

Received: 02 November 2019  
 Revised: 02 December 2019  
 Accepted: 10 December 2019  
 Published: 20 February 2020

Funding: None  
 Conflict of Interest: None  
 Permission: Not applicable  
 Ethics approval: Not applicable

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 in 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 Leone (*maaya*), South Africa (*ubuntu/botho*), Tanzania (*utu/obuntu/bumuntu*), Uganda (*obuntu*), Zambia (*umunthu/ubuntu*) and Zimbabwe (*hunhu/unhu/botho/ubuntu*). It is also found in other Bantu countries not mentioned here.

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## UBUNTU GREETING

Before I start, I would like to acknowledge with deep gratitude and respect the Coast Salish territories. I especially want to acknowledge the Lekwungen-speaking Indigenous people, on whose traditional territory the University of Victoria that I work for, stands. My family and I also live, and play on the territories of the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ people as visitors. I acknowledge your historical relationships with these lands, which continue today and into the future. I also want to acknowledge that I am here through the colonial settler project and therefore implicate myself in the colonial project, which endeavours to dispossess you of your lands. As we dialogue, I am awakening to our colonial realities. My acts of relationally seeing you is leading me to decolonizing scholarship and actions. Hence, my first action as an Indigenous Ubuntu (being) is to request that you allow me to raise my hands so I may acknowledge you as Ubuntu. As Ubuntu when we meet, we extend to each other an Indigenous Spiritual Ubuntu greeting. I would like to offer this Ubuntu greeting to you, to our people of African descent scattered across the globe and to those on the mother continent. “Sanibonani,” meaning “We see you” but also implying that at a deep spiritual level, I am never alone as my ancestors are always with me and in me. Subsequently we see you. The response to this is “Yebo Sanibonani,” meaning, “Yes we see you too.” Again, the implication is that you, the reader, and your ancestors, agree collectively about your observation of us. So, to our ancestors, to our elders, to our parents, to our sisters and brothers, to those yet unborn and to all of creation, “Sanibonani.”

## UBUNTU

This paper advocates that we become personal with our scholarship by centring our Indigenous oratures, while critiquing our oratures to determine how we will further exercise relational Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a philosophical and ethical system of thought, from which definitions of humanness, togetherness and social politics of difference arise (Mucina, 2019; Mutwa, 1964). Ubuntu can also be viewed as a complex worldview that holds in tension the contradictions of trying to highlight our uniqueness as human beings among other human beings. My interpretation of our Indigenous Ubuntu knowledge communicates how my understanding of Ubuntu is influenced by my Ngoni, Chewa and Shona ethnic identities. I believe that by sharing our fragmented social oratures we build collective confidence to engage and challenge each other with respectful curiosity and, above all, with love. Love is the expression of relational care for our interconnectedness, which is the basis for researching our truths in our shared humanity. Ubuntu has many ways of transmitting knowledge. This being said, for this work I will focus on how we can share our fragmented memories through our oratures of family, community and nationhood, as a way of better understanding our accountability and responsibility to relational Ubuntu. This is the process of love creating possibilities beyond pain, isolation, abandonment and hate. Yet, let me also request that we exercise caution, because we know that the act of speaking can also be used to deny, refuse and ignore our relatedness. Therefore, as I give voice to our relatedness, I also acknowledge the relationships that we have also erased and silenced. May the ancestors be with us as we try to renew and re-establish familial bonds. May the sacred cycle of breath connect us as one, Ubuntu.

## SEEKING CONSENT TO TEACH

As Ubuntu, we should not offer educational knowledge (orature) without seeking the consent of our audience and conveying the context of our sharing. Such truths are self-evident in Ubuntu teaching structures, as exemplified by the starting structure of Shona orature in Zimbabwe (Mucina, 2019). It starts with a consent-seeking probe of “Paivapo,” which also communicates that the orature is based on historical happenings in the olden times (context). In response to the storytelling prompting of “Paivapo,” in Shona the audience respond by saying, “Dzefunde”, which is to say, “I am ready to receive your teaching and I give my consent to this learning engagement.” Each time the elder introduces a new setting in the orature, different characters, or conveys the objectives of the characters in the orature, she inquires about the audience’s willingness to continue giving consent through the call and response of “Paivapo.” This prompting goes on until the elder is convinced that her audience and her are synchronized in their orientation towards the consensual teaching methods of that particular Ubuntu orature. So, “Paivapo?”

