

UBUNTU AS AN AXIOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Increasing awareness has been drawn, in recent years, to the flaws of culturally irrelevant human rights education. Several factors, including a general lack of a culturally appropriate approach, a lack of integration of indigenous values, and the failure to provide human rights education that is responsive to community perspectives, have created a gap between the conceptualisation and practice of human rights by indigenous communities. So widespread is this feeling that parents are beginning to abdicate their roles of instilling values to their children and are blaming the system of education for introducing human rights education in schools which encourages unacceptable behaviour in communities.

This article is concerned with a critical discussion and analysis of the key tenets of ubuntu and attempts to show how these can be utilised as an axiological framework for human rights education in South Africa.

Keywords: *Ubuntu*, Human Rights, values, axiology, Human Rights Education.

INTRODUCTION

There's an increasing recognition that the integration of values in human rights education is not trivial, irrelevant, or indulgent, but is an integral part of meaningful and effective education. The way human rights education is unpacked is becoming a powerful determinant for relevant and meaningful understanding and attitudinal and behavioural change. Values are therefore strong determinants of attitudinal and behavioural change. Values need to be recognised as one of the most significant of all factors underpinning successful human rights educational outcomes which is behavioural change. Therefore the achievement of behaviour change requires behaviour to be consistent with the values. For indigenous African communities many of these values are traditionally based and commonly derived from their own unique values, in this case *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is still cherished and is not just a remnant of the past (Tibbitts, 2002; Ramose, 2001).

The current human rights education is perceived as the imposition of culturally inappropriate approach which overemphasises on the individual rather than the group which has resulted in resentment and disengagement by indigenous communities. For indigenous communities the individualistic approach to human rights education has resulted in social dichotomy. The indigenous communities

perceive human rights as a paradigm that marginalises indigenous values and a monoculture that is gradually eliminating their way of life (Metz, 2011).

In the article I argue that human rights education and indigenous values should be inextricably interwoven and their dissociation from each other will be culturally detrimental. With the current approach that has put the individual rights at the centre with little attention to contextualising them to indigenous values, a dissociation of human rights education from culture became inevitable. While human rights education is of critical importance in the democratic South Africa the end result has been one of disillusionment and disengagement. Therefore, the concept of using *Ubuntu* as an axiological framework for human rights education is explored.

UBUNTU AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Every society is built on a set of values and norms. Indigenous values form the basis for developing principles, protocols, ethical and cultural standards, and for guiding philosophies for an attitude of ethical behaviour in all people regardless of class, ethnicity or gender. This ethical attitude is itself part of *ubuntu* (Mkabela and Luthuli, 1997). An openness to *ubuntu* as an ethical guide to human rights education could be a fertile ground to nurture a morally inclined human rights discourse about common values and the attitudes that come to the fore.

Ubuntu moral values such as humility, modesty, conformity, empathy, etc. determine how an individual is viewed within indigenous African communities. In the indigenous African context, for example, a sense of duty and responsibilities on individuals is more paramount than the notion of individual human rights. These moral values are premised on the reciprocal belief that an individual's humanity is expressed through personal relationships with others in a community and in turn other people in that community recognize the individual's humanity. The adage *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Zulu) or a person is a person through other persons indicates the cultural importance of *ubuntu* to indigenous African people (Nyawuwe and Mkabela, 2007). The moral values of *ubuntu* therefore shape the relationship between an individual and his/her community because it was rooted in the spirit of mutual support and the principle of caring for each other's well-being.

The South African government's white paper recognizes *ubuntu* as expressing "each individual's humanity through his/her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual's humanity" (Government Gazette, 1996). In essence *ubuntu* is both a factual description of being-with-others and a rule of conduct that articulates basic respect and compassionate for others. The moral philosophy of *ubuntu* is important to people in a community because of its power for creating cooperation and unity of purpose among the people. According to this conception, human beings have a dignity by virtue of their capacity for community,

understood as the combination of identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them.

In a similar fashion, South Africa has enacted the Bill of Rights which suggests a different way of understanding and conceptualising the individual within the society. However indigenous values (*ubuntu*) can still play an important role in the Bill of Rights by providing an axiological framework for Human Rights Educa-Education. In other words, it means that the human rights discourse needs to shift from placing emphasis on individual rights to addressing responsibilities of individuals which places the common good before individual satisfaction. The notion emanates from the fact that in most parts of South Africa there is still a sense of collective and communal responsibilities. Current human rights education places the individual at the centre without or with little mention of the individual, thus making it deeply underscored by the philosophy of individualism it is not warmly received by these communities (Mwenda, 2000). But that is not to say individual rights are not important. What is important therefore is to identify and rationally stitch together into one fabric, *ubuntu*-laden human rights.

UBUNTU DEFINED

Ubuntu can be defined as a social ethic, a collective worldview contained in the Zulu proverb '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' ('one is a person through others'). *Ubuntu* stresses the collective spirit; the importance of community, solidarity, caring and sharing. This worldview *ubuntu* advocates a profound sense of interdependence and emphasizes that human dignity and one's true human potential can only be realized in partnership with others (Nyawuwe and Mkabela, 2007).

