

Indigenization and Decolonization of Social Work Education in Africa through the Prism of Ubuntu Philosophy: Perspectives from Somalia

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Abstract: Social work, both as an academic discipline and a profession, has been gaining a remarkable standing, recognition, and appreciation in Africa and across the globe. A large number of African students graduate from higher learning and professional social work schools in the continent and overseas to join the professional ranks of social work, equipped with the necessary tools that facilitate the execution of their duties. Among the achievements are an increasing number of scholarly voices advocating for a more focused African/Ubuntu approach to social work education, research, and practice. These voices aspire for an approach that positions African theory and philosophy at the heart of the scholarly foundation of the discipline. Based on the factual elements of social work that benefit the African people, this study argues that there is need to support the legitimacy of the advocacy for indigenization and decolonization of social work in Africa, where despite the vast indigenous knowledge available, very little of it is theoretically and epistemologically consumed in the context of pedagogical advancement of African social work education and professional practice.	Review Paper
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I. INTRODUCTION

A growing number of scholars advocate for the indigenization and decolonization of social work across the globe, calling for a revamping and replacement of the Western-dominated tutelage of social work theory, education, and professional practice as indicated in works by Cheung & Liu (2004), Holl *et al.*, (2025), Dash *et al.*, (Eds.), (2020), Swanson *et al.*, (2021), Twikirize and Spitzer (Eds.), (2019), and Das *et al.*, (2020), to name a few examples. Authors among them Amanu and Aredo (2022) maintain that a large volume of the social work knowledge, theories, approaches and views taught and discussed in the African lecture halls have been entirely adopted from western perspectives. The claims are supported by evidence that most of the social work corpus studied in African higher learning institutions and

professional social work schools are premised on western models (Amanu and Aredo 2022:114), a large assortment of which does not reflect a substantive essence for consumption beyond the western culture.

Quite unlike their counterparts, elite in the national political arena, African scholars, with the exception of a few, find it perturbing to borrow from outside intellectual knowledge domestically available and usable for the benefit of the citizens of the continent. Viewed from another perspective, while most African political leaders presume disagreement with their western masters a disastrous alley to navigate, African academicians articulate their views through the transparent channels of intellectual reasoning. The disagreement, to borrow from Ahmed's critical analysis

elsewhere of western anxiety towards the global transformations faced at the end of the cold war, “usher[s] in a new reality...[which] engenders narratives of transition.” Yet, these “narratives of transition” cannot be underestimated by the dominator as they embody imminent challenges (Ahmed 2004:886) to the hitherto unchallenged or inadequately interrogated western ideological forces of domination so accustomed to degrading that which stands for Africa and the African.

In effect, the “narratives of transition” create a worrisome situation because of the three obvious reasons we analyze below:

- First, the narratives are imbued with realities “marked by fear” of the unknown, as triggered by the disruptions affecting the status quo.
- Second, disruptions are subject to “consternation” caused by movements determined to free themselves from the shackles of intellectual oppression and exploitation.
- Third, fear and consternation lead to a perennial “angst” that haunts the dominator more than the dominated, since the disruptions are midwived by the latter (Ahmed, 2004:886).

Ahmed’s argument informs of African scholars conscious of their values; ethos that cannot be betrayed by subterfuges of western ideologies, unless African intellectuals themselves forsake the worth of their indigenous treasure. This very point articulates why the “narratives” of disagreement pose “fear”, “consternation”, and “angst” as illuminated in Ahmed’s analysis. Simply put, “narratives” of discontent prefigure a “dramatic collision” whose eruption is aimed at complicating the current state of affairs, as far as social work education and profession is concerned. Hence, the promoters of a disruption-free status quo feel dismayed by the daring voices of the discontented who are now determined to seek disentanglement from manipulations of thought as mediated through western patronization.

