The Undiluted African Community: Values, The Family, Orphanage and Wellness in Traditional Africa

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Abstract

This paper interrogates traditional African community values; the family; wellness; and the impact of westernization on African family value systems. The paper is based on literature and studies by the academic community. It reviews related literature on the African extended family system and how it caters for orphans in their communities. The central argument in the paper is that in traditional African culture, there were 'no orphans' as parentless children were cared for within the kin system. This paper shows how the extended family heads were involved in the promotion of African community values. Orphans were expected to abide by the norms and values of the community in order for them not to be considered as outcasts. Therefore, it was the duty of the extended family value systems to ensure that expected norms and values were imparted to children including orphans.

Keywords: Orphan, African community, values, the family, traditional Africa, wellness.
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1. Introduction

This paper reviews related literature on the African extended family system and how it caters for orphans in their communities. The paper starts by looking at the African community and family value systems. It then moves on to look at the types of families found in African communities today before touching on the dimensions of wellness and the impact of westernisation on the African community and family value systems.

2. African community values

Values refer to aspects usually abstract in nature, held by an individual or group to be worth and enduring over a period of time; a belief about the appropriate way to behave, that is, the should and should not of an individual and cultural life (Kanu, 2010). However, values are not necessarily carried out in behaviour. *Hunhu* in Shona (*Ubuntu* - Ndebele) means a foundation and in English an essential component of community life and participatory action among the Shona people in Zimbabwe (Charema & Shizha, 2008). *Unhu* (Shona)-*Ubuntu* (Ndebele)-*Botho* (Sothu) is trusted, reliable way of building oneself as a person, as a fully human being, in the spirit of fellowship, humanity, and compassion (Rukuni, 2010). Besides, it is the Africans' most reliable way of building family relationships, and processes, and many have used it to build communities, and even nations.

   Biko (2006) argues that colonization by super powers have throughout history, resulted in nothing more sinister than mere cultural or geographical fusion at worst, or language bastardisation at its best. It is true that history of weaker nations is shaped by bigger nations, but nowhere in the world today do we see whites exploiting whites on a scale even remotely similar to what is happening in African countries (Biko, 2006). In the spirit of *hunhu/Ubuntu*, collective unity was employed for every person's survival (Mogobe, 2003).

   In Zimbabwe, the Shona and Ndebele languages are abounding with proverbs that express the importance attached to community. For instance, the Shona people has a proverb; "*Shiri yakangwara inovaka dendere rayo neminhenga yedzimwe shiri,*" which means "a clever bird builds its nest using other birds' feathers. And in Ndebele, the expression: "*Isisu somhamb'asinakanani"* translates as "*the stomach of a traveller is small,"* meaning that the community looks after other people (Shizha & Charema, 2008). *Hunhu/Ubuntu* unites people and defines people within their cultural community context, thus imprinting individuals with their social and cultural identity. The community is a strong cultural, social, political and economic institution and the basis of the philosophy of *hunhu*, an ethnic or humanistic philosophy focusing on people's allegiances and relations with each other (Shizha& Charema, 2008).

   In line with the above, critical aspects in strengthening any traditional African system are going to be discussed. These aspects are interrelated and they function in a synergistic fashion. For example, religion was permeating in every aspect of African community. The following aspects will be discussed under the Traditional African system; human relations/ sense of community, hospitality, respect for authority and elders, extended family and sense of religiosity.

2.1 Human Relations/Sense of Community

In the African traditional family, the community is the custodian of the individual; hence the individual has to go where the community goes. In light of this statement, a popular African proverb to express the African sense of

community says "Go the way that many people go; if you go alone, you will have reason to lament" (Thumi &Horsfield,2004). This implies that the African idea of security and its value depended on personal identification with and within the community. In the traditional family, harmony was rated as the most important value for all family members (Shizha & Charema, 2008). In light of the above view, Foster, Makufa, Drew and Kralovec (1997) maintain that, traditional life was characterized by brotherhood, a sense of belonging to a large family and by groups rather than individuals. In this study, orphans were expected to grow up accustomed to expectations of the community just like any other children who had parents. Therefore, extended family heads had an obligation to see to it that, orphans were engaged in community activities all the time.