Ubuntu is also about interconnectedness, it is a phenomenon in which persons are interconnected in a holistic manner; physically, socially and spiritually. It also focuses on the development of the whole person; physical, mental, spiritual and social. And to this end, the conception personhood deserves unpacking.

PERSONHOOD IN CONTEXT OF UBUNTU

The conception that a person is a person through other persons makes a person a moral being, that is, one becomes a moral person insofar as one honours communal relationships or a human being lives a genuinely human way of life to the extent that he/she values identity and solidarity with other human beings. An individual realises his or her true self by respecting the value of communalism. Thus, personhood, selfhood and humanness are value-laden concepts. That is, one can be more or less of a person, self or human being, where the more one is, the better. One's ultimate goal in life should be to become a (complete) person, a (true) self or a (moral) human being (Elegbeleye, 2004). From this perspective, one's deepest moral obligation is to become more fully human. And this means entering more and more

deeply into community with others. A person who does not have these social skills is inhumane. A person who exhibits egoistic tendencies is not viewed as *umuntu* (a person). Thus in some instances that person is labelled an animal.

By grounding the conception of a human being as a moral being, means that identifying with others means sharing a way of life and exhibiting solidarity toward others that ultimately entails caring about their quality of life.

In like manner, an individual is a spiritual being. The spiritual significance of a person and the interconnectedness of people has a strong influence on how human rights are perceived.

The indigenous view of the world does not separate spiritual aspects from the physical practices of human interaction. All people including elements of the natural environment possess a life/vital force and all forms of life are related. Indigenous people see themselves as part of whole (the group and the environment), belonging to it and complementing other entities. The interconnectedness of all things means that the human rights of the person will directly impact on the welfare of the people and the environment.

Tamper with or destroy any part and you weaken the whole. The primary objective of *ubuntu* is to maintain the integrity of the connective life force, the collective. I therefore argue that the concept of individual human rights is understood and measured against the moral and spiritual conception. However I have not lost sight of the fact that human rights issue are an often debated question whether or not they are or ought to be universal, and if so, whether they should be "adapted" to local circumstances because of socio-culturally conditioned differences in the constitution of the person. Be this as it may, the situation in South Africa, where indigenous communities do not consider personal autonomy as an absolute, the contextualisation of individual rights is a requirement.

What are human rights?

Human rights are moral principles or norms that describe certain standards of human behaviour, and are regularly protected as legal rights in national and international law. They are commonly understood as inalienable fundamental rights "to which a person is inherently entitled simply because she or he is a human being, and which are "inherent in all human beings" regardless of their nation, location, language, religion, ethnic origin or any other status. They are applicable everywhere and at every time in the sense of being universal, and they are egalitarian in the sense of being the same for everyone. They require empathy and the rule of law and impose an obligation on persons to respect the human rights of others. They should not be taken away except as a result of due process based on specific circumstances, and require freedom from unlawful imprisonment, torture, and execution (Wikipedia).

The precise meaning of the term right is controversial and is the subject of continued philosophical debate; while there is consensus that human rights encompasses a wide variety of rights such as the right to a fair trial, protection against enslavement, prohibition of genocide, speech, or a right to education, there is disagreement about which of these particular rights should be included within the general framework of human rights; some thinkers suggest that human rights should be a minimum requirement to avoid the worst-case abuses, while others see it as a higher standard.

The above definition demonstrates that the individual rights are at the centre. From an indigenous conception of the person the above definition of rights is viewed as ego-centric in relation to the indigenous conception of a person as a moral being. What is of critical essence is that moral duties and individual rights need to be integrated. Generally, the concept of duty requires an individual to place the common good before individual satisfaction. This is how the individual African society was modelled.

The point being made here is not to disregard individual human rights. Rather, the argument, is that we should deconstruct the Western myth of human rights and permit indigenous communities to re-discover their ideal versions of human rights.

If the current state continues where the moral and spiritual conception of an individual is not interwoven in the human rights education, individual human rights can be seen by the majority as truly alien, even if they are often promoted and adopted by some segments of society, usually educated middle-class elites. Furthermore, the individualistic approach to the human rights education risks to be seen rather as a disturbing factor against the family and community harmony than as a progressive one. For instance, the introduction of women's particular rights in the *ubuntu* oriented family context can lead to disagreements in that context, not because the so called universal human rights catalogue is wrong, but rather because the *ubuntu* axiology and theory has not provided yet a framework, which culturally responsive and can illuminate educational approaches to human rights education.

This calls for an elaboration of an *ubuntu* oriented axiological approach to human rights education.

