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## BABA JAIROS JIRI'S UBUNTU MODELS OF CHARITY, DISABILITY AND REHABILITATION

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### ABSTRACT

Referred to as Baba, meaning respected father, Jairos Jiri deserved this honour and many global awards for starting charity, disability and rehabilitation work in Zimbabwe. But if one reads the available written works on Baba Jiri today, you would think he grew up a Christian in a westernised urban environment, and that he was western educated. He was not any of these. This article has three major objectives (1) to give a short but elaborate history of Baba Jiri (2) to emphasize the three models that characterize baba Jiri's work and (3) to reframe these models using ubuntu theory. A fourth but minor objective is to point out how these models could be used by academics, researchers, learners, practitioners and activists.

**KEY TERMS:** Baba Jairos Jiri, Rozvi, Zimbabwe, Bulawayo, disability, rehabilitation, charity

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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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## INTRODUCTION

Referred to as *Baba*, meaning respected father, Jairos Jiri deserved this honour and many global awards for starting charity, disability and rehabilitation work in Zimbabwe. His work influenced social work in Zimbabwe and Africa. But if one reads written works on *Baba Jiri* today, you would think that he grew up a Christian in a westernized urban environment, and that he was western educated. He was not any of these. This article has three major objectives (1) to give a short but elaborate history of *Baba Jiri* (2) to emphasize the three models that characterize *baba Jiri's* work and (3) to explain these models using ubuntu theory. A fourth but minor objective is to point out how these models could be used by academics, learners and practitioners. In this work, I started his name with *Baba*. In African culture, it is disrespectful to call or write about people with their first names. It is not acceptable to call an adult person by their family or first name – it is acceptable to add the respect noun *Baba* (father) *sekuru* (grandfather) or in this case *Moyo* which refers to *Baba Jiri's* Rozvi respect title.

## METHODOLOGY

This work was motivated by a lack of African charity, disability and rehabilitation models in the literature. But having grown up hearing my parents and teachers talk about the charitable deeds of a great man called 'Jairos Jiri', thereafter called *Baba Jiri*, *Moyo Jiri*, *Prince Jiri* or *Mr Jiri*, I wondered why his work did not feature in my social work training. I then wrote a few paragraphs using the information I already knew about him from my upbringing, and my recollection of a few of his centres I interacted with when I worked in the disability sector in Zimbabwe. When I searched online I saw a stub history of *Mr Jiri* in Wikipedia, which I thought emphasized a colonized history of his. I then expanded the tub before I wrote this article. This was important to correct what was already in the public domain to emphasize the role of ubuntu in his work. I did come across a few more articles, though all written a long time ago. The few articles point to his royal ancestry and upbringing, so I had to read a bit further about Chief Mutenyami, his father. They were a Rozvi royal family as elaborated in the next section. I then used ubuntu theory to reframe the work of *Baba Jiri*.

## PRINCE JAIROS JIRI - THE ROZVI ROYAL PRINCE

He was a Prince in the Rozvi Royal family, the last Shona rulers of Zimbabwe. His names of respect were *Moyo* (meaning heart) and *muRozvi* (his tribal and royal name). He was born in 1921 in *Bikita Reserve*, a dry area where his people had been driven by white colonialists three decades earlier. His father, Chief Mutenyami Jiri was a Kingmaker, an Appointer of Rozvi Chiefs. This was an important role given that the Shona King had been assassinated in 1868. The assassination of Shona King Tohwechipi Chibhamubhamu in Uhera (now Buhera) left the Rozvi without a royal leader but more importantly it left Zimbabwe without a leader to fight invaders. As Royal people, people like Chief Mutenyami would not only appoint chiefs but provide social services in the community like feeding the hungry and housing the travelers or homeless. His mother, *Mai Marufu* came from a royal family too and was charitable as was expected of her role. *Mai Marufu* was a daughter of sub-chief *Mazimba* of *Gutu*.