2.2 Hospitality

African hospitality can be defined as that extension of generosity, given freely without strings attached (Ekeke & Ekeopora, 2010). Olikenyi (2001) explains that, African hospitality which he contends is a vital aspect of existence in Africa in general, is one of the few facets of ancient African culture that is still intact and strongly practised today by most Africans in spite of the forces of recent external influence or even internal pressure. A sense of hospitality used to be inherently indispensable in the survival of African values. There used to be a spontaneous welcome and accommodation to strangers and visitor (Ekeke & Ekeopora, 2010). Africans would easily incorporate strangers and give them land to settle hoping that they would go one day (Kanu, 2010) and land would revert to the owner. It is, thus, the willingness to give, to help, to assist, to love and to carry one another's burden without necessarily profit or reward as the driving force. Unlike in the West, no appointment and special invitation were needed for one to visit a distant relation or neighbour. On arrival when there is food, the visitor is invited to eat. The visitor would be treated kindly, just as one would wish to be treated when visiting another home.

The extended family heads would be seen inculcating the value of hospitality among orphans. This value in the Zimbabwean Shona philosophy is based on the proverb which says "*Mweni haapedzi dura*" literary translated means "a visitor does not finish the contents of granary". Another aspect of hospitality which was highly cherished among African cultures, was sharing with the needy neighbour who came for assistance (Kanu, 2010). In this circumstance, anybody who did not assist was regarded as a bad fellow (Soro, 2007). The extended family heads welcomed and co-operated orphans into their families. This action was meant to reinforce the African idea that orphans were not strangers in a community hence the African community emphasised on the value of giving and sharing with other community members (Nyaumwe, & Mkabela, 2007)**.** This value is based on the Zimbabwean Shona philosophy which says "*Chaibva chaora*" literary translated means "food which has been cooked cannot be kept for a longer time for future use, it's already finished**."**

2.3 Respect for Authority and the Elders

In the African society a sense of respect for authority and elders was considered to be an essential tool for soldering and smoothening social relations amongst members. There was a deep respect for legitimate and constituted authority, be it that of a head of the family, village or community hence the saying by the Igbo African tribe which says "*He who listens to an elder is like one who consults an oracle".* The oracles are believed to say the truth and words and instructions are heeded to for the promotion of the good behaviour among the young. The respect given to the elders has its practical effect in the maintenance of custom and tradition. Since African society was characterised by tradition of conformity rather than heresy, the extended family heads were obliged to impart these principle to enable orphans to conform to set societal norms and values so that they will be empowered adults of tomorrow. However, with the advent of slavery and slave trade, colonization, migration and urbanization, this concept was gradually eroded (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006).

2.4 African Community Family

The African community used to be one but extended (Kanu, 2010) large family and all African languages generally still have words for uncles, aunts' cousin and niece who comprise the entire family. Marriage was taken as a good and serious commitment in the sense that it is a covenant between two (extended) families, kindred and villages. "Living together" and the sense of "community of brothers and sisters" are the basis of, and the expression of, the extended family system in Africa. This arrangement guaranteed social security for the poor, old, widowed, and orphaned which is one of the most admired values in the traditional African socio-economic arrangement. The aspect does not exist in the Western perspective which is characterized by individualism and the nuclear family structure. In the African community, a man had the obligation to cater for the widow and orphans of his deceased relative. Failure to do so earned him strong public opprobrium and as a result, it was difficult to find someone in the community without help (Kanu, 2010). In essence, the extended family was a veritable instrument in the family cohesion and community continuity and stability**.** In this study, extended family heads had a duty to empower orphans with skills and techniques in order to be able to live in the

community in peace as well as solving problems amicably whenever faced with difficult situations.

2.5 Sense of Religiosity

Africans are deeply religious, for African life is religion and vice versa. The attachment to and worship of a divine creator called *Musikavanhu* (in Shona) *Nkulunkulu* (in Ndebele) meaning God/The creator, formed a dominant part of their cosmic worldview. All they did and permitted was impregnated with a vision of the divine, and all natural reality was explicable in terms of the supernatural (Kanu, 2010). African social values rested on the moral values which were grounded on religious values. This implied that, religion that lends meaning and authority to values. Religious or spiritual elements in African man characterized African relation with the divine, with God and/or the gods. It is indubitable fact that this sense of religion was a promotion of moral excellence in the African community. It was this sense of religion that naturally endowed man with respect for life and human dignity. Truth-telling was an indefeasible obligation among the African Traditional culture. Failure to observe this rule was regarded as a very serious lapse from good behaviour (Wiredu, 1990). This community principle was important to extended family heads in that they groomed orphans within the circle of fearing *Musikavanhu* as the creator of all human beings. In this way, their personalities and behaviour were well shaped. The idea of fearing "*ngozi*" in Shona culture was a sense of encouraging people to value human life. Extended family heads had to care for orphans or any relatives in fear of offending spirits (*Vadzimu*-in Shona) and consequently will befall misfortunes. This is rooted in the African folktale, "one good turn deserves one another"