With such bold articulation like Ahmed’s and like-minded academicians and practitioners of social work, African scholars challenge both overt and covert intents of domination by reverting to a *mélange* of theoretical facts which, despite the precedence of the written word in western culture, parallel African versions exist in the continent as philosophical entities of essence to the African experience and way of life. This justifies the reason why intellectual disagreement with western counterparts perturbs not the African erudite in the quest for the liberation and decolonization of the legacy of their epistemic value. However, we also maintain that the valorization of that ancestral legacy as a gift of knowledge and intellectual treasure, both in theory and practice, can best be achieved in a process that prioritizes its usage by the indigenous professionals on the local scene as a substitute to the imported western knowledge too alien but also of little substance to the African citizens.

We also contend that on the basis of its epistemic value, indigenous African knowledge has magnificent potential to contribute to the enhancement of African higher education systems, particularly in what pertains to social work education and professional practice. It must be incumbent upon higher education leaders and lecturers to contextualize the essence of original, homegrown edification that aids the students being prepared to deliver professional services to their communities. Edification, in this regard, should literally begin with a carefully designed policy and curriculum that accommodates the teaching of African theories as a principle *sine qua non*. In fact, a majority of African scholars of social work believe that indigenous pedagogy nuanced on African theory and episteme promises a more progressive way forward for an efficacious education network that flourishes the continent than a borrowed material from the west.

In the same vein of thought, we unequivocally support the opinion of tapping into domestic principles of learning that replaces all irrelevant parts of hired education and practices that jeopardize the effectiveness of the African principles of Ubuntu-based social work, social culture, and service delivery. Education that bases students’ learning on a culture and knowledge they can identify with, is more likely to yield impactful results that connect the intellectual to the society than a rented system alien to both the service provider (social worker) and the beneficiary (local citizen). From this critical perspective, a pedagogy based on the principles of Ubuntu potentially influences both lecturers and their students to explore deeper into the hitherto unexplored phenomena lodged in the epistemic world of African social work education and professional practice within the context of their indigenous locale.

Moreover, the motivation inspired by the sense of belonging alone can contribute to the development of meaningful research engagement through which new knowledge on Ubuntu in a certain area and context may be observed from multiple perspectives. The observation related to the theoretical and philosophical approaches, and the application therein may be enhanced and also expanded to field practice. Engagements of this kind nurture the core principles of professional African social work that aim at catering for the African society, many of whom are unaffected or least-affected by western approaches to real life and its coping mechanisms.

In order to solidify the argument, the study embarks on a review of scholarly discussions on the important theme of indigenization of social work education in Africa. It applies secondary data to analyze the argument surrounding the formalization and contextualization of Ubuntu philosophy in African social work through the indigenization, decolonization, and professionalization of social work in the continent. Thus, it is in light of the substantive epistemological materials well-preserved in the Ubuntu philosophy that this study

presents a review of literature covering voices of advocacy for Ubuntu as an appropriate African thought for social work education and professional practice by Africans in the continent and in the diaspora.

The discussion in the ensuing parts is divided into several segments. The next part provides a brief account of the topic, Ubuntu, and aims to lay out the argument. It is followed by a segment dealing with theorization of indigenous social work before moving to the section that covers theory of Ubuntu in the context of African social work. Part five presents a view regarding the prioritization of Ubuntu social work in the continent before winding up the discussion with a conclusion that is the sixth segment.

II. LAYING OUT THE ARGUMENT FOR UBUNTU

What does Ubuntu mean in social work? And what is its significance in the professional lacuna of social work education, theory, and practice? Nuanced responses to these questions will take more than could be accommodated in the limited space of this paper. However, we take a summarized version of the broader descriptions provided by African experts and specialists of social work as elaborated in the special issue of the *African Journal of Social Work* 2020, Volume 10, Number 1, dedicated to the very theme of Ubuntu Social Work.

In their definition of the term, coeditors of the volume, Mugumbate and Cherene (2020: vi) elucidate: “Ubuntu refers to a collection of values and practices that black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings.” Conscious of the diversity of the ethnic communities, values, and cultural practices in the African continent, and regardless of whatever the differences, the coeditors highlight that African people share the belief that “an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world,” (Mugumbate and Cherene, 2020: vi).

