

PATRIARCHY AND UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY: THE VIEWS OF COMMUNITY ELDERS IN THE EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

South Africa still shows signs of being a very patriarchal society and this somehow leads to instances where the rights of women and children have been trampled on because of a male-favouring environment. This situation prevails despite the South African Constitution and current laws that prohibit discrimination based on gender. This study will explore whether the adoption of the philosophy of Ubuntu could offer a remedy for our society today, to counter the patriarchal views that dominate society and the ignorance these views reveal about both women and children's rights. This paper draws on the study undertaken by the Eastern Cape chapter of South Africa's National Research Foundation (NRF), namely "Archaeology of Ubuntu", which explored the notion of Ubuntu as a moral concept. In the study, "Archaeology of Ubuntu", the point of departure was that community elders, as the custodians of African epistemologies, should be consulted while still alive, because, once they are gone, all their wisdom and knowledge about the culture would be lost. In this paper, it is argued that the values propagated by the Ubuntu philosophy, and as it was practised in patriarchal societies the olden days, meant that the rights of women and children were not ignored. In this study, isiXhosa-speaking elders revealed that, based on the philosophy of Ubuntu, patriarchy enabled a caring society, where the vulnerable, that is, women, children and the elderly, were looked after, protected and provided for. Therefore, the conclusion is that the Ubuntu philosophy should be considered to address patriarchy in South African society, to remedy the ever-increasing incidents of abuse of women and children.

Keywords: Ubuntu, patriarchy, philosophy, gender and society

INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy is a phenomenon well entrenched in South African society, despite the fact that the country has one of the most progressive democratic constitutions in the world. Nel (2007) defines patriarchy as a male-controlled society, focused on the upkeep and support of male mastery in each circle of life. However, according to (Letseka, 2000) patriarchy has its roots in Western society, especially the so-called liberal countries. In most cases, the domination of man is displayed by power over women and children. This domination sometimes leads to the violation of the rights of children and women.

In South Africa, in recent months, there has been a surge in the number of incidents that can be deemed to be originating from patriarchy. Most noticeable have been incidents of assault on the elderly and the assault, rape and murder of women and children perpetrated by men. This kind of behaviour is very different from the prevalent culture of Ubuntu that prevailed in the past in African society. The theory of Ubuntu is underpinned by the values of, among others, kindness, compassion and respect, which creates a caring and communal society that draws from the knowledge and wisdom of the elders in the society. Thus, Ubuntu

could assist in strengthening morality within communities and improve the current situation in the country. Ubuntu generally translates as humaneness, personhood and morality.

The literature and empirical data form the bases of the assertions raised in this paper. I report on a three-year study of the Eastern Cape chapter of National Research Foundation, conducted between 2014 and 2016, entitled the “Archaeology of Ubuntu”, a Southern African research project. Countries involved in the project-included Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. In South Africa, the following provinces: Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West.

This article consists of various sections. In the first section, there is a discussion on the concept of patriarchy as a culture that “privileges men casting them as rational, strong, protective, and decisive”, while women are cast as emotional “irrational, weak, nurturing and submissive” (Tyson, 2015 :81). I argue that, despite modernising and emancipatory imperatives, patriarchal attitudes in our societies have led to incidents of gender violence in the society (Mama 2005). I will also elaborate on the adoption of the philosophy of Ubuntu, as a way of life, to remedy the situation of gender-based violence brought by patriarchy in society. In the second section, Ubuntu is discussed extensively in relation to the treatment of the vulnerable and weak in our society. In the third section, consideration is given to the research ethics that had to be adhered to ensure that this study is aligned with the prescripts contained in the Unisa Research Policy on Ethics. In the fourth section, the findings of the research are discussed.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section review of the written sources that relevant to the researched phenomena. By reviewing relevant literature ,asn understanding of the breadth and depth of existing body of work ,provides an opportunity of identifying shortcomings of literature that can be furer explored (Xiao, & Watson, 2019).

PATRIARCHY AS A CONCEPT

Patriarchy, as a concept, dates back centuries and could be found in all the societies. There are, however, contesting views on patriarchy. Of specific interest, is the perception that patriarchy is more prominent in African societies, though literature reveal that it originated from the so-called civilised world.

