

**UNHU/UBUNTU VALUES IN UNIVERSITY
EDUCATION DURING COVID PERIOD: THE
CASE OF A STATE UNIVERSITY IN
ZIMBABWE.**

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Abstract

This study investigates Ubuntu virtues, which were apparently violated during the COVID -19 period at a state university in Zimbabwe. Specific Unhu/Ubuntu values and virtues were often compromised or even not observed at university during the COVID-19 period. Unhu philosophy calls for equality through sharing in society and the education sector is no exception when it comes to sharing but with the coming of the COVID-19 pandemic, Unhu virtues were compromised, thereby

violating the principles of social justice which are the hallmark of Ubuntu philosophy in teacher education in universities. The study is informed by the Afrocentric theory and its methodological approach involves interviews with students and lecturers. On the basis of these interviews conducted with students and lecturers, the author argues that the COVID-19 period exposed those students who came from poor families as they could not raise the money to buy the necessary gadgets to enable them to learn using the Online platform. Findings of the study show that equality and moral uprightness, which are at the core of Ubuntu philosophy, were compromised during the COVID-19 period at Great the university under study. The paper also discovered that COVID-19 affected the education sector in various ways as it brought in a lot of changes in the learning process. The study, thus, underscores that Ubuntu, which is central to African culture, was put to test by the coming of the COVID-19 virus and its major virtues were greatly compromised or to some extent ignored.

Key Words: unhu/ubuntu, COVID-19, social justice, teacher education, Africa.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The advent of Covid-19 made university education switch from the old normal to the new normal where both teaching and learning, including university operations were done virtually. This switch to the new norm had its

on effects and the compromisation of unhu/ Ubuntu was one of it. Chitumba (2013) said that the government of Zimbabwe after attaining independence embarked on reviewing its curriculum. In 1999 it instituted the Presidential Commission of enquiry into Education and Training, the Nziramasanga commission of 1999 that recommended refocusing of education on Ubuntu, Sciences, mathematics, technology and life skills. Manungo (2013) says that there is great significance of rooting university education on values and principles of Ubuntu philosophy considering the fact that university affect directly and indirectly the quality and direction of society. Beets and Louw in Viriri (2017) spoke on Unhu/Ubuntu in South African education transformation and assessment and they saw it fit that Unhu/ Ubuntu principles to become part of education of learners and for all South African teachers to adhere to those as they are the key players in the transformation of their education. They believe that Humanness and caring capture the spirit in which assessment should be conducted. To them humanness towards and caring unconditionally for the learner constitutes the foundation for effective teaching and learning. Learners experience assessment as positive only when they are sure that the teacher who guides the learning process is a humane and caring person. During

the Covid-19 period the bond between lecturers and their students was severely affected and this was a violation of the Unhu/ Ubuntu philosophy which believes in people working together and seeing each other face to face. Marumo and Chakale in Ojakorutu (2018) argues that since Unhu/UBUNTU is communalistic in character it therefore means that it calls for equality among all persons in society. This taken further means that if it calls for equality in society it can be used as a vehicle to promote unity and eradicate unindividualistic tendencies which were experienced during the Covid period. Because of its caring for all people, it means that all people are the same irrespective of their social background, therefore people should be treated the same. It calls for eradication of stigmatisation that might affect some students in their pursuit of their tertiary education. Chibaya et al (2022) sum up the idea when they say that in their opinion, Higher education represent the most effective approach for reaching an entire nation and affecting the skills, knowledge and attitudes of its people. In a real sense as university education goes, so goes the nation' The learning from home situation as was advocated by the Covid protocos had its challenges and one of them was the compromisation of Unhu/Ubuntu ethos. In Zimbabwe just like the rest of countries in Africa, one of the worst

affected sectors by Covid -19 was education with schools, colleges and universities having to shut down at different times. Omodan and Ige(2021) observed that schools, colleges and universities faced challenges that threatened to stall the education progress made in the recent decades due to the pandemic as it became difficult for learners to attend school and for government to fund them. Zimbabwe's higher education was severely hit since all institutions of higher learning went under phased lockdowns from March 2020. Ubuntu is defined by Letseka (2011) as a form of human engagement that allows for critical thinking, no-domination and the optimal development of human relationships. Chemhuru and Makuvaza (2014) say, Ubuntu is a concrete manifestation of the interconnectedness of human beings; it is the embodiment of South African culture and lifestyle. Unhu/Ubuntu is a capacity in Southern African culture that expresses compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining a community with justice and mutual caring. Shutte(2001) Ubuntu lies at the heart of the African way of life and impacts on every aspect of people's well being. The Covid period in Zimbabwe witnessed many changes in the way university operations were run and some of these changes saw the violation of Unhu values in these

