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Experiences of Ubuntu and Implications of African philosophy for social work in Australia

Reflective Narrative

Dr. William Abur and Dr. Jacob Rugare Mugumbate

Dr William Abur is a Lecturer in social work at the University of Melbourne, Department of Social Work – Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. He has worked and conducted research in the areas of social work, mental health, refugee settlement and participation in employment and sport.

Dr Jacob Rugare Mugumbate is a lecturer in social work at the University of Wollongong, School of Health & Society, Faculty of the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities. He previously lectured at the Bindura University in Zimbabwe.

Corresponding authors: Dr William Abur | Dr Jacob Rugare Mugumbate

william.abur@unimelb.edu.au | jacob.mugumbate@uow.edu.au

Abstract

Indigenous knowledges come in many ways and they are contained in diverse philosophies. Africa's overaching philosophy that shapes its knowledges, values, practices, approaches, methodologies and perspectives is *Ubuntu*. Put simply, Ubuntu is about seeing the individual through their family, community, environment and spirituality. Ubuntu has no specific place or date of origin but is expected to have originated in west-central and northern parts of Africa and spread throughout the continent through migration that started 4,000 years ago. It is found in all communities of Black people in Africa. Literature on Ubuntu first appeared in the 1960s but it is more recently that the philosophy has gained prominence in social work. In this article authors used an autoethnographic approach to share their lived experiences of Ubuntu. By doing this, we are hoping to add to available literature and to provide a nuanced understanding of the philosophy. The philosophy of Ubuntu will be introduced first and narratives of each author's lived experiences in Africa and Australia will be provided followed by a combined reflection. The reflection focuses on use of Ubuntu among Black African families in Australia and the issues emanating from preserving these values in a foreign environment. The discussion will then turn to implications for practice where authors share their insights into what needs to change to make Australian social work more meaningful to Black people of African origin in Australia and how Ubuntu could impact social work practice more generally.

Keywords: *African; Decolonisation; Indigenous knowledges; Nhiar-baai; Social work practice; Values; Ubuntu; Unhu*

The philosophy of *Ubuntu*

Ubuntu is the overarching philosophy among Black people of Africa (Nabudere, 2005). It forms the "base of the African philosophy of life" and from it values and practices are derived (Nabudere, 2005, p. 1). While Africa has more than 3000 tribes with different sub-cultures, Ubuntu is a common thread running through their values and practices (Khomba & Kangaude-Ulaya, 2013; Ramose, 1999). Ubuntu can be summarised as Africa's worldview of humanity, and how human beings are expected to relate with each other, their families, community, society, the environment and the spiritual world (Nabudere, 2005).

Ubuntu has no specific place or date of origin but is expected to have originated in the West-central and northern parts of Africa and spread throughout the continent through migration that started 4000 years ago (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). It is found in all communities of Black people in Africa, from the Nubian desert to the Cape of Good Hope and from Senegal to Zanzibar (Nabudere, 2005; Ramose, 2002). Historically, most Black people used to stay in the northern and western parts of Africa but migrated East and South for several reasons, including, but not limited to, invasion by people from the Middle-East and Europe, desertification and population growth (Diop, 1987; Ramose, 1999). Linguistic research has shown that Ubuntu is available in all countries in Africa but is known by different names among different communities such as *gimuntu* in Angola, *botho* or muthu in Botswana, *bato* in Cameroon, *bantu* Congo, *bomoto* or *bantu* Congo Democratic Republic, *utu*, *munto* or *mondo* in Kenya, *umunthu* in Malawi, *vumuntu* in Mozambique, *omundu* in Namibia, *mutunchi* in Nigeria, *bantu* in Rwanda, *ubuntu* or *botho* in South Africa, *nhiar-baai* in South Sudan, *utu*, *obuntu* or *bumuntu*) in Tanzania, *obuntu* in Uganda, *umunthu* or *ubuntu* in Zambia and *hunhu*, *unhu*, *botho*, *ubuntu* or *ubukhosi* in Zimbabwe (Metz, 2007; Mugumbate, 2020). From these names, *ubuntu* has become more popular and is used with a capital letter U when referring to it as Africa's philosophy. A closer look shows that most of the names include the stem *tu*, *nt* or *nh* which refers to people or humanity (Diop, 1987). The common name for these people is Bantu, which was derived from their common use of these word stems.