2.6 The Family as a Unity of Analysis

There are numerous definitions of the word family from different theoretical perspectives, stemming primarily from sociology and anthropology. The term "family" is used by many Western sociologists and psychologists as synonymous with "nuclear family", that is, mother, father, and children (Infield, 2001). Thus the above definition reflects cultural values of Western societies about family. The traditional African system, composed of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, form both sides of parents, even unrelated persons, will be considered to be a "family" (Infield, 2001). Infield (2001) additionally maintains that a family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction.

The family setup plays a paramount role in the development of a child as children do not develop into competent adults, simply through the unfolding of their genetic endowment (Berk, 2000). Instead, they require direction and delimitation of their vast potential to develop into integrated individuals capable of living amicably in their society together with their fellows. Thus the family is of unique importance to a child in that it provides a buffer and mediates between the child and the world (Wiredu, 1990). The family unit also ensures promotion of emotional, cognitive and other higher order needs amongst children to enable them development to optimal potential (Seedat, Duncan & Lazarus, 2001). In traditional African culture, there were 'no orphans' as parentless children were cared for within the kin system (Foster, 2002). The practice continues today as more than 90% of orphaned children in the sub-Saharan Africa are cared for by relatives within the extended family system (UNICEF, 2003). Tartar and Myers (2010) maintain that cultural background is also an important consideration for the well-being of children.

Differences regarding the well-being of children from various countries have stressed the importance and relevance for understanding the impact of culture in shaping children's world. Likewise, the different families' way of life, as well, has a great impact on children's well-being in general and orphans in particular. However, this system has come under immense pressure as a result of the death of many bread winners being either ill or dead from the HIV and AIDS pandemic. As a result of the economic meltdown in Africa few can afford to support extra children (Bhargawa & Bigombe, 2003). Those who take in orphans face increasing challenges leading to worsening poverty and failure to meet basic needs (UNICEF, 2003). Thus, Foster (2000:202) argues that, "the once seemingly limitless network of extended family, which expanded through geographic areas and generations, is depleting because of migration, westernization, demographic changes and AIDS." Many households who are likely to take care of orphans are headed by grandparents, siblings, or other relatives (UNICEF, 2005). In some cases grandmothers are caring for multiple orphans.

2.7 The Notion of Family in Traditional Society

Most theories on child development, social interaction and communication are developed based on the "normal" family and a "normal" society, this means that most children grow up with at least one parent and are able to interact and communicate with people in the community. African societies have always been people centred society (Shizha & Charema, 2008). Westerners have on many occasions been surprised at the Africans' capacity for talking to each other not for the sake of arriving at a particular conclusion but merely to enjoy the communication for its own sake. Conversations used to be only amongst groups and these were determined by age and division of labour (Biko, 2006). All commonly shared their secrets, joys and woes. As a result, no one felt an intruder into another person's life. The attitude to see people as not themselves but as agents for some

particular function either to one's disadvantage or advantage was foreign to traditional Africans society (Biko, 2006). Africans, regarded their living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among them, but as a deliberate act of God to make them a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problem of life (Biko, 2006). Traditionally, African culture was prepared to make slower progress in an effort to make sure that there was agreement among all community members. For example, to discourage dissent in society, there is an African proverb "Go the way that many people go; if you go alone, you will have reasons to lament" (Nussbaum, 2003). In this way, the community was viewed as the custodian of the individual, and one had to observe the norms and values of the community. Hence, Thumi and Horsefield (2004) maintain that, in the African mentality, the community as entity remains, while individuals, as persons, come and go. Therefore, the Africans emphasized community life and communalism as a living principle of which the basic ideology was community-identity.

3.   Types of families in Africa
3.1 Extended Family
The extended family is defined in the context of family relationships that are created through the expansion and the extension of the traditional nuclear family either due to genesis or by law through marriage (Siloz in Floyd & Morman, 2006). Makone (2006) notes that the extended family comprises grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins from both one's family of origin as well as in-laws. The extended family system in Africa emphasises on the principle of 'living together' and the sense of 'community of brothers and sisters'. Thus, the African notion of family includes the whole lineage of the couple and their in-laws. Sometimes, people from the same village or the same region would call each other brothers and sisters (Sachs & Sachs, 2004). All these were part of one family but extended. In every African traditional family, community-based solidarity pervaded every aspect of social life. For example, Mwamwenda (1995), confirms that in societies with unilateral descent groups, functions of the nuclear family, in particular parenting, were not solely the responsibility of the biological parent but were shared across different individuals in the larger kin group, that is, the extended family.

