Article

Deconstructing Social Work in Africa: An autoethnographic approach

by

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Abstract

In the dominant debate, dialogue and literature, there is an assumption that Africa had no form of social work before colonisation. In this article, we deal with the historical question pertaining to the existence of social work in Africa, and deconstruct the term 'social work', its origin and meaning in an African context. We employ an autoethnographic approach to describe the knowledge and skills known as social work in African communities using Indigenous Knowledge. We conclude that the Western epistemological paradigm facilitated the idea that social work was non-existent in the pre-colonial era, which distorted and distracted knowledge and skills construction in post-modernism theory and practice.

Keywords: social work, deconstruction, autoethnography, Indigenous Knowledge, decoloniality, Africa

Introduction

The history of social work as both an academic discipline and practice-based profession has been well-documented, and can be traced as far back as in the early 20th century. The origin and development of social work have been clearly linked with the work of Mary Ellen Richmond and Jane Adams as the founding mothers of professional social work. In social work literature, it is agreed that social work started as charity work through casework, and developed to address the social question of increasing poverty in Europe (Elizabeth, 2004; Stuart, 2013). In the dominant debate, dialogue and literature, there is consensus that social work originated in Europe and North America (Bremmer, 1956; Rodgers, 1998; Stuart, 2013; Simon, 1994; Lymbery, 2005).   Literature on decolonial, human rights, critical and radical debate indicates that social work is a Eurocentric profession (Smith, 2014; Hall, 2005; Schiele, 1996; Reisch & Andrews, 2002).

Throughout history, social work has been marked by disputes about its identity, and its role in changing times. For decades, counter colonial hegemonic discourses on the history and nature of social work show that social work is practiced uniquely in Africa due to Indigenous families and community-focused living, while social work theory uses Western epistemologies dominated by the ideology of individualism. Western social work models continue to guide social work practices, because social workers are mostly preoccupied with the provision of short-term services due to the survival needs of the clients and acute poverty issues (Gray, Kreitzer & Mupedziswa, 2014; Green, 2008).

However, the debates on decolonisation and Afrocentricity in social work prompt the need for discourse that will deconstruct the history of social work in Africa from pre-colonial to colonial narratives, as well as post-colonial social work.

In this article, we deal with the historical question about the existence of social work in Africa, and deconstruct the term 'social work', its origin and meaning in an African context. We use an autoethnographic approach to describe knowledge, methods and skills known as social work in African communities using Indigenous Knowledge.

Social work in Africa

History of social work: Popular history

The colonisation period in Africa is a phenomenon which took place from 1400 to the 1960's. The colonisation of Africa by European powers was fuelled by several factors. Among these was the emergence of the industrial revolution, which brought about unprecedented change in the socio-economic status of European countries. The revolution also led to increase in production. Therefore, there was a need for European powers to go outside for food and additional raw materials. African colonisation was mainly economic, political and religious. In 1788, the creation of the African Association was done by wealthy Englishmen, as they travelled to 'find' the fabled city of Timbuktu and the course of the Niger River they started to record details of markets, goods and resources for the wealthy philanthropists who financed their trips. The exploration of Africa lends itself to an exploitation of the continent through legitimate trade, which was a time of plantations and cash crops, dedicating the region's workforce to producing rubber, coffee, sugar, palm oil and timber for Europe (Shonibare, 2019). According to Nkrumah, colonialism is: 'The means of the European powers to satisfy their ends, the exploitation of the subject territories for the aggrandizement of the metropolitan countries; they were all rapacious, they all repressed and despoiled, degraded and oppressed' (Nkrumah, 1963: xiii). Thus, African exploitation resulted in inequality, economic and technological backwardness, tribalism and parochial national interest, the insecurity of lives and property, as well as poverty, disease and illiteracy, will remain unabated without a strong recourse to a sound and purposeful leadership, i.e., a leadership that will be sincerely patriotic, rationalistic, utilitarian, detribalistic and forthright in the pursuit of collective set goals (John, 2014:22).

Social work as a profession in Africa was introduced in the 1960s. Its history in Africa is deeply linked with three major activities: the work of missionaries from Europe and other parts of the world, African mutual aid societies, and the colonisation of the continent by external powers (Chitereka, 2009:145). The primary role of social work during the missionary era was to address the religious and spiritual needs of African people through informal work (Darkwa, 1999). In South Africa, welfare focused on ('white') orphans and juveniles, with an orphanage established by the Dutch

Reformed Church in 1814 (Smith, 2014). The church contributed to the development of social work by helping people living in poverty with food and clothing. During the missionary era, social work was promoted by missionaries and the colonial administrators, not solely as a mechanism of promoting human well-being, but also as a mechanism of social control (Kaseke, 2014).