Ubuntu exists mainly in oral forms and has been transmitted from generation to generation through storytelling, poetry, song, art, dance and many other formats (Louw, 2006; Mabovula, 2011). However, beginning in the 1960s, Ubuntu started to appear in written literature (Gade, 2011; Mbiti, 1969; Samkange & Samkange, 1980). The literature on Ubuntu is growing, especially in Africa, and its recognition has also increased globally, including in social work where it was the theme for World Social Work day for 2021 organised by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

Ubuntu is usually expressed in maxims such as "You are what you are because of other people," "I am because we are" or "I am what I am because of you" (Mbiti, 1969, p. 106). Every individual is viewed through their family and the family is viewed through the extended family and tribe (Lutz, 2009) and individualism is not valued (Tutu, 2000). Ubuntu values sharing of responsibilities and reciprocity (Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Ramose, 1999). For instance, there

is a famous saying in Africa that says a child is raised by the whole village (Kakowa & Kaomba, 2020; Mbiti, 1969). The idea is that every person or adult has a role to play in taking care of children by nurturing, mentoring and teaching them to be responsible people who can or will play significant roles in their communities.

Ubuntu values connection of humans to the natural environment (Terblanché-Greeff, 2019). This is achieved in several ways, including but not limited to, viewing the environment as part of humanity, where the environment is seen as a living being capable of thoughts, feelings and emotions (van Breda, 2019). Ubuntu views the environment as a source of life. Human beings have a reciprocal relationship with the environment, they take responsibility to protect the environment. This has a bearing on how people look after the environment, it increases their sense of responsibility (van Breda, 2019). This world view provides alternative ways of looking at environmental issues (Terblanché-Greeff, 2019). Another way of looking at Ubuntu and the environment is through ancestral lands. Every African has land that they inherited from their ancestors, however, for others the land was colonised but the fight to reunite with their land one day is a constant struggle. This land is greatly valued and protected to be passed on to future generations. Ubuntu values spiritual connectedness to parents, elders, ancestors and God (Louw, 1998).

One of the criticisms of Ubuntu has been that it can mean so many things which should not be surprising given that it is the main African philosophy (Nabudere, 2005). With more written literature available now, Ubuntu is becoming more clear to students, academics and practitioners. For example, in social work, there is now an extensive body of literature on the subject covering roles in social work (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013), spirituality and the environment (van Breda, 2019), decolonising (Mugumbate, 2020; Mupedziswa et al., 2019) and indigenising social work using Ubuntu (Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). This literature expands the philosophical ideas of Ubuntu, provides definitions, models and case studies and show how Ubuntu ethics, theories, values and principles are used in practice. More recently, Mugumbate and Chereni (2020) provided an integrated framework of Ubuntu which states that Ubuntu has six levels: the individual, family, community, societal, environmental and spiritual.

While Ubuntu forms the base of Africa's philosophy, it does not apply to all people who identify as Africans (Nabudere, 2005). Africa has a predominantly Black population to which Ubuntu is indigenous. However, Africa also has people of Middle-Eastern, European and Asian origin who came to Africa as a result of trade and colonisation. Africans refer to these people collectively as white. For these groups of people, Ubuntu is foreign. There has also been a criticism that some Black Africans do not know Ubuntu (Nabudere, 2005). However, this could be because the initial global literature on Ubuntu restricted it to South Africa yet it exists in all Black African communities but is known differently in African languages. While Ubuntu as a philosophy did not originate from South Africa, the word ubuntu was popularised to the outside world mainly by South Africans, including the late former post-apartheid President of South Africa and freedom fighter Nelson Mandela (Metz, 2007).

If the philosophy is described using local language, the people in that community will understand it. However, in other African communities, especially urban communities, Ubuntu has been eroded largely because of colonisation, modernisation, westernisation, foreign religions and education which trivialise anything African including African philosophies and cultures as inferior (Tusasiirwe et al., 2021).

Ubuntu has gained prominence globally as seen by the growth in literature about the philosophy. In social work, it was the World Social Work Day theme for 2021. Sharing lived experiences of Ubuntu can add to available literature and provide more nuanced information about the philosophy. In this article, we share our lived experience of Ubuntu followed by our reflections and conclude with implications for social work.