While from an epistemological perspective Ubuntu is the source that nourish African thought and sagacity, scholars of critical social work theory establish the inseparability of Ubuntu from the social work discipline, whether in its applied form or on theoretical ground, as illustrated in Charles Kalinganire’s (2024) lecture emphasizing the adoption of an “effective implementation of Ubuntu in the social world today.” Commenting more specifically on the relationship between Ubuntu and social work, Mugumbate and Cherene articulate that ideologically Ubuntu social work deals with a combination of “theoretical, pedagogical, and practical,” approaches of social work anchored on the communal principles of Ubuntu.

A vast majority of scholars and experts define social work more or less in the same direction and towards the same objective. They similarly describe the responsibility of social workers in different details but by still pursuing the same goal. Relying on literature by IFSW, IASSW and ICSW (2014), Kakowa (2016:1) describes social work as a career with its main focus on practical functions and as an academic area of study that aims to enhance transformation toward a better social development and wellbeing, ensures solidarity, and empowers members of the wider society to realize independence from dominant forces. From this explanatory standpoint, social work is a profession ethically guided by the “principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities [which] are central to social work.”

Kakowa expands the explanation and responsibility of social work by characterizing it as a professional practice that benefits from an interconnection with multiple disciplines including indigenous knowledge, theories of social work, the social sciences and the humanities, by engaging people in the search for solutions to their problems and improving their lives. The social work profession has been recognized for its magnificent role of improving human wellbeing. According to the UNOHCHR:

More than many professions, Social Work practitioners are conscious that their concerns are closely linked to respect for Human Rights. They accept the premise that Human Rights and fundamental freedoms are indivisible, and that the full realization of civil and political rights is impossible without enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. (UNOHCHR 1994:5; italics in original).

To help address the problems of the needy among the society, social workers reach rural people and urban dwellers. They provide profession-based services they have been trained to deliver. These two inseparable components of training and service delivery, in other words education and practice, make indigenous education an essential asset for social workers to function effectively among the communities they serve—hence our argument on the premise of upholding the indigenization of social work according to the African ideology, philosophy, and geographical context in which the social work education is imparted and social work service provided in its practical aspect.

III. THEORIZING INDIGENOUS SOCIAL WORK

Social work scientists, experts, policy-makers, and practitioners highlight the inevitability of engendering indigenous education in social work. As these experts claim, critical observation of the social work curriculum in Africa borrows a lot from western theories and written materials by western writers who based their views in the context of their different

countries and environments. In this nature, western tutelage adds little ingredient to the African principle of thought (Kreitzer 2012; Gebru & Wako 2022; Mugumbate *et al.*, 2023). Put differently, western materials, though usable in certain situations, remain mostly irrelevant to the African context in that they do not respond to the very reality of life as experienced by the African people. The irrelevance of a vast majority of western-focused social work literature, therefore, calls for the adoption of a more suitable social work education strategy and curriculum that cements the roots of African social work pedagogy—one that interprets into indigeneity, solidifies ownership, and profoundly responds to the needs of the citizens of the continent—hence the appropriateness of the concept of indigenization and decolonization of social work in the African continent.

The idea of infusing indigenous knowledge in the heart of social work is supported by a broad spectrum of African social work scholars and practitioners who believe social work education is best taught and learned, practically as well as pedagogically, when it is centered around the local culture, tradition, and knowledge owned and enshrined by the citizens. Accentuating the very same point, Midgley (1981:150) enlightens us on how African social work educators and practitioners relied on and based their teachings on Western realities, ideologies, and approaches without committing its theoretical relevance and practical application to critical scrutiny. As a consequence of that earlier oversight, meaning the absence of scrutiny, contributed effectively and enduringly to the dominance of westernized social work in various countries in the African continent (and elsewhere as well), despite its meagre connection with the people to be served.

In fact, the lack of interrogation has militated scholars like Midgley to cast aspersions on whether social work education and practice benchmarked on western ideologies could effectually help address indigenous communities' challenges. Indeed the said challenges might increase while western learning would yield no solutions, considering particularly the distinct cultural and moral values of the African people. As a consequence, Midgley announces the verdict that due to the "dependence on Western ideas, social work education in developing countries is unsuited not only to the demands of practice but to the amelioration of pressing social problems," (p. 150).

