



Freedom for Responsibility: The Essence of Ubuntu/Unhu Philosophy

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Abstract

Ubuntu/Unhu societies were characterised by the thrust on freedom for responsibility where the elders were the bearers of authority which was conducive for the development of the freedom. The authority of the elders had a bearing on the freedom of the non-elderly people. Authority and freedom are connected by responsibility. Without responsibility as the nodal point between authority and freedom, authority lapses into power and freedom lapses into licence. This study sought to find out how elders in Ubuntu/Unhu societies socialised the youngsters to become responsible citizens. In exploring the thrust and procedures of civic education in Ubuntu/Unhu societies, a study of ten elderly informants of ages between sixty-five and ninety-five were purposively selected from a district in Zimbabwe. The research findings are that the advent of colonialism has begotten misconstruction of the nature of freedom in Ubuntu/Unhus societies. The thrust has of late been on negative freedom which is freedom 'from' social vices. Many of these social vices are attributable to cultural invasion by the Euro-ethnocentric tendencies of the colonialists and the effects of global citizenry. Ubuntu/Unh societies were essentially focusing on the philosophy of freedom for responsibility in their pedagogy and andragogy. The contemporary institutions could get some insights from Ubuntu socialization strategies on how to develop responsibility in children and youths in this era of modernity.

Keywords: Freedom; Responsibility; Ubuntu/Unhu; Gerontocratic Settings

Introduction

The gerontocratic settings of Ubuntu/Unhu societies implied that the societies were generally conservative in terms of their cultural values and norms. The criteria of socially accepted behaviour in conservative societies are exemplified by the elderly people in a collectivist manner. Ubuntu/Unhu societies are collectivist [1]. In collectivist societies, all the members of society are obliged to contribute to the welfare of society [2,3]. In other words, each member of society is responsible for whatever was happening in society. Thus everyone in society is accorded freedom for

responsibility by the society.

In collectivist societies, individualistic tendencies are abhorrent. Some people with individualistic tendencies readily confuse freedom with licence. It is not clear whether it is by mistake or design. Very often such people claim that they do not have freedom when they actually have it but would be deprived of licence. Licence is the opportunity to indulge in socially unaccepted behaviour. Thus when society sanctions the indulgence in behaviours that are not acceptable, one claims that society is oppressive and does not respect individual rights. There are some articles produced

by Euro-ethnocentric writers that had misconstructions about freedom for responsibility in Ubuntu/Unhu societies. For example Enslin and Horsthemke have authored an article entitled, "Can Ubuntu provide a model for citizenship education in African democracies?" [4]. The article was critiquing the essence of Ubuntu traditional education principles about their worth in providing the framework for citizenship education. Enslin and Horsthemke authored the article from the perspective of Ubuntu/Unhu axiological observers and are likely to have missed the insiders' perspectives of Ubuntu/Unhu societies since some aspects are closed to outsiders [4-6]. Enslin and Horsthemke argue that Ubuntu/Unhu faces various problems in the political, moral, epistemic and educational spheres [4]. Eliastaum corroborates by asserting that some scholars argue that Ubuntu/Unhu is open to misconstructions [7].

The misconstructions about Ubuntu/Unhu by some people who are not adherents of Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy have provoked some reactionary thinkers for example Letseka [8]. He was convinced that Ubuntu/Unhu should be considered as the guiding philosophy for citizenship education. Metz posits that Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy should be the basis for moral theory [9]. The above ideas were earlier on postulated by Venter and Higgs that Ubuntu/Unhu should be considered as the guiding philosophy of education in Ubuntu/Unhu societies [10].

This paper is divided into eight aspects. The first two aspects are the conceptual frameworks of the two key terms that are; freedom and responsibility. The third aspect focuses on the thrust of Ubuntu/Unhu as the guiding philosophy in Ubuntu/Unhu societies. The discourse on this aspect offers an anchorage of the arguments of the adherents, defendants and the proponents of Ubuntu/Unhu in the development of responsible freedom in the young people in Ubuntu societies. Taking from Letseka, responsible freedom is closely intertwined with citizenship education which is the forth aspect of this paper [8]. The fifth aspect is the research methodology. The researcher employed the qualitative research methodology. The purposively selected informants were interviewed. The data generated were then reflected upon with reference to the literature that was explored. Last but not least, the conclusion is presented.

