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# Learning from Ikibiri and Ubuntu to Decolonise Social Work Research in Higher Education

*Jill Childs, Omar Mohamed, Nick Pike, Susan Muchiri, Jody Bell, Alayna Dibo and Alexis Ndabarushimana*

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This article explores the foundation of a joint research project between social work (SW) colleagues at Hope Africa University in Burundi, and Oxford Brookes University in the United Kingdom (UK). It considers the destructive impact of colonialism on indigenous SW practices in Burundi setting out an argument for decolonisation of the SW curriculum both in Burundi and the UK. Drawing on the work of Mbembe and the traditional concepts of Ikibiri and Ubuntu, the article sets out a framework for cross-cultural collaboration not dominated by western colonial ideas and works towards the Global Agenda for SW. Potential barriers, and solutions to collaborative working are identified and discussed.

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## Introduction

Collaboration between academic institutions to support educational developments and research, particularly between institutions in the global north and global south, provides a range of opportunities to gain experience in international cooperation, strengthen capacities, and produce high-quality innovative outcomes. However, it challenges all those involved to reflect on the balance of power in relationships. For example, in African countries, this could be legacies of colonial power relations which continue to permeate the production of knowledge about the continent, the countries of Africa, its peoples, and societies. The issue of how to acknowledge and mitigate against the oppressive relationships of those working in East Africa, has rarely been discussed in academic literature. Therefore, power dynamics in mutually based exchanges in collaborative work will be reflected upon. The sharing of good

practice around the co-production between UK based and Burundi based SW academics in collaborative research is worthy of exploration. This links to the Global Agenda (GA) for Social Work Theme 3, Promoting Environmental and Community Sustainability (International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], International Council on Social Welfare [ICSW], and International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] 2018).

The aim of this paper is to explore the challenges, opportunities and dynamics which presented whilst undertaking a joint research project between Hope Africa University, Bujumbura, Burundi and Oxford Brookes University in the UK. The collaborative SW research project draws on Mbembe's (2016) work reflecting on dynamics of power sharing and co-production and that of Ikibiri, an indigenous Burundi model of bringing people together to achieve a given outcome (Muchiri, Murekasenge, and Claver 2019). Experiences of both UK and Burundian based SW and psychology academics are critiqued to understand parameters for effective SW research between partners in the global north and global south. The research project was funded through the Global Challenges Research Fund [GCRF] (UK Research and Innovation) funding, aimed to develop collaborations addressing United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 3, 'Good Health and Wellbeing'. The project's focus was on the development of an online peer mentoring programme between students in Burundi and the UK, focusing on the capacity for intercultural peer exchange. This involved the use of buddying groups to allow for an understanding of one another's' cultures.

A visit to Rwanda in 2018, led to the collaboration between Hope Africa University and Oxford Brookes. Colleagues in Africa advocated the use of inspirational African indigenous practice models, such as Ubuntu and Ikibiri, in their teaching of SW. This led to the idea of using indigenous models to inform the development of the teaching philosophy in the UK. 'Creating a place to inhabit', as a concern to change the curriculum to become more inclusive, using indigenous voices (Mbembe 2016) as a basis for achieving greater equity for students. Initially, Oxford Brooke's aim was to seek to better understand and address the differing outcome and awarding gap, between white and racially minoritised students (Universities UK and National Union of Student 2019). However, this developed into a commitment to producing a SW curriculum which would no longer privilege white anglo-centric approaches to learning and practice, drawing on indigenous models of practice from the global south. In addition, the importance of laying foundations for high-quality future research with partners, acknowledging ethical dilemmas and practical ways to overcome obstacles was discussed.

### ***Global Agenda for Social Work***

The Global Agenda for Social Work (GASW) has been developed to strengthen the profile of SW, to enable SWs to make a stronger contribution to policy

development (Jones and Truell 2012). It aims to unite SW and social development efforts around the world and highlight the role of SW in addressing the UNs Sustainable Development Goals (Rice, Fisher, and Moore 2022). The GASW 2020-2030 (IFSW 2020) highlights the following themes: co-building inclusive social transformation and Ubuntu: strengthening social solidarity and global connectedness. This paper aims to spearhead the GASW themes of co-operation and co-building social transformation around developing and valuing indigenous knowledge, drawing on the practice principles of Ubuntu and Ikibiri.