tertiary institutions. In universities just like in other institutions of learning outcomes are influenced by Unhu personality values such as caring, forgiveness, sharing, equality, sympathy, empathy, compassion, respect, tolerance, humanness and harmony for others. Lefa (2015) observes that the school culture gives the school its unique identity. Culture therefore represents the school's way of life and the way things are done. Msengana (2006) reveals that many studies have shown a great link between school culture and its effectiveness, school development, academic achievement and learner discipline. Letseka (2011) says that the school culture influences how people do things in the school and the same can be said about universities. The issue of discipline is one such aspect of Unhu which is topical in universities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research will be guided by the Afrocentric theory which calls for Africans to go back to their roots culture wise of which Unhu/Ubuntu happens to be at the core of this African culture. The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training of 1999 had the recommendation that the Zimbabwean education be refocused using Ubuntu philosophy among other

recommendations. Afrocentricity deals with consciousness of a people who have been separated from the core of their heritage through slavery, historic untruths and political, educational and economic oppression. The Shona have been separated from their culture through acculturation. The Afrocentric theory seeks to recapture, through historical and cultural awareness, a full understanding of how Africans should view the world and this can be best achieved by observing Unhu / Ubuntu philosophy. The proponent of this theory, Molefi K. Asante suggests that African Americans should disencumber themselves from the Eurocentric point of view and adopt instead a way of thinking that gives primacy to the cultural traits that are African. Asante (1980) notes, a black person without Afrocentricism operates in a negative manner; his manner is contradictory to himself and is destructive to his personal and collective growth and development. Chief amongst these cultural traits is the ubuntu philosophy which forms the basis of the Shona culture. The Ubuntu theory optimises the indigenous setting of an African organisation. Tutu (2004:25) says that Unhu/Ubuntu philosophy believes that a person is a person because of others. None of us comes into the world fully formed. We would not know how to think, or walk, or speak, or behave as human

beings unless we learned it from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human. Ramose (1999) observes that ubuntu ethics are concerned with unity, oneness and solidarity and traits were compromised during the Covid-19 period at Great Zimbabwe university. The distinctive nature of ubuntu is that the philosophical facets are meant to mould an individual who can fit and interact peacefully with others in society. The Ubuntu philosophy is not just an abstract concept because it permeates every aspect of African life. It is expressed in various ways and it is collectivist in its very nature. Ramose (2002) observes that within the Ubuntu philosophy, the importance and value of the human being is pivotal. The practices of Ubuntu philosophy with regard to humanity, care, sharing, teamwork spirit, compassion, dignity and forgiveness enable society to survive peacefully. Phori and Nkoane (2019) regard the English term 'personhood' as similar to Ubuntu. The Ubuntu philosophy forms the basis of the Shona culture. It is the argument of this research study that the Ubuntu philosophy is very important in shaping the character of students at university. The Zimbabwean university system is founded on the philosophies of British thought (as epitomized by the Ox-bridge education tradition), to Africanise this institution, there is need to make Unhu/

Ubuntu the African moral theory .Unhu/ Ubuntu philosophy contributes to the disruption and decolonization of hegemonic meanings, provides an opportunity for renewal and transformation in our desire for egalitarian human dignity. With the coming of Covid -19 all this was compromised.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach. The qualitative approach provides a better understanding of the research problem (Creswell 2013). The qualitative research design is appropriate for this research which looks critically at personal names in as far as they enshrine Unhu ethics among the Shona of Buhera. The research is ethnographic in nature and is committed to the naturalistic perspective as it focuses on understanding of the research phenomena in situ and interprets phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them. A total of 50 personal names were collected and then a purposive sampling technique was adopted in the selection of 10 participants for the study. Interviews about the meaning and motive behind the name were carried out with the parents of the name-bearers and the name-bearers of the 10 names used for this study. The strengths of purposive sampling afforded the researcher room to judge particular

people as suitable for the provision of the required information (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2013). The study sample consisted of 6 students and 2 lecturers, at Great Zimbabwe university. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participants. Since participants were above the age of 18 years, the researcher sought their consent by making them fill in consent forms or verbal consent. The participants were assured that the study was purely for academic purposes. This qualitative research on Unhu/ Ubuntu tenets during Covid-19 period seeks to answer to processes, meanings and questions that stress on how social experiences are created and given meaning. Questions to be answered by this research study are:

1. What are the virtues of Unhu that are accepted at Great Zimbabwe university i?
2. What was the impact of Covid-19 on Unhu at Great Zimbabwe University.?
- 3To what extent did the Covid 19 period affected Unhu virtues?
4. What can be done to correct Unhu virtues affected during Covid 19 period?