As expected of Royal Rozvi, *Baba Jiri's* family was guided by *unhu* values. They were spiritual and valued family and community. They prayed to *Mwari* (God) and respected their elders present and past. Values of helping, giving, friendship, being good in the community and working and doing work that please *Mwari* (God) guided their royal family. The Prince grew up heading cattle and learning to write in the sand with sticks or fingers or on rocks with charcoal. His community was poor and overcrowded. His family and many others in *Bikita Reserve* struggled to take care of themselves as they did not have good and large enough land to farm. At night, during sleep, he would dream of himself as a big helper of the people in his *Bikita* area as part of his royal duties as a prince of a Chief himself.

## EFFECTS OF COLONIALISM

But it was hard to realise these dreams because of the poverty of his people caused by colonization. Land dispossession had resulted in small pieces of land per family, and young married adults had no land of their own. The land was dry and many more people became landless after the Land Apportionment Act put up by the white settler regime in 1931. People were driven from fertile land, there was more tax and herds of cattle were reduced per family as a result of this policy. A few schools were available, run by missionaries but there were numerous bottlenecks including entry requirements and fees. Resultantly, many young men and women flocked to towns, mines and white settlements to look for work although very low wages were paid. Ubuntu guided social safety nets that had existed in communities started to fail. This affected people with disabilities more who then also flocked to white settlements for opportunities but ended up on the streets begging because the opportunities were not there.

On his part, Baba Jiri's parents, despite being royal, were not able to send him to school. Together with his family, he had to grow and sell vegetables as well as provide labour to some people in the villages to enable him to raise some money to go to school. The family raised some money and enrolled at Gokomere Mission School, a Christian focused institution. He was already over age so he was quickly moved to the second level but fell ill and had to return home. By the time he recovered, the school term had passed and he needed money for the coming term. He then abandoned the school project and joined others going to white settlements to trade their labour. Perhaps one thing he gained at Gokomere was confirmation of his beliefs about helping, charity, patience, tolerance and non-judgment.

No doubt his *ubuntu* background influenced his view of life when he saw destitute people on the streets of Masvingo (then Fort Victoria) where he worked briefly and in Bulawayo where he arrived on foot from Masvingo in 1939 with his brother Mazviyo Jiri. It was in Bulawayo where he came across many destitute people. Some of the people he saw were half-naked, blind, disabled, homeless, unemployed and they were begging. This situation was very different from life in his village where any people needing this kind of help were assisted not to live this harsh kind of life. He was motivated to help, but he had no decent income himself. He was only a gardener working for white families and at times a newspaper vendor or deliverer who used an employer's bicycle. His friends were struggling too. He helped in small ways nevertheless by just speaking and making friends with the poor people on the streets.

### From royal dreams to real helping

Around the 1940s, he joined the Rhodesian Africa Rifles military unit as a dishwasher. The facility where he worked rehabilitated soldiers injured in war World War 2. He observed rehabilitation workers, and doctors and this gave him ideas about rehabilitation. This experience shaped his rehabilitation model. One day, it is reported that he used his worker's bicycle to carry a disabled young man to Old Memorial Hospital and persuaded the hospital to do corrective surgery which he paid for from his meagre earnings. He did not stop there, but took beggars who were blind from the streets of Bulawayo to his lodgings. He had a two roomed place, so he created a backyard house to accommodate his clients. The experience led him to think of registering the first disability organisation by a black person in Zimbabwe. Initial attempts to register were dismissed by the colonial administrators who thought his ideas were wild. He had to overcome numerous bureaucratic huddles as a black person registering a first charity organisation in colonial Rhodesia. The Jairos Jiri Association for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled and the Blind was founded in Bulawayo in 1950, initially registered as Bulawayo and Bikita Physically Defective Society. The first committee was made up of Stephen Kwenda (Secretary), Fabian Dururu (Treasurer), and members Job Mapfinya and Jacob Mufute. After hard years of setting up a new organisation, in 1950 the first skills training workshop was held with the support of Bulawayo City Council. In 1959, he opened a training centre in Nguboyenja providing skills like basket weaving, shoe repair, literacy and leatherwork. This was followed by a tour of rehabilitation facilities in the United States and Europe supported by donors. He expanded his work to Harare (then Salisbury) after getting land from Salisbury City Council, Gweru and Rusape. One of the centres was an art workshop that became popular with tourists who valued the baskets, plaques, clay pots, paintings, wood and soapstone sculptures produced there. His rehabilitation centre in Bulawayo also fostered music and dance resulting in bands like the Jairos Jiri band popularised by Paul Matavire who was blind. Like Baba Jiri, Paul came from Bikita.