Freedom

Freedom in the pedagogic and andragogic contexts should not be confused with licence which is the opportunity to behave in socially unaccepted ways. Freedom does not imply that one is free to do as one would wish. One's situatedness defines one's freedom in terms of the responsibilities to be fulfilled. Freedom is independence from anything other than moral law alone [11]. Moral law is societal and one

needs to abide by it to be considered to have humaneness so that one is considered a human being among other human beings. Thus the Ubuntu/Unhu maxim, Ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu; Munhu munhu muvanhu becomes handy in explaining one's moral responsibility in society. According to Griessel, Louw and Swart, freedom is the opportunity granted to someone to choose from various alternatives for one to achieve humanely accepted goals in order to become what one ought to become [12]. Thus responsible freedom should be understood with responsibility. Freedom should thus be taken as a right that is bestowed on someone to enable him or her to execute his or her obligations and responsibilities. One should be entitled to the degree of freedom for which one is able and willing to accept responsibility.

Human beings have freedom to make choices. Every situation to which they are exposed has myriad of options to choose from. The options of behaviour and interaction patterns are either of degree, kind or both. Due to the situatedness of human beings, the options of behaviour and interaction patterns are usually more of degree rather than of kind. The degree to which one embodies values through normative interactions with others gives one's unique personhood. According to Griessel, the inherent freedom to make choices bestowed in humans makes freedom an essential human characteristic [12].

One of the distinctive features of humans from bestial existence is that humans have conscience. To some extent conscience entails responsibility of one's choices. The responsibility to make choices is what Griessel refer to as real freedom which is the inner spiritual freedom that has to be acquired through the interactions with other human beings [12]. Real freedom involves observance of societal norms and entails some aspects of positive freedom. Positive freedom is the responsibility that one has to make choices for the achievement of one's goals that are accepted by society. Thus positive freedom grants responsibilities and obligations to humans. This is the freedom that is; "freedom to ...", "freedom of ..." and "freedoms for ...". Positive freedom is concerned with making responsible choices based on adequate information and rationality [12]. The youths should be exposed to as much information as is possible to enable them to make responsible choices.

When freedom is considered as being free from something, it is referred to as negative freedom. According to Griessel negative freedom is [12];

- Freedom from inner instinctive compulsions such as emotions, passions, whims and fancies
- Freedom from external pressure, control and limitations that are imposed by a powerful person or a body of powerful persons
- Freedom from some social ills such as poverty, ignorance,

fear, oppression, etc.

The freedom that is from inner instinctive compulsions implies that the socialization of the individual about some cultural traits would not have been effective. The instinctive compulsions should be dampened when the individual gets socialized in some cultural values of a particular society. After effective socialization one becomes responsible for his or her choices of certain behaviour traits.

Freedom from external control implies that the powerful people annihilate the less powerful. The focus of the less powerful becomes a reclaim of the human status. When human beings are controlled they get reduced to the status of things [13].

The social ills that the people need to be freed from are caused by inappropriate interactions of members of society which are oppressive and exploitative. Due to such interactions, the members of society become antagonistic and responsible freedom is undermined. The oppressed members of society get to realize that freedom is acquired by conquest not by gift [13]. Freedom has to be pursued constantly and responsibly.

Responsibility

The term responsibility is derived from the Latin word “respondere” which means to give back in return. Thus “re...” means back and “spondere” means pledge or promise [12]. Thus responsibility is that for which one is morally answerable for the discharge of a duty or trust. Responsibility is the nodal point between authority and freedom. Authority and freedom cannot be exercised separately. Due to responsibility, each one is the precondition for the other. When responsibility does not connect them, authority degenerates into power which is characterised by tyranny and coercion. Freedom without authority inevitably degenerates into licentiousness. Authority creates the environment for people to have freedom of choice and to assume responsibility for the choices. The freedom to make choices brings with it tremendous responsibility and is one of the benchmarks of citizen education.