Contextualizing their study on the basis of promoting human rights in the Zimbabwean situation, scholars Mtetwa and Muchacha (2013) postulate that African social work needs to take an unprecedented step towards centralizing social work education and practice from a local African perspective. Other authors contend that the shortcomings of social work in addressing the challenges facing the African society have been influenced by the neglect of the fundamental values the

profession was expected to embrace (Mmatli, 2008; Briskman 2008; Mtetwa and Muchacha 2013). Although Mtetwa and Muchacha (2013:42) build their argument on the premise of human rights, their perspective concurs with the general notion maintained by social work gurus in the realm of Mupedziswa (1992), Ankras (1987), Kaseke (1991), Tusasiirwe (2019, 2020, 2022) and Twikirize (2014), just to name a sample of expert intellectuals who advocate for indigenization of social work as an indispensable solution to the daily challenges encountered by the African masses.

Ife (2001: 3) stresses that there is not much significance or substance in enhancing education, providing good healthcare, and assuring the legal right to free speech and self-expression, when people are losing their lives due to lack of clean water to drink, clean air to breathe, or cannot afford to access the economic gains they are entitled to enjoy as citizens of their countries. The arguments, discussions, and descriptions of the subject explain the role of social work profession as a promoter of human wellbeing, a fact which can be gleaned from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which stipulates the right of every human-being to be respected and accorded the dignity they duly deserve (United Nations Centre for Human Rights, 1994).

The general aim of the UN declaration, according to Ife (2001), and as equally supported by Mtetwa and Muchacha (2013), makes social work a profession whose practice and approaches can be based on the ethical pronouncements of global human rights—a commodity dauntingly too scarce in many spheres of the African life. The above scholars' concerns regarding social work practice, theory, education, human rights, etc. shed light on the necessity of framing social work on the pedagogy bequeathed upon us by our own indigenous knowledge and as built on the ideological foundations of Ubuntu.

IV. UBUNTU IN THE MILIEU OF SOCIAL WORK

Ubuntu is a deeply-rooted, broadly-based African philosophy. It informs an African reality—uniqueness of Africanity—and is embedded to a broader view of the spirit of humanness through the African ideological premise of being humane and caring for one another. In simultaneity, it is African, communal, and indigenously original. It is a collective communal philosophy which dwells in and fosters the main artery of African thought that feeds from all that constitutes African wisdom and way of living. That is why the role of Ubuntu is universally recognized. According to Mugumbate *et al.*, (2023:2), "Ubuntu is one of the themes of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development 2020 to 2030," and that "The Agenda's theme for 2020–2022 [was] 'Ubuntu: Strengthening Social Solidarity and Global Connectedness.'"

So, understanding Ubuntu helps delineate the distinction between African philosophy—ways of visualizing and experiencing African reality—and alien epistemes which, although learned, nevertheless remain foreign and in many cases irrelevant or, at best, on the periphery of the education, profession, and practice of social work in the context of Africa.

Tusasiirwe (2022) lays out a scholarly debate by examining the relationship between Western and African perspectives of social work, subsequently condemning the former of dominance over local knowledge, whilst the latter's role is functionally reduced to the status of receiver of an unfamiliar pedagogy hardly adaptable to the social work dynamics prevailing in the domestic situation in African. In a similar argument, prominent social work scholar Janestic Twikirize denotes the inevitability of localizing the theory of social work education. According to Twikirize, it is indigenization that helps African people realize a professional practice well-suited to the cultural doctrine they cherish and the communal values that shape the reality of their daily life and wellbeing.

Despite the contention, a caveat needs to be raised here that, by indigenization is not meant to entirely disqualify and abandon Western knowledge; but that it is cautiously selected and used where applicable and when necessary, so as to appreciate its “links with the original [indigenous] material” (Twikirize, 2014, p.79). The aim is first to foreground the indigenous African material of thought and practice in social work. From an African viewpoint, the gist of the argument is demonstrated in what Tusasiirwe (2022), citing Twikirize (2014), undergirds as a theory and professional practice which are, reciprocally, “locally responsive and culturally appropriate,” (Tusasiirwe 2022).