At the time of his death in 1982, the Association, which Mr. Jiri founded, had grown from one centre in 1950 to 16 centres including schools, special schools for the deaf and blind, hostels and homes, vocational training center, agriculture skills training center, clinics, orthopedic workshops and satellite units, Community-based Rehabilitation Programme, craft shops and gender empowerment programmes. "(Baba) Jairos Jiri not only gave hope and opportunity to thousands of people living with disabilities during his life time and after his death, but also earned Zimbabwe international recognition in the care and rehabilitation of the disabled. It takes a man of great compassion and courage to assume responsibility for such people and to break down the barriers and attitudes of society towards them, and in doing so, restore to them human dignity and rightful place in the community. He has left a tangible legacy to the nation and all of us inherit the Jairos Jiri Association with gratitude and pride in its achievements to date (Jairos Jiri Association, 2019)".

For all this work, he was recognized and awarded. Getting recognised by the name Baba at a national scale is not an easy thing to achieve in Zimbabwe. That respect is given to people who have played a major role in national building. Baba Jiri was honoured by Zimbabweans who refer to him as Baba, meaning Respected Father. Notable heroes recognised in the same manner are Father Zimbabwe Joshua Nkomo, Mbuya (respected grandmother) Nehanda and Sekuru (respected grandfather) Kaguvi. In 1982 when he died, he was honoured with National Hero of Zimbabwe status but opted to be buried in his home village of Bikita instead of at the National Heroes Acre in Harare. Later, the government of Zimbabwe honoured him by naming an award in his name, The Jairos Jiri Humanitarian Award given to people who contribute significantly to helping others, for example, those who helped cyclone Idai Victims in Chimanimani in 2019. Further to this recognition, he had received these awards:

1. International Symposium on Rehabilitation awarded in Kampala, Uganda in 1975.

2. Honours Degree in Masters of Arts by the then University of Rhodesia.
3. Queen of England awarded Mr Jiri an MBE, which means Member of the British Empire. In this article, I avoided prefixing *Baba* Jiri’s name with MBE in favour of *Baba*, which is more politically and culturally appropriate.
4. Audience with Pope Paul VI, where he received a blessing for his great work and was presented with a medal marking a Holy year in 1975.
5. Lions International Service Award in 1977
6. Humanitarian Award from the then Salisbury Union of Jewish Women in 1977.
7. Freedom of the City of Los Angeles in 1981.
8. Goodwill Industries International Award for Humanitarian and Rehabilitation Work in 1981.
9. Rotary International presented him with their International Year of Disabled Person Award for Africa which carries citation “Greatest Contribution to Rehabilitation in Africa - IYDP 1981”.

**BABA JIRI’S MODELS**

Baba Jiri contributed to charity, disability and rehabilitation work in Africa in a very profound way. He was a pioneer. Three models of interest to social workers emanate from his work, these are:

1. *Baba* Jiri charity or philanthropy model
2. *Baba* Jiri disability model
3. *Baba* Jiri rehabilitation model

**Baba Jiri charity or philanthropy model**

Mr Jiri's charity model was replicated by several organisations in Zimbabwe and Africa. His model can be described by the acronym HOPESS as follows:

*Figure 1: HOPESS model*

<b>H</b>	Have natural values of <i>unhu</i> .
<b>O</b>	Observe the environment for opportunities to help.
<b>P</b>	Provide help using your own physical, financial and other resources.
<b>E</b>	Encourage and treat people you want to help as your friends and family.
<b>S</b>	Seek outside help.
<b>S</b>	Start and sustain a charity organisation.