Thrust of Ubuntu/Unhu in Ubuntu/Unhu Societies

The thrust of Ubuntu/Unhu in Ubuntu/Unhu societies is basically hinged on responsibility. One is afforded freedom for responsibility in making choices of interaction patterns that are always in a continuum from socially deplorable to socially acceptable behaviours. Thus the choice resonates from the extent to which one is dignified and worth in society. The benchmark of one’s worth is guided by the maxim that

is ubiquitous in Ubuntu societies. In Isizulu the maxim is *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. In Sotho the maxim is *motho ke motho ka batho* [14]. The variation of the maxim in ChiShona is *munhu munhu muvanhu* [15]. The English approximation of the maxim is ‘a person is considered humane through the humane interactions with other people’. The maxim implies that one’s humaneness is judged by the people he or she interacts with. Thus in Ubuntu/Unhu societies one is afforded freedom of choice of one’s interactions with others. The extent to which one’s interactions shows responsibility for the welfare of others and the society defines one’s humaneness. Thus from the Ubuntu/Unhu maxim, Ubuntu/Unhu has been understood as the indigenous philosophy of the southern African people which has the principle axiological tenet as humaneness [16]. The tenet is understood as an interactive process of becoming an ethical human being [17]. According to Louw, the Ubuntu/Unhu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu/Munhu munhu muvanhu* articulates a basic respect and compassion for others [18]. As such it is both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic [14]. It does not only describe the human being as “being-with-others” but also prescribes how we should relate to others that is what “being-with-others” should be all about.

The interactive aspect is indispensable in the descriptions of Ubuntu/Unhu. Thus Ubuntu/Unhu is described as being-with-others [19,20]. Being-with-others may not be inclusive of all there is in Ubuntu/Unhu. The adage that goes a bit further in the descriptions of the interactions there should be in Ubuntu societies is being-for-others. The adage being-for-others entails responsibility. In Ubuntu societies each individual is granted freedom for responsibility to society. One’s degree of Ubuntu-ness/Unhu-ness is judged *inter alia* by one’s philanthropic interactions with others.

Citizenship Education

Societies the world over have long had an interest in the ways in which their young are prepared for citizenship and how they learn to take part in civic life [21]. Civics is the study of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship [22]. The term ‘civics’ is derived from Latin word ‘civicus’ which means ‘of a citizen’ [23]. Thus civics entails the duties of citizens to each other as members of a community, for the welfare of the community. In every community there is civic education which incorporates citizenship education. Civic education is understood broadly as all the processes that affect people’s beliefs, commitments, capabilities and actions as members of a community [24]. Civic education needs not be intentional or deliberate since the communities may transmit values and norms spontaneously. However, most scholarships that use the phrase ‘civic education’ refer to deliberate, institutionalized programmes of instruction.

Due to the effects of colonialism and subsequent contemporary globalization, individuals may have multiple civic identities at the same time. For example one could be a citizen of Zimbabwe and Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). Thus there could be conflicts between cultural and civic identities that may force the individuals to choose between a cultural identity and a politico-economic identity. Thus globalization has brought about the phenomenon of global citizenship that transcends the boundaries of traditional national sovereignty [5, 25-27]. The very critical aspect for global citizenship is the designing of curricula which can foster allegiance to a myriad of groups of people and organizations.

Ubuntu/Unhu societies have gone through colonialism in which they experienced socio-cultural and political deprivation. There was the inculcation of the oppressive ideology which emphasized on docility and malleability. There was a shift from developing civic values for freedom and justice. Thus the people in Ubuntu/Unhu societies, since they underwent colonialism, require citizenship education to endeavour the restoration of freedom for responsibility so as to capacitate them to play meaningful roles of citizens.

According to Mkhabela and Luthuli [28]

The biggest task that faces African philosophy of education is turning blacks from subjects into citizens. This is the process that will make them responsible as individuals not only to their fellow learners but also to their country.