The history and origin of social work in Africa is intertwined with historical records of colonisation, imperialism, industrialisation and mining revolution, political structural changes, white supremacy and power structures, conditions of poverty and social conflict. Various authors (Smith, 2014; Bundy, 1992; Lester, 1996; Worden, 2008) trace the history of social work in Africa to socio-political events of specific countries, which are linked with significant colonial and post-colonial events. Smith (2014) submits that the history of social work is interwoven with the history of colonisation and imperialism. During the colonial era in Africa, traditional forms of social relations based on community care rooted in Ubuntu philosophy were disrupted and denigrated, and social work practice grew from paternalism and welfare policies that favoured whites as the welfare elite, particularly in South Africa (Patel, 2005).

In South Africa, the development of the social work profession is linked with the colonial and apartheid policy framework of racial exclusion that favoured care for the needs of white families (Smith, 2014). In Zimbabwe, social work developed as a response to resolving urban social ills such as crime, inequality, lack of health care services and destitution from the British colonial experience. During the country's colonial governance, it is argued that social work was used as a mechanism of social control, and did not address the root causes of these social ills (Kaseke, 1991). Tanga (2013) reported that social work in Lesotho was introduced during the colonial era by the British. In Eswatini, the Department of Social Services was established in 1952 as a structure initially mandated to respond to charity cases, such as poverty, malnutrition, food insecurity and unemployment (Kanduza & Mkhonza, 2003).

The history of social work in Africa is also linked with social issues experienced by African people in transition from the colonial experience to 'colonial independence'. During the colonial era, African people experienced enforced labour, land disposition and the introduction of cash crops, even to the neglect of food crops, thereby halting

inter-African trade. The socio-economic and political realities experienced by African people triggered the need for social workers. One of the primary triggers of the need for social work in Africa is malnutrition, poverty, food insecurity and unemployment. Iliffe (1987) argues that in pre-colonial Africa, poverty, malnutrition, food insecurity and unemployment rarely existed.

Based on the competing history of social work in Africa, it is argued that the first school of social work in Africa was established in Egypt: The Cairo School of Social Work in 1937 (Yiman, 1990). Currently, the International Federation of Social Workers- Africa (IFSW Africa, 2024) recognises 34 African partners with social work associations (Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Congo, Congo (DRC), Djibouti, Egypt, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Eswatini, Tanziania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe). However, there are several African countries such as Mozambique, the Gambia, Ethiopia and the Ivory Coast with social work as a profession, but not affiliated with the IFSW.

History of social work in Africa: Unpopular history

Social work has historically always been looked at from a dominant, hegemonic and Western viewpoint. Reisigl (2017) argues that a historical perspective means understanding the social, cultural, intellectual and emotional settings that shaped people's lives and actions in the past. However, the history of social work in Africa has often been recorded and investigated from a socio-political perspective without taking into account the cultural and intellectual settings of the African people. In the section below, we provide a history of social work from a few different lenses:

Pre-colonial social work

Before the term 'social work' and its practice became popular in the world, African people had their own forms of social support and social care, which was embedded into indigenous ways of engaging and confronting communal and personal issues. One of the African cultural forms of social support is the traditional culture of collectivism. Ibrahima and Mattaini (2019) describe collectivism as a cultural pattern

and a value system that emphasises the extended family, community, caste, tribes and related groups. For example, the Burundian pre-colonisation society was characterised by kinship that tied the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa together in a web of collaboration and interdependence (Timpson, Ndura & Bangayimbaga, 2014). In the Swati tribe, common food sharing poverty and psycho-social issues, such as communal planting for maize meals in communal land, which every member of the community had access to harvest when experiencing a food shortage (Mabuza & Mamba, 2022). The Swati people have extended families, which are significant in maintaining the welfare standards of its members by providing psychological, emotional, physical, economic and social support (Mabundza, 2021). In children without parents, no child is an orphan because of the belief that 'it takes a village to raise a child'.

In African communities, ways of problem-solving have always been based on customs rooted in the ethics of *Ubuntu* (humanity to others). The Ubuntu approach to communal ways of dealing with individuals and social issues is inextricably bound with characteristics of values of humanism, goodness, compassion, forgiveness, wisdom, empathy, generosity, hospitality and kindness (Timpson, Ndura & Bangayimbaga, 2014). Ubuntu is regarded as a persuasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness that individuals display to one another. It promotes a genuine harmony and continuity throughout the wider African human system (Mangaliso, 2001). In other African traditions, Ubuntu is considered integral to maintaining social cohesion among the different communities at the grassroots level.

Colonial social work

In South Africa, social work has its roots in coloniality by the British and Dutch which achieved gains for race-based mercantile capitalism through the violent enslavement of local people and the importation of thousands (Harms-Smith & Turton, 2023). In colonial social work, its identity has been characterised by promoting social systems imposed by colonial powers, such as services designed for European descendants. Harms-Smith and Turton (2023) argued that during the colonial period, social work was used to justify the violent enslavement of local people. Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo (2012) pointed out that social work in the colonial control was adopted to

facilitate 'civilisation and improvement of living conditions of the natives and to take control of as many territories as possible for the economic advancement of the colonial powers'.