Methodology

In writing this article, we asked ourselves these questions: What is our lived experience of Ubuntu? How can Ubuntu be used in practice with Black people of African origin and other people in Australia? What are the implications for social work practice more broadly? To answer these questions, each author provided a detailed narrative of their lived experience. We then had a meeting to discuss the narratives and reflect on them together. This autoethnographic approach has been preferred to demonstrate our standpoint as insiders and to acknowledge the role of experiential knowledge in social work. As Nabudere (2005, p. 3) said, "An African philosophy of life that guides the thinking and actions of Africans must therefore be found in their lived historical experiences and not from philosophical abstractions that have very little meaning in actual life". The method also allows anecdotal information to be used to understand social issues especially where data collection is not possible because of financial or time constraints (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; wa Thiongo, 1986). However, we acknowledge that autoethnography has a potential for personal bias as noted by Holman (2005). We have addressed this shortcoming by providing literature on Ubuntu before presenting our lived experiences. While autoethnography provides an opportunity to use one's experience to contribute to literature, it also exposes the individual's personal and sometimes private life. As authors, we took a lot of time to revise our lived experiences to ensure that we shared what was useful for this article and what we were both comfortable with. We are cognisant that our work will be useful for readers in both Africa and Australia, hence we have also used a few nouns in African languages where an English equivalent could not be found or could distort the meaning.

Lived experiences of Ubuntu

Author 1's lived experience

I was born in a remote village in South Sudan and grew up in an extended family with many siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews. The philosophy of *nhiar-baai* (humanity or Ubuntu) is constantly referred to by parents and elders, in particular the principle of community. *Nhiar-baai* means love of your community, your people and other human beings such as strangers and visitors. It is common to hear elders saying "If you show kindness and do good to visitors or strangers, they are more likely to leave a blessing to you and your family."

Parents and elders constantly talk to children about these principles as part of their significant role of raising children. Aunties and uncles play a significant role of mentoring and bringing up community-minded children in the village. *Nhiar-baai* was something I learnt from a young age to assist me to understand family and community connections. Our connection with our relatives and other community members was something our parents taught us to maintain as one of the values of our culture. My parents always said "we are nothing without connecting with other people in the community and we are nothing without assisting other people in difficult situations." My father was one of the community leaders with a role to take care of vulnerable families and individuals in the village. Both my parents are now deceased and are buried on our land in the village, a place I hope to be buried too one day.

Human connection, kindness, respect, empathy, and sympathy are some of the core values I was taught to hold on to as a human being. In my community in Africa, Ubuntu is applied to a diversity of life situations, often in the form of stories about leadership, history, food, health, conflict, environment, and weather. My siblings and I were taught to learn the importance of sharing resources and food with our extended family members and other community members that needed some support. Part of this teaching and mentoring happens naturally in the family and community. However, there is organised teaching and mentoring that happens every year as a way of marking transition from one stage of life to another. This teaching and mentoring focuses on being responsible in life but also body changes such as what happens at puberty. The program can take about four weeks and finishes with a community graduation. The teaching and mentoring is done for both boys and girls.

We are connected to our environment in many ways. For example, our family has three symbols – a rock, a tree and cow – all derived from the environment. For other tribes, their symbol is rain, others the sun and others, the wind. Each tribe is expected to have expertise about their symbol. They use this expertise to maintain and protect the environment and advise the community in times of natural disasters. Cows are even more significant in our life: besides providing us with food and labour, we use them as gifts to our in-laws to strengthen marriage and promote family connections.

Due to political instability in my country, I migrated to Australia but I am still connected to my land of birth. I am working to honour the expectation of my community to build my home on our land. In Australia, I live in an urban community in a white-dominated society that has different values from those I acquired when I was growing up. I have observed that the Australian society, which is dominated by European culture, views family and community connection differently from the way I do. They tend to be more individualistic – individuals can have little family connections, families can have little or no tribal connections and households can have little community connections. I have observed little connection to the environment and to spirituality.

One "discovery" that struck me in Australia is the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I learnt about the diverse knowledges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples when I first arrived in Australia. Through study, research and discussion, I learnt

about Australia's history of colonisation and oppression of its First Peoples and identified links between this history and the colonisation of my own ancestors. Their history is the same as Africa's history, especially the role colonisation has played in reducing their population so drastically and almost completely dismantling their culture. Another thing that interested me was to learn about "women's or men's business" in Aboriginal culture and the roles of aunties and uncles. This is a contextual way of sharing roles, developed over time. Gender roles are shared in similar ways in Africa to promote responsibility and to reflect what the people value – family, community, collectivity and responsibility. The connection between Indigenous Australians and the environment also struck me – land, rocks, trees, sacred places and water – resonates with South Sudanese cultural approaches.

The new environment I migrated to required that I get more formal education in order to sustain the high cost of living. My choice was to train as a social worker and I am now a social work academic responsible for teaching and research. As a researcher, the philosophy of my community of birth became more meaningful to me and what I learnt from a young age makes more sense to me now. This has made more sense as I observe other cultures in the multicultural country where I currently live and work. Out of my work and present life, I have learnt how closely related African values are. *Nhiar-baai* exists in other African cultures.