5 Which measures were implemented by Great Zimbabwe University to ensure students and staff maintain Unhu virtues?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants were university students and lecturers.

Findings in this study revealed that Unhu values were violated or even ignored during the Covid period at Great Zimbabwe University. The introduction of online learning strategy as a way to avoid contact as was required by the Covid regulations meant that every student was supposed to have his or her own gadgets, that included a laptop or a smart phone to enable him or her to join the Online platforms. Interviews carried with a number of participants who include students and lecturers bears testimony of the violation of Unhu/Ubuntu values. The following were responses from the participants:

Participant 1 when asked about the effect of Covid-19 on Unhu/Ubuntu has this to say, “ They are asking me to join Online classes but i do not have the data and the gadgets to do so because my parents only gave me this simple phone which cannot enable me to join on-line platforms.

I really need to continue with my studies just like other students and for me to raise the money to meet my academic needs I have no option than to fall in love with sugar daddies who while in return give me money”. Social inequalities affected our teaching, some students are from rural areas where internet connectivity is a problem. The coming of on-line learning meant the less privileged students were exposed and this was a violation of Unhu/Ubuntu values. Matsilele (2021) noted that in Zimbabwe the government did not revise the budget and did not make any intervention to ensure students can study online. With the Covid-19 period students were supposed to study from home and movement was limited and this meant those students without the necessary resources to access on-line classroom were left behind. Chibaya et al say Online learning entrenched inequalities among students, especially students living with disabilities who were left behind because commonly most Online platforms are not designed with disabled students in mind; the visually impaired may not be able to cope with online demands (Strivastava 2018).Jentleson (2018) saus that Ubuntu is best characterized as an African version of humanizing stressing interconnectedness of all people in society. Marumo and Chakale in Ojakorutu (2019) say Unhu/Ubuntu promotes unity, communalism and

communal usage of resource whereby each see each other as a friend, neighbor, and compatriot but the Covid -19 period violated what Unhu /Ubuntu philosophy entails as it emphasized that students should not mix nor share gudgets.

Participant 2 said, “Covid -19 has come to destroy the spirit of sharing ideas which was common among students during discussions.” These sentiments were shared by a number of participants during the interview sessions. Omodan and Ige (2021) say online learning leads to social isolation as lack of classroom interaction with classmates might not be good for the overall cognitive developments of students. Under normal circumstances students should learn with, and from, each other for them to know true diversity which may exist amongst themselves in terms of physical, cognitive, sensory and emotional differences. In this way, artificial notions of normalcy that usually save to diminish and devalue students when they learn on their own can be avoided. As microcosms of society, lecture rooms save to reflect, exemplify and engage with actual diversity. What was obtaining during Covid-19 period was the opposite of Unhu/Ubuntu tenets. Jentlesson (2018) says Ubuntu is best characterized as an African version of humanizing stressing interconnectedness of all

people in society. The philosophy of Unhu/Ubuntu can be interpreted as a statute of conduct in social life which describes a human being as 'being-with-others and prescribes what 'being-with-other' entails. The fact that during Covid period students were detached from their counterparts at the campus meant that the tenets of Unhu/Ubuntu were violated .

Participant 3 said., "Covid -19 period has promoted students to cheat when writing assignments. I only discovered later that a number of students were jublicating the same assignments". When the participants asked the concerned students they said that they had no data to access sources hence they had no option but to cheat through dubbing an assignment of a fellow student who managed to access the relevant sources. Unhu/Ubuntu mainstream in tertiary education ensures and guarantees teamwork, unity and hard work among other important values. Genuine education fosters Unhu/ Ubuntu values. Chitumba in Matsilele 2021 proposes use of Unhu/Ubuntu philosophy as the bedrock upon which university education in Zimbabwe can be based but given what transpired during the Covid-19 period Unhu/Ubuntu values were compromised. By mainstreaming unhu/Ubuntu at universities even during critical periods

like the Covid-19 , the result could have been a truly humane community, a community of interconnected beings who respect and care about the welfare of one another and that could have seen all students progressing well with their studies.