Bryson (2003) traces the opposition to patriarchy back to the emergence of radical feminist theory that gained prominence after 1960s in various anti-establishment efforts, including civil rights movement, anti-war protests, and New Left and student movements in North America, Europe and Australia. The women’s rights movement grew in popularity and, by the late 1980s, there was a total rejection of the patriarchal system. Millet (1985) approaches patriarchy from a political theoretical perspective, tracing the word, “patriarchy”, back to the Greek word *patriarches*, meaning “head of the tribe”. Millett (1985) associated this definition, the “head of the tribe”, with the monarchical power, where the king ruled over his people and a man ruled over his family. Central to Millets’ (1985) argument was the view that, in most societies, relationships between men and women are based on power and, in that way, relationships have become political. “This power takes the form of male domination over women in all areas of life; sexual domination is so universal, so ubiquitous and so complete that it appears ‘natural’ and hence becomes invisible, so that it is perhaps the most

pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power” (Millet, 1985: 25).

On the other hand, as earlier indicated, patriarchy has its roots in Western societies. Okin (1987: 47) says that, even according to liberal conventions, in spite of its alleged establishment of individual rights and human uniformity, nonconformists have accepted that the “person” who is the fundamental subject of their hypotheses is the male leader of a man-centric family. Okin (2004:143) cites Linda McClain who contends that :

“Liberalism has been seen as inseparably manly in its model of isolated, atomistic, competing individuals establishing a legal system to pursue their own interests and to protect them from others interference and to protect them from interference with their rights to do so. Hence, it is said that liberal, masculine jurisprudence has excelled rights over responsibilities, separateness over connection, and the individual over the community.”

Okin (1989:14) presents gender as an issue of equity on three tallies. Right off the bat, it is the undeniable call for inclusion of women in a theory that is focusing on justice. Second, the current gender injustices in the societies undermines equal opportunity for both women and children. Thirdly, the family – currently the linchpin of the gender structure – must be just if we are to have a just society, since it is within the family that we first come to have that sense of ourselves and our relations with others that is at the root of moral development

On patriarchy, Shvedova (2005) posits that men, largely, overwhelm the political field, generally detail the tenets of the political amusement and frequently characterise the guidelines for assessment. She contends that, in principle, the right to cast a ballot gives rise to the right to stand for election, to become a candidate and to be elected. Be that as it may, as a general rule, women’s right to vote stays confined, chiefly in light of the fact that the hopefuls are, for the most part, male. “This is true not only for partial and developing democracies, but for established democracies as well”. (Shvedova 2005: 34). She contends that the low number of female representatives in some European parliaments ought to be viewed as an infringement of women’s essential vote based right and, accordingly, an infringement of their fundamental human rights (Shvedova 2005). This confirms Okin’s (1989) view that a significant number of the world’s customs and societies are unmistakably man-centric; (Shvedova, 2005) asserts that the unequal rate of female representation in authoritative bodies means that women’s representation, as opposed to being an outcome of democratisation, is more an impression of the norm. It is clear from the above examination that male-centric societies and the relegation of women are a worldwide phenomenon. As Amartya Sen (2001: 35) mentions, “they exist in many pieces of the world, from Japan to Morocco, from Uzbekistan to the United States”. Norris and Inglehart (2001) go further to contend that women have not accomplished equivalent representation with men in any nation.

Patriarchy is defined by (Tyson, 2015:81) as any culture that benefits men by advancing customary gender jobs. The customary allocation of jobs, based on gender, give men a role as the normal, solid, defensive and unequivocal figure; while females are cast as enthusiastic (silly), powerless, sustaining and compliant. This is a flawed argument, according to (Tyson 2015), because women, over the years, have proven to be just as capable, if not more capable, in various aspects of life.

In a South African context, patriarchy dates years back and became worse during from the colonial era, especially for black women during the apartheid era. Gouws (2005) refers to patriarchy as denying citizenship to women until 1930, when white women were granted the right to vote for the first time. The majority of women, namely black African, coloured (mixed race), Indian and San and Khoi women, were excluded. The Post 1994 democratic South Africa brought hope with the constitution that guaranteed gender equality and rights of

every citizen. After twenty-five years of democracy, not much has changed, judging by the number of incidents that involve men as perpetrators of violence against vulnerable groups (women, children and elderly), the positions women are still occupying in society and women of colour being affected more by poverty and unemployment.

South Africa is still a very patriarchal society, according to (Coetzee 2011), who cites the Commission on Gender Equality (1988:10), which states the following:

It is a sad fact that one of the few profoundly non-racial institutions in South Africa is patriarchy ... indeed, it is so firmly rooted that it is given a cultural halo and identified with customs and personalities of different communities. Thus, to challenge patriarchy, to dispute the idea that it is men who should be dominant figures in the family and society, is to be seen not as fighting against the male privilege, but as attempting to destroy African tradition, or to subvert Afrikaner ideals or undermine civilised and deemed British values. Patriarchy brutalises men and neutralises women across the colour line.