With the compound phrase “locally responsive and culturally appropriate”, Tusasiirwe envisions, among other factors, two theoretical and practical elements that are key to the overall scheme of engendering practical theory on the one hand and professional practice of social work in Africa on the other. Taken together, Twikirize and Tusasiirwe elucidate the shortcomings laden to an alien social work knowledgebase unbefitting and socially detached from the theoretical and cultural nuances that inform the lived experiences and everyday interactions of the African society.

With confidence, both scholars, Tusasiirwe and Twikirize, elaborate the underlying advantages of indigenization and the vital impact it has on the students and professional practitioners of social work as well as the beneficiaries served by them in their own indigenous abode. They effectuate African-based community theory and philosophy generated from within the very recipients of the service provided, one that makes learning more friendly and aptly contextualized as an appropriate

practice whose ideological base is cemented on the practical needs of the beneficiaries—in this sense, the Africans indigenous to the land and culture.

Examination a wide range of resources among them books, journal articles and book chapters, Tusasiirwe deploys a comparative investigation of scholars' views on the debate over indigenization of social work, classifying them into proponents and opponents or deniers of the positioning of the indigenous episteme at the forefront of social work in Africa. Furthermore, Tusasiirwe substantiates her contention that despite the growing voices of advocacy by a section of scholars, experts, and professionals of social work around the world, among them Gray *et al.*, (2013), Tusasiirwe (2020), Tascon & Ife (2020), Twikirize and Spitzer (2022), Uwihangana *et al.*, (2020); and the resolve to undo teachings from the colonial base and its ongoing neo-colonial attitude in social work, the opposing segment repudiates the idea by way of condoning the effective accommodation of that tutelage. The deniers' diffracted notion that past evils of colonialism and the impact of colonization need neither be contextualized nor blamed for the woes currently prevailing in the continent, amounts to oblivion, an oversight well below the bar of the progressive African intellectual mindful of the damages of Western hegemony: theoretically, historically, politically, environmentally, socially, academically as well as economically.

V. PRIORITIZING INDIGENOUS THOUGHT IN SOCIAL WORK

Social work scholar Tusasiirwe, a strong proponent of the indigenization and decolonization movement, and other supporters of the project, deliver their contention from an African theoretical and philosophical perspective, as mentioned above. In their clearly outlined argument, African academicians accentuate that indigenous social work, whether observed from national or continental outlook, is part of the locally-owned cultural knowledge acquired and practiced through the prism of Ubuntu philosophy, which itself is a composite of African knowledgebase. Thus, the very concept of ownership by localization automatically qualifies Ubuntu for adoption as an epistemic African heritage that frames African social work, while the western body of learning could be adapted to it on grounds of its relevance and as per each nation's or institution's education system (Tusasiirwe 2019, 2020; Twikirize and Spitzer 2022).

The approach of prioritizing African tradition and philosophy to be the center pole of social work predicts confidence in the transmission of Africa's native knowledge within the continent and beyond. Yet, it does not seek a complete neglect of Western education or the relevant areas learned from it that can follow (not lead) the indigenous which is the prerequisite learning in the curriculum. Indigenized education attuned to the theory

of Ubuntu is then fostered through institutional research as national and continental agenda that enhances a lot in the discipline, while pertinent topics from the west may be retained to supplement the indigenous curriculum (Tusasiirwe 2022; Uwihangana *et al.*, 2020).

VI. CONCLUSION

Examining arguments presented in various scholarly publications, this essay analyzed the background to the debate on the indigenization of social work in its various aspects relating to theoretical, epistemological and practical approaches. In principle, it supports the side of the argument that advances Ubuntu and other forms of indigenization and decolonization of social work to be the nucleus of all that constitutes African social work; primarily social work education but equally also the theoretical assumptions laid in Ubuntu and applications achieved through professional practices that harmonize social welfare and wellbeing to the citizens of the continent. The study further highlighted the dominating culture of western social work education in the continent and the role of prioritizing epistemic African knowledge as a way forward in the theorization, educationalization and professionalization of social work.

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