Participant 4 said, “ Covid -19 has meant affected me because I used to go to the university authorities to ask for a payment plan then they would allow me to attend my lectures but with this Online classes set up only those who are paid up are allowed to join lectures.” This meant that students from poor families were disadvantaged yet Unhu/Ubuntu philosophy calls for equal treatment of individuals in society. The fact that students who were not paid up in terms of their fees could not join online classes affected the concerned students emotionally. Their self –esteem was severely affected and this is contrary to what Unhu/Ubuntu philosophy calls for.

Given the social background of some of the students at the institution, that requirement was far above their rich as most of them had simple phones which could not go on internet. Matsilele (2021) observed that issues related to data affordability, poor connectivity, lack of devices affected many students. Cross and Adam in Matsilele (2021) say that this Covod period brought with it

challenges such as the adoption of technologies like WhatsApp, Google classrooms and Zoom. They observed that this technological intervention into education came with challenges such as internet accessibility and access to a working computer, something that is still not readily available to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Only students from well-to-do families managed to buy these gadgets and as a result managed to join the On line class. By this move , Unhu virtues that include equality and equity in education were compromised thereby disadvantaging students from poor families.

Some students resorted to prostitution as a way to raise money to buy data and gadgets needed for Online learning. By doing so the philosophy of Unhu /Ubuntu was violated. The absence of Unhu/Ubuntu during Covid -19 period manifested itself in the behavior of students who demonstrated a lack of moral focus, respect for other people, intolerant and corrupt. A lot of people expressed distress about the moral decadence that was exhibited by students during the Covid period. It was pointed out that there was dearth of role models among the students during the Covid period. Manungo in Matsilele (2021) noted that by introducing Unhu as one of the key pillars of university curriculum, the university was aiming to produce morally

upright students, whose values are at par with the African community. He goes on to say that the African epistemology and metaphysics are rational and so the African university should produce a product who values interconnectedness and interdependence. Samkange and Samkange (1980:34) in Chemhuru and Makuvaza (2014) wrote Hunhuism or Ubuntuism is a philosophy that sets a premium on human relations. Relatedness, according to Uhu philosophy is central to Unhu. Thus, the philosophy of hunhu is best captured in the aphorism, *kunzi munhu vanhu or umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* translated, “a person is a person through other persons”. (Shutte, 1993:46). In an education grounded in hunhu/Ubuntu, treating others as humans becomes concretised through the principles of Unhu philosophy. Thus, education based on Unhu would emphasize’ warmth, empathy, understanding, the ability to communicate, interaction, participation, sharing, reciprocation, harmony, cooperation’ (Prinsloo, 1998:42) The education informed by the philosophy of Unhu/Ubuntu gives primacy to the social basis of human life in all learning activities.

Chabaya et al (2022) says that since time immemorial, pandemics have affected the formal informal sectors of any given society including schools, and institutions of

higher education' Matsilele (2021) noted that most Zimbabwean institutions of higher learning adopted WhatsApp and Google Classroom models of teaching and learning during the Coronavirus-induced lockdowns. However, majority of students could not effectively participate in the learning process for reasons that included lack of finances and resources, as well as general resistance to changes among some of the students and lecturers. Omodan and Ige (2021) say that the concept of Ubuntu along its principles, can be used a productive style that could put into use to instill organization unity, progress, collaboratives, compassionateness and humanity among people. The ethics of Ubuntu require that those who are stronger and better off protect and provide for the weak and vulnerable in society. Thus, students from less to do families were supposed to be helped by those from well to do families or from the government but this did not happen during this period in question.

CONCLUSION

The findings showed the Covid-19 had adverse effect on Unhu /Ubuntu at Great University. Although changes in culture often occur slowly and sometimes even unintentionally, there are certain instances in history where certain events, episodes or happenings accelerate

cultural change like the Covid -19 period. The Covid-19 pandemic will pass as one of such occasions. The notion that Unhu/Ubuntu is very important in the university operation during an emergency period such as the Covid-19 is very true because of various aspects discussed in this essay. Unhu/Ubuntu principles promote communal way of doing things and given the social backgrounds of many university students at Great Zimbabwe it has been found that many students were greatly affected during Covid period due to the methods of teaching adopted. Upholding the ethos of Unhu will go a long way in molding students who will be relevant to the Zimbabwean society. Besides helping Zimbabwean people to gain their identity and self-esteem, a meaningful education informed by Unhu/Ubuntu philosophy may see its graduates being better citizens, employment creators and morally upright leaders who shun corruption. There are plenty positive spinoffs when one is a recipient of relevant and meaningful education that is grounded in one's values. This chapter observed that various Unhu/Ubuntu virtues were compromised or violated during the Covid-19 period. It is recommended that the government must be ever ready for such emergencies if they are to occur in the near future.

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