The socio-cultural and political deprivation of the people in Ubuntu/Unhu societies reduced them to the status of things. Thus the people in these societies were deprived of the positive freedom. In the wake of post-colonialism, the people in Ubuntu/Unhu societies are now clamouring for negative freedom. They want freedom from cultural and epistemic deprivation. This could be one of the reasons why there is a resurgence of interest in indigenous knowledge systems.

The effects of socio-cultural and political deprivation of people in Ubuntu/Unhu societies have made it appear like the people are devoid of responsible freedom. Some scholarships on citizenship in Africa raise doubts whether there was civics in some indigenous African societies before colonialism [29]. Some scholars also doubt whether the philosophy of Ubuntu could serve as the basis for a more culturally appropriate civic education [4].

The doubts raised by the scholars could be attributable to that they are cultural observers rather than participants of societies guided by Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy. The finely nuanced Ubuntu/Unhu axiological practices are not readily availed to the cultural observers. Ubuntu/Unhu societies are

closed to the observers to some extent [8]. In Ubuntu/Unhu societies, parents, older brothers and sisters, grandparents, uncles, aunts, neighbours and elders all participate in the socialization process and feel a sense of responsibility for results. The focus is on the development of the community not on a specific individual [30]. Thus Ubuntu societies had a pedagogy that introduced philosophy to children at an early age. The philosophical concepts, ideas and propositions were imbedded in the Ubuntu/Unhu proverbs, linguistic expressions, myths, folktales, religious beliefs and rituals, customs and traditions of the people [31]. The Ubuntu/unhu philosophical ideas helped to develop children to become reflective, responsible and progressive citizens.

The gerontocratic set-up of Ubuntu societies could have influenced the efficacy of Ubuntu pedagogy.

According to Finkel and Ernst [32];

When students perceived their teachers to be highly knowledgeable, competent, likeable and inspiring, they appeared to internalize attitudes and values supportive of democracy, such as an increased sense of the responsibilities of citizens in a democratic system and trust in political and social institutions.

Thus the children in Ubuntu/Unhu societies gained civic knowledge and improved attitudes about their society through the interactions with the very experienced educators who were the elderly people. Some studies have shown that civic knowledge can be acquired when educators foster an open climate that encourages free exchange of ideas and opinions and where frequent discussion of controversial issues are held [33-35]. The elderly people encouraged dialogical interactions during curriculum implementation.

Research Methodology

The study employed the phenomenological paradigm which is embedded in the qualitative research methodology. The focus was on the generation of data that are primarily verbal [36]. The phenomenological paradigm is concerned with the descriptions of the lived experiences of the informants [37,38]. These lived experiences were expressed in the respondents' own words [39,40].

In order to generate data about the lived experiences of the informants, interviews were used. The informants were selected purposively. Oliver defines purposive sampling as a strategy which calls for the judgement of the researcher concerning the information-richness of the informants. Similarly, Saumure & Given postulate that purposive sampling is the informant selection process where informants are selected on the basis of meeting the criteria predetermined by the researchers such as being appropriate to providing

insights to the research question. According to Creswell, purposive sampling is used so that individuals are selected because they have experienced the central phenomenon that is required by the researcher. Patton contends that the essence of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases whose responses will illuminate the question under study. Thus, according to Patton, the size of the sample selected purposively is determined by informational considerations.

The community elders who served as informants were considered to be information-rich about the nurturance of freedom for responsibility. There were ten community elders – five males and five females aged between sixty-five and ninety five years see Table 1. During their formative years, they were nurtured in freedom for responsibility.

Informant	Male	Female	Age
Informant 1		X	76
Informant 2		X	69
Informant 3		X	85
Informant 4	X		90
Informant 5	X		65
Informant 6		X	75
Informant 7		X	68
Informant 8	X		95
Informant 9	X		82
Informant 10	X		91

Table 1: Community Elders (Informants) by Gender and Age.