### **Context**

Due to the catastrophic impact of European colonialism on African society, a range of community care models have been adopted from western principles. A history of these practices and a comparative framework for understanding their adoption in the current project will be utilised. The pre-colonial Great Lakes region (modern Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Uganda) possessed complex kinship-support systems capable of treating the most vulnerable members of society (Apt and Gricco 1994). Many of these forms of social welfare were family or kin-based, whilst others were religious or cultural in nature (Midgley 1997). As Tandon (1996, 296) adds, pre-colonial Africa ‘was probably more democratic than most other parts of the world, including Europe’.

The colonisation of the Great Lakes region by European powers damaged, but did not destroy, these pre-colonial mutual-aid practices, as colonial governments imposed their social welfare models on the region, despite having limited local knowledge. European missionaries further established schools and vocational training, an important prerequisite for today’s professionalised SW, albeit to ‘Christianise’ and ‘civilise’ the region, rather than adapt to local customs (Darkwa 2007). Despite the very real idealism of many colonial philanthropists and educators, SW in post-colonial Africa remains a distinctly colonial enterprise, developed in Western Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Lambert and Lester 2004; Nikku 2020).

Colonised initially by Germany (1891-1918) and then Belgium (as part of Ruanda-Urundi, 1918-1962), Burundian SW largely fitted this pattern before achieving independence in 1962. De-colonisation, however, brought with it a new set of challenges as UN promoted SW programmes across Africa, encouraged transplanted western SW practices, rather than adopting culturally sensitive local evidence-based practices (Kendall 1995). This led to a significant prevalence of professional imperialism, with the imposition of western theories and practice methods as a prescription for the economic and social development for the global south (Midgley 1981). African SW practitioners, trained in theories and practice, based on western models and influenced by colonial orientalisng narratives of their own societies, continued to replicate colonial

assumptions as direct colonisation gave way to new forms of cultural imperialism (McLeod 2000; Nandy 1988; Said 1979).

### ***Westernism, Indigenisation and Africanisation of Social Work***

The impact of the western bias in the curriculum began to shift with the creation in the 1970s of the Association of Social Work Education in Africa (ASWEA) through which African-based SW educators began to discuss replacing the SW curriculum focussed on ‘western’ methods with more culturally relevant, African-centred SW interventions (ASWEA 1986). In addition to practitioners, SW theorists developed a range of methods to mitigate the problems of western-based, colonially infused SW practices in African contexts. These included the incorporation of pre-existing cultural values and local social and religious practices (Spitzer, Twikirize, and Wairire 2014). In this sense, decolonised SW demands exploration, development, deployment, and analysis of culturally specific theories and practices through local, empirically based knowledge; as opposed to universal, internalised, or standard theories and practices (Gray and Coates 2010). Muchiri, Murekasenge, and Claver (2020, 18) highlights that ‘the use of indigenous approaches in contemporary social work can lead to better communities and to a better understanding by social workers of the community in which they are working’.

### ***Indigenisation of Social Work***

There is a consistent call to ensure that SW and the education curriculum should be developed to reflect African social contexts, and approaches to SW practice, should not just be restricted to western approaches (Hollis-English 2017; Ibrahima and Mattaine 2019; King, Bokore, and Dudziak 2017; McInnes 2013; Olaore and Drolet 2017; Veta and McLaughlin 2022). Many of these scholars explore the significance and benefits of diverse knowledge bases, therefore highlighting the importance of indigenising SW. Evidencing the value in learning from indigenous knowledge and wisdom is imperative, to aid in culturally and contextually relevant knowledge. Deconstructing understanding of the colonial legacy is needed, where indigenous populations are left feeling disconnected and removed from their ancestral beliefs, culture, and ways of being. Ibrahima and Mattaini (2019), argue that decolonisation of SW requires challenging dominant models of practice and research identifying the the importance of integrating local language, landscapes, and social structures. Olaore and Drolet (2017) found that in Nigeria, using indigenised practices were effective both for the indigenous populations, as well as descendants living elsewhere. Indigenising SW and valuing indigenous philosophies and

knowledge bases, ensures effective SW practice is created utilising locally based culturally and contextually relevant knowledge (McInnes 2013).