The community was treated as a body; as such an offence committed by one individual could have far-reaching consequences on all members of the community. Thus, communality, collectivity, social justice, human unity, and pluralism are implicit in this principle (Chilisa, 2012). In essence, in African traditional society in general, and Zimbabwe in particular, the extended family used to be a veritable instrument in the family cohesion and community continuity and stability. Rukuni (2010:3) maintains that traditional ancestors over the centuries crafted family and extended family structures so it was unthinkable for people to become destitute. The extended family system was as secure a system in dealing with social issues as any on earth. Every natural disaster was thought to be the consequences of somebody's violation of the sacred code of nature, which creates an imbalance in the cosmic order (Soro, 2007). However, this brilliant system has faced tremendous pressure from the impact of the western way of life. In light of the above observation, this research intends to establish the extent of involvement of extended families in promoting orphan wellness in Masvingo city in as much as the system is under pressure because of the new socio-economic environment.

3.2 Nuclear Family
The term 'nuclear family' originated in the Western World. This term was used to distinguish the family groups that consisted of parents and their children, to that of an extended family (joint family) which constitutes aunts, cousins, uncles, grandmothers, grandfathers, brothers and sisters (Foster, 2002). The shift from the extended family to small nuclear family has originated from the western values and civilization. In a nuclear family there is no one to instruct the children in folk ways or tell them about the days of past (Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2007).

3.3 The Child Headed Family
This is a new concept to describe a new phenomenon which was not there in the past in the African culture. Child-headed families are a new phenomenon particularly in the African community which had always had provision for children whose parents are deceased. A child-headed family in this study is defined as a household in which the individual who is primarily responsible for the day-to-day running of the household is 18 years old or younger (Foster, et al, 1997). Historically, orphaned children were absorbed into the extended family network system. African history reflects a strong kinship and tribal bonds, which suggest that adults showed a high degree of concern and care towards children as well as towards members of their families and communities (Trawick-Smith, 2010). In this regard, Landman (2002) reminds us of the tradition of 'Ubuntu', a type of sacrificial giving or showing of kindness to others which previously obligated a person's closest relative or even neighbours to care for orphans within the community.

Sadly, most of the extended families are encountering great challenges to adequately care for most of these orphans due to abject poverty and limited resources. In addition, the HIV and AIDS pandemic have devastated the family structure which is already strained by other detrimental factors such as westernization and

urbanization (Arowolo, 2010). The disintegration of the extended family due to the highlighted factors has negatively impinged on the care for orphans (Nwoye, 2006). The failure of the extended family have given rise to the emergency of the of child headed family system as a new phenomenon. The above observed issues have therefore immensely contributed to the increase of child-headed families. Child-headed families' home members experience various psychological traumas while trying to come to terms with their burden of their roles and responsibilities (Nesengani, 2006) which lead them in experiencing negative feelings and insecurity. Similarly, orphans in this study are likely to experience psychological trauma and to be over-burdened by household chores since they are being cared for by aged grandmothers who cannot continuously do hectic work to care for the orphans.

4.   Dimensions of wellness
Orphans are likely to suffer a lot of inadequacy in as far as the following wellness dimensions are concerned; social, physical, emotional and intellectual wellness. The subsequent paragraphs outline dimensions on wellness from an African perspective.

4.1 Intellectual Wellness
An orphan's lack of enrolment in school causes psychological distress as children often associate school with the possibility of being able to care for themselves and their siblings as they enter adulthood (Cluver & Gardner, 2007). Even when orphaned children are enrolled in school, they are not necessarily able to take advantage of their enrolment. Bereaved African children are less likely to do their homework, study, or read, because of chores at home, engaging in economic activities before and after school, as way of impressing those who take care for them. Paxan and Abledinger's (2004) study on the impact of orphanhood on children's school enrolment in sub-Saharan countries established that besides poverty, lack of care and love from caregivers contributed to orphans' absenteeism from school. In this study, the researcher sought to establish ways in which extended family heads avoided psychological distress among orphans through assistance in homework. The researcher observed how extended family heads were engaged in different fund raising projects in order to raise money for payment of orphans' school fees as well as buying them school uniforms. In this way, they would be promoting orphans' intellectual wellness.