UBUNTU AS AN AXIOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The axiological framework means locating human rights education within the moral ethic, beliefs and practices of indigenous African communities. The word "locating" pretends to stress the need for a new discourse on human rights education: that is a discourse which is located within the *ubuntu* discourse and not the one which tries to be "adopted" and "adapted" to the context, as generally is the case. Indeed, the collective context of *ubuntu* provides not only ethical framework for the behaviour and attitudes of its members, but also framework to formulate a discourse around

human rights education. By doing this, is not a matter of philosophising “against” the West, but to show respect to the local and traditional discourses and understandings of human rights.

Although indigenous communities differed slightly due to context, there are commonalities – the focus of the article will be on the common ground shared by all. *Ubuntu* then in this context mirrors, without distortion, how indigenous people have traditionally understood it. It contains perennial ideals of *ubuntu* which entails among other things, the holistic orientation, collective ethic, and respect which entails the notion of responsibility as a basis upon which social order is constructed.

THE COLLECTIVE ETHIC

The South African society, evolving through different socio-economic epochs, has often shown greater tendencies towards communitarianism; with values and ethos of the common good embedded in the collective. Thus it has been a futile exercise to educate indigenous communities on human rights in isolation from the indigenous collective values.

Africans are known for their strong orientation to collective values, particularly a collective sense of responsibility. This is captured in the *ubuntu* moral worldview. The strong orientation to collective values, particularly a collective sense of responsibility of the indigenous African people should be used as a paradigm for human rights. This entails elevating the importance of the individual in the context of the family and community connectedness. It therefore suggests that the human rights approach should be collectivist and oriented towards bringing social stability and harmony.

The approach also suggests that the human rights educator needs to be part of the collective as well. He/she needs to move from an alienated mode of consciousness which perceives the knower as separate from the known to a collective mode of consciousness. Such a mode of consciousness addresses a fundamental reordering of our understanding of the relationship between self and other and indeed between self and the world, in a manner where such an ordering not only includes connectedness but necessitates letting go of the focus on self (Mkabela, 2005).

By accepting the value of a deeper understanding of the collective orientation the human rights, educator can integrate the human rights within the context of the collective moral responsibility of individuals. However this approach doesn't mean some kind of group-think, uncompromising majoritarianism or extreme sacrifice for society, which is incompatible with the value of individual freedom that is the basis of human rights.

The collective principle of *ubuntu* suggests that the human rights education should re-affirm the centrality of indigenous values as the foundation for an African centred human rights education. This is the core of *ubuntu* as an axiological framework to human rights education. Therefore the collective paradigm can be used to underpin the approach and understanding in the following manner:

- Human Rights education would recognise that a person's life, his/her experiences and all actions are within a collective context (family, community or country). Therefore human rights education should seek to maintain the harmony and balance of that collective whole;
- Human rights and responsibilities are intertwined;
- Human rights education would promote both the individual rights and the collaborative and co-operative life of the community. The rights of individuals being understood and practiced in the context of enhancing and maintaining the harmony and balance of an interrelated and essentially collective system and;
- Human Rights education would thus by and large promote the collective value system that strengthens the centrality of African indigenous ideals and values which would enable individual human rights to thrive within the collective.

Human rights understanding in this context is not aggressive and assertive but modest and humble yet at the same time realising the importance of coexistence. With this assertion individual human rights are necessary to promote the spirit that quality of life of an individual is a prerequisite for a stable and harmonious community.

RESPECT

Generally the concept that is seen as essential to *ubuntu* is respect. Respect is an act of demonstrating that someone or something is valuable, important, good, etc. and should be treated in an appropriate way. Individuals have human rights for the same reason, that they are valuable and important.

Respect is inculcated from childhood. In the context of *ubuntu* it is characterised by humility, empathy, maturity, hospitality, politeness and understanding. A reasonable formulation of the principle of respect confers on the human rights educator an obligation to respect the values and interests of the indigenous community the education is meant for.

Therefore, what respect means in the context of human rights education is:

- an appreciation of the importance of all individuals, their families, communities and their values and to use that as a point of departure;
- promote appreciation of individuals as spiritual beings and the interconnectedness of all things;

- way of maintaining harmony and balance of the group (community) for example by balancing respectful treatment of both individual and community concerns conflicts between individual rights and community interests;
- respect of the seniority system by using elders and other holders of knowledge as a resource for the contextualisation of the human rights education thus getting buy – in of the whole community.

CONCLUSION

The integration of African indigenous values in human rights education is essential for indigenous communities and essential for the nation as a whole. This means that ubuntu must be reinforced, rebuilt, re-established, and refurbished; this can only be done through the development of value-laden human rights educational programs promoted and delivered within the indigenous environment.

Moving from the premise that indigenous values are instrumental in maintaining cultural and ethical standards, giving direction, and provide cultural essence in human rights education one recommends the following:

- There is a need to have a recognised centred/value laden framework of human rights or for delivering human rights education, as currently there is no nationally co-ordinated or strategic approach.
- There should be an agreed standard of what constitutes an adequate and meaningful understanding of human rights; as generally there is limited knowledge and understanding of human rights, their relevance to everyday life, and the relationship between the indigenous values and human rights.
- There should be constant evaluation of the impact of human rights education, especially the measurement of its long-term effects.

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