Decolonial social work

Ibrahima and Mattaini (2019) expressed that decolonising social work requires becoming genuine, and returning to one's cultural roots for direction, which entails resistance to social work's 'West to the Rest' movement, which seeks to 'internationalise' and 'standardise' the profession. With decoloniality in social work practice and education, the focus is argued to be on the use of local language, respecting traditional authority, demonstrating cultural competence and attention to power dynamics, such as race, class and gender, the acknowledgment of structural issues, critical conscientisation and voice, i.e., Ubuntu (Harms-Smith & Rasool, 2020).

Literature in decolonial and indigenous social work practice in Africa revealed that some African countries such as Kenya, Burundi and Rwanda use indigenous approaches to social work. Twikirize and Spitzer (2019) provide an example of indigenous social work in Rwanda in the form of indigenous systems, such as *umugoroba w'ababyeyi* (parents' evening forum) and *ubudehe* (community-based poverty reduction), which was used to rebuild Rwanda by social workers. Twikirize and Spitzer (2019) further reveal that in Burundi, a system of community development, leadership and conflict resolution known as *ikibiri,* which is used as a model of organising the community, has historically existed in precolonial society. *Ikibiri* is considered as social care rooted in the indigenous African ways, which is equivalent to a social work knowledge base. In the next section, we deconstruct the term 'social work' in Africa.

Deconstruction of the term social work in Africa

Royle (2000:1) defines deconstruction as '*a method of critical analysis applied especially to literary texts, which, questioning the ability of language to represent reality adequately, asserts that no text can have a fixed and stable meaning, and that readers must eradicate all philosophical or other assumptions when approaching a*

text. To deconstruct the term 'social work' requires overcoming Eurocentric thinking (Spitzer, 2014).

Literary deconstruction of the term social work

The globally accepted definition of the term 'social work' is that:

> 'Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being.' (IFSW and the IASSW, 2014)

Some academic critics posited that social work must critically review its meaning, the implications of the meaning and the profession's commitments (Ornellas, Spolander & Engelbrecht, 2018). Sewpaul (2013:12) argues that it is not possible to have a single definition of social work, and to accommodate the particularities of every context. Sewpaul (2013) further argues that regions and/or nation states should have a brief, concise and aesthetically appealing definition, which will be easily translatable into different languages while encouraging the amplification of the definition at regional and/or national levels.

The term 'social work' holds different meanings, and can be defined differently in diverse African languages. In some African languages, social work holds no direct meaning, but has the closest meaning to what it would mean. For instance, in Swahili, social work would hold the closest meaning to *Kazi za kijamii.* This means services to others in the community, and not as a professional identity and conduct. Therefore, social work would not mean work in a professionally qualified sense but services to people in a spirit of humanity and helping each other without expecting remuneration. It would also mean giving services to people without necessarily being a qualified social worker or voluntary accredited services. In *Xhosa* language, social work means *ntlalontle*, which means well-being and living well. In the isiZulu language, the term 'social work' means *zenhlalakahle,* which is translated as staying well and living well.

In Africa, the term 'social work' is not defined based on professional practice, but rather the service actions that promote the well-being and well-being of communities.

Debates on genuine profiles of social work in African contexts still caution against inherent attitudes of dominant Western hegemony (Healy & Link, 2011; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). Thus, engaging with the African profile of social work can counter the dominant identity of social work in Africa, which is deeply rooted in Western ideology. Royle (2000) postulates that there is no stable meaning to words and actions, and one must eradicate all philosophical or other assumptions when approaching a term; hence, interrogating the term 'social work' requires a perspective that has no stable meaning. African communities are categorised in terms of diverse cultures and ethnicities. The term 'social work', and the use of the African philosophy of Ubuntu, will be applied differently with different values, but aimed at achieving similar outcomes. In the *Swati* context, *Ubuntu* is referred and applied in community relationships in acts of service that show respect, kindness, equality, relatedness, justice, reciprocity and collaboration. The *Xhosa* context of *Ubuntu* in the promotion of well-being and well-living is shown through community ways of togetherness and collaborative work. In the next section, the methodology used in the article is presented.

Approach and methods

In an effort to deconstruct social work identity from an African viewpoint, we needed to use a methodology that allows us to analyse our personal experiences through our understanding of our cultural experiences. This article employs the autoethnographic approach, which enables first-person narratives, self-observation and self-reflection of the author's experiences (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015). This approach or design involves personal autoethnographic narratives, which facilitate an understanding of activities in which one participates (Perumal et al., 2021). In this article, we analyse self-observational empirical material through the lens of Deconstruction theory. The autoethnographic inquiry follows several rules that legitimise the approach (Anderson, 2006). Firstly, in terms of the complete member researcher (CMR) status, autoethnographers must orient themselves (at least for significant periods) to document and analyse actions, as well as purposively engage in these actions. For us to qualify our view of the meaning of social work from our cultural and decolonial understanding, we needed to tell about both our orientation and identity. Secondly, in terms of analytical reflexivity, autoethnographers-as-

authors frame their accounts with personal reflexive views of the self. Their ethnographic data is situated within their personal experience and sense-making, where researchers attempt to scrutinise the interaction between themselves, the environment and other social factors. In the analysis of the meaning of social work, we use our personal experiences embedded with knowledge transferred from our great grandparents to our grandparents. Thirdly, the narrative visibility of the researcher's self is paramount because it should be visible and active in the text, and is attained by providing a plot and the opportunity for the reader to understand the story empathically (Zawadzki & Jensen, 2020). Finally, in terms of commitment to theoretical analysis, the defining characteristic of analytical social science involves the use of empirical data to gain insight into a broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. Zawadzki and Jensen (2020) add that the analysis of empirical data should apply to a wider set of social phenomena.

Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2015) allude to that the autoethnographic methodology is a process. In this article, we followed the following process: firstly, we retroactively and selectively wrote about our past experiences of what social work looked like in our native communities using journals. Secondly, we used audio recordings to recall, in hindsight, the social system of care. Thirdly, we compared and listened to each other's recordings to authenticate if the recordings contained personal experiences to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences. An autobiography must also illustrate new perspectives on personal experience finding and filling a 'gap' in existing, related storylines (Couser, 1997; Goodall, 2001).

In using the autoethnographic methodology, we faced limitations of emotional control as we reflected on personal experiences. Ellis (2009), Hooks (1994) and Keller (1995) point out that the autoethnographic methodology is dismissed by social scientific standards as being insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, analytical and too aesthetic, emotional and therapeutic. However, Holman-Jones (2005) argue that autoethnographers view research and writing as socially just acts, rather than being preoccupied with accuracy. The goal is to produce analytical and accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better. In the section below, we provide the theoretical framework of the study.

Theoretical framework

As critical social work educators of African descent, we explored a variety of theories and pedagogical approaches to guide our reflections. We identified the decolonising the mind theory to guide our reflections. Decolonising the mind theory is regarded as the brainchild of Kenyan-born Ngugi wa Thiongo in 1986 (Rani, 2022; Sharma, 2019). Ngugi (1986) argued several aspects of decolonising, in this article we use the aspects below to deconstruct social work identity in our reflections. Ngugi (1986) first argued that while Africans defeated colonialists who had stolen their land, their minds remained trapped and controlled by former colonisers. In the reflections, we attempt to disassociate our thinking from our colonial thinking on social work and its practice. The second argument made by the decolonising the mind theory is that colonial languages (English, French, etc.) play an important role in hierarchies and systems of oppression. In our reflections, we use our languages (isiSwati, isiZulu, and isiNdebele) to name social systems of care, and to authentically unpack social work from a deconstructed lens using our language and words, which we consider to lose meaning if translated into English. The third idea of the decolonising the mind theory is that Western ways of thinking, believing, acting and valuing still dominate Africans. In our reflections, dominant Western ideologies that form the identity of social work are challenged. The fourth idea by Ngugi (1986) is that Africans see African values, beliefs, languages and land as undesirable, uncivilised or unattractive. In our reflections, we use the idea to point out African values, beliefs and languages to deconstruct the meaning of social work in an African context. The fifth idea is that Christianity has been key in habituating Africans into Western ways. Our reflections use scholarly arguments to show the link between African social work development and Christianity. Lastly, Ngugi (1986) argues that Africa will remain colonised unless Western ways of being are shaded off. Building from Ngugi's (1986) ideas about decolonising the mind theory allowed us to search for a new meaning for social work in the African indigenous context, and to construct a social work identity that is not only responsive to the contextual problem of African people, but instead an identity relatable to local people.

Autoethnographic reflections

We reflected on the description of self, knowledge, methods and skills known as social work in our various African communities. We use narratives and experiences of those who came before us, our parents, grandparents and our great grandparents through stories and historical narratives, as well as tacit knowledge.

Complete Member Research Status

I am a first-generation male South African born of Mozambican parents who got displaced to South Africa during the Mozambican Civil War of 1977. I am a product of a village, someone who was raised by the village, and of the African philosophy, 'It takes a village to raise a child'. I consider myself as a representative of his ancestors, grandparents, brothers and sisters, and everyone who looks up to me. I am a social worker by profession. I am teaching social work in a South African university where I teach social work and community development theories. I am someone who grounds most of the teaching using decolonial, Afrocentric and indigenous theories in a contextual approach - ***Zibonele Zimba***

My name is Sinenhlanhla Nyoni. I am an African female from Mbuzini, Mpumalanga Province in South Africa. Mbuzini is situated on the borders of Eswatini and South Africa. I belong to the Swati Nguni tribe, which settled in Eswatini and Mpumalanga (before the separation of Swaziland and South Africa). I have family ties and ancestral lineage from both countries (Eswatini and South Africa), and claim my narrative, self-reflections and observation, in addition to the passing down of knowledge of the Swati culture from having ancestral ties from both countries. I represent the black African girl child. My grandfather was Bhobho Nkala, a well-known traditional healer in Mbuzini, Mpumalanga province, who was a polygamist with nine wives, 12 concubines and more than 60 children. It is this rich history of my family background which has made me passionate about indigenous social systems, and being an academic to contribute to this body of knowledge. In terms of my profession, I am a social worker, and currently I am a lecturer at the University of Johannesburg. I hold an Honours degree which I obtained in 2015, and a master's degree in social work (community development), which I obtained in 2019 from the University of Johannesburg. I am currently pursuing a PhD. Before joining the