The interviewees showed their consent to be audio-taped thus all the data were captured verbatim. Audio-taping is the panacea to the problem of forgetfulness about what was said by the informants. Audio-taped data is also easy to transcribe. The interviews were conducted in Chishona (the mother language of the informants). The data were then transcribed and translated into English. Analysis of the data was done by employing the thematic approach, which generates themes and emergent trends from the interviews [41,42]. The emic interpretations (informants' verbatim interpretations) informed the etic interpretations (the researchers' interpretations) [43].

Reflections on the Findings

Beingness-with-others

The Ubuntu maxim Ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu/Munhu munhu muvanhu inspires a sense of responsibility

in the adherents of UbuntuUnhu philosophy. The adherents were socialized about the importance of being-with-others. Being-with-others entailed responsibility for the creation of harmonious and peaceful interactions. Informant 1 remarked;

“Let’s say we wronged each other here as husband and wife, I was supposed to introspect to ascertain my unacceptable behaviour which would have caused the misunderstanding.”

Introspection is an important aspect for the creation of sound relationships with others. A comprehensive definition of introspection is self-contemplation, self-examination, the contemplation of one’s own conduct, thoughts, desires, emotions [44]. Self-examination is one of the attributes of responsibility since it requires an acknowledgement of one’s faults, weaknesses, failures and shortcomings. Thus examining one’s conduct and accepting responsibility for consequences affords one the opportunity to avert one’s mistakes and charts different interactions that promote harmony. Introspection is value that gives one complete freedom to interact responsibly [44]. Informant 2 corroborated by remarking that;

“To avert a dispute in the family, the perpetrator of a misconduct act was supposed to apologize.”

Introspection helps one to learn from his or her mistakes and this makes the perpetrator not to repeat the same mistakes [45].

In instances of more serious crimes like murder there was intervention of the other family members and elders in the promotion of being-with-others. Informant 4 postulated;

“If a member of this family committed murder, sure I would rush to seek arbitration of the case from the chief. When there was a dispute, elders would sit down and talk and seek reconciliation.”

One of the critical criteria for being-with-others is respect for others. It was stressed by informant 5 that;

“People guided by Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy respect others and are respected by others. The person without Ubuntu/Unhu is the one who has failed to behave properly. One who does not respect the community does not have Ubuntu/Unhu. Respect for the community was realized in the observance of societal norms. In Ubuntu/Unhu society, the boy and the girl could swim together being naked and they respected each other’s bodies.”

Beingness-for-others

In Ubuntu/Unhu societies, freedom for responsibility could be considered as being-for-others. People in Ubuntu/Unhu societies were there for others during hard times. Informant 6 postulated;

“Those who ran short of food were given by the chief ... but that would have been produced by all people in the community. There was collective work on chief’s fields.”

Being-for-others was the norm at familial level. The members of the extended family were obliged to practice being-for-others. Informant 3 explained; “The paternal aunt, one’s elder sister and the eldest sister-in-law were the three prime people to stabilize one’s marriage. ... because they were aware that my husband and I were not experienced in marriage.”

In Ubuntu/Unhu societies, conjugal rights were considered at the polygamous altruistic perspective. This showed the large extent of being-for-others. Informant 5 posited; “My first wife would design a weekly roaster so that each one of my wives would have me as husband”.

Thus the first wife was supposed to be responsible for the emotional welfare of the polygamous marriage.

Freedom for Social Responsibility

Ubuntu societies focused on social responsibility. Informant 4 remarked; “There were grandfathers, grandmothers, paternal aunts and marriage mediators to resolve some domestic disputes. I could not divorce my wife easily, if I would do that, I would be exposing my foolishness to the whole family and the community.”

The remarks point to that one’s interactions with others were supposed to show some responsibility and hence the adage, Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu/munhu munhu muvanhu. Thus indecorous behaviour was regarded as lack of family and community respect. Informant 5 postulated; “How could rape occur, people were guided by Ubuntu/Unhu. ... they had the spirit of respecting each other. Because for a man to be convicted of rape ... aah one would have tarnished the name of the whole family.”