THE CONCEPT OF UBUNTU

Ubuntu is derived from a philosophy of “communal existence”, meaning that a person exists because of the others. According to the Ubuntu philosophy, a person is defined in the context of social bonds and cultural traditions rather than through individual traits (Mabhovula, 2011). Letseka (2000:179-180) conceptualises *Ubuntu* or *botho* as “encapsulating moral norms and virtues such as kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence, courtesy, and respect and concern for others”. Therefore, the major aspects of Ubuntu is its humanistic values and emphasis on caring of others. Retired South African judge, (Mokgoro 1998), argues that Ubuntu “is a humanistic orientation towards fellow beings”.

She contends that Ubuntu envelops key values of group solidarity, compassion, respect and human dignity. According to Mokgoro (1998), the fact that the spirit of Ubuntu emphasises respect for human dignity marks a shift from confrontation to reconciliation. In the same vein, (Letseka 2000: 180) argues that Ubuntu has normative implications in that it encapsulates moral norms and values such as “altruism, kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence, courtesy, and respect and concern for others”. For Letseka (2000:188), persons living in communities that embrace Ubuntu would be marked by a commitment to treating others with a sense of *botho* or *Ubuntu*, which entails treating them with justice and fairness. Broodryk (2002:13) conceives *Ubuntu* as a “comprehensive ancient African worldview, based on the values of humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values”. Although the Constitution of the country guarantees gender equality, South African society is still considered patriarchal. The latest incidents of attack against women and children in South Africa have been blamed, among others, on the patriarchal system in South African society. It is in this context that I submit that the promotion of Ubuntu through education is critical for South Africa, given that the country has recently emerged from a political era that was marked by civil strife, racial segregation and discrimination, subordination and exclusion.

The objective of this paper is to provide possible applications, in terms of theories and interpreting interviews, of how the theory of Ubuntu can be applied today, to curb the challenge of patriarchy in South African society. The phenomena discussed in this paper will contribute to the discourse on women issues, including femicide, which is a problem that South African society is faced with.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach, based on an explorative and a descriptive design, was used to explore how, through the experience of the elderly, Ubuntu values can be used to remedy societal issues like patriarchy. Oral historical conversations (structured interviews) were conducted with Xhosa community elders in the districts of KwaBaka (Mount Frere), eGcuwa (Butterworth) and Idutywa in the Eastern Cape province. Finnegan (2003: xvii) writes that oral historical conversations transmit information from one generation to the next and this lies at the heart of culture and memory. The oral traditions that are encoded in these speech forms can become threatened when elders die or when livelihoods are disrupted. Seidman (2013: 9) suggests that interviewing shows an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. The selection criteria for the participants were guided by the research question and the fact that people from the age range of 70-85years are expected to have more information on how, through ubuntu, issues like patriarchy could be addressed and how this was done in the olden days.

Table 1: Data sample (Participant by town, gender and age)

| Town | Participants | Male | Female | Age |
|-------------|--------------|------|--------|---------|
| Idutywa | 1 | | 1 | 73 |
| Butterworth | 2 | | 2 | 78 & 82 |
| Mount Frere | 1 | 1 | | 85 |
| | 1 | 1 | | 82 |

Data collection took place in November 2014 in eGcuwa (Butterworth), kwaBhaca (Mount Frere) and Idutywa, in the Eastern Cape. The semi-structured interviews were recorded and conducted in isiXhosa to ensure that the elders could comfortably express their views. Sampling was easy, because of this researcher's familiarity with the villages, where the respondents lived. A total of five (two males and three females) elderly people were interviewed. Interviews were scheduled to take a day or two, because these were elderly people, so they were given as much time as they wanted. A number of issues were considered about the participants. Because the elders were frail and the state of their health was important, the interviews were scheduled for midday. They were also given the opportunity to introduce themselves according to their clan names, as is customary among isiXhosa-speaking people. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any time during the research. Consent was granted to audio record the interviews and they were transcribed and analysed, as described by (Creswell, 2009).