University of Johannesburg, I worked in mental health institutions and more recently in the Department of Health - ***Sinenhlanhla Nyoni***

I am the daughter of a Zimbabwean Shona and Ndebele father, and a South African Zulu mother, who created and discovered their family lives and roots in the second largest city in Zimbabwe, Bulawayo. Born in 1990 as the last of five children, a sense of family orientation formed a pertinent foundation in my upbringing. My family life was deeply rooted in Christian principles and values, as my father was a Lutheran pastor and a Zimbabwean Military Chaplain, while my mother was a doting wife, evangelical activist and educator. Growing up straddled in the intersections of a Zimbabwean household, Ndebele, Shona and Zulu community, the system I grew up has shared similarities in the way in which we believed and practiced family unity, interdependence and interconnectedness. There was a shared sense of responsibility with family well-being, and the function of the family was upheld by the principles of Ubuntu. There is no denying that in growing up to become who I am as a family-oriented, spiritually grounded social worker and academic, I have been significantly shaped by learning from knowledge systems that were heavily entrenched in the Western knowledge systems, which have influenced a lot of my upbringing and worldview. In acknowledging this, it is hoped that personal experiences and shared stories of family and community traditions will help me explore the ways in which we can begin to deconstruct and understand indigenous forms of social work in a pre-colonial South Africa - **Nolwazi Shongwe**

Knowledge of social work from an African perspective

Zibonele Zimba - My knowledge of social work is based on my experience, observation and narratives of elderly people in the village of Driekoppies in Mpumalanga Province, which is situated on the borders of Mozambique and Eswatini. The knowledge of social work in my village has been based on lived village experiences, which is characterised by social problems experienced by the majority of the people in the village. Social challenges such as poverty, high risk of unemployment, child-headed households and a high rate of illiteracy were understood to be a village social challenge, rather than an individualised social problem. Social work was understood from a context of social care and a social

support perspective, which provided help to those who needed it. I knew social work as a social mutualism approach to problem-solving, which entailed that the village shared skills, knowledge, experiences and resources to resolve prevailing problems. For example, to deal with poverty in the village, elders called a village gathering to discuss the challenge. In the gathering, elders would decide collectively that the sharing of resources, such as land for farming and vegetation, is the correct approach to deal with poverty as a social collective. In my village, elders developed a collective practice of planting and growing indigenous food crops such as *amadumbe, libankane and ematsanga* for village sharing. Social work was based on social caring and indigenous ways of working with the village through trusted individuals, who involved the elderly people of the village, and those who worked close to traditional leadership and the village chief.

Sinenhlanhla Nyoni - I grew up knowing social work to be about helping, mutual aid and caring for those in need. This was not difficult for me, as in the African traditional setting mutual aid is part of the norms, values, morals and traditions instilled in an African child. In the Swati tribe, the extended family and kinship used to fulfil social welfare functions, as well as addressing individual problems and challenges such as poverty, infertility, mental health and spirituality. This extended family and kinship still fulfil social welfare functions in most communities in Eswatini. The role of a social worker in my own upbringing, and based on my own experience, was usually given or associated with a maternal figure. This is because women are entrusted to be nurturers, carers and mothers. Again, in an African community, it takes a village to raise a child. Thus, as a woman you mother different children biologically, spiritually, by adoption and by association. I acknowledge that male leaders played some roles like mediation in conflict resolutions, but social work was conceived as work which can be done by a woman.

When I think of a social worker in my immediate circle, which can be correlated with the micro/mezzo level, I think of my late maternal grandmother, who is called 'gogo' in isiSwati. Gogo was a very brilliant, knowledgeable and analytical person who spoke truth to power, but harsh if she had to be hard. She could solve problems for different genders and persons of different ages. She was not only a problem solver within her immediate family, but also for the entire community. She dealt with diverse

issues that were brought to her attention. One thing which was of interest to her is that secrets were also safe with her. This indicated the highest level of confidentiality, which was key to solving relationship problems in the community.

Common in many African families, Gogo plays a very significant and important role, and was regarded as a custodian of family traditions and a teacher of traditions and socially accepted ways of living, a mediator, an advocate, a peacemaker and a counsellor. To put it into context, the role of social work within my grandmothers' ways of engaging issues can be explained in the following ways: the first is the setup of a Swati extended family homestead.