### ***Foundations of Traditional Concepts in Africa and Burundi: Ubuntu and Ikibiri***

Central to the development of indigenous knowledge is the concept of *Ubuntu*, a Nguni Bantu philosophy. Tutu (1999) explains that *Ubuntu* suggests that one's humanity is inextricably bound up with another, where a person is a person through other persons, which allows us to reflect on a notion of humble togetherness (Swanson 2014). *Ubuntu* promotes teamwork and collaboration, meaning this principle promotes group cohesiveness and support (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa 2019). Within East Africa, there is a strong culture based on traditional African communal values of reciprocity and mutual aid, founded on the principle of Ubuntuism (Mutua 2009).

In Burundi, community organisation has centred on the concept of *Ikibiri* ('coming together'). Nkurunziza, defined *Ikibiri* as teamwork aimed at the accomplishment of a given task in a short period of time (Muchiri, Murekasenge, and Claver 2019, 214). Working together is the main objective of an *Ikibiri* system. The *Ikibiri* system promotes mutual community support in a broad range of practices including farming, harvesting, conducting key life events such as weddings and funerals, economic empowerment, and maintaining community sanitation (Muchiri, Murekasenge, and Claver 2020). *Ikibiri* is a duty carried out together for a person in need of social support, founded on the ethic of *Ubuntu*, or humanity to others (Ong'ayo and Fransen 2010). The *nawe nuze* ('you are also welcome') community solidarity group, has promoted female economic empowerment through informal savings and credit. Set up and supported by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and UN agencies, *nawe nuze* strengthens women's economic autonomy and reduces vulnerability to transactional sex, early pregnancy and school dropout (Muchiri, Murekasenge, and Claver 2020).

Similar 'merry-go-round', self-help groups in nearby Kenya allow women to come together to pool financial resources to buy domestic utensils (Chitere 1994; Muchiri, Murekasenge, and Claver 2020). This enables SW practices of empowering the strengths of a community to come together to achieve outcomes based on shared goals, address social problems and issues through engaging with the resources, strengths and knowledge of local communities. Dialogue about *Ubuntu* and *Ikibiri* opens possibilities for wider consideration of theories, values and practice for SW, for example in comprehending the complexity of diverse social issues. Dialogue about the positive approaches and outcomes inherent in frameworks of *Ubuntu* and *Ikibiri*, have the potential to guide work to decolonise UK based SW teaching and research.

## ***Decolonisation***

The understanding of decolonisation we share as UK and Burundian academics can be adopted more widely than Africanisation or even indigenisation. This draws heavily on Mbembe's (2016) call to decolonise the university, and to replace current models with his vision of a 'pluriversity'. Mbembe (2016, 37) explores a pluriversity as an opposite to a Eurocentric model presumed to be universal and suggests that knowledge production should be open to epistemic diversity, of many different knowledge bases and epistemic traditions. This inspiration underpinned the research project. Mbembe (2016) is helpful in focusing on transcending disciplinarity and epistemic diversity, helping to guide aspirations as partners in research with an enhanced openness to a diversity of ideas, beliefs, and thought processes. As a paradigm this helped in thinking about some of the more practical aspects of the project. Collaboration has the prospect of bringing people together, to complete a given task. As researchers from different contexts come together it is important to understand some of the challenges that can work to undermine such collaboration, which links to the GA's Vision for SW (Jones and Truell 2012). For there to be progress, collaboration must be ongoing. However, there are often barriers affecting collaborative working.