**Baba Jiri disability model**

As a person who grew up in a spiritual society where the Rozvi and their people prayed to Mwari and elders visited spiritual places such as Matopo Hills often, Baba Jiri could have easily believed disability had spiritual causes. If he did, this did not show up in his work. He did believe though that disability was a ‘defect’ as shown in the first name of his association. What is clear is that he believed that medical interventions were a key response to disability as seen by his support for corrective surgery and setting up clinics. He believed in institutionalization perhaps motivated by the fact that in rural areas where people came from opportunities were even hard to come by. Related to this, he did think the challenges of disabled people in rural areas also needed to be attended to, hence the original organisation included Bulawayo and Bikita before it became national. He believed social support was important as seen by making friends, explaining situations and taking clients as part of his family. He was not focused on the broader causes of disability, and the political barriers as seen by his non-involvement in political struggles against colonialism, and his failure to push for policies that would address the plight of black people with disabilities on a national or even international scale. He believed in charity not broad-based social justice. This probably was a result of colonialism itself which silenced people by punishing those calling for social justice. He needed to be pro-white for his association to be registered. The Zimbabwean disability movement for equality was born in his institutions in 1975 but he did not support it. He saw the call for involvement, participation and increased opportunities as a threat to his charity model. The movement emanated from Joshua Malinga and .... They formed and registered the National Council of Disabled Persons Zimbabwe which started as Kubatsirana Welfare Society later National Council for the Welfare of Disabled. In 1980, Malinga attended an international disability congress, Disabled Peoples' International (DPI)’s Winnipeg World Congress in Canada. This marked internationalization of disability work in Zimbabwe.

**Baba Jiri rehabilitation model**

Mr Jiri's rehabilitation work can be described by the TO PARENT model as follows:

Figure 2: TO PARENT model

<b>T</b>	Take people you want to help as your friends or family ( <i>ukama</i> ).
<b>O</b>	Only use existing facilities like friends, hospitals and homes ( <i>ujamaa</i> ).
<b>P</b>	Provide resources like transport people to facilities because they may not be able to go on their own.
<b>A</b>	Adequate care, education and support. Provide practical ideas about how rehabilitation could be done.
<b>R</b>	Reduce stigma and cost of care by providing housing (institutionalization).
<b>E</b>	Enterprises ( <i>ushavi</i> ) for income.
<b>N</b>	Need for supporting carers like his wife and friends.
<b>T</b>	Training opportunities for self-reliance.

TO PARENT, is to provide care as you would do your own children. This was a key strategy for Baba Jiri. The facilities he built were homes, he was Baba, the father and his wife was a Mother. This explains why Ethel, his 4<sup>th</sup> wife was able to carry on with the family trust after Baba's death.

The major strengths of his model are that it supports building of skills and income but a major weakness is institutionalisation because resources like food, shelter and education are limited. Further, once institutionalised, people are separated from community and it becomes very difficult for them to thrive in those communities when they go back. This model does not address the structural issues that cause disability, exclusion and injustice. However, the work that he started has changed to include community work and advocacy for social inclusion as can be seen in picture.

#### THE ROLE OF UBUNTU IN BABA JAIROS'S WORK

Where did that strong force that drove a penniless, uneducated, unemployed, rural child or poor parents to be one of Africa's greatest philanthropists for more than 35 years come from? The energy to set up 16 facilities in Zimbabwe, and live a strong foundation for the disability movement to emerge, and receive the highest medal on the land. Colonial documents quoted the Kingmaker, Murozvi Chief Mutsenyami saying "wealth is unimportant...we have not been placed on earth to be rich but to direct the affairs of others". To confirm this, his son, Prince Jairos helped his people even when he himself was poor and unemployed. "It is that feeling of helping others, when there is no other help, which makes the 51-year old Jiri feel important and wealthy indeed". Only ubuntu can strongly account for his perseverance, faith and generous deeds for 35 years.

#### CONCLUSION

*Baba* (or more aptly put *Mzee*) Jiri's work influenced social work in Zimbabwe. Although he was not a professionally trained social worker, he provided direction on how ubuntu values that had long existed could be integrated with western values. Many other charity, disability and rehabilitation programs were modelled along his. Even today, values of empowerment, income and job creation are important in social work. He used both individual and group approaches while his successors at the association expanded to community and policy work while maintaining the individual and group approaches. The disability movement, which he unknowingly created, has taken policy work much further. Today, we can refer to his models to decolonize and indigenize social work, in Africa and globally. Instead of looking at western models, we have our own, grounded in ubuntu, to look at and use in our daily work: teaching, learning, assignments, research, writing and practice.

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