In the traditional Swati homestead, there was a hut called *Indlu yaka gogo,* which used to be a beehive known as *Guca* in the *isiSwati* language. This house was built with sticks in the form of a circle. Women played a crucial role in the binding and thatching of the structure, using braided split reeds and grass. A tree trunk was used as a central support of the house, and the door was made very low so that when you enter you had to stoop. The floor of the house used to be smeared with cow dung. The material used to build the house made it remain cool in hot temperatures, while warm in winter. Symbolism shows that *Indlu yaka gogo* was a place of refuge, and a calm and peaceful atmosphere. *Indlu yaka gogo* was regarded as a special place, and seen as the cornerstone of the family, an important structure and a pillar to the running of the home. The hut served different purposes. Firstly, it was a storage place of the history, traditions, culture and norms of the family. Secondly, all important cultural practices aimed at spiritual, physical and psychosocial well-being, as well as preserving the culture and customs of the family, were performed in *Indlu yaka gogo*. For spiritual wellness, *Gogo* served as the medium of communication with ancestors and the living, through a process of communication with the former (*kuphahla)* to ask for their blessing of the children in case of infertility, luck to succeed in life, healing from sicknesses and other life stressors. For cultural preservation, *Indlu yaka gogo* served as a place for rituals (*imisimeto nemihambo),* where family traditions, culture and norms were enforced. For example, when a new bride (*malukatana*) joined a family, she was welcomed and educated about the family history, traditions and culture.

Having a maternal figure like Gogo, who held such power, wisdom and knowledge in the traditional Swati homestead, kept the family unit intact and ensured that members of the family were taken care of holistically.

Nolwazi Shongwe - Many of my own personal experiences of social care and well-being emanated from the unity seen in the family and the immediate community. The familial and neighbourly camaraderie and kinship manifested in being there for those in need whether emotionally, socially and/or fiscally, was organised by the capacity to be present for one another during distressing times, and to meet people at their point of need. I often experienced this in a process we called *'ukuhambelana,* which is derived from *ukuhamba,* which is 'to go' or 'to be present for'. This was done when a family had an illness in the family and needed support, or when a family had experienced a heavy ordeal or loss. This would be an experience taken on by the older members in the community to provide an opportunity for support and collective presence.

A great deal of what social work is concerns tasks of *'ukukhamela" (knowledge transfer),* which in indigenous conception was shared through oral traditions and folk tales. For example, fostering a holistic understanding of well-being that went beyond individual concerns. I recall fond memories of family weekend farm visits in *'Nyamayendlovu'*, sitting around a fire after long days of farming and cattle herding, and community engagements under the scorching sun, that often left one physically and emotionally drained. This would be the opportune time to sit around the fire to share a meal and stories that enlivened the mood, but more especially had a deeper meaning, centred around connection, support and education. This built a solid communal practice of oral tradition. The concepts of social care and social work were often seen to be practiced, especially by *abantu abadala* (the elders) and those in leadership positions in the community, e.g., *iNduna* (Chief) or *oThitsha* (Teachers). It was seen that this kind of care and concern and best practice came from those who had developed maturity and wisdom, and gone through life experiences.

Methods and skills associated with pre-colonial social work

In South Africa, colonisation is traced back to 1652 after the arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck. Social work is recorded to have been introduced in South Africa in 1900 for 'white' South African women and children. Indigenous people of South Africa had their own system of social care, methods and skills of engaging with social issues, which was dismantled by colonialism and exuberated by apartheid, which prohibited the recognition of native knowledge. In my village, methods of resolving social problems were embedded in indigenous principles of togetherness, harmony and humanity. The Ubuntu approach was used as a foundation to guide the process of resolving problems, and as a guiding code of interaction. For example, in my village during disputes and conflicts on various matters, Ubuntu is used to set the standards of engagements during the *Tinkhundla* hearing process*. Tinkhundla* is a name of a place in which disputes and conflict cases are heard by the elders of the village and trusted individuals or traditional leaders. To achieve resolution and agreements, the principle of Ubuntu was used to set up the importance of sharing communication during the dialogue process of disputes hearing. The Ubuntu approach of resolving problems was also used to encourage community members to listen to one another, and to seek an understanding of the different views and realities which caused the disputes. The approach was used to find common ground and assist communities to de-escalate tensions, and to work towards peaceful agreements - ***Zibonele Zimba.***

Healing and conflict resolution were essential skills, with individuals serving as mediators and facilitators in resolving disputes and restoring harmony. Elders often played a crucial role in this process, drawing upon their wisdom and experience to guide the community through challenges. Social work in pre-colonial Africa relied on an open dialogue and consensus-building like *ukuhla idale (humbling of self)* in the presence of *Inkosi* (traditional leader). The emphasis was on understanding the perspectives of others, fostering a sense of belonging, and addressing issues collectively.

Additionally, traditional healing practices often involving a combination of spiritual and herbal remedies, were integral in pre-colonial social work. Individuals with knowledge of medicinal plants and healing rituals played a vital role in promoting the physical

and mental well-being of the community. Pre-colonial social work in Africa was characterised by a communal approach rooted in the Ubuntu philosophy. The skills associated with this context revolved around communal healing, conflict resolution and traditional healing practices, thereby reflecting a holistic and interconnected understanding of well-being within the community. **Sinenhlanhla Nyoni**

Discussion

As decolonial social work educators, who are often critical of social work history and its identity in the African literature, we have used our reflections to deconstruct social work in Africa. We have based our reflection on three main questions: How do we describe ourselves? What did we grow up considering as social work'? What do we consider as social work methods in pre-colonial social work? Our reflections were themed on the identity of autoethnography below.