## ***Barriers to Decolonisation and Collaborative Working***

Such barriers spring ultimately, both from the hegemonic thinking described earlier, and from differing primary cultural values. According to Pitta, Hung-Gay, and Isberg (1999), primary cultural values are transmitted to a culture's members by parenting and socialisation, education, and religion. There are also secondary factors that affect ethical behaviour. They include differences in the systems of laws across nations, accepted human resource management systems, organisational culture, and professional cultures and codes of conduct. As a result, this has an impact on cross cultural ethics and governance in research. Unpicking the learning from Pitta, Hung-Gay, and Isberg (1999), within this joint collaborative exercise, the academics involved needed to be mindful of the influence of their own primary cultural values and open to each other's cultures.

The biggest challenge was of hegemonic thinking, or what is sometimes referred to as single story narratives (Adiche 2021), which creates stereotypes that are incomplete. One story becomes the only story, which is seen as a whole truth. There is a risk in research that adherence to single story narratives will lead to the continuing dominance of western SW theory (Payne and Askeland 2008) and the persistent devaluing of the Burundian perspectives. A shared commitment to the agreed values of Ubuntu and Ikibiri and empowerment to work together was needed to mitigate this challenge. Challenges also

arose around questions of intellectual property and protection of academic privilege. Whilst the general principle is that the co-authors of collaborative work are the first joint owners of the moral and economic rights to the work, collaborative work must be governed by the respective intellectual property laws of the country of origin of all participants.

### ***Ubuntu, Ikibiri and Mbembe's Work***

During this project effective models of power sharing built around *Ubuntu*, *Ikibiri* and Mbembe's (2016) work, aided the intention and agreement about how power was shared. Such a commitment to power sharing was an essential counterbalance to the persistent influence of privilege, especially the privileging of white, Eurocentric, assumptions (Harms Smith and Rasool 2020). In the case of SW research, the persistence of privilege often blinds participants to learning from indigenous and community groups (Tamburro 2013). Privilege is also intertwined with economic power, defined as the ability of countries, businesses, or individuals to enhance their standard of living, often at the expense of others. It increases their freedom to make decisions that benefit themselves alone and reduces the ability of any outside force to reduce their freedom (Amedeo 2020). Thus, in this research collaboration, economic power was a challenge when deciding prioritised decisions. The funder placed the onus on the UK partner to lead on holding the funds, and this posed particular challenges, as to where equity prevailed.

Prioritising decision-making extended beyond the intellectual hierarchy and encompassed the day-to-day practicalities, not exclusive to decolonising SW research, but universal to international collaboration. Geographical distances, time and technology all provided opportunities, but also competing pressures. The geographic location of the teams resulted in compromises from working across different time zones. All participants had external workloads and developing a mutual understanding of competing priorities was needed. The temptation to problem solve the practical arrangements meant we could have ended up working in silos, or with one partner dictating the schedule. The challenge was to ensure that schedules were a shared endeavour and not a replication of colonial expectations.

Virtual collaboration took place *via* email, online faculty forums, virtual learning communities, online mailing lists, and other forms of communication facilitated by technology (Schieffer 2016). The benefit of modern technology meant we could utilise virtual platforms when addressing practical issues. The project required a high level of virtual collaboration learning and reflection on common experiences (Hu et al. 2011). Technological and social media applications were facilitated to allow team members to communicate and dissipate challenges. However, the project was overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO 2022). It is in the context of the pandemic that the teams found



their plans for in-person collaboration restricted by shifting government regulations. Furthermore, quarantine regulations affecting international travel meant a reliance on virtual meetings.