Author 2's lived experience

I was born and raised in an African rural and agricultural community among some of my kin in Zimbabwe. Although some kin live in other places, my immediate family is constantly in touch through visits, ceremonies and these days, through social media. These relationships stretch to five generations back. They include kin from my fathers's side, and those from my mother's side. Besides kin, I am connected to my tribe, which is divided into several houses. Where I come from, each tribe has their special symbol, *mutupo*. The symbol of my tribe is a mouse or elephant – they both symbolise hard work or being enterprising. These symbols are also genetic markers, distinguishing my tribe from others. Connections at the tribal level are usually through ceremonies and boys' rites of passage but these days there are social media groups for the tribe. I highly value and nurture connections at the immediate family level, extended family level and tribal level for myself and my own family.

I do not have one mother but many. I have many fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles. In my culture, my mother's sisters are my mothers, not aunts and my father's brothers are my fathers, not uncles. The children of my other fathers are my brothers and sisters, not cousins. It has not happened that one of our family or tribal members had to be put in an orphanage, foster care, children or older people's institution because we have alternative forms of care naturally arranged within the family and extended family. If my mother dies, I have many other mothers to look after me. I do not need to be in a children's institution or to be adopted.

Respect is an important part of my culture. I can never call anyone older than me or anyone who is married by their first name. I use names that convey respect such as their clan name, their surname, the children's name or simply father, mother, grandmother, aunt or other.

A cardinal rule is to respect your parents, and while you can argue or fight with your father, you can never fight with your mother or mother-in-law. It is disrespectful to look someone in the eye or face, especially when they are older than you or they are of a different gender. There are situations where eye contact is expected, for example, when arguing, when expressing surprise or when showing your anger or displeasure.

My community of birth and upbringing has people from other tribes. The community is made up of seven villages, each with a village leader, *samusha*. The larger community is made up of several other villages, together they form a Chiefdom, led by *Ishe*, the Chief. Our Chiefdom and seven others form a Country or Territory led by *Mambo*. Before the beginning of a meeting, party, ceremony or event, we pay respects to the leaders and *Mambo's* people, the owners of the land. The leaders from village to Country level all contribute to conflict prevention, justice and resolution and environment protection. Each Thursday is a day to honour the environment (*chisi* day), no one works the land on that day. My immediate and extended communities usually join hands to help individual households, do work parties or do community projects that are community or government initiated. As for justice, the focus is on prevention, maintaining relations, returning what has been obtained unjustly and compensation – punishment is not a priority.

Our community uses a single language, and that language carries our values, history and meanings in idioms, songs, stories, proverbs, general poetry, praise poetry, names and nouns. Another binding factor for my community is freedom from colonial occupation. The community contributed to the liberation of the country from the British, something everyone is proud of and celebrates during independence and heroes day each year. "You can not be human if you are not free," often elders say in reference to the fight for liberation they participated in. This means Ubuntu is tied to freedom.

My community has these sayings "some people are not humans" and "not every person is human." When I was young I didn't understand what it means to be not human when you are already human. I later learnt that a human being needs *unhu* to be human. *Unhu* is a way of relating to others, and a way to think about life. These values were further reinforced during my rite of passage at 11 years of age. The rite involved attending a riverside camp for a month, where teachings about being enterprising, Ubuntu and humane animal slaughter were received mainly through storytelling, song and poetry. One major Ubuntu lesson was – you can not be human enough if you do not value or are not connected to your family, community, Country (ancestral lands) and country (nation). Other lessons were that you can not put yourself first, you put family, community, Country and country first and Ubuntu is not only for the village life, it is something that stays in you wherever you go, and has to be passed on to the next generation.

My family has land that was passed on to us by our ancestors. My father will pass on the land to me, and we will pass it on to our future generations. This land I will not trade, and it is my responsibility to enhance and protect it. I have a physical and spiritual connection to this land.

I can have a house in an urban community or outside the country, but my permanent home will remain the one I built on my ancestral land.

I have started my own family, and I have proudly followed marriage rites of my culture. One of them is paying gifts to my in-laws who are from the same community as mine in Africa. This is an important part of our doing and being that cements relations between my family and my wife's family, the two of us and our communities. The gifts were in the form of cattle, goats, money and food paid to my wife's family, in particular my wife's aunt, sister, brother, mother, father and herself. These are not expensive gifts in any way, far less costly than engagement rings, wedding rings, other gifts, weddings and honeymoons that are required to show love and cement relations in other cultures. In some societies, especially western culture, this important cultural rite is devalued and seen as promoting gender inequality, but we disagree with this view. In line with Ubuntu philosophy, the rite's aim is building stronger families and to some extent, stronger communities.