Freedom for Responsibility

Freedom for responsibility was emphasized in the youths. Informant 8 explained; “Even when both of us had matured, there weren’t any thoughts of having sex together. The spirit was discouraged by parents. That freedom we had of swimming together when we had matured sexually, gave us responsibility and that was part of grooming”.

The people of standing were supposed to be authority bearers rather than power bearers. As bears of authority

they were supposed to show that they had responsibility. Informant 5 who was a bearer of authority postulated, “As a village head I was not allowed to get anything from the village granary for my own benefit. If I could do that, I would evoke the anger of the ancestral spirits.”

Freedom for responsibility was philosophical in Ubuntu/Unhu societies and was infused in day to day activities. Informant 9 postulated; “In Ubuntu/Unhu societies we taught children about Ubuntu/Unhu values through folktales whilst they were still young.”

Freedom for responsibility was inculcated naturally and was very effectively also explained by informant 9; “When we went out hunting there were some taboos. The taboos made the children to know that there are rules and regulations. What was forbidden had to be observed because if transgressed, one spoiled the activities of the whole group.”

The Demise of Social Responsibility

The demise of social responsibility in Ubuntu/Unhu societies is attributable to the effects of colonialism. Informant 7 postulated; “Due to the Anglicanisation of social institutions, the people are now behaving like chameleons – changing colours – they have foreign justifications for unacceptable behaviour in Ubuntu societies.

Informant 10 gave the confirmatory remarks that; “Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy has been hybridized. Its vigour was destroyed by the mixing up of conceptions of reality. Some people still cherish Ubuntu/Unhu values but others do not. They are mixing Ubuntu values with the values of the people from Europe. When the white do their own things, these naive people copy. But that is not in tandem with our values. I say Ubuntu/Unhu was killed by the churches – when the gospel arrived – this teaching about God, proclaimed that our Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy breeds stupidity, barbarism and heathenism.”

What the participants expressed is in line with what Parker, who opines, that most indigenous African societies that have gone through colonialism have experienced socio-cultural and political distortions [46].

Civic Education for Freedom for Social Responsibility

In Ubuntu/Unhu societies civic education was promoted to enhance freedom for responsibility. Informant 6 gave a comparison of the extent of influence of civic education on social responsibility [47-50]. “The children of today even when they see you carrying

something heavy, they do not assist but those of long ago helped as a social obligation. Now all that is gone. Like us grannies when you say my grandchild – can you please help me – they tell you ‘You are not my grandmother. My grandmother is at home.’

The participant was making a claim that civic education was more effective in Ubuntu societies than it is in the post-colonial and global societies. The youths are now exposed to global citizenship. Informant 10 showed disapproval of the effects of global citizenship by remarking [51-53].

“These days girls say they are wearing (clothes) when they are virtually nude. They wear mini-skirts in the name of fashion. You cannot reprimand them- they tell you that our ancestors used to walk almost naked before the advent of western clothes.”

Civic education in Ubuntu/Unhu societies was requisite in the African traditional education curriculum. The gerontocratic set up of the Ubuntu societies bestowed in each adult the status of a civic educator [54-56].

Conclusion

Global citizenship has adversely affected the socialisation in Ubuntu/Unhu societies. In Ubuntu/Unhu societies, there was trust on freedom for responsibility and the elderly people played the central role in reinforcing this attribute. Freedom for responsibility was ingrained in the maxim that runs across Ubuntu/Unhu societies which is, Ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu/Munhu munhu muvanhu. Though the maxim has variations in different languages, the essence is the same. There is stress on being-with-others and being-for-others. Each member of society had a social responsibility of promoting the welfare of the society. The elderly had philosophical pedagogical means of moulding the youngsters to embrace freedom for social responsibility which is the norm in global society. Thus to a large extent, Ubuntu can provide a model for citizenship education the world over. However there are some misconstructions about the value of Ubuntu/Unhu by some non-adherents of Ubuntu/Unhu. Thus texts about evaluation of Ubuntu/Unhu by some non-philosophical adherents of Ubuntu/Unhu need to be treated cautiously.

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