## THE CONTEXT OF MY UBUNTU LOCATION

I was born in Zimbabwe, in the rural lands of Makoni on the colonially created reserve of Chendambuya to Joyce Nyamunda. This is the genealogical blood memory that connects me to my maternal family. Without them, I would have no life. I am because they are. Yet our Ubuntu Indigenous traditions dictate that when I am in the Shona territory of Zimbabwe, I am a welcomed familial visitor as my rightful place is with my paternal family according to our Ubuntu traditions. Through my Baba’s (father) lineage, I am Maseko Ngoni and Chewa from

LiZulu, which is on the colonially created border of Malawi and Mozambique. These colonial created boundaries speak to a colonial context, which renders us silent about our own territorial knowledges as conveyed in *Moving the Centre* by Ngugi wa Thiongo, 2008. My Baba is Peter Dee Mucina and our shared totem is Khomba (Bushbaby). Even before, I understood my location; my names located me, to the knowing Ubuntu communities. Devi Dee Mucina Khomba, are names that communicate my blood ties among my paternal Maseko Ngoni and Chewa families. My Dadakazi (my Baba's sister in my Ngoni culture is referred to as my female father) told me when I went home to Malawi for the first time in 2008, that even if I was a fool, I would still be their fool.

## HOW WE GOT HERE

As a way of offsetting the costs of administering colonial governance in Southern Africa, while also creating cheap labour, white settler society ushered in hut taxes against the "Natives" (Crush, J., Williams, B., Gouws, E., & Lurie, M., 2005; Massey, 1978; Mutwa, 1969). The need to pay colonial taxations disproportionately forced many Indigenous men to migrate as part of the cheap labour movement in Southern Africa. Disconnected by distance from the everyday communal labour of community parenting, while being underpaid, meant that most men could not return home or were too ashamed to face their communities due to their perceived failures of accumulating capitalistic colonial power (Mucina, 2013; Mathabane, 1986; Mutwa, 1969). This left Indigenous African women disproportionately attending to familial survival and communal parenting, with very limited support from their male folks (Mucina, 2019; Vera, 1999). Indigenous feminist scholars have critically highlighted this phenomenon as the imposed intersections of sexism, racism and capitalistic classism that colonialism uses to conquer, exploit and oppress us as Indigenous peoples (Kuokkanen, 2015; hooks, 2004, Wane 2004).

After marrying my Amai (mother) and starting a family, the poor soil of the colonially created reserve of Chendmuya could not yield enough food to sustain the needs of our growing family. Thus, my Baba had to leave his family in the early 70s and go to the city of Harare to find a job as a cheap laborer but his sporadic jobs did not pay him enough to support his growing family. This history of colonialism, which continually fragments my family, can be traced to my Baba leaving his parental family in 1944 and heading to South Africa as a cheap laborer. After finding some limited success in Johannesburg, South Africa, Baba married and started a family but the apartheid system separated him from his young family because only African workers with work passes could live and work in white communities without fear of being criminalized. Disconnected and isolated from familial structures of responsibility and accountability, Baba began an affair with a white woman supervisor in the hotel that he worked as a linen wash boy. News of the white woman being pregnant signaled real-life threatening danger for Baba from the white apartheid system. Therefore, to save his life, Baba secretly escaped to colonial Rhodesia.