When I became a social worker, and explored the world, it became clearer to me that each community has their philosophy and that the philosophy of Black people of Africa was colonised and today it struggles to survive because of colonial tendencies and global pressures. It also became clearer that Ubuntu is about being a Black African. When you have not been in touch with other races and cultures, you rarely look at Ubuntu from that perspective. The concept of "brother" and "sister" gets a larger meaning outside Africa, every Black person becomes your "brother and sister from another mother," a common saying among Africans.

In Australia, I have come to realise that African families struggle with maintaining their values and African identity. In line with the dominant values of white people who are in the majority in Australia, African families tend to become more individualistic, and kinship ties usually become weak or broken. This could also be because of the disconnection from the rest of the family, extended family, tribe and community in Africa. My own children usually ask me why I have to send money home to the village? How come I have so many mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters? Why I contribute to community projects back home? Why I connect and contribute to social media groups of extended family, tribe, community, Zimbabwe and Africa? Why we have to use our language? Why we have to go back to Africa, Zimbabwe and our community constantly? Why it is impossible to call Australia home? I have heard these questions from many other African children.

Authors' reflections together

Ubuntu is our common philosophy

Although we took different paths to be where we are today, we are connected by being social workers, academics and members of the African community in a foreign land. We have both maintained our connections to our places of birth and hope to be united permanently with our communities of birth again in future. Our communities of origin are further apart but in one continent, and the philosophy of our cultures – Ubuntu – is the same although our people name it differently, *nhiar-baai* for author 1 and *unhu* for author 2.

Common values in *nhiar-baai* and *unhu* are:

(1) valuing relations, connectedness and continuity of the family and the tribe;
(2) community connectedness;
(3) connectedness to other Black people and to Africa;
(4) environmental or land connectedness;
(5) spiritual connectedness; and
(6) respectful, responsible and just humanity.

These commonalities show that there are more common values among Africans than differences. Differences are overblown by colonialism, for example, colonial languages (while some speak English, others speak Arabic or French), colonial religions (some are Christian and others Muslim), colonial dressing and other practices. In our view, more often than not, outsiders want to emphasise the differences and undermine the similarities, this is often seen as emanating from the colonial tactic of "divide, conquer and rule" (wa Thiongo, 1986).

Differences between African and the dominant western worldviews in Australia

We have both observed differences between African and the dominant Australian worldviews. For example, Ubuntu view family connection as a basic relation that every individual should have and hold to strongly (Ramose, 1999). Ubuntu worldview holds that individual lifestyle is dependent on other people such as your family members and other community members (Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Ramose, 1999). However, western worldviews hold that individuals can determine their lifestyles based on their desires and dreams, not their family and community expectations (Mayaka & Truell, 2021; Mungai, 2014). Ubuntu practice holds that parenting is a responsibility of the family, relatives and community members (Mungai, 2014), however, in western worldviews, parenting is a responsibility of parents and close relatives such as grandparents, while the community has limited or no involvement in parenting decisions or directions (Sawrikar, 2016).

African families' struggle with maintaining family and kinship connections

We have both observed that African families struggle with maintaining family and kinship connections in Australia. The struggle with maintaining kinship ties could be because of distance (most relatives are in Africa, not Australia) but also acculturating to Australian society (Abur, 2019). Another important struggle is with language, which, as has been said already, is a medium of transmitting African values enshrined in Ubuntu (wa Thiongo, 1986). Connection to Country is another important struggle, practically this is limited by distance. Not many people are able to travel back home to Africa frequently to keep this connection because of cost. Related to this point is the issue of language. African communities put emphasis on their indigenous languages, which give them ways to communicate with their family members in Africa. However, in a multicultural society like Australia, African indigenous languages are not prioritised. Instead, English language is prioritised. If children do not speak their African indigenous languages, this increases the loosening of kinship ties as communication will be more difficult (wa Thiongo, 1986).