African identity and similar history

To deconstruct social work in Africa, we intentionally started by reflecting on our identity and history. Reflecting on our identity as Africans with a similar historical background was significant to help facilitate a deconstructed approach to social work from a native's point of view of our own voices and narratives. Our collective identity formation shares a similar complex history of displacement (Jaya, 2011). As we reflect, we recognised that we are defined by our ethnicity of Nguni descendants and our close link to one or more countries in Africa. We define ourselves based on our ancestral lineage. Zeleza (2006:14) postulates that the idea of an 'African' is a complex one with multiple genealogies and meanings, but that African identity is as much a reality as it is a construct whose boundaries – geographical, historical, cultural and representational, have shifted according to the prevailing conceptions and configurations of global racial identities and power, and African nationalism, including Pan Africanism.

Sinenhlanhla Nyoni's words echo the recognition and affirmation of being an African female with clear ties to her ancestors, culture and cross-national identity. Historically, being an African with ties to ancestors and cultural practice has been seen as evil. Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada (2022) argue that in Africa, there is a

generalisation that African cultures are evil. Postcolonial projects deal with the pain, humiliation, destitution and destruction not solely of material conditions, but also and primarily of the symbolic order from which the confidence and meaning of Africa originally stemmed. We reflected on our identity in relation to our ancestral lineage as recognising and paying respect to all those family members who came before us, and continue to be one with us as part of who we are.

Deconstructed knowledge of social work in Africa

We reflected on elements that constituted social work in our villages and indigenous contexts by focusing on a content that provides a different meaning to what we have considered as social work in its forms, techniques and materials. We have considered social work as the following in our reflections:

Family

We considered social work as deeply functioning from a family approach. We recognise the role of a family in providing stability and directions into a person's life. Family in this context of our reflection is defined from one generation to the other. We considered that in our African families, an older female person (*Gogo-Grandmother*) took the role of providing for the family with problem-solving, an analytical outlook on issues, conflict mediation, and providing diverse guidance when feeling alone, serving as a spiritual guide and being confidential on issues shared with her. Kariuki (2015) attests that an elder in African families plays a significant role of authority and provides directions to the family. Respect for elders, ancestors, parents, other people and the environment is cherished and firmly embedded in the customs, taboos and traditions. The role of an older person is considered significant, and is parallel to those of a social worker in a helping profession. An older person in Africa is considered as a person over the age of 60, but other factors are also considered on the description of an older person, such as family status or physical appearance, as well as ancestral gift.

Indigenous social care

Our reflections consider social work from a deconstructed identity as indigenous social care grounded to social mutualism. We considered social mutualism as a

system of social help in resolving communal issues, as individual issues were seen as shared problems rather than individualised challenges. We reflected social mutualism as an African traditional approach to social care, which was aligned to social work in community functioning. In our reflection, traditional leadership, customary law, norms and values of the community were used as a guide to resolve community problems. Our reflections looked at social work, which was performed by elders in conflict resolution and mediation. Our elders' ways of dealing with conflicts and disputes was based on social or cultural values, norms, beliefs and processes understood and accepted by the community. Kariuki (2015) argued that in some African communities such as Kenya, elders serve on justice councils to listen and resolve day-to-day complaints. We argue that such roles are not different from the one of a social worker in a conflict context.

We reflected on the use of indigenous systems of food creation such as farming (*Kulima)* for sharing the community food supply. Based on our experiences and narrative history from our elders, social care has involved interventions of spiritual-ancestral practice, cultural celebration, psychosocial support and physical well-being. We also reflected that social care is practiced by everyone in the community for community support. For example, *Kuhambelana* is a form of a social visit done by *Nguni* ethnic people from one person to the other to check on their well-being. *Kuhambelana* also takes place in the form of a social system of support which community members provide to each other during bereavement.

Women leadership

In our reflection, we considered the role of women in our African communities as tantamount to social work. Critical to our reflection was the role of elderly women in various contexts from family to communal levels. We reflected on the role of women in providing family leadership, guiding the processes of growth and order. Women provided leadership by providing shelter for children without biological parents by raising the children as their own. They played an important role in leading families and communities in resolving issues of conflict. Our reflections and positioning of women in social work is evidenced in the role played by woman leaders who pioneered social work, and those who fought for social justice in parts of the African continent like South Africa. Women like Ellen Kuzwayo, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela

and Charlotte Makgomo were trained social workers, and played an important role in South African society, and in shaping the course of history and that of social work, as well as the recognition of other women in African communities (Shokane & Masoga, 2019). In our reflections, social workers in Africa have been regarded as elderly women who were considered with wisdom and respect. The wisdom was regarded as the required knowledge based on lived experiences, natural intelligence and the skills to communicate and analyse contexts and life challenges. In African communities, respect for elders is considered a part of cultural values which shows that they were regarded as guardians of life with the ability to preserve peace. In these communities, respect provides guidelines for living, including appropriate clan-based inter-generational behavioural patterns, as well as ways to honour and revere ancestors (Mbele et al., 2015:88). Based on our reflections, elderly women provided community care, functioning and guidance from one generation to the other. This reflection is similar to the argument that the social work profession is dominated by women in the provision of social work-related services (Nichols, 1973; Fraser, 2013; Lerner, 1976; Rosser, 2013).