Baba's ID status marked him as an "illegal immigrant," which meant that as a domestic servant he was under the whims of the white settler society in Rhodesia. He thus, was underpaid, overworked and if he showed any signs of fatigue, risked being fired instead of being given a break. In this colonial white settler structure, once again, Baba was disconnected and isolated from his struggling family. My Amai tried everything to save my brother and sister who died from poverty and malnutrition, while my Baba worked like a donkey but could offer little help to save his babies from the death of colonially created poverty and malnutrition. Seeing no hope for my survival on the reserve of Chendambuya, my Amai told my Baba that the marriage was over and that he needed to come and get me before death claimed me too. Thus, from the mid 70s until the early 80s, my father kept me as a secret in white neighbourhoods where he worked as a domestic labourer. In those white communities, I dreamt of going to their European schools, which were loosening their segregation laws but were inaccessible to me due to high uniform costs and other associated schooling fees.

Even the 1980 independence of Zimbabwe, which removed government school fees as a commitment to addressing colonial poverty and inequity (Mapako and Mareva, 2013) could not and did not foresee that so many parents in Zimbabwe would labour extra hard to send their children to these schools. In a limited amount of time, all government public schools became overcrowded and, in an effort, to control the overcrowding, these same schools started to implement strict policies of prohibiting admission to any child that did not have a birth certificate (Zindi, 1996). Hence, I was kicked out of school because I did not have a birth certificate, as it had been burnt in a fire in Chendambuya. The little schooling that I had gained from the Snake Park School outside the township of Kuwadzana had made me realize that I had a learning disability. Therefore, my failure to attend school caused me anxiety because it meant a level of denial to the capitalistic game of accumulation, while also feeling a sense of freedom from needless and pointless struggles. So here, in the liberated Zimbabwe, Baba and I were among the people on the margins of the new Zimbabwe, living but not thriving.

I want to focus in on the period between 1980 to April 1982 just before I was admitted into the orphanage, St. Joseph's house for boys in Belvedere as a ward of the state. However, the stories of the orphanage are for another time. As I did not have school to attend during this time, I wandered the streets looking for something to amuse

myself with until the other kids came back from school. This is how I ran into some aunties. They were selling their vegetables off the side of the road while keeping a lookout for police, as they did not have street vendor licenses for selling and those upscale neighbourhoods. When they spotted me, they called me over and questioned why I was not at school and I told them my story of how I had been kicked out of school because I did not have a birth certificate. From the questioning, they soon learned that my Baba was an immigrant from Malawi, who had separated from his wife and had been given the custody of his remaining child as the other two children had died of malnutrition and poverty in the village of Chendambuya.

I can still remember one of the aunties asking me, “Do you miss your mother?” To which I replied, “No because I don’t remember her?” Now although the statement that I made was true and even though I did not know my Amai, I still missed her but I had learnt with the help of my father to bury this truth because it pained us both. Thus, I seemed very dismissive of my mother to those aunties and such blasphemous was unheard of in Zimbabwe culture, where mothers are the bedrock of family, community and dare I say nation (Wane, 2004). Even though I have heard Zimbabwe men challenge this but if you ask anyone in Zimbabwe as to how the nation cries, you will know the importance of mothers. Regardless of age, status, and gender. The crying of a Zimbabwean is actually the calling out of Amai. Thus, when people cry they literally call their mother regardless if they are living or dead. So, my denouncing of the importance of my Amai was grounds for intervention by those aunties.

They told me that a man without a feminine influence was a lost being who was a danger to society and they did not wish for such a fate upon me. Thus, they took it upon themselves to awaken the femininity within me. They awakened a sleeping baby and asked me to sooth it until it stopped crying. They made me change the baby’s poopy diaper and cook the lunch meals that we all shared. Doing these chores became my morning rituals with these aunties and if I didn’t show up they came looking for me. Even my Baba did not dare contradict or challenge their teachings. This went on for about a month until my father lost his job and we moved to a nearby neighbourhood. The next time I saw the aunties, they spoke to me as an equal and a friend, in a manner that seemed to signify the end of my training. In fact, one of the women insulted me in a manner that made it seem like the whole experienced had never happened, she asked me why I was still so short like time had not lapsed. I disliked her for making that comment as I was so conscious of my height. I never went back to find those aunties after that incident.

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