Common sources of conflict within African families in Australia

There are some common sources of conflict within African families in Australia. These include social change, family expectations, raising children, gender and sexuality expectations; the concept of being a child; rites of passage; and even dressing (Abur, 2019). Although not everyone holds the same view in Australia, their dominant view is that there should be greater choice of gender roles and sexuality. The African worldview prioritises the family, community and cultural conceptions of gender and sexuality. In African society, a child remains a child until they start their own family. In Australia, children seem to be free as soon as they start earning their income, which might be as low as 15 years (Abur, 2019). They can easily move out of their family home. The expectation in African families is for the child to move out when they marry and start their own family. Marriage itself is another source of conflict. In African families, it is normal and expected that the family contributes to marriage choices and processes. Aunts and uncles are especially involved. The extended family is also involved in the process. So is the community. While a person makes a choice of who to marry, the family plays an approval role. The community celebrates with the individual and their family. The individual has a responsibility to consider the family when they make their choice. In a society like Australia, chances of ending in an interracial marriage are common but these often present challenges for the family, the individual and the children born out of the marriage. For the individuals involved, conflict as a result of different cultural expectations is high, so is divorce. For the African family, their social and cultural expectations of having a marriage where they observe all rites for the married couple and their offspring is not ensured in an interracial marriage, a source of discontent. For the children, issues of cultural and racial identity arise. For these and other reasons, one of the greatest source of regret, discomfort and conflict for African families in Australia is interracial marriage.

Child bearing and rearing

African families prefer to have large families (Ochala & Mungai, 2016). There are three issues often associated with this. The first one is the cost of having children in Australia. In Africa, this cost is reduced because of free care provided by the family. In Australia, the cost of child care is very high. The second issue, as shown by Ebbeck and Cerna (2007) and Dalikeni (2021) is the difference in child-rearing practices between Australia and Africa. Often there are culturally normal practices that white social workers classify as neglect or harmful yet they are not (Dalikeni, 2021; Sawrikar, 2016). The third is a challenge with the Australian health, child care, education and child protection system. There is often a sense of oversupervision of families by health and human service workers. In other cases, parents feel deskilled while their children are well educated with the western systems (Dalikeni, 2021). Related to this is a different conception of child rights, in Africa the focus is on rights with responsibilities.

Important rites of passage and hinderances in fulfilling them

There are important rites of passage that are important in the life of Africans, yet are difficult to fulfil in the diaspora. For example, the process of bereavement is often partially done in a foreign land, resulting in inadequate healing (Sneesby et al., 2011). In Africa, the community

and family take part in the process of burial (Makgahlela et al., 2021) but often this is not possible in Australia because of the cost associated with burial. In African cultures, the bereavement process is communal, associated with night vigils of singing and dancing (Sneesby et al., 2011). After burial, there are often memorial celebrations after one month and one year but often this is not done away from home. The death wish to be buried in Africa at the permanent home on ancestral lands is often not fulfilled because of cost.

Another rite of passage that is valued in Africa is the transition from childhood to adulthood. This takes many forms, including camps or schools where lessons about life and trades are received. In many communities, there are designated uncles and aunts who play a more community-oriented mentoring role (Mabovula, 2011). In others, the transition is marked by circumcision. While in the western cultures, there are different ways of ensuring transition, it could be through church-based programs (baptism or catechism) or mentoring programs such as Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Scouts, Guides, Brigades, Pioneers, Interact, Rotaract, Camp Fire, Rotary and Big Brother Big Sister (BBBS) (Moodie & Fisher, 2009). In African mentoring models, focus is placed on naturally and culturally occurring mentoring in the family and community (Griffiths et al., 2009; Mugumbate et al., 2020).

Spirituality

African communities are highly spiritual and their spirituality is exercised in several ways, including belief in the role of God and family ancestors in their lives (Mbiti, 1969; van Breda, 2019). There is also a spiritual connection with unborn generations (van Breda, 2019). Some people migrate already exposed to foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam yet others come without these religions. Those who come to Australia often get surprised that the role of churches and spirituality in Australia has dwindled, yet it flourishes in Africa. The question for them will be, white people brought Christianity to Africa but now they are turning away from worshipping, how come? For those who come without exposure to western countries and religions, they struggle with practising their own religion and understanding Christian beliefs, practices and festivals like Christmas and Easter. Among both our peoples, there is a seamless connection between members of the family who are now deceased, living members, future members, the environment and God, as is arguably the case among all Black Africans (Mbiti, 1969). For example, when rain has not come on time, living beings communicate with God directly or through deceased members. Usually, this happens during a rain-making ceremony. This may surprise some readers, but if you use a decolonial lens this is the same with Judeo-Christian worldviews. For example, people communicate with God directly or through deceased religious figures such as Jesus, Mary or Abraham.