Four themes that underpinned the topic covered in the interviews, which guided the questions, and sub-questions were posed. These are:

- i. Ubuntu, as a worldview and normative principle.
- ii. Ubuntu, as a notion of African social justice, thus, the aim was to elicit, among others, community elders' view on (a) crime, assault, domestic violence, rape, attempted murder; (b) the treatment of women and children; (c) judgements by the chief's council; (d) perceptions that justice was being served; (e) the treatment of people with disabilities; and (f) the treatment of children.
- iii. Ubuntu, as a public policy, thus, the aim was to understand the ways in which communities were organised, in the past, (a) to deal with conflict over pastures or contested farmland; when rules pertaining to public order were breached; (b) managed

- social and cultural events and celebrations; (c) coordinated development initiatives; and (d) forged collaborative relations with neighbours.
- iv. Ubuntu, as a pedagogical principle, thus, the aim was to explore ways for communities to educated young people to relate to others through the adoption of Ubuntu dispositions, norms and values.

Data from the semi-structured interviews was analysed according to the process previously described. It is important to highlight, from the onset, that qualitative data is analysed in many ways. In this regard, Patton (2002, p. 432) says, “Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation. Guidance yes, but no recipe.” Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p. 3) reiterate that there are multiple practices and possibilities of analysis that qualitative researchers may employ. What links all approaches is a central concern with transforming and interpreting qualitative data – in a rigorous and scholarly way – in order to capture the complexities of the social world we seek to understand. It is, therefore, in this context that data analysis was approached in this paper. The research team adhered to the above principles during the oral historical conversations. These included fair and just treatment of participants, guarantees of confidentiality and non-disclosure of participants’ identities. In the Eastern Cape, during interviews, the following was explained to the elders in isiXhosa, as per UNISA’s (2013) *Policy on Research Ethics*:

Imiqathango ke xa sisenza olu dliwano ndlebe yale mfuna –lwazi yo Buntu yeyokuba sifumane isivumelwano kwabo bathi bavume ukuthatha inxaxheba. Kufanele bavume Kuqala, kwaye bazi ukuba nanini na xa befuna ukunqumama ekuphenduleni imibuzo bavumelekile. Ukwanelungelo lokurhoxa xa nangaliphi ixesha usiva ukuba ayikuphathi kakuhle imibuzo. Okokugqibela igama lakho alisayi kukhankanywa kwimiphumela yale mfuna-lwazi.

(Participants are advised to give their consent for the interview to take place and this is one of the guidelines when conducting interviews about Ubuntu. They have a right not to continue with the interview or answer a question at any time they feel uncomfortable. Names will not be mentioned in any output of the interview.)

Below is a presentation of the findings and an analysis of the semi-structured interviews. In the following section, the discussion of the findings will show how the above-mentioned themes were addressed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

As noted in the opening section, Ubuntu, as a policy, is associated with morals and the willingness to “take care of the others” (Letseka, 2013; Mabhovula, 2011 & Mokgroro, 1998). Reference was also made to Broodryk, (2002, p. 13), who views Ubuntu as a “comprehensive ancient African worldview based on the values of humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values”. The findings in respect of patriarchy and Ubuntu are Ubuntu as a form of normative justice, Ubuntu as communal way of living and sharing, Ubuntu as notion of caring for the vulnerable in society and Ubuntu as a vehicle of caring for the poor.

(i) *Ubuntu as of normative justice*

Based on the understanding of Ubuntu, as a worldview of normative justice, participant 1 (male, aged 83) was asked about his understanding of Ubuntu, and his response was:

Ubuntu kaloku ibikukukhathela abanye abantu kuthi nokuba umntu uyagwetya xa efunayniswe enetyala, ohlwaywe ngokulingene nesenzo sakhe eso solwaphulo-mthetho. Isigwebo ke besenzelwa ukuba anagphinde one, ingasikuko ukuba uyabulawa.

(Ubuntu was shown by looking after people even when a person has committed an offence. The punishment meted out was equated to the offence. The aim was to deter the person from committing the offence again, not to kill the person.)

When the same question was asked to the participant 2 (female, aged 78), she indicated the importance of sharing and communality:

Ubuntu kaloku yinto apha youkuba umntu abe negalelo ebomini, aphile nanbanye abantu. Ukuba umntu usisityebi unezinto, uye aphe abo basweleyo. Kungoko ke kde kubekho ntetho ithi apha esiXhoseni: "Umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu."

(My understanding of Ubuntu is that every person has been created to live harmoniously with others. For example, if a person is rich, he/she is supposed to share with those that are poor. That is why, in the Xhosa culture, there is even the saying: "A person is because of others.")

(ii) *Ubuntu as a way communal living and sharing*

The notion that Ubuntu is about sharing cuts across the genders in these interviews and with the people in the Southern African region. Sharing means being in touch with the community and serves as a moral viewpoint. Mabovula (2011), on the topic of Ubuntu, gives an example of how things are and used to be done in African indigenous settings. According to Mabovula (2011), when problems occurred, people used to come together, they would share ideas, and all the community members would contribute to find solutions.