4.2 Emotional Wellness
 In relation to the findings by Paxan and Abledinger (2004) orphans in this study may also reflect signs of less alertness in class, less focused on their studies, non-assertive, and un-involved in activities (Nyambedha, Wandibba & Aagaard-Hansen, 2003).Their preoccupation with their history of abuse and some problems which they face at home may isolate them from their peers and harm them emotionally (Cluver & Gardner, 2007; Dowdney, 2000), leading them to feel hopeless for the future (Shaw, Stacey & Jini, 2006).

4.3 Physical Wellness
Cultural background is an important consideration for the physical well-being of children. Differences regarding the well-being of adolescents from various countries have stressed the importance and relevance for understanding the impact of culture in shaping children's world (Tatar & Myers, 2010). Likewise, the different families' way of life; have a great impact on children's physical well-being. The physical wellness incorporates the Exercise, for example, I am physically active most of the time; and Nutrition, and for example, I eat a healthy diet (Tatar & Meyers, 2010). These aspects promote the physical wellness of an individual. Regrettably, in most cases, a balanced nutritional diet was rarely found among orphans in this study hence disturbing the physical growth. However, on the area of physical exercise, orphans were exposed to this through their engagement in the garden project. Orphans were watering vegetable beds in the garden, digging in the garden, making new beds as well as pulling out weeds, in this way, their physical wellness was promoted.

4.4 Spiritual Wellness
In Africa, there was a sense of religiosity which was promoted among the Zimbabwean Traditional Culture through worshipping of the so called *Musikavanhu* (Shona) or *Unkulunkulu* (Ndebele). Leisure was viewed as a crucial aspect of every human being since it provided the time and space for spiritual well-being (Hattie, Myers & Sweeney, 2011). Myers (2011) concurs through his findings were there was an overwhelming consensus amongst participants that busyness in life detracted from spiritual wellbeing or growth. Regrettably, the orphans in this study experienced minimum time and space for the spiritual wellness since most of their time was spent on selling in order to raise money for a leaving.

5.   Impact of Westernization on African systems
5.1 Westernization

Since 1652, African culture was forced into the Anglo-Boer culture which all the trappings of a colonialist culture which was heavily equipped for conquest (Biko, 2006). Thus, African culture sustained severe blows and may have been battered nearly out of shape by the belligerent cultures it collided with. Where they encountered resistance, European colonizers resorted to the use of fire-arms to their advantage. As a result Africans were exposed to western values that are characterized by individual interests and people were regarded as nothing but a means to achieve individual ends (Khoza, 1994). The impact of westernization has led to the weakening of the extended family system and the emergence of the nuclear family system. As a consequence, Africans have become alienated from their culture with the result that the values of community solidarity are no longer being practiced.

5.2 Effect of Urbanization/Globalization

With the attainment of independence, many African nations pursued with vigour the policy of intensifying formal education of their citizens. This aspiration is matched by the push for urbanization and industrialization, resulting in the phenomenon of mass exodus of youth to the cities (Nwoye, 2006). Consequently, there was an increasing nuclearization and fragmentation of the modern African family, with attendant consequences. One of these was the collapse of the old structures very ably depicted by Achebe (1958) in his classic novel, "Things Fall Apart" (Nwoye, 2006). In view of the above, Foster, et al.(1997) argue that changes such as labour migration, the cash economy, demographic change, formal education and westernization have occurred and weakened the extended family structure. Labour migration and urbanization have led to a reduction in the frequency of contact with relatives and encouraged social and economic dependence: possession are perceived as personal property and no longer belong to the extended family. Education about social values is likely to be obtained from schools and interactions of children with their peers rather than through traditional mechanisms, which has lessened the ability of older people to exert social control over younger generations (Nwoye, 2006). In this way, some traditional roles of the extended family have been modified whilst others have almost disappeared (Foster, et al.1997).

6. Conclusion

This paper interrogates traditional African community values; the family; wellness; and the impact of westernization on African family value systems. The paper reviews related literature on the African extended family system and how it caters for orphans in their communities. It argues that in traditional African culture, there were 'no orphans' as parentless children were cared for within the kin system. The paper shows how the extended family heads were involved in the promotion of African community values. Orphans were expected to abide by the norms and values of the community in order for them not to be considered as outcasts. Therefore, it was the duty of the extended family value systems to ensure that expected norms and values were imparted to children including orphans.

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