To conclude our reflections, we would like to state that we both came to Australia as migrants because of the economic opportunities the country presents, however, there are several social issues and problems associated with this move as already alluded to. While the the security situation was not good back home for author 1 and the economy was not good back home for author 2, there is family, community and land for us and our future generations. Economic,

educational and security opportunities alone are not enough to achieve a balanced life in a foreign land. Migration is not an end, but part of a journey that should see a person and their future generations reconnect permanently with their ancestral lands.

Implications for social work practice in Australia and beyond

It is important for social workers to understand African values

We have presented information about Ubuntu from the literature, provided our lived experiences of Ubuntu and reflected, we now turn to what we think needs to change to make social work more meaningful when working with Black Africans in particular, and how Ubuntu could benefit other communities more broadly. As a starting point, by sharing our experiences and reflections, we hope this helps practitioners with a nuanced understanding of Ubuntu, African families, their values and how these connect strongly with social work. African Ubuntu values have a strong link with social work values (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). They both envision socially functioning individuals, families, communities and societies and they both value spirituality and the environment as some of the vehicles through which social functioning is achieved (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). Ubuntu values existed among Africans well before the social work profession was born. A critique of social work is that it emphasises the individual more than the family and community (Ochala & Mungai, 2016). Further, while Ubuntu social work is theoretically, pedagogically, and practically grounded in African worldviews, modern day social work is largely grounded in western worldviews (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). When working with people of Black African origin, for example in casework, community work and mentoring, it is important to ensure that programs are culturally aligned (Mugumbate et al., 2020). The family and community play a more significant role of ensuring the social functioning of the individual and that of society (Griffiths et al., 2009; Mugumbate et al., 2020).

Using Ubuntu to aim for cultural competence

As Green (2019, p. 90) said in reference to Australia, "while the government states that Australia is multicultural, its policy is about integration, which includes removing cultural differences from people and becoming a monocultural state." When cultural differences are not accounted for in policies and services, cultural competence can not be achieved. As shown in our reflection, the worldviews of Black African people are largely situated in their cultural understanding and practices. We know that in Australia, when cultural competence is discussed in relation to services for Africans, it is often not linked to their indigenous, decolonised ways of doing and being. Social work services for Africans in Australia are more western-centric and aligned to the dominant Australian culture than local indigenous culture (Abur, 2021, Griffiths et al., 2009; Ochala & Mungai, 2016). There is need to make social workers more culturally competent (Sawrikar, 2016). More could be done to ensure that lessons are drawn and shared between social workers involved in social work with Black Africans and Australian Indigenous groups. This can be one way of making Australian social work practice more meaningful to African families in Australia. One lesson is about the role of the family in social work – as a form of social security, cultural knowledge and life skills (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). Together with the community, family provides life skills teaching and mentoring. The role of social work must not be to replace, but to enhance these culturally defined roles (Sawrikar, 2016).

There are some small, often neglected practical issues that contribute to cultural competence when working with African people. These include, but are not limited to, not forcing people you are having a conversation with to look you in the eye or face; not expecting parents to be too affectionate with their children or each other especially in public; not expecting everyone to feel belonging to Australia and call it home; not exhibiting a white saviour attitude; not expecting people to observe Australia Day as this is viewed as invasion day; not expecting people to feel good about or celebrate Christmas, Easter or other non-African festivals; being humble when you visit people's homes or are working with them; not involving family when working with their children; not showing surprise or disdain of African culture and practices; being mindful not to give an African child a white doll or toy that exhibits whiteness and being gender sensitive.

Using Ubuntu as a framework for understanding sources of conflict and social dysfunction

Another important implication for social workers is to use Ubuntu to help unpack the sources of conflict, violence, mental health, dysfunction, disharmony and divorce in African families in Australia (Abur, 2019). These include the different concepts of human rights (African families tend to be more concerned with responsibilities than rights); sexuality as already discussed; marriage (marriage to known Black families is preferred) and expenditure (more collective is preferred than individualistic). Understanding the forms and nature of the conflict provides social workers with tools to develop appropriate interventions. Using a white lens to interpret social issues does not solve these challenges in most cases, hence the need for adopting indigenous practices in addressing such forms of conflict (Sawrikar, 2016).

The fact that most Africans hold values on family, gender and sexuality that are different from the dominant Australian views should not result in their voices being silenced. But often, this is what happens. African values of having large families and having a close-knit extended family are not well regarded in Australia. Every society has gender role expectations, even among western cultures, but often the west disregards other worldviews. Western culture has evolved to be largely embracing of same sex marriages, lesbianism and gayism but Africans have not. All these differences, if not recognised and tolerated, result in a sense of frustration and contributes to a failure to belong to Australian society.