African indigenous knowledge transfer

In our reflections, we acknowledge the use of African indigenous knowledge transfer as a form of indigenous social work. Elderly women who we regarded as social workers in our villages used various methods to transfer knowledge for educational, preventative and historical events. The tools for knowledge transfer which were used by indigenous social workers were oral literature, folk tales, narratives and African proverbs. Our reflections regarded the use of orals as a system in which lessons and knowledge were transferred from one generation to the other. Oral literature and African proverbs were used for a social purpose of handing down knowledge and cultural heritage to new generations. Mota (2009) argues that orals and folktales are regarded as a useful component in the development process of any community. In social work practice, cultural competence is seen as the ability to understand, affirm and recognise other persons' culture. The use of African proverbs in social work is considered as a knowledge system which provides insight into a range of cultures, and for social workers from specific ethnic groups, a further acknowledgement and celebration of their heritage (Tedam, 2013).

Methods of Kwabelana, Ukuhambelana and Kukhamela in pre-colonial social work

In our quest to deconstruct social work in Africa, we reflected on the methods known as *kwabelana (sharing), ukuhambelana (visit)* and *kukhamela (educate)* in social work. We reflect on tacit knowledge, narratives from our elders, and historical orals. Our reflections touch on precolonial social work, which was based on methods of the communal approach and traditional healing practices, reflecting a holistic and interconnected understanding. We acknowledge that other scholars, such as Nukunya (1994) and Avendal (2011), pointed out communal approaches to social care in Ghana. However, in our reflections, we link the forms of *kwabelana, ukuhambelana* and *kukhamela* to what was understood to be social work in our communities.

Kwabelana, ukuhambelana and kukhamela communal approach

In this reflection, *kukhamela* in Africa is seen from the context of a collective responsibility towards engaging with the family and social issues. Our reflections centre on a community sense of togetherness as the foundation of a communal functioning through *kwabelana, ukuhambelana* and *kukhamela*. We regard issues of individuals in pre-colonial communities as collective problems which often require a collective involvement. African people are known for their values of collectivism and shared humanity in their approach to social problems. They are accustomed to collective ownership and the use of all land and natural resources, whereas most African systems include clearly defined individual or family rights to some types of land, as well as common property resources. We reflect that *kwabelana, ukuhambelana* and *kukhamela* were based on communal systems that support poor people's livelihood strategies that are not premised on customary law. For example, African communities use communal land and ownership approaches. Cousins (2009) argues that land ownership and land tenure in Africa were communal until the use of chieftaincy as an institution of colonial government, and the development of the customary land tenure law.

Implications for contemporary social work in Africa and recommendations

The definition of social work has its own historical, political, social and economic dimensions. In the historical aspect, it means it has been a profession that is linked to colonialism. We put the following recommendations, which we will present together with our motivations:

- Social work literature agrees that social work is a Eurocentric profession with Eurocentric epistemologies. We recommend that historical research of social work in Africa be conducted, thereby focusing on collecting and interpreting data about past events or ideas in order to find how they affected the present events and ideas, as well as the scope of social work in Africa.

- Decolonial, indigenous and Afrocentric social work make the case for a social work practice that is responsive to problems and challenges of local people in their cultural context. We recommend that a true decolonial, indigenous and Afrocentric social work must explore the use of African philosophies, folk tales, narratives and storytelling as methods to social work interventions.

- Africa is a big continent with many ethnic groups, diverse languages and knowledge systems that are deeply embedded in the local meaning of the word 'social work', which in isiZulu means *sontlalakahle*, and in isiXhosa *tlalotle,* which is directly translated as living better. We recommend that the word 'social work' and its meaning be interrogated in the context of African languages to truly contextualise and locate its direct meaning in Africa, which could have implications to local social work epistemologies.

- We acknowledge that in our autoethnographic reflection, we provide an analysis embedded in social work identity in pre-colonial and colonial contexts. We acknowledge that social work identity in Africa is influenced by several processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation - in addition to colonialisation, which continues to challenge social workers' responses to such trends. Therefore, we recommend that the influence of industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation in social work identity and practice needs to be investigated.

As African social workers with our roots in an indigenous knowledge system, we immerse ourselves in a journey to deconstruct social work and share our narratives, experiences and historical stories from our elders on what social work was in pre-colonial Africa. Based on our reflections, we conclude that in pre-colonial Africa, we had our own form of 'social work.' Various studies and literature in Africa have engaged in indigenous social work, and provided different forms of practices infused in social work's micro to macro interventions (Luwangula, Twikirize, Twesigye & Kitimbo, 2019).

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