(iii) *Ubuntu as form of protection of others*

From the interviews, it is established that in the past, based on Ubuntu, men were not only playing a leadership role, but also acted as protectors in the community - men were protectors of both women and children. On the protection of women, participant 2 (male, aged 85) said:

Umntu ongumama ebehlonitshwa kakhulu sisizwe sonke, ethobekile exatyisiwe kwaye endilisekile. Ubesaziwa ukuba ungunozala wesiswe.

(A woman was well loved and respected, because she is a nurturer of the nation.)

(iv) *Ubuntu as a means of caring for the poor*

Responding on a question about how men protected female children, girls specifically, participant4(female, aged 82) indicated that:

Intombazana kwa isakhula ibizazi ukuba iyityatyambo, nto leyo ke iphathwa kakuhle. Bekuthi ngexa lesivuno,kuqinisekiswa yilali ukuba abahlolokazi kunye neenkedama bayabonelelwa nabo.

(A young girl was referred to as a flower. The reason was that a flower is treated well, and looked after, so that it can grow well and remain beautiful. The village men will make sure that caters for orphans and widowers during harvest time).

This is a confirmation of the way in which that society and men in particular, viewed women as flowers to beautify their homes. Mkandawire (2005) concurs with this by arguing that women in some African societies, especially before and after colonisation, were not treated equally as men. Cultural issues, like marrying off younger women to older men and polygamy, subjected women to perpetual domination by men. In this case, Mkandawire (2005) also blames African intellectuals in failing to address the historical impact of colonisation and the patriarchal system that women in some African societies, especially before and after colonisation, were not treated equally as men. Cultural issues, like marrying off younger women to older men and polygamy, subjected women to perpetual domination by men. In this case, Mkandawire (2005) also blames African intellectuals in failing to address the historical impact of colonisation and the patriarchal system that colonisation brought.

DISCUSSION

Although the interviewees confirmed that men occupied positions of power, when it came to ownership of livestock and homesteads, that power was used to take care of women and children. Participant 5 (elderly female, 82 years) confirmed this, saying that:

Ukuba ungumhlolokazi abantu abangotata walowo mzi bebekulimela emasimini khonkuze ube nako ukutya.

(A widow would be taken care of by a man in the family and plough field for her, so that she can have something to eat.)

This action is the purest form of Ubuntu and a reflection of the role that the man would play in the society in the olden days. The argument here is that although society was patriarchal, women and children were taken care of. In today's South African society, there is a Bill of Rights, which enshrines the equality of all in the country. Ubuntu values are associated with democracy and the Bill of Rights (Makwanyane, 1995). Therefore, this means that the recent incidents of violence against women and children are foreign to the concept of Ubuntu. As confirmed by the elders in these interviews, in the past, although there were different roles for men and women in society, men were not perceived as a threat to women and children. The elders argue that gender-based violence, which is so prevalent in South Africa today, is because people have lost Ubuntu

CONCLUSION

This paper drew on the study undertaken by the Eastern Cape chapter of the NRF, namely "Archaeology of Ubuntu", which explores the relationship between Ubuntu and patriarchy in the olden days. The data collection method used in this research, was through interviews (oral historical conversations), which were conducted with five Xhosa elders in Mount Frere,

Idutywa and Butterworth, in the Eastern Cape. The elders were two males, aged between 80 and 85, and 3 females, aged between 66 and 80. The “Archaeology of Ubuntu” project is based on the principle that community elders are the source and custodians of African knowledge; hence, they were relevant for this paper.

In this paper, I discussed the two phenomena of Ubuntu and patriarchy to establish how Ubuntu can be utilised to remedy the challenges of patriarchy in our society today, especially regarding abuse of women and children. Central to the concept of Ubuntu is a common understanding of the values of humanness, community, empathy and sharing. I have argued that although patriarchy has been part of society, the men looked after women and children, according to the elders. Incidents of rape and the murder of children and women, as is the case in South Africa today, were not prevalent. From the interactions with the elders, it emerged that the scourge of femicide (killing of women by their partners) and gender-based killings in our society are a result of a society that has abandoned the values of Ubuntu. On the educational front Ubuntu approach needs to form a cornerstone of ensuring that education curriculum embraces the values of the society. Policy makers, researchers and professional organisations have to embrace and incorporate Ubuntu principles for betterment of the society they operate in.

There is a need to establish community gatherings, where elders are given an opportunity to share their experiences on how the Ubuntu philosophy can help South African society to deal with the current social ills.

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