Supporting struggles of Blackness and Africanness

An important role for social workers is to listen and understand people's struggles of Blackness and Africanness. As already alluded to, a common value between the two authors is maintaining connections to other Black people and to Africa. This is a value enshrined in Ubuntu. Part of this struggle is to be connected with ancestral lands in Africa. When families are sending their children back to Africa, it is not because they have neglected them, but they are strengthening the connections. Or, if relatives are sending their deceased back to Africa for burials it is not because they are careless with their income, they value connection to the land through burial on land.

Accelerating indigenisation

The call for indigenisation of social work has grown louder (Abur, 2021, Gatwiri, 2019; Green, 2019; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). As Green (2019) said, Australia social work is currently white. Australia has Black people from different African countries, and while they have different sub-cultures, Ubuntu is their indigenous philosophy (Tusasiirwe, 2019). Ubuntu values that connect them include the relational nature of life; importance of family; culture that views life more holistically and communality. However, it is common to find African people who are not able to articulate their culture and the philosophy of Ubuntu. There are several reasons for this, mainly the impact of colonisation but also urbanisation and migration. Colonisation and urbanisation introduced and reinforced foreign cultures, lifestyles and religious beliefs such as Christianity and Islam. In the process, African culture, lifestyles and religious beliefs were demonised, diluted or displaced (Gatwiri, 2019). Some people will be unable to make a distinction between what is colonial and what is indigenous. In other cases, some Africans will deny the impact of colonisation or prefer western practices as a way of assimilating in western cultures. These differences can also be related to age, with young people expected to hold more western views of life. Others will acculturate or assimilate but this has problems for present and future generations as can be witnessed in many ways in today's societies. In this case, the role of social work becomes that of helping people understand what indigenisation is, why it is important, how it can enhance their social functioning and to give them confidence in their own indigenous ways.

Improving international social work

There are social workers involved in international social work in Africa. Ubuntu provides important lessons for social work practice in Africa (Gatwiri, 2019). For example, when it comes to child care, putting children in institutions is lowly regarded in Africa. No doubt this is a colonial intervention that takes children away from their family, extended family, tribe and community. Many orphanages and children's homes were built in Africa by Christian churches, western philanthropists and colonial administrators. They were all modelled on western values but resulted in numerous challenges (Mupedziswa et al., 2019). These are now being dismantled in Africa in favour of Ubuntu-inspired approaches. Related to this is the issue of child adoptions, they are not valued, especially so when the person adopting is from a different race. A child is cared for in the extended family or tribe, not to be uprooted from their family, community and people. As one of the authors said, a child has many parents. For international social workers, it is important that they consider local culture when they plan their interventions.

Using Ubuntu with non-African communities

Lastly, it has been argued that Ubuntu values of being welcoming, voluntarism, collectivity and reciprocity are applicable all families and communities in Australia (Mungai, 2014). For example, Africans are strangers in Australia, and being welcomed is important in their journey. There are many other "strangers" who have come across the seas who need welcoming communities. Voluntarism and collectivity are important social protection assets, especially

when we consider natural disasters such as bush fires and floods. Collectivity is indeed central to Ubuntu (Mungai, 2014). For example, African ideas of making the whole extended family and village raise a child, means that the welfare and protection of children is a duty of society, it is shared by all (Mungai, 2014). This makes any adult person in the village more likely to take the responsibility of protecting, caring, teaching, and guiding children. Social workers working in community work and development could tap into these values to improve their interventions.

Conclusion

Ubuntu is the overarching philosophy of Black people of Africa, including those who are living in other regions of the world because of work, migration or studies. They derive their values and practices from Ubuntu. Among Black Africans, there are more similar than diverging values. It is colonial languages and religions that magnify differences between Africans. Put simply, Ubuntu is about seeing the individual through their family, community, environment and spirituality. Ubuntu philosophy is an important tool for social workers working with Africans but also for other communities. It is also important for advocates of decolonisation and those who promote indigenous knowledges in social work because it provides knowledge that has not been adequately recognised yet offers a basis for social work practice. It is important to acknowledge that enlightenment philosophies, knowledges and practices are not the only ones in the world. In Australia, as is the case throughout the world, there is a need to promote indigenous knowledges and practices such as those espoused in Ubuntu at the educational, practice and policy levels. It is impossible to replicate African communities in the diaspora, but what is possible is to incorporate core African values that have sustained generations. This will contribute to the sustainable wellbeing of African communities in the diaspora. Social workers can play a significant part in ensuring this.

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