### ***Reflections on the Global Agenda***

This research has highlighted the need to spearhead the GA themes around promoting indigenous knowledge such as Ubuntu and Ikibiri, to improve understanding of cross-collaboration across global SW contexts, by reflecting on the challenges of doing so. The overarching message that cross-collaboration founded on indigenous philosophies and meaningful and mutual respect for each other's cultures and understanding is needed. The need to adapt practice, has led to work on developing a list of proposed solutions. This includes a need to address the inequalities created by privilege and economic status by drawing on a non-westernised paradigm. The decision to use Ubuntu and Ikibiri as a lens, new to those from the UK, was a conscious decision to shift the power through shared knowledge. This was achieved through discussion, reflection, and self-examination to identify personal positions and learn about each other's perspectives; working together to create a shared narrative. Thus, presenting an opportunity to learn from our different contexts and cultural understandings of power and leadership.

Drawing on Mutsonziwa (2020)'s work on evaluating Ubuntu, helped the team create a framework to keep focussed on the importance of developing a shared narrative. This supports the evaluation of other indigenous philosophies, such as Ikibiri. This has the potential to reframe the project to address inequalities in relation to privilege and economic status. This links to maintaining an ongoing dialogue to build a community of learning, which extends beyond the focus of specific decision making. The target being to focus on relationships and connectedness between all parties. This enables everyone to feel their contribution is valued equally and confident to challenge each other when needed. The positive eldership inherent in the Ubuntu evaluative tool which focuses on humanness, interconnectedness and compassion, frames an opportunity of developing ground rules and of achieving reflective pauses throughout. With a project as complex as this, reflective pauses were essential. The Covid-19 pandemic and the requirement for online working and shared platforms, inadvertently created the opportunity to achieve a practical reflective pause. However, the consequent issues of digital poverty for students were another potential barrier and taking a collaborative approach to develop digital literacy to enhance relationships enabled all participants to contribute equally.

The constant consistent feedback from student participants, along with the support from both the teaching teams and the specific aims of the project, helped to shape the project as it evolved. The challenges faced by the

buddying groups involved language barriers, difference in time zones, lack of access to technology to support attendance/participation in meetings. These barriers created anxiety among members and dropouts. The evaluation of this project will be completed through an Ubuntu questionnaire (Mutsonziwa 2020), evaluating: humanness and respect for others, interconnectedness and relationships, and compassion and concern for others.

Collaborative activities need to be located within the existing universities' curricula to enable contributors to benefit from existing technological facilities and minimise the risk of digital inequality. Thus, promoting that idea that everyone has similar opportunities to contribute. Timetabling sessions into student learning, promoted active participation between all contributors and raised the profile of the research. The ultimate success of this project will include students learning how to create an environment of mutual collaboration and respect, and a more inclusive anti racist environment. Thus, this is intended to promote open mindedness and intercultural awareness, to inspire a shift away from the emphasis in SW education of white western perspectives. In this cross-cultural collaborative research, Ubuntu and Ikibiri are principles which challenged and expanded the modern global SW profession to question the western philosophical bases on which it was largely built (Mayaka and Truell 2021, 8). According to these principles, no one is superior in that we all need each other to be able to accomplish the task at hand. Moreover, the variety of cultural experiences and differences in heritage and the influence that this had on participants, meant that participants experienced a rich knowledge base in their interactions with one another.

## Conclusion

As a way forward to address the challenges associated with power and power sharing, this project was able to draw on a particular element of Mbembe's (2016) work focussing on the meaning of decolonisation in HE. Moreover, it scrutinises history and critiques how access is achieved, with the aspiration of reversing bureaucracy to create a pluriversity (Mbembe, 2016, 36-37). Together with Ubuntu and Ikibiri this paradigm has the potential to build on the idea that power structures must be individually scrutinised, in specific contexts, before being 'dissolved'. Furthermore, a pluriversity may lead to a pluralism of equally valued/valid perceptions. Our overall aim going forward will be to explore the capacity for intercultural peer exchange with SW students, both in Burundi and the UK. The complexities of negotiating the inherent power imbalances in the institutions which operate with traditional HE pressures and constraints, means the challenges for developing relationships going forward should not be underestimated or oversimplified. Through our partnership, we have built working relationships that enable us to actively learn from indigenous practices. These ongoing relationships built on Ubuntu

and Ikibiri values, will ultimately guide us in collaboration to inform future practice and research.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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